

Beyond The Colonial Trope: Economic Independence and Spiritual Agency Among North Indian Women, C. 1400–1799

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Abstract- Colonial historiography of South Asia, most of it written between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, built an enduring picture of the North Indian woman as secluded, propertyless, and without a religious voice of her own. That image did double duty; one, it was offered as proof of Indian civilizational decline and other, at the same time, as moral cover for British rule. This is to test that picture against the documentary and material record of North India from roughly 1400 to 1799, drawing on Mughal administrative and mercantile records, hagiographical and devotional literature, and the historiographical work of scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Sangari, Lata Mani, and Ruby Lal. Two arguments are developed. First, elite and sub-elite women exercised real, sometimes substantial, economic agency through landed revenue jagirs, commercial investment, and customary property rights called stridhan. Second, the bhakti and Sufi devotional movements opened avenues of spiritual authority and self-authorship that operated partly outside patriarchal and caste hierarchies, with Mirabai being the perfect example. The study also pushes back against both the colonial "declension narrative" and its nationalist mirror image, the "golden age" counter-narrative, warning against swapping one totalizing myth for another. The record, in the end, supports a picture of agency that was constrained but real, and unevenly distributed by class, caste, and religious community as a picture that colonial epistemology worked hard to obscure.

Keywords: North Indian Women, Mughal History, Bhakti Movement, Colonial Historiography, Stridhan, Gender and Agency, Precolonial India

I. INTRODUCTION

Few historiographical constructs have proven as durable, or as politically useful, as the colonial image of the Indian woman as a passive victim of an unchanging, oppressive tradition. From the late eighteenth century on, British administrators, missionaries, and Orientalist scholars stitched

together a composite portrait of North Indian womanhood defined by seclusion, illiteracy, child marriage, and ritual self-destruction painting a portrait that found its most vivid expression in colonial fixation on sati.

This was not incidental to colonial rule; it did real ideological work. As historians of the "women's question" have long pointed out, casting Indian women as helpless and in need of protection gave British governance one of its central moral justifications, allowing colonial intervention to present itself as rescue rather than conquest.

The more empirical question asked is that what does the evidentiary record from North India actually show, in the three and a half centuries before sustained colonial rule, about women's economic independence and spiritual agency? The 1400–1799 window is chosen deliberately, to sit before colonial governmentality and its codification projects took hold those projects that, from the late eighteenth century, began fixing and often narrowing customary practice into rigid "personal law."

Reading the pre-1799 record on its own terms, rather than through the lens colonial administrators later imposed on it, makes it possible to say more precisely where women held really economic and spiritual authority, where that authority was limited, and how colonial discourse later flattened all of this into a single story of timeless oppression.

The argument unfolds in few stages. Firstly, it lays out the historiographical scaffolding behind the colonial trope and the feminist scholarship that has since taken it apart.

Secondly it turns to economic independence, moving from the well-documented landed and commercial wealth of Mughal royal and noble women to the customary property regime of stridhan and the thinner evidence for artisanal and mercantile women outside the court.

Then it addresses spiritual agency, centered on the North Indian bhakti movement and its best-known figure, Mirabai, with a shorter look at Sufi devotional contexts. After that adding necessary qualifications which is not an argument for a precolonial golden age, and the evidence available skews heavily elite, textual, and mediated.

The conclusion is that the record backs up a claim of real, if unevenly distributed, female agency, one that undercuts the colonial trope without licensing its nationalist mirror image.

II. THE COLONIAL TROPE AND ITS HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CRITIQUE

The colonial construction of Indian womanhood served what Uma Chakravarti (1989) has influentially called an "Orientalist, nationalist" framing of the Indian past, in which British administrator-scholars projected a story of civilizational decline from an imagined golden age onto the historical record.

Chakravarti's essay "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?", published in the landmark 1989 anthology *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, edited with Sudesh Vaid, traces how colonial scholarship on ancient India invented a supposedly glorious Vedic age of female freedom, against which the present condition of Indian women could then be read as evidence of later "Muslim" or medieval degeneration.

The framing was politically convenient in two directions at once: it let colonial administrators claim a civilizing mission grounded in the restoration of an ostensibly authentic Indian past, while giving Indian nationalist reformers a way to defend indigenous culture by moving the source of women's oppression

outside the boundaries of an idealized "Hindu" or "Aryan" tradition.

Chakravarti's later work on what she terms "Brahmanical patriarchy" goes further, arguing that caste, class, and gender in early India formed mutually reinforcing systems of control over women's sexuality and labor, a structural account that resists both the colonial declension story and nationalist celebration alike (Chakravarti, 1993).

