

WOMEN IN INDIAN HISTORY: CHANGING ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the changing roles and contributions of women in Indian history. Women have held many positions as scholars, rulers, reformers, artists, athletes, scientists, and social leaders. Their work has shaped India's social and cultural life, even when laws, customs, and political systems limited their freedom. In ancient India, women such as Maitreyi and Gargi took part in philosophical debate, religious learning, and intellectual life. Epic figures including Sita, Draupadi, and Kunti were also remembered for their courage, judgment, and endurance. Rani Padmini became associated with bravery and sacrifice, while other women exercised power in courts and local kingdoms. During the medieval period, practices such as purdah and sati restricted many women, although their effects differed across regions and communities. Razia Sultana challenged accepted gender roles by becoming the first woman to rule the Delhi Sultanate. Nur Jahan influenced Mughal politics and supported art and architecture. Rani Abbakka led armed resistance against Portuguese forces along the Karnataka coast and defended Ullal for many years.

The colonial period brought major debates about education, marriage, widowhood, and caste. Reformers such as Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai worked to educate girls and oppose social injustice. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also promoted education for Muslim women and founded a school for girls in Calcutta. Their efforts helped widen public discussion about women's rights and access to learning.

After independence in 1947, women gained stronger legal rights and entered public life in greater numbers. Indira Gandhi became India's first woman Prime Minister. Kalpana Chawla gained international recognition as an astronaut, while Mary Kom became a world champion boxer. Women have also made lasting contributions to literature, science, business, public service, and the arts. Writers such as Mahadevi Varma, Ismat Chughtai, and Arundhati Roy expanded the place of women's voices in Indian literature.

KEYWORDS: *Women, Indian History, Roles, Contributions, Gender Equality, struggles, Indian literature.*

INTRODUCTION: Women in Indian history have a varied and lasting legacy. Their experiences show how social customs, religious ideas, political power, and economic change affected different groups of women over time. In early Indian society, some women received education, joined religious discussions, composed hymns, and took part in public and family decisions. The lives of Maitreyi and Gargi are often linked with this tradition of learning and debate. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata also present women such as Sita, Draupadi, and Kunti as figures who showed patience, intelligence, and courage during periods of conflict.

The rise and fall of kingdoms changed the opportunities available to women. During the medieval period, conservative customs became stronger in many communities. Purdah and veiling limited women's movement and public contact, while sati caused the deaths of many widows in areas where the practice occurred. These customs did not affect every region or community in the same way. Women still held authority in several courts and local states. Razia Sultana ruled the Delhi Sultanate for a short period in the thirteenth century, challenging the belief that political power belonged only to men. Jijabai helped shape the education and values of her son Shivaji, who later founded the Maratha kingdom.

The Mughal period brought further changes. Some rulers introduced measures that offered limited protection to women, while royal women sometimes gained influence through family, property, and court politics. Nur Jahan, the wife of Emperor Jahangir, took part in state affairs, issued orders, and supported buildings, gardens, and the arts. Her public role showed that women could influence imperial decisions even within a male-led political system.

British rule created both new opportunities and new restrictions. Western education, printing, missionary work, and social reform campaigns brought issues such as child marriage, widow remarriage, and women's schooling into public debate. Savitribai Phule opened schools for girls and worked with Jyotirao Phule against caste and gender discrimination. Pandita Ramabai supported the education and care of widows. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain argued that women needed education to gain independence and founded a school for Muslim girls. These reformers faced strong opposition, but their work helped change public attitudes.

After India became independent in 1947, the Constitution guaranteed equality before the law and gave women the right to vote. Women entered politics, education, government service, science, business, sports, and the arts. Indira Gandhi became the country's first woman Prime Minister. Other women

gained recognition in fields that had long been controlled by men. Kalpana Chawla worked as an astronaut and inspired many students in India and abroad. Mary Kom won world boxing titles while also raising a family and representing India at the Olympic Games.

Women have also shaped Indian writing and public debate. Mahadevi Varma wrote poetry and essays on women's lives. Ismat Chughtai addressed class, sexuality, and social control through bold fiction. Arundhati Roy has written novels and essays on politics, inequality, and human rights. Women journalists, artists, scientists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and activists continue to add new perspectives to national life.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY: This study examines how the roles, status, and contributions of women have changed throughout Indian history. It considers women's participation in education, religion, politics, social reform, resistance movements, literature, science, sports, and public life. It also identifies the social and cultural barriers that have limited women's progress.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: This study is based on secondary sources, including books, academic articles, journals, research papers, historical records, and other published materials. The information has been reviewed to understand major changes in women's status and to identify important women from different periods of Indian history. The study uses a historical and descriptive approach rather than collecting new field data.

CHANGING ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN HISTORY: Women in India have made important contributions despite restrictions created by social customs, political systems, caste structures, and economic inequality. Their roles changed as kingdoms rose and fell, religions spread, colonial rule expanded, and independent India built new laws and institutions. Women worked within families and communities, but many also acted as teachers, rulers, soldiers, writers, reformers, and public leaders.

