Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

17

Gender Roles and Women as leader in Medieval India: Navigating and Subverting Patriarchal Norms

Prity Jha[1] and Dr. Abhay Leonard Ekka[2]

1) Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Language, Central University of South Bihar Email: jhas62334@gmail.com
2) Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Language, Central University of South Bihar

Page No. 119-126

Abstract: *This research paper examines the societal status of women warriors in medieval India (6th-16th century CE). Firm patriarchal boundaries and delineated societal roles for women marked this period. Even though societal restrictions kept women mainly in the domestic sphere, history provides evidence of numerous women in martial roles, exercising political power, and defying the established order. Based on historical writings, literature, and inscriptions, this study examines how women with exceptional "gaps" in the system were able to negotiate patriarchal structures and challenge societal norms. This study aims to demonstrate that women warriors in medieval India were able to politically and militarily insert themselves into predominantly male domains by manipulating the political order, exercising male powers in exceptional circumstances, and constructing a male martial persona.*

Keywords: *Women Warriors, Medieval India, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Rajput Women, Military History, Gender Subversion*

Introduction

Throughout history, Indian society, particularly during the Medieval period between the 6th and 16th centuries CE, was organized according to patriarchal principles. Religious and social permeations informed such principles of custom and law (Chakravarti, 1993). The dharmashastra tradition defined and differentiated the socio-legal sanctioning of hierarchically ordered gender roles. It was the Manusmriti that enshrined these roles and legal guidelines, subordinating women to the guardianship of men for their entire lives—first, from childhood to fathers, then to husbands in marriage, and finally to sons in widowhood (Doniger & Smith, 1991; Leslie, 1991). It is of little surprise that women were legally defined to possess no free agency lasting a lifetime. The Manusmriti captured this sentiment articulately, "By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently... a woman must never be independent" (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p. 115).

The ideological construction of womanhood in medieval India primarily revolved around the notion of stridharma, or 'women's duties,' which prescribed a limited set of roles centred around a woman's marriage and motherhood, the management of the household, and the unqualified servitude of the husband (Roy, 1999). Because these prescriptions emphasized the familial and domestic, they also left little scope either in theory or practice for women's

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

participation in the public sphere, political and military administration, or the exercise of arms—these were regarded as exclusively masculine, and therefore the domain of the male body, the physical strength to dominate, and the violent courage and aggression to kill (Harlan, 1992). The socially mandated spatial arrangements of society are also integrated with the purdah system, which imposes and amplifies these inequalities. Under purdah, elite women were confined to the inner quarters of the household. They were politically and socially situated outside the public arenas of discourse and assembly, where military affairs were discussed and enacted (Sreenivasan, 2007). The economic structures also compounded women's dependence, which, in a vast surplus of legal systems, was characterised by weak property rights, thereby disallowing the inheritance of economic resources (Kapur, 2009). Even within a highly restrictive normative framework and given the numerous and interlocking forms of patriarchal control, history offers a remarkable counter-narrative: women who took on martial responsibilities, led troops into battle, defended fortresses, and ruled kingdoms as independent sovereigns exercising political power, all of which clearly contested the traditional notions of women, power, and politics (Talbot, 1995, 2001). From Rani Durgavati of Gondwana, who died fighting Mughal forces rather than accept defeat, to Rudrama Devi, who ruled the Kakatiya dynasty for over two decades and of whose official designation was a masculine title, to Abbakka Chowta, who successfully repelled Portuguese colonial incursions, these women warriors exemplify history's critical exceptions and highlight the tensions and transformations within the medieval Indian gender order (Pawar, 2016; Talbot, 1995).

The complexities of ideology and practice, of social restraint and personal power, and of stasis and movement within a gender system, are perhaps best illustrated by the history of these women and the contradictions they embraced in order to exercise power, both martial and political, that was characterologically attributed to men. These revisions further women's history in India, for it is as important to acknowledge the women's agency as they worked within and, at times, in opposition to the prevailing patriarchal order (Thapar, 2000).

Research Objectives

Objective 1: To analyze the specific gender roles and patriarchal constraints that governed women's lives in medieval Indian society, and to identify the structural, ideological, and practical barriers that prevented women from assuming martial and political roles.

Objective 2: To examine the strategies and mechanisms through which women warriors navigated, challenged, and subverted these patriarchal norms, investigating how they legitimized their authority, constructed their public identities, and created spaces for female agency within male-dominated military and political spheres.