A parallel intervention came from Lata Mani's analysis of the colonial debate over sati, included in the same *Recasting Women* volume (Mani, 1989). Mani shows that the colonial debate over widow immolation, though framed as a debate about women, actually used women as the ground on which colonial officials and Indian male elites fought over who got to define "tradition."

Women's own testimony and agency barely figured in a discourse that treated them as objects of protection or reform rather than as historical subjects in their own right. This scholarship, together with the other essays in *Recasting Women* more broadly (Sangari & Vaid, 1989), helped establish what is now a foundational premise in feminist historiography:

the colonial archive cannot be taken at face value as a transparent record of "traditional" gender relations. It has to be read, instead, as itself the product of a specific, interested discursive contest.

A related strand of scholarship has focused on the Mughal domestic and courtly world, where the image of the secluded, sexually confined harem woman proved especially durable in colonial and Orientalist travel writing.

Ruby Lal's study of the early Mughal domestic order (Lal, 2005) argues that European travelers' accounts of the imperial household written by men who had little or no actual access to it for sure produced a genre of fantastic, often self-contradictory description that later hardened into historiographical fact.

Rereading Mughal court chronicles, and in particular Gulbadan Begum's own memoir of the Mughal household, Lal reconstructs a domestic world in

which elite Mughal women were active participants in courtly politics, patronage, and household governance, and in which the line between "public" and "private" was considerably more porous than colonial travelers, or later historians, assumed.

A further wrinkle in the historiography, and one directly relevant to how this paper is framed, concerns the nationalist response to colonial denigration. Early twentieth-century Indian historians, A. S. Altekar chief among them, answered colonial claims of civilizational decline by constructing an idealized image of female freedom in the ancient, especially Vedic, past a standard against which the medieval and early modern periods were then implicitly or explicitly measured and found wanting.

Chakravarti's critique of what has come to be called the "Altekarian paradigm" (Chakravarti, 1989) shows that this nationalist counter-history, for all its apparent opposition to colonial claims, actually reproduced the same evidentiary methods and the same all-encompassing narrative structure.

It simply moved the golden age earlier and pushed the decline to a later, often implicitly "Islamicate," period. The periodization used from 1400 to 1799, spanning the late Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, and the eighteenth-century successor states is chosen partly to sidestep that nationalist teleology, treating the period on its own documentary terms rather than as a way station in a longer story of decline or awakening.

None of this scholarship claims that precolonial North Indian society was egalitarian. The claim is narrower and more precise that the colonial trope of total, undifferentiated female passivity was a discursive construction serving colonial purposes and, in mirrored form, nationalist ones, and that it can be tested and falsified against the surviving economic and devotional record.

III. ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

3.1 Land Revenue, Trade, and the Wealth of Mughal Women

The clearest documentary evidence for women's economic agency in this period comes from the Mughal elite, where administrative and travel records are relatively abundant. Under the jagir system, revenue assignments over specified territories went not only to male nobles but routinely to senior women of the imperial household like their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of the emperor.

These were not symbolic pensions. They generated real, independent revenue that women invested, administered, and spent according to their own judgment.

Empress Nur Jahan, Jahangir's chief consort wife, is the best-documented case (Lal, 2018). She held jagirs including Ramsar and Toda, the latter drawing revenue from tolls on the Surat–Agra trade route, on goods ranging from Bengali cotton to Patna raw silk.

She used this income to back substantial commercial ventures, particularly in indigo and embroidered textiles, dealing directly with Portuguese and English merchants and, by some accounts, running her own oceangoing trading vessels (Dawn, 2025).

She financed and commissioned major public works at her own expense, including the caravanserais at Jalandhar and Agra known as Nur Mahal Sarai. Uniquely among Mughal women, coins were struck in her name and imperial edicts issued under her seal, an honor that reflected genuine administrative authority, not just symbolic status, at a time when Jahangir's declining health had already limited his direct rule.

Nur Jahan was not the only case. Jahanara Begum, Shah Jahan's daughter, received substantial revenue from the port city of Surat and kept her own gardens and estates at Fatehpur Sikri through dedicated revenue duties.

Earlier in the dynasty, Mariam-uz-Zamani, Jahangir's mother, is recorded as having sponsored and profited from maritime trading ventures, including at least one

large ship in the lucrative Red Sea trade, navigating the commercial risks that Portuguese maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean posed.

Taken together both royal and noble women acting as jagir holders, caravanserai operators, and merchant-investors as this pattern points to an economic role far more active than the passive seclusion the "harem" was assigned in colonial travel literature (Lal, 2018; Dawn, 2025).

3.2 Customary Property Rights: Stridhan

Beyond the imperial household, Hindu customary law across this period recognized a distinct category of female property known as stridhan which is literally "women's wealth" (Jus Corpus, 2023).

