

Why the Ideology of Goddess Durga Requiring a Feminist Mindset to Get Protected in a Country Like India

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Abstract

The cultural worship of the divine female, personified as Goddess Durga, creates an amazing ideological dichotomy in the Indian society where the mortal woman is subject of systematic oppression. In the past, ancient Indian ideas identified women as the physical manifestation of spiritual and cosmic energy, called Shakti, in culture. This symbolic worship, however, often hides a strong tradition of patriarchy that is oppressive of women's autonomy and perpetuates patriarchal dominance. An ideology of goddess worship is vastly different from the daily experience of women, who are socially stigmatised as widows, the powerful women are labelled as 'witches', and safety for women is defined as having strict patriarchal control over them. This paper will examine the relationship between mythological worship and earthly outcast. It goes to argue that the traditional provision of safety by males is fundamentally problematic, because it depends on the restriction of behavior, not on individual autonomy. The ideology of protection and empowerment of Goddess Durga can be realized through the use of a modern feminist approach in Indian society, where the mythological characters are not subjugated but given the opportunity to act independently. This study suggests that just as with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, a rights-based approach toward gender justice must be meshed with the veneration of myths, otherwise it cannot be realized.

Keywords: Goddess Durga, Shakti, Gender Justice, Feminist Framework, Institutionalised Patriarchal, Women's Safety, Indian Mythology, SDG 5.

Introduction

India is one of the most complex and paradoxical gender matrixes in the history of the world. It is marked by a persistent dualism between the relationship of the divine feminine, which is treated with great reverence and the relationship of the terrestrial feminine, which is subjugated through a system, a woman is mortal (Jasvi, 2021). The ideology of Goddess Durga, a supreme goddess, who is the embodiment of Shakti—the ultimate protector, martial power and primordial cosmic energy against evil (McDaniel, 2023), occupies the centre of this cultural divide. On the abstract level of the theological, Indian culture elevates women to the status of Devis (goddesses); the female identity is linked to purity, wisdom, and moral guardianship (Aich, 2025; Jasvi, 2021). Yet this extreme ideological worship starkly contrasts with the day-to-day reality and experience of Indian women, who are expected to cope with a society that has entrenched, repressive and deeply rooted patriarchy that actively curtails their autonomy, limits their movement and denies their basic rights to human life (Mohapatra, 2015).

It is important to critically analyze the history of gender roles in the subcontinent to understand the current threats faced by women in India. The earliest Indian texts also show that female subjugation was not a permanent and intrinsic part of the early Indian experience (Kumar & Saran, 2026). In the early Vedic period, women were given a comparatively dignified and an egalitarian place in society (Soni, 2024). Historical sources indicate that women were educated, engaged in sophisticated philosophical discussions, and played important roles in religious practices, and female scholars like Gargi, Lopamudra and Maitreyi were revered as great seers and thinkers (Brahmavadinis) (Aich, 2025; Soni, 2024). Moreover, the early customs like swayamvara (self-choice of the husband) showed a significant personal agency and

choice in marriage (Soni, 2024). During this golden era, there was minimal child marriage, purdah system, dowry system and women enjoyed equal rights in domestic and public sphere (Soni, 2024).

But this egalitarian model was drastically reduced during the later Vedic and Smriti periods (Kumar & Saran, 2026). The codification of Brahmanical orthodoxy, in particular the Manusmriti, helped institutionalize patriarchy (Aich, 2025). This social structure was a deliberate effort to undermine female autonomy, systematically taking the rights from women that they had to property, legal status and scriptural education (Aich, 2025; Jasvi, 2021). These social and legal norms were completely reshaped to confine women within the household, and such practices as child marriage and system of lifelong male guardianship were enforced (Kumar & Saran, 2026). This is an outdated system in which a woman's identity in her childhood was united with her father, her husband in her youth and her son in her old age (Aich, 2025; Mohapatra, 2015).

This historical transition resulted in the basic distortion of the idea of "safety" for women. In traditional Indian contexts, the concept of 'safety' was only understood in the context of male control and protectionism, not female empowerment (Kumar & Saran, 2026). The patriarchal system was based on the assumption that women were an inherently weak sex, which led to the strict limitation of women's movement, their behavioural freedom and their sexual autonomy all in the name of protecting family and community honour (Aich, 2025). Thus, the cultural worship of the feminine became a privilege, to be accorded to women only if they dedicated their selfhood to the womanhood of the family, and performed their role as wife and mother in the most "ideal" way (Poddar, 2026; Tyagi, 2024).

This protection paradigm fails spectacularly, as is evident in the case of the least protected sections of Indian society. In the absence of the patriarchal shield, the facade of social respect will fall apart. For instance, in India, widows suffer from being socially ostracized, deprived of property, psychological trauma, and extreme socio-economic marginalisation (Barot & Parmar, 2024). Widows have been surveyed and found to be subject to a high level of prejudice and violence, in fact deep-rooted prejudice and violence is evident in traditional systems and women are completely vulnerable without a man to take care of them (Barot & Parmar, 2024). The fear of female independence is similarly expressed violently when mortal femaleness tries to wield spiritual or social power (McDaniel, 2023). Women who assert a religious authority, for example as sadhika or a priestess, are often demonized and branded 'witches' in rural and tribal communities, an example of the underlying fear of uncontrolled female agency in society that exists in rural and tribal communities (McDaniel, 2023). Moreover, the utilization of the biological and social differences of women as weapons to ensure its subordination from birth to death is the harsh truth, which is starkly evident from the widespread of female foeticide, the dowry-based exploitation of women, and alarming rates of gender-based violence (Jasvi, 2021; Mohapatra, 2015).

