Original Article
ISSN (Online): 3049-2319

ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies
July-December 2024 1(1), 159–169

# POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIAN SOCIETY

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**Received** 25 November 2024
**Accepted** 23 December 2024
**Published** 31 December 2024

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**DOI**
10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v1.i1.2024.181

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The proposition that women held a high position in Vedic society and lost it in later centuries took its classic form in Altekar's survey and has since been challenged by Uma Chakravarti, who reads the same record through caste, property and Brahmanical patriarchy. This paper asks whether the surviving evidence supports either account and what each category of source can demonstrate. The design is descriptive-analytical and source-critical, resting on published editions, translations and scholarship, and it re-examines Vedic and Dharmaśāstric texts, the epics, Buddhist and Jaina sources, Greek and Arthaśāstra notices of the Mauryan court, and inscriptions from the Ashokan period to the Gupta age. Three findings emerge. The apparent decline owes much to a shift in the available sources, as liturgical texts that idealise women give way to legal texts that regulate them. The Eran inscription of 510 CE, usually cited as the earliest epigraphic evidence of satī, records a single woman's act without naming any practice, and the revised edition identifies the enemy in a way the 1888 translation left open. Donative inscriptions, analysed in detail by Kirit K. Shah, show women acting as patrons in the same centuries in which the normative literature restricted them. The paper concludes that a differentiated reconfiguration of gender relations, shaped by caste endogamy, property and early state formation, fits the evidence better than a general decline, although the argument applies chiefly to propertied, upper-varṇa households.

**Keywords:** Ancient India, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Dharmaśāstra, Early Indian Epigraphy, Satī, Strīdhana, Vedic Period, Women's History

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The proposition that women enjoyed a high position in Vedic society and lost it in later centuries has long been a familiar claim in writing on the Indian past. It has circulated in the reformist writing of the nineteenth century, in public argument and in a considerable body of modern scholarship, and its durability has an explanation in the setting in which it took shape. The thesis emerged as part of a nationalist response to colonial criticism of Hindu social practice, and it offered, as a purely

defensive argument could not, an indigenous precedent for reform Chakravarti (1988). If women had once been educated, mobile and ritually competent, reform could be presented as the restoration of an older order instead of an imitation of the West.

The usefulness of the claim is itself a reason for historians to examine it carefully. A. S. Altekar's survey, first published in 1938, remains the most influential single statement of the position, and later work has defined itself largely in relation to it Chakravarti (1988). Altekar held that women of the Ṛgvedic period were educated, chose their husbands, took part in ritual and moved freely in public, and that a long constriction followed which he attributed mainly to foreign invasion and to ordinary social conservatism Altekar (1938). Chakravarti (1988), Chakravarti (1993) has contested both his periodisation and his explanation, arguing that gender relations in early India must be analysed in terms of caste, property and the state.

### 1.2. ARGUMENT AND OBJECTIVES

This paper takes that critique seriously without discarding the evidence Altekar assembled, and its argument is that the familiar curve of rise and fall is partly a product of the sources themselves. The kinds of text that dominate the record change over the period studied here, and they change in a direction that produces an appearance of decline. The earliest material is liturgical and pedagogical, and such texts tend to idealise; the material of the middle centuries is normative and legal, and such texts tend to regulate; and documentary evidence, in the form of donative inscriptions, enters the record in quantity only in the last centuries BCE Shah (2001), as the product of identifiable people recording their own transactions. A historian who reads these three bodies of material as one continuous series will find a decline whether or not one took place.

The paper pursues four related aims: to trace the changing legal, ritual, social and economic position of women from the Ṛgvedic period to the end of the Gupta age; to determine what each category of evidence can support and to apply that question consistently; to re-examine two pieces of evidence, the Eran inscription and the Greek notices of the Mauryan court, that have been made to carry more than they can bear; and to set the Altekarian explanation beside the structural accounts that have challenged it, with a view to a formulation that accommodates both.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND CATEGORIES OF EVIDENCE

The study is descriptive-analytical and source-critical, in the manner usual in social history. It works from published monographs, edited volumes and peer-reviewed articles, together with the primary textual and epigraphic material that this scholarship discusses, and it makes no claim to new archival or epigraphic discovery; its contribution lies in a source-critical synthesis and a revised interpretive frame.

