

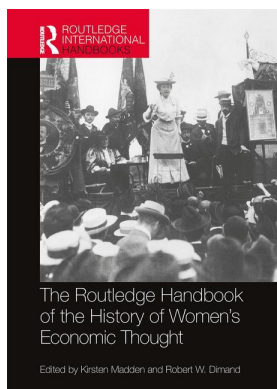
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## **The Routledge Handbook of the History of Women's Economic Thought**

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### **Indian women's agency through Indian women's literature**

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# 1

## INDIAN WOMEN'S AGENCY THROUGH INDIAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

*Sheetal Bharat*<sup>1</sup>

Patriarchy has been a dominant institution influencing the structure of society through recorded human history. In this chapter, I bring out the various ways in which Indian women have engaged with this institution from the fifth century BCE till colonial times. I use Amartya Sen's construct to identify the well- (or ill-) being of women as it is represented in their own writings, and go further to identify their exercises of agency in effecting welfare.

Welfare, according to Sen (1985), is determined by more than a certain state of wellbeing of the individual concerned. It must also include agency in choosing among a range of aims, including those unrelated to personal wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Freedom is the central idea in Sen's notion of wellbeing and is incorporated in the analysis through agency, a related and wider concept (Sen 1985, p. 203).

A person's "agency freedom" refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. A person's agency aspect cannot be understood without taking note of his or her aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations.

The historical source material must be suitably broad-based to afford an understanding of women's "aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations", a task critical to understanding agency. I look at a sample of the surviving and accessible literature produced by Indian women through recorded history. For reasons of economy, I restrict the sample to works for which an English translation is accessible. This reduces the sample size to a few dozen works spread over two millennia. Tharu and Lalita's exhaustive two-volume anthology of Indian women's writings is a primary resource, supplemented by other works, as available.

The oldest anthology consulted is the *Therigatha* (*Theri*: nun; *gatha*: songs), by Buddhist nuns who lived and composed verses about their religious experience in the time of the Buddha around the fifth century BCE. This is the earliest surviving literature by women anywhere in the world (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 65). Around the time that these verses were composed, script was not in common use. This meant that if these experiences of realisation were to be shared, they had best be in poetic form that is easy to commit to memory (Murcott 1991, p. 5).

The *Bhakti* (meaning devotion) movement produced rich literature in several languages across the subcontinent from the eighth till the nineteenth century CE. The aspect that ties this

vast body of literature together is that it was composed by people who formed a wave of revolt against *brahmanical* supremacy (Nadkarni 2013, pp. 67, 97). The idea was that salvation is not the sole prerogative of the elite male. Anyone can achieve the highest religious goal by unconditional devotion to their chosen idol.

Two *Mughal*<sup>6</sup> women's works are included in this study: Empress Nur Jahan (1577–1645) did not leave any written works, but the train of her thoughts and actions is available to the modern scholar through travellers' records. Princess Zeb-un-Nissa (1638–1702), daughter of the last powerful *Mughal* emperor, Aurangzeb, composed poetry for her pleasure.

Literary and political works from the nineteenth century, when India was under colonial rule are innumerable. The range of works includes poetry, novels, speeches, newspaper contributions, journal articles and official communication with the government, covering themes of politics, social issues, religion and science.

Since literary composition demands use of higher mental faculties, the women who composed poetry, wrote novels and made speeches may be considered intellectually abler than the average woman in each age. There is no reason to believe that the lived experience of an intellectually abler woman would be any worse than average. Judging by the content of their writings, these literary women write of troubles that reflect the experience of the masses, and so their descriptions can be considered representative of the women of the age, even though these women themselves might not have been representative. Appendix 1 has a list of women named through this chapter with some details for quick reference.

In the following section titled *Lack of wellbeing achievement and the vicious cycle of gender discrimination*, literature from across the ages is cited to illustrate instances of women's ill-being. Chronological continuity is unnecessary as women's lived experiences from across two millennia are strikingly similar in respect of their lack of wellbeing, and the material is rather presented to reveal the elements of a vicious cycle. The latter section titled *Agency in effecting wellbeing* highlights instances of women exercising their agency in expanding freedoms for themselves and other women.

### **Lack of wellbeing achievement and the vicious cycle of gender discrimination**

One starting point in a cycle is as good as another (see Figure 1.1). I begin a description of this vicious cycle with girls not being given opportunities to learn skills that would be valuable outside the house. A word of justification is due for the expression – skills valuable outside the house. It is valid to argue that women who work in the house develop skills related to the house and provide a valuable service in sustaining the family. Members of a family working outside rely, for their sustenance, on those staying in. Sen explains that “the activities that produce or support that sustenance, survival or reproduction [of earning members] are typically not regarded as *contributing* to output, and are often classified as ‘unproductive’ labour” (1987, p. 11, emphasis in original). Boserup (1970) and Papanek (1979) have written extensively on the supporting role played by women in creating family status. Given the acknowledgement that both men and women do productive work, the unequal status appears to be due to valuation. Work done outside the house is valued more than that performed within. Sen (1987, p. 25) points out that it is a person's ‘perceived contribution’ to household income that determines their status. “The impact of ‘perceived contribution response’ may have been primitively associated with acquiring food from *outside*” (Sen 1987, p. 29, emphasis in original), and this perception lingers to the modern day. Gender disparities tend to be strikingly unfavourable to women, and even sex ratios (number of women to number of men) tend to be lower in northern India where women work more indoors, compared with the south (Sen 1987, p. 31).

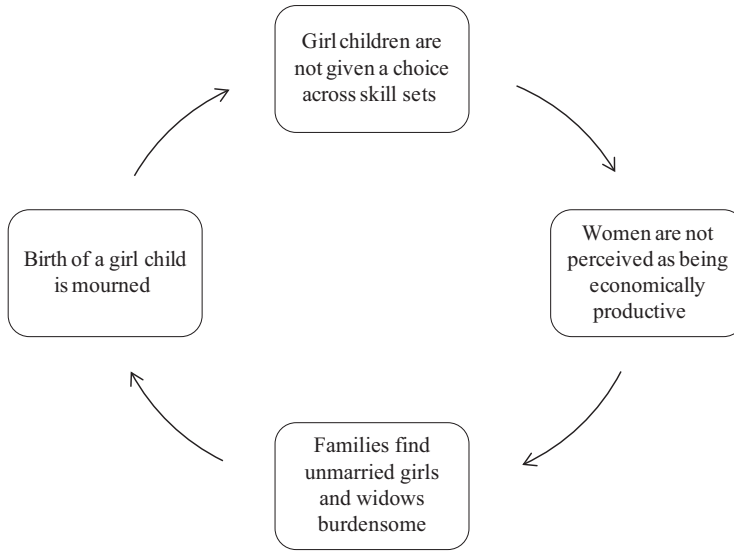


Figure 1.1 Vicious cycle of gender discrimination

Women staying at home results in them not being perceived as economically productive. Historically, property was handed down through sons, while daughters commanded ownership only over movable property such as jewellery and clothes gifted at the wedding (Altekar 1956, pp. 217–20). This meant that parents had to spend a lot for their daughter’s wedding. They were not sent to school or made to feel a valued member of the family, and so the cycle continued. King and Hill (1997, p. vi) mention a vicious cycle vaguely in the form discussed above. The details of the elements are substantiated with reference to the human capital literature (Schultz 1990; Becker 1994).

