



Research Paper

A Historical Exploration of Women's Journey: Discrimination and Development from Ancient to Modern Age with Special Reference to India

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive examination of the historical journey of Indian women, focusing on the themes of discrimination, conditions, and development spanning from ancient to modern times. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates analysis of historical records, literature, and socio-cultural perspectives, this study uncovers the diverse and complex challenges faced by Indian women throughout different historical periods. It investigates the social, cultural, and institutional frameworks that perpetuated gender-based discrimination and shaped the living conditions of Indian women. Moreover, this article emphasizes the significant socio-economic, educational, and legal factors that influenced the progression and empowerment of Indian women over time. By critically analyzing the evolving status of Indian women, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of their struggles, accomplishments, and ongoing endeavors towards achieving gender equality. The outcomes of this study aim to provide insights and inspiration for policy interventions, social reforms, and empowerment initiatives, promoting a more inclusive and equitable society for Indian women in the future.

Keywords: Women, Discrimination, Gender Equality, Empowerment, Historical Exploration.

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I. Introduction

Historically, Indian women have played significant roles in various spheres, including politics, literature, arts, and social movements. Their contributions have shaped the cultural fabric of the nation and influenced social change. However, traditional societal structures often restricted women's agency, confining them to prescribed gender roles and limiting their access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making power.¹⁻² The condition of Indian women has undergone significant changes over the years, reflecting the complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. In ancient times, Indian society was deeply patriarchal, with women often subject to various forms of discrimination and inequality. They were assigned traditional roles primarily focused on domestic responsibilities, marriage, and childbearing, while their access to education, property rights, and decision-making power was limited.³

The exploration of Indian women also involves an examination of the prevailing social norms and cultural practices that have shaped their identities and experiences. This includes aspects such as marriage practices, dowry, gender-based violence, and the influence of religion and caste on women's lives.⁴ Furthermore, the exploration delves into the economic conditions and challenges faced by Indian women. It examines their participation in the workforce, access to resources and financial independence, and the impact of economic policies on their empowerment and socio-economic status. The political landscape and women's engagement in governance and policymaking are also crucial areas of exploration. This involves an analysis of women's representation in politics, the impact of affirmative action policies, and the role of women in shaping legislative reforms and social policies. Contemporary explorations of Indian women further address issues such as gender equality, reproductive rights, healthcare access, and the intersectionality of identities, including caste, religion, and class.⁵⁻⁷

II. Women in ancient time (6000 BCE 650 CE)

The condition of women in ancient times varied significantly depending on the specific culture, region, and era. It is important to note that the following information provides a general overview, but there were exceptions and variations within different societies.

2.1. Mesopotamia

In ancient Mesopotamia, women had some legal rights and could own property, engage in business, and participate in certain religious roles. However, they generally held lower social status compared to men and were expected to fulfill domestic roles. Women in Mesopotamia (**Fig. 1**), which encompassed the regions of modern-day Iraq, Syria, and parts of Iran and Turkey, played significant roles in the ancient societies that flourished there. While societal norms varied across different city-states and periods, women in Mesopotamia enjoyed certain rights and privileges, although they were still subject to gender-based limitations.⁸



Fig. 1: Mesopotamian women.

In Mesopotamian society, women had legal rights and could own and manage property. They could engage in trade, run businesses, and participate in economic activities. Some women held high-status positions as priestesses in temples, where they played vital roles in religious rituals and ceremonies. Marriage and family life were important for women in Mesopotamia. Marriage was typically arranged by families, and women assumed the role of wives and mothers. While men held greater authority within the household, women had influence and decision-making power within their spheres.⁹

Education was accessible to some women, particularly those from elite families. They could receive formal education in reading, writing, and mathematics. Female deities held prominent positions in religious beliefs, and women were often depicted in artistic representations engaging in various activities, including weaving, nursing, and participating in religious ceremonies. Social status, wealth, and geographical location influenced the freedoms and opportunities available to women in Mesopotamia.¹⁰

