**Historical Research**
**Journal of History and Archaeology**
www.hrjha.lexarcheus.com
Vol.-01, No.-02 (Apr-June, 2023)

# Gender Perspectives in Indian Historical Research

**T. Santhi**

[1] Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of History, Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), , Erode-638012

*** Corresponding Author:**

**T. Santhi**
Drsanthi121@gmail.com

**ARTICLE INFO**

***Article History***

| | |
|---|---|
| Received | 16th April, 2023 |
| Revised | 21st April, 2023 |
| Accepted | 23, May, 2023 |
| Available Online | 30, June, 2023 |

**ARTICLE ID**

**HRJHA1200005**

***KEYWORDS***

***Gender historiography, feminist scholarship, intersectionality, Indian history, women's agency, caste and class, oral narratives***

OPEN ACCESS

**ABSTRACT**

*The study examines the evolution of gender perspectives in Indian historiography, highlighting the historical exclusion of women from mainstream narratives dominated by colonial, nationalist, and elite male viewpoints. It traces the transformative influence of feminist scholarship from the 1970s onward, especially the contributions of historians like Uma Chakravarti, Geraldine Forbes, and Tanika Sarkar, who re-centered women as historical agents. The study emphasizes the shift from a singular patriarchal lens to intersectional approaches that incorporate caste, class, and regional diversity, thereby enriching the understanding of women's lived experiences. It also foregrounds the importance of oral histories and personal narratives in recovering subaltern voices, particularly Dalit and tribal women. By challenging the traditional boundaries of historical inquiry, the article advocates for integrated methodologies that recognize gender as central to all historical processes. This comprehensive analysis expands the scope of historiography in India and reinforces the significance of inclusive and intersectional feminist frameworks.*

**Historical Research: Journal of History and Archaeology**
**ISSN: 2583-9764**
Vol. 01 , No. 02 , Apr-Jun, 2023
www.hrjha.lexarcheus.com

## INTRODUCTION

For a long time, historical literature in India mostly left out women's experiences and instead focused on political events, powerful men, and changes in institutions. Colonial administrators and nationalist historians constructed history mostly through the lens of rulers' activities, military battles, and legislative changes, therefore marginalising the examination of women's roles, struggles, and agency. Early nationalist histories portrayed women either as emblems of cultural pride or as passive victims of colonial domination, rather than as historical agents in their own right. This omission was not coincidental; it originated from a historiographical tradition that emphasised political tales above social structures and quotidian existence.[1] The rise of feminist groups in the 20th century fought against this exclusion by calling for a reevaluation of historical materials and methods. In the 1970s, the globe experienced a rise in interest in gender as a way to look at history. This was due to changes in feminist research across the world. The renewed interest in women's histories coincided with broader discussions on class, caste, and subaltern action, compelling historians to reevaluate the constraints of conventional historiography. Research into women's employment, household life, and political engagement broadened the parameters of historical investigation beyond governmental documentation and elite accounts.[2]

Historians like Uma Chakravarti, Geraldine Forbes, and Tanika Sarkar were very important in bringing women's history back to life after they had been lost in archives. Their research challenged the notion that women were marginal to historical transformation, instead illustrating their active participation in economic production, nationalist movements, and social reform. Uma Chakravarti's study examined the influence of Brahmanical patriarchy on the oppression of women, establishing a connection between gendered subordination and caste systems. Her examination of ancient and mediaeval materials demonstrated that women's historical experiences cannot be comprehended in isolation from overarching power systems.