Four categories of evidence carry the argument, and they differ in kind. Vedic and post-Vedic ritual literature was composed for liturgical use and preserved by specialists, so that it records what a small priestly elite believed ritual required, often in deliberately archaic language. The Dharmasūtras and Smṛtis are prescriptive texts which show what Brahmanical jurists thought women ought to do, and their internal disagreements point to debate rather than to practice (Olivelle, Olivelle (1999), Olivelle (2005). The epics were composed and revised over several

centuries and therefore reflect changing ideals instead of any single historical moment Thapar (2002). Inscriptions stand apart from all three, because a donative record that names a woman, her family, her town and her gift documents a transaction instead of an aspiration, and such records from the three centuries on either side of the Common Era are numerous Shah (2001).

## 2.2. LIMITATIONS

The paper works from translations and published editions rather than from manuscripts, so that its readings of contested passages are only as secure as the editions on which they rest. Its geographical reach is also uneven, since the textual corpus is overwhelmingly north Indian and Sanskritic while the epigraphic material comes from scattered sites across the subcontinent, and generalisations that hold for the Gaṅgā valley may not hold for the peninsula.

A further limit follows from the nature of the corpus. Almost the entire Brahmanical corpus concerns propertied, upper-varṇa households, and when this paper speaks of a narrowing of women's position it refers to that stratum alone. The position of women in cultivating, artisanal and service groups is largely invisible in these texts, and it is better sought in inscriptions and Buddhist sources than in the Smṛtis.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The evidence is taken genre by genre and, within each genre, in roughly chronological order, so that the question of what a particular kind of source can bear is raised afresh at each stage. The later subsections bring the findings together and set them against competing explanations.

## 3.1. THE VEDIC EVIDENCE AND THE MAKING OF A GOLDEN AGE

The Ṛgveda attributes hymns to women seers, among them Ghoṣā, Apālā, Lopāmudrā and Viśvavārā. The slightly later Upaniṣadic literature preserves Gārgī Vācaknavī, who questioned Yājñavalkya in public debate at Janaka's court, and Maitreyī, whose exchange with the same teacher on the nature of the self survives in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Whatever the historicity of these figures, their preservation within the Brahmanical canon shows that female learning was a category the compilers could recognise and honour Altekar (1938).

The early Vedic evidence on marriage points in the same direction. Svayaṃvara, in which a woman chose among assembled suitors, appears as an available form, and niyoga, the arrangement by which a widow bore children to a kinsman of her late husband, was permitted rather than condemned. Altekar (1938) found no clear evidence of child marriage or of widow immolation in this stratum, and he saw women as participants in the assemblies known as sabhā and samiti, although the extent of their influence there can only be inferred.

A frequently repeated claim in modern surveys requires correction. Writers on the subject commonly distinguish two classes of female students, the brahmavādinī, who underwent upanayana, kept the sacred fire, studied the Veda and lived on alms within her parents' house, and the sadyovadhū, for whom the ceremony of upanayana was performed shortly before her marriage. Kane (1941) reports the distinction from the Hārīta Dharmasūtra as it is quoted in the Smṛticandrikā, and he concludes from the wider evidence that by the time of the Manusmṛti upanayana for

women had gone out of practice, although traces of its performance in earlier days remained. A passage known only through quotation in a medieval digest cannot be treated as a description of an institution that operated in the Vedic period, and the confidence with which it is usually cited exceeds what it can bear.

The later Vedic centuries saw the elaboration of solemn ritual, and women's place in it changed in ways that neither the golden-age account nor the decline account describes well. Jamison (1996), studying the role of the sacrificer's wife in the ritual manuals of the Vedic and early epic periods, isolates a set of conceptual functions that the wife fills in the rite and finds the same functions at work in the institutions of hospitality and marital exchange. Her analysis concerns conceptual function rather than social standing, which is why it sits uneasily with both narratives. Tyagi (2008), working from the early Gṛhyasūtras of the middle of the first millennium BCE, shows how the household ritual literature separated girls from formal learning and marginalised women within domestic ritual, including the rites connected with their own reproductive roles.

The picture rests on a particular kind of evidence. The material in this section is liturgical or pedagogical, composed to instruct or to celebrate and not to record, and texts of this kind preserve exceptional women because exceptional women were worth preserving, while saying little about ordinary ones. The Vedic material can therefore show that female learning and choice in marriage were culturally intelligible, but it cannot show how common either was.

## 3.2. CODIFICATION: THE CONDITIONAL GRANT OF HONOUR

Between roughly 600 BCE and 200 CE Brahmanical social norms were systematised, first in the Dharmasūtras and then in the verse Smṛtis. The Mānava Dharmaśāstra, or Manusmṛti, dated by Olivelle (2005) between the second century BCE and the second century CE, is the best known of these texts, and on the subject of women it is inconsistent, a feature that has long occupied historians.

