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# THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT: WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL AGENCY AND RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHAL NORMS

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**Abstract:**
The Bhakti movement in India, which flourished between the 6th and 17th centuries, was a significant religious and cultural development that radically redefined spiritual devotion and challenged societal norms. Women played an integral role in this movement, finding spiritual agency through direct, emotional devotion to the divine, often defying traditional patriarchal constraints. Female saints like Andal and Mirabai became symbols of resistance, embracing devotion as a means of liberation rather than obligation. This paper examines the impact of the Bhakti movement on women's roles in spiritual and social spheres, highlighting how it offered a platform for women to transcend societal boundaries imposed by caste, gender, and traditional religious hierarchies. It also explores the intersection of devotion, spiritual agency, and resistance to patriarchal structures, as women reclaimed authority in their relationship with the divine. Despite the patriarchal norms that sought to contain their spiritual power, these women found ways to reshape the sacred and contributed to a rich, diverse spiritual tradition that continues to influence Indian religious thought.

**Keywords:**
Bhakti Movement, Women's Spiritual Agency, Patriarchal Norms, Devotional Poetry, Andal, Mirabai, Feminism in Religion, Gender and Devotion.

**Introduction:**
The Bhakti movement, which emerged in medieval India, represents a significant shift in the religious landscape, emphasizing personal devotion to God over ritualistic orthodoxy. While the movement is often remembered for its critique of caste hierarchies and the priesthood, it also provided a unique space for women to assert their spiritual agency. The Bhakti poets, particularly women like Andal and Mirabai, used devotional poetry and song as expressions of direct, emotional connection to the divine, bypassing the patriarchal restrictions that limited women's access to religious authority. These women rejected the traditional roles that confined them to domestic spheres and instead embraced a radical form of spirituality that prioritized personal devotion and direct access to God. Their spiritual journeys exemplified resistance not only to the external religious structures but also to societal expectations that suppressed female autonomy and expression. This paper explores how the Bhakti movement became a platform for women to challenge patriarchal norms and claim spiritual authority, asserting their place within both the sacred and social realms.

## EDUCATION AND INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In ancient India, education was deeply interwoven with spiritual and philosophical life, and women initially held a respected place within this intellectual tradition. They studied sacred texts, engaged in debates, and contributed to early literature and theology before gradually being marginalized due to rising patriarchy and ritual orthodoxy.

### Access to Learning and Scriptures

In ancient India, the Vedic age (c. 1500–500 BCE) marked a formative period for intellectual development, where education was not merely utilitarian but deeply intertwined with spiritual growth, oral tradition, and social duty. Education revolved around the study of the Vedas, ritual performance, grammar, logic, astronomy, and metaphysics. In the earliest phases of this era—especially the Rig Vedic period—women of the Brahminical elite had notable access to sacred knowledge and intellectual pursuits.

Young boys and girls were initiated into education through the ritual of upanayana (the sacred thread ceremony), which signified entry into student life or *brahmacharya ashrama*. Though predominantly reserved for upper castes, records suggest that girls from Brahmin families were also recipients of this rite during the early Vedic phase. They were known as brahmavadinis—women dedicated to studying the Vedas for a prolonged period and remaining unmarried for the sake of knowledge. In contrast, sadyovadhu referred to those who studied briefly before entering married life.

Texts such as the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda contain hymns attributed to female composers—among them *Lopamudra*, *Ghosha*, *Apala*, and *Vishvavara*. These compositions reflect an intellectual agency that includes philosophical introspection, ritual instruction, and theological inquiry. Women were permitted to participate in Vedic rituals and sacrifices, sometimes even as officiants, and their presence in shastrarthas (philosophical debates)

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suggests an environment in which their cognitive contributions were both acknowledged and respected (Ghosh, 2018; Jamison, 2015).

Education at this time was holistic, integrating memorization, recitation, interpretation, and dialogue—skills in which some women evidently excelled. The inclusion of women in ashrams, courts, and debating assemblies supports the idea that intellectual life, though male-dominated, was not entirely male-exclusive in early Vedic India.

**Notable Female Scholars and Teachers**

Among the most renowned female intellectuals of ancient India are Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi, whose dialogues are preserved in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, a key text in Vedantic philosophy. Their presence in these texts is not symbolic—it reflects their genuine engagement with the metaphysical questions of existence, consciousness, and liberation (*moksha*).

- Gargi Vachaknavi, daughter of sage Vachaknu, is remembered for confronting the sage Yajnavalkya in a public assembly hosted by King Janaka of Videha. In this philosophical contest, she boldly questioned the ontological foundations of reality, asking, "*That which is above the heavens and below the earth, that which is between heaven and earth…on what is it woven, warp and woof?*" Her questioning culminated in a profound interrogation of Brahman, the formless and infinite principle underlying all existence. Though she ultimately yields the debate to Yajnavalkya, her courage, clarity, and knowledge earn her deep respect—she is neither mocked nor marginalized but remembered as a philosophical equal.

