

# The Invisible Women

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## Untold Stories of Leadership, Resistance, and Every Day in the Indian Subcontinent

SARAH ALAM AND NJOKI WANE

*À l'échelle mondiale, les femmes ont acquis une grande importance dans la politique électorale, en accédant à des postes de haut niveau dans divers domaines professionnels et en remportant de nombreux sièges au sein des parlements. Cependant, depuis l'antiquité, les femmes en Asie du Sud participent activement dans différentes sphères aux côtés des hommes. Alors que les États-Unis ont célébré l'arrivée d'une première vice-présidente féminine en 2021, la première femme à occuper le poste de premier ministre du monde en 1960 fut Sirima Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike au Sri Lanka, puis Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Haseena Wajid, Sonia Gandhi et Khaleda Zia ont été premières ministres de l'Inde, du Pakistan et du Bangladesh à la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> et au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cette étude examine le rôle des femmes dans divers milieux de vie principalement en Inde antique ou dans le sous-continent en Asie du Sud.*

### Introduction

While it cannot be claimed that women were ever equal to men in the Indian subcontinent region of South Asia, women enjoyed a prominent position in society during ancient times, as evident in the early Vedic period (2500 BC to 1500 BC) (Punam and Sharma). The concept of widow burning (Sati), burying a girl child alive, child marriages, polygamy, and Purdah were alien concepts to women of that era. During the late Vedic period, women's status started declining due to invasions and the influence of different cultures, religions, and regional misinterpretations. But over time, tyranny became women's fate in Indian history; regardless of the

oppression women have faced, which impacted women's lives, women in Indian society have continued to carve their niche and elevate their status. Indian culture has always attributed the element of respect to women. The Indian society overall value family relations and consider women bonded to men as they believe that men and women rise or sink together (Punam and Sharma).

Throughout the Indian subcontinent's history, class has played a significant role in elevating women's status. Women from elite or royal backgrounds have, one way or the other, marked their presence by actively engaging in politics, education, arts, and business. On the other hand, the situation has always been quite different for women from low-income backgrounds. Since in economically weaker families, the birth of a girl child in the olden days was not welcomed as preference was given to the birth of a male child (Kapur). The role of women throughout South Asia has not much changed since ancient times; women were regarded as the ones striving for the welfare of family and society.

On the contrary, in the olden days of the subcontinent, women from wealthier families were given high status. They were provided with the opportunities to attain intellectual and spiritual standards (Kapur). The Rig Vedic period was when women enjoyed the most freedom and were appreciated; they were not familiar with the practices such as "Sati," child marriages, or polygamy. It was the late Vedic period when women started being discriminated against, but women rose and continued contributing to various walks of life regardless of their circumstances.

## Study Objective

The colonial narrative paints another picture of South Asian women by recognizing their political contributions from post-colonial times and not identifying women's roles in different spheres before colonialism. Throughout history, women's status has undergone drastic and dramatic changes; this paper aims to examine women's role in ancient times and assess whether women's positioning has elevated, maintained, or declined over time. The article further investigates the impact of patriarchy, intrusion, and colonialism on women's leadership and assesses whether it has influenced women's prominence. While providing a historical perspective on women's leadership from South Asia, I have highlighted women's importance in religion, politics, spirituality, education, and economic development and have shared their resistance and resilience stories during various dynasties in the South Asian region. The paper concludes by reflecting on how patriarchy has always overshadowed women's participation, and how it has suited colonial narratives to undermine women's involvement.

This paper aims to (a) study the role of women in South Asia from ancient times and examine the way women participated in leadership, education, religion, spirituality, and business despite facing discrimination and patriarchy; (b) investigate the impact of patriarchy in undermining women's prominence while examining the challenges women faced, and uncovering their resilience stories. The study will enable us to shed light on the involvement of South Asian women in social, religious, economic, and household matters in pre-colonial times.

## Positioning the Authors

### *Njoki Wane*

I enter into this conversation as a Black woman who grew up in rural Kenya, and currently serves as chair of a department at the University of Toronto. Growing up on the slopes of Mount Kenya, I was surrounded by beauty from nature, people, and an abundance of love, health, and wealth. My parents had very little material wealth, but they are great examples of leaders in the family and the community. Our home was full of laughter and joy. Every morning and evening, our homestead was greeted by Mother's call for gratitude for the rising sun, health, and well-being for everyone in the family, the village, and travelers. Every evening she repeated the same thing; a call of gratitude for the days' blessings or challenges as we gazed at the sun, as she gently lowered her eyelids ready to close her eyes for the night. These two moments have had a permanent mark in my life. The rising sun with

its beauty was something we all cherished as we either walked to school, or walked off the cows and goats to graze, or walked to the family farm. The setting sun was spectacular as we raced home to ensure we were home before nightfall. However, once in a while, playing with our shadows would cause us to be late, which did not sit well with our parents. Reflecting on these moments of my village life is very healing and brings lots of warmth to my heart. I wish I could re-live those moments again. The values that I acquired growing up have provided me with my norms on how to be a good leader—a leader who listens and reflects. I also position myself as a person who is interested in the role of women in leadership across the world. I teach a course on women in leadership positions from a global perspective and currently, I have funded a research project that explores the roles of women in the academy. Researching and writing on "Untold Stories of Leadership of Women from the Indian Subcontinent" has provided great lessons on similarities and differences on different women of the world. We all have untold stories, and we all have been very invisible within this patriarchal society that dominates the world ruling apparatus.

### *Sarah Alam*

Sarah holds a PhD in Mass Communications from University of Karachi, and is currently a candidate in the Doctor of Education program at the Social Justice Education department of the University of Toronto. She identifies as a racialized migrant woman of colour living in Canada hailing from Pakistan—a developing country that emerged from the Indian subcontinent after the Independence of 1947. The author's roots belong to India's Uttar Pradesh province; her parents migrated from India and settled in the largest port city of Pakistan.

