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From Dharma to Dignity: Women's Agency, Sewa Bharti, And the Changing Grammar of Empowerment in India

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Abstract

Women's empowerment in India cannot be understood only through contemporary legislation or through measures of income and education. It also requires attention to the cultural vocabularies through which women's duties, respectability, agency and social worth have historically been defined. This article examines that relationship through a connected reading of selected women's narratives in the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the contemporary service interventions of Sewa Bharti. The article asks how the movement from historically gendered expectations of women's duty and honour to present-day programmes of education, livelihood, health, digital literacy and community participation changes the meaning of empowerment, and what remains unresolved when empowerment is not accompanied by meaningful access to rights and justice. Sewa Bharti is the principal contemporary case. Its publicly available materials are examined alongside scholarship on seva, feminist theories of gender and symbolic power, and contemporary Indian criminal-law sources. The article does not assume that epic narratives directly cause present-day gender practices, nor does it treat Sewa Bharti's organisational claims as independent evidence of outcomes. Instead, it identifies continuities and transformations in the social conditions within which women exercise agency. The legal discussion focuses on the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, judicial rejection of the two-finger test, restrictions on the use of sexual history, credibility, consent and honour, and the constitutional protection of women's autonomy. The article argues that empowerment has moved from a predominantly normative language of duty and social role toward a multidimensional language of capability, participation and rights, but the transition remains incomplete. Sewa Bharti's programmes provide an important contemporary site for studying this transition because they combine service, community, skills and socialisation. Their significance for gender justice therefore lies not in assuming that service automatically produces liberation, but in examining whether service expands women's economic, informational, social and institutional capacity to define and pursue their own interests.

Keywords: Women's agency, Sewa Bharti, seva, dharma, access to justice

Introduction

The question of women's empowerment is often presented as a distinctly modern question. Contemporary policy frameworks measure women's participation through education, employment, political representation, health, financial inclusion and legal rights. Yet the social meaning of these measures cannot be separated completely from older ideas about what a woman ought to be. In South Asian traditions, concepts such as dharma, family honour, chastity, duty and respectability have historically provided normative languages through which women's conduct has been

evaluated. These traditions are neither uniform nor static, and epic narratives contain both expectations of conformity and moments of resistance. Nevertheless, they offer an important cultural archive for examining how women's agency has been imagined.

This article brings that cultural history into conversation with a contemporary institutional case: Sewa Bharti. The purpose is not to place an ancient epic and a modern service organisation on the same historical plane. Nor is it to argue that contemporary women are simply reproducing the experiences of Sita, Draupadi, Ahalya, Amba or Kunti. The

purpose is to ask a more precise question: what changes when women move from being primarily represented through prescribed duties and social expectations to being addressed as learners, workers, participants, beneficiaries, citizens and rights-bearing persons?

Sewa Bharti provides a particularly useful site for this question because its public programme descriptions combine several dimensions of social empowerment. Sewa Bharti Delhi describes initiatives in education, health, empowerment, vocational training, digital literacy, self-help groups and community development. Its women-centred stitching and tailoring programme states that it operates more than 160 centres in Delhi and provides training to more than 5,000 women ^[1]. Its digital-literacy programme describes computer centres and placement facilities, while its Kishori Vikas programme explicitly uses terms such as self-reliance, confidence, independence, citizenship and the ability of adolescent girls to understand their own worth. These are not merely economic categories. They indicate a vocabulary of personhood and capacity.

At the same time, empowerment cannot be equated automatically with service provision. A woman may receive vocational training without gaining control over household decisions. She may become economically active without being able to report violence. She may become digitally literate without knowing how to access legal remedies. She may participate in a community group while continuing to encounter expectations concerning family honour or appropriate femininity. The question, therefore, is not whether service is empowering in the abstract but what type of capacity service creates and whether that capacity extends into institutional and legal life.