- Maitreyi, wife of Yajnavalkya, is another intellectual luminary. When her husband decides to renounce worldly life, he offers to divide his wealth between Maitreyi and his other wife, Katyayani. Maitreyi's response is deeply philosophical: "*Can wealth give me immortality? If not, what shall I do with it?*" This leads to a profound dialogue between them, wherein Maitreyi questions the nature of self, love, and liberation. Her analytical mind and spiritual focus showcase the inner capacity of women to pursue jnana (knowledge) as a path to moksha—a notion later denied to most women under orthodox systems (Altekar, 2012).

Other notable figures include:

- Lopamudra, wife of the sage Agastya, who is credited with composing hymns in the Rig Veda and known for her articulation of the tension between asceticism and conjugal duty.

- Ghosha, afflicted by disease but expressing deep yearning for both healing and love through her hymns, illustrating both personal insight and ritual knowledge.

- Sulabha, a philosopher mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, who engaged King Janaka in a high-level debate on renunciation and identity. She challenges the king's patriarchal assumptions and asserts the equality of intellect, regardless of gender.

These women were not anomalies but part of a broader intellectual culture that, at least in its earlier phases, did not categorically exclude women from philosophical pursuits.

**Decline in Education Over Time**

The decline of women's education in ancient India was neither abrupt nor universal, but it was systematic, intensifying as patriarchal norms and ritualistic orthodoxy deepened. Several interlocking factors contributed to this regression:

1. Rise of Brahmanical Conservatism: As the social order became more hierarchical under Manu's Dharmashastra and similar legal texts (c. 200 BCE–300 CE), the role of women was increasingly confined to domesticity. The Manusmriti forbade Vedic learning for women, declaring them ineligible for sacred rites or study, and portraying them as intellectually and morally dependent on men.

2. Exclusion from Upanayana: The sacred thread ceremony—once accessible to select women—was withdrawn. Without upanayana, girls could no longer formally begin Vedic study. This institutionalized exclusion marked a critical turning point in the loss of female access to sacred and philosophical education.

3. Marriage and Domesticity: With the rise of prepubescent marriage, girls were denied the time and autonomy necessary for education. The ideal woman became the devoted wife, focused solely on household duties, child-rearing, and ritual purity. Education, if any, was practical—restricted to religious hymns for household worship or rudimentary literacy for managing domestic affairs.

4. Loss of Public Platforms: As shastrarthas, gurukulas, and temples became increasingly male spaces, women were removed from intellectual debates and theological development. Their voices disappeared from written texts, and their contributions became limited to the oral sphere, such as folklore, women's songs, kitchen wisdom, and ritual practices passed from mother to daughter.

5. Later Periods and Foreign Invasions: In the medieval period, especially under Turko-Afghan and Mughal rule, further constraints were placed on women's freedom of movement, dress, and speech, which indirectly impacted educational access. Practices such as purdah and seclusion grew more common among upper-class women, reducing their public presence and intellectual participation even further.

6. Social Reform and Colonial Period: By the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Savitribai Phule began pushing for female education again. However, this occurred only after centuries of suppression and erasure of women from intellectual history (Sharma, 2017; Olivelle, 2010).

The history of women's education in ancient India is marked by early participation, intellectual brilliance, and eventual erasure. From the brahmavadinis who debated the nature of the universe to the quiet silencing under rigid patriarchy, this trajectory reflects the broader cultural and political shifts of the subcontinent. Though many women's voices were lost to time, those that remain—like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra—stand as enduring testaments to an intellectual tradition that once welcomed, and later denied, their wisdom.

**POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ROLES**

Throughout ancient Indian history, women occupied a spectrum of roles within the political and economic landscapes, ranging from queens with sovereign authority to laborers in agrarian and artisan economies. While Brahmanical patriarchy attempted to curtail women's autonomy in formal governance and inheritance, historical records, inscriptions, epic narratives, and regional customs reveal numerous instances where women not only participated in but also significantly shaped the political, administrative, and economic fabric of their times. Their influence, often mediated through royal households, familial authority, or customary rights, challenges the idea that ancient Indian society was entirely male-dominated and static in its gender norms.

**1 Women as Queens, Regents, and Advisors**

Although the dominant ideology of kingship in ancient India privileged male sovereignty, women—especially those of royal lineage—were far from passive figures in the political arena. They exercised power both formally and informally, often stepping into the political vacuum created by succession crises, child rulers, or the absence of male heirs. Royal women frequently served as **regents**, ruling on behalf of underage sons or grandsons, and in many cases, their regency evolved into de facto sovereign rule. Their political engagement was not merely ceremonial; it encompassed direct involvement in statecraft, military decisions, and court diplomacy.

