



Garlanded, Not Heard: Women, Nature and the Shakti-Prakriti Equation in India

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Abstract

Indian environmental discourse often merges the Shakti as in divine feminine power with Prakriti which is nature to suggest that women are nature's custodians and lead sustainable development. This article asks if the sacred equation gives standing to women and to nature. It combines the hermeneutic textual analysis and critical discourse analysis of classical texts, rituals, court decisions, policy documents and movement accounts. Read through Nancy Fraser's status model of recognition and Bina Agarwal's feminist environmentalism, the evidence shows a pattern of veneration without recognition. Both environment and women are symbolically praised and kept in a higher position and still denied the actual authority, protection and acknowledgment. In the cases examined, this pattern is visible in four forms: idealization, displacement, substitution and iconization. Although the counter arguments against this tradition could also be seen, when a female yogini, Sulabha silences the sovereign and when certain ecological duties are not assigned to women, such instances are rarely present and are used symbolically throughout. The-paper concludes that Shakti and Prakriti can move forward towards sustainable development only if reverence and veneration are converted into real recognition, decision making authority to women, substantive protection for ecosystems and acknowledgment of the labor through which women manage resources.

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Introduction

In 2017 the Uttarakhand High Court declared the Yamuna and the Ganga to be legal persons (Mohd. Salim v. State of Uttarakhand, 2017) ^[51]. Every year during Chhath, pilgrims in Delhi, especially women, enter the Yamuna River twice during sunset and sunrise to make offerings of water to the sun. It has been reported that they performed the rituals in highly toxic water containing foam (ANI, 2023; Associated Press, 2021; Pillai, 2024) ^[6, 9, 62]. A stretch of river from Wazirabad to Okhla, which is merely 22 km and just under 2% of its total length, accounts for almost 76% of the pollution in it (Yamuna Monitoring Committee, 2020) ^[81]. According to the Delhi Pollution Control Committee's February 2025 report, the Yamuna River's water quality continued to be assessed against prescribed standards, including a maximum permissible fecal coliform count of 2,500 MPN per 100 mL and a BOD limit of 3 mg/L (Delhi Pollution Control Committee, 2025) ^[22]. The report presents water-quality trends up to January 2025, highlighting the continued importance of addressing sewage pollution and improving river-water quality.

The situation illustrates an apparent contradiction running through Indian environmental philosophy. The Indian religions regard nature as holy and feminine. In Hindu philosophy, Shakti (feminine divine energy) and Prakriti (primordial nature) are closely related to each other and to the Mother God in general since rivers, forests and the Earth itself are often called mothers (Kinsley, 1986; Pintchman, 1994) ^[42, 63]. Most notably, ecofeminists among whom is also Vandana Shiva (1988) ^[68], exploited this bond to assert that being the carriers of the female essence women are the guardians of nature and that the destruction of nature leads to the concern of women issues.

However, the Chhath puja offerings in a polluted Yamuna indicates that dignity and status are not the same thing. These women in the foam show great respect. The court decision recognising the river as legal persons, appointed three officials represented by the government as its guardians, not the local women who venerate it but representatives of the government (Mohd. Salim v. State of Uttarakhand, 2017) ^[51]. Moreover, the great majority of unpaid work done in Indian households is performed by women. The statistics say that in 2019 the share of females aged six years and over who participated in unpaid domestic services for household members was 81.2%, while the share of males was only 26.1% (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2020) ^[48]. Honoring women as mothers or concerned devotees does not mean that they can have access to the places where the decisions about the land, water, and forests are made.

The article discusses the point at which the sacred connection of women with the environment grants acknowledgement to women and nature. The article seeks answers to three questions in the process. First, how do certain Hindu scriptures and rituals represent the dynamics of the connection between Shakti, Prakriti and women from viewpoints of both agency and subjection? Second, where does the sacralization of the feminine and nature lead to acknowledgement of women and the natural world in the contemporary context of India? Third, what might be involved in developing a model of sustainable growth that shifts from reverence to recognition?

The article responds to these questions via a qualitative interpretive analysis of texts, rituals, judgments, policies and movement narratives. It comes up with the concept of veneration without recognition, whereby femininity and nature are being honored symbolically, but real women and real ecosystems are not allowed to make decisions. The term is intentionally rephrased to echo the question from Molyneux (1985) ^[52], posed to the women participating in the Nicaraguan revolution: “mobilization without emancipation?” This means that according to the definition veneration is more than cultural praise, it also hinders action as being put on a pedestal means being restricted.

Three contributions are made in the article. In terms of theory, it identifies four kinds of veneration without recognition: idealization, displacement, substitution and iconization, and defines the levels at which such claims can be made. It connects religion and ecology literature with the feminist political ecology whereby women have been excluded from resource institutions (Agarwal, 1992, 2001) ^[1, 2] using Fraser’s (2000) ^[26] status theory of recognition. Third, it proposes three shifts, from devotee to decision maker, from sacred status to enforceable protection and from giver to

rights-holder, through which veneration could be converted into recognition.

In section 2, the paper will discuss how Shakti and Prakriti are identified. In section 3, the theoretical framework will be established. Section 4 will explain the research methodology used. Section 5, the four forms will be explained. Section 6 deals with the counter currents and the conditions for moving from adoration to acknowledgement. Finally, section 7 concludes the paper.

Shakti and Prakriti: The Making of a Feminine Nature

Prakriti gains its most well-known meaning in *Samkhya* philosophy. *Samkhya* divides reality into *Purusa* and *Prakriti*. *Purusa* is pure consciousness that does not act, but witnesses. *Prakriti* is materiality that does not know, but acts. Everything that is manifest, including intellect, ego, and mind is derived from *Prakriti*, while liberation occurs when it is realized that *Purusa* has never been merged with any of these elements. In the classical meaning of the term, *Prakriti* is female in a figurative sense, though she does not have divine or ruling nature. The Bhagavad Gita takes this language within a theistic context. Krishna indicates the eight elements of the material cosmos are “my nature” considered in eight parts and states that “Nature gives birth to movables and immovables through me, the supervisor” (Bhagavad Gita 7.4, 9.10; Telang, 1882) ^[73]. Nature is said to act under supervision here. However, it is also stated that there is a superior nature that is “animate” and is “by which this universe is upheld” and Krishna proclaims that he is “the father of this universe, the mother, the creator, the grandsire” (Bhagavad Gita 7.5, 9.17; Telang, 1882) ^[73]. Divine supervision can thus be seen in action; however, this supervision is not simply a male god’s relationship with a female matter.