Being a Muslim by birth, she lived mainly in Karachi, Pakistan. She served as a social activist for several years by working for several not-for-profit organizations, and working for a foreign mission in Pakistan for a decade on gender issues, cultural preservation, and educational development in Pakistan's two most deprived provinces (Sindh and Balochistan). From a very early age, she has been a staunch advocate for women's and children's rights in South Asia. In addition, she worked on numerous projects promoting gender equality within the South Asian region. She started her professional journey as a high school student advocating for American-Muslim friendship within the United States and the Muslim world right after the world trade tower catastrophe and has rendered speeches at numerous international platforms worldwide on building bridges between cultures and interfaith harmony by availing 15 international scholarships.

## Research Methodology

The methodology of the paper is descriptive as it relies on secondary data sources. The study was conducted between September 2020 and April 2021 using online databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, and the University of Toronto library search engines to ensure the scope of the topic. For the analysis, the above-listed academic databases were used to review the existing literature. Hindu and Muslim religious books were also studied. The Hindu books that

of ancient grammarians from India, such as Patanjali and Katyayana, that women from the Vedic period were educated and disseminated knowledge (Srivastava 37). In the early Vedic period, women played an essential role within the family; they married at a mature age and even had the liberty to choose their husbands through a practice called *swayamvar*, or be a part of a live-in relationship called *Gandharva* marriage. The ancient collection of Indian Vedic Sanskrit hymns or texts called “*Rig Veda*” mentions that women even performed the duties of a *Rishi* (Sages)

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were studied were the Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharat, and Ramayana. With the help of the keywords, published articles and journal papers were also examined. The literature review presented in the study is based on some of the shortlisted readings.

In addition to the above-listed data sources, archived documents made available on government websites of South Asian countries and published newspaper articles, blogs, and books were assessed to investigate women’s role in the Indian subcontinent during ancient times.

## Historicizing Women’s Leadership in the Indian Subcontinent

In order to understand the role of South Asian women, specifically in the Indian subcontinent region in ancient times, it is crucial to examine various dynasties and their treatment of women. Most of the literature reflects on women during colonial times, and there is a limited scholarship available on women from pre-colonial times.

Women’s roles and status have undergone many changes over the years; women from ancient India to modern times have experienced a roller-coaster ride from enjoying autonomy to being discriminated against by men. However, their prominence within society is undeniable and cannot be undermined due to their sexuality, reproduction, and social production (Kapur 21). During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed equivalent status with men in almost all walks of life. Studies reveal through the works

and seers (Kapur). Among these, Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi (7<sup>th</sup> century BCE) gained significant prominence. Gargi was an ancient Indian philosopher and spread the “*Brahma Vidya*,” which means knowledge of Brahma in Hindi. Maitreyi is also a known philosopher from ancient times; she is recognized as a “*Brahmavadini*,” implying knowledge expounder. Maitreyi is regarded as a role model in education and is considered an icon of Indian women’s intellect (Ahuja). Even an institute in New Delhi is named after her, which exists to date.

In ancient India, women’s roles and positions were determined by social structure, cultural norms, value systems, and social expectations. Changes do not come about in the customs, values, standards, and principles of the society at the same pace as the changes within the social structure with the advent of technology, modernization, and globalization.

Regardless of the era they live in, women have been considered significant due to their self-sacrificing nature. In addition, they have been well respected for their roles, i.e., mothers and wives (Status of Women in India).

A complete literature review supports the significant contributions women have made in history in India. However, it is also crucial to understand how women’s status was subjected to discrimination, and the factors responsible for it. Therefore, the last segments of the paper provide a discourse on the influence of culture and religion, and other elements in the deteriorating status of women within South Asia.

## Literature Review

As discussed earlier in the paper, scarce literature details women's livelihood from South Asia; using the existing scholarship with publicly accessible data through search engines and databases, the following works were reviewed: Arbabzadah, Bharti's literary works, along with Bano, De, Koehler, and a couple of other scholars. These scholars have emphasized the dynamic role women have played during various dynasties in the subcontinent within South Asia. The chapter, "Women and Religious Patronage in the Timurid Empire" in *Afghanistan's Islam* focuses on the ruling class. Author Arbabzadah shares Timurid women's endeavours to protect religious architecture with their private funds. To trace the broader context of female religious patronage, the author provides an overview of women's roles from elite backgrounds in shaping medieval Afghanistan's religious landscape. While giving a historical narrative, the writer questions the term "Afghanistan" during a discourse on the medieval period since the name "Afghanistan" is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century development. As explained by Nile Green (qtd. in Arbabzadah), neither the state nor the term "Afghanistan" existed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Historical records are used as evidence of the author's time to validate that Timurid women had an exceptionally high status. This status allowed them to commission the building of khanaqahs, religious schools, mausoleums, and shrines. The historical evidence left by both stonemasons and scribes leads the author to conclude that the high status that the Turko-Mongol tradition granted to ruling-class females allowed Timurid women to play an essential role in the religious life of their era. Partly, this high status is a consequence of their Turko-Mongolian heritage, and partly due to the outcome of Shari'a laws of inheritance and property, which enabled them to have their private wealth and, in turn, to act as patrons. Simultaneously, the importance of charity (zakat) as one of the fundamental pillars of Islam further encouraged such patronage activity by giving a dimension of religious duty to the elite practice of support. These traditions later continued among Timurid women in Mughal India, as in the case of Princess Jahanara (d. 1681), the daughter of Shah Jahan and patron of various Sufis, who was buried at the Sufi shrine of Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325), in Delhi. Bharti's literary work in "An Analytical Study: Political Role of Women during Medieval Period" presents women's political position in India's medieval period. According to historians, in the late Vedic period, women were generally not encouraged in the political sphere, especially in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to male domination in Indian culture. However, quite a few notable women imprinted their names in politics and made it into history.