Geraldine Forbes studied how women were involved in the nationalist struggle and how they dealt with both colonial and patriarchal systems. Her study transcended the depiction of women as simply participants in Gandhi-led campaigns, instead chronicling their leadership in grassroots activism, education, and reformist organisations. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC), which started in 1927, was an important place for discussions on women's rights. However, nationalist historians frequently saw it as a minor event in the larger fight for independence. Forbes' approach reinstated women's political agency by emphasising their roles in influencing social transformation and legal discourse.[3]

Tanika Sarkar's research on women and communalism revealed the gendered aspects of religious politics in colonial and postwar India. Her study of the Hindu Right and its portrayal of femininity illustrated how political ideologies often exploited women's bodies and moral frameworks. The portrayal of women as custodians of cultural purity, especially in Partition tales, illuminated the connections among gender, violence, and nationalism. Oral testimony from women who lived during Partition disputed the main stories that concentrated more on diplomatic talks and dividing up land. They showed the brutality against women that happened when people were forced to leave their homes. The transition from absence to agency in women's history compelled historians to reevaluate both their sources and their analytical frameworks. Colonial archives, mostly chronicling male viewpoints, necessitated augmentation with other sources, including oral testimony, folk tales, and personal correspondence. Feminist historians have also challenged the classification of women's experiences as distinct from conventional history, advocating for a cohesive framework that acknowledges gender as fundamental to all historical dynamics.[4]

Broadening the parameters of women's history has resulted in a more intricate comprehension of political movements, economic frameworks, and cultural traditions. For instance, research on women's work has called into question the idea that economic history is not biassed against women. Research on textile workers in colonial Bombay, female farm labourers in Telangana, and domestic workers in postcolonial urban areas has shown how gender influenced economic involvement and exploitation. Likewise, research on women's education has demonstrated that access to information was influenced by class, caste, and religious identity, rather than following a straightforward narrative of advancement. Historiography concerning women in India has transitioned from a state of absence to one of agency, not only through the broadening of subject matter but also through a profound reevaluation of historical methodology. The retrieval of women's history necessitates a reassessment of sources, a criticism of prevailing narratives, and a dedication to include gender into extensive historical discourses. Feminist historians have made sure that women are no longer just background characters in history books. Instead, they are seen as people who have made a difference throughout time.[5]

**Intersectionality in Gender Studies**

A historical examination of gender in India cannot be confined to a solitary category of oppression. Women's experiences have been influenced not just by patriarchy but also by caste, class, and regional disparities, making it hard to generalise their history. In colonial and postwar India, elite women had access to education, reform movements, and political engagement. In contrast, Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women encountered systemic discrimination that transcended gender-based oppression. The concept of intersectionality has challenged previous feminist history that saw women as a monolithic category, instead necessitating an examination of the many axes of power that influence historical agency.

Caste has significantly influenced the position of women across several historical epochs. Uma Chakravarti's idea of Brahmanical patriarchy worked by strictly controlling women's sexuality and movement to keep the caste system pure. Women from higher castes were limited in what they could do in the sake of honour, while women from lower castes and Adivasi women frequently had to deal with sexual abuse that was allowed by the same social system. Colonial records describe the practice of devadasis as a kind of temple prostitution, but they don't talk about the caste-based systems that kept it going. Recent feminist history has rectified such narratives by illustrating the varied functioning of the devadasi system throughout areas, whereby some women had ritual and cultural power prior to colonial intrusions that changed their positions. Class disparities exacerbated women's historical experiences, especially regarding economic engagement. The nationalist movement urged middle-class women to take part in symbolic acts of resistance, such spinning khadi and engaging in satyagraha. Working-class women who worked in textile mills and on plantations were at the heart of labour battles. The 1928 textile strike in Bombay saw women workers seeking better pay and working conditions, yet conventional nationalist stories seldom ever mention what they did. The Telangana Rebellion (1946–51) also saw many women fighting against feudal landowners with weapons, although subsequent versions that centred on male leadership mostly left out their efforts.[6]

Regional differences have also changed women's roles and the way society is set up. Kerala saw early changes in women's education and property rights, especially in matrilineal societies like the Nairs. However, these privileges were mostly only available to women of higher castes. In northern India, on the other hand, purdah was enforced more strictly, which made it harder for women to move about and take part in the economy. Colonial and missionary narratives often juxtaposed Bengali bhadramahila (respectable women) with the ostensibly emancipated women of tribal groups,

neglecting the economic and social frameworks that characterised each milieu. The presumption that certain areas were inherently progressive or regressive overlooked the intricacies of local history.[7]