Without a doubt, the meaning of the term *Shakti* is strength. In the traditions of *Samkhya*, the transformation of the teachings that occurred in the *Devi Mahatmya* text (somewhere between the fifth and the sixth centuries), power becomes no longer a trait that belongs to the male god but gets defined as the primordial reality manifested by the Great Goddess (Coburn, 1991; Kinsley, 1986) ^[19, 42]. The *Devi Mahatmya* combines this power and nature. The hymn of Brahma at the beginning of the text introduces the Goddess with the words *Prakriti tvam ca sarvasya gunatrayavibhāvinī* that Pargiter interpreted as “thou art the original source of the universe, the exciting cause of the three qualities” where he cleverly states that *Prakriti* indeed is the term for this “original source” (*Devi Mahatmya* 1, Markandeya Purana canto 81; Pargiter, 1904, p. 471) ^[61]. The later Puranas developed the theme (C. M. Brown, 1974). The first verse of the *Saundaryalahari* illustrates that while Shiva merges with Shakti and can create things, he is incapable of doing anything without her presence (W. N. Brown, 1958, verse 1). According to Pintchman (1994) ^[63], the Great Goddess is the result of the merging of three initially separate concepts: Shakti, Maya, and Prakriti, in a chain of events starting with the Vedic hymns and continuing into the late Puranic philosophy. Thus, the blending of woman, goddess, and nature is a result of a long process, and it is not something that one could term “natural intuition”. The strands cannot be interpreted straightforwardly.

For example, in *Samkhya*, *Prakriti* is the unconscious counterpart of a conscious principle. In Sakta theology, the

feminine is regarded as consciousness and power itself. However, in the mentioned Upanishadic texts, the self is male (Svetasvatara Upanishad 4.10; Müller, 1884) ^[54]. The study suggests that there are numerous versions of the Shakti-Prakriti theory rather than just one. The modern interpretation of women as nature unifies the earlier versions of the theory. Constructs can always be analyzed in terms of their functionality.

From the Feminine Principle to Recognition: Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism and the Sacred Feminine

Francoise d'Eaubonne introduced the phrase *Ecofeminism* (d'Eaubonne, 1974) ^[20]. Ortner (1974) ^[60] insisted that much association of women with nature and men with culture refers to a cultural interpretation rather than the biological one; Merchant (1980) ^[46] illustrated that the view of the earth as a mother has previously limited its exploitation in early modern Europe before a mechanistic perception changed it to one of control; Warren (1990) ^[79] and Plumwood (1993) ^[64] connected the joint subjection of women and nature with the so-called logic of domination.

In India, the argument was heavily influenced by Vandana Shiva. In her book *Staying Alive*, Shiva stated that nature can be equated with Prakriti, which is a dynamic, active force that Shiva called the feminine principle; furthermore, she labeled modern development as maldevelopment as it undermines the integrity of living systems and contributes to the marginalization of nature and women. Shiva did not limit the feminine principle to women; however, her work on subsistence and Chipko represented rural women as the ideal bearers of the feminine principle. Together with Maria Mies, Shiva brought forth the argument criticizing both capitalism and patriarchy.

The Materialist and Religious Critiques

The critique imparted considerable positive reinforcement for materialism. Agarwal (1992) ^[1] argued that Shiva's argument had the flaw of generalizing about women in northwest India to women in the developing world and of attributing women's affinity to nature to an essence, rather than a historical and cultural avatar. Instead, she offered feminist environmentalism, which links women's relationship with the environment to the issue of labor division, property rights, and power: women are familiar with forests and water sources because they have the job of collecting fuel, fodder, and water, rather than because they are women. Jackson (1993) ^[38] similarly criticized the assumption that women are a natural ally of conservation; Leach (2007) ^[43] charted the progress of this view among donors and NGOs prior to the Rio conference in 1992 and its decline amid the growing feminist critique; and MacGregor (2006) ^[45] maintained that it is misleading to portray women's environmental efforts as merely caring for the earth's motherly qualities.

Nanda (2003) ^[55] claimed that the appreciation of the Hindu idea leads to valuing those traditions that made the life of Indian women confined to the domestic sphere and that traditional beliefs were adopted by conservative groups which helped to contribute to the development of Hindu nationalism. Sharma (2012) ^[67], who analyzed the case of the village of Ralegan Siddhi, the anti-Tehri dam movement, and the ecological campaigns in Vrindavan, demonstrated that the use of Hindu expressions in the green movement can serve exclusionist nationalist ideas, while Tomalin (2009) ^[74]

supposed that modern religious environmentalism derives more from the contemporary Romantic perception of spirituality than from the traditional understanding of the world by the majority of Indians who have a pragmatic approach to nature.

Recognition as the Analytical Lens

Critics argue that the woman-nature equation is intertwined with history and politics. However, the way in which veneration works remains open to investigation. To understand the concept of veneration better, the article brings the idea of recognition put forth by Nancy Fraser into play. According to Fraser (2000) ^[26], recognition is connected to social status, and misrecognition happens when certain groups of people fall short of being equal partners in social dealings because of the existence of rules of culture. The importance of Fraser's approach lies in the fact that it does not focus on human feelings and beliefs. Instead, it views the social problem as caused by set of cultural rules defining who gets to make decisions. One instance of such rules is called benevolent sexism; it is a set of beliefs whereby women are assigned traditional roles and praised even though these beliefs are viewed as positive by people (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491) ^[30].