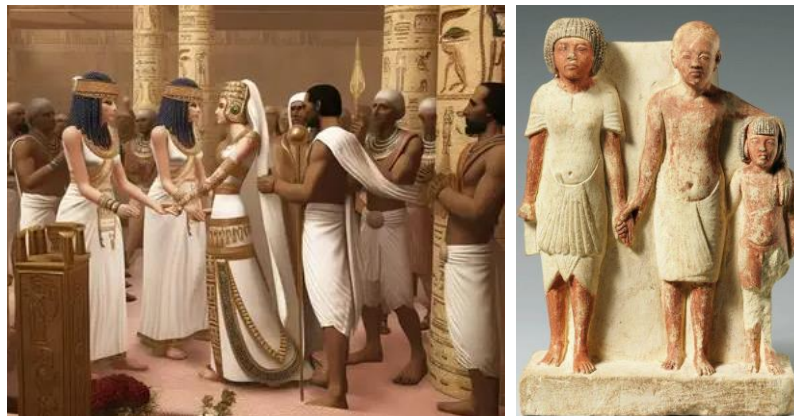
2.2. Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egyptian women (**Fig. 2**) enjoyed relatively more rights and privileges compared to some other ancient societies. They could own property, inherit, and initiate divorce. Some women even held high-ranking positions, such as pharaohs or priestesses. Women in ancient Egypt held a unique and elevated position compared to many other ancient civilizations. They enjoyed more legal rights and opportunities for social and economic participation. The roles and experiences of women in ancient Egypt varied depending on factors such as social class, wealth, and marital status. They could also enter into legal contracts, including marriage contracts, and initiate divorce.



Fig. 2: Ancient Egyptian women.

This legal agency allowed some women to accumulate wealth and achieve financial independence.¹¹ Marriage and family were highly valued in ancient Egypt (**Fig. 3**). Women played crucial roles as wives and mothers, ensuring the continuation of family lines. Women had the right to choose their partners, and marriage was typically a monogamous union. While men generally held positions of authority within the household, women maintained significant influence and respected roles as mothers and guardians of the home. Education was accessible to both boys and girls in ancient Egypt, and some women received formal education. They could become skilled in reading, writing, mathematics, and various artistic and intellectual pursuits. Education prepared elite women, such as princesses and members of the royal court, for positions of influence and authority.¹²



(a)

(b)

Fig. 3: Ancient Egyptian wedding (a) and family.

2.3. Ancient Greece

Women in ancient Greece had a limited role in public and political life, as Greek society was highly patriarchal. Their rights and status varied among city-states and over time, with notable differences between the lives of women in Athens and Sparta. In Athens, women were primarily confined to the domestic sphere. They were expected to manage the household, raise children, and perform household tasks. Athenian women had few legal rights and were subject to the authority of their male guardians, typically their fathers or husbands (**Fig. 4**). They had limited access to education, and their role in society was primarily as wives and mothers. In contrast, women in Sparta enjoyed greater freedom and participated more actively in public life. Spartan women received physical training and education alongside men, with an emphasis on producing strong and healthy offspring. They had more independence and were involved in athletic and social activities. Spartan women held property rights, and some exercised economic control in their households.

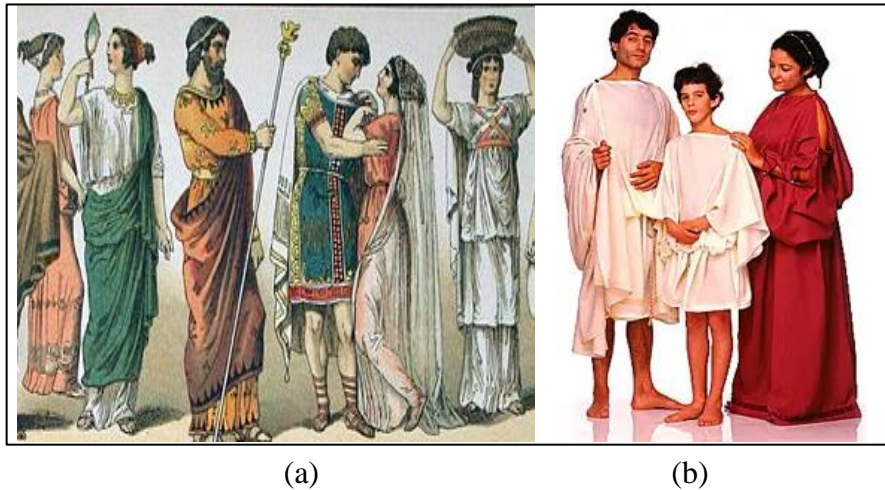


Fig. 4: Ancient Greece wedding (a) and family.