In the remainder of this section, I cite women’s literature from across the ages to illustrate each element in the vicious cycle.

Mutta, the fifth-century BCE Buddhist nun, celebrates the freedom she won from domesticity: “O free indeed! O gloriously free / Am I in freedom from three crooked things:-- / From quern, from mortar, from my crookback’d lord!” (Rhys Davids 2007, p. 15). She is clearly overjoyed with the new opportunity she found in Buddhism, while being relieved of her domestic responsibilities involving hand-milling and cooking for her husband. Similarly, Sumangala’s mother, the rush-weaver’s wife (her own name unknown<sup>4</sup>) expresses complete frustration with her domestic chores and even her husband (Rhys Davids 2007, p. 25): “Me stained and squalid ’mong my cooking-pots / My brutal husband ranked as even less / Than the sunshades he sits and weaves away”. These women’s alienation is evident in the use of the words “crookback’d” and “brutal”.

This gendered occupational segregation begs justification for this early age. Rhys Davids (1901, pp. 310, 313; 1923, pp. 205–6<sup>5</sup>) and Altekar (1956, p. 179) confirm that there was division of labour in the early Buddhist period not just at the level of a household, but also at the level of the community. Men engaged in occupations that took them outside, while women tended to stay at home. The economic background to the sentiment in these quotes is therefore consistent with current knowledge about the economy of the age.

Newer-age evidence of the occupational segregation of women is revealed in Bahinabai’s life story (1628–1700, *Bhakti* poet, Marathi language). After a series of supernatural occurrences

involving a calf and a travelling preacher,<sup>6</sup> Bahinabai at age eleven, had to decide whether or not to continue with her deep devotion of Lord Vitthal, while simultaneously performing her responsibilities at home. Her husband had a foul temper and “[w]hen it came to his mind to do so he beat [Bahinabai] violently. He tied [her] (hand and foot) into a bundle and threw [her] aside” (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 113). The preacher, after gauging the devotion that the girl was capable of, advised the husband:

[T]he manner of life she must adopt is of a very austere kind. Now do not distress her any more. By her special wifely duties she will do you service; and you will save your soul . . . [T]he calf is her guru . . . and all who live in association with her, will joyfully drink the sweet juice of *bhakti*.

Nonetheless, her husband vowed to leave home, because he did not want a wife who was more interested in prayers than in him – he took it as a personal insult. “Perhaps out of sagacity, perhaps out of timidity” (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 109), Bahinabai says (pp. 114–15):

[H]olding to my own special duties, I will give my mind to listening to the Scriptures, and the winning of God. My duty is to serve my husband, for he is God to me. My husband himself is the Supreme Brahma. . . . This is then the determination, and the desire of my heart. I want my thought concentrated on my husband.

The composition of these lines follows an advanced level of religious attainment. This is a decision that Bahinabai arrives at after a thorough consideration of her choices. One interpretation is that she exercised her agency and chose to serve her husband with all her attention. Alternatively, her decision could be a result of internalising and rationalising harsh patriarchal social relations. Any agency, then, is rendered meaningless. Being part of multiple generations of the vicious cycle, Indian women typically came to internalise the inferiority society imposed upon them and made choices that benefited the socially valued men, even to their own detriment.

Rassundari Devi’s (1810–?, Bangla<sup>7</sup> language) autobiography is among the most fascinating works in Indian literature. She has no meaningful choices in her life. Married at the age of twelve, mother of eleven, she was caught in an unending stream of domestic responsibilities. She describes her pitiful emotions at her wedding. Though she was happy through the festivities, Rassundari Devi cried through most of the journey to her new home which lasted a few days (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, pp. 192–4):

“Don’t give me over to them, Mother!” . . . I was trembling all over with fear . . . I clung to whomever came to pick me up and went on weeping incessantly. . . . I sank into a deep depression. . . . Very soon I felt too parched to cry. . . . Sorrow engulfed me like a raging forest fire. Those who have had such experiences perhaps know how useless words seem in times of sorrow.

Girls even younger were married and sent off to distant villages, and the trauma of separation was assumed to be something a girl had to go through unquestioningly. At her new home, though she accepts that her family were kind to her, Rassundari Devi led a far from contented life (p. 196).

There were eight maidservants in the house, but . . . [a]s was the custom, I had to do all the work and look after the children as well. . . . Suffice it to say that I had no time to think about my own health. So much so that I often did not eat either of the two meals.

The above instances of women speaking out against their social experiences and of being but-tonholed to the house, are not petulant complaints of mildly difficult circumstances, and neither are they anachronistic projections of modern sensibilities. These women made specific comparisons with men to highlight a *relative* deprivation. The fifth-century BCE Buddhist nun Patacara says (Rhys Davids 2007, pp. 72–3):

With ploughshares ploughing up the fields, with seed  
Sown in the breast of earth, men with their crops,  
Enjoy their grains and nourish wife and child.  
Why cannot I, whose life is pure, who seek  
To do the Master's will, no sluggard am,  
Nor puffed up, win to Nibbana's bliss?<sup>8</sup>

Other nuns make similar comparisons (pp. 73, 94). Patacara feels that she was being kept out of an opportunity by the force of tradition. That she managed to attain *Nibbana* shows the strength of her agency in the face of constraining tradition.

The sentiment is echoed almost identically in an early twentieth-century female contributor to the journal *Navabharat* [New India]: “In terms of brain power there is no difference between men and women. . . . The artificial demarcation of their spheres is, therefore, totally illogical. In fact, both should be able to participate in the same kind of activities” (Ray 1991, p. 11). The educationist Abala Bose (1855–1951) argued in 1907 that women needed an education (Ray 1991, p. 8):

not because we may make better matches for our girls . . . not even that the services of the daughter-in-law may be more valuable in the home of her adoption, but because woman like man is first of all a mind, and only in the second place physical and a body.

