

# Beyond His-Story: “Exploring the Forgotten Narratives of Women’s Contribution Towards Indian History

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## Abstract

*Historical narratives are essential for teaching people about the portrayal of the past. Examining the contributions made by distinguished personalities allows us to investigate the various facets of history. However, the prevailing narratives give precedence to the accomplishments and viewpoints of males and this has frequently eclipsed the significance of women’s role and contribution in making history. Furthermore, there are very few historical curriculums that shed immense light on the role of women in history, despite the fact that these courses are vital for educating young people about history. Women since ancient era in India have been subjected to unjust orthodox treatment by their own families, despite these grim and rigid circumstances many of them have courageously rejected the ideologies imposed by the orthodox patriarchal system and have made significant contributions to history. By delving into various historical context, this article illuminates the significant contributions undertaken by women to the collective tapestry of human history. Furthermore, it also discusses various strategies that can be espoused in order to honor the contributions of women who are the -  
unsung heroines of history.*

**Keywords:** *historical narratives, women’s contribution, history, curriculum*

## Introduction

Individual efforts and contributions have helped in reconstruction of history, but due to historical setting, historians may sometimes be biased and concentrate primarily on the contributions, statecraft and diplomacy of men, majorly because women were excluded from these domains since the inception of ancient era. Generally, women were confined to their homes and were expected to acknowledge and fulfill the responsibility of catering to the needs of their family members. While talking about education, early women’s education was limited to the royal household, benefitting only a few.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the nation’s progress benefitted greatly from the education accomplished by women. As a result, the history of Indian women shows how productively they worked to challenge gender norms and make significant achievements in various fields ranging from art, politics to being courageous in the battlefield.<sup>32</sup>

Women are the unsung national heroines and the contributions of many women are lesser known to the world, but they are sometimes highly celebrated in the folklore memory of varied regions. Also, it might have been mostly caused by the extremely sparse information that had been made public about them.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, social justice and female empowerment are as important as historical accuracy when it comes to appreciating the achievements made by women. This paper thereby strives to illuminate the forgotten stories of many such ‘Her-stories’.

## Literature Review

‘The Women Who Ruled India’ by Archana Gupta, is a core book which addresses women as national heroines and has played a key role in highlighting their contributions. The women rulers in this book span most of India’s ages and region. The author has skillfully woven the stories of them who otherwise would just have been forgotten pieces of history.

<sup>31</sup>Dr. Sudharshana Bhaumik, ‘Feminist Consciousness in Ancient India’ in ‘Women in Indian History’, edited by Dr. Manu Sharma, pp 2

<sup>32</sup> John J Pool, ‘Famous Women of India’, Calcutta, 1954, pp 3

<sup>33</sup>Apama Bandyopadhyay, ‘Her Story: Notes on Women’s History’ in Review of Historical Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 64-76

'Tamizh Is Not Just a Language: The Valor' by Madan Kumar, mentions about the valor, courage of warriors who hailed from southern part of India. The author delves into historical, socio-cultural significance of Tamilians by presenting it as a repository of knowledge which are otherwise not spoken about much.

'Famous Women of India' by John J Pool, features a range of notable women, from ancient to contemporary times showcasing their struggles, unique stories and contributions to the field of history. The book thereby highlights the importance of recognizing and honoring the women throughout history.

'Women in Indian Society' ed by Dr. Manu Sharma is an enriching book that evokes a sense of appreciation towards women contributors. The book not only highlights eminent figures but also sheds light on the contribution of lesser-known women across different eras from ancient times to modern era.

### Role of Women as Queens and Warriors: The Forgotten Historical Tales

**Rani Abbakka – The Admiral Queen.** She was born in the Karnataka city of Ullal and rose to prominence for her bravery in decisively beating General Joao Peixoto's formidable Portuguese fleet. She had used agnivans<sup>34</sup> which had set the Portuguese ship on fire, forcing them to flee after curbing immense casualties. Unfortunately, her valor has become a part of forgotten historical narratives.<sup>35</sup>

**Prabhavati Gupta:** Women in ancient India also undertook the role of administration of the kingdom. One such example is that of Prabhavati Gupta, -The Gupta princess and Vakataka queen. She ruled the Vakatakas for 20 years on behalf of her minor son.<sup>36</sup> Her father Chandragupta II had promised her of military and administrative assistance and thus employed some of his

trusted officers in the Vakataka kingdom. It is also to be noted that he had sent Kalidas the Sanskrit poet to impart education to her minor sons. A seal discovered during archeological excavations reveals that Prabhavati Gupta had introduced a clay seal in her honor. She has also made a significant contribution to the creation of iconography, sculptures, and temples while ruling the Vakataka kingdom.<sup>37</sup> Sadly, her achievements are hardly included in history textbooks.

