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Women's Voices in Medieval Historical Narratives: A Literary Perspective of Indian Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation and recovery of women's voices in medieval Indian historical narratives across Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, Tamil, and other regional literary traditions. Drawing on feminist historiography, postcolonial literary theory, and Indian women's literary history, it challenges the prevailing assumption that medieval Indian women were silent or passive. The analysis centers on Bhakti poet-saints such as Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Andal, as well as portrayals of women in court chronicles (tarikhs), Jain narrative literature, and Tamil Sangam poetry, to trace the ways in which women's voices were expressed, documented, suppressed, and subsequently recovered. Additionally, the paper investigates how canonical texts construct feminine ideals, exemplified by the figure of Sita in the Ramayana, and explores how historical women writers and speakers navigated and contested these ideals. The conclusion addresses the methodological challenges inherent in literary-historical recovery and underscores the significance of these voices for contemporary feminist literary scholarship in India.

Keywords: Medieval Indian Literature, Women's Voices, Bhakti Movement, Feminist Historiography, Mirabai, Tamil Sangam Poetry, Andal, Court Chronicles, Female Subjectivity, Indian Women Writers

1. Introduction

The examination of women's voices in medieval Indian historical narratives reveals both considerable diversity and notable challenges. This diversity is reflected in the variety of traditions from which women's expression arises, such as Sanskrit courtly literature, Tamil Sangam poetry, Bhakti and Sufi devotional works, Jain didactic narratives, Persian court chronicles, and regional vernacular literatures spanning the sixth to seventeenth centuries CE. The primary challenge lies in the extensive mediation, suppression, editorial revision, and ideological framing that distance contemporary readers from the historical women who spoke, sang, or wrote.

Medieval Indian literary history has predominantly adhered to the 'great text' paradigm, emphasizing a canon of Sanskrit epics, court poetry, and philosophical treatises produced and transmitted

primarily by Brahmin male scholars. These texts were celebrated in courts and kingdoms where women were officially assigned subordinate and largely silent roles. In this context, exceptional figures such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Khana are frequently cited to imply women's high status, while the broader structural exclusion of women from literary production and archival preservation is often overlooked.

Feminist literary historians and scholars of Indian women's writing have, since the 1970s, challenged this paradigm. Research by A.K. Ramanujan (1973) on Bhakti poetry, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) on gender politics in Indian literary and cultural history, and, more recently, Mandakranta Bose (2000) and Vijaya Ramaswamy (2007) has significantly reshaped our understanding of medieval Indian women's literary production. This paper builds on their work to provide a comprehensive literary-historical analysis of women's voices across major medieval Indian traditions. I methodology; an analysis of women's voices in the Tamil Sangam tradition; an examination of the Bhakti poet-saints as the most sustained instance of women's literary production in medieval India; a discussion of women's representation and occasional self-representation in court chronicles and Jain literature; and a concluding reflection on the methodological and political stakes of this recovery project.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

2.1 Feminist Literary Historiography

Recovering women's voices from medieval historical narratives requires a methodological framework that considers what Gayatri Spivak (1988) calls the conditions of the subaltern's speech: the circumstances that make subaltern speech audible, legible, and preservable. In medieval India, these conditions were shaped by caste, class, religious community, and gender. For instance, a Brahmin woman scholar like Gargi could participate in public philosophical debates, as recorded in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In contrast, a low-caste woman spinning cotton in fifteenth-century Rajasthan was much less likely to have her words preserved. Mirabai's poems, however, show that the Bhakti movement sometimes allowed women from various social backgrounds to achieve lasting literary expression.

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's (1989) concept of the 'recasting' of women in Indian literary and historical narratives is particularly relevant in this context. They contend that women in Indian texts are continually recast, with their stories retold and their significance reinterpreted to align with the ideological imperatives of successive historical periods. The medieval era offers numerous examples of this process; for instance, Sita's story in the Ramayana has been retold extensively, with each version altering the portrayal of her silence, suffering, and devotion. Consequently, the feminist literary historian must consider not only the content of women's speech but also the processes by which their words were recorded, transmitted, edited, and appropriated by traditions beyond their control.