These outmoded structures must be eliminated to truly protect and provide justice for women in the modern world. The need of the hour is to shift from the 'protection via restriction' to the 'modern rights-based approach' to protection in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) (Kumar & Saran, 2026). This shift calls for the recognition of women as independent and autonomous subjects, and their right to equality in the constitution, autonomy over their bodies and freedom from violence (Kumar & Saran, 2026).

There is a need of an ideological adjustment to bring the ancient worship of Goddess Durga and the demands of the feminists in tune with each other. In this era, the cultural bridging is being achieved through contemporary Indian literature and media where the myths about women are recreated in contemporary context (Poddar, 2026; Sharma, 2024). Authors are reconstructing figures such as Sita, Draupadi and Sati not as victim of destiny, but as a skilled warrior, a scholar, and a strong decision maker with much agency (Sharma, 2024). The perception is changing from one generation to another, and young audiences have become more demanding in terms of their story requirement, who now expect stories that break out of the traditional patriarchal mold and are based on contemporary values of empowerment of women (Poddar, 2026). These literary interventions challenge traditional narratives and offer a feminist perspective on cultural heritage, showing that true Indian tradition celebrates the power of women and does not oppress them (Sharma, 2024). Thus, this study contends that to serve the mandate of protection, the idea of Goddess Durga must be understood in a modern feminist perspective of collective demand for the empowerment, dignity and gender justice of women

instead of the system's demand for female obedience.

Research Objectives

This research paper focuses on several broad and cross-disciplinary goals to systematically break down the abstract cultural ideology and the actual gender situation in India.

To critically examine the ideological paradox of the divine feminine in Indian society: This study will critically examine the contradiction of the reverence of the Goddess Durga and the concept of Shakti and the discrimination, socio-cultural suppression, and violence faced by mortal women in everyday life.

The aim of the research is to understand the historical evolution process in which the agency of women has been undermined and the institution of patriarchy has been strengthened by the relatively gender-equal Vedic period and the extremely restricted period called Smriti period of the Vedic texts and customary laws (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026; Soni, 2024).

3. To provide a genuine understanding of the vulnerabilities and socio-economic, psychological and cultural disenfranchisement of a vulnerable population: This objective is to argue the catastrophic failures of the traditional “protection” model by analysing the socio-economic, psychological and cultural disenfranchisement of specific vulnerable groups. This includes significant marginalisation of Indian widows, including harsh marginalisation (witch-branding), of female spiritual figures in rural India, among others (Barot & Parmar, 2024; McDaniel, 2023).

4. To compare protection-based models with rights-based models (SDG 5): The study will also emphasise the incompatibility of traditional models of male guardianship and the modern constitutional values. It aims to validate the need to move away from the old values and norms that have hindered women's participation in decision-making, and in favor of the progressive goals set forth in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), which focuses on women's individual rights, structural empowerment and bodily autonomy (Kumar & Saran, 2026).

5. To examine the role of contemporary literary and cultural re-imaginings of the construction of a feminist ideological framework: Lastly the research aims to investigate how modern Indian literature and the developing generations' perception is a corrective tool for the culture. The study examines the feminist transformation of mythological characters, and its evaluation is based on the ability to establish a true and culturally relevant model for the protection and empowerment of women in a spirit of reconciliation between the traditional and the progressive values of that time. The feminist reconstruction of mythological characters is analysed and an evaluation has been done to ensure that there will be a true and culturally relevant model for the protection and empowerment of women in a spirit of reconciliation between traditional and progressive values of that time.

Research Methodology

The type of research design used in this study is a qualitative type of secondary research with an interpretivist epistemological paradigm. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is subjective and is created by long-standing cultural, historical and linguistic processes. Thus it is the most solid theoretical framework to analyse the intricate relationship between religion, mythology and gender sociology in the Indian context. The basic aim of this research is to critically examine the hypothetical socio-cultural narratives that revolve around the divine feminine, namely the ideology of Goddess Durga, and compare it to the empirical ground realities and vulnerabilities of mortal women (Jasvi, 2021; Kumar & Saran, 2026). This study does not involve primary quantitative data collection, as this would simply capture one or two points in time for the gender dynamics of a specific site; instead, a systematic thematic synthesis of preexisting peer-reviewed academic literature is used. Qualitative secondary method helps in making a macro level sociological mapping of the institutionalized patriarchy in different historical periods, different geographical areas as well as different literary representations (Aich, 2025; Sharma, 2024).

Data Corpus and Source Selection Strategy

It is the aim of this research that the data corpus should be deliberately interdisciplinary in order to synthesize insights from sociology, theology, historical jurisprudence, anthropology and literary criticism. Literature was carefully chosen to provide a balance between theoretical religious teachings and social realities of the day.

The sources chosen are from a variety of methodological approaches, to ensure maximum academic rigour:

Empirical Sociological Surveys: Qualitative surveys (n=364) in Gujarat, India, to explore the high level of socio-economic and psychological disenfranchisement of widows in modern India (Barot & Parmar, 2024). Further, outcome of generational perception survey (n=12) was also used to map the changing attitudes of modern times for the mythological representations (Poddar, 2026).

