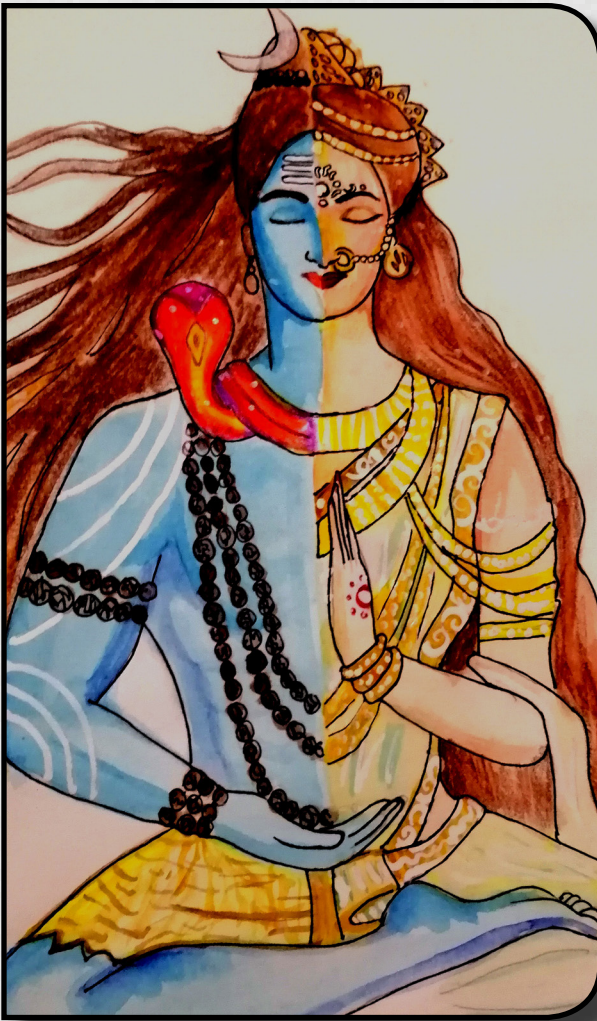


## Gender Equality : A Fight to Steer India to Worship God As "Ardh Nareeshwar"

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India is an ancient land, rich in its culture and traditions. Women in India are revered as Goddess and the Hindu deity Durga is celebrated as the Goddess of Shakti, of power to triumph good over evil. It is a trait which every mother, a Durga in her own self, wants to inculcate in the character of her children. In this land of sages and Sufi's, the best portrayal of Women and Men being equal is in the depiction of God as "Ardh Nareeshwar" in which God has been depicted as half man and half woman.



The concept of "Ardh Nareeshwar" has its origin in the belief that a part of God resides in all humans. This part of God in humans is known as the "the soul or the conscience". This soul is "gender neutral" and thereby the concept of God as "Ardh Nareeshwar". It also emanates from the belief that God is the "Life giver" (male) and also the "Care taker" (female). Hence God is both male and female and therefore worshipped as "Ardh Nareeshwar". The very thought of God as "Ardh Nareeshwar" is so pure, appealing and beautiful.

But over the years, since the evils of caste system became all pervasive in the Indian society, the society became inward looking, ridden by rituals, dogmas and superstitions. Humans in it have become materialistic and fatalistic, which has dented their resilience and slowly the "Shakti within", to believe that Good will win over Evil, has all but diminished.

Women here slowly lost their revered status and became an object of desire for Indian males. She became a commodity and a chattel in a deeply patriarchal society.

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The birth of a girl child, earlier a matter of rejoice, is now treated as a curse. Materialistic society could not bear to feed, clothe and educate a girl child, only to see their investment being transferred to another family, on marriage. A marriage where to make the girl acceptable to the groom needed a bribe in the form of "Dowry". It does not end here as during the course of her married life, her parents are supposed to shower costly gifts on her in laws and forever stay in their gratitude for accepting this burden of feeding, sheltering and clothing their girl child.

Girl child became a curse, best got rid of at the earliest, giving rise to child marriages.

In a land where God was celebrated as Ardh Nareeshwar, as the religion became the preserve of males and Gods started residing in temples, women were made into Devadasis, in abodes of worship, a sickening fall in status. Her entry into temple or even at home was governed by her reproductive body clock. Even recently, a teenage girl in South India, perished when the menstrual hut where she was banished to, collapsed during a cyclone. In another instance, a lactating young mother with her son died due to carbon monoxide poisoning from the wooden charcoal heater kept inside the menstrual hut, during the period of her monthly banishment.

And slowly, all such restrictions and regressive practices killed that "Shakti" within each woman and she became a living shell of her former self. But now no more! The Durga with the Indian woman is reawakening.

The Constitution of India grants all citizens equal rights. Since independence, efforts of successive Indian governments have been to co-opt women as equals in all walks of life. Co-education institutions, encouragement of women to join Armed Forces or Central Police Organisations, encouragement to excel in sports and most importantly to become educated and skilled, to join the work force as a productive modern citizen, is slowly taking roots.