Dalit and tribal feminist history has contested the preeminence of upper-caste narratives in gender studies. Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege are two scholars who have said that mainstream feminism frequently doesn't talk about caste oppression and puts Dalit women's struggles under gender problems. Dalit women's works, especially in Marathi literature, provide firsthand narratives of their lived experiences, challenging the paternalism of both upper-caste reformers and mainstream feminists. Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke and Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life show how caste, gender, and economic exploitation all come together. They also show how limited past feminist history was.[7]

Oral testimonials and community narratives have also helped to bring back tribal history. Colonial ethnographers classified Adivasi women as either extremely liberated or wholly subjugated, neglecting the complexity of tribal social relationships. Research on Santhal, Gond, and Khasi women has shown how colonial practices that imposed outside legal and economic frameworks messed up their roles in farming, commerce, and government. The Chipko movement, sometimes characterised as a women-led environmental protest, was fundamentally rooted in the economic marginalisation of Uttarakhand's hill people, illustrating the inseparability of gender issues from regional and economic contexts. In gender studies, intersectionality has changed the emphasis from vague discussions about patriarchy to specific historical analysis that takes into consideration differences in caste, class, and location. Historians who disregard these variables jeopardise the perpetuation of elite narratives that inadequately represent the comprehensive range of women's experiences. The inclusion of Dalit and tribal perspectives in feminist historiography has rectified previous exclusions and has also transformed the analytical frameworks used to examine gender in Indian history.[9]

**Women's Agency, Resistance, and Everyday Lives**

Writing history that recognises women's agency has necessitated a profound reassessment of conventional sources and analytical frameworks. Mainstream history generally ignored women's roles in politics, economics, and society, focussing instead on elite males and formal institutions. The belief that women were passive receivers of change instead of active participants skewed historical accounts, limiting the comprehension of resistance, labour fights, and quotidian existence. To get these histories back, we have had to change the emphasis of our archives and rethink the methods we employ to research the past. Gendered systems that controlled access to work, pay, and property have long affected how people participate in the economy. Women worked in agriculture, textiles, and household labour, which were all important parts of the colonial economy. However, official records seldom ever showed how much they contributed beyond the number of workers. Research on textile workers in Bombay and jute mill workers in Bengal has shown that women were integral to industrial output, but often encountered diminished earnings and harsh working conditions. The industrial system enforced strict hierarchies that excluded women, but their participation in labour strikes, like the Bombay textile strike of 1928, challenged the notion that resistance was only male-dominated.[10] Women workers created their own networks of solidarity and fought for better pay and working conditions, even when male union officials said their complaints were less important than the larger class fights. Political engagement included not just electoral politics and nationalist movements but also quotidian acts of resistance that challenged both colonial and patriarchal rule. Nationalist history sometimes depicted women's participation in anti-colonial activities as peripheral, diminishing their responsibilities to mere symbolic representations of the country instead of acknowledging their genuine contributions. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, many women took part in

demonstrations in public and in secret networks that let people talk to each other, move weapons, and get people in remote areas to join the fight. Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta, and Sucheta Kripalani were very important to keeping revolutionary activities going, although women work didn't get as much recognition as that of male leaders.[11]