The central question of this article is: How does Sewa Bharti's contemporary model of service-based empowerment relate to the changing conditions of women's agency, when read against older cultural expectations of women's duty, honour and social role and contemporary legal commitments to dignity, consent and access to justice? Three subsidiary questions follow. First, what gendered expectations about duty, honour, sexuality and agency are visible in selected epic narratives, and how should they be understood without treating the epics as direct descriptions of historical social reality? Second, what forms of women's empowerment are publicly documented in Sewa Bharti's programmes, and what kinds of agency do those programmes appear designed to cultivate? Third, where does contemporary criminal law challenge older assumptions about women's credibility, sexual history, bodily dignity and family honour, and what does this reveal about the difference between empowerment as social capacity and empowerment as access to justice?

The hypothesis is that women's empowerment in contemporary grassroots service organisations represents a shift from a predominantly role-based conception of women's social value toward a capability-based conception of agency, but that the shift remains incomplete unless economic, informational and social empowerment are accompanied by institutional capacity: the ability to understand rights, approach public institutions, communicate claims and seek remedies.

The article makes a further methodological argument. It is possible to study an organisation such as Sewa Bharti

critically without reducing its activities either to benevolent welfare or to ideological mobilisation. The organisation's own materials are evidence of institutional priorities and self-representation. Academic scholarship provides different interpretations of organised seva and its relationship to the wider RSS network. Legal materials provide a third domain in which women's rights are formally articulated. Bringing these sources together makes it possible to examine the relationship among service, culture and justice while keeping their evidentiary status distinct.

Conceptualising Women's Conditions: From Duty to Agency

The phrase "women's condition" can easily become overly general. Women in different periods, regions, castes, classes and communities have experienced social life differently. This article therefore does not propose a single historical condition of Indian women. Instead, it examines particular normative structures that have repeatedly appeared in discussions of women's conduct: marriage, chastity, family responsibility, sexual respectability, dependence, property, mobility and public voice.

The concept of *strīdharmā* is useful in identifying one part of this normative structure. Scholarship on *Dharmaśāstra* describes women's legal and religious status through questions of guardianship, marriage, property, inheritance, ritual partnership and socially prescribed roles. Stephanie Jamison's account of *strīdharmā* shows that the tradition contained rules concerning women's independence and legal status alongside questions of property, life-cycle duties and social roles. Such materials should not be collapsed into the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, because *Dharmaśāstra*, epic narrative and lived social practice are different kinds of sources. They can, however, be placed in conversation to show the broader normative environment in which ideas of womanhood developed ^[2].

The *Mahabharata* is especially valuable because it does not present women's agency in a simple or uniform manner. Women such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari and Amba occupy different positions within kinship and political structures. Their narratives reveal both the power of patriarchal institutions and the capacity of women to question, negotiate or resist them. Scholarly work on women's *dharma* in the *Mahabharata* similarly emphasises that the epic repeatedly places women's duties and marriage norms under scrutiny rather than presenting a single settled code ^[3].

The *Ramayana* offers another important example through Sita. The episode of Sita's ordeal in the *Yuddha Kanda* has been interpreted through questions of chastity, public reputation, marital duty and authority. In the Valmiki text, the episode unfolds before a public audience and therefore links female sexuality with collective judgement. Sita's response also matters because she speaks within and against that normative structure. The relevant analytical point is not that Sita represents "the passive woman." It is that the narrative exposes the tension between a woman's own account of herself and the authority of others to define her honour ^[4].

Draupadi's questioning in the *Sabha Parva* raises a related but distinct problem: whether a woman can make a legal and moral claim when the institution before which she

speaks has already embedded her within a structure of male authority. Her question is significant precisely because she refuses to accept that her status can be determined without scrutiny of the authority claiming the right to determine it. The episode therefore offers a useful cultural vocabulary for examining women's voice, institutional authority and credibility without treating the epic court as equivalent to a modern courtroom ^[4].

These narratives should not be read as evidence that contemporary Indian women continue to live under an unchanged epic order. The relationship is more indirect. Cultural narratives can supply symbols and categories through which social expectations are remembered, debated and reinterpreted. They form part of a broader cultural repertoire concerning honour, sacrifice, ideal womanhood and resistance. Feminist scholarship is useful precisely because it enables these narratives to be read critically rather than as timeless prescriptions ^[5].