Agarwal's idea of feminist environmentalism gives meaning to acknowledgment. By blending both methods, we define reverence as an elevation of both femininity and nature through anthropomorphism, worship and idolizing. Recognition includes three areas of functioning: authorities, or ability to participate in resource-making decisions; protection, or enforceability of security measures in relation to bodies and ecosystems; and acknowledgment, or treating women's resource work as profession and expertise rather than something natural. This distinction is like Molyneux's (1985) ^[52] differentiation between practical gender interests, which emerge within the existing division of labor, and strategic gender interests, which would challenge women's subordination itself. As a result, reverence without acknowledgment is the case when symbolic elevation is there, and functionality is gone. A temple idol can be decorated every morning but cannot sit on the committee of the temple.

Research has already analyzed each side of the issue. Religion-and-ecology studies have shown the disconnect between the divine standing of rivers and their destruction (Alley, 2002; Haberman, 2006) ^[5, 34] and evaluated ecological capacities and limitations of the teachings of Hinduism (Chapple & Tucker, 2000; Nelson, 1998; Tomalin, 2009) ^[17, 57, 74]. Feminist political studies have illustrated the absence of women from the groups that manage forests and water (Agarwal, 2001, 2010) ^[2, 3]. These two areas of research have not yet been combined to examine how the idea of praising femininity can oppose the phenomenon of its absence and which conditions can lead to the opposite situation.

Methodology

This work uses a qualitative and interpretive approach. It is based entirely on documentary sources and does not draw on survey, interview or other data from human participants. Classical texts, rituals, court decisions, program papers, official statements, and historical events are viewed as documents, that is, as resources that represent and influence social phenomena while allowing analysis of that influence (Bowen, 2009) ^[10]. Two approaches are used as a

combination. First, hermeneutic textual interpretation is used for reading the classical texts in their own terms, with careful examination of the basic concepts, imagery, and story-telling elements, as well as the context of the work; after that the next step is to check what kind of agency these texts are referring to. After that critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) ^[24] is conducted for the analysis of contemporary texts in terms of the presentation of women and nature and what kind of power these presentations can provide to the readers. The data was organized by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) ^[11], with different combinations of texts and their contexts.

The corpus is drawn from four sites. The first is classical texts that link the feminine with nature, among them the Vedic hymns to the Earth and to Vach, the Svetasvatara Upanishad, the Samkhya Karika, the Bhagavad Gita, the Manusmriti, the Sulabha episode of the Mahabharata, and Puranic texts including the Devi Mahatmya. The second is seasonal rituals: Raja Parba in Odisha and the Ambubachi Mela at Kamakhya, which celebrate the menstruating earth or goddess, and Chhath on the Yamuna in Delhi. The third is law and governance: the 2017 judgment declaring the Ganga and Yamuna legal persons and its stay, the Namami Gange program's volunteer and committee arrangements, the Sabarimala litigation, and official reports on the Yamuna, with New Zealand's Te Awa Tupua Act (2017) ^[72] as a comparator. The fourth is accounts of the Chipko movement at Reni and Dongri-Paintoli (Guha, 1989; S. Jain, 1984a, 1984b; Rangan, 2000; Shiva, 1988) ^[33, 39, 40, 66, 68]. Classical texts are quoted from the published translations listed in the references, with verse or chapter numbers where available. Sanskrit terms are given in simplified transliteration without diacritics, except in quotations and in the titles of cited works. Each type of source was read with its own question: for classical texts, how the feminine is represented in relation to nature and who acts, decides or benefits; for rituals, where sacred value is placed and on whom restrictions fall; for legal and governance documents, who is named as guardian, member or decision maker and what powers they hold; and for movement accounts, how women are represented and whether they gained a share in decisions.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, the paper examined how females and nature are portrayed in each article using codes such as mother, giver, goddess, performer, and other. In the second stage the paper finds out who acts, who takes the decision, who is benefitted and who suffers in each representation. During the third cycle, every locale was evaluated according to the three positions of recognition including authority, protection, and acknowledgment. Then, codes were grouped into possible themes with a theme kept only after more than one sort of source had given it its support. As a result, four themes passed this test, while this article considers them to be four forms of one pattern. In every case, counter-testimony was presented along with supporting evidence (see Table 1). Considering the difference between levels mentioned above, every form can be designated as presence of veneration in the absence of recognition, direct connection is indicated only when a source indicates use of sacred thing in its reasoning. The analysis has been intentionally checking for counterevidence, which was both textually based oppositions and institutional cases of veneration going together with recognition.

The four forms are defined as follows. Idealization occurs when the feminine is praised as a giver, so that provision is treated as duty and the labor behind it goes unacknowledged; its diagnostic question is whether what women or nature provide is treated as a natural gift rather than as work. Displacement occurs when sacred value is assigned to a divine body while restriction falls on human bodies; its diagnostic question is whether a quality honored in the goddess or the earth becomes a ground for restricting women. Substitution occurs when a symbolic or legal status stands in for enforcement or for the voice of those who revere; its diagnostic question is whether a declared status takes the place of enforceable protection or decision-making power. Iconization occurs when women's struggles are celebrated as feminine spirituality while decisions remain with men or the state; its diagnostic question is whether women are honored as symbols of a cause while being kept out of the bodies that decide it. A case is classified under a form when the evidence answers its diagnostic question affirmatively and at least two kinds of source support that reading. The forms are analytically distinct but not mutually exclusive: symbolic status without authority, for example, can display both substitution and iconization, and each case is therefore discussed under the form it illustrates most clearly. Table 1 shows how each form is supported and qualified by the evidence.

Sources were compared across types. A reading suggested by a classical text was retained only where historical, ethnographic or institutional sources showed a comparable pattern in practice, and conflicting interpretations, such as the competing historical accounts of Chipko, are reported rather than resolved. Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), this comparison across source types and the deliberate search for disconfirming evidence were used to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations. Because the study analyzes documents, it examines how women and nature are represented and positioned in texts and institutions; it does not claim to establish women's own experiences or intentions, which lie outside its scope.

Findings: Four Forms of Veneration Without Recognition

The analysis identified four forms of a single pattern, in which the sacred feminine is elevated while recognition is withheld. Each is presented below through the site in which it is most visible, together with the evidence that complicates it, and all four are summarized in Table 1. The textual readings identify representations that later interpreters could draw upon; claims about contemporary practice rest on the historical, ethnographic and institutional sources cited for each case.