Rooted in classical legal texts including the Yajnavalkya Smriti and elaborated in the twelfth-century Mitakshara commentary of Vijnaneshwara, stridhan covered movable and, in some formulations, immovable property like jewelry, garments, land, livestock, cash which was given to a woman by her natal family, her husband's family, or others at marriage and at later life events.

Crucially, this property stayed under the woman's own ownership and control. Neither husband nor in-laws had legal claim to it, and it functioned as a form of economic security a woman could draw on independent of her marital household, particularly if she was widowed.

It would be a mistake, though, to inflate the practical significance of stridhan into a claim of general female economic parity. The institution coexisted with, and did nothing to offset, women's much more limited claims to ancestral or agricultural land, which under most regional customary and textual traditions passed preferentially through the male line.

Scholarship on early Indian property regimes, including work collected in Kumkum Roy's edited volume on women in early Indian societies (Roy, 1999), cautions that categories such as stridhan often described property that was, in N. N. Bhattacharya's phrase, hard to put to fully productive use, weighted as it was toward movable and ornamental wealth rather than land or other productive assets.

Even so, the consistent textual and customary recognition of a legally protected sphere of female property throughout the pre-1799 period sits in direct tension with the colonial-era legal picture of Indian women as uniformly propertyless dependents made a picture that, ironically, hardened rather than loosened once colonial administrators began codifying "Hindu law" from Sanskrit textual sources in the later eighteenth century.

3.3 The Eighteenth-Century Successor States

Elite women's economic prominence did not end with Mughal imperial decline after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. If anything, the fragmentation of central authority into regional successor states such as Awadh, Murshidabad, and others, opened new spaces in which royal and noble women went on holding and managing independent wealth.

Historians of Mughal gender relations note that the scholarship on elite women's political influence and economic means (Lal, 2005, 2018) is, if anything, richer for these successor courts, even as the harem system itself became, in some respects, more formally institutionalized than it had been in the peripatetic early Mughal period.

This continuity across the political rupture of imperial decline suggests that female economic authority in North India was not simply a byproduct of a single strong central state, but a durable feature of elite household and revenue administration that persisted, and in places evolved, across the whole period under study, right up to the eve of substantial British territorial control by the close of the eighteenth century.

3.4 Beyond the Elite: Artisanal and Mercantile Women

Evidence for non-elite women's economic activity is considerably thinner, and that limitation needs to be stated plainly rather than glossed over. Women across social strata are documented as central to textile production like spinning, weaving, embroidery etc., one of the principal commodities in both internal and export trade during this period, and a major source of household income attributable to female labor.

Recent readers on women's work in precolonial India have begun to reconstruct this largely undocumented labor history (Roy, 1999), though the source base still remains thin next to the rich administrative record available for the imperial household.

That asymmetry is itself historiographically significant because elite women are so much more visible in the surviving record, any reassessment built on that record, however more accurate than the colonial trope, still risks skewing toward court and commercial elites rather than the agrarian and artisanal majority.

IV. SPIRITUAL AGENCY

4.1 The Bhakti Movement and the Case of Mirabai

If the economic evidence complicates the colonial trope of dependency, the North Indian bhakti devotional movement complicates its companion trope of religious voicelessness.

Bhakti is a devotional mode of Hindu religiosity built around a personal, emotionally direct relationship with a chosen deity, typically Krishna or Shiva, rather than Brahmanical ritual intermediation which gave women a theological register in which spiritual authority could be claimed independent of caste status, Sanskrit literacy, or male religious sanction.

The sixteenth-century Rajput princess and poet-saint Mirabai is the paradigmatic North Indian case. According to the hagiographical and devotional tradition around her, Mirabai, married into a Rajasthani royal house, refused to treat her human marriage as her defining bond, declaring lifelong devotion to Krishna as her true and only husband.

She is remembered as having refused to perform sati after her husband's death, a firm refusal that cuts directly against the colonial-era assumption that widow immolation was an uncontested norm rather than a practice women could, and did, resist and as having left her marital household to join wandering communities of bhakti devotees, reportedly taking the low-caste poet-saint Ravidas as her guru in open defiance of caste boundaries.

Nancy Martin's 2023 study, *Mirabai: The Making of a Saint*, traces how successive generations — precolonial devotional communities, nineteenth-century colonial commentators, twentieth-century nationalists and feminists etc., each remade Mirabai's story for their own ends (Martin, 2023).

That layering is itself saying that how contested and non-static the meaning of female religious authority has been across this period, rather than fixed within a single unchanging "tradition."

Mirabai's case is the clearest example of a broader pattern, not its full extent. Comparative work on women bhakti saints across the subcontinent, including Vijaya Ramaswamy's studies of women in Virashaiva and South Indian devotional traditions (Ramaswamy, 1992), describes these women's public devotional lives as sitting in productive tension with domestic and caste expectations, neither straightforward "rebels" against patriarchal order nor simple "conformists" reproducing it, but figures who used the idiom of devotion to carve out unusual room for public voice, mobility, and authority.

