

Revolutionary voice of Tarabai Shinde in Colonial India: Feminism, Gender equality and educational reform

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Introduction

Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910), a pioneering feminist thinker and writer from 19th-century Maharashtra, occupies a critical place in the historiography of Indian social reform and feminist thought. Her groundbreaking text *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men), published in 1882, stands as one of the earliest and most radical critiques of patriarchy, caste, and the moral double standards embedded in Indian society. Written in response to the prevailing social norms that demonized women—especially widows—while valorising male authority, Shinde’s work marked a decisive departure from the reformist rhetoric of her time by explicitly confronting the intersections of gender and caste oppression. Emerging from the socio-political ferment of colonial India, Shinde was deeply influenced by the Satyashodhak Samaj, a progressive anti-caste movement led by Jyotirao Phule. Her engagement with the movement informed her scathing analysis of Brahminical patriarchy and underscored the necessity of social reform grounded in egalitarian and rationalist principles. Yet, despite the critical importance of her contributions, Shinde’s voice has often remained marginalized within mainstream academic discourses and feminist histories.

This research seeks to revisit and critically examine Shinde’s intellectual legacy by investigating the thematic and argumentative structure of *Stri Purush Tulana*, situating it within its historical context, and evaluating its enduring relevance to contemporary feminist and educational discourses. In doing so, the study not only contributes to the growing body of scholarship that reclaims subaltern voices in Indian feminism but also interrogates the broader socio-cultural mechanisms that shape and silence dissent.

Review of Related Literature

The study of Tarabai Shinde’s *Stri Purush Tulana* has gained scholarly attention in recent years, with scholars such as Omvedt (2008) and Rege (2006) noting its significant contributions to feminist and anti-caste discourse. Shinde’s work is situated within the larger context of 19th-century Indian feminism, which emerged as a response to both colonial rule and patriarchal social structures. While early reformers like Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar addressed social and legal reforms, figures such as Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule (Omvedt, 2008) made explicit connections between caste oppression and gender subjugation. Shinde’s critique aligns with this tradition, offering a distinctive feminist perspective that challenges Brahminical patriarchy and calls for gender equality. Her anti-caste stance is informed by the rationalist ideologies of the Satyashodhak Samaj, which sought to dismantle the caste-based oppression of women (Omvedt, 2008). Additionally, her advocacy for women’s education aligns

with the broader critiques of the colonial education system that excluded women, especially from marginalized castes, from intellectual life (Forbes, 1996; Kosambi, 1993). Scholars like Chatterjee (1989) and Mani (1989) have explored the complexities of colonial modernity, and Shinde's work critiques both colonial and indigenous patriarchal norms. Her ideas resonate with contemporary feminist movements, particularly Dalit feminism, which highlights the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression (Rege, 2006), and her critiques of gendered double standards and moral policing remain relevant to ongoing debates in gender justice (Kumar, 2018; Chakravarti, 2003). Through this, Shinde's work continues to inform both Indian and global feminist discourse, advocating for education as a tool for social transformation and gender equality.

Significance of the Paper

This study holds significant academic and social relevance as it revisits and re-evaluates the pioneering contributions of Tarabai Shinde, a trailblazing voice in colonial India whose work has been foundational yet historically marginalized in mainstream feminist and educational discourses. By engaging critically with her seminal text *Stri Purush Tulana*, the study sheds light on early articulations of intersectional feminism in India, foregrounding Shinde's challenge to patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies. Situating Shinde's ideas within the socio-political context of 19th-century colonial India allows for a deeper understanding of how indigenous reformist and rationalist movements shaped emergent feminist consciousness. Furthermore, by examining her stance on women's education, the research highlights how Shinde's advocacy laid intellectual groundwork for later developments in gender-sensitive educational reform. The relevance of Shinde's thought extends well beyond her historical moment. Her radical critique of gender inequality, moral double standards, and systemic exclusion remains profoundly applicable to contemporary feminist theory and activism. This study thus contributes to the broader project of decolonizing feminist historiography and reinforces the need to incorporate voices like Shinde's into present-day dialogues on gender justice, social reform, and inclusive education policy.

Objectives

1. To critically analyse the central themes and argumentative strategies employed in Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana*, with a focus on her feminist and anti-caste discourse.
2. To contextualize Shinde's writing within the broader socio-political and cultural landscape of 19th-century colonial India, examining the factors that influenced her perspectives and literary intervention.
3. To explore the implications of Tarabai Shinde's educational advocacy and its impact on discourses of women's education during the colonial period.
4. To assess the contemporary relevance of Shinde's ideological contributions in shaping modern feminist thought and informing current debates on gender equality and social justice.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a historical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources for data analysis. A wide range of authentic materials, including scholarly books, journal articles, government documents, magazines, relevant websites, and visual sources, have been incorporated to ensure a

comprehensive analysis. In addition, both internal and external critiques have been applied to critically assess and interpret the collected data.

