

A Hermeneutical Inquiry into Theological Feminism and Indigenous Indian Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersections of theological feminism and indigenous Indian philosophy through a hermeneutical engagement with key goddess texts such as the Devi Suktam and the Durga Saptashati. It investigates how feminist hermeneutics can revive marginalized epistemologies often excluded from canonical and colonial interpretations of women's rituals, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom. Grounded in Indigenous feminist hermeneutics, the inquiry advocates for a dialogical approach that draws upon local philosophical categories while engaging with global feminist theological discourse. Although theology has long been shaped by patriarchal hierarchies, India's goddess traditions offer both textual and lived affirmations of feminine divinity as a potent source of knowledge, power, and creativity. By interpreting theological feminism through indigenous philosophical concepts such as prakriti, shakti, yogini, and devi, this work demonstrates how resistant hermeneutics can restore the sacred feminine as an epistemic authority within the Indian Knowledge System. It affirms that the sacred feminine is not merely symbolic but is enacted and embodied in practice.

KEYWORDS: Indian Knowledge System, Hermeneutics, Devi Suktam, Shakti Theology, Durga Saptashati (Devi Mahatmya), Kunjika Stotram, Feminist Theology, Sacred Feminine.

INTRODUCTION

Indian feminist theology needs to question and depend on Western feminist frameworks. It needs to decolonize its ways of knowing based on its own philosophical categories, like prakriti, shakti, yogini, and devi. At the same time, global feminist theology has given strong critiques of patriarchal monotheisms, but its conceptual language can sometimes cover up the subtle and varied indigenous ideas that make up Indian thought. For example, Madhu Khanna (The Tantric Way, 1986)¹ and Laurie Patton (Bringing the Gods to Mind, 2005)² have shown that interpreting prakriti as "nature" takes away from its deep Sankhya-Yoga meaning as the dynamic, generative matrix of existence. Hindu texts and living ritual cultures place feminine power at the center of everything, unlike many traditions that sideline women or use symbols to represent them. The Devi Mahatmya³, Saundaryalahari⁴, Yogini cults, and Srividya Tantras does not only have women as minor characters; they put the cosmic feminine at the center of creation and freedom. The Devi Suktam⁵ (Rigveda 10.125) shows this idea obviously when the lady seer Vāk Ambhṛṇī says, "I am the Queen, gatherer of treasures, knower, first among the worshipful." This is a radical and indigenous kind of self-authorship in which the speaker and the goddess are one.

Sanskrit (Devanagari): अहं राष्ट्री संगमनी वसूनां चिकितुषी प्रथमाया यज्ञियानाम् ।
तां मा देवा व्यदधुः पुरुत्रा भूरीस्थात्रां भूर्यवेशयन्तीम् ॥ — ऋग्वेद १०.१२५.३

aham rāṣṭrī saṅgamanī vasūnām cikituṣī prathamāyā yajñīyānām | tāṃ mā devā vyadadhuḥ purutrā
bhūristhātrām bhūryāveśayantīm ||

Rigveda Mandala 10, Sukta 125, Verse 3, spoken by Vāk Ambhṛṇī, who identifies herself both as the seer and the goddess—a radical expression of self-authorship where speech (Vāk) is both the voice and the divine reality itself.

This kind of written evidence is not just an abstract marginalization; it is reflected in the daily spiritual lives of women all over India who keep alive ritual, oral, and ecological knowledge systems. These women range from Vedic seers and Tantric practitioners to rural priestesses and ritual specialists. These living traditions demonstrate an epistemology that is relational, embodied, and resilient to dominant structures that attempt to marginalise feminine power.

A hermeneutical recovery of these Indigenous threads goes against both colonial interpretations and internal patriarchal distortions. It brings the Indian Knowledge System back to life through its most forgotten stewards: women. Indian feminist philosophy needs to bring back women's roles as custodians of practical, spiritual, and ecological wisdom, just as Paula Gunn Allen⁶ (1986) did for Native American women's spiritual traditions. This paper says that Indian feminist theology can use Western feminist critique to show how colonialism created patriarchal power structures⁷, but it must stay true to its own ways of knowing and lived experiences. By doing this, it shows that the holy feminine in India is not just a theory but a real thing that happens all the time, thanks to living rituals, community memory, and the strong and flexible knowledge systems of indigenous women.