The authors talk about various ladies who could rise above the bounds of societal desires to end up noticeably conspicuous in medieval society. It was clear through non-government fields of intellectual and spiritual standards, which allowed ladies to deal with state issues alongside their male sovereigns. Women not only acquired the position of rishis but also became prominent leaders of their time. For instance, Razia Sultana turned into the leading lady ruler to have ruled Delhi. Chand Bibi guarded Ahmednagar against the intense Mughal powers of Akbar in the 1590s. Jehangir's significant other, NurJahan, successfully employed supreme power and was perceived as the Mughal royal position's real power. The Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zebunnissa were notable writers and impacted the decision making. History depicts exceptional women leaders such as Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, a ruler due to her capacity as a warrior and a director.

Similarly, Akbar's sister Bakhtunnisa was Kabul's legislative leader, who effectively administrated the zone for a long time. Different women were predominant in the great Mughals' political undertakings, even outside the mistresses' array. Rani Durgavati, the Chandel princess of Gondwana, administered her nation with extraordinary strength. Her reign not only was prosperous but her administrative abilities were preferred more over Akbar the Great. The political enthusiasm of women during the Mughal era shows the beginning of the destruction of patriarchal norms.

While Bharti talks about women in politics, Bano highlights the role of women in generating immovable income, wealth, and property. She talks about inheritance in her scholarly work titled "Women and Property in Mughal India" in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*. The article's thrust is the inquiry made by the author mainly into the women's immovable income and wealth-generating property. Women of the royal and aristocratic households had better visibility compared to others in history. Ordinary women are generally not mentioned in the feminist history of South Asia. The author attempts to explain the various laws in pre-colonial India that deal with property inheritance and other forms of wealth based on Hindu and Muslim traditions. The author states that the information available on women ordinarily propertied and the middle class is evident through the numerous references from the Mughal Empire's different areas, which provide much relevant information on women's property status during the period. It was pretty standard during those periods for women to possess their jewellery and cash. The presence of women with immovable property in the documents is remarkably inspiring. The precedent was prevalent in both Hindu and Muslim families. In "Re-Assessing Women's Status in Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial India," Aparna

## SANDRA DIXON

### Living Our Truths and Reclaiming Our Voices as Black Women

It's a new day, Black women

Reclaiming our womanist rights, family-oriented and liberated from the ideology of Eurocentric feminism fraught with inequality and privilege juxtaposed to gender and race  
The complexity of our realities reflects the intersectionality of identities that we wrestle with in our daily lives both at home and in the workplace.

Collectively, our tripartite plight of racism, sexism, and classism is shared  
Yet, we strive to overcome society's systemic prejudice and microaggression  
Clinging to our faith for the strength and resilience to fight another day  
With hope that the pain of yesterday will bring us a ray of sunshine tomorrow  
Since weeping may endure for a night, but our joy comes in the morning.

Women of African descent, the rich history and legacy of our ancestors is there to guide us in forging our future  
With strong determination and tenacity, we hold steadfast and unmovable to the profound words of the activist Sojourner Truth—"Ain't I a Woman?"  
In our responses, we proclaim fearlessly with our voices and speak our truths, amidst the noises of western dominance, patriarchal subjugation, and systemic oppression.

Yes! We are women with hopes, dreams, and passion to break the glass ceilings and change the socio-cultural, economic, and geopolitical strata of society  
Our grit for passion and perseverance extends beyond the need for recognition  
It is rooted in our quest for social justice, equity, solidarity, and harmony  
We are no longer tolerated for our similarities  
But rightfully accepted and celebrated for our cultural differences.

Like George Floyd, we can't breathe, fearful of losing our sons to police brutality, wrongful accusations, racial profiling, and false imprisonment  
We are tired of being gaslighted from sharing our experiences of marginalization and discrimination with others who deem them frivolous  
We push back when our daughters are fetishized for their sexuality  
labelled as angry Black women for asserting themselves, or by speaking their truths and using their own voices.

Despite academic accolades and accomplishments, many cannot seem to transcend the systemic domination into and within the corporate sector.  
Often the ones in countless employment spaces who are ready to serve others in a multicultural society  
Seen as the minority who are always "less than" the majority.

Still, we fight on in the hope of a better day where our sacrifices will be noticed  
Seen as women with intrinsic values and limitless worth  
Standing unmovable and relentless in our proud roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, leaders, allies, accomplices, co-conspirators, colleagues, change agents, and friends  
Giving of our time, effort, skills, and expertise.

Asking for nothing in return  
Other than the validation of our humanity.

Strong Black women, we say, 'no more running from the racism we face and the hate we have to endure'  
Today, we make a conscious decision and take a courageous stand to stop the generational trauma inflicted by colonialism  
We look and listen for opportunities to create a movement not a moment to ignite social change,  
and lay a strong foundation for future generations to cultivate their dreams even in a society poisoned with hate, covert racism, and implicit biases  
We carry the torch of our ancestors high for all to see we are survivors who will not be shaken  
Come what may, we are brave warriors who will fight to the end to live our truths, to reclaim, to sustain and nurture our voices.

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De has analyzed women of the ancient period in India and compared with the present situation of women. She suggests up-gradation of women's lives in present times on socio-economic and political premises. She suggests that the level and position of women are different in different periods and various civilizations. Like other authors, Aparna De also claims that women in the early Vedic period in Indian history enjoyed high status. However, a decline in women's high level started in the late Vedic period and continued to decline further during other dynasties. The position of women reached an all-time low during the age of the Dharmashastras.