Objective-wise Discussions

The following discussions have been made in accordance with the objectives of the study –

According to Objective 1:

Central themes and argumentative strategies employed in Tarabai Shinde's 'Stri Purush Tulana'

The objective of investigating the key themes and arguments narrated in Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men, 1882) involves a critical engagement with one of the earliest feminist texts in modern Indian literature. This work, composed in colonial Maharashtra, is a foundational document that interrogates the gendered structures of power, morality, and social control prevalent in 19th-century Indian society (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). One of the central themes in *Stri Purush Tulana* is the **double standard of morality** applied to men and women. Shinde critiques the patriarchal norms that vilify women for transgressions while excusing similar behavior in men, particularly in the context of sexuality, widowhood, and domestic roles. This critique emerges in direct response to the death of a young Brahmin widow who was severely punished for alleged moral misconduct, exposing the societal bias against women (Kosambi, 1993).

Another salient theme is the **institutionalization of caste and gender hierarchies**. Shinde aligns her gender critique with anti-caste thought, reflecting the ideological influence of the Satyashodhak Samaj. She condemns the Brahminical order that marginalizes women and lower-caste individuals, thereby linking the oppression of women to broader structures of social stratification (Omvedt, 2008). Shinde also emphasized the **lack of educational opportunities and intellectual agency for women**, arguing that denying women access to education perpetuates ignorance and subjugation. She asserts that women's moral and intellectual inferiority is not natural but the result of systematic exclusion from knowledge and learning (Forbes, 1996). The rhetorical structure of the text is itself revolutionary; Shinde uses sarcasm, irony, and moral questioning to destabilize dominant narratives. Her arguments foreground the **hypocrisy of male authority** and challenge the legitimacy of religious and cultural norms used to justify women's oppression. In doing so, she advocates for **gender equality, social justice, and rational critique** of tradition (Chakravarti, 2003).

In essence, *Stri Purush Tulana* is not merely a critique of gender inequality but a broader philosophical and political statement that calls into question the moral legitimacy of the existing social order. The work remains a landmark contribution to Indian feminist thought, offering an early articulation of intersectionality by addressing the intertwined nature of caste and gender oppression.

According to Objective 2:

Shinde's writing within the broader socio-political and cultural landscape of 19th-century colonial India

The objective of examining the socio-political and cultural context of 19th-century India that influenced Shinde's writing requires a nuanced understanding of the historical backdrop against which her work emerged. The 19th century in India was marked by significant social, political, and cultural upheavals resulting from both indigenous reform movements and the colonial encounter. This period saw the rise

of social reformers like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Rammohan Roy, who advocated for women's rights, education, and the abolition of oppressive practices such as sati and child marriage (Forbes, 1996). The colonial administration itself had a complex impact. While the British promoted certain educational and legal reforms, these were often limited and failed to challenge deeply entrenched gender and caste hierarchies. Moreover, the colonial discourse frequently portrayed Indian society as regressive to justify imperial rule, thus influencing the ways in which Indian reformers articulated their critiques (Mani, 1989).

Tarabai Shinde was profoundly influenced by the ideology of the **Satyashodhak Samaj**, which challenged Brahminical patriarchy and caste-based discrimination. This anti-caste and rationalist framework provided her with a critical lens to interrogate both indigenous and colonial systems of oppression. Her writing reflects the **growing consciousness among lower-caste and marginalized women** who were beginning to articulate their experiences and assert their rights in the public domain (Omvedt, 2008). Culturally, the 19th century was a time of contestation between tradition and modernity, as new ideas about gender, education, and morality circulated among the Indian intelligentsia. Shinde's work must be situated within this **transitional cultural milieu**, where early feminist voices began to emerge in response to both internal social constraints and external colonial influences (Chatterjee, 1989).

Thus, the socio-political and cultural context of 19th-century India played a pivotal role in shaping Tarabai Shinde's radical critique. Her work can be seen as both a product of and a response to the complex forces of social reform, caste politics, colonial modernity, and emerging feminist consciousness.