One of the most powerful examples from historical records is Queen Didda of Kashmir, who reigned during the 10th century CE. Initially the regent for her grandson, she gradually consolidated power, overcame court opposition, and ultimately ruled as monarch in her own right for over two decades. Didda effectively administered her kingdom, managed internal rebellions, and demonstrated a level of state control that earned her comparisons to rulers like Catherine the Great in later global historiography. Her reign challenges assumptions about the limits of female political agency in pre-modern India, showing that in certain political environments, particularly when dynastic survival was at stake, women could command armies, issue decrees, and be recognized as sovereign rulers.

In literary and mythological narratives, figures such as Queen Kaikeyi from the *Ramayana* reflect the embedded recognition of women's influence in dynastic affairs. Though her motives are often portrayed negatively, Kaikeyi's successful manipulation of court promises and her strategic use of royal boons to alter succession plans reveal a queen's potential to intervene decisively in matters of state. Her role may have been controversial, but it illustrates that royal women could, and did, influence high-stakes political outcomes.

Beyond singular examples, there is broader epigraphic and textual evidence—particularly from the Mauryan, Satavahana, and Gupta periods—that indicates royal women sometimes shared responsibilities with their husbands or ruled as regents. Court inscriptions occasionally bear the names of queens as co-donors, administrators of temple lands, and participants in state-sanctioned religious acts that reinforced dynastic legitimacy. These instances suggest not only their presence but also their political legitimacy within the framework of ancient Indian kingship (Thapar, 2013; Joshi, 2010).

**2 Involvement in Trade, Agriculture, and Property**

Outside the courts, women played critical roles in the economic life of ancient India, particularly in agrarian production, artisanal labor, small-scale commerce, and property management. In rural settings, women's involvement in agriculture was foundational, encompassing sowing, transplanting, harvesting, threshing, and managing livestock. These contributions, while underrepresented in textual sources, were vital to village economies. Women also took part in post-harvest processing, food storage, and preparation for seasonal markets, forming an invisible but indispensable labor force.

In domestic and cottage industries, women engaged in spinning, weaving, basket-making, pottery, oil-pressing, and dyeing. These industries were not merely extensions of household labor but significant contributors to regional trade networks. In many urban and semi-urban settlements, especially in South India, historical sources—like Sangam literature—mention women who functioned as independent traders, artisans, and even heads of guilds. Some

inscriptions refer to women who endowed land or donated wealth to temples and monasteries, indicating that they controlled not just labor but also capital.

The question of property rights for women in ancient India reveals a complex legal landscape. While Brahmanical texts such as the *Manusmriti* severely restricted women's rights to inheritances, they did acknowledge the concept of stridhan—a woman's personal property, including gifts received at marriage, inheritance from her mother, or wealth earned through artistic or professional skills. In theory, stridhan was under a woman's control, though in practice, it could be appropriated by male relatives. Despite these restrictions, customary laws in tribal, regional, and matrilineal communities diverged significantly. Among the Nairs of Kerala, for instance, inheritance passed through the female line, and property was managed by matrilineal joint families. Similarly, among tribal communities in northeast India, such as the Khasi of Meghalaya, women were the custodians of ancestral property and familial continuity.

In some cases, widows and unmarried women also retained rights to manage land or revenue-free grants. The Copper Plate Grants and epigraphic charters issued by dynasties such as the Cholas and Rashtrakutas include names of women who made land donations or oversaw temple estates. These records highlight an often-overlooked reality: women, particularly in elite or localized contexts, could function as economic agents in their own right (Bhattacharya, 2011; Sharma, 2017).

**3 Power in Royal Courts**

Within the royal court, women exercised soft power through multiple channels—cultural patronage, strategic diplomacy, religious endowments, and informal advisement. Courtly women, particularly queens, were often key figures in the legitimization of rule. Their patronage of temples, learning institutions, and art was not simply ornamental; it had political implications, reinforcing dynastic prestige and religious orthodoxy. In many cases, queens served as intermediaries between the king and religious institutions, sanctioning land grants or commissioning iconography that celebrated both divine favor and royal might.

A striking example of this is Prabhavati Gupta, daughter of the Gupta emperor Chandragupta II and queen of the Vakataka dynasty. After the death of her husband, Rudrasena II, she governed as regent for her minor sons and issued several land grants in her own name—a rare occurrence in early Indian epigraphy. These inscriptions, composed in formal Sanskrit and bearing royal seals, showcase not only her administrative authority but also her grasp of diplomatic and religious symbolism. She maintained ties with her natal family, upheld Gupta-style religious patronage, and managed land revenues—blending political power with cultural continuity (Misra, 2015).