- **Ancient India:** During the Vedic period, generally dated from 1500 to 500 BCE, some women had access to education and took part in religious and intellectual life. Women could attend learning centers, join philosophical discussions, and compose hymns. The Rigveda includes hymns linked with female sages, showing that women were not absent from early religious thought. Their freedom was not equal in every community, but the period provides evidence of women's participation in learning and ritual. The Ramayana and Mahabharata include strong female characters. Sita is often associated with endurance, duty, and moral strength. Draupadi speaks firmly in public settings and questions the actions of powerful men. Kunti manages

family responsibilities during war and political conflict. These characters have been interpreted in many ways, but each shows that women occupied important places in Indian storytelling and moral thought. The names of Gargi and Maitreyi are connected with philosophical learning in the Upanishadic tradition. Gargi took part in a public debate with the sage Yajnavalkya, while Maitreyi discussed knowledge, wealth, and the meaning of eternal life.

- **Mauryan Empire, 322-185 BCE:** The Mauryan period saw the growth of a large and organized state. Women took part in family life, religious activity, trade, and court affairs, although written evidence about ordinary women is limited. Queen Asandhimitra, the wife of Emperor Ashoka, is remembered as an influential figure who supported Buddhism and charitable work. Her example reflects the role royal women could play in religious patronage and public welfare. During Ashoka's reign, support for Buddhism led to the building of religious institutions and the spread of moral teachings. Women also joined Buddhist communities as nuns and patrons. These developments gave some women new spaces for learning, worship, and community service.
- **GUPTA EMPIRE, 320-550 CE:** The Gupta period is often associated with growth in literature, education, science, and the arts. Women's lives differed according to family, class, caste, and region. Some women from learned families received education, while many others remained tied to household work and strict social duties. Gargi and Maitreyi belong to an earlier intellectual tradition, but later Indian memory continued to honor them as examples of women's learning. Their ideas were preserved through religious and philosophical texts used by later generations. The period also produced women who supported temples, religious institutions, and cultural work through donations and family wealth.
- **MEDIEVAL INDIA:** Women's status changed during the medieval period, and many faced stronger restrictions on movement, education, and public activity. Purdah, or seclusion, became common among some royal and upper-class communities. Sati, the self-immolation of widows, occurred in certain regions and communities. These practices were not universal, but they caused serious harm where they were imposed or encouraged. Women still exercised power in courts, households, and local states. Razia Sultana became the first woman to rule the Delhi Sultanate. She wore royal dress, led troops, and took part in government despite opposition from nobles who rejected female rule. Her reign was brief, but her rise challenged the political customs of her time. Jijabai, the mother of Shivaji, helped shape the future Maratha ruler's education and political ideals. She managed estates, supported administration, and encouraged

resistance to hostile powers. Her contribution shows that women could influence political movements even when they did not hold the formal title of ruler.

- **MUGHAL EMPIRE, 1526-1857:** The Mughal period included several different policies and experiences for women. Emperor Akbar introduced some measures linked with women's welfare and opposed certain harmful customs. His administration also supported institutions and arrangements intended to protect widows, including those associated with Harkha Bai. The reach of such measures varied, and they did not end discrimination against women. Royal women could own property, manage estates, arrange marriages, support religious institutions, and influence court decisions. Nur Jahan was one of the strongest examples. As Emperor Jahangir's wife, she took part in political affairs, issued official orders, and supported painting, gardens, buildings, and charity. Coins were even issued in her name, an unusual sign of her influence within the imperial court. Rani Padmini, also called Padmavati, is remembered in regional history and legend as the queen of Mewar in Rajasthan. She is linked with the siege of Chittorgarh by Alauddin Khilji, the Sultan of Delhi, during the fourteenth century. According to the traditional account, she and other women of the fort chose jauhar, or mass self-immolation, rather than capture. The story has been told as an account of honor and sacrifice, although historians continue to discuss its sources and the line between historical record and later legend. Rani Abbakka ruled Ullal, a small coastal kingdom in present-day Karnataka, during the sixteenth century. She resisted Portuguese efforts to control trade and ports along the western coast. Abbakka organized armed forces and led naval attacks against Portuguese positions. She defended Ullal for decades, using local alliances and knowledge of the coast.
- **BRITISH COLONIAL ERA (1757-1947):** British rule introduced social and cultural reforms that encouraged women's education, ended practices such as sati, and led to the growth of women's groups focused on social concerns.
- Women such as **Rani Lakshmibai** of Jhansi and Sarojini Naidu took active parts in the Indian independence movement.
- **Begum Hazrat Mahal** was one of the leaders of the 1857 rebellion against the British East India Company. She helped unite several princely states in opposition to British rule.
- **Anandibai Joshi:** In 1886, Anandibai Joshi became the first Indian woman to earn a medical degree in the United States. Her success opened new opportunities for Indian women in higher education and medicine. Born in 1865, Anandibai Joshi faced many barriers as a woman in 19th-century India. She continued her studies and graduated from the Women's Medical College

of Pennsylvania in 1886. Her career ended tragically when she died of tuberculosis at age 21. Even so, her achievement encouraged more Indian women to enter the medical profession.