Religion played a significant role in the lives of Greek women. They participated in religious festivals and held positions as priestesses in certain cults. Women's religious activities were seen as essential in maintaining the favor of the gods and ensuring the well-being of their families and the community. Literary works from ancient Greece, such as the works of Homer and the dramas of Euripides, often depicted women in roles that reflected societal expectations and norms. They were portrayed as wives, mothers, and objects of beauty and desire.

2.4. Ancient Rome

In ancient Rome, women's status varied depending on their social class. Upper-class women had more rights and freedoms, including the ability to own property and engage in business. However, they were still subject to male authority and limited in political participation. Women in ancient Rome had a complex and evolving role within society. Their status and rights varied over time, influenced by social, cultural, and legal factors. While some Roman women enjoyed certain privileges and freedoms, they were ultimately subordinate to men and subject to the patriarchal structure of Roman society. During the early Republic, women had more independence and legal rights. They could own property, engage in business, and participate in religious ceremonies. Some women from noble families had access to education and played influential roles in politics and society.¹³ The concept of pater familias, where the male head of the family had complete authority over household members, limited women's autonomy. Women were expected to fulfill the role of wife and mother, managing domestic affairs and raising children. Marriage was a crucial aspect of a woman's life in ancient Rome. It was an institution focused on procreation and the continuation of family lineage (Fig. 5).¹⁴



Fig. 5: Ancient Roman wedding (a) and family (b).

Women were often married at a young age, and their primary responsibility was to bear and raise children. Adultery by women was strictly condemned, while men had more freedom in their sexual pursuits. Elite women in ancient Rome had access to education and could participate in cultural and intellectual activities. Some notable women, such as the poet Sappho and the philosopher Hypatia, achieved recognition in their respective fields.¹⁵

2.5. Ancient China

In ancient China, women played a significant role in society, but their status and roles were largely influenced by Confucian ideals and patriarchal norms prevalent during that time. Confucianism emphasized the importance of hierarchy and filial piety, which placed men at the top of the social order.¹⁶ Women were expected to be subordinate to men and fulfill their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. Their primary purpose was to support the family and produce male heirs. Marriage was a crucial aspect of a woman's life, and arranged marriages were common. Women had little say in choosing their partners and were expected to obey their husbands and in-laws. Their virtue and fidelity were highly valued, and any transgressions were met with severe consequences. While women had limited access to education, some elite families did provide education to their daughters (**Fig. 6**). However, the curriculum primarily focused on household management, moral virtues, and the arts rather than academic subjects.¹⁷



Fig. 6: Chinese family in ancient times.

Women from lower social classes often worked in agriculture, weaving, or as domestic servants. However, there were also exceptions to these gender roles. Some women achieved positions of power and influence, such as Empress Dowager Cixi and Wu Zetian, who became the only female emperor in Chinese history.¹⁸ Despite these restrictions, women exerted significant influence within the domestic sphere. They managed household finances, raised children, and played a crucial role in maintaining family harmony. Women also participated in religious and cultural activities, including the practice of ancestor worship.¹⁹

III. WOMEN IN INDIA

3.1. During ancient times

In ancient India, women occupied a diverse range of roles and experienced varying degrees of rights and freedoms depending on their social, economic, and cultural context. The status and position of women in ancient India were shaped by religious, philosophical, and societal factors.²⁰ Hinduism, which was the dominant religion, played a significant role in shaping gender norms and expectations.²¹ Marriages in ancient India were considered a significant institution that involved various rituals, customs, and social norms. The institution of marriage was deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, with the primary purpose being the continuation of family lineage, procreation, and the consolidation of social and economic ties.²²

Arranged marriages were the norm in ancient India, where families played a central role in selecting suitable partners for their children (**Fig. 7a**). The choice of a spouse was influenced by factors such as social status, caste, family reputation, economic considerations, and horoscope compatibility.²³ Polygamy was practiced by some sections of society, particularly among the elite and ruling classes. The practice of abducting girls for marriage did exist in certain regions and among certain communities, although it is important to note that it was not a universal or dominant practice throughout the entire subcontinent. This practice, known as "rakshasa vadha" or "rakshasa marriage," was mentioned in ancient Indian texts and epics (**Fig. 7b**). Men were allowed to have multiple wives, but it was not a common practice for the majority of the population.²⁴



Fig. 7: Arrange marriage (a) and rakshasa marriage (b) during ancient India.