Gender Roles and Patriarchal Structures

Prescriptive Frameworks: *Dharmashastra* and Gender Ideology

The foundational principles of female subordination and gender relations in medieval India were documented and espoused in the dharmashastras. The defining and dominant duties of women as prescribed in the texts included the preservation of chastity, total subservience to husbands, whom they were to treat as ‘gods’, management of the household, producing sons for the patrilineage, and total obedience to male authority (Leslie, 1991). Beyond these duties, women were also denied access to Vedic education and the performance of most religious rituals, as well as public roles in governance and warfare. The concept of stridharma also entailed the total exclusion of women from participation in the civil and public spheres (Chakravarti, 1993). The control of women and the denial of their civil rights were also justified

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

on the principles of dharma, which located male authority in religious and cosmic order and made women's subordination to men as 'holy' and 'natural' (Bose, 2010).

Social Practices: *Purdah*, *Sati*, and Control of Female Mobility

The Dharmaśāstra tradition laid down the principles foundational to the subordination of women, which shaped the gender relations of the medieval Indian period. Through these texts, women were taught to embrace complete devotion to their husbands (who were to be treated as gods), manage the household, bear sons to continue the patrilineal lineage, preserve their chastity, and obey all male authority without question (Leslie, 1991). Furthermore, women were excluded from all religious education and most rituals, public governance, and roles in warfare, as well as the inheritance of property (except in the most limited circumstances), and Vedic education. The stridharma ideology established a comprehensive and multifaceted framework that relegated women to the private and domestic sphere, while men were entitled to the public, political, and warfare spheres (Chakravarti, 1993). More than these textual commands, gender inequalities were maintained and perpetuated through different social practices in medieval India:

Purdah (Seclusion): During the medieval period in North India, particularly among upper-caste Hindus and Muslims, the practice of female seclusion gained widespread implementation. Purdah included both physical veiling of women and restriction to the inner chamber (zenana) of the household, confinement to the company of men of the household, and a complete restriction to public life. While practices differed from region to region and by class, the ideology of female seclusion endorsed the confinement of women to the domestic sphere (Sarkar, 1920).

Sati (Widow Immolation): Sati, or widow immolation, became particularly glorified among warrior communities, such as the Rajputs. Ideologically, the supremacy of widow immolation as the climax of wifely devotion reinforced the identity of women as entirely marriage-bound. The remaining widows were confined, marginalised, and socially punished (Harlan, 1992).

Marriage Practices: The practice of child marriage became widespread, as girls were wedded before the onset of puberty to ensure the retention of female virginity and the nullification of choice in the selection of a marriage partner. The marriage system was patrilocal and patrilineal, which meant that women geographically and socially relocated from their natal families to their husbands' families and lineages, and they did so with vastly unequal rights (Roy, 1999).

Property and Inheritance: Women's rights to property were minimal. Even though legal texts recognised a woman's personal property (stridhan), women could only gain access to ancestral property in the absence of male heirs and even then plausibly only in a limited capacity, which meant that economic dependence framed women's subordination and their inability to gain independent authority (Kapur, 2009).

This ideology and exclusion were reinforced with religion, which justified male authority as divinely sanctioned and crucial for upholding the cosmic order (dharma). Women's oppression, in the guise of subordination, was rationalised as a natural consequence of their sacred feminine duty (Bose, 2010).

Martial Masculinity and the Exclusion of Women

The valorisation of hegemonic masculinity in medieval Indian warrior society, especially among Rajput communities, was closely tied to martial valour and the warrior's code. Harlan (1992) notes that military training and the conduct of warfare were an exclusively masculine

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

domain, with martial skill as the primary marker of a man's identity. Male warriors of epic literature and courtly culture were celebrated through vir-kavyas and prashastis, which lauded the masculine virtues of gallantry, brute strength, and a willingness to die in battle.

The political theory of the time constructed the idea of rajya (kingship) as a male domain. The masculine functions of the king encompassed military leadership, the conduct of warfare, and the protection of the realm. Such an ideological framework rendered the concept of female military leadership an extraordinary aberration, and when it occurred, it demanded special rationalisation (Talbot, 2001).

Women Warriors: Case Studies

Rudrama Devi of the Kakatiya Dynasty (r. 1263-1289 CE)

Rudrama Devi represents one of the most remarkable examples of female sovereignty in medieval India. She ruled the Kakatiya kingdom in present-day Andhra Pradesh for approximately 26 years during a period of significant military challenges (Talbot, 1995).