2.2 The Problem of Voice and Authorship

A significant methodological challenge is determining the attribution and authenticity of women's voices in medieval texts. Many poems attributed to Mirabai, Andal, or Akka Mahadevi exist in multiple manuscript versions with textual variations. Oral transmission, devotional practice, and scribal copying have altered these poems as they circulated, often through male transmitters. Although this does not make the voices inauthentic, it requires literary historians to consider both the possibility of genuine female authorship and the influence of male intermediaries. Feminist scholars have addressed this challenge in various ways. A.K. Ramanujan (1973) recommended interpreting Bhakti poems as products of their cultural context and as expressions of personal experience, resisting both simplistic biographical readings and purely formalist analyses that ignore the poems' gendered significance. More recently, scholars such as Shailendra Sengar (2008) and Parita Mukta (1994) have analyzed Mirabai's poems through the lenses of oral tradition and community memory. They argue that, even when individual authorship is uncertain, the female voice and experience in these poems provide authentic historical records of women's lives and aspirations.

3. Women's Voices in Tamil Sangam Poetry



3.1 The Sangam Tradition and Female Authorship

The Tamil Sangam corpus, conventionally dated to the first to third centuries CE but likely composed over a more extended period, represents one of the earliest and most significant records of women's literary contributions within Indian traditions. Among the approximately 473 poets featured in the Sangam anthologies—the Eight Anthologies (Ettuttokai) and the Ten Idylls (Pattupattu)—around 30 are women. Avvaiyar stands out as a legendary poet-saint whose wisdom and devotional poems have circulated for nearly two millennia. Nevertheless, her historical identity remains uncertain, as the Sangam poems on love, known as akam poetry, are particularly significant for analysing women's voices. The akam tradition is organised around a set of landscapes (tinai), each corresponding to specific phases and moods of love. For example, the mountain landscape represents lovers' union, the seashore symbolises patience and waiting, and the forest signifies anxious expectation. Within this structure, a diverse range of female perspectives is presented: the woman waiting for her lover, the woman separated from her husband during his travels, the woman who discovers her husband's infidelity, and, notably, the courtesan (panan's wife), who articulates a moral authority that challenges the normative hierarchy between respectable and disreputable femininity.

3.2 Agency and Constraint in Akam Poetry

The female voices in Sangam akam poetry is their combination of emotional directness, erotic openness, and strong social awareness. Poems attributed to women do not merely accept female subordination to male desire; instead, they express longing, grief, jealousy, and moral judgment with clarity and force, creating a distinct feminine subjectivity. For example, in a poem by Velli Veetiyor, the speaker confides to her friend that she cannot hide her love because her body reveals it: her eyes darken, and her shoulders lose their smoothness. Here, the body resists social expectations of feminine concealment, and the woman's voice embraces this physical expression rather than suppressing it.

George Hart (1975) contended that Sangam women poets occupied a unique social position associated with the sacred power of female sexuality and fertility, which conferred cultural authority absent in later, more Brahminized traditions. Although this interpretation remains contested, it underscores a significant point: the social status of women within the Tamil literary tradition evolved over time. The Sangam corpus's openness to female authorship reflects a specific historical and cultural context that did not persist into the medieval period.

4. The Bhakti Movement: Devotion as Feminine Voice

4.1 Bhakti as a Counter-Tradition

The Bhakti movement, which flourished in South and North India from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries, represents the most extensive and well-documented tradition of women's literary expression in medieval India. Many Bhakti saints, who composed devotional lyrics in regional languages and rejected Brahmin priestly authority in favor of direct union with the divine, were women. The poems of these women have been preserved, performed, and celebrated for centuries.

The Bhakti tradition offered women a platform to challenge conventional gender constraints through devotional practice. Central to this tradition was the belief that total self-surrender to God, a form of love that transcends social hierarchy, enabled the critique of worldly norms, including those that confined women to domestic roles or male authority. Although this did not dismantle patriarchal structures, it provided women poet-saints with a compelling rhetorical and experiential foundation to negotiate and critique these limitations.

4.2 Andal: Desire, Devotion, and Female Agency

Andal (c. 8th–9th century CE) is recognized as one of the earliest women Bhakti poets and is the only female among the twelve Alvars, the Tamil Vaishnava poet-saints whose hymns constitute the Divya Prabandham, the canon of Tamil devotional scripture. Her works, Tiruppavai, a sequence of thirty poems, and Nacchiyar Tirumozhi, a more extensive collection of erotic-devotional verse, are distinguished by their use of Tamil love poetry conventions, particularly those of the Sangam akam tradition, to articulate a deeply personal devotional relationship with Vishnu, whom she addresses as



her lover and husband.