Idealization: The Mother Who Is Milked

The most ancient layer of the corpus associates the honor given to the land with the anticipation of her generosity. The hymn to the Earth from the Atharvaveda, Bhumi Sukta, contains probably the most well-known phrase used in Indian environmental literature: "Let what I dig from thee, O Earth, rapidly spring and grow again. O Purifier, let me not pierce through thy vitals or thy heart" (Atharvaveda 12.1.35; Griffith, 1895–1896) ^[31]. Here, the act of extraction is envisioned as limited by Earth's regeneration capacity, which is an idea very close to sustainability, but it also brings complexity to the treatment of Earth as an infinite provider.

Nonetheless, the speaker remains the one to dig, while the land is the one to renew itself. Samkhya clarifies the relationship much more precisely, although it may not be straightforward. According to the last verses of the Karika, Prakriti appears to be a performer that shows herself to a male spectator: “As a dancer, having exhibited herself to the spectator, desists from the dance, so does nature desist, having manifested herself to soul” (Samkhya Karika 59; Colebrooke & Wilson, 1837/1887) ^[20]. The next verse names her “generous nature”, meaning that she fulfills “without benefit (to herself) the wish of ungrateful soul” (Samkhya Karika 60). When one looks at the imagery of servitude, showing off, and pulling away, one truly sees how straightforward the meaning of the verses is. However, the next passages cast doubt on any interpretation that would accept the idea of the male figure being free while the female keeps on serving in other words, in saying that “Verily not any soul is bound, nor is released, nor migrates; but nature alone, in relation to various beings, is bound, is released, and migrates” (Samkhya Karika 62), the philosopher adds that it is only nature in relation to various beings that gets tied, freed, or running away. Since Prakriti is not conscious, nothing described here refers to the social role of women. What the Karika offers is just the image of the feminine service, which at later stages could be applied to real women in a philosophy that complicates such application.

Although it is clearly manifested in the Puranic tradition, here too we find the earth not dumb. In the Visnu Purana, the protagonist is the first king, Prithu, who discovers people starving because of the earth having stopped providing any growing things. He takes up “his divine bow Ajagava, and his celestial arrows”, the “Earth, assuming the figure of a cow, fled hastily from him” (Visnu Purana 1.13; Wilson, 1840, p. 103) ^[80]. However, she has nowhere to escape as she starts to argue and suggests a solution: “give me that calf, by which I may be able to secrete milk. Make also all places level, so that I may cause my milk, the seed of all vegetation, to flow everywhere around” (Wilson, 1840) ^[80]. After that, the Earth got the name of the king: “she thence derived the patronymic appellation Prithivī (the daughter of Prithu)” (Wilson, 1840, p. 104) ^[80]. Although it is a story about fair kingship that brought an end to famine in the Purana, it should be understood in this context. The form of telling is informative anyway. The knowledge belonging to the Earth gives the way to understand how sustenance works, but still the danger, power, and name of the king remain the same. The episode combines repressive and limited power: the Earth can express her opinion but not on her terms, having to leave as Prithu’s daughter.

The concepts that govern women’s representation in the Dharmashastra are the same. The Manusmriti is well known for its assertion that “where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards” (Manusmriti 3.56; Bühler, 1886) ^[15]. According to Manusmriti, “Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age” (9.3), and “By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house” (5.147). It is evident from the statements in Manusmriti that they do not contradict each other according to the logic of this sacred text. The ideas of honors and protection are connected; the woman is honorably considered as the sacred center of the household although she lives under the power of men. As with the other

classical texts, these passages are read here as normative resources available to later interpreters, not as direct evidence of how women lived.

Similarly, in the Sakta Purana we find the same association. The Devi Bhagavata Purana states that “all the female sex, everywhere in the Universe are all come from the parts of Prakriti”, and therefore that “to insult any woman is to insult the Prakriti” (Devi Bhagavata Purana 9.1.137-138; Vijnanananda, 1921-1923, p. 809) ^[78]. It calls the worship of “an upright Brahmin woman with a husband and a son alive,” or the worship of an 8-year-old girl “the worship of Prakriti” (9.1.138–139), and the verses that follow proceed to arrange women according to the three gunas. The respect of equally all women, as parts of Prakriti, and the classification of them into grades according to the degree of their chastity and independence, work together here. This can provide better material evidence of deification without recognition than any conceptually similar imagery the text gives a command to honor it and lays down the positions of the dependent women. Throughout these pieces, the process of idealization is carried out in the same way, even when its definition is challenged from within. What a mother gives are never considered work; what a cow gives are not payment; and what a goddess gives are thought of more as a gift than a job. The same idealization is reproduced in contemporary ecofeminist writings, where women are celebrated as the natural protectors of nature (Shiva, 1988) ^[68]; however, as Agarwal (1992) ^[1] pointed out, this celebration makes it look like women have the knowledge for free rather than through work.

Displacement: The Goddess Rests, the Woman Is Restricted

In India, there are two festivals that are very rare and unique coincident with menstruation. One is Raja Parba located in the eastern state of Odisha celebrated in mid-June when a three-day festival is held known as Pahili Raja, Raja Sankranti and Bhuin Dahana when Mother Earth or Basu Mata will be regarded as a menstruating woman and digging of soil or tempering it in any way is strictly prohibited (Mohapatra, 2006, p. 122) ^[50]. In the three-day festival, unmarried girls are not permitted to work, and they must use swings and on the fourth day of the festival, earth is ceremonially bathed. Apffel-Marglin (2008) ^[7] points out Raja Parba as a festival of menstruating earth, sea, goddess and women at the same time when the women in the village of Mishra and Apffel-Marglin behaved as menstruating women (Apffel-Marglin & Mishra, 1995) ^[8]. The annual Ambubachi Mela held at Kamakhya Temple is again a festival associated with the goddess (Urban, 2011) ^[76]. It is believed the goddess menstruates for three days in a year closing the temple and prohibiting agriculture during that time (Deka, 2020) ^[21]. Both festivals use the time of menstruation as a period where no creation can take place by either divine or human sources.

