From Access to Agency: Reclaiming Shakti through Economic Self-Reliance

शक्ति: Atmanirbharta (Self- Reliance)

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Abstract: ***Shakti, often seen as a spiritual idea, finds its real-world expression in Atmanirbharata or women's economic self-reliance. Economic independence helps women move from mere access to true agency. Women's economic roles in India have deep civilizational roots, from ancient agriculture and crafts to modern entrepreneurship and financial inclusion. Although medieval and colonial periods limited these roles, recent reforms have reopened opportunities. Progress is visible through self-help groups, microfinance, and women-led enterprises, but gaps in financial literacy, credit access, and business growth remain. Sustainable empowerment requires skills, inclusive finance, and meaningful economic agency to achieve Shakti–Atmanirbharata.***

Keywords: Shakti; Atmanirbharata; Financial Inclusion; Financial Literacy; Women Entrepreneurship; Gender Equity; Vocational Skills; Economic Agency

1. Introduction

Yaa Devi Sarva-Bhutessu Shakti-Ruupenna Samsthitaa |
Namas-Tasyai Namas-Tasyai Namas-Tasyai Namo Namah ||

The concept of Shakti in Indian civilizational thought signifies not only divine feminine energy but women's active capacity to shape socio-cultural and economic life. Rooted in philosophical traditions that view women as co-creators of *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*, Indian history challenges the idea of women as passive dependents. Archaeological findings at Bhimbetka (c. 5000 BCE) suggest women's participation in gathering and hunting, while ancient texts and inscriptions record women as landowners, traders, guild members, and officials. Across eras, women contributed to agriculture, handicrafts, trade, governance, and knowledge systems.

The contemporary vision of *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance) revives this enduring civilizational ethos rather than introducing a new concept. Although women sustained themselves and their families across ancient, medieval, colonial, and modern periods, patriarchal norms and disruptions during medieval and colonial rule constrained their economic agency and deepened gender disparities. Today, renewed policy emphasis on financial literacy, vocational skills, and access to credit are now seen as critical enablers of women reclaiming their agency.

This article traces the historical trajectory of women's economic roles, identifies key challenges to economic self-reliance, examines existing policies and solutions, and proposes innovative strategies for strengthening women's agency. Positioned within the Shakti–Atmanirbharta framework, it argues that economic self-reliance through financial literacy, skill development, and institutional support is essential not only for material progress but also for women's dignity, freedom, and social transformation.

Looms to Leadership: Women's Economic Roles Through the Ages

Ancient Period: Women as Producers, Traders, and Administrators

In ancient India, women were deeply integrated into productive, economic, and even strategic spheres of life. Vedic and post-Vedic texts depict women engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, dairy and household industries, weaving and pottery, contributing significantly to both subsistence and economy. In 'Aspects of Women and Work in Early South India' by Vijaya Ramaswamy, it is stated that among the low class Velalas called *Kataiyar* meaning the 'last in society', women, known as *kataicciyar,* shared in the task of field cultivation. Women's role in spinning and weaving was central to textile production, a key economic sector, while archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization suggests organized craft production such as pottery and bead-making, where women likely played major roles. Vijaya Ramaswamy states that in the handloom industry "while the spinning of the threads was also done by housewives, it was by and large the sole occupation of widows and unmarried or destitute women. Such female spinners are referred to in Cankam literature as *parutti pentukal.*"

Indian Weaver Couple. Source: Nationalmuseets Samlinger Online

Women were also actively engaged in trade and commerce, with historical references to women merchants, members of trade guilds (*śreṇīs*), landowners, and heads of households. Buddhist and Jain sources mention wealthy women donors and traders who patronized religious institutions, while inscriptions from the Satavahana and other periods record women donating land, funding irrigation works and managing estates.

Beyond economic production, women served in administration and diplomacy. Rulers like Queen Prabhavati Gupta of Vakataka dynasty and Queen Janaki Kanwar of Bihar governed territories, and women in royal courts influenced political and economic decisions. Historical accounts also mention women spies and intelligence agents, highlighting their strategic roles. Overall, women were integrated into the Dharma-Artha-Kāma framework, where the pursuit of wealth (Artha) was considered ethically legitimate for all, reflecting their recognized economic agency in ancient Indian society.