The comparisons were incisive, but answers in these respective ages were not forthcoming. Insults were. The omnipresence of discrimination is illustrated in the language used. The fifth-century BCE nun Soma includes in her verses, words that were spoken by Mara, the demon “invisible and in the air” (Rhys Davids 2007, p. 45):

That vantage-ground the sages may attain is hard  
To reach. With her two-finger consciousness  
*That* is no woman competent to gain! [emphasis in original]

The phrase “two-finger consciousness” is in reference to the practice of checking with two fingers if rice is cooked. The suggestion was that the only work that women did was to cook, and so the only skill that they needed to have was to check if rice was cooked. Women were incompetent outside the house and it was acceptable for them to stay indoors. If this indeed was a widespread attitude, it would have greatly undermined the ability of women to develop their potential.

Along similar lines, Sulekha Sanyal (1928–1962, Bangla language novelist) presents the contours of a common argument in the following tirade by Punasashi when her granddaughter, Chobi, a school-going girl, asks for a second helping of dessert (Tharu and Lalita Vol. II 2006, p. 293, *Nabankur* [Seedling]):

Teach her to read and write, and look what happens next! The girl imagines she's as good as these darling boys of mine! Ridiculous! Will you be earning like the boys? All you'll ever be is a shackle on your father's neck. Yes, those days are coming, and pretty soon, when we won't be able to get food down his throat for worrying over how to get you married off.

Later, Chobi's mother pulls her by her hair to discipline her for her impertinent demand. Chobi's behaviour was born more out of ignorance of custom rather than a desire to rebel against it. She was unaware that custom expected her to be submissive, and was being "socialised for inequality" by her grandmother and mother (Papanek 1990, pp. 176, 179). As the older women in the family harshly impose restrictions on the younger girls, they themselves go through a secondary phase of socialisation for women's inferiority, accepting it as necessary to maintain harmony over generations. Every member of the family, young and old, was made to realise that unmarried girls were a burden.

As an instance of how widowed women were seen as burdensome as well, an anonymous woman wrote in 1889 about the typical life of a widow from the *kayastha* caste, known for being particularly dogmatic about ritual pollution (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, pp. 358–63). "[W]omen from the barber caste" were hired to tear off the jewellery from a woman's body as soon as her husband passed away. It is instructive to quote her at length (pp. 359–61).

[N]o one comes near her to console her. . . . [T]hose who had loved her from her childhood, and had brought her up tenderly, even they shower curses on her. . . . There has to be a distance of two hundred feet between her and the rest of the women [in the funeral procession] because it is believed . . . that if her shadow falls over a married woman, she too will become a widow. . . . A woman whose husband is dead is like a living corpse. She has no rights in the home. . . . Her mother-in-law says, "This horrible snake bit my son and killed him. He died, but why is this worthless woman still alive?" . . . [T]here is nothing in our fate but suffering from birth to death. When our husbands are alive, we are their slaves; when they die, our fate is even worse.

Since women did not have the rights to any property, male relatives grudgingly spent for their maintenance. They would often need to find an alternative source of income using the only skills society allowed them to develop – by working as a servant – and so being brought down to the lowest social stratum, regardless of their earlier position.

Further household behaviours resulting from this discrimination are illustrated in this conversation overheard by the narrator in Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani's (1861–1920, Bangla language) story, *Adorer na Anadorer?* [Beloved, or Unloved?]. At the river bank for a bath, a woman reveals that her sister-in-law had had a third daughter (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, pp. 263–4):

When my brother heard it was a girl, he said to me, "Keshto, I can't get up. I feel drained of all my strength." . . . His wife wouldn't pick the baby up; she took it in her arms only after a lot of coaxing, and even then she said she'd throttle it. . . . Sorrow hangs over the whole house.

A sympathetic listener responds (p. 264):

[T]hree girls, no less, to be married off to *kayastha* families – a tough job it's going to be. It's hard on the wretched woman too – giving birth to a lump of earth, having carried it in her womb for ten months!

The vicious cycle of gender discrimination is here illustrated through women's reports of their lived experiences. The *Therigatha* verses, and *Bhakti* poetry show women as being constrained to domestic responsibilities and as not having, or not being perceived as having, the skills required to survive outside the house. Women report that they are systematically excluded from the opportunity of engaging in an occupation that is perceived as valuable. Modern literature is cited to show how the birth of a girl child is considered a burden on the family – specifically on the father who has to pay heavily for the wedding. Sending a girl to school is presented as a grave mistake that can only result in her nursing unrealistic expectations regarding her worth. The suggestion that “efficiency criteria alone would predispose a family to invest differentially in the human capital of their children, depending on their *perception* of the ability and opportunities of each child” (Schultz 1990, p. 3, emphasis added) seems true, not just in a modern utilitarian economy, but in ancient times as well. The morbid sorrow that accompanies the birth of the girl child in Keshito's brother's home completes the illustration of the vicious cycle of gender discrimination.

The above instances are from specific points in time separated by centuries. An explanation for them still justifiably forming part of a single cycle is provided by Sen (1987, p. 28): the asymmetries in the status of men and women are “stable and sustained”, regardless of how they might have started. A “feedback transmission” effect causes asymmetries in access to opportunities and benefits to be perpetuated “from one generation to the next, indeed from one historical epoch to the next” (Sen 1987, pp. 26–7).

### Agency in effecting wellbeing

Most women, presumably those who did not rebel or compose poetry or talk publicly about their woes, had accepted tradition. Many might have recognised their relative status but might have been timid to speak out. Only a few agitated and took measures to correct the inequality. Still fewer left a record of their attempts. This section gleans from the literature the attempts at improvement of those women who were conscious of their inferior status adversely affecting their health, community participation and livelihood options.

The inclusiveness that Buddhism promised to all persons regardless of caste or social status caused it to spread far from its place of origin in eastern India. But this inclusiveness, for women, neither came easily, nor was it unconditional. After the establishment of the Buddhist monks' monastery, Gautam Buddha's aunt and foster mother, Mahapajapati Gautami begged his permission for women to enter the order. The Buddha declined. A disciple argued on behalf of women with the question: are women as capable as men of religious attainment? Answering in the affirmative, the Buddha laid out eight rules that the women's monastery was to follow, all of which explicitly granted the monks superiority (Rhys Davids 2007, p. 7; Murcott 1991, pp. 15–16).

This attitude toward women in a system that prided itself on individual agency in religious attainment was probably due to the culture that it nonetheless was part of. Williamson (2000, p. 597) identifies institutions related to religion or custom as deeply “embedded”. They “display a great deal of inertia – some because they are functional; others take on symbolic value with a coterie of true believers; many are pervasively linked with complementary institutions”.



The institution of patriarchy derived its legitimacy from religion, and dictated the way the economy functioned, ensured the preservation of tradition, and the mode of social interactions. So deeply embedded does patriarchy turn out to be, and so pervasively is it linked with complementary institutions, that it continues to display inertia to the present.

