

Protofeminism Women's Agency Before Modern Feminism

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1. Executive Summary

The study of history has often been one of mankind's greatest achievements with loquacious scholars, historians, and explorers delving into the lives of great kings, wars, political transformations, often sidelining the emphatic role of women that define such events. However, women have always played a leading role in shaping society, polity, culture and traditions as we see it today. This project traverses the concept of proto feminism, which refers to the anticipation of modern feminist concepts, advocating women's rights, education and autonomy before the formal feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. To explore proto-feminism and its transition, when we are defining it in relation to our primary sources, we must understand the roles of men and women in the cultures we are discussing. The concept of gender equality is a very important part of the culture of the times of the texts that will be explored in this paper. Gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same, but that their interests will be accorded equal consideration. This project hopes to throw some light upon the comprehension of such nuanced topics with the help of some fascinating sources of history exploring the aforesaid themes.

2. Understanding Proto-Feminism

Proto feminism, as a distinct class, denotes those early articulations of women's agency, autonomy and free expression that predate the organized feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. It does not refer to a coherent ideological programme but rather it refers to dispersed, yet significant moments in which women asserted intellectual, political or moral independence within deeply patriarchal systems. In the Indian context, the origins of proto feminism may be discerned through both narrative representations of female sovereignty and the emergence of women in nationalist movements. A close look of *Makers of Modern India* by Ramchandra Guha reveals contemporary perspectives of such early feminist ideologies. In *Makers of Modern India*, Guha carefully depicts a torn nation and its rise to glory, focusing on the Indian nationalist movement. Although the tome is not exclusively devoted to women, it carefully weaves a narrative of the emphatic role that women played in the socio-political atmosphere and their innumerable contributions towards nation building. Debates around female education, legal rights of the girl child, and widow remarriage—initially discussed by male reformers, gradually expand discursive space towards women to articulate their political position. The emergence of women as writers, thinkers, political reformers during the late colonial period signal the maturation of proto feminism thought. Proto feminism here originates as the reconfiguration of the quintessential Indian naari into a women shaped and molded by power, rational thoughts and debates.

3. Women in Ancient Indian Society

Women in Indian Society have historically occupied a position that is both indispensable and complex; they have been central in the preservation of societal structures, familial relations and culture, yet often marginalized among the wider mix. A closer looking of Children's History of India by Subhadra Sen Gupta, which provides a brief and lucid introduction to Indian history, allows us to infer that the story of Bharat cannot be fully comprehended without recognizing the immeasurable roles and contributions of women. In ancient India, women were held in high esteem and were recognized for making major contributions to the health and happiness of their families and communities. Within society, the ladies were accorded a high standing, which contributed to their feelings of gratification and contentment. They were given the chance to achieve high intellectual and spiritual standards, which were made available to them. During this period, there were a significant number of female rishis. The more affluent groups held the belief in polygamy, while the majority of people practiced monogamy. Both sati practice and child marriage were uncommon during this period. They were the nucleus of economic, social, and cultural life within their households, preserving rituals and transmitting values to their future generations. Their contributions to agrarian, artisanal, handloom industries further prove their non-dependence on the male members of the family.

4. Education, Religion and Intellectual Agency

Education is perhaps one of the base pillars of a profeminist thought. Formal education was largely denied to women and those who did crave for it, acquired it by means of self-learning. Rashsundari Debi, was a woman from Bengal who taught herself to read and right in the secrecy of her conservative household's kitchen. She later wrote *Amar Jiban*, the first full-length autobiography composed by and Indian woman. Education allowed women to write, teach, govern, and argue for their own civil liberties, challenging the belief that intellectual ability was exclusive to men. Durgabai Deshmukh overcame restrictions on girls' schooling through self-education and later used her learning to advocate strongly for women's edification. Ammu Swaminathan used her education to move beyond domestic roles, participate in the freedom struggle, and help shape India's democratic institutions through leadership.¹