Today, women make up approximately 27 percent of the workforce in India [1]. Out of this 95 percent are employed in unorganised sector [2]. But despite all the efforts since 1947, has the quality of life for a growing up girl and a woman changed much in India? Has misogyny in Indian society, which manifests itself at every nook and corner of the life of Indian women, making them feel like an object and to feel insecure, reduced? Has our society again realised the concept of Ardh Nareeshwar and has started practising "gender equality" or "gender neutrality", are questions which I leave to reader's best judgement.

Studies have revealed that both species of humans have numerous emotional and mental dissimilarities. These differences affect their thinking, behaviour, habits and their role towards future generation. Human male is inherently aggressive in disposition supported by more physical strength endowed by nature as compared to their female companion.



Females of human species get naturally attracted to tall, dark men with deep baritone voices. Such men trigger a sense of security in the women and their subconscious judges them as healthy specimens who can provide them with healthy children and a safe life to nurture them. It is this that makes the behaviour of female human species as submissive. As a mother she is considered capable of ingraining human values in her children such as compassion, humility, duty and responsibility, love for all life forms on earth etc.

Often in debates, however, these inherent mental and physiological differences are discarded and difference in behaviour are attributed to the environment in which men and women have grown up. Social environment and upbringing are, no doubt important but ultimate result is patriarchy – a mindset in which women are submissive and their male counterparts are assertive.

The sex of a human, the biological identity attained by the physiological structure that human is born in, is a stroke of fate for a human. Conception, giving birth and nurturing the child with breast milk definitely are undisputed biological functions which nature has ordained the female species of all mammals in the animal world to execute. In humans, this possibly is where the difference between a male and female end. In case exposed by the society in an equal way with equal opportunities as her male counterpart, a girlchild too will develop many or most of the thinking and behaviour of her male counterpart and this is today in full display with the girl child becoming astronauts, Prime Ministers, fighter pilots, corporate heads and female leaders and workers in all fields, some which were even exclusive male bastions like the Army.



This is not to proclaim that women are thought and treated as equals. There is actually a tilt and the endeavour of a modern educated society is to produce gender neutral society. Great strides have been made in this direction already and United Nations too has passed many resolutions and launched many programs as has all the states. The thinking is changing, albeit slowly. . as they say, “Hunoz, Dilli Durast”, that means “Delhi is still far away”.

## Education

“Catch Them Young” is the key in evolving a gender-neutral world. The environment at home, society and the school programmes a child’s thinking. In nascent years, in this modern age of working parents, schools are a second home for children where they spend more time awake, then at home. Needless to say, that it’s here that both the male and female student should be subjected to a curriculum which implants the concept of gender neutrality firmly, nurtures it vigorously and impartially, over the school years, till graduation.

Children following higher education too should be subjected to a gender neutral, well supervised environment to eradicate misogyny and unfair treatment of either by the other. Such a bringing up will develop gender-neutral humans.

It is the need of the hour and at its very inception it requires the teaching and other staff at the educational institution to be trained and sensitised to develop and nurture gender neutral children. The home and society too need to be made aware of this need through media campaigns, religious teachers, workplace seminars and training.

Social taboos, the results of caste system and patriarchal society however will take time to diminish. Taking baby steps towards this, India today has increasing participation of the girl child in formal education system and increasing women force in the formal work sector. However, still in 2017, compared to 28% of boys not enrolled in schools, the girls were 32% [3]. Caste system denies many intelligent Dalit girls schooling or to drop out after elementary education. In poor villages even today nearly 27% girls are married off before they reach 18 years of age [4]. Schools lack toilet facilities in rural India, where most of India lives. As of 2017, every year nearly 23 million girls dropped out of school after attaining reproductive maturity [5], more due to lack of personal hygiene facilities in schools and also due to lack of education on their physiological maturity and rampant social taboos. Digital Literacy and access to internet too remains at a dismal 60 percent in 12 States and UTs [6]. But things are rapidly changing, mainly due to awareness being spread by electronic media and even by Bollywood.

The good news is that since 2001, literacy of girl child has shown a steady increase. In 2020 it was approximately 54% [7]. This has been the achievement of Right to Education 2009 Act which makes it compulsory for children from six years to 14 years to attend school, where, to alleviate malnutrition, they are provided with nutritious meals.

## Employment

20.3% of labour in the organised work sector is women [8]. A Deloitte study reveals 95% of Indian women workforce is in unorganised sector [9]. Agricultural sector

witnessed 33% women's participation [10]. In a one hectare farm as per a study in a north Indian state, a pair of bullocks works for 1064 hours in a year, a man 1212 hours and a woman a staggering 3,485 hours. In Andhra Pradesh, during the agricultural season a woman works 15 hours in the fields whereas her male companion puts in seven to eight hours [11].

In India, as the woman steps out of the security network of home- educational institute and joins the mainstream work force in organised / unorganised sector, she is subject to harassment and violence. This is increasing by the day as their increased visibility and ability to earn and possibly earn more, are an affront to the patriarchal mindset of the Indian Society.