When Mara, the demon, insulted Soma in the forest by suggesting that women were only suited to see to the cooking, it was a clear representation of this tradition. Soma responds with calm confidence (Murcott 1991, p. 159):

What harm is it  
to be a woman  
when the mind is concentrated  
and the insight is clear?

Soma's interlocutor, whether demon or man, was avowedly a member of the above-mentioned 'coterie'. He adhered to the general norms of behaviour with regard to women in non-traditional roles – in this case, a woman who was in a forest, alone, aiming to something that was considered the male prerogative. These nuns were doing something radical, denying the social worldview of the age to free themselves of domestic drudgery and fulfil their aspirations.

The following conversation in the fifth century BCE between Punnika, a slave-turned-nun, and a *brahman* named Udakasuddhika, is another instance of a woman asserting an influence that the times did not afford her (Murcott 1991, p. 175):

[Punnika:]  
[W]hat are you afraid of, brahman,  
that makes you go down to the water?  
Your limbs shake with the bitter cold.  
[Udakasuddhika:]  
But you know why, Punnika.  
I am doing good to prevent evil.  
Anyone young or old who has done something bad  
is freed by washing in water.  
[Punnika:]  
Whoever told you  
you are freed from evil by washing?  
The blind leading the blind!  
In that case all frogs and turtles  
would go to heaven,  
and water snakes and crocodiles  
and the rest of the water creatures.  
Butchers of sheep, butchers of pigs,  
fishers and trappers,  
thieves, executioners,  
and other wrongdoers  
would be freed from their bad karma  
by washing in water.  
If these streams carried away all your old evil  
they would carry away your virtue too.  
You would be separated from both.

This verse is striking for two reasons. First, it presents a conversation between a former slave and a *brahman*, itself a social aberration. Further, the dynamics in this conversation are such that it is both a *slave* and a *woman* admonishing a *brahman*, thus causing religious instruction to flow *to* the *brahman* instead of *from* him. Punnika throws a direct challenge to the prevailing *brahmanical* monopoly of religious practice. She argues that if indeed religious goals could be attained through the ritual involving water, then anyone with access to water could wash away their sins; where was the need for the *brahman* class? Rituals were complex and expensive, and therefore exclusive. Buddhism stressed self-discipline, which did not require wealth or high birth.

Mutta, Mahapajapati Gautami, Soma and Punnika are only a few women among several in the fifth century BCE who broke the social mould and chose a path that afforded them self-actualisation. They composed verses to share their experiences with others and encourage them to follow. The *Therigatha* is composed by nuns who meditated and roamed through settlements begging for alms. This is the price they paid for being nonconformist: they were not part of society. That said, their interactions with members of society caused these members to reflect on their actions and on what they wanted in their own lives. Mahapajapati Gautami brought “five hundred women”<sup>9</sup> with her, many recently widowed due to a war, to join the order (Murcott 1991, pp. 14–15). The *brahman* Punnika spoke with went on to become a Buddhist himself (p. 177). These nuns achieved their aims of freeing themselves from oppressive domesticity and achieving the highest spiritual state, and also presenting their own lives as a viable and satisfying livelihood option to other oppressed women.

The *Bhakti* movement poet-saints played a similar role in the communities that they travelled through and interacted with, but unlike the Buddhist nuns, renouncing the world was not a necessary condition to be a *bhakt* or *bhaktin* (a male or female devotee). While formally entering the Buddhist order entailed a strictly adhered to initiation process, being a *bhakt* or *bhaktin* only required devotion. This implies that their interactions with, and influence on, lay society is likely to have been more powerful.

An important characteristic that all *Bhakti* poets share is that they composed in the vernacular with the explicit aim of reaching the most people, intending to demonstrate that the language of the Gods was not exclusive. Atukuri Molla (sixteenth century, Telugu language; Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 97) writes:

As honey sweetens  
the mouth readily  
a poem should make sense  
right away.  
Obscure sounds and sense  
are no better than  
the dumb and the deaf conversing.

Legend has it that she, being a lower caste woman, took it up as a challenge to compose her own version of the *Ramayana* in the local language in just five days when a minister in the royal court insulted her village. Not only did she keep her word, but Molla's *Ramayana* is considered a classic of Telugu literature – a significant personal achievement, and a boost to Telugu literature (p. 95).

Janabai (1298–1350, Marathi language) worked as a maid and wrote about the difficult and mundane lives of other women (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 82). She encourages women to be independent, even if it means breaking norms (p. 83):

Cast off all shame,  
and sell yourself  
in the marketplace;  
then alone  
can you hope  
to reach the Lord.

The general perception of women out in the open as being of easy virtue lends Janabai her choice of words, but the above verse is to be interpreted as Janabai encouraging women to step out of home and set up a trade (p. 83).

Akkamahadevi's (twelfth century, Kannada language) verses are said to possess a "mystic complexity" and "her many-hued images . . . shift and glow into life" (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 78). She stands out as an exemplar of *Bhakti* poets in her use of the "metaphor of illicit love" (p. 79) for her devotion to Lord Shiva. Her verses contain erotic descriptions of her intimacy with Lord Shiva, which, coming from a woman, were a startling contrast to what was considered appropriate for the times (p. 79).

For women, her work embodies a radical illegitimacy as she . . . include[s in her poetry] the struggles of her body, struggles against the pettiness of roles she is forced into as a woman, . . . and against the social expectations that restrain her.

The following verse (Swamy 2012, verse 1232) reflects her disgust with the society that made demands on her, in which she also points out that her shunning of society should not suggest that she is in any way intimidated by it. In fact, having dismissed the romantic advances of a local king, she travelled naked in search of her ideal, carrying out public debates with religious and secular scholars and mendicants, and composing verses that remain popular to the present day.

If a swine were to meet an elephant on its way  
if the elephant were to move aside in disgust  
would the swine become a lion?

Akka's confidence in her dealings with society are also seen in Muktabai's life and verses (thirteenth-century poet-saint who attained *samadhi*<sup>10</sup> at the age of eighteen, Marathi language). Muktabai spoke lucidly about the non-duality of Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti, his wife. The worldly extension of this doctrine was gender equality, which she demonstrated by offering instruction in public to learned men. Muktabai's brother, Jnaneshwar, was a great saint as well, and often received instruction from Muktabai on appropriate conduct. With the famous saint Changdev, she held prolonged discussions and preached to him on the nature of knowledge and ascetic temperament before accepting him as her guru (Irlekar and Jahagirdar 1999, p. 187). In Indian tradition, the guru is held as being superior to God.<sup>11</sup> Yet here was Muktabai teaching her teacher, more by dint of her confidence in the quality of her spirituality than arrogance (Deshpande 1999, p. 196).