Succession and Legitimization: Rudrama was designated as heir by her father, Ganapatideva, who had no male heirs. Significantly, she was formally invested with masculine royal titles and represented in inscriptions using masculine grammatical forms. This deliberate gender transformation-from Rudramba (feminine) to Rudradeva (masculine)—represented a strategic approach to legitimization: rather than claiming authority as a woman, she was symbolically transformed into a male sovereign, thereby conforming to existing norms that associated kingship with masculinity (Talbot, 1995).

Military Leadership: Inscriptions and historical accounts credit Rudrama Devi with leading military campaigns and suppressing rebellions by subordinate chiefs who challenged her authority precisely because of her gender. Her reign involved constant military engagement to maintain territorial integrity against both internal challengers and external enemies (Talbot, 2001).

Navigating Gender: Rudrama's approach involved complex negotiation between masculine and feminine identities. While official inscriptions used masculine forms, some records acknowledged her biological sex. She married but maintained political authority independently of her husband, who held a subordinate position. This separation of queenship (providing heirs) from kingship (exercising sovereignty) allowed her to fulfill traditional female roles while claiming masculine political authority (Talbot, 1995).

Rani Durgavati of Gondwana (r. 1550-1564 CE)

Rani Durgavati, queen of the Gond kingdom in central India, exemplifies the warrior-queen who assumed power as regent and then ruled independently, ultimately dying in battle defending her kingdom (Pawar, 2016).

Assumption of Power: Durgavati was born into the Rajput Chandel dynasty and married Dalpat Shah, the Gond king. Upon her husband's death in 1550 CE, their son Bir Narain was only five years old. Durgavati assumed regency but effectively became the ruler, making military and political decisions independently (Pawar, 2016).

Military Campaigns: Historical accounts, including Mughal historian Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*, credit Durgavati with administrative reforms and military campaigns that expanded and consolidated her kingdom. She built fortifications, maintained a professional army, and successfully repelled initial attacks by Mughal forces (Sarkar, 1920).

Battle and Death: When Asaf Khan, leading Mughal armies under Akbar, invaded her kingdom in 1564, Durgavati personally commanded her forces in battle. Despite being

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

wounded, she continued fighting and, according to tradition, took her own life rather than face capture. Her death in battle became legendary (Pawar, 2016).

Legitimization Strategy: Durgavati's legitimacy derived initially from her role as regent for her minor son, a recognized position that allowed temporary female authority. However, she extended this role beyond mere guardianship to active sovereignty. Her Rajput heritage, which valorized martial culture, provided additional cultural resources for her martial identity (Harlan, 1992).

Abbakka Chowta of Ullal (16th century CE)

Unlike most rulers in medieval India, Abbakka Chowta was not only a woman but also a member of the ruling class from the Ullal coastal kingdom, located in present-day Karnataka. She is also one of the very first rulers of the region. She is famously remembered for her indomitable will in repulsing the Portuguese colonial military for the first time in the 16th century.

Matrilineal Context: The Chowta dynasty was one of the first in Karnataka to adopt the aliyasantana system, also known as matrilineal succession. Coastal Karnataka had a social structure where women did not solely possess a lesser status, but simultaneously contributed to making caste hierarchies and sovereignty uneven. Although women still faced disproportionate social control, the lesser social status of women was not wholly a barrier to female rulership, like in the rest of North India, which was patriarchal and had patrilineal systems of succession.

Colonial Resistance: Abbakka was one of the first rulers to prompt the Portuguese colonial military to reassess its strategies and achieve success. She was responsible for leading her caste and kin in military ritual, and integrated Portuguese control as sink or swim to her polity.

Abbakka did not restrict herself to military ritual, but also sustained the expansion of her alliances through direct personal immersion in sea battles with her forces, and used her matrilineal control to galvanise the will of her female warriors.

Rajput Women and *Jauhar*

While not engaged in battle, Rajput women's involvement in jauhar self-immolation reflects the intricate, and at times paradoxical, intersection of femininity, honour, and militarism. During refusals to surrender when Rajput fortresses were besieged, the women, in a ritual of self-immolation, committed 'jauhar'. At the same time, the men went into battle to the death in a 'saka' ritual (Harlan, 1992). The practice of jauhar self-immolation was a means of participating in the culture of honour and militarism associated with the Rajput clans. This act of ritual self-immolation, in connection with the infamous Chittorgarh sieges of 1303, 1535, and 1567-68, was similarly interpreted by some as 'victimisation' (Sreenivasan, 2007). However, 'jauhar' was primarily an act of agency enabled by the collective determination to refuse capture by the enemy and their active participation in the collective honour that defined the Rajput identity.