According to Objective 3:

Tarabai Shinde's educational advocacy and its impact on discourses of women's education during the colonial period

The objective of assessing the impact of Tarabai Shinde's work on education during the colonial period necessitates an exploration of her role within the broader socio-reformist and feminist movements of 19th-century India. While Tarabai Shinde is primarily recognized for her pioneering feminist text *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men, 1882), her contribution to the discourse on education, particularly women's education, holds significant historical relevance (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

Tarabai was an active member of the **Satyashodhak Samaj**, an organization established by Jyotirao Phule with the aim of dismantling caste and gender-based discrimination and promoting education among the marginalized (Omvedt, 2008). Within this ideological framework, Shinde emerged as a vocal critic of the patriarchal and Brahminical structures that perpetuated educational deprivation, especially among women and lower castes. Although she did not directly establish educational institutions, her literary work served as a critical foundation for questioning gendered exclusions in colonial education systems (Forbes, 1996).

Her treatise *Stri Purush Tulana* can be interpreted as an early feminist critique that challenges the moral hypocrisy of male-dominated society and highlights the structural barriers faced by women, including limited access to education. This work functioned as an **ideological catalyst** in reformist circles, fostering dialogue on the necessity of educational reforms for women (Kosambi, 1993). It also

contributed to legitimizing women's demands for intellectual emancipation and helped shape the emerging feminist consciousness in colonial Maharashtra (Chakravarti, 2003).

The impact of Tarabai's work on education during the colonial period can be analyzed through several dimensions:

- Her writings stimulated **critical discourse** on the inequalities entrenched in the educational system.
- Her ideological stance **reinforced the efforts** of contemporaneous educators and reformers, such as Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule.
- Her advocacy **influenced the trajectory of early feminist thought**, situating education as a fundamental right and a vehicle for social transformation.

In this context, Tarabai Shinde's contributions, while not institutional in nature, were nevertheless significant in shaping the reformist climate that supported the expansion of women's education. Her work laid an important foundation for future movements that recognized education as both a right and a means of empowerment. In conclusion, Tarabai Shinde's influence on education during the colonial period was primarily ideological but deeply impactful. Her critical engagement with gender inequality positioned education as a central theme in the broader struggle for social justice and women's rights.

According to Objective 4:

Relevance of Shinde's ideological contributions in shaping modern feminist thought and informing current debates on gender equality and social justice

The objective of evaluating the relevance of Shinde's ideas in modern feminist movements and gender equality debates reveals her continued significance as a foundational thinker in the genealogy of Indian feminism. Despite being written in the late 19th century, *Stri Purush Tulana* addresses themes and concerns that persist in contemporary discourses around gender justice, including structural patriarchy, intersectionality, and the politicization of morality.

Shinde's emphasis on the intersection of caste and gender has gained renewed attention in present-day feminist thought, particularly within the framework of **Dalit feminism**, which critiques both mainstream (upper-caste) feminism and patriarchal structures within marginalized communities (Rege, 2006). Her critique aligns with the efforts of contemporary activists who highlight the compounded forms of discrimination faced by women at the intersections of caste, class, and gender. Her challenge to religious orthodoxy and cultural conservatism resonates with ongoing debates around women's autonomy, bodily integrity, and freedom from moral policing. For instance, present-day discussions on marital rape, honor killings, and restrictions on women's dress and mobility often mirror Shinde's concerns about gendered double standards in morality and punishment (Kumar, 2018).

In the global feminist discourse, Shinde's work can be situated alongside early feminist critiques in other colonized societies, where questions of gender were inseparable from colonial and racial domination. Her writings prefigure contemporary theories of **postcolonial feminism**, which emphasize the need to decolonize feminist thought and remain attentive to localized experiences of oppression (Mohanty, 2003). Moreover, Shinde's insistence on education as a tool for liberation continues to be a vital theme in feminist activism and policy today. Educational inequality, gender gaps in literacy, and barriers to

higher education for marginalized women remain urgent issues, making her arguments strikingly relevant more than a century later (UNESCO, 2020).

Further, Shinde's pioneering critique provides enduring insights into the operation of gendered power structures and remains deeply relevant to both Indian and global feminist thought. Her legacy persists in contemporary struggles for equality, justice, and the dismantling of oppressive social orders.

Conclusion

Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* is a pioneering text that laid the groundwork for feminist thought in India during the colonial period. By interrogating the double standards of patriarchy, Shinde not only critiqued gender inequality but also exposed the complicity of societal structures in perpetuating oppression. Her work's intersectional lens, although not explicitly articulated, resonates with contemporary feminist frameworks, showcasing her visionary understanding of oppression's multifaceted nature. Despite its initial neglect, the significance of Shinde's contribution to feminist thought cannot be overstated. Her courage in addressing taboo subjects in a rigidly patriarchal society serves as an inspiration for ongoing struggles for gender equality. This research underscores the enduring relevance of Shinde's voice and calls for a re-examination of her legacy within the broader spectrum of feminist and anti-caste movements in India and beyond.

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