Religion also functioned as a space for resistance rather than submission. Spiritual traditions allowed women to question social norms and claim moral authority independent of familial or marital roles. While patriarchal interpretations limited women, religious belief and moral authority allowed them to speak, lead, and serve publicly without rejecting tradition. Faith legitimised women's education, ethical reasoning, and social reform work, giving them accepted platforms to challenge gender hierarchies. Begum Qudsia broke religious barriers by asserting an independent political voice as a Muslim woman and prioritising national unity and equal citizenship over sectarian or gender-based limitations.¹

Intellectual agency in profeminism refers to women's ability to think independently, question social norms, and assert authority through reason, education, and ethical judgment. Even without formal rights, women used writing, debate, reform work, and political participation to challenge assumptions about female inferiority. Rather than seeking equality through protest alone, profeminist women demonstrated it through competence and clarity of thought, using intellect as a practical tool to negotiate power within existing social and political structures.

5. Social Restrictions and Patriarchy

The Indian civilization, like many other ancient societies, might be described as having a patriarchal structure. Within the context of the patriarchal society, the most important factors that were considered were sexuality, reproduction, and the development of social relationships. The prominence provided to the women was because their participation in the performance of these responsibilities was regarded as being significant. On the other hand, there were regulations and policies that were developed that prevented women from exercising certain rights and opportunities and regarded them to be subordinate to males. These rules and policies were formulated. The more covert manifestation of patriarchy was seen in the form of symbols that sent signals about the subordinated position of women. The stories that emphasized self-sacrifice were how this message was conveyed. After the conclusion of the Vedic period, women gradually lost their social and religious privileges owing to discrimination. They were barred from participating in any social, religious, or cultural activities whatsoever. multitude of elements, including social structure, cultural norms, the value system, and societal expectations, all played a part in determining the status and position of women in ancient India. Changes do not come about as quickly in a society's norms, values, principles, and standards as the changes that come about within the social structure because of the development of technology, modernization, and globalization. This is because the norms, values, principles, and standards of a society are more intangible. Women were denied the ability to own property, which was the primary factor that contributed to their dependency on their fathers, husbands, and sons. In addition, women were not permitted to vote. They were no longer able to maintain their independence and instead became reliant on the male-dominated society. The patriarchal system underpins not just the social, cultural, and religious aspects of Indian culture, but also the structure of the society itself.

6. Women in Medieval India: The Mughal Period

The position of women in the Indian society changed considerably with the coming of Mughals. The social laws and customs which evolved in the changed set-up of things stamped many a times the women with the stigma of mental deficiency and created in them a profound sense of inferiority complex. Under Mughals a healthier tradition came to prevail among the Indian aristocracy. The ladies of the royal harem of the Emperor Humayun used to mix freely with their male friends and visitors. They sometimes went out in male garments, played polo, and applied themselves to music. They were also well versed in the use of pellet bows and other practical arts. There is very little information about women in lower walks of life, but probably they approximated to the standards of women higher than themselves in status. There had been definite deterioration in the position of women in the centuries that followed the Vedic Age. In the ancient period, the existence of purdah, though not very common, cannot be completely denied. The practice of strict veiling of women was the common practice among the Muhammadans in their native lands. With the advent of Turks in India, it was also adopted by the Hindu women as a protective measure to save their honor at the hands of the foreign invaders. The system of purdah was prevalent under the Mughals, as under the Delhi Sultans. Women in Medieval India wielded a considerable influence in society and played a significant role in the development of social, cultural and philosophical values and trends and held a respectable position society. A change in the status of

women came as a sequel to the advent of the Mughals in India. There had been a growing emphasis on the social, economic, political and cultural life of women in general as well as that on royal women of the Mughal period. In Mughal India the women's participation in politics and their position depended on their personal ability rather than their blood relations, like Maham Anaga, who played an important role and exercised an unbounded influence in the harem and over Akbar himself. The contribution and the interference of the women of ruling classic contemporary politics reflects the position of women. The senior Mughal women are recorded ubiquitously as having played a central part in the affairs of peace-making. In some cases, they were even handed over the charges of the government.