Medieval and Colonial Period: Disruptions and Reconfigurations

Women's economic and public participation in India has ancient roots. Sangam texts like *Maturaikkanci* mention women working as cooks, nurses, and foster mothers, while other sources record their roles in administration and justice. Megasthenes observed women serving as justices of peace in Tamil regions, and inscriptions from Manamai note a woman on a village judicial committee. References to Lakkadevi as a village head (mahapravini) and Revakabbarasi as a royal officer in Karnataka further highlight women's leadership in governance.

However, medieval and colonial periods brought significant disruptions. Feudal systems, invasions, and restrictive cultural practices such as purdah and early marriage limit women's mobility, education, and property rights. Despite these constraints, women remained central to agrarian and household economies, contributing to farming, dairy, food processing, weaving, embroidery and other cottage industries.

Young women workers in a booming Bombay textile mill, 1941-1943. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Colonial rule further altered women's economic roles. British policies weakened indigenous handloom and handicrafts, pushing women into low-paid informal sectors such as plantations and domestic work. Colonial land revenue systems marginalized women's land rights. Yet, colonial modernity also enabled women's education and entry into professions like teaching and nursing. Reformers such as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and Begum Rokeya promoted women's education and economic independence, laying the foundation for modern empowerment movements.

Modern Period: Revival of Women's Economic Agency

Post-independence India marked a turning point in women's economic participation, with constitutional guarantees of equality and state-led development initiatives opening new avenues for education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Women gradually entered formal education, public service, and professional sectors, while cooperatives, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and microenterprises helped restore women's economic roles at the grassroots level. In recent decades, financial inclusion initiatives and digital platforms have expanded women's access to banking, credit, and markets. Women-owned micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are steadily increasing, and women are emerging as entrepreneurs and leaders in cooperatives and social enterprises.

Women in the MSME sector. Source: Disha Daily

However, women's economic empowerment remains uneven and constrained by persistent structural barriers such as limited access to capital, digital divides, unpaid care burdens, and socio-cultural norms. Post-independence reforms initiated the gradual restoration of women's historical economic agency, and contemporary trends reflect a revival of women's transition from traditional handicrafts and informal work to modern entrepreneurship and high-technology vocations. While progress is evident, significant gaps remain in scaling women-led enterprises and ensuring equitable access to financial and institutional support, underscoring the need for targeted policy interventions to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic empowerment.

Barriers to Women's Economic Autonomy: Structural and Social Challenges

Women's economic self-reliance continues to face interconnected structural, social, and institutional challenges despite historical participation and recent policy initiatives. A major barrier is limited financial literacy and awareness, especially among rural and marginalized women. Although bank account ownership has increased, informed financial decision-making, investments, and digital financial usage remain low, creating an "access versus control" gap where accounts exist in women's names, but financial decisions are often made by male relatives.

Restricted access to capital further constrains women's entrepreneurship. Women often lack collateral because land and property titles are largely held by men. Gender bias in financial institutions, limited credit histories, and dependence on informal lenders with high interest rates deepen financial vulnerability. Even Self-Help Group (SHG) credit is often inadequate for scaling enterprises beyond micro-level activities.

Socio-cultural constraints remain deeply entrenched. Patriarchal norms limit women's mobility, decision-making power, and asset ownership. Women also bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care work, reducing time for education, skill development, and income-generating activities. These factors contribute to women's concentration in low-paid informal jobs and persistent gender wage gaps.

The digital divide remains a major challenge, as women have limited access to the internet, digital banking, and e-commerce, restricting their participation in fintech and online markets. Most women work in informal, low-paid sectors with poor linkage to formal markets. Legal and property rights barriers persist due to weak implementation of inheritance laws, leaving women with limited asset ownership and restricted access to formal credit. Addressing these systemic barriers is essential for achieving genuine women's economic self-reliance and empowerment.

Empowerment in Action: Policies and Programs Supporting Women's Self-Reliance

India has introduced numerous policies and institutional initiatives to promote women's economic self-reliance and financial inclusion. A key milestone has been financial inclusion drives such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), which enabled millions of women to open bank accounts and directly receive welfare benefits, strengthening their access and control over finances.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have proven highly effective for collective empowerment. Through SHG–Bank linkage programs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), women access microcredit, savings mechanisms, and social capital, supporting income generation and community development.