The practice of Sati became quite widespread. The Purdah system, prevalent among royal families and merchant classes before the advent of Muslims, spread to other types. Women's status continued to deteriorate during the age of Smriti (AD 500 to AD 1800) and Muslim rule until they almost lost all social status. Many factors were directly or indirectly responsible for the continuous deterioration of Indian women's position in medieval times. Early marriage became a rule to safeguard the honour and virtue of girls. Because of the Muslim invasion, the indigenous culture had been subjected to acculturation. The customs and traditions of Islam had made in-roads into the Indigenous culture.

On the other hand, Hinduism's values sustain the male supremacy over females, women's "mother wife" role in the private domain, and man's "public" role in economic and political spheres. De also blames the priestly class who

misapprehended the sacred texts and granted religious permission to discriminate against women. In the scholarly work "Labor Class of Women in Mughal India," Iftikhar presents the working-class women's contribution to medieval India before European colonization. In the political history of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the source material had just passing references to reflect women's social and economic life. Although some information is available regarding the kinds of work women did, a considerable amount of such literature has been addressed in the archival document *Abul-Fazal's Ain-i-Akbari* (1873). Almost every traveler commented on the daily life of women in India. This material's reliability is still questionable, but these accounts are considered an essential source of medieval Indian history. The pictorial evidence offered by illustrations and miniatures of the Mughal School of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries documented by the author portrays women's economic contribution. These illustrations suggest women's activeness in various middle-class professions, such as domestic work, entertainment, prostitution, and the service industry. There are accounts where the state even appreciated working women of medieval Indian society. Mughal Emperors have taken many steps to facilitate them. But in medieval India's patriarchal political history, there are only passing references to working-class women.

On the contrary, Koehler in "Female Entrepreneurship in Early Islam," provides a discourse on the absence of female business leaders and public life, as evident in

societies following Islam. One idea may be that Islam imposes legal and social inequality on men and women. However, a comparison of female entrepreneurship in the pre-Islamic community and Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him [PBUH]) era shows that women occupied leadership roles before and after Islam's establishment. Prophet Muhammad's wives were commercially astute, and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his contemporaries respected women's rights to make decisions regarding finances, matrimony, and religious affiliation. The author argues that the right of women to assume public leadership roles is compatible with Islam. While discussing the biographies of women in early Islam, Koehler suggests that the narratives do not conform to preconceptions of female discrimination. For the sake of comparison, early Islamic society seems to feature greater self-determination by women than would have been the case in then-contemporary Christendom. Female merchants and poets are not recorded for seventh-century Europe. Facts do not support the assertion that Islam's advent reversed or thwarted Arabic women's right to decide their finances or religious choice.

In comparison to Koehler's works, Lindsey Harlan, in "Religion and Rajput Women," discusses the relationship between caste and gender in Rajput women's narratives. Harlan conducted fieldwork for over a year, and interviewed 100 women to understand why certain rituals and attributes were crucial to Rajput women, and how they justified these to themselves. During her interviews, the women described their spiritual practices—chief among them the worship of the family Kuldevi (the Goddess who exemplifies the ideal wife by staving off sickness, poverty, and infertility), and the adoration of satimatas (women who have immolated themselves on their husband's funeral pyre). As the women discussed these rituals, they told Harlan religious myths and stories, drawing parallels between their behaviour and various Indian heroines. These narratives and their role in the women's self-perception are fascinating and enlightening subjects of this book. Through the literature, it is evident that Islam dominated a major period in history before colonization, which had a greater impact on the lives of women living in South Asia. Minault, in "Making Invisible Women Visible," studies the history of Muslim women in South Asia. The title rightfully suggests the invisibility of Muslim women from South Asian history. While conducting the research, the author entails the difficulties encountered in studying the history of Muslim women in South Asia, some of which are applicable even today. It presents problems of both sources and interpretations. The author suggests a few ways to render invisible women as visible in ancient Indian history. The paper looks at elite women; nevertheless, a lot still needs to be studied to examine the history of ordinary

Muslim women living in India during pre-colonial times.

The article on Shakti by Morales provides a historical and theoretical lens on Hinduism's feminine power by using the term "Shakti." Within Shakti's theoretical framework, the author discovers the feminine concept as the indicator of influence itself. The article examines Shakti's idea, as found in various schools of thought of Hinduism throughout history. It explores the historical effects that this notion has backed in developing the traditional Hindu perception of the nature of the feminine, and women's consequent role. The article is helpful to understand the positioning of women in Hindu mythology. Hindu goddesses and their significance are well established across all Hinduism schools. Therefore, it won't be easy to find any Hindu literature with no mention of feminine power. The author's reference to Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, and Purana is notable literature where women's influence is mentioned and attributed to various effects hailed by different goddesses. The author's primary argument is that the West is now debating Shakti's ancient concept in academia. In contrast, the feminine aspect of Divinity should be recognized as part of the long and positive history of Shakti's thought in India.

The paper "Transgressive Subversions?" by Naidu wrestles with the assertion (DeNapoli) that female gurus are transgressive bodies and irruptions into a predominantly malestream tradition of religious teachers. The piece of writing works through the theoretical notion of intertextuality. It attempts to deconstruct and read whether such irruptions (and interruptions) into the Hindu tradition are actually transgressive and gendered religious violations, or whether they work instead to discursively and differently perpetuate particular parochial and masculinized social constructions of "woman." Thus, the paper probes what could be conceived as "intertextual gaps" to examine the assertion that the female gurus' gendered enactments are subversive. Instead, the paper suggests that the gendered portrayals present ambivalences and ambiguities to renunciate discourses on gender and female agency.

