

THE WOMAN NEITHER TRADITION NOR REBELLION PREPARED FOR

International Women's Day invites a deeper inquiry into identity, freedom, and borrowed expectations.



ACHARYA PRASHANT

She has spent her life being told how a 'good woman' should be. Dutiful daughter, devoted wife, selfless mother: these are the ideals she inherited, often before she was old enough to examine them. And yet, on the one day set aside in her name, we rarely ask the question that matters most: good by whose standard, and at what cost to herself?

On 8th March every year, International Women's Day is observed, speeches are made, and achievements are listed. But the woman sitting quietly behind all of it, the one who has given and adjusted and accommodated her way through an entire life, she is not waiting for a celebration. She is waiting, perhaps without knowing it, for permission to ask who she actually is beneath everything she was told to be.

That permission does not need to come from outside. That is what we must understand today.

So the incapacity some women feel is not a question of ability. The centuries have settled that. Every field once declared off-limits has been entered and excelled in, often under conditions of resistance that would have probably broken most men entirely. The question that remains unasked, and therefore unanswered, is not whether she can. It is why, in the presence of all that evidence, she still reaches for permission before she reaches for the door.

A BORROWED CENTRE
No girl is born believing her

ambitions are pretension, her opinions disruption, her body the primary locus of her value. These are not innate beliefs. They are installed, over years, through family, ritual, story, clothing, approval, and the withdrawal of approval, so thoroughly and so early that by the time she reaches adulthood, the installation feels like personality. She does not experience it as conditioning; she experiences it as herself.

And because she has never been encouraged to know herself from within, she gathers her identity from without. She does not know, through direct and honest seeing, what she values, what she wants, or even who is doing all this wanting. So she turns outward. She measures herself through others' eyes so habitually and so continuously that she mistakes the habit for nature. This is where the real damage is done: once your worth is measured by others, they already hold the scale by which you judge yourself. They did not have to seize it. It was yielded in a thousand small acts of fear, imitation, and dependence, repeated until surrender began to feel like personality.

Every culture that has diminished women has often also glorified them in symbol. This is not contradiction; it is the same mechanism operating at the level of civilisation. In India, the *Durga Saptashti* is precise: the assembled gods cannot defeat Mahishasura and they approach the goddess not with condescension but supplication, acknowledging that what they cannot do, she must do. She stands ten-armed, carrying weapons and wisdom simultaneously, answerable to no one. This is the woman the tradition placed at its apex. And then this same tradition produced the household ideal in which the actual woman is instructed



to regard her husband as her god regardless of his character, and to understand her highest calling as the management of his comfort. One hand lights incense before the goddess who defeated what the gods could not, and the other keeps the living woman indoors.

Those most thoroughly shaped by the arrangement often become its fiercest defenders. Mothers teach daughters to be modest and accommodating. Older women shame younger ones for questioning. The family meeting in which important decisions are made has five men and no women, not because the door was barred, but because conditioning had gone so deep that entering probably never arose even as a possibility. The system perpetuates itself through the very people it has most comprehensively diminished.

She knows this not as theory but as memory. The voice that told her to sit quietly at the table was not a man's. The hand that adjusted her clothing before

she stepped outside was not hostile; it was tender. The woman who first taught her that smallness was safety claimed to love her completely. That is what makes it so difficult to name, and so difficult to leave.

And yet the most unsettling part of this arrangement is not that the cage was built, but that the woman often builds it herself, and builds it eagerly. In many cases, women themselves internalise the timelines of marriage, home, and family long before those expectations are consciously examined.

And when liberation finally came, it largely repeated the same error in a different register: where the first woman had organised her life around her body as object of devotion and restraint, the second organised hers around her body as object of display and assertion. The veil came off; the body remained central. The movement remained body-bound and mistook that shift for freedom. It was not freedom. The address had changed, the landlord had not.