The movement from duty to agency is therefore not a simple replacement of one system by another. Contemporary women may continue to negotiate family responsibilities, marriage expectations, religious values and community norms while simultaneously exercising education, employment, political participation and legal rights. Empowerment takes place within this layered environment. This is why the language of dignity becomes important. Dignity shifts the question from "What should a woman be?" to "What conditions enable a woman to decide and act as a person whose choices are entitled to respect?" Contemporary constitutional and criminal-law developments increasingly use this language. The Supreme Court's jurisprudence on sexual violence, medical examination and bodily privacy illustrates the transformation from judging women through character to recognising women as rights-bearing subjects.

Sewa Bharti enters this conceptual discussion as a contemporary institution that explicitly uses the language of service and, in several programmes, self-reliance, confidence, independence and citizenship. The analytical task is to determine how far this language changes the practical resources available to women and what kinds of agency it creates.

Sewa Bharti: Service as A Contemporary Form of Women's Empowerment

Sewa Bharti should be understood first through what its own public materials say it does. Sewa Bharti Delhi describes a broad range of initiatives in education, health, empowerment, social support, disaster relief, medical camps and self-help groups ^[6]. This breadth is important because women's lives are not divided neatly into "economic" and "social" problems. Health, education, income, mobility, digital access and community relationships can influence the ability to exercise agency.

The organisation's stitching and tailoring centres provide a particularly clear example of women-centred service. Sewa Bharti states that more than 160 centres operate in Delhi and that more than 5,000 women receive training. The programme describes its objectives in terms of women's economic upliftment and empowerment and also refers to literacy, primary education, monthly empowerment meetings and self-help groups ^[7]. The programme can

therefore be read at three levels. At the first level, it is vocational: women acquire a skill. At the second level, it is economic: the skill is associated with livelihood and income generation. At the third level, it is relational: repeated participation and group meetings create a social environment in which women may exchange information and develop networks.

The third level is especially important for understanding empowerment. Economic independence is not only about money. It can alter the practical options available to a person. Similarly, a collective group is not simply a meeting. It can become a site for information, discussion and recognition. Nevertheless, these possibilities must not be converted into claims about outcomes that the organisation's public materials do not independently demonstrate. The article therefore treats the programmes as institutional opportunities rather than measured causal effects.

Digital literacy adds another dimension. Sewa Bharti Delhi's digital-literacy material describes 36 computer centres and reports 3,318 students, including 1,702 girls, together with placement facilities ^[8]. In a contemporary environment where public services, government information, educational opportunities and institutional communication increasingly involve digital platforms, digital capability may have implications beyond employment. It may affect the ability to search for information, communicate independently and access public resources. Whether this occurs among Sewa Bharti participants is an empirical question; the programme description itself does not establish it.

The Kishori Vikas programme is particularly revealing for the present argument. Sewa Bharti describes its purpose in terms of making adolescent girls healthy, educated, balanced, self-reliant, confident, judicious, aware and independent citizens who can protect themselves and understand their own worth ^[9]. This language marks a significant conceptual movement. The woman or girl is no longer described solely through relational identities such as daughter, wife or mother. She is also described as an independent citizen with self-worth and protective capacity. This does not mean that the older language of social responsibility disappears. Sewa Bharti's wider programme material combines education and service with moral and cultural vocabulary. Its digital-literacy programme, for example, refers to "sanskars." ^[10] Empowerment therefore takes place within a normative framework rather than outside culture. That fact should be studied rather than assumed to have one predetermined meaning.

The organisation's scale and institutional location also matter. Academic scholarship situates Seva Bharati historically within the expansion of organised service associated with the RSS. Christophe Jaffrelot identifies the creation of Seva Bharati in 1979 as part of a more systematic social-welfare strategy ^[11], while later scholarship discusses the scale and institutional development of RSS-associated seva ^[12]. These interpretations are important for understanding the organisation's political and ideological context, but they do not by themselves establish what every programme does or how every woman experiences it.

A balanced study therefore requires two levels of analysis.

The first is institutional: what programmes are offered, to whom, and with what stated objectives? The second is experiential: how do women interpret and use those programmes? The present article can answer the first question from documentary evidence but cannot claim to answer the second without fieldwork.

This distinction strengthens the argument. Instead of declaring that Sewa Bharti “empowers women,” the paper identifies the specific forms of capacity that its public programmes seek to cultivate: skills, education, health awareness, digital competence, self-reliance, confidence, collective participation and citizenship. It then asks whether these forms of capacity can become relevant to legal and institutional agency.