To enhance employability and entrepreneurship, programmes like Skill India Mission, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen

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Kaushalya Yojana, and credit schemes like Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) and Stand-Up India provide skill training and collateral-free loans to women entrepreneurs.

Digital and market platforms, including Government e-Marketplace (GeM), Mahila E-Haat, e-commerce portals, and digital payment systems, are expanding market access for women-led enterprises, especially in handicrafts and rural products. The Digital India initiative is gradually improving connectivity and digital participation.

Legal and policy frameworks such as constitutional provisions, gender budgeting, and inheritance and labor law reforms aim to reduce gender gaps and strengthen women's rights. Despite progress in credit access and entrepreneurship, gaps remain in awareness, effective usage, scalability, and sustainability, highlighting the need for stronger implementation and capacity-building efforts.

Pathways to Women's Economic Agency: Innovative and Actionable Strategies

Innovative and practical solutions are needed to move women's economic participation from mere access to real agency and self-reliance through a multidimensional approach integrating financial, digital, legal, and social interventions. Contextual financial education is essential and should be delivered in local languages through schools, SHGs, adult education programs, and community centers. Community workshops can improve understanding of savings, investments, and insurance, enabling informed financial decisions.

Women-centric credit products are crucial for entrepreneurship. Financial institutions should offer collateral-free, flexible, and scalable loans for women-led enterprises, supported by gender-sensitive credit scoring, group guarantees, and credit guarantee schemes. Preferential interest rates can further encourage women-owned startups and MSMEs.

Digital inclusion can bridge the gender gap through digital literacy training, and women-friendly fintech platforms. Women-only digital marketplaces can create safe and supportive economic spaces. Strengthening value chains through women cooperatives and enterprise clusters can enhance bargaining power and market integration. Branding, certification, and design innovation can link traditional women-led enterprises to global markets.

Asset ownership and legal awareness initiatives, including joint land titles, inheritance rights enforcement, and legal literacy campaigns, are vital for economic security and credit access. Finally, redistributing unpaid care work through childcare facilities, flexible work policies, and social norm change campaigns can provide women the "time wealth" needed for education, skills, and economic activities, creating sustainable pathways to women's economic self-reliance.

Reclaiming Shakti: Charting the Next Phase of Women's Economic Empowerment

Economic self-reliance is fundamentally about agency—the power to make choices and control resources. Across history, women who exercised economic control also possessed greater social and personal autonomy. *Atmanirbharta* is essential for purposeful and ethical living, and women's financial autonomy enables investments in education, health, and community development, generating intergenerational benefits. Thus, economic empowerment emerges not merely as a welfare goal but as a transformative force for families, communities, and nations.

The future of women's economic empowerment lies in integrating tradition with innovation. Reviving traditional crafts and indigenous knowledge systems through digital platforms, e-commerce, and global markets can create sustainable livelihoods, while emerging domains such as fintech, artificial intelligence, and the green economy offer new opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Policymakers must adopt holistic strategies combining financial inclusion, skill development, legal reforms, and social norm change, supported by public–private partnerships and community institutions. Education systems should nurture entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and gender equality, while media narratives must celebrate women's economic achievements to reinforce positive role models.

Ultimately, the journey toward *Shakti–Atmanirbharta* requires a transition from labor to leadership. Women's economic self-reliance is not merely a social cause but a developmental necessity, enabling women to take back their historical role as creators and sustainers of livelihoods, reclaiming agency over their lives.

The journey from access to agency embodies the true essence of Shakti–Atmanirbharta. Women's economic participation in India reflects civilizational continuity—from ancient weavers and traders to modern entrepreneurs. While policies have improved access to finance, skills, and markets, barriers in literacy, credit, digital inclusion, and social norms still restrict full agency. Economic self-reliance is not merely developmental but civilizational, restoring women as creators, custodian and leaders of transformation. Bridging India's civilizational past with its technological future is essential to achieving true empowerment. When women become economically self-reliant, they transform not only their own trajectories but also the destiny of society. Moving beyond mere access toward genuine agency will ensure that every woman has the tools, opportunities, and autonomy to write her own economic destiny and stand at the center of India's Atmanirbhar future.

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