- **Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay:** Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a social reformer, freedom fighter, and women's rights activist. She helped revive and promote Indian arts and crafts, including handloom weaving, pottery, and embroidery. She also supported women's rights and rural development by calling for better working conditions and more economic opportunities. Kamaladevi helped establish the Handicrafts Board and the National School of Drama, leaving a lasting influence on Indian culture.
- **Sarojini Naidu:** Sarojini Naidu was a poet, freedom fighter, and politician who took part in the Indian independence movement. Her powerful speeches and poetry earned her the name "Nightingale of India." In 1925, she became the first Indian woman to lead the Indian National Congress as its president. She contributed to the non-cooperation movement and later advocated women's rights, social reform, and education.

POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA: After India gained independence in 1947, the Constitution made women's rights and equality important parts of national law. Women such as Indira Gandhi, India's first female Prime Minister, and Mother Teresa, a Nobel laureate known for her charity work, made major contributions to politics and social welfare. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay continued her work as a reformer, freedom fighter, and women's rights activist. She promoted Indian arts and crafts while supporting women's empowerment and rural development. Vijayalakshmi Pandit Born in 1900, Vijayalakshmi Pandit was a diplomat, politician, and sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. She represented India as an ambassador in several countries, including the United States, and at the United Nations. In 1953, she became the first woman to serve as President of the United Nations General Assembly. Pandit helped shape international diplomacy and promote India's interests abroad. She also worked within the United Nations on decolonization, racial discrimination, human rights, social justice, and women's rights.

MODERN INDIA:

- **M.S. Subbulakshmi:** M.S. Subbulakshmi, often called MS, was a celebrated Carnatic vocalist and the first musician to receive the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honor. Her expressive voice and command of classical music earned recognition in India and abroad.
- **Indira Gandhi:** Indira Gandhi was India's first female Prime Minister. She held office from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984. During her terms, she introduced major social and economic reforms and had a strong influence on Indian politics.

- **Kiran Bedi:** Kiran Bedi joined the Indian Police Service in 1972 and became India's first woman IPS officer. Known for her firm and new approach to policing, she introduced community policing and prison reforms. She also worked to improve conditions for women and children. After retiring, Bedi continued to oppose corruption and support good governance. She later became Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry, the first woman to hold that post.
- **Kalpana Chawla:** Kalpana Chawla was an Indian-American astronaut and the first woman of Indian origin to travel into space. In 1997, she worked as a mission specialist aboard the space shuttle Columbia. The shuttle broke apart during re-entry in 2003, killing all members of its crew. Chawla's achievements and love of space science inspired many young scientists and brought pride to India.
- **Mary Kom:** Mary Kom, known as "Magnificent Mary," is an Indian boxer and Olympic medallist. She is the only woman to win six World Championship titles in boxing. Her skill and determination challenged stereotypes about women in Indian sports. Her success raised the profile of women's boxing and inspired many young athletes.
- **Arundhati Roy:** Arundhati Roy is a well-known author and social activist. Her first novel, *The God of Small Things*, won the Booker Prize in 1997. Her writing addresses social inequality, caste discrimination, and the effects of globalization on marginalized communities in India. Roy is also known for her direct views on political and social issues and her support for human rights and social justice.
- **Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw:** Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw is an entrepreneur and the founder of Biocon Limited, one of India's largest biopharmaceutical companies. She is a leading businesswoman who has made major contributions to biotechnology. Her work to make health care more affordable has earned her many honours, including the Padma Bhushan, one of India's highest civilian awards.

CONCLUSION: The history of women in India shows their strength, courage, and lasting commitment. Across the centuries, women have taken on many roles and shaped Indian society in lasting ways. Their work has influenced politics, literature, the arts, science, and social reform. In every period, many women challenged social rules and overcame barriers to achieve great things. They were scholars, rulers, warriors, poets, and leaders who questioned the roles given to them. Maitreyi and Gargi displayed great learning in ancient India, while Rani Lakshmibai and Indira Gandhi showed courage and strong leadership in later times. The roles and achievements of women have been shaped by cultural, social, and political change. Some periods placed strict limits on women, yet they continued

to claim their rights and contribute to their communities. Their efforts helped shape India's history, even when society failed to recognize them fully.

Indian women continue to move forward and open new doors for those who follow. They have succeeded in areas once controlled mainly by men, including science, sports, business, and public leadership. Many also work for social change by supporting gender equality, education, and women's rights. Serious problems remain. Gender discrimination, violence, and unequal access to opportunities still prevent true equality. Society must confront these issues, support women's growth, and provide conditions in which their skills and ideas can flourish. The lives of women in Indian history encourage people to honour their achievements and recognize the hardships they faced. Their experiences also call for a fairer and more inclusive society. When India values women's contributions and gives them equal chances, the country can make better use of its people's abilities and build a brighter future for everyone.

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