Strategies of Navigation and Subversion

Leveraging Crisis and Necessity

Among women warriors, one consistent feature was their assumption of command during periods of political crisis or military emergencies, in the absence, incapacitation, or despite the youth of male heirs who could rule (Talbot, 2001).

Regency: Social and political customs recognised the regency of mothers over minor sons, which allowed women, however slightly, to wield power. This construction of power was hinged on the idea of temporary guardianship, which was less threatening to patriarchal

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

systems. However, women like Durgavati boldly pushed the limits of regency to active sovereignty, making unilateral decisions, not merely 'for' sons, but in her own right (Pawar, 2016).

Military Emergency: Situations of foreign invasions, succession disputes, and military threats created domains where practical necessity could transcend the strictures of gender norms. When kingdoms faced existential crises, the military leadership of women, even if only temporarily and as a last resort, was accepted and tolerated, despite prevailing societal norms (Kapur, 2009).

Gender Transformation and Masculine Performance

Some women warriors strategically and successfully enacted and performed masculine identities, labels, and roles as a means of gaining the control and authority that systems of power and control granted to men (Talbot, 1995).

Symbolic Gender Transformation: Rudrama Devi's use of masculine titles and driving grammatical forms represents the most evident case and extreme example of this. Legally and symbolically becoming a male sovereign and a king, even while retaining the biological female body, she fulfilled the ideological requirement of the time whereby all sovereign kings had to be male (Talbot, 1995).

Martial Performance: There are accounts of women warriors who not only developed martial skills, but also personally and courageously led their armies, a performance of the physically dominant and violent masculine tasks, thus boldly, in a directly confrontational manner, claiming the 'rights' and 'abilities' that men 'exclusively' possessed and contesting the ideological order that associated martial capacity and male bodies (Harlan, 1992).

Limitations: Nevertheless, the totality of male gender transformation, in any form, was, as pointed out, never, and could never be, achieved. They could not legally change their biological sex. Women warriors had to meet societal expectations of marriage and motherhood, which they were often led to them being publicly ridiculed and contested for, and even, most severely, precisely as women. The masculine performance strategy, thus, was always only incomplete. (Talbot, 2001).

Emphasizing Royal Lineage and Divine Sanction

Women soldiers frequently justified their power by highlighting their place in royal lineages and claiming divine approval that transcended traditional gender limitations (Pawar, 2016).

Royal Blood: Entry into royal families included essential means while claiming authority. Rudrama Devi was the heir to her father, the king, and Durgavati was born into the illustrious Chandel Rajput dynasty. Royal bloodlines meant that sovereignty was presumed to flow through both male and female lines (Talbot, 1995).

Divine Sanction: Many women warriors claimed, or had claimed to them, a unique divine favour which justified the elevation of their status. Extreme devotion to religion, and especially the unique ties with particular deities, socially placed (Harlan, 1992).

Kshatriya Dharma: For women of the warrior caste, there was the Kshatriya dharma or the warrior's code, which encouraged the defence of the realm and provided justification for their martial roles as the upholding of divine duties (Sreenivasan, 2007).

Building Networks and Alliances

Women rulers and warriors-built networks of support among military commanders and administrative officials who enabled their authority (Talbot, 2001).

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Issue 1 (February 2026)

Loyal Commanders: Effective rule required military commanders willing to serve under female authority. Women rulers cultivated loyalties through patronage and demonstrated competence.

Strategic Marriages: While marriage often constrained women, some women rulers strategically managed marriages to enhance their authority. Maintaining distinction between the political authority of the queen-ruler and the subordinate position of husbands allowed women like Rudrama Devi to fulfill expectations of marriage while retaining independent sovereignty (Talbot, 1995).

Limitations and Constraints

Persistent Challenges to Legitimacy

Even within each ruler's specific culture and context, challenges arose due to the unique context of each culture in history. For example, Rudrama Devi spent considerable portions of her reign dealing with civil disputes, which were primarily on rebellions, defiance by local sub-chiefs and rulers, and the maintenance of her sub-principalities. Constant proving over time, and at each period in the ruler's reign, of one's competence in civil rule demonstrated the overarching contested and compromised political, civil, and social positions of the gender in the governance of a polity. (Talbot, 2001).