**Rani Karnavati:** Karnavati is a Kangra native. Mahipat Shah, her husband, succeeded to the Garhwal throne. Since the rulers of the adjacent kingdom were aware of his arrogance, they primarily planned to wage war against the kingdom of Garhwal. Following his demise, Karnavati was named a regent and his son was crowned.<sup>38</sup> She presided over a tolerant and cosmopolitan society. She is also credited with building tanks and canals, which helped to advance agriculture. She had to fight against the Mughals under Najabat Khan when Shah Jahan was in power, who went on to conquer Garhwal.<sup>39</sup>

Shah Jahan closed off the highways during the conquest to prevent his warriors from turning around. Due to a shortage of attack supplies, they had decided to request a truce while facing Rani Karnavati, but the Queen intervened and ordered that all of the Mughal troops' noses be chopped off, the Mughal warriors were forced to obey her command.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Queen Karnavati's defiance of the powerful Mughals was an epitome of bravery. Shah Jahan also addressed her as "nak - kati - rani."<sup>41</sup>

**Velu Nachiyar:** Velu had her mastery over ten languages, she was well versed with martial arts, which included archery and sword combat. She also possessed her knowledge of Silambam<sup>42</sup>. She married Muthu Vaduganatha, the crown prince of Sivagangai in 1746, In

<sup>34</sup> Agnivana – A type of flaming arrow that is ignited and launched towards the adversaries

<sup>35</sup> Archana Gupta, 'THE WOMEN WHO RULED INDIA', Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt. Ltd, Gurugram, 2019, pp 83 – 92

<sup>36</sup> Naresh Rout, 'Role of Women in Ancient India' in Odisha review, January 2016, pp 43

<https://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2016/Jan/engpdf/43-48.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Kanchana B. Bhaisare, 'A New Perspective on Dynamic Role of Prabhavati Gupta in the Regimes of the Vākāṭakas and the Guptas' in Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology, 2020, pp 942-949

<sup>38</sup> Archana Gupta, 'THE WOMEN WHO RULED INDIA', Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt. Ltd, Gurugram, 2019, pp 134-135

<sup>39</sup> Ibid pp 137

<sup>40</sup> Ibid pp 138

<sup>41</sup> nak - kati - rani – The Queen (Rani Karnavati) who Chopped Off Noses

<sup>42</sup> Silambam – It is a martial art style that is practiced with specialized weapons, typically bamboo sticks in South India.

1747, when the British were in power, her spouse lost his life in a conflict with the British and the Nawab of Arcot. Although Velu was eager to exact swift retribution, her minister Thandavarayan Pillai advised her to hold off on attacking until the right moment. She then fled into hiding in the forest and forged partnerships with nearby kingdoms.<sup>43</sup> She had also received help from Hyder Ali who was pleased by her fluency in Urdu and decided to help her by giving her 400 gold pieces in addition to giving her refuge in Dindigul.<sup>44</sup> Following eight years of banishment, a chance to exact retribution presented itself. She commanded an army of women that she referred to as "Udaiyal Padai." The reason for naming her army "Udaiyal" was to honor the cow girl who sacrificed her life to the British for refusing to tell them where Velu was. Velu and her troops arrived at Sivagangai, where they successfully began their military effort to retake her domain. She is renowned for her use of guerilla tactics and her leader Kuyili's bravery. Kuyili doused herself in oil from blazing lamps in the temple, lit herself on fire, and ascended towards the British ammunition storage thereby destroying them. She was thus known as first 'human bomb'.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, this brave woman's pride is hardly discussed.

### Need of the Study

Analyzing the *forgotten narratives of her-stories* can help to challenge and change the gender stereotypes that have been prevailing in our society. Learning about women contributors will also foster critical thinking among the readers. Overall recognizing the contribution of women to history can lead the present and future to have an equitable understanding of the past.

