

**Title : TARABAI SHINDE: WEAVING FEMINIST NARRATIVES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study deals with the workings and contributions of Tarabai Shinde, a pioneering feminist and social reformer in 19th-century Maharashtra, India. Tarabai is best remembered for her influential work, “Stri Purush Tulana” (A Comparison Between Women and Men), written in 1882 which exhibits the oppressive practices and norms that women faced during that age in a critical light. Shinde’s profound insights into the plight of women and her advocacy for education and empowerment marked a significant departure from the prevailing norms of her time. Despite facing societal backlash, she courageously confronted patriarchal structures and laid the foundation for feminist discourse in colonial India. This research employs historical analysis and textual examination to explore Tarabai Shinde’s life, writings, and impact on women’s rights. Therefore, this research paper delves into the intellectual contributions of Tarabai Shinde, exploring the socio-cultural context of that era and her everlasting impact on the struggle for women’s rights in colonial India. Lastly, it delves into her pivotal role in shaping the early feminist movement in South Asia.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Sati, Feminism, Patriarchal

### **INTRODUCTION**

Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. The emergence of feminist movements in India dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century where countless women fought fiercely against patriarchal and dehumanizing norms such as sati, child marriage, and denial of education. At the front of these feminist movements stood Tarabai Shinde, a pioneering feminist thinker who wrote the first feminist text of India. In her influential work “Stri Purush Tulana”, she dissected the oppressive treatment of women in Indian society and advocated for their rights and freedom.

## **EARLY LIFE**

Born in 1850, Tarabai spent her early life in obscurity as a member of the socially elite Marathi caste in the town of Buldhana in Maharashtra. She never received formal education and was home-schooled by her father, Bapuji Hari Shinde, who was himself a radical. She was a voracious reader, well-versed with both classical and modern literature, which placed her far ahead of the women of her time. Even in her marriage, Tarabai sought to break the well enforced mold of the traditional societal norms. She followed the practice of “gharjavai”, in which her husband came to live in her household as opposed to the traditional patriarchal custom which requires the woman to move to her husband's house. She made a deliberate decision to not have children of her own; a choice that she had to defend resolutely in a society that regarded a childless married woman as an example of social perversion.

## **POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY INDIA**

In late 19th century India, women's roles were primarily confined to traditional domestic duties. Social norms and customs restricted their participation in public life, education, and employment. There was prevalence of archaic practices such as sati and child marriage. Most of the women were denied the basic right to education and were expected to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers above their personal aspirations. They were brainwashed to act as voiceless figures whose main purpose was to serve men and their wants (O Hanlon 79).

However, movements led by reformers such as Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule sought to challenge these norms. Tarabai Shinde worked with them to fight for the noble causes of gender equality and caste eradication. She was a member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, or else known as the truth finding committee which worked towards educating girl child and remarriage of widows.

## **ANALYSIS OF STRI PURUSH TULANA**

Tarabai Shinde's most significant contribution is her most renowned feminist text, Stri Purush Tulana; A comparison between Men and Women. Tarabai's furiousness with the standpoint of women at that time found expression in this 40 page essay which was originally published in Marathi. Stri Purush Tulana was written in response to an article which appeared in 1881, in Pune

Vaibhav, an orthodox newspaper published from Pune, about a criminal case against a young Brahmin widow, Vijayalakshmi in Surat, who had been convicted of aborting her illegitimate son for the fear of public disgrace and ostracism and sentenced to be executed. The newspaper also published several articles accusing women of having “loose morals”. Shinde exposed the chauvinist and prejudiced perspective of many males towards women at that time. Her literary style is labeled as engaging as she employed the use of sarcasm, stairways and critical analysis of popular myths.

In the depth of displaying the unfair treatment vetted out to women, she even questions God,

***“Let me ask you something, Gods! You are supposed to be omnipotent and freely accessible to all. You are said to be completely impartial. What does that mean? That you have never been known to be partial. But wasn’t it you who created both men and women? Then why did you grant happiness only to men and brand women with nothing but agony? Your will was done! But poor women have had to suffer for it down the ages.”***

*-Excerpt from Stri Purush Tulana (A Comparison between Men and Women)*

Tarabai asked that one question that fueled a fire in the hearts of women, the one that nobody dared to ask openly: ***“But do men not suffer from the same flaws that women are supposed to have?”*** (Shinde 1994/1882)

Stri Purush Tulana also delves into the double standards regarding women in many areas such as:

**Adultery:** Adultery was considered to be a grave crime, in which both men and women were involved, but men were forgiven while women had to face humiliation, punishment and untold misery. Men were forgiven easily for the same crimes for which women were severely condemned.

**Religion:** Tarabai boldly expressed her views and distaste for the religious and cultural practices that robbed women of their rights such as sati and manusmriti. Manusmriti was considered as a guide to living human life and was extremely orthodox to the point that it made women's life unbearable. It outrightly stated that girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the

custody of her son as widows. Women were forbidden from asserting their independence at any stage (Chakravarti 19).

Stri Purush Tulana did not garner the attention it deserved and instead was faced with tremendous hostility and condemnation. The work was only rightly acknowledged when it was later translated to English by British historian Rosalind Hanlon and given the title 'A Comparison between Men and Women'.

## **TARABAI SHINDE'S IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

Tarabai Shinde supported the British Policy of imparting education to women. She believed education was the key to free women from the shackles of inequality and patriarchy. The work contributed by Shinde in that particular setting played an essential role because she called into question the presumption that men are superior. The manner in which she had fundamentally questioned the social conventions and cultural biases that serve as the basis for patriarchy and male supremacy is particularly noteworthy. Her critique of patriarchy, her emphasis on education and economic empowerment, and her intersectional approach have shaped the feminist movement in India and continue to inspire scholars, activists and individuals engaged in gender advocacy. Her ideologies brought on the realization that feminism was not only limited to advocacy of women's rights but also included challenging power imbalance, social injustices, and rebuilding an inclusive and just India.

## **CONCLUSION**

Tarabai Shinde's work remains profoundly significant and relevant today. Her critiques of patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and social norms continue to challenge oppressive structures and inspire discussions on gender equality. Shinde's emphasis on intersectionality reminds us that gender discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression, highlighting the need for inclusive and comprehensive approaches to social justice. Her advocacy for education, economic independence, and women's agency continues to be instrumental in empowering women and dismantling systemic barriers. Shinde's legacy is a testament to the resilience and strength of women in the fight for gender equality.

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