From Honour to Dignity: Cultural Continuities and Changes

The central cultural problem linking the epic narratives and contemporary gender questions is not that ancient texts dictate modern behaviour. It is the recurring social question of who has the authority to define a woman’s worth.

In the Sita narrative, public suspicion makes female sexuality a matter of collective reputation. Sita’s ordeal can therefore be read as a narrative of credibility: the woman’s own assertion of fidelity is placed within a structure in which public recognition matters. The exact historical meaning of the episode is contested and depends upon the textual tradition and interpretive framework used. This article does not treat it as evidence of a universal ancient practice. Its value is analytical: it shows how female honour can become a public question ^[12].

Draupadi’s episode provides a different configuration. Her speech in the Kuru assembly challenges the authority of those who seek to define her status without first answering the question of whether they possess the right to do so. Her agency is therefore located in questioning the institutional order itself. The episode has been interpreted in many ways, but for this article it highlights the relationship between voice and authority.

Ahalya, Amba and Kunti further complicate the picture. Their narratives cannot be reduced to victimhood. Each demonstrates different relationships between women, sexuality, family, power and social recognition. Amba’s story is particularly significant because it links female agency with the refusal to accept a social destiny imposed by others. Kunti’s narrative illustrates the consequences of secrecy, lineage and social legitimacy. Ahalya’s story has often been read through sexuality, blame and restoration. These narratives demonstrate that women’s agency has long existed within constraints rather than outside them.

This is precisely where contemporary feminist analysis becomes useful. Uma Chakravarti’s work draws attention to the intersection of gender and social hierarchy; Nivedita Menon challenges the naturalisation of gender roles; and Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence helps explain ^[13] how norms can become embedded in everyday expectations ^[13]. The question is not whether women are “free” or “unfree” in a binary sense. The question is what social resources make particular choices possible and what costs accompany them.

Modern criminal law attempts to transform some of these relationships. The law no longer treats a woman’s sexual

history as a legitimate measure of whether she consented to a particular sexual act in the specified circumstances covered by the BSA. The Supreme Court has rejected medical practices that treat the condition of a woman’s body as evidence of sexual credibility. Honour cannot lawfully override an adult woman’s constitutional autonomy in choosing a partner.

The movement from honour to dignity is therefore visible in legal language. Honour asks whether conduct conforms to a social expectation. Dignity asks whether the person’s autonomy and bodily integrity are respected. The two concepts can coexist uneasily. A family or community may continue to invoke honour while constitutional law protects individual choice.

The relevance of Sewa Bharti lies in the social space between these two languages. Programmes that provide women with skills, education, group participation, digital knowledge and self-confidence may contribute to a broader shift from role-based identity toward capability-based identity. But this does not automatically dissolve honour norms. Empowerment is negotiated within social relationships.

The most useful comparison between “then” and “now” is therefore not a simplistic claim of progress. It is a comparison of the institutions through which women’s claims become intelligible. In epic narratives, authority is frequently located in kinship, kingship, marriage and public reputation. In contemporary India, authority is distributed among family, community, civil society organisations, administrative institutions, police, courts and constitutional law. Women’s empowerment depends partly on whether they can move between these spaces without losing the capacity to speak for themselves.

Women, Credibility and Contemporary Criminal Justice

The question of women’s empowerment becomes especially concrete when a woman is required to make a claim of violence. A woman may possess economic resources and social confidence, yet the justice process can introduce a new set of demands concerning credibility, evidence and bodily examination. This is why the cultural analysis of honour must be connected directly to contemporary law.

The Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023 contains an important safeguard. Section 149 addresses cross-examination, and its proviso restricts evidence or questions about a victim’s general immoral character or previous sexual experience where consent is in issue in specified sexual-offence prosecutions, when such evidence is offered to prove consent or the quality of consent.¹⁴ The rule is significant because it separates credibility from sexual respectability. A complainant’s past sexual experience is not a lawful substitute for evidence about consent to the act under adjudication.