The concept of pativrata (devoted wife) emphasized a woman's duty to her husband and family. In the Vedic period, women enjoyed relatively higher status and had access to education and participation in religious rituals. However, as time progressed, women's roles became more restricted, especially within the Brahminical society. The practice of child marriage, dowry system, and sati (self-immolation of widows) were prevalent in certain regions and time periods.²⁵ Ancient India was not a monolithic society, and the status and rights of women varied across different regions and time periods. In certain societies, such as the matrilineal communities of Kerala, women enjoyed greater autonomy and property rights.²⁶ Women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra were revered scholars and philosophers, contributing to the intellectual and philosophical discourse of their time. In the political sphere, some women held positions of power and authority.²⁷ For example, Queen Didda of Kashmir (**Fig. 8a**) and Queen Rudrama Devi (**Fig. 8b**) of the Kakatiya dynasty ruled independently.²⁸⁻²⁹

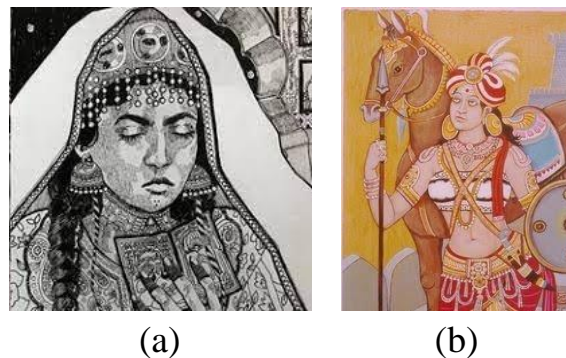


Fig. 8: Queen Didda (a) and Queen Rudrama Devi (b).

3.2. During the medieval period

During the Medieval period, which spanned roughly from the 5th to the 15th century, the socio-economic condition of women varied greatly depending on their social class, geographical location, and cultural norms. Here is an overview of women's socio-economic conditions during this period:

Noble and Aristocratic Women: Women from noble and aristocratic families held a relatively privileged position. They had access to education, received dowries, and were often involved in managing estates and land ownership. However, their primary role was still considered to be that of wives and mothers, expected to maintain social status through marriage alliances.

Peasant Women: The majority of women during the Medieval period were peasants, and their socio-economic condition was challenging. Peasant women worked alongside men in agricultural activities, performed household chores, and contributed to the family's economic survival. They had limited legal rights and were subject to the authority of their fathers or husbands.³⁰

Urban Women: In urban areas, women had more opportunities for economic participation compared to rural settings. They engaged in various occupations, such as artisans, merchants, midwives, and alewives. However, they often faced restrictions due to guild regulations and were paid less than men for similar work.³¹

Religious Women: Women who chose religious life, such as nuns, had more autonomy and access to education compared to secular women. They could pursue scholarly activities, engage in charitable work, and have some control over their own lives within the confines of religious institutions.³²

Legal Rights and Status: Women's legal rights were generally limited during the Medieval period. They had few property rights, and their rights were often subsumed under their husbands or male family members. Inheritance laws usually favored male heirs, which further marginalized women's economic prospects.³³

3.3. During modern history

During the Modern History period, spanning from the 15th century to the late 18th century, women's conditions varied greatly depending on their social status, geographical location, and cultural norms. It is important to note that women's experiences were diverse and not uniform across all regions and classes.

Social and Legal Status: Women were generally considered subordinate to men and had limited legal rights. They were often regarded as the property of their fathers or husbands. Laws and customs varied, but women typically had few property rights, limited access to education, and were excluded from political participation.³⁴

Marriage and Family: Marriage was the expected norm for women, and it was often seen as their primary purpose. Women were expected to marry and bear children to fulfill their societal roles. Marriages were often arranged by families for economic or social reasons, and women had limited agency in choosing their partners.³⁵

Education: Formal education for women was rare, especially in comparison to men. Education, if provided, focused on skills necessary for domestic duties and religious instruction. Opportunities for higher education or intellectual pursuits were limited for women during this period.³⁶

Employment and Economic Roles: Women's economic roles were primarily centered on the household and family. In rural areas, women participated in agricultural work alongside men. In urban areas, women could engage in various trades or work as apprentices or servants. However, their options for professional careers were generally restricted.³⁷

