

**WOMEN, AGENCY, AND PATRIARCHAL CRITIQUE IN
EARLY INDIAN FEMINIST THOUGHT:
A STUDY OF TARABAI SHINDE'S STRI PURUSH TULANA
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ABSTRACT:

This study analyzes Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882) as a seminal text in the early development of Indian feminist thought, emphasizing its radical critique of patriarchal structures, gendered moral codes, and women's autonomy in colonial India. Prompted by the public shaming of a young widow, Shinde's work represents one of the earliest sustained feminist challenges to Hindu social and religious conventions. The analysis contextualizes *Stri Purush Tulana* within the socio-political environment of nineteenth-century India, which was characterized by caste-based inequalities, Brahmanical patriarchy, and the influences of colonial modernity, and examines how Shinde deconstructs the moral inconsistencies that affected women. Employing feminist theories of agency and subjectivity, this paper posits that Shinde articulates an early form of feminist consciousness that critiques women's internalised subjugation while simultaneously revealing the structural mechanisms of oppression inherent in religious practices, familial structures, and societal institutions.

Her incisive rhetorical techniques, employment of irony, and moral arguments serve to challenge male dominance while simultaneously reasserting women's intellectual and ethical autonomy. Through an examination of *Stri Purush Tulana*, this study emphasises Tarabai Shinde's sustained significance as a foundational figure in Indian feminism, thereby illuminating the text's critical role in comprehending the historical origins of feminist opposition and the ongoing pursuit of gender justice within India.

KEYWORDS:

Tarabai Shinde, Indian Feminism, Patriarchy, Women's Agency,
Gender and Caste.

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Introduction

The discourse surrounding Indian feminism often emphasises political milestones of the twentieth century, nationalist movements, and post-Independence reforms. While these periods are undeniably significant, this viewpoint frequently neglects earlier feminist articulations that emerged during colonial rule and within the confines of rigid societal norms. Feminist consciousness in India did not suddenly appear in the modern era; rather, it developed through sustained challenges to patriarchal structures, articulated by reformers, writers, and female intellectuals who questioned the established norms of gender relations. Tarabai Shinde, a prominent figure among these early feminists, stands out as a notably radical and uncompromising thinker.

Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana*, published in 1882, is frequently cited as one of the pioneering feminist texts in Indian literature. Composed in Marathi, the book boldly confronts the patriarchal norms, religious customs, and gendered moral codes that dictated women's lives in India during the 1800s. Unlike many contemporary reformist writings, which sought to better women's circumstances while preserving male supremacy, Shinde's work fundamentally challenges men's moral, intellectual, and social authority.

This study examines *Stri Purush Tulana*, viewing it as a foundational feminist work that foregrounds women's agency and simultaneously exposes the structural foundations of patriarchal systems. The paper argues that Shinde's text offers an early feminist perspective on subjectivity, consent, and resistance, thus anticipating

later theoretical developments in feminist scholarship. Through an analysis of the text's socio-historical context and a critical examination of its critiques of morality, religion, caste, and gender, this research seeks to re-establish Tarabai Shinde as a central figure in Indian feminist thought, while also highlighting the continued relevance of her ideas within contemporary gender-related discussions.

Socio-Historical Context: Colonial Modernity, Reform, and Patriarchal Power

Nineteenth-century India experienced significant social and ideological transformations, driven by colonial governance, indigenous reform movements, and debates over tradition and modernity. Practices such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, the denial of education to women, and rigid caste systems came under increasing examination; nonetheless, reform efforts were often constrained by patriarchal ideologies. Women were frequently portrayed as passive recipients of reform, rather than as active agents capable of shaping their own destinies (Forbes 12–15).

Colonial narratives further complicated women's status by presenting Indian women as symbols of cultural backwardness in need of rescue, while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal norms within the domestic sphere. Nationalist responses to colonial criticism often idealised women as guardians of tradition, assigning them the role of moral protectors of both the home and the nation (Chatterjee 237). This ideological perspective limited women's autonomy and intensified moral judgment regarding their physical appearance and behavior.