Judicial treatment of medical evidence demonstrates a parallel transformation. In *Lillu v. State of Haryana*, the Supreme Court held that the two-finger test and its interpretation violate the privacy, physical and mental integrity, and dignity of rape survivors ^[15]. In *State of Jharkhand v. Shailendra Kumar Rai*, the Supreme Court reiterated that the two-finger test has no scientific basis for proving or disproving rape and can re-traumatise survivors. The Court also emphasised that sexual history is immaterial

to the adjudication of rape and directed attention to appropriate medical practices.

The question of credibility remains more complicated. Courts have developed standards concerning the reliability and consistency of testimony. The “sterling witness” formulation in *Rai Sandeep @ Deepu v. State* (NCT of Delhi) concerns the quality of testimony, but it should not be transformed into a moral test of the complainant^[16]. The socio-legal issue is therefore not that courts simply require women to be “pure.” It is that institutional standards of credibility can interact with wider social expectations about how a believable woman should behave.

This is where the connection to empowerment becomes direct. A woman’s ability to participate in justice is affected not only by whether a legal right exists but by whether she can understand the process, obtain information, communicate her account, access medical assistance, secure support and continue through institutional procedures. Empowerment therefore has an institutional dimension.

The same principle applies to consent. The BNS defines consent in section 63 through voluntary agreement communicated through words, gestures or other forms of communication and provides that lack of physical resistance alone does not constitute consent^[18]. This is a significant legal articulation of agency because it moves away from treating silence or non-resistance as an affirmative expression of willingness.

Yet the law remains internally contested and incomplete. The BNS retains an exception concerning sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his wife where the wife is not under eighteen^[17]. The present article does not attempt to resolve the constitutional controversy surrounding marital rape. Its relevance is that the legal recognition of sexual autonomy remains mediated by categories of relationship and status.

These developments demonstrate why empowerment must be understood beyond livelihood. If empowerment means only earning income, the criminal-justice dimension disappears. If empowerment includes the ability to understand bodily rights, recognise unlawful conduct, communicate without fear, seek institutional assistance and have one’s testimony assessed without discriminatory assumptions, then access to justice becomes part of empowerment itself.

Sewa Bharti and the Possibility of Justice-Oriented Empowerment

The question now becomes whether Sewa Bharti’s service programmes can be connected to this broader understanding of empowerment without making unsupported claims. The answer must be carefully qualified.

The organisation’s public materials do not establish that its tailoring centres, digital-literacy programmes or adolescent-girl initiatives systematically provide legal aid, police referrals or criminal-justice counselling. The article therefore does not make that claim. Instead, it proposes that these programmes create potential points of contact with the conditions that make institutional agency possible.

Consider four forms of capacity.

The first is economic capacity. Vocational training can potentially expand women’s access to income and skills. The significance of income is not simply consumption. It

may affect mobility, bargaining power and the ability to make decisions. However, the extent to which this occurs for Sewa Bharti participants requires independent empirical study.

The second is informational capacity. Literacy and digital literacy may improve access to information. A woman who can independently search, communicate and read institutional material may have greater ability to identify services and rights. Again, this is a plausible pathway, not an established outcome of Sewa Bharti’s programmes.

The third is social capacity. Self-help groups and repeated community participation may create networks through which women exchange experiences and support. Social isolation can be an important barrier to agency. Collective participation may reduce that isolation, but whether it does so in particular Sewa Bharti settings must be established through interviews and observation.

The fourth is institutional capacity. This is the decisive stage for access to justice. Institutional capacity means knowing where to go, how to make a complaint, how to seek medical assistance, how to communicate with officials, how to find legal support and how to continue participating in a process. Public Sewa Bharti materials reviewed for this article do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that these functions are systematically performed.

The concept of “justice-oriented empowerment” is therefore proposed here as a research framework rather than a description of existing Sewa Bharti practice. It asks whether empowerment programmes contain or develop pathways from social capacity to institutional action. Such pathways could include rights-awareness sessions, referral networks, partnerships with legal-services authorities, trained programme workers, confidential complaint mechanisms, information about helplines, or support for navigating hospitals and police stations. Whether any such practices exist within particular Sewa Bharti units should be documented rather than assumed.