Religion and Witch Hunts: The early modern period witnessed the European witch-hunts, during which thousands of women were accused of witchcraft and subjected to persecution and execution. This led to a climate of fear and suspicion, with women often seen as inherently dangerous or linked to supernatural powers.³⁸

Intellectual and Artistic Contributions: Despite societal limitations, some women managed to make significant contributions to art, literature, and philosophy. Notable examples include artists like Artemisia Gentileschi, writers like Aphra Behn, and philosophers like Mary Astell.³⁹

Feminist Movements: While the term "feminism" did not exist in its modern sense during this period, there were some early expressions of women's rights and gender equality. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment thinkers began questioning traditional gender roles and advocating for women's education and social reforms.⁴⁰

3.4. Between 17th to 18^h century

During the Mughal Empire (**Fig. 7a**) and the reign of Shivaji Maharaj (**Fig. 7b**) in Maharashtra, the lives of women were influenced by various factors, including social norms, religious practices, and the political context of the time. Here's an overview of women's lives during these periods:

3.4.1. Mughal Empire era (16 - 17th century)

The Mughals were a powerful Muslim dynasty that ruled over the Indian subcontinent from the 16th to the 19th century.⁴¹

Purdah System: The Mughal society followed the purdah system, which involved the seclusion of women from unrelated men and the covering of their bodies. Elite women, such as those from the royal families and aristocracy, practiced purdah more strictly, limiting their interactions with the outside world.⁴²

Royal Women: Women from the Mughal royal families often held positions of influence and power. Some women, like Nur Jahan, exerted political authority and played active roles in the administration. However, their power and involvement varied depending on their individual circumstances and the policies of the ruling emperor.⁴³

Influence of Persian Culture: Persian culture, which heavily influenced Mughal society, introduced concepts such as adab (etiquette) and tehzeeb (refinement). This cultural influence impacted the lives of women, emphasizing elegance, grace, and proficiency in arts and literature.⁴⁴

Patronage of the Arts: Women in the Mughal court often played important roles as patrons of the arts. They supported and encouraged the development of various art forms, including miniature painting, poetry, music, and dance.⁴⁵

3.4.2. Shivaji Maharaj's Era (16 - 17th century in Maharashtra)

Shivaji Maharaj was a legendary Indian warrior and the founder of the Maratha Empire. He valiantly fought against Mughal rule and established a strong and independent kingdom in western India. Shivaji Maharaj's military strategies, administrative reforms, and emphasis on cultural and religious tolerance made him a revered figure and an iconic symbol of Maratha pride and sovereignty.⁴⁶

Women in Maratha Society: Maratha society, under the rule of Shivaji Maharaj, exhibited a relatively more egalitarian approach compared to some other contemporary societies. Women had greater mobility, involvement

in economic activities, and participation in the defense of the kingdom. The Marathas recognized the contributions of women and valued their role in society.⁴⁷

Administrators and Warriors: Shivaji Maharaj had female administrators, known as "mavalis," who managed forts and territories. Some women, like Jijabai (Shivaji's mother) and Tarabai, played significant roles in politics and administration. Shivaji also encouraged the training of women in martial arts, allowing them to actively participate in defense activities.⁴⁸

Social Reforms: Shivaji Maharaj implemented social reforms to protect women's rights. He worked to abolish practices like child marriage and enforced punishment for offenses against women, such as dowry harassment.⁴⁹

Valuing Women's Contributions: Shivaji Maharaj recognized the importance of women in society and acknowledged their contributions. He honored and respected women, and his policies aimed to create an inclusive and progressive society.⁵⁰

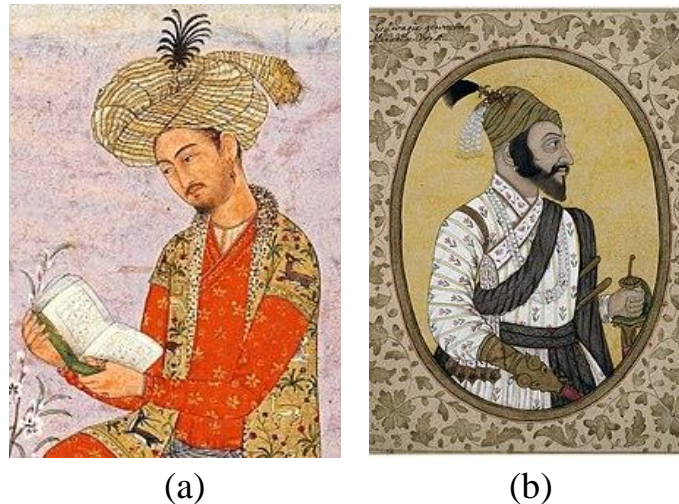


Fig. 7: Mughal emperor Babar (a) and Maratha emperor Shivaji Maharaj (b).