Except Hari, none can liberate your soul for ever  
Only He can redeem you from misfortunes of the mundane world . . .  
Not only is Muktai redeemed from the mundane world ever and anon  
Herself indivisible, she has already sundered dissimilitude

The didactic element in her poetry is obvious in the first couplet above where she exhorts her listeners to focus their meditation on Hari (Lord Krishna), while distancing themselves from “the mundane world”. She then confidently presents herself as an example.

Lal Ded or Lalla (fourteenth-century *Bhakti* poet-saint<sup>12</sup> from Kashmir) too had a didactic vein running through her verses. She composed in the vernacular, and made references to the daily concerns of the masses, and so giving hope (Ded and Hoskote 2013, p. 102):

Does the sun not warm every country he visits  
or does he touch only the richest ones?  
Does water not flow in every house?  
But Shiva can play hard to get: hold on to that message.

Lalla suggests that while salvation is not easy to attain, its attainment is certainly not determined by ritual sacrifice, an option open only to the rich. Her verses are replete with insults for those who followed rituals blindly, and reserved severe chastisement for those who sacrificed animals (pp. 43, 61, 64, 82, 83, 125) because these practices eliminated participation of those who could not afford to perform them. Lalla celebrated simplicity (p. 82):

Wear just enough to keep the cold out,  
eat just enough to keep hunger from your door.

Her prescription for religious attainment is that lives shorn of meaningless ritual practices *can* attain the highest religious goals – the key is knowledge of the Self and service to others (p. 141):

Don't torture this body with thirst and hunger, . . .  
just help others through life, there's no truer worship.

Chandrabati (sixteenth-century *Bhakti* poet, Bangla language) composed poetry for the first time about socio-political issues through fiction. Her epic poem *Sundari Malua* (Beautiful Malua) is most explicit in its concern for religious and gender biases, and political improprieties that accentuated the crisis. The *Mughal* administration, under Emperor Akbar (1542–1605) imposed certain taxes, but details were often left for local officers to decide. Taking advantage of this leeway, a local Muslim landlord demanded that Malua, a Hindu lady, live with him for a time, because her family was unable to pay an unreasonable tax imposed in an *ad hoc* fashion. To preclude violence, Malua went, but lied that a vow prevented her from sharing a bed with a man for three months. In the meanwhile, the villagers managed to extricate her. But doubting her chastity with a man outside her religion, the villagers wanted to excommunicate her: “[f]or three long months/ She lived between Muslim walls. The shame of it/ Would shatter a tiger! Who can save a doe/ Caught in the wild beast's claws? We can do/ nothing once chastity and caste are gone” (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 106).

Chandrabati represents in her work the worst of the political corruption and social stigmatisation that she observed in her world. Yet, in response, the eponymous woman and her mother-in-law display a surreal strength of character (p. 104).

Indian literature of all kinds is full of the enmity between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. But in this story, when Malua is released, . . . her mother-in-law stands up for her and argues, in a remarkable passage, against the elders of the village, who want to exile her.

As the earliest known piece of Bangla fiction, Chandrabati creates a stunning piece of literature that is taught in modern curricula in West Bengal state in India and in Bangladesh (Sen 1997, p. 164).

*Bhakti* poet-saints travelled extensively within their respective linguistic zones, and composed verses that became immensely popular in their time and remain so to the present day.<sup>13</sup> These interactions afforded them a wider ambit for acquiring knowledge, for sharpening their religious and social arguments. Importantly, they generated awareness of the restrictions imposed on some and privileges endowed on others by the orthodox Hindu system of social organisation. Tharu and Lalita (Vol. I 2015, p. 58) point out that there was a surprisingly large number of *bhaktins*, and this was no accident. The very idea of the movement was inclusivity, and so several women and lower caste members chose the path of *Bhakti*, which was difficult and liberating. In comparison, the lives hitherto of these marginalised groups were difficult and constraining.

The *Mughal* princess, Zeb-un-Nissa (1638–1702, Urdu language) though from a completely different religion and cultural background, echoes *Bhakti* voices in her verses. She was the daughter of the last powerful *Mughal* emperor, Aurangzeb, unlike the *Bhakti* women who were often either lower caste or poor or both. Not being burdened by the conviction that her religion was the only true one, she accepts the right of all people to find their religious ideals in their own ways (Lal and Westbrook 1913, p. 28).

Whether it be in Mecca's holiest shrine,  
Or in the Temple pilgrim feet have trod,  
Still Thou art mine,  
Wherever God is worshipped is my God.

Her outright rejection of labels, yet simultaneous adoption of metaphors from two rival religions, reveals her broadmindedness (p. 23).

No Muslim I,  
But an idolater,  
I bow before the image of my Love,  
And worship her:  
No Brahman I,  
My sacred thread<sup>14</sup>  
I cast away, for round my neck I wear  
Her plaited hair instead.

She also deftly mixes up conventionally assigned gender roles, by referring to either her God or her lover as a woman; in both respects, crossing the boundaries of custom.

Empress Nur Jahan (1577–1645) distinguished herself for a different set of reasons. She was the only *Mughal* woman to be honoured with the title of Empress because she held the reins of empire (1611–1627) while her husband, Emperor Jahangir (1605–1627)<sup>15</sup> was incapacitated, by his own admission, by opium and alcohol abuse. She was the head of a junta rule (Findly 1993, p. 43) and had complete power over all decisions of the palace: so absolute was her power that any order had to carry her seal to be taken seriously (p. 122). Agency, in this case is about political power and the benefits it afforded. The Empress took advantage of her position to enhance her treasury through the abundant trade that flowed through the commercial centre, Agra (p. 151). She also used her wealth to assist women in need. But her most important contribution

might have been that she brought about a major change in the social movements that women were permitted. Earlier, women travelled only with their men on hunting missions or pilgrimages. Under Nur Jahan's influence, "women became confident sensualists whose open attire and epicurean habits were fully accepted in the growing cult of material luxury at court" (p. 245). This was a perceptible improvement from a millennium and a half earlier, when women who went on a "pleasure trip with other women" were to be fined<sup>16</sup> (Chakravarti 1993, p. 584), according to the *Arthashastra*.<sup>17</sup>

Though Zeb-un-Nissa, two generations later, was an obvious beneficiary of this change, this benefit was not afforded to common women even two centuries later. Rassundari Devi, the child bride constrained by housework, did not have a say in her marriage at age twelve. Rassundari's agency becomes apparent in her later years. The expectation of her age was that women should remain illiterate. But so strong was her desire to read the scripture that she covertly stole pages from her son's book and matched the letters with her memory of what she learned in her school days to teach herself to recognise letters and decipher words. This she did while nursing agonising guilt and hiding her reading materials in the cooking quarters: they had the least chance of being discovered there, since no one other than herself normally went in.