These events have significant ecological importance and some feminist potential. However, in the larger context of women’s health, women’s own menstruation is treated in a far more negative way. Several studies carried out in India show that menstruating girls are not allowed to enter the puja room or the kitchen and perform religious rituals or pray (Garg & Anand, 2015) ^[29]. Moreover, a meta-analysis conducted of studies involving adolescent girls in India showed that there were significant restrictions on girls’ participation in religious activities (van Eijk *et al.*, 2016) ^[76]. For the time until 2018,

women aged between 10 and 50 were prohibited from entering the temple at the Sabarimala site in Kerala, when the Supreme Court struck down the restriction by a majority of four to one (Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala, 2018) ^[37]. In November 2019, a five-judge bench, by a majority of three to two, kept the review petitions against this judgment pending and referred broader questions on freedom of religion to a larger bench (Kantaru Rajeevaru v. Indian Young Lawyers Association, 2019) ^[41]. Those defending the restriction pointed to the point of the deity being celibate in addition to the view that women between the ages of menstruation could not maintain the vow of forty-one days needed for performing the pilgrimage while Justice Chandrachud concluded that the reasoning for the exclusion rested over the idea of menstrual impurity (Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala, 2018) ^[37]. So, in both cases, the result was that the age-based criterion regarding said access led to religiosity being connected to reproductive life of the women in question.

The difference between these two beliefs is not that one is related to abstaining and the other is not. In Raja Parba as well, girls follow the rules of abstention while they are having their periods (Apffel-Marglin & Mishra, 1995; Mohapatra, 2006) ^[8, 50]. The difference is in the meaning and the environment. In Raja Parba, the rules of abstention are joyful and respect women on their periods; whereas restrictions discussed above divest the women who are on their periods from the communal sacred and household spaces like the temple, the kitchen, etc. The distinction between the two is what this article calls displacement. Sacred value is shifted upward to the menstruating body of the earth and the Goddess, and restriction comes on down to the menstruating bodies of women. Divine feminine can rest, but human feminine must withdraw. Chakravarti's (1993) ^[16] explanation of Brahmanical patriarchy allows understanding why the two realities can coexist so well. The domination of women's sexuality and women's purity control is the main feature of caste reproductive cycle and the existence of feminine worship in the abstract. Apffel-Marglin and Mishra (1995) ^[8] have pointed out that the women in Brahman families among the participants in their study did not participate in the Raja festival.

Thus, the festival's endorsement of menstruation is not accepted equally by all castes. These are all separate traditions that include various regional beliefs and gods. The only connection that can be pointed to in this case is the caste restrictions associated with the endorsement of menstruation in the case of Raja.

In the case of Sabarimala, this restriction had a rational explanation related to the sacredness of a god and not the menstruating goddess, therefore the evidence does not demonstrate a full-fledged displacement and in this case, one can speak of sacredness being a source of restriction but not a substitute for it, and in a similar fashion, the majority opinion issued in 2018 overturns the directive arguing that the law prevailed over the traditional sacredness of the practice. In this case, however, the evidence shows coexistence rather than displacement.

Substitution: Personhood Without Voice on the Yamuna

The case of the Yamuna is the most obvious instance of substitution, where both the meanings and the legal statuses of the river are substituted for enforcement and representation. The pollution of the river has concrete

reasons. According to the Delhi Pollution Control Committee's February 2025 report, sewage treatment plants in Delhi continued to face challenges in meeting prescribed discharge standards, while untreated or inadequately treated sewage remained a major source of pollution in the Yamuna River (Delhi Pollution Control Committee, 2025) ^[22] that year. For nearly nine months of the year, sewage, treated or otherwise, is the only flow below Wazirabad in the river (Yamuna Monitoring Committee, 2020, p. 28) ^[81]. Hence, the point is that the reverent attitude does not lead to this situation, but that, in the cases studied, symbolic and legal status was given without any enforcement and representation that could have changed things significantly.

Theology plays a part in the understanding of the situation. In Banaras, Alley (1998) ^[4] reports that *pandas* at Dasasvamedha Ghat state that, while the Ganga may be unclean, anything added by people (*gandagi*) cannot taint her (pp. 306, 313). A belief in unassailable purity can exist with physical dirt, because the goddess is not thought to need to be clean to be sacred. Down the flow of the Yamuna, Haberman (2006) ^[34] has found that badly polluted conditions make devotees seriously ask the question, and some of them try to counter this by framing environmental action as *seva*, love of the river mother.

The Uttarakhand High Court's 2017 decision turned sacred status into legal validity. "all the Hindus have deep *Astha* in rivers Ganga and Yamuna and they collectively connect with these rivers" (Mohd. Salim v. State of Uttarakhand, 2017, para. 17) ^[51], it ruled that the rivers were "juristic/legal persons/living entities having the status of a legal person with all corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person" (para. 19). Additionally, the court refers to Articles 48-A and 51A(g) of the Constitution obligating the government to hold stewardship of the environment which must be observed by everyone concerned. Thus, who would speak for the new legal entities? According to the report, the court says that the Director, Namami Gange, the Chief Secretary of the State of Uttarakhand, and the Attorney General of Uttarakhand are to be considered as legal guardians (para. 18). Therefore, the three offices of government have become guardians in this case and no non-governmental person or body was named among the guardians in the judgment. This means that no devotees of these rivers or any people living near these rivers would be a part of the process of guardianship that the judgment established. Therefore, we see that this issue was not a purely women's problem but rather a case when the law is put into action without those people whose knowledge and beliefs concerning the river were the grounds for its implementation. In just four months, the Supreme Court froze the ruling (State of Uttarakhand v. Mohd. Salim, 2017) ^[70], and O'Donnell (2018) ^[58] pointed out that the rights created based on definitions of harm in such a broad spectrum make their implementation hard to visualize. The ruling never appeared to reach the river's stretch in Delhi outside of the Uttarakhand area, irrespective of its legal status. Three matters should therefore be kept apart: the High Court's declaration of March 2017; the Supreme Court's stay of July 2017, which suspended it; and the declaration's territorial reach, which was limited by the High Court's jurisdiction over Uttarakhand and did not, in practice, extend to the river's course in Delhi. The question of community representation is separate again: participation in river programs, discussed below, is not the same as a share in guardianship.