THE TWO WOMEN, AND THE THIRD

Modern history produced a rebellion against this arrangement, and the rebellion was necessary and real and costly. The second woman demanded education, employment, legal rights, reproductive autonomy, and won many of these at great cost and with real courage. But something went wrong that the rebellion itself could not see, because the blindspot was inside it.

In defining herself against man, the second woman still kept man at the centre, no longer as master perhaps, but still as reference. She measured progress by his standards, competed on his terms, and adopted his metrics of success. She wore his armour and called it freedom. Reaction hardened into imitation, rebellion became mimicry.

The pattern, once seen, cannot be unseen. The first woman organised her entire inner life around the question: am I acceptable to him? The second woman organised hers around: am I equal to him? Both ques-

tions still place the man at the centre. The dependence has merely changed vocabulary. The ego that once sought validation through compliance now seeks it through defiance, but it is still measuring itself against an external reference, still unable to answer the far more unsettling question: who are you when he is not in the room at all?

This is the question that neither the tradition nor the rebellion has been willing to sit with, because it dissolves both. It cannot be answered by performing a role better, whether the role is dutiful wife or liberated professional. It cannot be answered by winning more rights or occupying more positions. It can only be answered by the kind of inward turning that most people spend their entire lives avoiding, because what it requires is not strength in the conventional sense but the willingness to face, without consolation, the falseness of the centre from which she has been living, a centre assembled from fear, memory, culture, and borrowed approval.

The Upanishadic tradition understood this with a clarity that later religiosity buried. Gargi debated Yajnavalkya before the full court at Janaka's palace; the text does not pause to consider her clothing or her compliance. Maitreyi, offered half her husband's wealth, refused it and asked instead for the knowledge by which she might know everything worth knowing. They are presented not as exceptions to femininity, but as serious human beings doing what seriousness demands: turning inquiry inward without apology. At its highest, the tradition had no need to grant women permission for inquiry, because inquiry belongs neither to man nor to woman.

What Gargi and Maitreyi demonstrate is not that women can equal men in inquiry. They demonstrate something far more unsettling: that the inquiry itself has nothing to do with being a woman or a man at all. The ego is what takes on gender, borrowing it from the body, then from culture, then from every room that ever told her what she was. What the inquiry reaches beneath that construction carries none of those markings. The question "Who am I?" dissolves the categories before it answers them.

What emerged from that inquiry was not a woman who had won her rights. It was a woman who had stopped needing permission.

She is not a type but a direction, not an identity achieved but a quality of ongoing attention. Her aim is not equality with men but the dissolution of the very structure of borrowed identity that has confined both men and women, in different ways, since the beginning of recorded history. She is not defined by what she submits to or what she opposes. She has moved the question past the po-

litical, past the biological, to the one that underlies both: who is this "I" that submits, opposes, performs, and seeks approval? She watches conditioning as conditioning, and in that very seeing becomes less its prisoner. She does not mistake fear for devotion, compliance for strength, or the performance of rebellion for freedom. She is not the woman of tradition and she is not the woman of reaction.

Most structures are not built to recognise her. Religious structures built on female obedience find her disorienting. Family systems built on female silence find her threatening. Even other women, still deeply identified with conditioning, may experience her presence as accusation, because she embodies a possibility they have not chosen. She is called difficult, arrogant, cold. These are the accusations of a system that requires her legibility. She has become illegible to it.

The cage may have been built from outside. What makes it hold is the belief installed within.

Others may point to the door, but the step across belongs to no one but her. Most will not take it, because the prison eventually learns to call itself protection. And those who do take it will not arrive at some final condition called freedom. They will discover something subtler: that freedom lives only in attention, only in honest seeing, only in the refusal to once again become what fear has taught them to be. The ego returns, yes. But each return will be thinner than the last, and the woman who knows this does not need a day to celebrate. She has something better: the next moment of seeing clearly.

* Acharya Prashant is a teacher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life.