Much will depend on how the young ladies respond to these challenges at their work place. Submissiveness, accepting lower pay, longer working hours, tolerating misogynistic behaviour even when disguised in jokes, partiality and failure to support a female colleague against exploitation are all harbingers of more exploitation. One must earn respect of the male and female colleagues through performance and amiable yet reserved personality and by not accepting any favours for being a woman.

A gender-neutral workplace will epitomise gender neutral work assessment, an equal chance in promotions, respect for attaining motherhood and the "right" to be away from work when in confinement due to pregnancy and later for initial nurturing of the child. Motherhood in no way should be a career impediment in gender neutral work culture. A gender-neutral world should have gender neutral administrative facilities as they should be in gender neutral educational and training institutions.

## **Woman & Home**

For an Indian working woman, managing home and workplace is a very fine balancing act. The patriarchal mindset entrenched in Indian males is so pervasive that even the most educated and aware ones somehow take it for granted that the home is a world reserved for the Lady of the house. This mindset is the barrier.

The story in both organised and unorganised sectors is similar for a working lady who trudges back home tired from her workplace, only to find that her children, her husband, her in-laws and the house waiting for her to provide succour and happiness, with no shortcuts. Herein ladies can do their bit to change the mindset by rebelling against this mind set and being firm in equal division of domestic work amongst all able family members. Germaine Greer, the famous female activist of yesteryears, in an interview to the BBC had stated that "all women by nature, prefer to stay within their home and will venture out to work and earn, only to service domestic debt". For majority of Indian working women, she wasn't much off the target.



## **Pandemic & Women**

The on-going pandemic has affected girls/females in more than one ways. As schools closed due to lockdown, girl child returned to mal nutrition especially in rural and semi-rural India. Mid-day meal had been a major factor in attracting girl child to school. As it stopped, she suffered as her male sibling would be a preferred child for nutrition when parents were struggling to meet daily expenses in their tough times.

On job front, pandemic has seen preference to males over female workers in many professions/ industries when the employer was faced with the need to cut his workforce. In those households where males were laid off and women remained employed, the earnings of such women were used to pay the family bills, instalments of various loans, school fee etc. The pandemic in such cases was a great leveller but Indian male's patriarchal mind set may not accept women as equal yet. Such women must drive home her equality albeit with compassion.

Recently, Mckinsey conducted a survey of how the pandemic affected the women workforce [11]. A few important self-explanatory findings are listed below: -

- **Women make up for 39% of the total workforce. During pandemic, 54% women lost their jobs in business downsizing.**
- **Women have 1.8 times more chances of losing job than men.**
- **Majority of women are employed in COVID hit sectors like retail, accommodation, hospitality, health and so on.**
- **70% of all health and social workers are women.**
- **79% of the Nurses are women.**
- **Women also have to take care of the sick at home; therefore, they are more prone to the infection.**
- **Due to work from home and closed schools, the domestic unpaid work load of women has increased by 30%.**
- **The Domestic Violence against women has risen by 32-35%.**

The study stated that after the pandemic, the world should give priority to the following in respect of the women: -

- o **Education.**
- o **Family planning.**
- o **Maternal mortality.**
- o **Digital inclusion.**
- o **Monetise unpaid care work.**

The study has stated that if 1.7% of world's GDP is invested in the above for five years, it will raise the GDP of the world by three times. Actions to invest in Women jobs will give a \$13 trillion boost to the world's GDP by 2030.

## End Note

In an IMF study, IMF Chief Christine Lagarde and Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg have stated that if in India the women workforce participation reaches an equal level to that of men, India's GDP will get a boost of a whopping 27 percent [13].

For a young lady of today, to break the shackles of patriarchal society in India to attain a gender equal status is a very big challenge. The key to success is to take the fight of demanding gender equal or gender-neutral society, into the camp of the men dominated, patriarchal society.

For all of you, the key to achieve the above, is imbibing good education and exploring the world of knowledge by quality interactions with the teachers and your peers. Added to this is the need of each girl to step out of their homes in spare time and pursue sports and adventure activities. Acquisition of life skills such as cycling, driving a powered two/ four-wheeler, ability to fix a defective water tap or an electric appliance, to paint a door or to change a punctured tyre and such like skills add to the confidence of a young lady, making her realise that she can do what till now was thought to be the work of a male.

Armed with good education and a well-rounded personality, the young ladies must aspire to join the work force of the organised work sector and make their mark by their sincerity and hard work. Professional respect so earned will mellow down misogyny.

You must demand employment in all workplaces and even in the Infantry in the Indian Army. Remember Kalpana Chawla, the small-town girl from India with big dreams, who made her indelible mark in this world by becoming an astronaut at NASA.

To commemorate her contribution, on 10th Sept 2020, a commercial cargo spacecraft was sent to International Space Centre named after Kalpana Chawla.

As you young ladies mature, become contributors-enablers- employers and mothers, in the course of life, you must strive to break shackles of patriarchy and misogyny and strive to make the world so gender equal/gender neutral that it cleanses the soul of India and India again starts believing in God as "Ardh Nareeshwar".

It is your internet savvy, knowledge armed generation which has to take up this struggle, in earnest. Yours is the "make or break" generation for gender equality fight in India.

The onus lies on you. Do you have it in you?

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