The research titled "The Saga of Women's Status in Ancient Indian Civilization" by (Bhaswasti) attempts to study women's position in Ancient Indian culture based on old available scripts and texts. The author categorized the ancient era into four distinct periods: the Vedic period, Epic, Jainism, and Buddhism. The author also examines the period of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti onwards. The study has portrayed the downgrading of the women's dignified role and position entirely to a subservient one from the Vedic period to the period of Dharmaśāstras, Mānsmṛiti onward. The author argues that the decline in women's status and roles can be credited to the implementation of Mānu's codification of social rules and gender discrimination. Brahmanical austerity applied to the entire Indian

society due to the crudest embodiment of women, the imposition of rigid restrictions induced by the social caste system and the joint families system, resulted in women's exclusion from educational facilities, foreign invasions, as well as the introduction of non-Aryan females as wives in Aryan families, resulting in gender-based discriminations and the marginalization of women.

Ramaswamy presents various perspectives on women and work in pre-colonial south India. The article attempts to understand the interrelations of women and work over an extended historical period, by observing women's agency in labor processes through pre-colonial era. To make the historical evidence more cohesive, it has been written with particular reference to Peninsular India, while also drawing similar comparisons from the regions to the north of the Vindhya mountains that geographically and culturally mark the north-south divide. The author provides a panoramic survey of women and work in Peninsular Indian history up to the beginnings of colonialism, and suggests that it should be seen as an initial step towards a much more ambitious feminist enterprise. The primary endeavour has been to salvage available data on women's work, both paid and unpaid, both visible and less visible, to highlight South Indian women's contribution to the work domain and indicate movement and change directions in women's work/labour history. Like Ramaswamy, Vijaya also talks about South Asian female roles in pre-colonial times by providing a distinctive relation between sexes in the Southeast Asian region. The author suggests that although women were not equal to men, there was still limited competition between the two genders in different spheres of life. Since the gender roles were defined, females from the region have always enjoyed autonomy, influence, and power in their respective domains. Their reproductive function gave them magical and ritual powers, which were difficult for men to acquire. The author provides accounts of women's active participation in trade and leadership, and discusses the factors that led to the failure of female rule in Southeast Asia. It is also crucial to understand how different scholarship portrays women's role in South Asian history.

The article "Rethinking Gender-Tased in Sanskrit texts" starts with Rukmani discussing Western and Indian scholars' attitudes addressing women's position in Hinduism. Then, the author presents a counter-argument by providing a historical lens on gender in Hinduism. The authors assert that historical evidence from Sanskrit texts indicates that Hindu women have had some "agency" deciding how to run their lives. The evidence may not be extensive, but is sufficient to provide another lens on women's roles in managing their lives. The position of women in India can be investigated in several ways; it can either be done

by examining how society perceives women's well-being equally with men in different areas where basic human values are not observed. Or it can be analyzed by women themselves, who found space to exert their agency despite these restrictions by a patriarchal society. The author states that evidence shows how Hindu women did, indeed, find space to exercise their choices in different life fields. The author points out how when reading the Sanskrit texts closely, one comes across incidents where women had some form of agency, and women made decisions concerning their own lives. While discussing women's agency, the role of Rajput women is irrefutable.

Sreenivasan, in the book *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India* talks about the medieval Rajput queen Padmini, also known as Padmavati, who became a symbol of Indian patriotism. Like other Indian nationalist writers, the author portrays her story as an example of a heroic sacrifice. Padmini is believed to have been pursued by Alauddin Khalji, the Sultan of Delhi. The information focuses on various South Asian narratives, ranging from a Sufi mystical romance of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the nationalist histories from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The article discovers how early modern regional elites, caste groups, and spiritual and monastic communities shaped their distinguishing versions of the past through the repeated refashioning of the legend of Padmini. Ramya Sreenivasan uses Padmini to illustrate the influence of gender norms in creating heroic memory. She depicts how such narratives about notable women have changed as they spread across South Asia amid the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Scholars, such as Vyas and Kumar, argue that since the evolution of Islam and the advent of the Muslim era in the Indian subcontinent, Muslim women have played an essential role in shaping the region's history. Whether they are royalty or ordinary women, they have actively participated in political and socio-cultural spheres. However, few scholarly attempts have brought to light the concerns, trials, and tribulations they endured in this long journey, especially the ordinary women. The Quran mentions that both men and women are equal, and they both are created from nafs Walidah (a single soul). The Islamic literature suggests that women have been provided socio-economic and legal standing within a historical framework commencing with the inception of Islam leading to Muslim rule in India, besides outlining their contributions, successes, and failures, and the challenges they faced. While providing the historical context, the authors Vyas and Kumar highlight the Mughal era where the ruling elite women gained prominence in politics, education, spirituality, art, and music. However, the authors also emphasize that this prominence was not widespread among ordinary women, resulting in gender-based oppression and declining



women's empowerment over time. To improve women's present-day living conditions, the authors refer to the fact that education, especially Quranic literacy for women and girls, is in urgent need to familiarize them with their rights. Islamic feminists must revisit the Quran and reinterpret it in the appropriate context of women's rights to improve Muslim women's living conditions in South Asia. While we have discussed the rich and powerful women, we must also discuss the role of middle-class women in the Mughal era. Yasmin, in "Middle-Class Women in Mughal India," discusses how not much has been written on Mughal India's middle-class women. However, their existence could be more visible. Thus, we can say that the tale of many invisible women is buried within the folds of history. They were not distinguished as a different class as a whole, but a middle-class exists in Mughal India.

The author provides details of the controversy regarding the existence of the middle class in India during the Mughal rule. Although this reality was denied during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, scholarly literature suggests the presence of a type of people comprised of mobile professionals, drawing salaries in compensation for their skills. These salaried, mobile, and professional groups appear to have had a distinct character of their own. Women from this class enjoyed civil liberties and laws based on religious traditions, which provided them rights in the property and "Mehr" (alimony) paid at wedding time. It is an indication that women in those times had significant relevance, and were regarded for their prominent role in raising families.