### Objectives of the Study

1. Highlight and address gaps in the existing historiography regarding women's roles and achievement in Indian history

<sup>43</sup>S. Santhi, AR. Saravanakumar, 'South Indian Freedom Fighter the Queen Of – Velunachiyar- A Historical Perspective' in IJSTR, Volume 9, ISSUE 03, March 2020

<https://www.ijstr.org/final-print/mar2020/South-Indian-Freedom-Fighter-The-Queen-Of-velunachiyar-A-Historical-Perspective.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Madan Kumar, 'Tamizh Is Not Just a Language: The Valor', Edu creation Publishing, New Delhi, 2017, pp 17-25

<sup>45</sup> Archana Gupta, 'THE WOMEN WHO RULED INDIA', Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt. Ltd, Gurugram, 2019, pp 214

2. To examine narratives published in various historical curriculum.

### Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study involves a comprehensive approach using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include a structured questionnaire that was circulated around. Responses were received from 50 participants, based on which the table below is constructed. Secondary sources comprise of books, journal articles and previous research studies that offer critical analyses and contextual background.

### Results and Discussion

**Participants:** Male: 44% Female: 56%, Other: Nil

**Table 1.1**

Questionnaire	Responses YES/ NO	
	Do you believe traditional narratives of Indian history have marginalized women's contributions	90%
Do you think recognizing women's historical contributions impacts contemporary gender equality movement in India?	96%	4%
Do you think the contributions of women are adequately represented in textbooks as compared to their male counterparts?	72%	28%
Have you participated in any events or read any literature focusing on women's contribution to Indian history.	10%	90%
Do you think modern media can help in bringing the stories of forgotten women to light?	98%	2%
Do you think the government has taken initiatives to recognize and celebrate women's contribution to history?	58%	42%
Do you know the story of any women contributor apart from Rani Lakshmi Bai? If yes, please Specify	55%	45%

As a part of the research questionnaire, participants were asked to suggest few ways in which they think women contributors can achieve recognition. The responses received are as follows:

**Table 1.2**

Dedicating chapters of 'her stories' as a part of current history curriculum	50%
Publish more women-oriented books	15%
Women should begin re- writing profusely so that the contributions of other women are brought to light	5%
Advocate awards, scholarship in their names	3%
Birth Anniversary and commemorative days of women freedom fighters and achievers' history should be celebrated in all institutions	15%
Encouraging research into Indian history focusing on women's contribution	3%
Initiate women-oriented newspapers which will cover the achievements and contribution of women only	1%
Dedicated social media pages which will shed light on their contribution/ films to be made based on their life story	7%
Naming of roads/streets/public buildings after the female historic personalities.	1%

### Interpretation

According to table 1.1, 55% of people are aware of women contributors other than Rani Lakshmi Bai. Most people believe that including chapters on women in school programs can aid in learning more about the overlooked women. Conversely, some believe that honoring the women by dedicating public buildings or streets in their names will help them become more well-known. Increased publication of books about women and naming awards and scholarships in their honor can help increase their profile. Regretfully, 72% of people believe that women are underrepresented in the current curriculum in comparison to males who are reformers which is a sad reality.

### Review of Textbooks in Higher Education Section

As a part of this research paper, few textbooks of various educational boards have been studied in order to gather information about the portrayal of Women in Indian History.

#### State Board of Maharashtra - Subject: History

Grade 5: 'How We Came to Be', by Dr. Shubhangana Atre. This book introduces the discipline of history to the students and endeavors to offer an understanding about the evolution of mankind. The book comprises of 10 chapters, and no special mention of women are made since the theme of the book revolves solely around evolution of humans.<sup>46</sup>

Grade 6: 'History and Civics' by Dr. Shubhangana Atre, Smt. Sadhana Kulkarni. The book constitutes of 10 chapters beginning from the History of Indian Subcontinent until the territorial relations that prevailed in ancient India. Chapter 8 titled 'States after the Mauryan Empire' narrates the coming of Gupta period. It highlights the rule of Chandragupta Maurya, conquest of Samudragupta Maurya and also talks about Harsha's period<sup>47</sup>but unfortunately there is no mention of Prabhavati Gupta who was Chandragupta II's daughter and the queen of Vakatakas who ruled the Vakataka empire for 20 years on behalf of her minor son.