2. Anthropological and Folk Culture Studies: Analyzing ethnographic data on the social consequences of rural women's attempts to 'become' spiritual personae or Shakti in rural West Bengal, including women from the Santal community who are subjected to intense social backlash, prejudice and 'witch-branding' (McDaniel, 2023).

3. Legal and Constitutional Analyses: Comparison and analysis of the historical evolution of women rights from egalitarian early Vedic to highly restricted Smriti period with the current rights-based demands of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

Systematic Reviews and Literary Criticism: Synthesizing findings from systematic reviews on gender inequality, and examining contemporary Indian English fiction to observe how the contemporary authors are actively deconstructing the orthodox female archetypes (Dixit & Yadav, 2026; Sharma, 2024).

Table 1

Source Typology and Thematic Alignment

Source Domain	Methodological Nature of Source	Contribution to the Current Research
Hindu Traditions & Law	Historical Analysis & Jurisprudence	Establishes the paradox of Goddess worship versus the systemic denial of education, property rights, and personal freedom under male guardianship (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026).
Folk Religion & Tribal Studies	Anthropological Field Study	Provides empirical evidence of the patriarchal fear of female power (<i>Shakti</i>), detailing the social exclusion and marginalization of female priestesses and <i>sadhikas</i> (McDaniel, 2023).
Sociology & Vulnerability	Qualitative Survey (n=364)	Delivers empirical proof of the failure of traditional "protection," highlighting the intense socio-economic hardships and violence faced by widows (Barot & Parmar, 2024).

Source Domain: Methodological Nature of Source: Contribution to the Current Research: Hindu Traditions & Law Historical Analysis & Jurisprudence Creates the paradox of worshipping Goddess while denying education, property rights, and personal freedoms under the guardianship of men (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

Folk Religion & Tribal Studies Anthropological Field Study Provides empirical evidence of the patriarchal fear of female power (Shakti), social exclusion and marginalization of female priestesses and sadhikas (McDaniel, 2023).

Sociology & Vulnerability Qualitative Survey (n=364) Empirical evidence of the failure of traditional 'protection' and the overwhelming socio-economic vulnerability and violence of widows (Barot & Parmar, 2024).

Literary Re-imagining Textual & Cultural Critique Provides the ideology solution by making relationship between ancient heritage and contemporary gender equality through literary re-imagining of modern feminist literature (Poddar, 2026; Sharma, 2024).

This analysis is grounded in a two-fold theoretical framework: Intersectional Feminist Sociology and the Rights Based Approach of SDG 5. The feminist sociological approach is used to explain how the biological differences, spatial segregation and religious ideology are used by the patriarchal institutions to enforce the subordination of women (Aich, 2025; Tyagi, 2024).

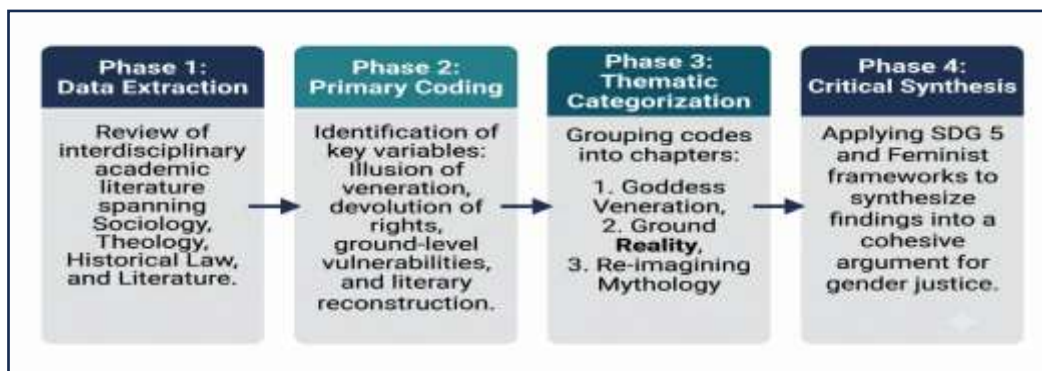
The study of intersectionality is especially significant in this context because it has allowed the voices of women who are vulnerable in multiple ways to come to the fore, such as those who are widows, women of different castes, such as Dalit women, and rural women such as those in the priest caste (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Dixit & Yadav, 2026; McDaniel, 2023).

At the same time, the SDG 5 framework serves as a modern benchmark for gender justice, stronger than the notion of male protection, with a focus on structural empowerment, constitutional equality and absolute rights to control one's body over traditional notions of male "protection" (Dixit & Yadav, 2026; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

Thematic Coding & Data Synthesis Process. The protocol of rigorous thematic analysis was employed for data synthesis. Selected interdisciplinary literature was reviewed in a systematic manner and patterns of the veneration of women, patriarchal control, spatial segregation and empowerment in modern times were coded.

Figure 2

Methodological Workflow for Thematic Synthesis



The thematic synthesis results in an extremely logical argument as shown in Figure 2. The approach of the book from the abstract theological paradoxes of Goddess worship through the harsh empirical realities of marginalized women and finally to progressive literary and generational solutions ensure that the book provides a comprehensive and academically sound examination of the protection of women in India that is multi-dimensional in scope (Barot & Parmar, 2024; McDaniel, 2023; Poddar, 2026; Sharma, 2024).