The differences with New Zealand are illustrative. On 20 March 2017, the same day as the Uttarakhand case ruling. The New Zealand Te Awa Tupua Act, which treats the Whanganui River as a legal person, received Royal assent. The human entity created by the Act, Te Pou Tupua comprises two individuals, one being selected by iwi and the other representing the Crown (Te Awa Tupua [Whanganui River Claims Settlement] Act 2017, s. 20; Also see O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018) ^[72]. The Act is also based on a sacred relationship which it demonstrates by quoting iwi "I am the river and the river is me" (s. 13[c]). The New Zealand arrangement emerged from a negotiated settlement with the river's own people and gave them a guardian. The two legal contexts differ, however: Te Awa Tupua arose from a Treaty of Waitangi settlement between the Crown and Whanganui iwi, within a distinct constitutional and Indigenous-settlement history. The comparison is therefore limited to one institutional feature, community representation in guardianship, and does not suggest that the two legal systems are otherwise equivalent. In the Indian case, reverence was invoked by a court, and it came without a voice for those who revere.

The governance language is telling too. The first among the guardian bodies is Namami Gange, the Union government's flagship initiative regarding the Ganga River, which means "I bow down to you, Ganga". Public involvement is welcomed in this program. There are voluntary organizations like Ganga Vichar Manch, Ganga Doots, and Ganga Praharis ensuring community participation (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2021) ^[47]. Ganga Praharis are the trained local volunteers who work to "support the local level institutions and monitor the quality of the natural resources of the river" (State Mission for Clean Ganga Uttarakhand, n.d.). In 2021, District Ganga Committees were formed in the districts of Uttar Pradesh such as Bareilly, Mathura and Jalaun, and, as such, these committees are headed up by District Magistrates with the composition of bureaucrats and three appointed members (National Mission for Clean Ganga, 2021) ^[56]. In this framework, participation is used as service but not as power. Put differently, the program offers participation and, through its nominated seats, a measure of consultation, but not decision-making authority for the communities that revere the river. Thus, the idea of substitution also comes into play, either by imbuing the sacred aspect into law or allowing people who believe in the river to be involved in its rituals without granting any authority to them.

Iconization: Chipko's Women as Symbols, Not Decision Makers

On March 26, 1974, while the male inhabitants of Reni village in the Garhwal Himalaya were in Chamoli, seeking

overdue payment for land appropriated by the army, Gaura Devi, leader of the Mahila Mangal Dal, mobilized about twenty women and seven girls to block a group of men hired to chop down the forest. This incident became synonymous with the Chipko movement which, according to Shiva (1988) ^[68], established the Chipko logo, which became a symbol for women's ecological spirituality; thus, foreshadowing the emergence of a feminine force that protects Prakriti from exploitation. The idea attained international resonance as author Rangan (2000) ^[66] states, a period during which the notion of women as defenders of nature was getting popularity in donor circles (Leach, 2007) ^[43].

There are different views among historians on this issue. According to Guha (1989) ^[33], Chipko was primarily a peasant movement fighting for the traditional rights of the forest against the commercial timber industry, and environmental or feminist interpretations played a minor role. Rangan (2000) ^[66], however, claimed that Chipko turned into a universal myth and distanced itself from the local circumstances and calls for regional development. While none of the viewpoints can deny the courage of women, both imply that the image created in Chipko made the struggle turn into a story of women and nature.

What is absent from the picture becomes apparent in empirical studies from that era. Shobhita Jain has chronicled that women joined actively in Chipko and could perceive the reasons behind their hardship (S. Jain, 1984b) ^[40] and started demanding participation in decision-making together with men (S. Jain, 1984a, para. 1) ^[39]. In Dongri-Paintoli in 1980, a council made up entirely of male members acted in cooperation with officials of the Horticulture Department in approving the assignment of a nearby oak forest to logging, while women organized their own Chipko protests. As Jain notes, the men were "demanding that the women stay in their fields and homes" (S. Jain, 1984a, Implications for Society section) ^[39], which meant that at least in this particular village, the movement that turned women into symbols of ecological spirituality did not allow them to define the destiny of the forest.

The exclusion also continued in the institutions that eventually made community management of forests official. Agarwal (2001) ^[2] proves that community forestry groups in India and Nepal that were participatory in their design could exclude large portions of the public, specifically women even in situations that they heavily relied on forests. Her later research also showed that when women were able to occupy important posts in the management of institutions, the environment improved (Agarwal, 2010) ^[3]. The evidence reviewed clearly demonstrated that something such as the celebration can coexist with exclusion; there is no proof that the former leads to the latter.

Table 1: Four Forms of Veneration Without Recognition

Form	How it works	Where most visible	Counter-evidence in the corpus	Recognition withheld
Idealization	The feminine is praised as the giver, so provision becomes duty and its labor goes unacknowledged. Test: is provision treated as a gift rather than as work?	Bhumi Sukta; the Prithu myth; Manusmriti 3.56 with 5.147 and 9.3; Devi Bhagavata Purana 9.1; ecofeminist narratives of women as natural guardians	Atharvaveda 12.1.35 on regeneration; the Earth's own proposal to Prithu; Samkhya Karika 62–63; Vach, the Devi Mahatmya and Sulabha; duties to water and trees (Manusmriti 4.56, 8.285) not assigned to women	Acknowledgment of labor and knowledge
Displacement	Sacred value is assigned to divine bodies while restriction falls on human bodies. Test: does a quality honored in the divine become a ground for restricting women?	Raja Parba and Ambubachi alongside menstrual restrictions in homes and temples	Raja's festive valuation of rest; differences across region, caste and community; the 2018 Sabarimala judgment	Protection of bodily autonomy and equal access to sacred and domestic space
Substitution	Symbolic or legal status stands in for enforcement and for the voice of those who revere. Test: does a declared status take the place of enforcement or a voice?	The Yamuna in Delhi; Ganga-Yamuna personhood and its stay; Namami Gange's volunteer model	The Kaliya narrative of a poisoned river restored; river activism framed as seva; the Whanganui guardianship as comparator	Protection for the river; authority for those who revere it
Iconization	Women's livelihood struggles are celebrated as feminine spirituality while decisions stay with men and the state. Test: are women honored as symbols while kept out of decisions?	Chipko (Reni; Dongri-Paintoli); community forestry institutions	Women's own demands for a share in decisions; better forests where women gained presence	Authority in resource institutions

