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## LEGACY OF INDIAN WOMEN – A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

Across millennia, Indian women have shaped, challenged, and reconstructed the contours of society from the Vedic age, through medieval empires, colonial subjugation, nationalist awakening, to contemporary transformations in the 21st century. This article traces the varied lives of women in the Indian subcontinent, examining their agency, constraints, and transitions over distinct historical phases. It adopts four major lenses: the symbolic and ritual role of women in ancient and early medieval India; the political, warrior, and administrative roles of women in medieval and early modern kingdoms; the impact of colonialism and nationalist movements on women's education, rights, and public presence; and the contemporary era of social movements, labour, politics and global diasporas. Through these lenses, we see recurrent patterns of patriarchy and resistance, tradition and transformation, exclusion and voice. The article examines how gender intersects with caste, class, region, and religion in shaping women's life-worlds. It argues that Indian women's history cannot be reduced to either victimhood or triumph rather it is a continuous journey of adaptation, negotiation, and creativity. Drawing upon scholarly works, memoirs, and feminist histories, the narrative demonstrates how women have been at the heart of India's cultural and political evolutions even when their contributions were marginalized. Finally, the article discusses the remaining challenges structural inequality, patriarchal norms, and intersectional marginalization and suggests pathways for inclusive histories and policy interventions that honour women's lived experiences. Ultimately, the article

invites a re-reading of Indian history through the lens of women's journeys, thereby enriching our understanding of India's past, present, and future.

## KEYWORDS

Indian women., Gender history India., Women's agency., Patriarchy and resistance., Medieval women rulers., Women in colonial India., Feminist historiography India., Intersectionality India, Women's social movements., Indian women and modernity.

## INTRODUCTION

The story of India is incomplete without the story of its women. Across centuries, Indian women have lived, loved, struggled, ruled, resisted, and reinvented themselves within complex social frameworks. From the philosophical grace of Gargi and Maitreyi in the Vedic era to the political brilliance of Razia Sultan and Rani Lakshmi Bai, from the reformist zeal of Savitribai Phule to the modern-day resilience of women scientists, activists, and entrepreneurs, women's journeys in India form a continuum of transformation. Their narratives are woven through the changing fabric of caste, class, religion, and region, reflecting how gender relations shaped and were shaped by broader historical dynamics.

This article traces the trajectories of women's experiences from ancient to modern India, emphasizing the interplay between patriarchy and resistance. It avoids framing women's history merely as oppression or triumph, but rather as a dynamic journey of negotiation, agency, and creativity. Through a humanised narrative, the essay reveals how Indian women continuously redefined their place within family, religion, economy, and state from ritual spaces to public platforms, from domestic courtyards to global stages.

## WOMEN IN THE VEDIC AND EARLY HISTORICAL PERIODS

The earliest textual evidence about Indian women comes from the Vedic corpus (1500–500 BCE), where women occupied an honoured and intellectual position. The Rigveda mentions women philosophers such as Lopamudra, Gargi Vachaknavi, and Maitreyi, who debated metaphysical truths with men. Women were educated in philosophy, astronomy, and poetry, and some even composed hymns. Marriage was largely monogamous and often based on consent; the institution of “swayamvara” allowed women to choose their husbands.

In this period, the concept of “Ardhanarishvara,” the composite form of Shiva and Parvati, symbolized gender complementarity in divine imagery. Ritual texts also recognized women as co-participants in sacrificial rites (yajnas). Yet, by the later Vedic and post-Vedic age, women’s autonomy began to shrink under emerging patriarchal norms and Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The Dharmashastras (like *Manusmriti*) codified a more restrictive vision of womanhood, where women’s dependence on father, husband, and son was emphasized. Property rights and education were curtailed, and widow remarriage was condemned. Nevertheless, women like Queen Didda of Kashmir, Prabhavati Gupta of the Gupta Empire, and Kundavai, sister of Rajaraja Chola, continued to exert political influence, showing that power and patriarchy often coexisted in complex ways.

## WOMEN IN THE CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL ERAS

The medieval period witnessed both the spiritual empowerment and social marginalization of women. On one hand, Bhakti and Sufi movements from the 8th to 17th centuries created new spaces for women’s voices through devotional poetry and personal piety. On the other, feudal structures and patriarchal morality restricted their freedom.