Grade 7: 'History and Civics' by Dr. Sadanand More, Shri. Mohan Shete, ed.al. In the History section, the concept of 'History of Medieval India' has been introduced. The textbook has been designed by focusing upon the place and role of Maharashtra in the making of Medieval India. Focus is laid on the foundation of Maratha empire and the contribution undertaken by saints and great warriors like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Chapter 2 titled 'India before the times of Shivaji Maharaj' talks about the bravery of 'Chandbibi' and Rani Durgavati on the battlefield. Chapter 10 titled 'The Maratha War of Independence' has just a page dedicated to Maharani Tarabai who managed Maratha administration and was

<sup>46</sup>Dr. Shubhangana Atre, 'How We Came to Be', Standard Five, Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau, Prabhadevi, 2015, pp 01 – 45

<sup>47</sup>Dr. Shubhangana Atre, Smt. Sadhana Kulkarni, 'History and Civics', Standard Six, Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau, Prabhadevi, 2016, pp 37 -40

known for her guerilla tactics in the battlefield.<sup>48</sup> Yet women make up only about 10% of the contributors included in the textbook when compared to the mention of male contributors.

Grade 8: History and Civics' (History of Modern India) by Rahul Prabhu, Shivani Limaye, ed.al. In chapter 4, titled 'The Freedom Struggle of 1857, the struggle of Kunwar Singh, Taty Tope are well mentioned but the bravery of queens- Rani Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal constitute of only few lines. Chapter 5 titled 'Social and Religious Reforms' majorly address the reformation brought only by male thinkers. (10 male contributors are a part of the lesson plan but only 1 female contributor could make her way to the chapter.) However, chapter 11 titled 'Struggle for Equality' has the names of eminent women contributors such as Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade, Dr. Rakhmabai Sarve.<sup>49</sup>

Grade 9: 'History and Political Science' by Dr Ganesh Raut and Dr Vaibhavi Palsule. The book reviews the development that has taken place in India in the social, cultural and other areas since 1961. Fortunately, Chapter 6 titled 'Empowerment of Women and other Weaker Sections' highlights the struggle undertaken by women to bring about various changes thereby contributing to history.<sup>50</sup>

Grade 10: 'History and Political Science' by Dr Shubhangana Atre Dr Ganesh Raut. The main theme of the book is 'Applied History' the book highlights the relevance of history in various field such as Art, Architecture, Sports, Entertainment, Mass Media, Tourism.<sup>51</sup> Overall mention of women contributors in the above-mentioned field are very sparse.

<sup>48</sup>Dr Sadanand More, Shri. Mohan Shete, ed.al, 'History and Civics', Standard Seven, Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau, Mumbai, 2017, pp 06- 38

<sup>49</sup>Rahul Prabhu, Shivani Limaye, ed.al, 'History and Civics' Standard Eight, Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau, Prabhadevi, 2018 pp 21-54

<sup>50</sup>Dr Ganesh Raut Dr Vaibhavi Palsule, 'History and Political Science', Standard Nine, 2017, Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau, Prabhadevi, 2021, pp 31-35

<sup>51</sup>Dr Shubhangana Atre Dr Ganesh Raut 'History and Political Science' Standard Ten, Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau, Prabhadevi, 2018, pp 1 -59

## IGCSE, CBSE Board

The IGCSE Board<sup>52</sup> and CBSE Board of History lesson plan covers a wide range of historical facets and does a great job of describing the historical circumstances. However, there is a dearth of recognition for the contributions made by women in this field. Only a few notable female warriors and reformers have had their contributions consistently recognized; others continue to be ignored. There is also a point in the course work which states that Gandhiji in the earlier days of independence struggle was convinced that it was women's duty to look after home and be good mothers and good wives first.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

Examining the lost accounts of women's contributions to Indian history reveals a complex and varied picture that has frequently been overlooked. In comparison to men, women have also made an equal contribution in making history. Sadly, the greatest acknowledgement they receive comes from merely inserting just few lines in the history curriculum with their names. The Government of India has taken little efforts by introducing stamps on women personalities like Velu Nachiyar, in addition they should also take abundant initiatives in celebrating the stories of such women contributors. Furthermore, movies based on their experiences should be encouraged so that they can swiftly reach a bigger audience, the numerous historical tales that are currently included in curriculum needs to be revised so that their contributions can be brought to the forefront. Thus, this research is a testament to the enduring impact of women's contributions and a reminder that a truly comprehensive understanding of history must include the voices and contributions of all its participants.

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<sup>52</sup>Mrinalini Jaitly, Anuradha Bhattacharyya, Augustine Kaitharath, 'Excursions: History and Civics' 2018, Harper Collins Publisher India Pvt Limited, 2021, pp 07 - 105

<sup>53</sup>Brij Tankha, Janaki Nair, ed.al 'History and contemporary World -I' 2007, Swapna Printing Works Pvt Limited, Kolkata, 2022, pp 34

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