From a feminist literary perspective, Andal's poetry is significant for its explicit use of erotic desire as a mode of spiritual expression and its strong assertion of female subjectivity. Rather than depicting herself as a passive devotee of Vishnu, Andal adopts a demanding, expectant, and at times reproachful stance. She rejects the passive femininity typically associated with devotional traditions, instead articulating an active and insistent female desire. According to hagiographic accounts, her decision to reject human marriage in favor of union with the divine constitutes a notable act of female self-determination, irrespective of traditional interpretations.

4.3 Akka Mahadevi and the Vachana Tradition

Akka Mahadevi is regarded as a prominent and innovative figure among women Bhakti saints within the Kannada Vachana tradition of the twelfth-century Virashaiva movement. Her vachanas, composed as free-verse prose poems in Kannada, are notable for their philosophical depth, erotic mysticism, and explicit rejection of prevailing social norms. By renouncing her marriage to a Hoysala king and choosing to wander unclothed, she embodied the Virashaiva principle that prioritizes inner spiritual authenticity over external appearances.

Her poems, addressed to Shiva as Channamallikarjuna, employ a complex erotic-mystical discourse that interrogates fixed notions of gender. The speaker's female body is depicted both as a source of earthly shame, which society attempts to conceal, and as a vehicle for attaining divine union. Through this duality, Akka Mahadevi challenges patriarchal constructions of femininity, rejecting conventional domestic roles as well as traditional asceticism. She instead articulates a distinctive female spiritual authority grounded in embodied devotion.

4.4 Mirabai: Transgression, Community, and Memory

Mirabai (c. 1498–1546 CE) is recognized as the most widely celebrated female Bhakti poet. As a Rajput princess and devotee of Krishna, her poems are highly esteemed within the Hindi literary tradition. Her life, characterized by early devotion to Krishna, resistance to her husband's family, public performances alongside male devotees, and eventual departure from her household, exemplifies female self-determination in medieval India. Her poetry examines the intersections of female desire, social transgression, and spiritual freedom.

Parita Mukta's (1994) study of the Mirabai tradition in Rajasthan and Gujarat demonstrates that Mirabai's poems have functioned as enduring cultural resources for women across centuries. Her songs have been performed by women during domestic labor, by low-caste devotional communities who interpreted her defiance of Rajput norms as both class and gender liberation, and by nineteenth- and twentieth-century reform movements that adopted her as a symbol of women's spiritual autonomy. This ongoing communal engagement and reinterpretation is central to Mirabai's legacy. Her poems acquire new meanings in diverse contexts, and their continued relevance is sustained through this process of renewal.

5. Women in Court Chronicles and Jain Narrative Literature

5.1 Women in the Tarikhs

Persian-language court chronicles (tarikhs) produced in the Sultanate and Mughal courts of medieval and early modern India provide a distinct perspective on women's voices and historical presence. Authored by male scholars in service to male rulers, these texts primarily emphasize political and military history, domains from which women were largely, though not entirely, excluded. When women are referenced, they are most often queens, mothers of rulers, or wives of nobles, and their significance is generally defined by their relationships to powerful men.

Despite these constraints, women at the medieval Indian court exercised agency and, on occasion, articulated their voices in ways that the chronicles partially document. Razia Sultana (r. 1236–1240 CE), daughter of Iltutmish and the only woman to rule the Delhi Sultanate independently, serves as a prominent example. The thirteenth-century chronicle by Minhaj-i-Siraj emphasizes Razia's political acumen, her decision to appear unveiled in court, and her public address asserting her claim to the



throne. The chronicler's ambivalent response, which both acknowledges her abilities and expresses discomfort with her challenge to prevailing gender norms, is historically significant because it reveals the ideological pressures that shaped the documentation of women's public voices in courtly Islamic culture.

5.2 Women's Voices in Jain Narrative Literature

The Jain literary tradition constitutes a distinctive and frequently underexplored resource for examining women's voices in medieval India. Its narrative corpus, encompassing story collections, epics, and didactic tales composed in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and various regional languages, presents numerous female protagonists whose narratives engage with themes of female agency, spiritual aspiration, and the Jain concept of the spiritually accomplished woman (*sadhvi*), who renounces domestic life in pursuit of liberation, provides a framework analogous to the Bhakti tradition for legitimizing women's self-determination within cultural contexts. Narratives centered on figures such as Chandanbala, a princess subjected to enslavement and imprisonment prior to achieving spiritual liberation, address themes of female suffering and resilience. Although these stories primarily serve didactic religious functions, they also offer substantive insights into the lived experiences of women in medieval India. Furthermore, the Jain tradition produced women scholars and nuns who authored texts, yet their intellectual contributions have received significantly less scholarly attention than those of their male counterparts.