The scholars reviewed here have revealed some interesting facts and stories of women participating in politics, arts, religious rituals, and governance, and inheriting properties and receiving shares in their parents' and spouses' properties. These depictions of women's historical significance in ancient India are contrary to the view that women did not have agency within the Indian subcontinent.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to comprehend women's status in the ancient Indian subcontinent, the works of Gramsci, Spivak, and hooks provided the theoretical lens for this paper. These colonial theories have countered the colonial theorists who identify women from the Indian subcontinent as the most powerless humans living within the socio-economic confines of imperialist India. Although, like ancient times, women in post-colonial times have been actively engaged in politics, as is evident in the form of women Prime Ministers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Yet, colonial theorists tend to ignore the participation of native women in the subcontinent in different walks of life historically. Thus, as Spivak and hooks rightly point out,

the subaltern must speak for themselves. It is evident that scholarship on ancient women's history from the region is limited, and South Asian scholars have not done much work in this area. Therefore, there is a dire need that South Asian academia focus on producing more scholarly literature that supports the various stories surrounding ancient women. Furthermore, there is a need to develop flexible theoretical frameworks that will redress the imbalance that has been caused by exclusive reliance on textual perspectives presented by Western and predominantly colonial scholars. In the subcontinent, religion and culture are not just restricted to texts; instead, it is essential to study non-textual domains better to understand the role of women in the region.

At present, the literature available is scattered and is inspired by colonial theories of informing the world. Spivak reasons that the western intellectual discourse displaces non-western forms of discussion as folklore or myth. Moreover, it nullifies the importance of the historically available texts and other domains as they do not appear in line with the academic requirements defined and confirmed by the colonists. Thus, it raises the need for academia from South Asia to provide a more nuanced picture of women's status from ancient times, while filtering through intellectual and cultural views of conformity defined by western academia.

### **Position of Women in Hindu Mythology and Religion**

As discussed earlier, the positioning of women in the subcontinent had faced ups and downs; this is evident from the Hindu texts that provide diverse and conflicting views on the status of women, which ranges from feminine leadership as the highest Goddess to having limited gender roles. Religion in the subcontinent has played a crucial role in determining the rules and ideals generally understood in India to be the historical basis for defining women's lives. At the same time, examining the way religion is used as levers in the political machinery of patriarchy. The Hindu texts from ancient and medieval periods present a diverse picture of the duties and rights of women in Hinduism. Scholars suggest that through the Hindu texts available from the Vedic era, and some of the records left by travelers from ancient and medieval periods, it is evident that the practice of dowry and Sati were not present in Hindu society (Witzel). These practices, which colonial scholars have highlighted, became more rampant during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium CE due to socio-political developments in the Indian subcontinent. The subcontinent has witnessed several female rulers, saints, scholars, practitioners, and religious figures throughout history, from pre-colonial to post-colonial times. Historically, it is observed that Hin-

duism has the most vital presence of the divine feminine among world religions (Bryant). The most ancient sacred Hindu texts, the Vedas or records of revealed truth, which date back to 1500 BCE, reflect a society that freely had room for women to participate actively in intellectual and religious activities. The Vedic works of literature show that women were less subjugated during that time.

Mahabharata and the early literature also validate that goddesses are seen as central in the Shakti and Saiva Hindu traditions (Kinsley). According to the Bhagavad Gita, the burden of maintaining order within the family and society lies on women. The two Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, portray mixed roles for women. In Mahabharata, the main female character is Draupadi, who was the cause of the great war. The instructions “Anushasana Parva” of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, dedicates several chapters concerning women’s rights and conduct. In one of its chapters, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity “Lakshmi,” meaning money or monetary value in Hindi, asserts herself as the one who lives within those who are kind, righteous, truthful, sincere, dutiful towards their husband and family, as well as pious and hospitable. The Goddess emphasizes that she does not prevail among dishonest women who are not loyal to their families, greedy, and unkind towards people.

Furthermore, the texts also suggest that both girls and sons are equal. The Mahabharata continues to elaborate on women’s duties as wives, daughters, mothers, and humans. The responsibilities of women are to be of good disposition with humbleness in speech and conduct. It also states that in the view of Parvati (Uma)—Rama’s wife—for a woman, the husband is like a god and is everything. For a woman, the family is the ultimate centre point around which her life revolves. In the Ramayana, the female lead, Sita, is depicted as a homemaker and holds inordinate respect as Rama’s wife. In Hindu mythology, most women’s oral retellings of the Ramayana in its recent origins represent autonomy as a rule rather than an exception. The treatment of women and symbolic characterization in the Shastras and Smriti texts of Hinduism is mixed. Scholars have questioned the authenticity of the texts, as several different versions of the Smriti texts have been discovered (Olivelle 353–354, 356–382).

Similarly, the Puranas have some of the most dedicated discussions of the role of Devi and the sacred feminine in the late ancient and early medieval eras of Hinduism. However, the argument is not limited to the two most important Hindu Goddess religion-related texts (Brown). In the Hindu religion, both male and female gods are found called Deva and Devi. According to Hindu mythology, each Hindu God is partnered with a Hindu Goddess. In Hinduism, the Goddesses, according to the scholar Gross,

are portrayed as strong, beautiful, and confident, symbolizing their strength within life. The female Goddesses in Hinduism are symbolically represented as those who inspire action (Gross 269–291). Women Goddesses within Hinduism are portrayed as the patrons of arts, culture, nurture, learning, crafts, arts, spirituality, happiness, and freedom.