Literature Review

1. The Paradox of Goddess Veneration and Societal Subordination

Goddess Veneration and Societal Subordination is a paradox. The Paradox of Goddess Veneration and Societal Subordination: The religious double-bind in Indian society is a deeply embedded paradox in its ideology and socio-cultural life, as the worship of the Divine Feminine side by side with the systemic subjugation, exploitation and marginalisation of mortal women (Jasvi, 2021; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

In Hindu belief, the primal, creative and sustaining cosmic energy is always and everywhere feminized, as Shakti (McDaniel, 2023).

This theology is the key that raises the female deities to absolute supreme power, especially the Goddess Durga, who is extolled as the most pure, the most moral, the most protective, and the most fierce (McDaniel, 2023; Tyagi, 2024).

But intensely critical sociological, historical and legal studies have repeatedly shown that this symbolic elevation serves as a theoretical "mask" (Jasvi, 2021). Traditional worship of the Goddess has not yet brought forth any concrete gains in terms of equality, political empowerment, and gender justice on the earth, and it is for this reason that it has been rejected by many women. The worship of the goddess in the culture has not yet brought any material benefits to the earth

for women with equality, political power or gender justice, and for this reason it has not been accepted by many women (Kumar & Saran, 2026; Mohapatra, 2015).

The Weaponization of Biology and Spatial Segregation A critical study of the history of Indian cultural documents shows that the glorification of women has been used as a complex instrument for controlling and regulating behaviour of the citizenry. This dichotomy is most clearly reflected in Hindu traditional families in terms of the spatial and cultural division of women. Within the patriarchy, the norms of patriarchy culturally define women as the ones who are responsible for maintaining the au

spiciousness, purity and the traditions of the akam (the inner, domestic, private sphere) and limit their access to the puram (the outer, public sphere, the socio-political sphere) (Tyagi, 2024).

The enforcement of such segregation has been achieved, throughout history, by the weaponisation of biological determinism (Aich, 2025).

The reproductive ability of women was not treated as a biological phenomenon, but was socially controlled to make the image of the ideal woman – sexually pure, loyal and subservient wife – come to life (Aich, 2025).

Women placed on a pedestal of sacred purity and idealized motherhood as a result of patriarchal structures successfully mask the control they wield over female reproductive and social autonomy (Aich, 2025; Tyagi, 2024).

Besides, folk rituals and vernacular art forms, like Madhubani paintings, often center on feminine symbols of fertility, prosperity and domesticity (Jha, 2024).

Although women are recognised as primary keepers of these rich cultural and ecological traditions the creative work of women is often overlooked in the mainstream male discourse, which casts it as a 'domestic handiwork' as opposed to the main stream culture and discourse of the arts and the intellect (Jha, 2024).

Hence, the worship of the Goddess in the context of traditional society demands absolute submission, chastity and sacrifice from women, making it completely divorced from the socio-legal realities that actively hinder women's independence and economic empowerment (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

When active mortal women try to acquire or assert the same Shakti that the society claims to worship, this ideological contradiction becomes hostile. The anthropological research done in the rural and tribal areas in West Bengal gives vivid empirical picture of this retribution. In these communities, women who hear from God, who are mediums, who have taken the role of bhar ladies, or who are sadhikas (tantric practitioners) are often subjected to extreme and violent resistance from their own families and the community (McDaniel, 2023).

Tribal groups like the Santals expressly bar women from gaining traditional religious authority because tribal women have enough power already and are too vulnerable to evil to be dangerous (McDaniel, 2023).

But when women try to defy these male limitations and exercise genuine spiritual or social agency, they are often victimized. They endure extreme psychological distress, physical abuse, including forced 'exorcisms' and are maliciously labelled by the community as 'witches' (either dayan or dan) (McDaniel, 2023).

Known as a direct sociological tool, the systemic branding of powerful, independent or marginalised women as witches is used by male-dominated hierarchies to, and to cause, socially sanctioned violence towards them (McDaniel, 2023).

This extreme reality makes it clear that in a patriarchy, the ultimate hypocrisy of the Goddess ideology is that there is a Goddess in abstract mythology that can kill cosmic demons but a real woman with independent power and agency is terrible to be feared and is actively being killed by Indian society (McDaniel, 2023).

Table 2

Comparative Analysis: The Abstract Theological Ideology vs. Empirical Reality

Dimension of Analysis	The Abstract Ideology of the Goddess	The Ground Reality of Mortal Women
Social Status & Reverence	Women are symbolically honored as <i>Devis</i> (goddesses) and celebrated as the ultimate custodians of culture, tradition, and morality (Jasvi, 2021; Tyagi, 2024).	Women face severe, systemic discrimination in education, personal freedom, workforce participation, and marital choice (Mohapatra, 2015).

Dimension of Analysis	The Abstract Ideology of the Goddess	The Ground Reality of Mortal Women
Embodiment of Power (<i>Shakti</i>)	The feminine force is revered as the ultimate source of cosmic power, protection, and boundless spiritual energy (McDaniel, 2023).	Mortal women claiming spiritual authority are intensely feared, excluded from religious leadership, and often violently branded as 'witches' (McDaniel, 2023).
Spatial and Behavioral Expectations	Goddesses like Durga are depicted as fierce, independent warriors who conquer the public/cosmic sphere (Sharma, 2024).	Society confines women to the <i>akam</i> (domestic sphere), demanding strict obedience, passivity, and submission, punishing those who display independence (Aich, 2025; Tyagi, 2024).
Protection & Safety	The Goddess is the supreme protector of the universe, requiring no external male guardianship to secure her safety (McDaniel, 2023).	Women are subjected to female foeticide, domestic violence, and extreme widow marginalization, proving traditional male "protection" fails them entirely (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Mohapatra, 2015).