## THE BHAKTI WOMEN SAINTS

Figures like Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai, Lalleshwari, and Janabai challenged social hierarchies through devotional expression. Andal's Tamil hymns to Vishnu reflect passionate self-surrender as a spiritual ideal, while Mirabai's poetry asserted personal devotion over social duty. These women refused the boundaries of caste and gender, transforming devotion into rebellion.

### QUEENS AND ADMINISTRATORS

In royal courts, women such as Razia Sultan (Delhi Sultanate) and Queen Rudrama Devi (Kakatiya dynasty) defied gender norms to rule with authority. Noor Jahan in the Mughal period exercised immense influence over imperial administration and art. Literary records describe her issuing imperial orders and coins in her own name, a rare assertion of female sovereignty.

In southern India, Velu Nachiyar of Sivaganga became a pioneer in anti-colonial resistance even before 1857. She formed alliances, trained an all-women army (Udaiyal regiment), and used guerrilla warfare tactics against the British centuries ahead of organized nationalist movements.

### WOMEN IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The majority of medieval women, however, lived within domestic or agrarian settings where their labour sustained households and local economies. Customary practices like *purdah*, *sati*, and *child marriage* emerged or intensified, symbolizing growing patriarchal control over women's bodies and sexuality. Yet folklore, ballads, and temple inscriptions testify to their roles as craftswomen, poets, midwives, and traders, vital but often invisible in official histories.

### WOMEN IN THE AGE OF EMPIRES AND REGIONAL KINGDOMS

During the Mughal and later regional empires, women from royal and aristocratic circles gained limited visibility in politics and culture. Mughal princesses like Jahanara Begum and Zeb-un-Nissa were poets, patrons of art, and builders of mosques and gardens. Maratha women, such as Tarabai, exhibited remarkable administrative and military acumen during the early 18th century.

In South India, women in Nayaka and Maratha courts of Tanjore and Madurai supported temple construction, music, and dance traditions. Devadasis, though later stigmatized, were once respected custodians of temple arts, music, and Sanskrit scholarship. Their decline during colonial rule reflected how Victorian morality misunderstood indigenous gender systems and sacred sexuality.

#### COLONIAL INDIA AND THE AWAKENING OF WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS

The advent of British rule (18th–19th centuries) transformed gender relations in unprecedented ways. Colonialism brought new ideas of modernity, education, and reform, but also imposed Western notions of morality and domesticity.

#### SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

The 19th century witnessed intense debates on women's issues *sati*, widow remarriage, child marriage, and education, spearheaded by reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, and Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Women reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain emerged as pioneers of feminist thought. Savitribai Phule (1831–1897), India's first woman teacher, revolutionized education by opening schools for girls and Dalits. Her struggle was not merely against gender discrimination but also caste-based exclusion, making her a forerunner of intersectional feminism in India.



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**EDUCATION AND PRINT CULTURE**

Colonial education opened limited opportunities for upper-class women, particularly in Bengal and Bombay Presidencies. The rise of women's journals such as *Bharati*, *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, and *Stree Darpan* created new spaces for intellectual exchange. English education exposed women to Western feminist thought, while vernacular print networks spread reformist and nationalist ideas among Indian households.

However, reform discourses often reinforced the "new woman" ideal, a domesticated yet educated figure who embodied moral purity. This construct, as feminist scholars like Partha Chatterjee note, symbolized the inner domain of nationalism where women were seen as guardians of Indian tradition in contrast to the materialistic West.

**WOMEN AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE**

The Indian nationalist movement (late 19th–mid 20th century) became a defining moment in the evolution of women's public identity. The Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation movements mobilized thousands of women from diverse backgrounds.

**REVOLUTIONARIES AND LEADERS**

Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Usha Mehta stood at the forefront of protests, civil disobedience, and underground resistance. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi became an enduring symbol of valor during the 1857 revolt, while countless unnamed village women sustained the nationalist struggle through spinning, sheltering revolutionaries, and participating in salt marches.

**FEMINIST VOICES AND ORGANISATIONS**

Parallel to nationalism, women's organizations such as the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) (1927), National Council of Women in India, and Women's Indian Association worked for legal reforms, voting rights, and equal opportunities. The Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties (1946) demanded gender equality in law, education, and employment, shaping the constitutional debates that followed.