Peasant uprisings and tribal resistance movements further demonstrate the magnitude of women's involvement in conflicts against exploitation. During the Telangana Rebellion (1946–51), hundreds of peasant women fought back against feudal landowners and unfair government policies. Women in these campaigns were not only helpers; they were important in fighting, acquiring information, and organising rural areas. The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal aimed to improve the rights of sharecroppers and saw significant participation from women; yet, historical narratives of the movement often emphasised the male leadership of the Communist Party. Research that puts women in the core of these movements instead of the edges has called into question the concept that economic struggle and gender struggle are separate.[12] Oral history has been vital in reclaiming these narratives, especially in instances when written records overlooked or misrepresented women's experiences. Official archives often represent the viewpoints of colonial administrators, nationalist leaders, or masculine academics, therefore marginalising the opinions of those without institutional authority. Personal tales, folk ballads, and oral testimonies have offered divergent perspectives on historical events, especially concerning gendered violence, displacement, and social transformation. For instance, popular stories that concentrated on diplomatic discussions and geographical splits generally left out what women had through during Partition.[13] Urvashi Butalia's "The Other Side of Silence" and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's "Borders and Boundaries" used oral accounts to recreate women's experiences of abduction, forced conversions, and honour murders, therefore revealing the gendered dimensions of Partition violence.[14]

Personal narratives have been essential in Dalit and tribal feminist history, contesting the caste prejudices prevalent in mainstream feminist discourse. Baby Kamble's "The Prisons We Broke" and Urmila Pawar's "The Weave of My Life" provide firsthand tales of caste oppression and gendered exploitation, countering the paternalistic myths propagated by upper-caste reformers. Oral traditions in tribal groups have kept stories of resistance that go against colonial records, which typically called tribal rebellions "spontaneous" and "disorganised" instead of seeing them as planned reactions to governmental brutality and land loss. The Santhal Rebellion of 1855 and the Rampa Rebellion of 1922 both saw women fighting and organising their communities, but colonial reporting and nationalist histories often left out their contributions. To write women's history, you need to do more than just add women to existing tales; you need to look at the basic underpinnings of historical research again. Economic histories must include gendered employment and exploitation, political history must recognise women's active involvement in movements, and social histories must transcend elite-focused narratives to encompass neglected perspectives.

## CONCLUSION

The integration of gender perspectives into Indian historical research has marked a profound shift in both the content and methodology of historiography. By moving beyond the traditional focus on political elites and institutional narratives, feminist historians have uncovered the multifaceted roles women have played in shaping India’s social, economic, and political fabric. The pioneering work of scholars like Uma Chakravarti, Geraldine Forbes, and Tanika Sarkar has highlighted women’s agency, resistance, and participation in movements that were previously framed through male-centric lenses. Furthermore, the adoption of intersectionality has enabled a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how caste, class, and regional dynamics intersect with gender to influence

women's experiences and opportunities This transformation in historical inquiry has also expanded the range of sources considered valid for research. Oral histories, personal letters, and folk narratives have complemented archival records to construct a more inclusive narrative that accounts for marginalised voices—particularly those of Dalit and Adivasi women.

## REFERENCES

1. Chaturvedi, Vinayak, ed. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London and New York: Verso, 2000.
2. Cheng, Eileen Ka-May. *Historiography: An Introductory Guide*. London: A&C Black, 2012.
3. Collingwood, R. G. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
4. Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
5. Desai, A. R. *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Bombay, 1948, 2000.
6. Devahuti, D., ed. *Problems of Indian Historiography*. Delhi: D.K. Publications, 1979.
7. ———. *Bias in Indian History*. New Delhi: D.K. Publications, 1980.
8. Dutt, R. Palme. *India Today*. Calcutta: Manisha, 1940, 1979.
9. Elliot, Sir Henry Miers. *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*. Vols. IV-VIII. London: Trübner and Co., 1871.
10. Fazl, Abul, Ibn Mubarak. *The Akbarnama*. Vols. I-III. Translated by H. Beveridge. Kolkata: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1897-1939.
11. Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe. *Near a Thousand Tables: A History of Food*. New York: The Free Press, 2002.
12. Fetner, Gerald L. *Immersed in Great Affairs: Allan Nevins and the Heroic Age of American History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
13. Ferro, Marc. *The Use and Abuse of History: Or How the Past Is Taught to Children*. London: Routledge, 2003.
14. Fischer, David H. *Historian's Fallacies*. New York: HarperCollins, 1970.