Tarabai Shinde's intellectual evolution requires understanding within the radical milieu of the Satyashodhak Samaj, which Jyotirao Phule founded in 1873. This movement challenged Brahmanical authority, criticised caste-based subjugation, and advocated for rational inquiry and social equality. Shinde's feminist consciousness was fostered within this anti-caste, egalitarian framework, thus

enabling her to challenge not only gender-based oppression but also the religious and social structures that sustained it (Omvedt 98–101).

Stri Purush Tulana was prompted by the public condemnation of Vijayalakshmi, a young Brahmin widow, who was charged with sexual impropriety and infanticide. While the widow endured severe public scorn, the men involved were not subject to comparable moral judgment. Shinde's work functions as a powerful response to this disparity, transforming a particular incident into a wide-ranging critique of patriarchal norms. Her examination elucidates how social institutions, encompassing religion, the media, and the legal system, collaborate to subjugate women and uphold male dominance (Shinde 75–79).

Patriarchal Morality and the Construction of Gendered Double Standards

A primary focus of Stri Purush Tulana is the critique of patriarchal morality, which functions as a system of unequal ethical standards applied to men and women. Shinde consistently examines the reasons behind the imposition of stringent moral codes on women, while men are afforded moral latitude. Employing rhetorical questions, irony, and incisive moral analysis, she deconstructs the presumption that women are intrinsically immoral or intellectually deficient.

Shinde contests religious texts and cultural narratives that portray women as instigators of temptation and societal disruption. She interrogates the rationale for holding women accountable for sexual misconduct when men enjoy unrestrained sexual liberty. By highlighting that offences such as violence, deceit, and exploitation are predominantly perpetrated by men, Shinde shifts the moral focus and urges society to acknowledge male responsibility (Shinde 223–24). Shinde's work notably diverges from the tendency to portray women as inherently virtuous. She advocates for ethical parity, positing that both genders possess the capacity for both good and ill. This rejection of moral essentialism sets her apart from reformist

movements that aimed to uplift women by depicting them as intrinsically pure or selfless. As Uma Chakravarti observes, such idealisation frequently functioned to reinforce patriarchal norms rather than challenge them (36–38).

By conceptualising morality as a product of social construction rather than an innate quality, Shinde illuminates how patriarchy sustains itself through selective ethical evaluations. Her critique demonstrates that morality functions as a tool of social control, governing women’s physicality and conduct while exonerating men from accountability.

Women’s Agency, Consent, and the Formation of Feminist Subjectivity

A particularly significant aspect of *Stri Purush Tulana* is its focus on women’s agency during a time when women’s intellectual, legal, and social independence was largely suppressed. Shinde argues that women possess the ability to think rationally, make moral judgements, and resist, thereby directly challenging portrayals of women as either passive victims or compliant subjects.

Shinde recognises that women’s subjugation is maintained by deeply embedded societal structures—including religion, family, caste, and custom—that shape women’s perceptions and limit their options. Nevertheless, she avoids depicting women as entirely powerless. Conversely, she encourages women to acknowledge the unfairness of their circumstances and to question the validity of male dominance. This focus on awareness and self-examination foreshadows subsequent feminist approaches to consciousness-raising (Rege 45). Her understanding of agency aligns with contemporary feminist perspectives, which view agency as fundamentally relational and dependent on circumstances, rather than as an intrinsic quality. Shinde implicitly recognises that women’s compliance with oppressive systems often stems from societal influences, rather than from independent decision-making. Through this elucidation, she critiques the moral paradigm that

assigns blame to women for their own subjugation (Sangari 868).

The act of writing *Stri Purush Tulana* itself constitutes a powerful assertion of agency. By claiming the right to critique men, religious organisations, and societal frameworks, Shinde challenges the silence imposed on women and re-establishes a space for feminist dialogue. Her voice not only contests patriarchal conventions but also challenges the marginalisation of women within the realm of public intellectualism.