Regarding her domestic responsibilities she writes, "[p]eople never realize these things unless they go through similar pressures . . . Every human being should know this. Most people do not have any knowledge about the matter" (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 198). These lines indicate a desperate attempt by the author to inform men of the deprivations that women go through in the most mundane sense – food and resources might have been abundant, but the time and freedom to benefit from them were not. She felt inhibited to speak out, so she waited to teach herself to read and then wrote her autobiography. Rassundari was not a scholar or saint, but she developed a consciousness of inappropriate constraints imposed on her and broadcast this experience to society to support the awakening of consciousness and agency of others. There is reason to infer that this work was widely read, being the first autobiography in Bangla, and being well received by leading thinkers of the age (p. 190).

Women during colonial India with a lot more exposure than Rassundari Devi made similar observations. They represented truth in fiction to raise public awareness of the potential role that women could play in society, if they could think beyond tradition and exert their identity.

Hannah Catherine Mullens<sup>18</sup> (1826–1861) wrote the first piece of Bangla fiction in prose in 1852 (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 203). Her protagonist seems, and probably Mullens herself was, desperately impatient with the superstitions that negatively influenced local practices at times as critical-for-life as childbirth. "I have seen myself how very often Bengali women lose their babies in the womb because of the ignorance of these midwives" (p. 208). Mullens' stated aim in having written this novel was "to show the practical influence of Christianity on the various details of domestic life" (p. 204). Nonetheless, her writing had the effect of bringing about an awareness of physically and socially healthy practices so that women questioned tradition when it went counter to their personal wellbeing.

Razia Sajjad Zaheer (1917–1979, Urdu language) with her Marxist leanings (Tharu and Lalita Vol. II 2006, p. 144) aimed for social awakening. Her protagonist in the short story *Neech* (Lowborn) is a fiercely independent woman, Shyamali, who claims that her husband is dead, though she has actually left him. She displays a cool confidence when confronted (pp. 148, 153):

He thought he could order me around just because he gave me food and clothing. Am I a prostitute to be bought with money? My limbs are sound. I can work. I have the courage to feed ten like him. . . . [W]hat is this fuss about making a living?

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932, English language), in her feminist utopian fiction *Sultana's Dream*, imagines a world where the men are cloistered in the *mardana* (a male equivalent word for *zenana*, where women were cloistered) and women run the world with aplomb. Science is used in the service of humanity rather than to gather power or profits, and crime and war are unheard of (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 340).

In all the above examples women have set examples, either personally, or through fictional characters, questioned tradition, goaded women to exert themselves, to aim higher, or shown a mirror to society to reflect its treatment of women. These were their conscious aims. It is not possible to even begin to answer the question of whether these efforts bore fruit, but the fact of women's agency in countering patriarchy is firmly established.

There were others who tried a more direct approach – they wrote, spoke and overtly acted to bring about institutional changes in the position of women in Indian society through direct or indirect engagement with the government.

*Tahzib un-Niswan* (Culture and Education for Women) was an Urdu language magazine launched in 1898 by a couple, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and Muhammadi Begam (Minault 1988, p. 2). It aimed to provide *parda*-observing women<sup>19</sup> with reading material to help them think for themselves and broaden their horizons. Articles identify the need to eliminate spending on rituals and dowry and, instead, spend on education. Ladies who completed courses of higher education are warmly congratulated; “[b]y the 1930s, the readers of *Tahzib* had come a long way” (p. 4). Waheed Jahan Begam, co-editor of the magazine, *Khatun* (Woman) writes (p. 6):

Uneducated women, who do not go out, think that respectability is confined to the four walls of their houses. . . . But God has ordained education for both men and women, so that such useless ideas can be gotten rid of.

These publications and their readership played an important role in educating women and impacting the way the Muslim population reacted to the child marriage discussions of the 1920s and 1930s. Formal education was the most important channel of change chosen by women. Hannah Catherine Mullens (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 203) and Krupa Sattianadan (p. 275), among several others, established schools for orphans, lower caste girls and Muslim women. Savitribai Phule was a courageous woman who broke all customs that threatened the rights of women to life and an education. She writes, in her collection of poetry, *Kavyaphule* (NCERT 2008, p. 2):

If you have no knowledge, have no education,  
And you yearn not for the same,  
You possess intellect but work not on the same,  
How then can you be called a human being?

She sheltered destitute women at personal cost, both in terms of money and ostracism (Vergheese *et al.* 2014). Several other women too were actively writing and talking about the oppressiveness of customs such as child marriage and *sati*.<sup>20</sup> A woman at an All India Women's Conference branch meeting said that child marriage “crushed [girls'] individuality and denied them opportunities for education and development of mind and body”. Another, in 1929, places the responsibility for change on women themselves by suggesting that it is the “outlook of women [that] should undergo a radical change” and that the “inferiority complex” must be eliminated (Forbes 1998, p. 87).

The Hindu Child Marriage Bill<sup>21</sup> was proposed in 1927 and it was enacted as the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1930. It set the minimum marriageable age for all women regardless of caste or religion as fourteen and for men as eighteen. Muslim leaders demanded an amendment to exclude Muslims from the purview of the Act, but the Muslim members of the All India Women's Congress wrote to the Viceroy (Forbes 1998, p. 89):

We, speaking also on behalf of the Muslim women of India, assert that it is only a small section of [Muslim] men who have been approaching your excellency and demanding exemption from the Act. This Act affects girls and women far more than it affects men and *we deny their right to speak on our behalf* [emphasis added].

These women were, for the first time, politically voicing their dissatisfaction with men making decisions on issues that concerned women. It was also the first learning opportunity for women as organised groups to formulate their strategies and negotiate at the policy level (p. 83). This was a major event in the history of the struggle against patriarchy in India, and a telling example of women's agency in ensuring the most fundamental human rights of women. The aim of the women quoted above was to ensure to all women that they would not be married earlier than their bodies were ready to engage in intercourse and childbirth.

Mrinalini Sen, a suffragette from the early twentieth century argued that though women were subject "to all the laws and rules of the land exercised by the British Government", they did not have the right to vote. It seemed as if women were expected to get their justice at home (Forbes 1998, p. 103). This attitude is represented by Darisi Annapurnamma (1907–1931) in her Kannada-language short story. A police inspector hears noises at night and says to his wife: "It must be Keshavaiya thrashing his daughter-in-law. That is a family matter and it is *not just to interfere*. If you can't sleep here, let us move to another room" (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 458, emphasis added). In the real world, this tendency to resist positive change again showed up in relation with the Child Marriage Restraint Act, which the British government refused to amend in favour of the Muslim men, not because an amendment would have been detrimental to Muslim women, but because "there was general agreement that the [Child Marriage Restraint] Act was a dead letter [anyway]. Enforcement for the Act was practically non-existent" (Forbes 1998, p. 89). The institution of patriarchy was resilient even in the face of formal institutional changes, and any perceptible change in the lived experience of women demanded great effort.

