



## The wound that equality cannot heal



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Feminism, in its original impulse, was a refusal—a refusal to accept that a woman’s worth could be settled by her body, her compliance, or her usefulness to the purposes of others. Whatever one thinks of the movement’s later directions, that original impulse deserves recognition. It named something real.

What has not changed is something harder to legislate and harder to measure: the way a woman sees herself when no one else is watching, what she finds at the centre of her self-esteem, and what happens to her sense of worth when her body changes or a particular kind of attention is withdrawn. The wound that produced the movement turns out to be deeper than the movement has so far been willing to go.

India’s Women’s Reservation Act, passed near-unanimously by Parliament in September 2023, has in recent days returned to the centre of parliamentary attention. When the Act takes effect, a third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies will be reserved for women. Across party lines, the argument proceeds with familiar certainty: more women in legislatures will mean better governance, greater representation, and a more just republic. Yet something in this certainty deserves examination rather than applause.

What is being asked is a different question: whether the woman who occupies those seats has changed her relationship with herself, or only changed her position in a transaction that was always conducted on someone else’s terms—whether she has left the building or simply moved to a better floor of it.

### The wound is real

What patriarchy does to a woman is particular and worth stating precisely. It assigns her a value anchored entirely in her body: her body’s labour, her body’s reproductive capacity, her body’s availability for male pleasure and display. Open any major Indian newspaper’s matrimonial section. The entry for a prospective bride will specify her complexion, height, weight, and domestic accomplishments, in roughly that order. The entry for a prospective groom will specify his income, profession, and property. The exchange being negotiated is not between two people; it is between a body’s display value and a household’s economic position. This advertisement runs today, placed with complete sincerity by educated, modern families. The patriarchal pricing of a woman has not disappeared; it has simply been



standardised. Think of what often happens when a woman enters a room. She knows, in a way she did not consciously learn and cannot consciously unlearn, whose eyes are on her and what those eyes are measuring. The knowledge is not external; it has been internalised so deeply that it operates as a continuous inner assessment, preceding any external one. The gaze she protests in the world is the gaze she has already absorbed within herself. The oppression she can name in a seminar is the oppression she conducts privately, against herself, before the seminar begins.

This is the real depth of the wound: the woman who diagnoses patriarchy in the world carries it intact within herself, where no legislation and no seat in any assembly can reach it. It is easier to count the empty seats in the legislature than to examine the occupied seat behind the mirror.

### The cure that confirms the disease

Here is where most of what calls itself feminism makes its decisive error. Having correctly identified the wound, it proposes a horizontal cure: move the woman from this position to another, from subordination to equality. The slave, if this logic holds, is freed by becoming the master. But note what remains constant in this exchange: the body remains the primary reality, gender the primary identity, and the transaction continues in the currency of power and social position. The woman who fought her way to the boardroom has changed her address within the same building; she has not left it.

Gender equality, for all the energy expended in its pursuit, is a limited objective. It asks the wrong question. Men have held political, economic, and institutional power for centuries; the record speaks for itself. To aspire merely towards parity with that record is not ambition—it is a request to repeat the same errors.

Three decades after the 73rd and 74th Amendments reserved a third of panchayat

seats for women, the phenomenon candidly known in villages as sarpanch-pati has become commonplace: the woman wins the seat, the husband runs the office. The seat moved; the inner arrangement did not.

### What no reservation can reserve

The Women’s Reservation Act will soon reach implementation. More women will enter legislatures, which is preferable to the alternative. But the more uncomfortable question remains: has anything changed in the relationship between a woman and her own sense of self?

The strongest evidence against the sufficiency of external liberation is not political. It exists in private comparisons, in the anxiety that follows bodily change, in the disappointment when desired approval is withheld. None of this yields to legislation. It yields only to a deeper inquiry—into who is looking, from where, and why what is seen never quite satisfies.

Patriarchy survives not only because men enforce it, though they do, but because the beliefs that sustain it are internalised. Consider a scene observed in Raipur: two young women walking by a lake, followed by a group of men, until one woman turned and said directly, “Why are you following us? Walk alongside.” The men, startled, withdrew. Most would have continued silently. What keeps many in fear is not only external threat, but an internalised belief about themselves that reform alone cannot erase.

India’s spiritual traditions offer examples often overlooked. Saint Lalleshwari, the fourteenth-century Kashmiri poet-saint, transcended the social scripts governing women. Akka Mahadevi, the twelfth-century Veerashaiva poet, left an imposed marriage and composed verses that endure centuries later. Their freedom did not lie in rebellion alone, but in transcendence of the body as the basis of identity.

There is a word for such orientation: not merely naariwadi, but chetanawadi—one grounded in self-inquiry, where gender becomes secondary to the deeper question of identity.

Without such inquiry, feminism risks reproducing the very structure it opposes. Patriarchy without self-awareness is domination; feminism without self-awareness risks becoming the same impulse in another form. Real freedom does not lie in shifting positions, but in questioning the premise that position defines identity.

The first woman was shaped by compliance; the second defines herself by resistance. Neither has fully found what both seek. Whether that discovery happens depends on a question no parliament can legislate and no movement can resolve: who, beneath the constructed identity of the woman, is truly present?

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