What does it mean to study art in such a way? How is it possible to consider art in an abstract sense? Social Status & Reverence Women are symbolically revered as Devis (goddesses) and celebrated as the ultimate guardians of culture, tradition and morality (Jasvi, 2021; Tyagi, 2024). Women are severely discriminated against in educational systems, their personal freedom, employment and marriage choice (Mohapatra, 2015).

The manifestation of Power (*Shakti*) The feminine aspect of power is worshipped as the supreme source of cosmic power, protection and limitless spiritual energy (McDaniel, 2023).

Mortal women with spiritual authority are highly feared, debarred from religious leadership and frequently violently labeled as 'witches' (McDaniel 2023).

The depiction of gods and goddesses such as Durga as strong and independent fighters is seen as conquering the public/cosmic sphere (Spatial and Behavioral Expectations) (Sharma, 2024). Society confines women to the *akam* (domestic sphere) and expects them to be passive, submissive and obey the rules, otherwise they are considered independent (Aich, 2025; Tyagi, 2024).

Protection & Safety The Goddess is the highest protector over the universe, which does not need a male protector or guardian to provide protection for the Goddess (McDaniel, 2023).

Female foeticide, domestic violence, and extreme marginalization of widows are the various forms of traditional male 'protection' that women suffer from (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Mohapatra, 2015). The ideology of Goddess Durga, without a modern feminist context, is nothing more than lip service as demonstrated by the data and cultural observations. Veneration of a female deity does not in itself serve to break the cycle of patriarchy, rather it can be used to ensure women remain in line (Aich, 2025; Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

Thus, to understand the real and protective nature of Goddess Durga, challenging the traditional paradigm that demands female obedience and replacing it with strong and robust framework of rights which gives women their inherent right to absolute authority, autonomy and dignity (Kumar & Saran 2026).

2. The Ground Reality: Vulnerability and Institutionalized Patriarchy

A personal journey through vulnerability and institutionalized patriarchy.

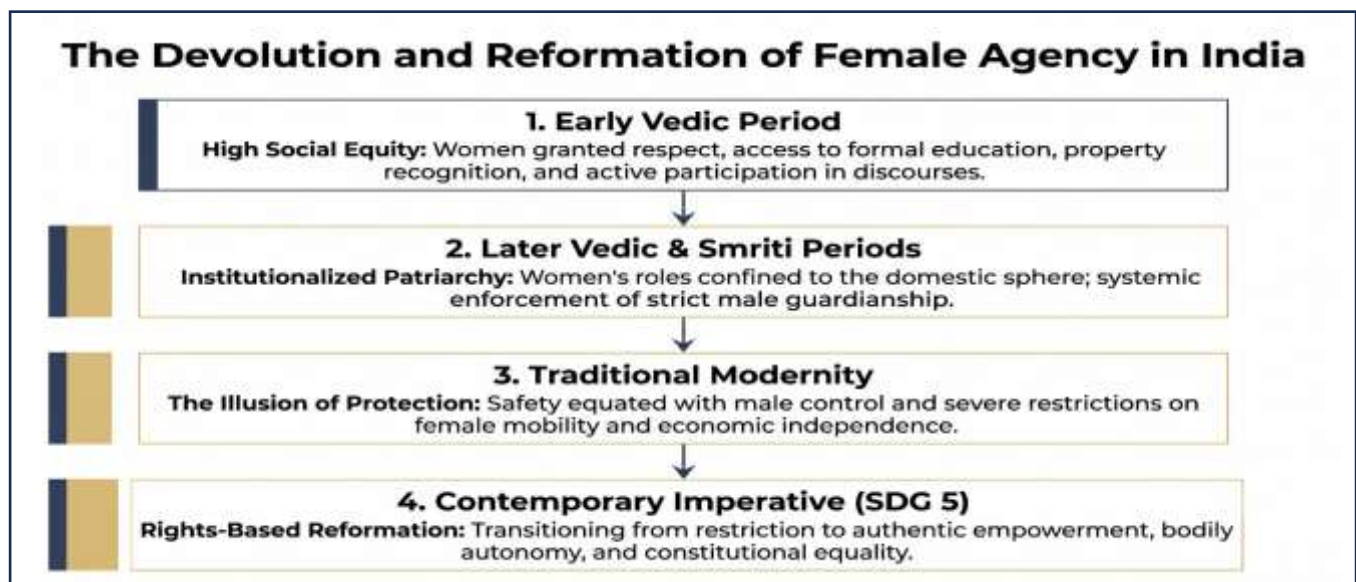
This is important to understand the extent of the profound female vulnerability that contemporary women in India face, to see how this situation has developed in the country's socio-cultural and legal history. What is seen as a systemic subjugation of women in modern India is not an inherent or fixed aspect of ancient Indian civilization but rather it is the outcome of a conscious, incremental institutionalization of patriarchy (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026). Traditional law and religious scripts report a clear historical transformation, from a once-done-egalitarian culture where women's security was based on the empowerment of the individual, to one where it was based on the male's limited and restrictive guardianship (Kumar & Saran, 2026).