This framework also allows critical questions about the content of empowerment. What does the organisation mean by confidence? What does it mean by independence? How are citizenship and self-worth taught? What happens when a woman’s individual choice conflicts with family expectations? How are cases of domestic or sexual violence handled if they arise in a service setting? Does the organisation encourage formal reporting, informal mediation, or another response? These are not questions that organisational websites can answer fully.

The value of the Sewa Bharti case therefore lies in its institutional complexity. It is a service network that operates through community spaces and offers programmes addressing education, health, skills and social participation. Academic scholarship also places it within a wider history of organised seva associated with the RSS^[18]. This combination makes it important to study how welfare, cultural values and women’s agency interact.

The article does not require a predetermined answer. A woman participating in a Sewa Bharti programme may experience the organisation as enabling, restrictive, both, or neither, depending on her social location and the particular programme. The appropriate scholarly task is to investigate those experiences rather than to substitute a general ideological judgement for empirical evidence.

The Changing Rules of Women's Empowerment: Then and Now

The phrase "rules for women's empowerment" requires particular care because empowerment itself is a modern analytical term. Earlier societies did not necessarily organise women's lives around the contemporary idea of empowerment. What existed were normative frameworks concerning women's duties, rights, property, marriage, ritual roles and social responsibilities.

In Dharmaśāstra traditions, women's lives were regulated through ideas of guardianship, marriage, sexuality, property and household responsibility. At the same time, the tradition contained recognition of *strīdhana* and different forms^[19] of women's legal and economic status. It is therefore inaccurate to describe the historical position of women simply as complete absence of rights. The more precise argument is that rights and responsibilities were embedded within a strongly relational social order.

Epic narratives complicate this further. Women could speak, advise, negotiate, refuse, curse, question and influence political decisions, yet their agency was often exercised within kinship and patriarchal structures. Draupadi's questioning, Kunti's decisions and Amba's resistance illustrate that women were not merely passive subjects. Their agency existed in tension with institutions that defined lineage, marriage, sexuality and authority.

The contemporary framework is different because constitutional citizenship formally recognises individuals rather than assigning rights primarily through family role. Women are entitled to equality, dignity, bodily integrity and participation in public life. Criminal law increasingly treats consent and bodily autonomy as questions of individual agency. Evidence law restricts the use of sexual history. Judicial decisions reject invasive tests that compromise dignity. Honour cannot legally justify coercion against an adult woman's choice^[20].

But formal transformation does not erase social expectations. Women may still encounter pressures concerning marriage, sexuality, family reputation, motherhood and appropriate behaviour. The significance of contemporary empowerment is therefore not that it creates a completely new woman detached from social relationships. It expands the range of legitimate identities and choices available within those relationships.

This is why Sewa Bharti's language of self-reliance, confidence, independence and citizenship is analytically important. The language does not simply repeat the older vocabulary of duty. It adds a vocabulary of capacity. A girl who is taught to protect herself and understand her own worth is being positioned differently from a woman whose social value is described only through familial duty^[21].

Yet empowerment can have multiple meanings. A woman may become "self-reliant" economically while continuing to accept restrictive gender norms. A girl may become "confident" in public communication while remaining subject to family control over marriage. A woman may gain employment without gaining legal awareness. The transformation from duty to dignity is therefore incomplete and uneven.

The article proposes that contemporary women's empowerment should be assessed through four questions. First, does it increase material capacity? Second, does it

increase knowledge and informational autonomy? Third, does it expand voice, mobility and collective participation? Fourth, does it increase institutional agency—the ability to claim rights and seek remedies?

The fourth question is often neglected. Yet it is where empowerment meets justice. If a woman cannot safely report violence, cannot access a hospital, cannot obtain information about legal remedies, or believes that her sexual history will determine whether she is believed, then formal empowerment remains limited.

This is also why the cultural comparison must avoid a triumphalist narrative. "Then" was not uniformly oppressive and "now" is not uniformly emancipatory. Both periods contain contradictions. The analytical movement is from prescribed roles toward expanded individual capacity, but that movement is mediated by caste, class, family, community, religion, geography and institutional access.

Sewa Bharti can therefore be studied as one contemporary site where this transformation is negotiated. Its programmes do not exist outside culture; they are part of a cultural institution. The research question is whether the service environment enables women to reinterpret their own position and expand their choices, and how those choices interact with formal legal institutions.