7. Royal Women and Political Influence

The history of the Mughal Empire [1526-1857] is often narrated through emperors, military conquests and administrative reforms. However, the women of the Mughal harem- queens, princesses and royal consorts played a significant role in shaping the political, cultural and economic landscape of the empire. Examining the lives and contributions of major Mughal queens including Hamida Bano Begum, Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum, Salima Sultan Begum, Mariam-ul-Zamani [Jodh Bai], Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara Begum and Zeb-un-Nisa, focusing on their political agency, architectural patronage, literacy and economic contributions, literary and economic contributions. Drawing upon primary chronicles such as the Babur Nama, Akbar Nama and Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, this project establishes that Mughal queens were not just passive royal figures but influential contributors to imperial governance, diplomatic strategies and the cultural landscape of the empire. Hamida Banu Begum helped stabilize the empire during its early struggles, Mariam-Uz-Zamani strengthened ties with Rajput kingdoms and became a major trader, Nur Jahan issued royal decrees and orders, Jahanara Begum supported architecture and Sufi culture, and Zeb-un-Nisa enriched literature with her poetry. Their involvement shows that the Mughal empire was shaped not only by its emperors but also by remarkable royal women whose impact can still be seen in India's cultural and historical legacy.

8. Ordinary Women in Medieval Society

During the Mughal Empire, the status of women in Indian society changed dramatically. The evolution of social laws and practices resulted in changes in features that reflected advancements in women's position. Women's intellectual culture differed depending on their social level. Women in rural regions were generally living in deplorable circumstances, with little space to foster their cultural and social growth. The primary focus of rural women was on their household obligations. They were mostly involved in agricultural and farming techniques, home tasks, taking care of their family members' wants and requirements, and engaging in certain recreational and leisure activities. Women from the higher classes were interested in honing their talents and abilities. They also registered in educational institutions and training centers to further their education. Within the households, the purdah system was prevalent. Due to this system, they were deprived of public observation. All individuals, irrespective of their communities,

categories, and backgrounds aspire to sustain their living conditions in a well-organized manner and enrich their overall quality of lives. To achieve these goals, they need to socialize and interact with others. When the women will be confined within the enclosures, screens, curtains and purdah, it is

apparent that they will experience number of problems and barriers within the course of sustenance of their living conditions in an efficient manner. The seclusion of women from public observation was recognized and is one of the major barriers experienced by them within the course of their progression. Therefore, deprivation of women from public observation was the major problem experienced by women in medieval India.

9. Transition to Modern India

Indian feminism is not a new phenomenon instead as old the western women's campaign for their emancipation from hegemonic forces. The social structure of India is very much patriarchal. Here women play the role of the 'other'; patriarchal institutions not only force them to assume the secondary position but also justify male domination over women. She is assigned a relative position through the process of continuous social and cultural conditioning. In India the female oppression has started from the pre-historic period. From the Vedic period to the period of the Nationalist movement, India has a rich and dedicated history that is marked by a strong contribution by women of our country. Despite existing social and cultural barriers in the society, women under imperial rule had actively made contributions for the general cause of freedom struggle. Feminism in India has various dimensions and courts in India are shouldered with this responsibility to promote their interest. Chief Justice of India, DY Chandrachud, quoted that "feminism is a lot about disrupting the existing social hierarchies, and that is what constitution intends to do. Transformation involves disruption of existing social structures" The core idea that it represents is the emancipation and liberation of women from traditional social rigidities and suggest the idea of change and transformation in the same direction.

10. Women and Social Reform Movements

"Although early reform initiatives emerged within colonial constraints and male-dominated reformist frameworks, women reformers progressively transformed these movements by asserting agency, redefining notions of social justice, and extending reform agendas beyond elite concerns."

-Maurya Janhavi Ram Singh, Chabbi Ram Singh ([International Journal for Research Trends in Social Science & Humanities](#))

Education emerged as one of the most significant instruments through which women engaged with and reshaped social reform. By advocating literacy and formal schooling for girls, women directly challenged dominant assumptions that education was either unnecessary or socially dangerous for them. Access to learning enabled women to occupy roles as teachers, writers, and reformers, through which they articulated critiques of practices such as child marriage, purdah, and widespread illiteracy. In doing so, they disrupted prevailing notions of intellectual incapacity and gradually normalised the presence of women as thinkers, educators, and leaders within public discourse.