One verse holds that where women are honoured the gods rejoice, and where they are not honoured all rites are fruitless (यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः; *yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ*, Manusmṛti III.56, in Olivelle (2005). Another holds that a woman is not fit for independence and should remain under her father in childhood, her husband in youth and her sons in old age (पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने; *pitā rakṣati kaumāre bhartā rakṣati yauvane*, Manusmṛti IX.3, in Olivelle (2005). Read within the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy Chakravarti (1993), Chakravarti (2003), however, the two verses need not be in conflict, because the honour that the first grants is conditional on conformity to a tightly bounded role, so that a woman who occupies the position assigned to her is revered there and loses that reverence once she leaves it. Honour of this conditional kind can serve to regulate women's conduct as much as to protect them.

The same literature classified marriage into eight forms, ranging from the Brāhma form, arranged by the bride's family and rated the most meritorious, through the Gāndharva form founded on mutual attraction, to the Rākṣasa form, which involved abduction, and the Paiśāca form, which involved the violation of a woman who was incapacitated. The Paiśāca form was condemned and the Rākṣasa form was tolerated for warriors Olivelle (2005), and the fact that the jurists catalogued such forms at all suggests that they were ordering practices they knew to exist. The same literature began the detailed elaboration of strīdhana, discussed in Section 3.6.

The character of the evidence changes at this point, since the Dharmaśāstra texts instruct a society and do not describe one. Their increasing specificity about what women may not do suggests that the jurists were working against practices they wished to suppress, and the codification therefore cannot be read directly as a record of worsening conditions.

## 3.3. EPIC AMBIVALENCE

The Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, composed and revised over several centuries from roughly the closing centuries BCE, supply narrative evidence of a more ambiguous kind. Sītā is the model pativratā whose fidelity must nonetheless be confirmed by ordeal, and who is banished while pregnant on the strength of public suspicion. The episode can be read as an expression of anxiety about female chastity and its public verification.

The Mahābhārata offers further instances. The marriage of Draupadī to five brothers falls outside the eight forms that the Dharmaśāstras later recognised, and Jayal (1966) provides a general survey of the epic treatment of women against which such episodes can be placed. Her attempted disrobing in the Kaurava assembly, after her husband's stake and loss at dice, is among the starkest illustrations in Sanskrit literature of a woman's exposure even at the top of the social order. Elsewhere in the same text Kuntī invokes a boon on her own initiative before marriage, and Gāndhārī blindfolds herself for life in solidarity with her blind husband; both acts show considerable personal will, and both are framed within a structure of wifely duty.

Because both epics reached something like their present form only after long transmission and revision, they document changing ideals and not a single social moment Thapar (2002). The coexistence of articulate heroines with narratives that repeatedly test and constrain them therefore does not require resolution, and it is consistent with the shift visible in the legal literature, in which an ideal of the compliant wife hardens around figures whose earlier depictions may have allowed them more room.

## 3.4. ALTERNATIVE SPACES: BUDDHISM AND JAINISM

The heterodox traditions of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE opened a religious domain that lay partly outside the Brahmanical household. Tradition records the Buddha's initial reluctance to admit women to the Saṅgha and his eventual agreement after the intervention of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who became the first ordained bhikkhunī, on condition that she accept eight additional rules, the garudhammas, which formally subordinated the order of nuns to that of monks. Horner (1930) devotes a chapter to these eight chief rules and, in her account of admission to the order, notes that the questions put to a candidate asked whether her parents had consented but not whether her husband had, although it was an offence for the ordaining party to accept a married woman without her husband's consent.

The community of nuns is associated with the Therīgāthā, a collection of seventy-three poems attributed to early Buddhist nuns, first translated into English by Rhys Davids (1909) and retranslated by Hallisey (2015). Its poems are attributed to named women, among them Muttā, Paṭācārā and Sumaṅgalamātā, and they present first-person testimony of renunciation, bereavement and release that the Brahmanical corpus does not preserve in comparable form (Hallisey, 2015). Jainism likewise admitted women to its mendicant order at an early stage, and the question

whether a woman could attain liberation without first being reborn as a man became a doctrinal dispute between the Digambara and Śvetāmbara traditions, which Jaini (1991) has reconstructed.

Neither tradition was egalitarian in any modern sense, yet both opened a field of religious agency that orthodox ritual practice largely closed to women, and the Buddhist tradition preserved women's own voices through the Therīgāthā in a way that the Dharmaśāstric literature did not. For the argument of this paper, the collection matters because it is the clearest body of evidence in the survey in which women speak at length in a voice presented as their own, and it therefore interrupts the pattern of idealising and regulating texts described in Section 2.