Discussion: Beyond Welfare, Beyond Symbolic Empowerment

The principal contribution of this article is to connect three domains that are often analysed separately: cultural constructions of women, grassroots service and formal justice. The connection is not causal in a simple sense. Rather, each domain addresses a different layer of women's agency.

The epic narratives provide a vocabulary for understanding how women's bodies, sexuality, honour and public voice can become objects of collective judgement. The contemporary legal framework provides a vocabulary of rights, consent, dignity and evidence. Sewa Bharti represents an institutional space in which women may encounter education, livelihood, community participation, digital skills and service-based socialisation.

The three domains therefore form a sequence. Culture shapes expectations. Service can shape capacities. Law defines formal rights. Women's lived agency emerges through their interaction.

This sequence also reveals the limits of each domain. Cultural reinterpretation alone does not provide economic resources. Economic empowerment alone does not guarantee legal access. Legal rights alone do not guarantee that women can reach institutions. A meaningful theory of empowerment must therefore connect the domains.

The Sewa Bharti case is particularly useful because service is organised through community. Community can be a resource, providing networks, information and solidarity. It can also be a site of social regulation. The scholarly literature on organised *sewa* has itself debated the relationship between welfare provision and broader forms of social organisation and identity^[22]. The appropriate response is not to resolve that debate abstractly but to investigate how women experience particular programmes. The paper therefore identifies a central empirical agenda. Future research should ask women participants whether

programme participation has affected their ability to make decisions about education, employment, marriage, health and mobility. It should ask whether women know where to seek help when violence occurs. It should examine whether programme workers receive training concerning gender-based violence and whether any referral mechanisms exist. It should also examine how workers respond when a woman's stated preference conflicts with family or community expectations.

Such research would also permit intersectional analysis. A middle-class educated woman, a woman in an urban settlement, an adolescent girl, a Dalit woman, a migrant woman and a woman dependent on family income may experience the same programme differently. Chakravarti's work is relevant precisely because gender cannot be detached from caste and social hierarchy ^[23]. An empowerment programme should therefore be evaluated not simply by aggregate numbers but by differences in who gains what capacity.

There is also a question of measurement. If empowerment is treated as a multidimensional process, programme evaluation should measure more than the number of trainees. Indicators might include independent income, control over earnings, educational continuation, digital access, knowledge of rights, mobility, decision-making, participation in groups, knowledge of support services and confidence in approaching institutions. These indicators would not prove that an organisation causes empowerment, but they would make the concept more empirically meaningful.

For Sewa Bharti, this framework could generate a distinctive research contribution. Its programmes can be studied not only as welfare delivery but as institutions that may shape forms of social citizenship. The key question is whether women become more capable of acting on their own behalf, including in situations where their interests conflict with expectations of family honour or conventional femininity.

The article also insists on the importance of organisational self-description. If Sewa Bharti describes adolescent girls as independent citizens who should understand their own worth, that statement deserves analytical attention. It is evidence of how the organisation frames empowerment. Whether participants internalise, reinterpret or resist that framing is a separate question.

The strongest conclusion, therefore, is neither that Sewa Bharti is an instrument of emancipation nor that it is merely a vehicle for social control. The evidence available here supports a more precise proposition: Sewa Bharti provides an important institutional site in which service, gender norms, skill formation, community participation and ideas of citizenship are brought together. Whether that combination expands women's substantive agency, including access to justice, is an important empirical question that warrants systematic study.

Methodology, Ethics and Future Research

The article is documentary and interpretive rather than ethnographic. Its contemporary primary materials consist of Sewa Bharti's publicly available programme descriptions and activity reports. Its cultural primary materials consist of selected epic narratives. Its legal primary materials consist

of statutes and judicial decisions. Feminist and socio-legal scholarship is used as secondary analytical material.

This methodology permits a close analysis of institutional language, programme design, legal rules and cultural narratives. It does not permit causal claims about beneficiaries. Accordingly, the article does not state that women participating in Sewa Bharti programmes necessarily experience greater confidence, income, autonomy, reporting behaviour or access to justice. Those claims require interviews, observation, programme records or independent evaluations.