Alongside education, women's involvement in social service and welfare initiatives constituted a crucial dimension of reform. Their work in healthcare, rural development, and community upliftment addressed the material and moral needs of marginalised populations. Because such efforts were framed around care, service, and ethical responsibility, they were often socially sanctioned, allowing women to enter public life while still drawing upon culturally recognised forms of moral authority.

Engagement in reform movements also expanded women's political and intellectual agency. Through organising meetings, drafting petitions, and participating in legislative debates, women demonstrated their capacity for rational judgment and leadership. Collectively, women's reformist interventions laid the groundwork for greater gender equality and the later emergence of explicitly feminist thought.

Durgabai Deshmukh grew up facing restrictions on girls' education but taught herself through determination and reading, later becoming a key social reformer. She worked actively for women's education, child welfare, and social justice, and played an important role in national institutions after independence. As a member of the Constituent Assembly, she contributed to discussions on governance and social policy, proving women's capability in law-making and administration.

11. Women in Nationalist Narratives

Women occupy a complex and often symbolic position in nationalist narratives. During nationalist movements, women were frequently portrayed as cultural icons representing tradition, sacrifice, and moral purity, embodying the nation as a nurturing mother figure. At the same time, many women actively participated in the freedom struggle through protests, organisation, writing, and political leadership. Their contributions extended beyond symbolic representation to direct involvement in mobilising communities and shaping nationalist agendas. However, nationalist histories have often prioritised male leadership, marginalising women's political agency. Re-examining nationalist narratives reveals that women were not merely passive symbols of the nation but active agents who negotiated public and private roles, challenged gender norms, and contributed significantly to the process of nation-building.

A clear example of women in nationalist narratives is Bharat Mata, who symbolised the nation as a sacred mother figure during the freedom movement. Portrayed as a goddess-like woman, Bharat Mata represented sacrifice, purity, and devotion, encouraging citizens to serve the nation as one would serve one's mother. While this image inspired mass participation and emotional unity, it also reinforced traditional gender ideals by associating women primarily with spirituality and self-sacrifice rather than political leadership.

12. Absence and Silence in Historical Writing

Despite the surfacing of new concerns and a new will amongst a section of historians, there are many inherent problems in writing a history that is genuinely inclusive of women. The sources of history, here as elsewhere, reflect the concerns of those who have wielded power. It is sometimes argued, with justification, that the notion of time, and therefore of history, in the dominant Indian tradition, which may also be called the Brahmanical tradition, has been cyclical and not linear, making for a crucial difference in the understanding of history. Nationalist history was primarily focused on political history (kings, conquests, invasions, as in the case of the earlier colonial history; liberal and imaginative administrators, political institutions and so on) and cultural history — mainly a detailing of achievements on the cultural front. Apart from an obsessive concern with locating and outlining idealized images and golden ages, there was almost a conscious steering away from examining internal contradictions, hierarchies along different axes, and oppressive structures. How then did the shift occur

in terms of the writing of women's history? We may attribute this to the women's movement of the 1970s which provided the context and the impetus for the emergence of women's studies in India. As Tanika Sarkar has recently pointed out, women's history as a sustained and self-conscious tradition developed from the 1970s since many feminist scholars were themselves involved in the vigorous and turbulent movements against rape, dowry and domestic violence. It was here that the contours of the multiple forms and structures of patriarchies, and the cultural practices associated with them began to be outlined through the experiences of women on the ground. These years, during the heyday of an explicitly political women's movement, and the insights derived therein, provided feminist scholars with the experiential material based on which they formulated gender as a category of analysis.