In Kashmir, Lal Ded also known as Laleshwari abandoned her abusive marital home, shed her clothes, and wandered as a naked mystic chanting her vakhs (verses). Her complete casting off of societal dress codes directly challenged the era's patriarchal obsession with monitoring and controlling the female body.

What made the bhakti register especially significant for women was its formal indifference to the Sanskritic, Brahmanical qualifications which are caste birth, scriptural literacy, ritual initiation by a male preceptor, that governed access to religious authority elsewhere in North Indian tradition.

Devotional poetry composed in vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit was, in principle, open to any devotee regardless of gender or caste, and the surviving corpus of songs attributed to Mirabai and other women bhaktas is one of the only substantial bodies of pre-1799 North Indian literary composition attributed to female authorship.

4.2 Sufi Devotional Contexts

Another, if less influential, parallel tradition is the North Indian Sufi devotional movements, where the same focus on experience of God led to similar, but restricted, toleration of women's reputational and informal social authority as devotees and patrons, and in some cases as protectors of shrine cults.

However, , like bhakti hagiography, the textual record of women's participation in North Indian Sufi devotional traditions has been well mediated by later compilers, and therefore needs to be read with similar caution.

4.3 Interpreting Spiritual Agency

This should not be romanticized as an easy liberation of the women. The devotional literature of the women was preserved (at least in a disproportionate number of cases) through hagiography, written generations after the fact as the record of a lineage with didactic and communal interests.

As Martin's source-critical method shows, verifiable biographical details about the women are hard to come by (Martin, 2023). What the bhakti record does, then, is not to show that women in precolonial North India had no problems with their religious freedom.

Rather, it shows that there was existing, culturally recognized routes within customary religious culture through which individual women could claim public spiritual authority and defy various kinds of patriarchal oppression, including that of sati, on the basis of discourses and grammar internal to the tradition itself.

This cut against the grain of colonial civilizing-mission discourse.

V. QUALIFICATIONS: AGAINST A NEW TOTALIZING NARRATIVE

None of the evidence gathered here should be read as license to build a counter-myth of precolonial gender egalitarianism a move Chakravarti's own scholarship explicitly warns against in its critique of nationalist historiography's "golden age" framing (Chakravarti,

1989, 1993). A few qualifications are worth spelling out.

Firstly, the surviving record skews heavily toward elite, and disproportionately royal or courtly, women. What holds for Nur Jahan or Jahanara cannot simply be generalized to an agrarian laborer or urban artisan, for whom source material is far scarcer and, though their economic agency was very real, less obvious and probably more limited.

Second, because female agency was recorded alongside the many well documented examples of subordination in the early modern period, such as child marriage, purdah in much of India, restricted inheritance of immovable property and, in some periods and communities, sati, agency and subordination operated in a complementary, not an either/or relationship.

Third, because the women most prominent in the sources, such as Nur Jahan and Mirabai, became prominent partly because of their outstanding status and hagiographical and chronicle sources have every structural incentive to foreground the extraordinary rather than the representative.

Finally, , this stops at 1799 because the colonial project of legal codification that followed did not simply describe a pre-existing and unchanging customary tradition.

In some cases, it re-worked customary practice to the disadvantage of women's practical property rights relative to pre-colonial custom, even while colonial discourse describes itself as liberating women from an unchanging custom. Establishing what the pre-1799 record actually shows is a necessary step before that later colonial claim can be properly evaluated rather than a nostalgic exercise for its own sake.

CONCLUSION

The colonial stereotype of the passive, property-less, voiceless North Indian woman is inadequate to account for the documentary and devotional record 1400-1799. There is evidence that women within the Mughal imperial household wielded substantial economic power independently of their husbands and

fathers, via independent holdings and economic patronage.

Even if the stridhan custom would not forge a consistent legal property right, it provided a recognized female property right of broad social scope. The North Indian bhakti movement, as exemplified in the songs of Mirabai, gave women a vernacular devotional idiom, a public religious authority, to criticize particular forms of patriarchal injustice (such as sati) using language from indigenous religious culture.

None of this supports the inversion of the declension narrative, which rather claims that sex equality pervaded precolonial India. But it does point to a more subtle historical conclusion.

In precolonial India, women had agency and autonomy (if unequally organized across caste and class) coexisting with patriarchal parallel orders, much more so than the declension narrative or its nationalist reaction allowed.

That complexity must also be recovered, for the sake of a much-needed corrective to a historiographical trope that continues to define popular understanding, and at times contemporary policy debate, on the historical roots of gender inequality in South Asia.

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