Royal women also played key roles as cultural diplomats, negotiating marriages, alliances, and fostering relationships between courts. Inscriptions refer to queens who brought with them dowries that included villages, revenue rights, or even military aid, thereby influencing broader geopolitical dynamics. Court poets and chroniclers occasionally mention queens as tastemakers and patrons of the arts, commissioning Sanskrit plays, temple murals, and architectural projects. Their patronage not only enriched the aesthetic life of the court but also served as a public expression of state ideology and religio-political legitimacy.

Moreover, female agency in courts was not limited to the Hindu context. In Buddhist and Jain kingdoms—such as those of the Satavahanas, Ikshvakus, and Rashtrakutas—queens actively supported monasteries and religious reform movements, sometimes shaping doctrinal shifts or funding the construction of viharas and stupas. Their involvement reflects a multifaceted courtly identity: royal women were not just consorts or ceremonial figures but political actors, cultural stewards, and religious benefactors.

## CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS: LITERATURE, ART, AND MUSIC

Women in ancient and early medieval India played vital roles in shaping the cultural and spiritual landscape. Though often marginalized in official histories, their creative voices survived through poetry, music, visual arts, and especially oral traditions. These contributions were not merely decorative—they formed a deep part of the religious, emotional, and philosophical fabric of society.

**1 Female Poets and Storytellers**

The earliest literary expressions of women in Indian history appear in the Rigveda, one of the oldest religious texts in the world. Within its thousands of hymns are a select few composed by female seers, or rishikas, including Lopamudra, Apala, Ghosha, and Vishvavara. Their verses express complex emotional and philosophical ideas—from devotion and desire to metaphysical inquiry and healing—revealing that women's spiritual experiences were integral to Vedic religion.

- Lopamudra, the wife of sage Agastya, composed hymns that articulate both conjugal love and the tension between asceticism and domestic life.

- Apala, afflicted with disease, composed a hymn seeking healing and spiritual clarity, invoking divine favor through ritual and personal faith.

- Ghosha, who suffered from a skin ailment and remained unmarried, wrote deeply personal hymns that blend longing, devotion, and philosophical depth.

These early literary voices were not marginal—they were canonized within sacred scripture, indicating a recognition of women's inner authority and poetic insight. Although few in number, their presence in the Vedic corpus signals that early Indian literary culture, at least in part, honored female authorship (Ghosh, 2018; Altekar, 2012).
As Indian literature evolved through the epic and classical periods, women continued to contribute as storytellers, singers, and keepers of lore, especially within oral traditions. Many women, even if not formally literate, played crucial roles in preserving myth, genealogy, and morality through folk tales, ballads, and devotional songs passed down across generations.

**2 Representation in Art and Dance**

Women were central to the visual and performing arts of ancient India, not just as subjects of representation but as creators, performers, and symbolic figures of religious power. Temple art, particularly from the Gupta period onward, abounds with depictions of women in richly varied roles: goddesses, dancers, musicians, devotees, and celestial beings. These sculptures were not simply decorative but ritualistic and symbolic, representing ideals of fertility, grace, cosmic power (*Shakti*), and spiritual enlightenment. Art historian Vidya Dehejia emphasizes that the female form was considered both aesthetic and sacred, and its portrayal in temple architecture—particularly in places like Khajuraho, Konark, and Ellora—celebrated women as embodiments of divine energy and sensuality. The goddesses Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati were more than religious figures; they offered archetypes for strength, wisdom, creativity, and maternal care, all of which shaped the cultural perception of womanhood (Dehejia, 2016).
In classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Mohiniyattam, women were both the subjects and the bearers of sacred stories. These dances, originally performed in temples, were heavily dependent on female devadasis—women trained in music, rhythm, and storytelling—who embodied and enacted the myths of gods and goddesses. Though later stigmatized during colonial and reformist periods, devadasis held ritual and artistic authority, often enjoying patronage from kings and temples. Their performances were not simply entertainment; they were spiritual offerings, blending narrative, gesture, and rhythm into acts of devotion.

**Conclusion:**

The Bhakti movement, through its emphasis on personal devotion and emotional intimacy with the divine, provided women with a unique opportunity to resist the patriarchal norms that restricted their spiritual and social freedoms. Figures like Andal and Mirabai demonstrated that women could redefine their relationship with the divine on their own terms, transcending the limitations imposed by societal expectations. The legacy of these female saints in the Bhakti tradition is not only a testament to their spiritual strength and devotion but also to their role in challenging the gendered structures of religious and social life in medieval India. Their contributions to devotional literature, religious reform, and the reimagining of women's roles in spirituality have had a lasting impact on Indian religious traditions, offering a vision of liberation that continues to inspire and empower women to this day. Through the Bhakti movement, women reclaimed their spiritual voice, contributing to a broader cultural and theological transformation that allowed them to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their place in the sacred domain.

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