The gifted orator Sarojini Naidu did more than anyone toward reminding women of their responsibilities. She claimed to be spreading Mahatma Gandhi's message of *swadeshi* (of one's own country, meaning preferring local production and consumption over importing) as an economic policy move at the level of individual households, and her primary justification was that it would help women (Naidu 1925, pp. 294–5).

[E]very inch spun of this stuff (pointing to her *saree* [made from coarse hand-spun, hand-woven fabric, *khadi*]) there is the benediction of a woman who knows that her hands are buying bread for her little children . . . [T]he women behind the *Purdah*, who cannot go out as their Hindu sisters do, have blessed the spinning wheel because it has saved them from the reproach that they are idlers hanging on the one solitary wage earner.

Naidu went to London to present the case for universal franchise in India, an effort that bore fruit in 1947. In the meanwhile, Saraladevi Chaudhurani continued the fight for women to



have equal access to all manner of opportunities. In what is cited as “certainly the most forceful feminist speech of the 1930s” (Forbes 1998, p. 143) she listed ten fundamental rights that should be accorded to women: “equal inheritance, equal rights to guardianship, no sex discrimination, fair wages, punishment for sex-related crimes, closing brothels, compulsory primary education, adult education, female teachers in co-educational institutions, and adult franchise” (Forbes 2005, p. 57). These incredibly liberal demands were part of Saraladevi’s proposal for creating a separate women’s Congress because “woman’s feeling has never been the man’s, neither the woman’s point of view his”. Eventually most of these demands were rejected and the separate women’s Congress was not formed (Forbes 1998, p. 143).

### Concluding remarks

Patriarchy has had a resilient presence for at least two millennia, though its manifestation has been changing. Correspondingly, the way women have exercised their agency roles in fighting patriarchy has also changed.

Chakravarti (1993, p. 580) infers that “the first large group to be enslaved in early Indian history [was] women as there are more frequent references to ‘dasis’ [female slaves] than ‘dasas’ [male slaves]” in the Rig Vedic literature. The Rig Vedic period ended around 600 BCE, when the Buddhist period began. Punnika, the slave-turned-nun who reproached the *brahman*, was a victim of this most severe manifestation of patriarchy – women were bought and sold for their utility as bearers of children and as sex objects. This was a denial to women of their most fundamental *human* right, because they were valued as commodities. Punnika escaped her reality by entering the Buddhist order, and so gained the confidence to exercise her agency role. She rebuked a *brahman*, a man who enjoyed the highest standing in the community that enslaved her. It was only by exiting society, so to speak, that Punnika and others like her were able to have their voices heard and fight patriarchy.

Later, instead of being treated as commodities, women were treated as members of the family whose movements had to be strictly controlled. Since women bore children, their sexual alliances determined the caste purity of a family line, and caste purity has been of supreme importance to all castes according to the *brahmanical* texts (Chakravarti 1993, p. 579) through the Buddhist period all the way till present times. These constraints imposed on women’s options in all areas of their lives were contested by Buddhist nuns, *Bhakti* poets and writers of the colonial period.

Literacy was a sign of the elite in pre-independent India. Two per cent of the adult female population and ten per cent of the adult male population were literate in India in 1910 (Census of India 1911, Vol. I, Part I, p. 293). These numbers were lower still in earlier years. So throughout this entire stretch of history considered in this chapter, anyone desirous of communicating with large groups of people used poetry, maybe set to music. Often this poetry passed down several generations orally before being committed to script. The oral tradition of a community is both a reflection of, and has an influence on, its guiding beliefs and ideals. Singing or hearing folk songs in which women are represented as being capable of the same religious attainment as men, or where women are encouraged to be assertive and independent, would have diminished the force and influence of the patriarchy ordained by tradition. Given that having their voices heard and seeing women’s lives change for the better were some of the aims of several of the women discussed in this chapter, their agency role took shape in their poetry and lyrical compositions that were repeated and imbibed by the masses.

It is only during the late nineteenth century that women could expect to communicate through writing. The publication, circulation and readership of newspapers and magazines showed a sharp increase near the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Annual Reports of the Post Office of India). This gave a boost to the struggle for national independence. Reach of the written word was certainly limited; but not as limited as the literacy numbers would suggest, because there was a village culture of reading the news and other information aloud in community spaces, and sharing stories (Ahmed 1995, p. 303). Discussion of political issues has long been an Indian hobby. Women's role in the independence movement is linked in an important way with their fight against patriarchy (discussed in Bharat forthcoming, and Forbes 1998, 2005). The urgent need to fight British rule drew women outside their homes and, importantly, legitimised their social and political presence in the eyes of society. Women's agency gained a great deal of force in this period. They were negotiating directly with the foreign government to ban child marriage and to grant women the vote. They were making public speeches to encourage women to exert themselves. They set up schools and shelters for destitute women to afford them the life of respect that tradition denied them.

Without these varied exhortations, the faith in women's agency would be misplaced. Urvashi Butalia (1993, WS13) questions the assumption that agency is a force for good. She points out that "women's loyalties could have shifted, that they were not undifferentiated and homogeneous, that their interests could tie in with those of their men and their class". These are references to women who encouraged their men to slaughter the girls in the family to preclude religious conversion during the communal riots of the 1940s, they resisted offering water to a dying person of a different religion, they assisted their husbands in looting during social tensions. These women were "acting upon some kind of a *perceived* notion of the good of their community [emphasis added]" (WS15), so reinforcing Sen's suggestion that women supported events or persons they perceived as valuable, even to their own detriment.

The only way to then distinguish true agency that might foster gender equality, from reactions born out of internalised oppression that might only sustain inequalities, is education and informed debate. To restore some faith in women's agency, all the women's writing presented in this chapter exemplifies a positive kind of agency that is a force for overcoming oppression.

This understanding of women's status in society and their agency in the fight against patriarchy afforded by looking into literature produced by women is not possible by looking at the more abundant literature produced by men. For the modern scholar, ancient Hindu religious and secular texts, written presumably by (*brahman*) men, paint a picture of precisely the patriarchal norms that women were struggling against.<sup>22</sup> The *Therigatha* is the first Indian text to bring up the concern of patriarchy and to demand gender equality. *Bhakti* literature produced by men was not so closed to the concerns of women and other oppressed groups. The literature produced by men during the nationalist period is more varied in its concern for women. There were reformers who worked unstintingly to diminish the horrors of patriarchy, and several others (reformers and obscurantists) who upheld patriarchy as essential to maintain social order. Many simply ignored the issue. For women, patriarchy pervaded every aspect of their lives and livelihoods and they could not possibly ignore it, whether they produced poetry or prose, whether they wrote of reality or created fiction, whether their subject was religious or political or social.