Historical Devolution of Female Agency Starting from the early Vedic period, one can see from historical laws and texts that women were a part of a relatively dignified and equal place in the social structure (Aich, 2025). Women were not restricted to domestic sphere but also involved in intellectual, philosophical and spiritual life (Kumar & Saran, 2026). The Brahnavadinis, women scholars, were allowed to perform the Upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) and thus have access to Vedic education and could write hymns (Kumar & Saran, 2026). In the domain of marriage and personal life, there were certain customs such as swayamvara (self-selection) that gave women autonomy in choosing their partners, as was the nature of their society at the time (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

But this progressive paradigm was structurally broken during later Vedic and Smriti time (Kumar & Saran, 2026). The codification of Brahmanical orthodoxy, especially in texts like the Manusmriti, created a very hierarchical, patriarchal social order (Aich, 2025). These texts unambiguously suggested that a woman should never be independent; that she should always be under the absolute control of her father when she is a child, her husband when she is young, and her son when she is a widow (Aich, 2025; Mohapatra, 2015). This meant that, among other things, women had little to no access to education, little to no rights to inherit family property and little to no access to public or intellectual life (Aich, 2025; Kumar & Saran, 2026). In order to provide a visual context to this historical step backward and the current need for rights-based reforms, Figure 3 illustrates the change from the Vedic era to modern day constitutional systems, from a patriarchal system to one rooted in the rule of law.

Figure 3

The Devolution and Required Reformation of Female Agency in India



Intersectional Oppression: Male guardianship had been formalized and a false sense of security had created a dangerous framework that sanctioned systemic oppression as an essential means of protection, creating a culture of oppression (Kumar & Saran, 2026). This version of the idea of protection assumes that women are inherently vulnerable, both biologically and socially, and thus need to be constantly monitored (Aich 2025) [cite: 23]. This, however, does not take into consideration the intersectional nature of oppression in India. Inequality is not a single phenomenon; in fact, it is exponentially exacerbated by the overlapping force of caste, class, religion and gender (Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

For example, there are different groups within society that are marginalized, especially Dalit women, who suffer from compound subjugation. By applying intersectionality theory, it can be seen that Dalit women are subjected to a "double harassment"—they are harassed by their own marginalized communities' patriarchal system and exploited and faced with violence from dominant caste upper-caste social groups (Aich, 2025; Dixit & Yadav, 2026). The traditional idea of protection for women by men is completely undermined for Dalit and tribal women, where the male-dominated mainstream society enables them to be exploited at every turn (Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

Moreover, the feeling of protection also filters into the contemporary economic arena, being expressed in extreme form of discrimination in the workplace, which is known as Work-Family Conflict (Dixit & Yadav, 2026). Even outside the traditional confines of the home, the "Glass Ceiling"—invisible systems and barriers that hinder women from entering leadership and decision-making positions—challenge women even as they enter the workforce (Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

Although the constitution has guaranteed equality for women in India, they are still under-represented in the formal workforce (Mohapatra, 2015). The cultural norms place a greater emphasis on caregiving and domestic responsibilities for married women than on their career goals, often leading to career setbacks for them and a dependence on their husband for financial support (Dixit & Yadav, 2026)[cite: 13]. This is because the women's contribution to the society in unpaid domestic work, child care and agricultural labour is extremely large in scale, but neither of these labours is acknowledged, nor is the women's ability to perform these labours given due recognition, rendering women without their proper economic voice or weight in the family house (Mohapatra, 2015).

When the male-guardianship model fails, its "ultimate failure" is most strikingly evident in the case of widows. The condition of Indian widows is a brutal reality, evident in so many ways. Although the culture idealizes women in marriage, the situation of widowhood results in immediate socio-economic disenfranchisement (Barot & Parmar, 2024). The magnitude of this humanitarian crisis is evident from the census estimate of 2010 which suggests that there are around 40 million widows in India. According to the census in 2010, India has about 40 million widows (Barot & Parmar, 2024).

The present study is qualitative, sociolwork in nature which, on empirical basis, brings out the hard multidimensional realities lived by the respondents from Gujarat (Barot & Parmar, 2024). The empirical findings show that there is a high level of prejudice, social isolation, and physical, emotional and economic violence faced by widows in the society (Barot & Parmar, 2024). Traditional morality often minimizes the loss of the husband, believing his death was caused by some "immoral activity" or bad fortune, which then becomes a social stigma for the widow and she is labelled as "omen of disaster" or inauspicious presence (Barot & Parmar, 2024).

Moreover, the financial status of the widows is at a very precarious level. They often lose their legal inheritance of property, their marital home and are pushed into destitution (Barot and Parmar, 2024). This leaves widows in a predicament of their capacity to function as home managers, financial providers and child-rearing parents alone, and yet at the same time they are actively restricted in their employment opportunities, and are faced with degrading superstitions (Barot & Parmar, 2024). Traditional communities also often require widows to give up their colorful clothes, shave their heads, and follow dietary rules (e.g., no meat, no onions, no garlic) as a way for sensory deprivation and forced mourning (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Mohapatra, 2015). In some parts of the world, including Vrindavan and Varanasi, old widows are often left behind by families, leading them to be left to fend for themselves in the ashramas, even if they are able to beg for food, without any agency or institutional support (Barot & Parmar, 2024).