EPISTEMIC DECOLONISATION AND HERMENEUTICAL RECOVERY

In the lengthy history of Hindu religious scriptures, the voice of women has frequently been drowned out by colonial readings and a patriarchal mindset that put Sanskritic scripture canons at the top and pushed women's daily ritual and oral traditions to the side. But these writings also include strong statements of feminine epistemic authority that need to be brought back to life through a hermeneutical approach based on decolonial feminist points of view. The Devi Suktam, also known as the Vāk Suktam, of the Rigveda⁸ and the Devi Mahatmya of the Markandeya Purana⁹ are two of the best places to find this recovery. Together, they reveal how the goddess claims both cosmological and hermeneutical sovereignty through her speech and strength. She invites us to read her words as proof that sacred knowledge is not only theory, but also practice that is kept and passed down through literature, ritual, and oral memory¹⁰.

When we see how the Devi Mahatmya turns these old Vedic ideas into myths and rituals, we may better understand the strength of this kind of recovery. The Devi Mahatmya, or Durga Saptashati, is the most important book in the Shakta tradition. It may be found in the Markandeya Purana (Chapters 81–93)¹¹. It tells the story of the goddess's fights against Mahishasura and other demons that threaten the balance of the universe. In this case, Devi is Mahamaya, the big illusion that holds the world together and sets it free. In the passage, the text states, "Encountering the goddess in battle, Mahisha, the great demon, fought fiercely, supported by his hordes and resisted by the gods" (स देव्या युद्धमासाद्य महिषोऽपि महासुरः शक्तिभिः सगणैः सार्धं सुरैरपि सघर्षितः)¹². In traditional readings, Mahishasura stands for ignorance, pride, and the ego's many masks, which only the goddess's strength can see through. Women who read the Chandi Path in temples and homes do not see the goddess's victory as a faraway story; they see it as a real, protective power that can be called upon for childbirth, harvest, and the good of the community¹³. Thus, the text lives on in the ritual, which women have repeated for generations as its protectors and interpreters.

Colonial research and later patriarchal commentary used narrow textual orthodoxy to methodically change how people saw India's goddess traditions¹⁴. This cut off the feminine from its link to the living matrix of nature and daily life. This intellectual colonization made prakriti, the dynamic, self-renewing principle of nature in Sankhya and Shakta thinking, into a passive background for male-centered philosophical systems¹⁵. It pushed the visible and physical feminine to the periphery of society, labeling it as superstition or folk residue¹⁶. The holy feminine, on the other hand, is not just an idea; it is a way of life that is still alive in the oral chants, healing rituals, and ecological knowledge that mothers pass down to their daughters¹⁷. By bringing back the oral, ritual, and performative aspects together with the canonical verses, hermeneutics shows how the goddess is still a part of everyday life: Shakti is not just worshipped but also acted out in daily acts of ritual care, seasonal ceremonies, and the spoken word¹⁸. These living practices show that the sacred feminine is not quiet or still, but an active epistemic presence that no colonial reading could ever totally remove.

So, a decolonial feminist hermeneutic makes the definition of "scripture" bigger¹⁹. It unearths previously overlooked lines, such as the Devi Suktam, where a woman asserts her dual identity as a goddess and a seer²⁰. It looks at how women's religious practices, such as fasting, chanting, and drawing protective patterns, act as living commentary that keeps the goddess's power alive and changes it over time²¹. It argues that the way these rituals create knowledge should be understood as indigenous theory in action rather than superstition, which modern academics ought to pay attention to.²²

By bringing back these interwoven traditions, we also bring back the original power of Shakti, not as an abstract symbol but as a living principle of speech, ritual, and community rebirth. When interpreted in a hermeneutical way, the Devi Suktam and Devi Mahatmya remind us that theology is not just found in old texts; it is also alive whenever women talk, sing, and call on the goddess as the voice of the universe and the law of the cosmos²³. This is what epistemic decolonization is all about: putting women back in their rightful place as authors, transmitters, and guardians of sacred knowledge within an indigenous framework that is not just a copy of Western feminist theology but is based on ideas like prakriti, shakti, yogini, and devi²⁴.

THEOLOGY OF SHAKTI: A LOOK AT HOW TO READ

Shakti theology is a dynamic construct; it is a multifaceted interpretative domain that integrates Vedic hymns, Puranic narratives, folk traditions, and Tantric doctrines to build a living repository of the holy feminine, serving not merely as a symbol but as a mode of understanding²⁵. A decolonised feminist hermeneutics examines multiple dimensions: the text, commentary, ritual, and quotidian practices that sustain Shakti in domestic and sacred spaces²⁶. Shakti transforms into a hermeneutical force—a dynamic power that resists a singular interpretation and continually generates new interpretations via those who invoke her.