Discussion: From Veneration to Recognition

Returning to the first research question, the texts and rituals examined represent the connection between Shakti, Prakriti and women in ways that combine agency with subjection. When the four types are combined in the cases examined, they signify the same idea. The first is idealization, which transforms the provision of women and nature into obligation. Displacement gives holiness to gods and limitations to humans. Substitution involves using legal and symbolic status to mean protection. Finally, iconisation praises women's actions while placing authority in other hands. It gives the status of feminine to concepts like mother, giver, innocent, and devoted, which would ensure exclusion from participation in decision-making. One thing that can be said about the Devi Bhagavata Purana is that the same group of terms indicating reverence to women as manifestations of Prakriti confirms the status of women as inferior (see also Hiltebeitel & Erndl, 2000; Sunder Rajan, 1998) ^[35, 71]. In terms of Fraser (2000) ^[26], this form of reverence should be interpreted as misrecognition: it is the fact that cultural value system has developed and has become institutionalized, thus existing even where participatory parity is denied, and thus legitimizing it under the mask of giving honor to someone. This realization broadens the materialist critique of ecofeminism. Agarwal (1992) ^[1], Jackson (1993) ^[38], and Leach (2007) ^[43] explain that the equation of women with nature is inaccurate empirically and dangerous politically. The present analysis indicates an additional pitfall. As is evident in the cases under consideration, even if it appears that the equation is sincerely believed in and correctly articulated, it recognizes women in the only one mode, the sacred and the symbolic, which recognition is totally free of charge for those who are holding power. The statement is not that Hindu traditions are uniquely dominated by patriarchy;

the equation of women with nature and its problematic romanticization are evident outside India (Merchant, 1980; Ortner, 1974) ^[46, 60]. The key point is that the Shakti-Prakriti equation is not heavy enough to share the loading which ecofeminist theorists attributed to it.

The issue of why veneration continues when there has been little realization in the instances under examination calls for a political interpretation of its persistence, which contributes to its attraction. Veneration can be done cheaply since no resources have to be redistributed. A river may be made a person without anybody from the bank, a festival can be organized to the blessed ushering of the earth without altering ownership of the land, and women of the movement may be paid respects to without being included in the forest council. Veneration provides political benefits because the image of the land as mother has been instrumental in nationalism (Ramaswamy, 2010) ^[65], and religious idioms have been utilized in environmentalism for the purpose of exclusion (Nanda, 2003; Sharma, 2012) ^[55, 67]. Veneration gives legitimacy to those who are already powerful without threatening their authority. If this is true, additional veneration will not help solve the problem. What is needed is redistribution of status, which veneration does not give us on its own.

The tradition also contains genuine countercurrents. Some show a feminine that speaks and rules: Vach confers authority (Rigveda 10.125; Griffith, 1896–1897) ^[31], and the Goddess of the Devi Mahatmya is a sovereign who nourishes the world from her own body as an act of protection rather than yield (Devi Mahatmya 11; Pargiter, 1904, pp. 517–518) ^[61]. In the Mahabharata, the renunciant Sulabha silences King Janaka in debate (Mahabharata 12.308; Ganguli, 1883–1896; see also Fitzgerald, 2002; Vanita, 2003) ^[25, 28, 77]. Other texts set duties of care towards nature without assigning them to women: the

Manusmriti forbids polluting water and fines harm to trees (Manusmriti 4.56, 8.285). Some narratives and practices confront material harm directly: the Bhagavata Purana tells of a poisoned stretch of the Yamuna being restored (Bhagavata Purana 10.16; Bryant, 2003) ^[14], river activists frame their work as *seva* (Haberman, 2006) ^[34], and sacred groves have been protected in the name of religion (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976) ^[27]. These resources are real, but none of them gives women a vote or an office. The argument, then, is not that religious reverence is ineffective, but that reverence alone does not guarantee enforceable protection or inclusive governance. The evidence is also of different kinds: the sacred groves document an ecological outcome, *seva*-based river activism documents a mobilization mechanism, and the textual injunctions on water and trees provide a normative rationale.

On the second research question, the institutional cases show where sacralization does and does not lead to recognition. In other words, veneration does not actually contradict recognition. The key issue is about which resources achieve meaning in institutional terms and according to whose opinion, as the institutional cases confirm the conclusions drawn from the texts. The cases where reverence is coupled with standing are such as the case of the Whanganui deal, which encompasses the importance of reverent relationship in the law. As seen in the 2018 Sabarimala case, although that judgment is now under review, it is recognition that prevails over reverence practices, while the sacred groves demonstrate that the religious protection acquired by reverence can guarantee ecological results though not achieving the authority of women. Regarding the Indian river case, the court used both the belief and duty derived from the constitution towards safeguarding nature and converted the same to custodianship of the functionaries only while in the other cases undergone an examination, it was the symbols used and the name of the program which formed the basis of public narratives, while the resources that would allow women to voice their concerns did not come into play at all. The argument here being more practical than theoretical; the claim men make to their authority is based on their work and their citizenship (Agarwal, 1992; Fraser, 2000) ^[1, 26] and nothing else. It follows from this that a tradition that defines women as the manifestation of nature cannot take away their power.

There are two points of criticism that need to be addressed. Firstly, it might be argued that devotion is a strong motivator for taking care of the environment and that a critique can reduce one of the few cultural resources available that inspire people to do so. The materials analyzed in this paper do not deny this argument. Sacred forests and river activism conducted through the concept of *seva* indicate the significant role of motivation. The only point this research is making is that motivation absent from the status results in the devotion that does not carry the power: care without the right to make decisions for effective care. The second point of criticism is that recognition is an outside element of the secularized liberal vocabulary and the religious tradition being explored. However, the concept is a highly familiar one in this tradition. The thought of women as *Prakriti* originates from it and does not stem from this paper (Devi Bhagavata Purana 9.1.137). The tradition that identifies women and recalls how Sulabha silenced the king would not provide women with garlands instead of voice. From this point of view, recognition cannot

be seen as simply an external standard brought into the tradition.