A future empirical study could employ a qualitative case-study design across selected Sewa Bharti centres. Interviews could be conducted with women participants, adolescent girls, programme workers and, where ethically appropriate, institutional partners. Questions could examine economic changes, household decision-making, mobility, knowledge of rights, experiences of violence, awareness of legal remedies and attitudes toward police and courts. Researchers should also examine whether the organisation has formal or informal referral relationships with hospitals, police, legal-services authorities or other institutions.

The study should maintain strict ethical safeguards. Research concerning sexual violence or domestic violence requires informed consent, confidentiality, trauma-sensitive interviewing and clear procedures for responding to disclosures. Researchers should avoid treating women's participation in a service programme as consent to discuss sensitive personal experiences.

Comparative research would also be valuable. Sewa Bharti could be compared with non-governmental organisations that are not associated with the RSS, women's self-help groups, state-supported programmes and legal-aid organisations. The objective would not be to rank organisations but to identify which institutional features most consistently facilitate women's agency and access to justice.

The present article thus offers a conceptual bridge that can support further empirical research. Its principal claim is intentionally limited: service-based empowerment should be evaluated partly by whether it expands the practical capacities through which women can exercise rights. Sewa Bharti provides a significant case for investigating that proposition because its programmes bring together livelihood, education, health, digital literacy, community participation and explicit language of women's self-reliance and citizenship.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment is neither entirely a modern invention nor a simple continuation of older traditions. Indian cultural narratives contain long histories of women's duty, sacrifice, negotiation, resistance and public voice. The contemporary legal order introduces a different language-equality, dignity, consent, autonomy and rights-but social expectations do not disappear when legal rules change.

This article has examined that transition through Sewa Bharti. The selected epic narratives illuminate the older problem of how women's bodies, sexuality, honour and voice could become subject to social authority. They also demonstrate that women were not simply passive figures. Sita's response to public suspicion and Draupadi's

questioning of institutional authority provide contrasting examples of women speaking within structures that constrain them.

The contemporary legal framework has moved significantly toward protecting women against some of the assumptions embedded in gendered credibility. The BSA restricts the use of previous sexual experience for proving consent in specified sexual-offence proceedings. Supreme Court decisions reject the two-finger test and emphasise dignity and bodily integrity. Honour cannot override an adult woman's constitutional choice. These developments represent an important movement from judging women through social character toward recognising women as rights-bearing individuals.

Yet law cannot by itself create substantive agency. Women require economic resources, information, social support and institutional pathways through which rights can be exercised. This is where Sewa Bharti becomes significant. Its public programme descriptions show a contemporary service model that includes vocational training, education, digital literacy, health, self-help groups and programmes for adolescent girls that explicitly invoke self-reliance, confidence, independence and citizenship.

The article has deliberately not converted these programme descriptions into claims of proven outcomes. The available documentary evidence does not establish systematic legal-aid services, police referrals or improved criminal-justice outcomes. Instead, the paper argues that Sewa Bharti should be studied as a potential institutional bridge between social empowerment and justice capacity.

The central hypothesis is therefore supported at the conceptual level: contemporary service-based empowerment represents a movement toward capability and agency, but the transition from duty to dignity remains incomplete unless women can exercise institutional power as well as acquire social and economic resources.

The deeper significance of the argument lies in its understanding of empowerment as multidimensional. Economic capacity matters. Education matters. Digital access matters. Collective participation matters. But the ultimate test of empowerment is whether a woman can make meaningful choices, articulate those choices, and seek institutional protection when those choices or her bodily integrity are threatened.

Sewa Bharti's significance for gender research lies precisely in this unresolved space. It is a service institution operating within a wider cultural and organisational environment. Its programmes can potentially expand women's capabilities, while the values and forms of socialisation accompanying service also require empirical examination. Neither possibility should be assumed in advance.

The study therefore ends with a research proposition: the relationship between seva and women's empowerment should be assessed through the movement from service to capacity, from capacity to agency, and from agency to the practical ability to claim rights. This framework allows the historical question of women's duty, the contemporary question of empowerment, and the legal question of justice to be studied as parts of a single socio-political problem—the conditions under which women become able to define dignity for themselves.

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