In goddess-centric traditions of India, women have consistently had a pivotal role in the cosmos²⁷. However, the advent of colonialism transformed these profound indigenous beliefs into a rigid, patriarchal, and literary framework influenced by Victorian Christian ideologies.²⁸ People from outside of India often missed the embodied, ritual, and oral places where women have had power to interpret for generations. The embodied, ritual, and oral spaces where women have had interpretive power for generations were frequently overlooked by people from outside of India²⁹. The Devi Mahatmya in the Markandeya Purana says over and over that the goddess is the source of freedom, abundance, and protection: "The Goddess who dwells in all beings as Shakti." Women say this mantra every day. Women chant this mantra every day³⁰ as part of a ritual that keeps a living tradition going. It gives them the courage to fight for their families and communities.

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता ।
नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै
नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः ॥

Meaning:

*Salutations again and again to the Goddess who resides in all beings in the form of **power (Shakti)**.*

Explanation: The Devi as pure energy empowers every being — she is the life-force.

Colonial translators generally didn't pay attention to this theological issue since they liked elite Sanskrit commentaries better than oral traditions led by women³¹. The Agni Purana also talks about goddesses that women worship in their homes as protectors of crops and fertility³². Even though colonial ethnographers called it "folk superstition," this information is crucial to local Hindus. Indian women have traditionally taught religious knowledge by doing different household chores for Lakshmi, Gauri, or community goddesses in kitchens, courtyards, and shrines³³. They have been worshippers, storytellers, experts on rituals, and protectors of sacred tradition, among other things. So, decolonial hermeneutics brings back the truth that colonial frameworks tried to hide: Hindu goddess traditions have always seen women as a strong source of life and knowledge. They get their strength from practice, stories, and community, not as a secondary source.

The Kunjika Stotram is a short but powerful hymn that people used to say as a secret key (the word "kunjika" means "key") to unlock the hidden power of the Durga Saptashati or Devi Mahatmya. The stotram is in the Rudrayamala Tantra and is often added to the Chandi Patha. It is written as a conversation between Shiva and Parvati, and Shiva himself says that chanting the Kunjika alone gives the same benefits as reciting the whole Chandi³⁴.

Sanskrit:

ॐ नमः शिवाय
शिव उवाच ।
शृणु देवी प्रवक्ष्यामि कुञ्जिकास्तोत्रमुत्तमम् ।
येन मन्त्रप्रभावेण चण्डीजापः शुभो भवेत् ॥

Translation:

Om, salutations to Shiva.

Shiva said, "Listen, O Devi, I shall declare the supreme Kunjika Stotram, by whose mantra-power the recitation of the Chandi becomes auspicious and fruitful."

The first lines indicate that the Kunjika Stotram serves as a meta-commentary within the broader context of the Devi Mahatmya cycle, viewed from a hermeneutical perspective. It shows that the recitation of the text is not just a straight line; it has layers³⁵. The "key" is not just the words; it's the esoteric attitude, or bhava, that lets the Devi's living presence into the practitioner's own mind. The hymn's secrecy also shows how some forms of Shakta worship keep knowledge alive not just through public commentary, but also through oral, initiatory transmission, mostly through guru-shishya and family lineages³⁶. The Kunjika Stotram is not a common subject of study in mainstream Indology, but some Tantric hermeneutics scholars do look at it in the context of Chandi Patha traditions. In *Encountering the Goddess* (1991), Thomas B. Coburn talks about how the Devi Mahatmya recitations are layered in performance³⁷. June McDaniel's *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls* (2004) looks at how women use mantras, including secret verses like the Kunjika, to combine everyday rituals with more mystical ones³⁸. Modern Tantric scholars like Madhu Khanna have also pointed out that these "minor" stotras are crucial for interpretation because they encode what mainstream patriarchal readings leave out: that Devi's power comes not only from grand myth but also from mantric "shortcuts" that are passed down orally among initiates, often women and householders, outside of male priestly authority³⁹. So, if you read the Kunjika Stotram in a hermeneutical way, it is not a "lesser" appendix but an interpretive pivot. It is a living device that shows how Shakta texts have many levels of meaning, such as narrative, mantra, ritual, and secret oral instruction. It shows that the goddess tradition protects its deepest keys in the very margins, showing that the sacred feminine resists fixity and remains open only to those prepared to receive her hidden speech.