The systemic discrimination against Dalit women and working women is a clear proof of this aspect of the society and further the immense hardships which women have to face as widow makes it very clear that the traditional patriarchal system does not "protect" women in itself (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Dixit & Yadav, 2026). Instead, it makes them extremely susceptible to exploitation when they go outside of the traditional limits of male authority. Thus, the physical and social security of women must be achieved by giving up completely such traditional protective philosophies. In parallel with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), society needs to move towards the overall rights-based approach to ensure that "safety" is generated from structural empowerment of women, constitutional equality and absolute individual autonomy (Kumar & Saran, 2026)[cite: 6].

3. Re-imagining Mythology: The Necessary of a Modern Feminist framework

A deep-rooted patriarchal system of structures that historically has subjugated Indian women needs a fundamental shift in ideology and culture to systematically intervene. Merely relying on legislative reforms and constitutional dictums are not enough if the cultural awareness is still that of women's safety and limited behaviour (Kumar & Saran, 2026). Hence, it is essential to provide a modern feminist perspective on the ancient mythologies and folklore, and to redefine the traditional norms and values, which will support the attainment of authentic gender justice, as per SDG 5 (Dixit & Yadav, 2026; Sharma, 2024).

The literature field is now a potent cultural corrective mechanism in need of this ideological overhaul, and the English-language literature in India has proved to be an effective mechanism to achieve this cultural transformation (Sharma, 2024). There is a renewed subversive effort to challenge orthodox and male-centric narratives by reinterpreting the

mythological female characters from a distinctly intersectional feminist perspective in contemporary writing (Sharma, 2024). In contrast to the stereotype of a passive, submissive woman, whose identity, social status and fate is completely dependent on a man, these writers bring to life mythological characters that are highly intelligent and independent, who have the power to create their own socio-political fate (Poddar, 2026; Sharma, 2024).

Amish Tripathi's literary works portray iconic characters, including Sita and Sati, who are far removed from their traditional, one-dimensional identities as dutiful and sacrificing wives to be seen beyond those roles as figures of selfless devotion (Sharma, 2024). In his portrayal they are depicted as great warriors, sharp administrators and great scholars who take active part in the redressing of social injustices, including the oppressive Vikarma laws, and oppose outmoded traditions (Sharma, 2024). For example, in one depiction, Sati is shown as a capable sword-slinger, whose sheer might and strategic brilliance matches that of Shiva, suggesting that the true essence of devotion is one of mutual respect and equality, and not of subservience (Sharma, 2024). Likewise, Sita is not depicted as a damsel in distress waiting to be rescued, but rather as an effective administrator of the state, a fierce warrior who possesses a very strong battle power, who is able to deal with complex political situations (Sharma, 2024). Besides, character such as princess Anandmayi appears as courageous and witty politicians who successfully integrate their cultural heritage and independent, critical thinking with diplomacy (Sharma, 2024). In these stories, Tripathi is actively challenging the myth that traditional Indian culture cannot do without the subservient woman, depicting a Shakti who is practically manifested in the context of governance and war. The narratives Tripathi creates amplify these traits, actively opposing the myth that Indian culture is a culture of the subservient woman, and presenting instead a vision of Shakti that is practically applied in governance and warfare (Sharma, 2024).

Likewise, Kavita Kane in her literature gives a significant feminist intervention as she brings in the voice of women who have been neglected and marginalised from the epics from India (Sharma, 2024). Kane gives these women voices and complex, multidimensional characters in the form of secondary characters like Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, Kaikeyi and Satyawati (Sharma, 2024). Kane's storytelling shifts the focus from mere backstories to the presence of these women as active participants rather than passive characters or one-dimensional villains, characters who play a vital role in the epic events unfolding (Sharma, 2024). For instance, Surpanakha is reimagined as not just another demonic antagonist, but a misunderstood and tragic figure, challenging the conventional demonization of her character in the patriarchal context (Sharma, 2024). Urmila is elevated from the background of her sister Sita and is depicted as a silent, strong character with the capacity to keep the emotional strength in the epic story of Ramayana (Sharma, 2024). This is a literary reconstruction that highlights intellectual power, emotional strength and leadership, and challenges the entrenched gender norms in modern society to reflect on the role women have played in the past and their place in history and philosophy (Sharma, 2024).

The cultural influence of these literary re-imagining is enhanced by the changing generational perceptions about folklore and mythology (Poddar, 2026). Both younger generation (16-28 years) and older generation (45+ years) have expressed a general consensus that the depiction of women in Indian myths should be updated to align with contemporary values and norms within society (Poddar, 2026). The traditional discourses associated with female virtue have been successions of patience, endurance, and extreme sacrifice, but the contemporary viewers seem to hold more sway with discourses that focus on women's voices, internal struggles, and active agency (Poddar, 2026).

Important, this cultural change does not require the elimination of traditional culture. Rather, it depends on a balance between the preservation and adaptation (Poddar, 2026). The retention of the main cultural structures of the epics and the development of the female characters into having realistic autonomy and independence render these fundamental texts accessible, interesting and culturally empowering to younger generations (Poddar, 2026). Such reinterpretations serve as an important means of value education, defying negative patriarchal values and preserving the historical and ethical foundation of the mythology (Poddar, 2026).