6. Feminine Ideals, Canonical Texts, and Counter-Narratives

The analysis of women's voices in medieval Indian literature necessitates an examination of the canonical ideals of femininity that influenced their reception. Sita from the Ramayana serves as the most influential exemplar within the Hindu tradition, embodying the ideal wife whose virtue is characterized by fidelity, self-denial, and obedience to her husband, even under unjust circumstances. The Manusmriti's concept of *stridharma*, which delineates women's religious duty as devotion to husband and family, provides the legal and philosophical foundation for these ideals.

These ideals were not universally accepted. Bhakti saints employed the devotee-as-bride metaphor to reinterpret a wife's obedience as passionate and assertive love, at times justifying women's defiance of prevailing social norms. The Buddha's establishment of the *bhikkhuni sangha*, as recorded in Pali texts such as the Therigatha, initiated a Buddhist tradition of female renunciation and spiritual authority. The Therigatha poems, which articulate liberation from domestic constraints, represent some of the earliest and most compelling examples of women's spiritual voices in South Asian literature. Women's literary production during this period is characterized by complex negotiation rather than straightforward opposition. Poets such as Mirabai and Andal both engaged with and challenged the Sita model. Andal embraced Sita's devotion while asserting an erotic agency absent from Sita's narrative. Mirabai referenced Sita's example yet openly defied the social norms associated with her. This simultaneous appropriation and subversion of traditional femininity distinguishes the literary voices of medieval Indian women.

7. Recovery, Significance, and Contemporary Resonances

Since the 1980s, efforts to recover women's voices from medieval Indian historical narratives have accelerated, supported by feminist literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and the democratization of Indian historiography through the Subaltern Studies school. Scholars including A.K. Ramanujan, Kumkum Sangari, Vidya Dehejia (1990), Uma Chakravarti (1998), and Vijaya Ramaswamy (2007) have produced influential works that have substantially reshaped understandings of medieval Indian women's expressions and actions.

Despite this expansion of scholarship, the recovery project encounters both methodological and political challenges. Feminist interpretations of medieval women's voices risk anachronism when modern concepts of female subjectivity are applied to historical figures who may not have recognised such frameworks. For instance, Mirabai's self-determination was grounded in devotional religious practice



rather than in modern feminist ideals. Describing her as a proto-feminist acknowledges her transgressive actions but may obscure the religious context that informed her choices. These voices engage with themes of desire and its limitations, the body and its spiritual potential, and the interplay between social belonging and individual identity. They further examine the costs and rewards of transgression. Rather than being mere historical curiosities, these narratives constitute valuable resources for contemporary feminist literary scholarship in India and internationally. They provide models of female expressivity, resistance, and creativity developed under patriarchal constraints that, although historically specific, continue to resonate with present-day challenges.

8. Conclusion

An examination of women's voices in medieval Indian historical narratives reveals a tradition of female literary expression that is richer, more diverse, and more politically complex than mainstream literary historiography typically acknowledges. From the erotic-devotional poems of Andal and the vachanas of Akka Mahadevi to Sanskrit-educated queens who commissioned court chronicles and Jain nuns who composed religious treatises, medieval Indian women contributed significantly to literary culture. Although often mediated and only partially preserved, these voices are essential to Indian literary history.

A dual approach is recommended for interpreting these voices: first, by considering the specific cultural, religious, and political contexts in which medieval women spoke; and second, by acknowledging the persistent male mediation, editorial interventions, and ideological reinterpretations that have influenced the preservation of their voices. While this methodology is demanding, it is essential for addressing the complexity of these texts. Within contemporary literary scholarship, the recovery and analysis of medieval Indian women's voices constitute acts of cultural and political significance rather than mere exercises in historical retrieval. This process recognizes that the history of Indian literature has always encompassed women's expression, however marginalized or mediated, and that any account excluding or minimizing these voices is not only incomplete but also actively distorted. The inclusive literary history constructed by feminist scholars, text by text and voice by voice, contributes both to academic knowledge and to the broader understanding of what it has meant, and continues to mean, to be a woman who speaks in South Asia.

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