13. Representation of Women across Historic Periods

The representation of Indian women across historical periods displays the dynamic interplay between social reality and historical representation. Indian history, long dominated by winding political narratives of kings and ministers, has traditionally privileged emperors, polity and statecraft, thereby sidelining women and their experiences. Yet a closer examination of ancient, medieval, colonial and postcolonial narratives depicts a bigger picture—the Indian women have never been passive subjects of history. Rather, their representation hangs in the pendulum of reverence and invalidation. In ancient India, textual and cultural traditions represent women who participated in intellectual and spiritual life, engaging in monkhood and austerities. At the same time, prescriptive texts gradually normalized patriarchal norms that restricted female autonomy. This duality is often depicted as an obscure reality—either women were in the 'golden age of respect' or uniformly suppressed. The medieval period adds another heightened layer to this subject. Court historians and Persian chroniclers occasionally document influential royal women who shaped diplomacy and succession. However, these figures are portrayed as having achieved success through dynastic necessity rather than systematic excellence. Meanwhile, the everyday contributions of rural and urban women to various industries such as artisanal handwork and handlooms are forgotten. The scarcity of documentation reflects the gendered nature of record keeping. Colonial modernity marked the cornerstone of women's representation. The 'woman question' became central to debates, discussions, social reform and education. Indian women were simultaneously constructed as victims of religious discourse and oppressive traditions in nationalist rhetoric. Reform movements addressing girls' education, widow remarriage and the banning of practices like sati expanded women's visibility in public life. However, nationalist ideology often depicted womanhood as a symbol of purity and everlasting self-sacrifice.

In the 20th century, with the advent of globalization and modern technology, feminist ideologies subtly challenged these reductive portrayals. Social media and vernacular sources led to the reconstruction of these experiences across caste and regional divides. This systematic reorganization of feminist ideologies revealed the continuity of women's agency—from spiritual motherhood to a force to be reckoned with.

14. Limitations of Proto-Feminism

The analysis of primary and secondary sources reveals a deeply embedded patriarchal structure within Renaissance England, where women were legally, economically, and socially dependent on male

authority. The dominant discourse emphasized the role of women as obedient wives and silent moral guardians of the household. Family life was especially important and patriarchal. The man was the head of the family and the sole bearer of authority. Children were brought up to show respect for their parents, especially their father. The father's power and authority were recognized as part of the social order. The father was considered to have the right to arrange marriage for his daughters. The view was accepted that there should be consent from both parties to a marriage, even when it came to a Contract marriage between, but this was not always respected. The voice of women was usually not heard within the family. According to Henry Swinburne's *Treatise of Spousal or Matrimonial Contracts*, written in circa 1600, consent to marry, was legally understood to be an inward state, constituted by a sober and well-considered intention. Another popular marriage treatise was written by Robert Cleaver and published in 1603, *A In Godly Forme of Hovsehold Government*. Cleaver demonstrates the patriarchal power structure and the necessity for gendered hierarchy, advocating: "If she is not subject to her husband, to let him rule all household, especially outward affaires: if she will make head against him, and seeke to haue her owne waies, there will be doing and undoing. Things will goe backwarde, the house will come to ruine." A lot of moral treatises which were published during the Renaissance, it was asserted that 'by her speech, the wife disrupts household harmony, by her unchastity she subverts patrilineal inheritance, and by her as far as the position and expectations for women who were parts of different social strata are concerned, in the time of Shakespeare and the other playwrights of his day, inequalities between men and women were implicit. There can be no denying that there is much evidence of a history of misogyny and female oppression at that time. In fact, significantly fewer historical records have been recorded for women than for men, which is a confirmation of the prevalence of the androcentric voice in Renaissance England culture. At that time, openly oppressive and misogynistic themes were very popular, and the stories they told were historically accurate expressions of beliefs that were generally accepted. In Renaissance England, women had very few rights. Numerous religious, economic, and political factors created a wide divide between public and private life and contributed to increased domestication of women and the restriction of their economic scope.

Conclusion

The examination of proto feminism in Indian history reveals that women's agency did not originate in the 20th century with the formal articulation of feminist ideology but was instead inherently present within India's socio-political landscape across centuries. From the spiritual autonomy exercised by women within devotional traditions to the political authority wielded by medieval queens and from the gradual emergence of women in reformist discourse to the participation in rationalist debates and ideologies, the Indian woman has consistently negotiated against structures limiting her autonomy. Moreover, the study of proto feminism underscores the importance of historiography. The relative invisibility of women in conventional political narratives reflects not an absence of contribution, but the gendered priorities of historical documentation. These early manifestations of selfhood and influence constitute what may justifiably be termed proto feminism: a pre-theoretical but substantive assertion of women's capability and courage.

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