The third research question concerns what a shift from reverence to recognition would involve. What would the conversion of veneration into recognition require? The three dimensions of recognition suggest three shifts, each of which already has anchors in Indian and international policy.

The first shift is from devotee to decision maker. Indian law already has templates of it. Rules under the Forest Rights Act require that at least one-third of the members of a Forest Rights Committee, and at least one-third of the members present at a Gram Sabha meeting, be women (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, n.d., Rules 3(1) and 4(2)). The Jal Jeevan Mission stipulates that women should comprise 50% of the members of the water and sanitation committee and their inclusion is “a key for success” (Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, 2020, p. 33) ^[23]. The example of the women heads of village councils that are reserved places for decision making reveals that such change enables resource decisions to be changed, as the councils led by women invested more on the public goods prioritized by women, especially safe drinking water (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) ^[18]. All the three are related to rural governance, whereas the guardianship of Ganga and Yamuna, established in 2017, was only afforded to the state officials. Two conditions would make such representation meaningful. Membership should carry voting rights on decisions about water, forests and rivers rather than an advisory or volunteer role, and compliance should be monitored, for example by publishing each committee’s composition and attendance and reviewing them through social audits.

The second change is from sacred status to enforceable protection. Legal personhood does not exist in a vacuum, and it only gains significance if guardianship includes those communities that reside by the river and there is enforcement of water quality standards. The Whanganui model, which incorporates one of the river’s guardians nominated by the *iwi* (Te Awa Tupua [Whanganui River Claims Settlement] Act 2017, s. 20) ^[72], demonstrates how guardianship of the Yamuna can incorporate representatives from riverside communities, including women, along with state officials. Only this feature is proposed for transfer; the Treaty-based history of the Whanganui settlement has no direct Indian equivalent. Currently existing programs could potentially provide voting seats on the District Ganga Committees to local community elected representatives instead of restricting members of the public to a supporting or outreach type of work. Sustainable Development Goal target 6.b calls on countries to “support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) ^[75]. The transition from giver to rights-holder is the third shift, which refers to the aspect of recognition. Target 5.4 wants nations to “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work” and target 5.5 wants to ensure “full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) ^[75]. Both aim at recognition which is often lauded by Shakti-Prakriti. Recognition of women’s resource work as work means measuring it, as done through the national time-use survey in India (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2020) ^[48], which focuses on designing resource policy considering the women as managers of resources as opposed to mere recipients of aid

(Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989) ^[52, 53]. In practice, this would mean using time-use estimates of women's unpaid water, fuel and care work in district planning and in gender budget statements, so that the time a resource program saves women is counted as a measurable benefit. Specific rules governing access to kitchen and worship must be lifted because that is not separable from who is allowed to cook (Garg & Anand, 2015) ^[29].

This means that the entitlement relies on labor and citizenship, and the lexicon of the tradition eliminates the excuse rather than providing the basis.

The commitments in Indian constitutional law have already been compared. Article 51A establishes the duties of citizens, and these include along with others that of renouncing derogatory practices against the dignity of women, valuing and preserving our composite cultural heritage and protecting and improving the natural environment including lakes, rivers and forests. (India Const. art. 51A). Observing these clauses together helps us in identifying the task spelled out in Article 51A: to honor the heritage while abandoning practices that cause harm to women, as well as undertake the responsibility of protecting nature and not just through symbols.

Conclusion

The women present in the foam of Kalindi Kunj were quite possessive of their respect. The main question in the present paper has been whether their respect or that of the tradition translates into actual progress. The argument of this paper is that one should rather regard the case they present as an example of a trend than of a case of poor implementation: this is a trend of honor paid to women and rivers without granting them authority which would ensure their actual success. Such a trend manifests itself, in the cases examined, in four ways: through idealizing, displacing, substituting and iconizing.

In relation to the first research question, the texts and rituals analyzed shape the linkage between femininity and nature in several ways. Some consider it as a sacred gift, controlled from a distance: the Earth provides and is used for production, Prakriti takes action and withdraws, women are seen as part of creation and judged according to their purity, and the goddess undergoes menstruation and is worshipped while those who menstruate are discriminated against. Others depict feminine power in acts of domination and speech like in Vach, Devi Mahatmya or Sulabha; and some do not link ecological responsibility with femininity at all. In response to the second research question, sacralization was converted into recognition only with the help of institutional recognition, for example, in Whanganui. In the Indian cases discussed, sacralization and constitutional language entered the courts, programs, and public discourse without any decision-making power; meanwhile, the tradition provides several channels for making oneself heard. Regarding the third research question, the framework that shifts from veneration to recognition would turn believers into decision makers, sacred status into legal protection, and gifts into labor that is acknowledged as work.

The study has limitations. It looks at public text and institutions but does not look at women's interpretations and thoughts. Future research should turn to the women directly: the vratis of Chhath festival, girls and women who keep Raja, and women of communities in the river and forest, and ask them how the sacred feminine is understood and what recognition would mean for them. Work on how some

selected quotes are used in modern governance, comparative research on the rights-of-nature regimes that have community guardians, and auditing urban resources institutions according to the authority of women would develop the idea further.

Shakti and Prakriti can move toward the sustainable future but must begin their journey by taking Shakti into account and listening to her voice.

Author Contributions

Pratishtha Rao: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Project administration; Writing – original draft.

Sangeeta Vijay: Supervision; Validation; Writing – review and editing.

Statements and Declarations

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on publicly available documents: classical texts and their published translations, court judgments, legislation, government reports and published scholarship. It involved no human participants, personal data or fieldwork, and therefore did not require ethics committee approval.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable. The study did not involve human participants.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Data Availability

No new data were generated or collected. All sources analysed in this study are publicly available and are cited in the reference list.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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