Exceptional, Not Normative

The existence and civil/ political carrier of war of a specific gender and individual politically, socially, and historically within the civil structure of a polity did not show such political carry in the dissipation of norms ruling under the civil polity... the breaking and attainment of a political and civil carrier in such activities politically within a civil polity, for a women in the context of patriarchy, is often in the dissipation of a ruling and patriarchal civil structure while such political military rule continues to reinforce such patriarchal civil polity and rule. (Chakravarti, 1993).

Limited to Elite Women

The documentation of women and the civil polity of each society, on the level of civil polity practised and executed within society, reveals the classes of women participating in society, including the military, for specific castes and levels, and within the polity. Civil and military activities within regions and polities were traditionally reserved for women of a particular caste and social class. Within each society, in lower urban and civil areas, women from lower social, caste, and political backgrounds did not participate in the structure of the polity, either militarily or within a military context. Such civil polity militarily and with, within, in a structure of polity was for the women of the caste and society and the province. (Roy, 1999).

Conclusion

This research examines the multifaceted role of women warriors within the social framework of medieval India, in conjunction with the normative restraints of patriarchy that barred women from citizenship in the martial order, and the exceptional cases of women who successfully circumvented and transformed those restrictions. It is evident that, on the one hand, medieval India practiced severe forms of gendered socio-political marginalization with the hegemonic order of dharmashastra, purdah, and the socio-cultural ideologies that valorized martial masculinity (as noted in (Chakravarti, 1993; Leslie, 1991) to, ideologically, socially, and practically, purging women from the corridors of military and civil political power and leadership. On the other hand, women such as Rudrama Devi, Rani Durgavati, and Abbakka Chowta claimed and exercised political and military power, albeit through the astute navigation of the aforementioned constraints. They took advantage of succession struggles and regencies

to project an overtly martial, masculine identity while retaining the social and cultural traits of femininity. They claimed divine power and noble ancestry as legitimizations, and to rule effectively, formed supportive networks (as noted in (Talbot, 1995; Pawar, 2016). Their lives demonstrate the possibilities, as well as the contesting restrictions, of feminine agency.

Unlike contemporary gender roles, the careers of women warriors within medieval India did not fundamentally alter the gender systems of the period, as the exceptional nature of their roles was frequently utilized to consolidate, rather than undermine, patriarchal structures. Given their elite status, their experiences may not be representative of all women. That said, the revisionist project of their histories is important because it signifies that the reach of patriarchal systems, while formidable, was not all-encompassing; women contested, negotiated, and at times overtly defied the boundaries of authority that ideological systems sought to limit (Thapar, 2000). The studies of these and similar women broaden the scope of medieval Indian political and military history, unearth the agency of women within, and at times, outside patriarchal systems, and offer complex examples that challenge the simplistic view of women's historical powerlessness. This terrain is rich for future research, particularly about the study of gendered regional divergence and the social order of non-elite women warriors, as well as the global comparative study of women warriors in different pre-industrial contexts.

References

1) Bose, M. (2010). *Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions*. Routledge.
2) Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(14), 579-585.
3) Doniger, W., & Smith, B. K. (Trans.). (1991). *The Laws of Manu*. Penguin Books.
4) Harlan, L. (1992). *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives*. University of California Press.
5) Kapur, N. S. (2009). *State Formation in Rajasthan: Mewar during the Seventh-Fifteenth Centuries*. Manohar Publishers.
6) Leslie, J. (Ed.). (1991). *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
7) Pawar, Y. (2016). Rani Durgavati: A Historical Reappraisal. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 77, 232-239.
8) Roy, K. (1999). *Women in Early Indian Societies*. Manohar Publishers.
9) Sarkar, J. (1920). *The History of Aurangzib* (Vol. 5). M.C. Sarkar & Sons.
10) Sreenivasan, R. (2007). *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India, c. 1500-1900*. University of Washington Press.
11) Talbot, C. (1995). Rudrama-devi, Queen of Kakatiya Dynasty: A Study in Gender and Political Authority in Medieval India. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 32(4), 397-420.
12) Talbot, C. (2001). *Precolonial India in Practice: Society, Region, and Identity in Medieval Andhra*. Oxford University Press.
13) Thapar, R. (2000). *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*. Oxford University Press.