Hindus have a common belief that there are several deities, most of whom are women, as their presence is found in philosophical deliberations across numerous other Puranas and extant-era texts. The prominent role of women in the family is apparent in the less familiar tales of women from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and later Smriti texts. Buddhist and Islamic texts also confirm similar women’s roles. However, this ability to uphold family virtues transcended into a responsibility within which women became imprisoned by the societal requirement to maintain traditional values. Therefore, the autonomy women enjoyed in the Vedic period was challenged over time. Women were often lauded for their submissiveness and their extraordinary role of sacrifice. Still, very few women were publicly noticed under patriarchal norms for their intellectual roles, and their authority as scholars was often subdued.

#### **Positioning Women within the Islamic Context:**

Another prominent religion within the subcontinent besides Hinduism and Buddhism is Islam, due to the invasion of Muhammad Bin Qasim during the Umayyad Dynasty. The experiences of women vary widely between different Islamic societies. In the subcontinent, the experiences of Muslim women are entirely dissimilar to those of the Arab world. Before the advent of Islam, it is known that Arabs used to bury their female daughters alive in sand. After the revelation to Muhammad, the burial of female daughters was stopped (Ibrahim). During the pre-Islamic era, women were denied the right to divorce and deprived of their inheritance. Subsequently, with the advent of Islam, Muslim women got their rights compared to western women who were entitled to their rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars suggest that the Quran outlays women’s rights to participate in public affairs.

There are only four sources of influence within Islam for Muslim women. The first two, the Quran and Hadiths, are considered primary sources. Simultaneously, the other two are secondary and derived sources that differ between various Muslim sects and schools of Islamic thought. Islam’s basic view of women and men postulates a complementarity of functions: like everything else in the universe, humanity has been created in a pair (Murata 14). Islam’s emphasis upon the feminine/masculine divergence results in separation and segregation of social functions. In general, a

woman's domain of operation is the home in which she is the dominant figure, and a man's corresponding domain is the outside world. However, this segregation is not as rigid as portrayed and translated by various clerics to support patriarchal ideologies. There are various verses in the Quran dedicated to women concerning their livelihood, especially Surah Nisa's verses. Both the Quran and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advocated for women's rights. The emphasis on acquiring education and knowledge is exerted by the Quran on all individuals regardless of gender. Islam encouraged religious education of women, and Muhammad (PBUH) himself taught women alongside men. Muslim women throughout history have played a pivotal role in founding educational institutions. Prophet Muhammad's wife Ayesha and daughter Fatima were both involved in teaching. In early Islam, women witnessed men work alongside business people as soldiers in warfare. It is evident from the verse in the Quran that refers to Khadijah, the wife of Prophet Muhammad. In early Islamic history, there are several examples of Muslim women who fought during Muslim conquests. Some prominent women Muslim soldiers were Nusaybah bint Ka'ab, Umm Amarah, Aisha, Kahula, and Wafeira (Hale 120). Women were also involved in nursing and business. Islam provides due rights to women in property, and emphasizes equitable economic treatment towards women. Women in the early history of Islam were given a great sense of freedom and power. The Prophet's wives and their livelihood were considered the ideal role models for women to live their lives. Khadija bint Khuwaylid was a businesswoman and economically sound before marrying Muhammad; she is also known to be the first convert to Islam, assisting the Prophet during the revelations and the early Islamic period.

The Prophet's wife Hafsa bint Umar was entrusted with keeping the Quran safe, and his last and youngest wife, Aisha bint Abi Bakr, in the Battle of the Camel, led an army. The Prophet also appointed a female imam, Umm Waraqa, for both men and women. The Prophet deliberately allowed women to take on these powerful leadership positions as an example. However, soon after his death, the role of women in society became governed by an onslaught of Hadiths and interpretations of Quran verses, which were influenced by a male-dominated and patriarchal society. It isn't easy to generalize the status of women within different Muslim communities due to the various interpretations and treatments. However, during the Mughal rule, women in the subcontinent actively engaged in politics, business, and education. In post-colonial times, Muslim women in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh actively participate in different walks of life. The first female Prime Minister of the world has been from South Asia; Muslim women such as Benazir Bhutto, Nusrat Bhutto, Sheikh Haseena Wajid,

and Khalida Zia have noticeably played an active role in politics during post-colonialism. Hindu women leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi equally played their part as Hindu women political leaders.

### **Prominent Women from Ancient India**

We cannot discuss the status of women in India without mentioning the list of female figures that are to date considered the torchbearer for women's empowerment in India. These females were not only leaders but were also freedom fighters. There are numerous folklore and stories told of historical women of India who did not let their gender and positioning of women in India be a hurdle in their way. There have been several women leaders and inspirational women in India whose stories need to be shared with today's generation; however, women were less empowered than today. Still, they carved their niche and made their names in the history of ancient India. The famous female leaders resisted patriarchy in their ways and became role models for current female leaders of India. The services of quite a few women leaders in fighting for social justice and freedom are significant. These brave women paved the way for other women to fight against injustice and for fundamental human values. Razia Sultana tops these prominent women as she was the first and only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate (Gabbay 45-63). She was not only bold and courageous, but fought numerous battles to protect her throne. She was regarded as a just ruler (Gabbay). Another prominent figure was Savitribai Phule, known for her service to education as the first female teacher of the subcontinent. She was also regarded as a social reformer and a poet; she also fought for women's rights in India (Agnihotri).

As discussed earlier in this paper, the mention of Sita is inevitable from Indian history as she was the symbol of justice, dignity, and strength at the time of adversity (Das 124). Savitri is regarded as the epitome of loyalty, love, and sacrifice. At the same time, Draupadi is a well-known legendary woman who is known to have practised polyandry as per Indian mythology (Bhattacharya). Then comes Maharani Durgavati, also known as Durga Bhabi, who is famous and inspirational for her courageous and warrior spirit as she bravely fought against the enormous army of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. She was a revolutionist and a visionary as she revolted against the British rule (Bakshi). Women from the subcontinent were also great administrators, as can be witnessed through the life of Ahilya Bai Holkar. Her contributions as an administrator include reshaping Indore as a city. Her reign was a period of peace and development for the region compared to other areas full of violence (Feldhaus 184). These powerful women

from Indian history serve as great role models for present women in India, as their lives give hope to future generations.