3.4.3. During peshwai in Maharashtra (16 - 17th century in Maharashtra)

During the Peshwa era in Maharashtra (approximately from the early 18th century to the early 19th century), the lives of women varied depending on their social class and caste.⁵¹

Upper-Class Women: Women belonging to the upper-class families, including the families of the Peshwas and aristocracy, had relatively more privileges and access to resources. They were often educated in subjects like music, dance, and literature. However, their primary role was seen as managing the household and raising children. They were expected to follow strict codes of conduct and observe purdah (seclusion) in the presence of men outside their families.⁵²

Caste and Social Restrictions: Caste and social restrictions played a significant role in shaping women's lives during this period. Women from lower castes and marginalized communities faced more restrictions and limitations. They had fewer opportunities for education, limited mobility, and were subject to stricter social norms.⁵³

Marriages and Family Life: Marriages were often arranged based on social and economic considerations, including alliances between families. Child marriages were prevalent, with girls getting married at a young age. Polygamy was practiced among the upper classes, although it was not widespread. Women were expected to be dutiful wives, manage households, and bear children to continue the family lineage.⁵⁴

Sati and Widowhood: The practice of sati, where widows self-immolated on their husband's funeral pyre, was prevalent during this period. While it is important to note that not all widows practiced sati, the pressure to conform to societal expectations and the stigma associated with widowhood were significant. Widows often faced social isolation, had limited rights, and were expected to live a life of austerity.⁵⁵

Education and Artistic Pursuits: Access to education for women, especially outside of the upper classes, was limited during the Peshwa era. However, there were exceptions where women from progressive families received education in fields such as music, dance, and literature. Maharashtrian culture valued artistic pursuits, and women from certain backgrounds were encouraged to develop skills in these areas.⁵⁶

Influence of Bhakti Movement: The Bhakti movement, with its emphasis on devotion and spiritual equality, provided some space for women to express themselves and challenge societal norms. Women saints and poets like Janabai and Bahinabai contributed to devotional literature and expressed their spiritual experiences.⁵⁷

Experiences of women during the Peshwa era were diverse, influenced by factors such as caste, class, and individual circumstances. The conditions and roles of women varied across different social groups, and there were exceptions and variations within these broad categories.⁵⁸

3.4. Current condition of women from 19th century

The condition of women in India has undergone significant changes since the 19th century. However, with the advent of social reform movements, such as the women's rights movement and the Indian independence movement, there has been progress in improving women's status and rights. In the post-independence era, the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights and opportunities for women.⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰ Various laws have been enacted to protect women's rights, including laws against dowry, domestic violence, and workplace harassment. Initiatives like reservation of seats for women in local government (Panchayati Raj) institutions have aimed to enhance women's political participation. Today, women in India occupy prominent positions in various fields, including politics, academia, business, and entertainment (**Fig. 9**).⁶¹⁻⁶² They have made significant contributions to society and have been recognized both nationally and internationally. However, despite progress, challenges and issues persist.



Indira Gandhi
(1st women Prime minister)



Mohana Singh
(1st Woman Fighter Pilot)



Priyanka Chopra
(Legendary Bollywood actress)

Fig. 9: Noted women personalities of India.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this historical exploration of women's journey from ancient to modern times in India reveals a complex narrative of discrimination and development. While progress has been made in improving women's rights and opportunities through social reform movements and legal reforms, persistent challenges remain. Socio-cultural norms, traditional practices, and patriarchal attitudes continue to hinder women's empowerment. The findings emphasize the need for ongoing efforts to address deeply ingrained biases, promote gender equality, and create a more inclusive society. By recognizing the historical struggles and successes, we can work towards a future where women in India enjoy equal rights, opportunities, and dignity.

Conflicts of Interests

Nil

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