### **INDEPENDENT INDIA: EDUCATION, LABOUR, AND POLITICS**

With independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution guaranteed equal rights, adult suffrage, and protection against discrimination. Women like Hansa Mehta and Durgabai Deshmukh were instrumental in drafting gender-inclusive constitutional provisions.

#### **EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT**

The decades after independence saw steady expansion in women's education and participation in professional fields. Universities admitted women in large numbers, leading to their emergence in academia, medicine, law, and administration. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's concept of "capabilities" helps frame this period as one of expanding choices, though uneven across class and region.

#### **POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

Women achieved visible leadership positions, most notably Indira Gandhi, India's first woman Prime Minister (1966–1977, 1980–1984), who reshaped political power dynamics. Yet, representation remained limited; women constituted less than 15% of parliamentarians for decades. Grassroots politics, however, witnessed remarkable female participation through Panchayati Raj institutions after the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992–93), reserving 33% of local seats for women. This democratized governance and brought rural women into decision-making spheres.

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**LABOUR AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION**

Women entered industrial, agricultural, and service sectors, though often in informal or underpaid roles. The feminization of labour particularly in textile, education, and health sectors reflected both empowerment and exploitation. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded by Ela Bhatt in 1972, became a model for women's collective bargaining and microfinance empowerment.

**CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIONS AND GLOBAL PRESENCE**

The late 20th and early 21st centuries mark an era of unprecedented transformation in Indian women's lives. Globalization, information technology, and transnational migration have diversified women's roles and identities.

(RASHTRAKAVI MAITHILI SHARAN GUPT)

**FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AND LEGAL REFORMS**

The post-1970s feminist wave addressed issues of domestic violence, dowry deaths, sexual harassment, and reproductive rights. The Mathura rape case (1972) triggered national outrage and led to amendments in rape laws (1983). Campaigns such as "Pink Chaddi", #MeToo India, and Pinjra Tod continue to challenge misogyny in public spaces.

Legal reforms, including the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, enhanced women's property and safety rights. However, implementation remains inconsistent due to entrenched patriarchy and socio-economic disparities.

**WOMEN IN SCIENCE, SPORTS, AND ARTS**



Contemporary India celebrates achievers like Kalpana Chawla, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Mary Kom, P.V. Sindhu, Deepa Malik, and Nirmala Sitharaman women who have shattered glass ceilings across sectors. Their stories reflect how education, technology, and media exposure empower women to transcend traditional limitations.

## DIASPORIC AND GLOBAL DIMENSIONS

Indian women in the global diaspora from academics to activists, contribute to reimagining Indianness. Authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Kamala Das articulate complex identities balancing modernity and heritage.

Yet, beneath these successes lie stark realities: gender-based violence, wage inequality, honour killings, and underrepresentation in corporate leadership. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data consistently highlight alarming levels of crimes against women, reminding us that progress coexists with persistent inequality.

## CHALLENGES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

Despite legal frameworks and growing awareness, Indian women face multidimensional challenges structural, cultural, and psychological.

- **Patriarchal Norms:** Deep-rooted gender stereotypes continue to restrict women's mobility and decision-making.
- **Intersectionality:** Caste, religion, class, and region intensify women's vulnerabilities Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women often face compounded discrimination.
- **Economic Inequality:** The gender wage gap remains wide; women's unpaid domestic labour is undervalued.

- **Political Underrepresentation:** Although local participation has improved, national-level political spaces still lack equitable gender balance.

To overcome these, the path forward must combine policy interventions, education reforms, gender-sensitive media representation, and inclusive historiography. Narratives of women's lives should enter school curricula, academic research, and public memory, recognizing not just heroines but also ordinary women who sustain India's social fabric through everyday resilience.

## CONCLUSION

The journey of Indian women from the Vedic age to the digital century is neither linear nor uniform it is a tapestry of continuity and change. Women have persistently negotiated with patriarchy through intellect, devotion, courage, and creativity. Whether as queens and saints, reformers and revolutionaries, or scientists and entrepreneurs, their voices echo across history's corridors.

To re-read Indian history through women's experiences is to rediscover India itself as a civilization shaped by shared struggles, dreams, and transformations. The story of Indian women is not one of oppression or triumph alone; it is a testament to endurance and evolution, a journey from silence to speech, from marginality to visibility, from submission to selfhood.

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