The thoughts of artists of all persuasions and activists in all areas of public life are often at the forefront of social change. Given that it has been mostly women who have written about and against patriarchy, it can be concluded that it is women's writings and activities that have been responsible for any expansion of women's freedoms through history.

## Notes

- 1 Assistant Professor, Bengaluru Dr B. R. Ambedkar School of Economics, India. I am extremely grateful to Kirsten for her patience with my several drafts. Her unbelievable sincerity in reviewing my work has only helped it improve. Any shortcomings are my responsibility. I am thankful to Susan for putting me in touch with challenging research opportunities. I thank former colleagues at Christ University, specifically Divya, Gerard Sir and Adaina. I thank Ritu, Nadkarni Sir, Susan, Mary Ma'm, Asha and Deshpande Sir for comments on drafts. I relied heavily on the library resources at Christ. I thank my family.
- 2 The additional distinction Sen makes between achievement and freedom in each of the notions of wellbeing and agency is key to being able to measure welfare. As measurement is not the focus in the current work, this distinction is brushed aside.
- 3 Babar from central Asia established the *Mughal* Empire in India in the early sixteenth century CE. His grandson, Akbar was the most popular *Mughal* emperor and ruled for half a century. The eighteenth-century emperors were reduced to nominal heads by the East India Company.
- 4 In Buddhist literature, the only occupations attributed to women were courtesan and prostitute because these were the only women who were financially independent. Other women were identified as being related to a man. Significantly, when the first elections were being planned in Independent India in 1950 (Guha 2007, p. 144), a problem faced by Sukumar Sen, the first Chief Election Commissioner, was that women refused to give their own names to be registered as voters, but insisted on being put down as related to a man.
- 5 Robert W. Dimand identified in email correspondence that Rhys Davids is the original translator into English of the ancient Buddhist nuns' poetry. As is apparent in Dimand (2000), Rhys Davids was a Pali scholar from Great Britain in the early 1900s and brought a feminist lens to her work which might influence the analysis in this chapter.
- 6 Bahinabai and the calf were deeply attached to each other. At a crowded sermon by Jayaram Swami, the calf was dragged outside the seating area. Bahinabai and the calf both wept. The Swami, "discerner of the soul", had the calf brought back in and the sermon continued with the calf "showing intense attention". Later as Bahinabai prostrated herself at the Swami's feet, the calf did the same. "When the [sermon] was ended, the people went away, remarking to themselves on the event, such as had never occurred before" (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, pp. 111–12).
- 7 The more commonly used anglicised adjective is Bengali.
- 8 *Nibbana* is the highest level of religious attainment in Buddhism.
- 9 A term used multiple times in the Pali language texts of the age, probably to be loosely interpreted as "many."
- 10 Muktabai attained the highest state of realisation, when the body ceases to have an independent existence and is united with the Divine, at eighteen and she then chose to become one with nature and die.
- 11 A fifteenth-century male poet Kabir is credited with the famous couplet which says that a teacher should be respected more than God, because it is the teacher who teaches one about God.
- 12 Hoskote (Ded and Hoskote 2013, pp. xxvii–xxviii) chooses to diverge from the traditional classification. He claims that Lal Ded was not a *Bhakti* poet-saint, because her method was more focused on attaining divine realisation through knowledge rather than purely through devotion.
- 13 The idea of worship through *bhakti* has been incorporated into the fold of formal Hinduism in modern times.
- 14 Hindu *brahman* men, after an initiation process, wear a sacred white thread over one shoulder and across their chest.
- 15 The grandfather of Emperor Augungzeb.
- 16 The fine was set at "three to six panas". Five panas was the monthly salary for the lowest paid (Rangarajan 1992, p. 110).
- 17 There is no consensus on when the Arthashastra was written. Dates range from fourth century BCE to second century CE (Habib and Jha 2004, p. 48).
- 18 There seems to be some doubt about whether Hannah Catherine Mullens was Indian or British, though it is certain that she was born in Calcutta, married a Christian missionary, and spent almost all her life in Calcutta (Tharu and Lalita Vol. I 2015, p. 203). This is reason enough for me to include her in this paper on *Indian* women's economic thought.
- 19 The *pardah* is a veil that women in many traditional societies must use. They are expected to not appear in public, especially in front of distantly related and unrelated males.

- 20 A custom that required a widow to immolate herself on the funeral pyre with her husband.
- 21 The Hindu Child Marriage Bill was proposed by a teacher, judge and politician Harbilas Sarma. The Act continued to be known by his name, Sarma Act.
- 22 With the notable exception of the *Upanishads*, which discuss spirituality, regardless of the gender identity or social standing of the seeker.

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*Appendix 1.1* List of women writers cited, with some details

Name	Period	Category
Abala Bose	1865–1951	Colonial
Akkamahadevi	Twelfth century CE	Bhakti
Atukuri Molla	Sixteenth century CE	Bhakti
Bahinabai	1628–1700	Bhakti
Chandrabati	ca. 1550–1600	Bhakti
Darisi Annapurnamma	1907–1931	Colonial
Hannah Catherine Mullens	1826–1861	Colonial
Krupa Sattianadan	1862–1894	Colonial
Lal Ded (Lalla)	Fourteenth century CE	Bhakti
Mahapajapati Gautami	Fifth century BCE	Buddhist
Mrinalini Sen	?	Colonial
Muhammadi Begam	1878–1908	Colonial
Muktabai	Thirteenth century CE	Bhakti
Mutta	Fifth century BCE	Buddhist
Nur Jahan	1577–1645	Mughal
Patacara	Fifth century BCE	Buddhist
Punnika	Fifth century BCE	Buddhist
Rassundari Devi	1810–?	Colonial
Razia Sajjad Zaheed	1917–1979	Colonial/Independent India
Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain	1880–1932	Colonial
Saraladevi Chaudhurani	1872–1945	Colonial
Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani	1861–1920	Colonial
Sarojini Naidu	1879–1949	Colonial
Savitribai Phule	1831–1897	Colonial
Soma	Fifth century BCE	Buddhist
Sulekha Sanyal	1928–1962	Colonial/Independent India
Sumangala's mother	Fifth century BCE	Buddhist
Waheed Jahan Begam	?	Colonial
Zeb-un-Nissa	1638–1702	Mughal