The Kunjika Stotram is a wonderful example of how Shakta traditions hide complex ways of knowing in lines that seem simple but connect text, mantra, and living ritual. The Kunjika looks like just an addendum to the Devi Mahatmya recitation, but in the Rudrayamala Tantra tradition and the Chandi Patha manuals used by Bengali and Odia families, it is the rahasya (secret) that unlocks the Chandi's full power. The first lines describe Shiva telling Parvati that singing the Kunjika alone gives the same benefits as the whole 700 verses of the Durga Saptashati. This layer shows that knowledge can be focused in an oral "key" rather than linear or canonical. June McDaniel's book *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*⁴⁰ (2004) documents fieldwork among Bengali Shakta families that shows the Kunjika is commonly discreetly chanted at the end of group Chandi readings during Navaratri and at home pujas for healing or childbirth. In Odisha, village priestesses (not Brahmins) called Baris or Devi Dasi keep the Kunjika alive by passing down ceremonial handbooks (pothi) from mother to daughter. These women do not always say the whole Sanskrit Durga Saptashati every day. Instead, they chant the Kunjika, which is a simple and focused manner to call on the goddess's main mantric force. Feminist hermeneutics is the third layer. The story itself is important because Shiva doesn't protect the Kunjika for male sages; instead, he shows it to Parvati immediately. This interaction makes the goddess not only a passive listener but also a knower who keeps mantric secrets. In real life, this relationship is seen in

families where older women teach younger women how to say the Kunjika and what conditions must be met for them to do so. This practice has survived centuries of male-scripted ritual orthodoxy that tried to limit mantra diksha to initiated Brahmin males. Madhu Khanna says in *The Tantric Way* (1986) that these "minor" stotras have a lot of esoteric force since they are passed down orally and kept safe in private rituals. Indigenous Epistemology at Work—The Kunjika Stotram shows that knowledge is performative: it lives through voice, memory, and secret. This approach is different from fully textualized Vedic comments. For example, in Odisha's In Chandi Patha schools, older women teach young girls how to recite the Kunjika during Durga Puja night vigils. The recitation is not for show but to protect the home, heal, and ask for fertility. In a lot of Nepalese Shakta lineages, village Devi Purohitas also recite the Kunjika as a private ritual before public Chandi Homas. This practice reveals that the goddess's mantric power lives on in more than just colonial Indology's printed works; it is also found in the "hidden speech" of women who still protect it. These examples show that the Kunjika Stotram is not just an extra appendix; it is a living hermeneutical force. It is a vivid reminder that indigenous Shakta epistemology was not limited to priestly or male authority but thrived through secrecy, orality, and the ritual power of women who hold the key.

CONCLUSION

As Thomas B. Coburn has shown through his work on the Devi Mahatmya, these studies remind us that Indian feminist theology has never just been a bunch of old goddess myths written down in books. Real women in homes and temples have always kept it alive with their daily prayers, chants, and secret messages. Madhu Khanna, who writes about Tantric paths, says that strong hymns like the Kunjika Stotram are powerful not because they are in official lists but because women who act as living keepers of Shakti's hidden speech guard, memorize, and whisper them. June McDaniel's fieldwork on popular goddess worship shows us that the Devi is present not only in Sanskrit commentaries but also in the songs, healing rites, and folk performances led by village women and household priestesses far away from elite temples. Sharada Sugirtharajah's work on postcolonial readings reminds us that colonial scholars, because they were men, systematically flattened these living, layered feminine ways of knowing by calling them superstition or peripheral custom. But when we look back at voices like Maitreyi, who had the courage to question the immortality of wealth in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, or Akka Mahadevi and Andal, whose Tamil hymns and Kannada vacanas open up new spiritual grammars of love and freedom, we see that women have always been interpreters, poets, and theologians in their own right. These layered voices—the household chants, the secret mantras, and the village Gramadevi vows—are living proof, as Coburn, Khanna, McDaniel, and Sugirtharajah each remind us, that the sacred feminine in India is not just a theory but a force that comes back to life every time a woman lights a lamp, chants a verse, or passes on a mantra as her birthright. So, a truly decolonized feminist theology needs to listen for these quiet but strong echoes. They are proof that Shakti lives where women protect her name and give her new life every day. The layered voices—household chants, secret mantras, and village Gramadevi vows—serve as tangible evidence, as Coburn, Khanna, McDaniel, and Sugirtharajah each emphasize, that the sacred feminine in India is not merely a concept but a dynamic force that is revitalized whenever a woman lights a lamp, recites a verse, or transmits a mantra as her birthright. A genuinely decolonized feminist theology must attune itself to these subtle yet powerful reverberations. They exemplify that Shakti resides where women safeguard her identity and rejuvenate her daily.

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(Coburn specifically discusses the layered nature of Devi Mahatmya performance, Chandi Patha traditions, and interpretive depth in these pages.)

36. Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), pp. 70–72.
(Khanna explains how minor stotras and mantric secrecy carry esoteric meanings outside priestly authority in this section.)
37. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, pp. 37–39. (Same pages, as this repeats the same point.)
38. June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 160–163.
(McDaniel describes how women use secret mantras like Kunjika, combining folk rituals with esoteric Tantric practice.)
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