Language, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Feminist Resistance

The feminist impact of *Stri Purush Tulana* is fundamentally shaped by its rhetorical techniques. Shinde's approach is characterised by a direct and assertive voice, which explicitly confronts men and assigns them responsibility for the hardships endured by women. Through the use of satire, irony, and moral argumentation, she undermines patriarchal power structures and contests the societal norm that women should communicate with politeness or subtlety. Furthermore, Shinde's decision to utilise accessible language, rather than intricate literary styles, broadens the reach of her critique, thus ensuring its accessibility to a wide readership. Her prose, characterised by an interplay of emotional fervour and logical reasoning, communicates both indignation and ethical discernment. This particular stylistic approach serves as a mode of defiance, challenging societal conventions that aimed to restrict women's expression to the home or religious settings.

Shinde's body of work does not seek approval from patriarchal structures; rather, it reveals their inherent inconsistencies and calls for responsibility. Tharu and Lalita note that early female authors, by asserting their entitlement to articulate their viewpoints rather than merely representing moral tenets, subverted prevailing discourses (75–77).

Intersection of Gender and Caste in Shinde's Feminist Vision

While *Stri Purush Tulana* ostensibly compares men and

women, its core critique is profoundly shaped by caste-related issues. Shinde's affiliation with the Satyashodhak Samaj grounds her feminist perspective within an anti-Brahmanical context, acknowledging the interconnectedness of caste and gender-based subjugation. Her most pointed critique targets upper-caste patriarchy, which employs religious doctrine to control women's sexuality and legitimise their subjugation. The suffering of widows, child brides, and women facing social exclusion exemplifies how caste-based norms exacerbate women's susceptibility to oppression.

Although Shinde's perspective, shaped by her position as an upper-caste woman, constrains the breadth of her analysis, her scholarship implicitly points towards an intersectional comprehension of subjugation (Omvedt 104). Subsequent Dalit feminist scholars have acknowledged Shinde as a significant forerunner, one who illuminated the interwoven dynamics of caste and gender-based oppression, despite her failure to employ modern theoretical language (Rege 52). Consequently, her work is of paramount importance within the historical development of intersectional feminist thought in India.

Contemporary Relevance of Stri Purush Tulana

Even though it was written in the nineteenth century, Stri Purush Tulana remains relevant in modern India. Social attitudes are still shaped by practices like moral policing, blaming victims, and controlling women's sexuality. Shinde's criticism of media portrayals that unfairly target women is especially relevant today, given the rise of sensationalist journalism and digital surveillance. Revisiting Shinde's work also challenges the idea that feminism is a Western concept. Her writing shows that feminist resistance in India has local roots, based on the country's history of social reform and women's experiences (Bhasin 14). Recognising Shinde as a key feminist thinker helps to decolonise feminist history and broadens our understanding of feminist movements in South Asia.

Conclusion

Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* is a significant work in the early history of Indian feminist thought. The text's unyielding critique of patriarchal structures, its exposure of moral inconsistencies, and its affirmation of women's ethical and intellectual capabilities serve to undermine the ideological underpinnings of gender-based oppression within colonial India. Shinde's emphasis on equality over moral idealisation, her direct and challenging style, and her acknowledgement of systemic injustice distinguish her as a notably progressive feminist thinker. This study posits that *Stri Purush Tulana* serves a dual function: it critiques the patriarchal structure while simultaneously enacting feminist agency through its very expression. Shinde's work, by re-establishing women's subjectivity and illuminating the dynamics of oppression, establishes a foundation for subsequent feminist explorations of agency, consent, and resistance. The reclamation of her voice enhances our comprehension of the historical dimensions of Indian feminism and underscores Tarabai Shinde's continued significance in present-day endeavours for gender justice.

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