Table 3

Comparative Analysis: Traditional Patriarchal Ideology vs. Modern Feminist Re-imagining

Thematic Dimension	Traditional Patriarchal Ideology	Modern Feminist Re-imagining (SDG 5 Aligned)
Concept of 'Safety' & Virtue	Defined as strict male guardianship, confinement to the household, obedience, and endurance of suffering (Kumar & Saran, 2026; Poddar, 2026).	Defined as individual empowerment, constitutional rights, decision-making capacity, and freedom from violence (Kumar & Saran, 2026; Sharma, 2024).
Embodiment of 'Shakti'	Revered in abstract deities but feared and violently suppressed in mortal women, leading to prejudice and labels like 'witches' (McDaniel, 2023).	Celebrated as tangible female agency, independence, intellectual brilliance, and leadership in both spiritual and secular domains (Sharma, 2024).
Role of Women in Narratives	Expected to be submissive plot devices; severe societal exclusion for those outside traditional marital structures (e.g., widows) (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Poddar, 2026).	Recognized as highly intelligent administrators, strategic warriors, and equals whose voices actively drive the socio-political narrative (Sharma, 2024).

These literary reimagining of mythological women reclaims the agency of the mythological women, which connect the ideology of ancient Indian heritage with modern gender equality (Sharma, 2024). They offer a modern-day template for generations to come with integrated ethical cultural value and empowering women in an effective manner in a manner that proves that the true and pure essence of Indian tradition is based upon the strength of women and not oppressing them (Poddar, 2026; Sharma, 2024).

Discussion

This research reveals a serious deficiency of a theological ideology in the socio-legal sphere of Indian society. The worship of the divine feminine (Shakti) is a tradition that developed in the abstract realm of culture, seldom effecting tangible equality or safety to mortality for women on earth (Aich, 2025; Jasvi, 2021). On the contrary, the notion of 'protection' has been used as an instrument of control in India, resulting in the curtailment of women's bodily autonomy, economic independence and decision-making power (Kumar & Saran, 2026).

But the harsh reality for marginalised groups is a stark reminder of the failings of this unequal, patriarchal system. Once the man's protective shield (patriarchal security) is taken away, there is no other security system in society, but only the condition of extreme socio-economic vulnerability of the woman. The qualitative information with respect to the lives of the 40 million widows in India conclusively shows that traditional system is built to safeguard and preserve male supremacy rather than female well-being (Barot & Parmar, 2024). The systematic theft of property, the financial hardship and the degrading cultural superstitions faced by widows, are a stark indication of the hypocrisy of a society that claims to respect women as goddesses, but leaves them to suffer in reality (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Mohapatra, 2015). Moreover, the social consequences of women striving to manifest spiritual presence often take the form of violent 'witch-burning' in rural communities, indicating an embedded and systemic patriarchal fear of female autonomy and unchecked agency (McDaniel, 2023). The intersectional analyses further add to this reality, as Dalit women and female professionals are subjected to multiple forms of marginalisation – first caste-based exploitation and then "glass ceiling" discrimination in contemporary job market (Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

The discussion, however, also shows us a very promising and culturally relevant trajectory in the reworking of myths in current literature and the changing perceptions of the newer generations (Poddar, 2026). Rewriting stories of mythological beings as intelligent decision makers, administrators and warriors is a tool that provides a needed cultural

corrective (Sharma, 2024). This modern feminist interpretation of the profound ideology of Durga opens the opportunity to overcome the old-fashioned constraints placed by patriarchy within the cultural context itself. Passive protectionism, though necessary for safety and gender justice is not sufficient; it must be firmly entrenched in active empowerment, structural economic parity and constitutional rights, which are consistent with SDG 5 (Dixit & Yadav, 2026; Kumar & Saran, 2026).

Conclusion

Goddess Durga's overall concept depicts a very strong and independent, intellectually powerful and ferocious Goddess. As the present comprehensive review has shown, there exists a vicious dichotomy in Indian society that while it celebrates women's power in a mythological fashion, it actively disempower, restrict and marginalise women in real life on earth (Jasvi, 2021; McDaniel, 2023). The original idea of women safety in the early Vedic times, which was an egalitarian society, was marred by institutionalized patriarchy in the later Vedic times (Aich, 2025). It redefined safety as a very strict system of male guardianship, and women are left with 100% of safety and vulnerability when they lose male protection, which is evident in the socially marginalised status of widows and the socio-economic precarity of Dalit and working women (Barot & Parmar, 2024; Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

Such traditional, limiting and restrictive notions of patriarchy must be discarded and categorically rejected from the society to actualise the real protective and empowering ideology of Goddess Durga in the contemporary world. The transition to a rights-based approach is an immediate need to achieve the global target of Sustainable Development Goal 5, which is to ensure women's constitutional equality, economic independence and absolute bodily autonomy (Kumar & Saran, 2026). As seen in modern feminist literature and changing perspectives from different generations, it is an essential step in the sociological process to reimagine a mythological narrative, ultimately transforming it in the process (Poddar, 2026; Sharma, 2024). The celebration of women as intellectual leaders, independent decision makers and warriors in their own right, without being bound by the pigeonhole of subservient roles, is the long overdue chance at rectifying the ancient reverence of the divine feminine with the pressing need of gender justice that Indian society has been facing for centuries (Sharma, 2024). It is only in this multi-faceted feminist approach with the understanding of rights that the power of Goddess Durga can be rendered in true and undeniable protection, dignity and equality for all women.

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