### **The Invisible Women**

By now, it has been established that although women have been discriminated against, they have also enjoyed a fair share in politics and other walks of life alongside men from time to time in the Indian subcontinent. During different periods of history in the Indian subcontinent, women enjoyed freedom, equal educational opportunities, and religious freedom; women had the right to choose their life partner, economic independence, and employment. Women often enjoyed prominent roles in politics. However, medieval India was not the age of women. It is supposed to be the “dark age” for them. In the medieval period, women started facing hardships as patriarchal norms became more rampant, including Sati, child marriages, polygamy, Purdah, and gender-based discrimination. Regardless of the hardships women faced, Indian women historically have carved their niche. Although scholars suggest that the role of women in the medieval period was very much oppressed, there is still evidence of middle-class women’s economic participation in different areas. Shireen Moosavi suggests that women did undertake more intense activities alongside men. Some of the lesser-known women from pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times are discussed to admire their contribution to women’s leadership. History suggests that the status of women in Southern India was far better than those of Northern India.

There are several names that stood out during those times. Priyaketaladevi, queen of Chalukya Vikramaditya, ruled three villages while Jakkiabbe used to rule 70 towns (Punam and Sharma 7). Padmini, who was also known as Rani Padmavati, was a legendary 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century Rani (Queen) of the Mewar kingdom of present-day India. She is mentioned in several texts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Jodha Bai also known by other names such as Mariam-uz-Zamani, Hira Kumari, and Harka Bai, married the great Mughal emperor Akbar; she was known for her beauty and fierce nature, which impressed Akbar. It was Akbar’s love for Jodha Bai that bridged the gap between the Rajputs and the Mughals. Jodha Bai’s son was the emperor Jehangir; both father and son were inclined towards Hindus due to Jodha Bai (Findly). Another notable political figure was Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi; she was the queen of the princely state of Jhansi in North India. She is known as one of the leading figures of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and became known as a symbol of resistance to the British Raj for Indian nationalists (Saul). Fatima Jinnah, a Pakistani politician, dental surgeon, and stateswoman, was one of Pakistan’s leading founders. She was the younger sister of

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder and the first governor-general of Pakistan, the then-President of Pakistan. Fatima Jinnah, alongside her brother, participated actively in the Indian freedom movement, and was regarded as a pillar of strength for Muslim women. She was assassinated mysteriously as she stood against the then Pakistani establishment (Commire). Like Fatima Jinnah, Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi met a similar fate; unknown assailants assassinated both prime ministers. These courageous women were often regarded as a threat to the patriarchal systems. Thus, they sacrificed their lives while fighting to resist patriarchy and the dominant cultures, which considered these women figures an obstacle. Women’s status to date is paradoxical as, on the one hand, women are seen to be climbing the ladder of success at the same time they are witnessed to be suffering—even the ones at the highest ladder of success do not reach the top without hindrances created due to patriarchal norms. Although women’s resistance leads them to excel in life, they have to pay a heavy price as they juggle family and professional lives. Similarly, women who do not have access to ways to fight patriarchy continue to suffer.

### **Conclusion**

This article has provided an overview of women’s status in the Indian subcontinent today: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The research findings indicate that historically, ancient India has proven that women were given significant recognition and importance, while also experiencing constraints. The women belonging to affluent backgrounds rendered distinguished contributions in improving the well-being of the family and community. Women historically in India have been provided with educational opportunities; they were engaged in teaching professions, and developed their skills and abilities to carry out administrative and political functions.

Simultaneously, the paper also highlights the roots of the prevalent patriarchy that originated in ancient times, and has passed on the disparity between men’s and women’s status. It also acknowledges the position of women from time to time. The article discusses the Rig Vedic, Vedic, and medieval periods. Based on pieces of evidence, the author discusses the active participation of women from 600 BC to 750 AD in art, literature, music, painting, acquiring education, and receiving a share in property. Evidence suggests that women were active in such public economic activities such as wage labour, and served as temple dancers, courtesans, and court attendants. During the earlier period of history, highly educated women held an honourable position in society and the household. Women

in the Indian subcontinent experienced both its highs and lows as they experienced positive and negative effects. They enjoyed liberty while also experiencing oppression and discrimination. A connection between the status of women and their economic position was witnessed, which depended on their rights and opportunities within society.

Women's roles deteriorated over time as they continued to experience several factors that had devastating effects on their well-being. The factors responsible included illiteracy, the Purdah system, forced child marriage, polygamy, and Sati. With time women's involvement in decision making was reduced, and they became reliant upon the male members of the family. Colonialism suited the prevalent patriarchal mindset, which painted women as weaker segments of the Indian society, and took advantage and turned them into a vulnerable population. Therefore, whenever women's role is discussed in India while providing the historical context, it is inevitable to ignore the rise of patriarchal norms and a decline in women's equality during the medieval era, which continued and was passed on in the colonial period and exists to date.

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## KATHY ASHBY

### Emily Dickinson

after studious seclusion she spoke  
her conversation cultivated, not to boast  
complained too often people said, "What?"  
gave up trying to talk and thus sent notes

and wrote and wrote and wrote  
poems—created with log-cabin efficiency  
level line timbers hewn longhand, solid roof shape safe from bear or beast  
wandering deer shy coming upon symmetry

raccoon return for back-door give-away feast  
embers of humanity emanating from hearth  
and home, surrounded by sparkles of wild flowers  
tangled vines, dark underbrush all rooted in good black earth

life thoughts simplicity, death thoughts morbidity  
long hours of lingering mystery, accepting they'd been there  
they'll be there for eternity