## 3.5. STATECRAFT AND THE INSTRUMENTAL WOMAN

The Mauryan period, conventionally dated c. 321–185 BCE, supplies evidence that is often quoted and seldom examined. Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambassador at Chandragupta's court, described armed women who guarded the king and accompanied him on hunts. His account survives only in fragments preserved by later classical authors, which McCrindle (1877) translated.

The passage is often cited as evidence of women's public prominence, but the version preserved by Strabo states that the women who guarded the king had been purchased from their fathers McCrindle (1877). Whatever status the arrangement conferred, it was founded on a purchase, and the Mauryan material therefore illustrates the capacity of the court to acquire and deploy women more directly than it illustrates female empowerment.

The Arthaśāstra refers to women who guard the king within the palace and recommends the employment of women as agents, and it contains detailed provisions on marriage, divorce and a wife's strīdhana Kangle (1963). Its value as evidence for the Mauryan period is, however, limited by its date. Olivelle (2013) holds that the surviving text is a compilation of earlier treatises, assembled in about the first century CE and expanded in the second or third century CE, and that it reached its final form by about 300 CE. The treatise is therefore good evidence for how a later theorist of statecraft imagined the management of women and weaker evidence for Mauryan administrative practice. The roles it assigns to women are again instrumental, since female agents work through prescribed strategies of seduction and intelligence-gathering, which reflects a calculated use of gendered access and not recognition of independent standing.

Ashokan inscriptions provide narrower but firmer evidence. Rock Edict XII refers to officers in charge of the women's quarters, and the Queen's Edict on the Allahabad–Kosambi pillar records the gifts of the second queen, Kāruvākī. These are contemporary documents, and for that reason they carry greater weight than the Greek testimony, which reaches us at second hand through authors who did not themselves visit India.

## 3.6. PROPERTY, PATRONAGE, AND THE LIMITS OF STRĪDHANA

Alongside these developments, the Dharmaśāstra literature elaborated a distinct category of female property, strīdhana, literally a woman's wealth. Manusmṛti IX.194 lists six kinds, namely gifts made before the nuptial fire, gifts made at the bridal procession, gifts given in token of affection, and gifts received

from her brother, mother or father Olivelle (2005), and Yājñavalkya Smṛti II.143 adds gifts from the husband, as discussed by Altekar (1938).

In principle, strīdhana remained under the woman's own control, including in widowhood. This has often been taken as evidence of a favourable economic position, and the inference needs two qualifications. The first is legal, for strīdhana was defined as a category of gifts and was distinct from a share in the family estate. The second is economic and carries more weight. N. N. Bhattacharyya, in his essay on the proprietary rights of women in ancient India, reprinted in Roy (1999), showed that strīdhana was movable property which could not be put to productive use, and that it was retained as a right precisely because it kept women out of productive processes. A right in ornaments and household goods is not a right in land or a workshop, and strīdhana is therefore better understood as a limited provision for personal security than as evidence of economic parity. The same volume also contains Mukund's study of Tamil society, which shows that women's access to property varied by region, caste and class, so that the conclusions drawn from the Sanskritic texts cannot be extended to the whole subcontinent.

The epigraphic record points the other way, and the contrast is central to the argument of this paper. Shah (2001) examined hundreds of donative inscriptions from the three centuries on either side of the Common Era, drawn from sites that include Bharhut, Sanchi, the Western Ghats and Mathura. The study found that the difference between the numbers of men and women donors was marginal, that women donors identified themselves by their own names and, more often, through their kinship ties, and that nuns appear at Sanchi in numbers almost equal to those of monks. Gifts of this kind presupposed independent access to wealth, which connects them with strīdhana, and they were made across precisely the centuries in which the normative literature was becoming more restrictive, so that prescription and documented practice diverged.

Two features of this patronage deserve comment. The inscriptions come largely from Buddhist sites, including Bharhut and Sanchi, which suggests that the institutions willing to record a woman's gift lay outside the household order that the Smṛtis were codifying. The donors were also not confined to royal women, for laywomen who gave generally identified themselves through kinship ties, and nuns appear alongside monks, so that the record extends beyond royal circles Shah (2001). The divergence between this record and the normative texts is what one would expect when a prescriptive genre and a documentary genre are compared directly, and it is the source problem described in Section 2 appearing in the evidence itself.

## 3.7. SATĪ AT ERAN: AN EVIDENTIARY REAPPRAISAL

The Gupta period, c. 320–550 CE, is conventionally described as a classical high point, yet the evidence bearing specifically on women points elsewhere, at least for propertied households, since Altekar (1938) found a falling age at marriage, growing restriction on widow remarriage and increasing seclusion.

The most frequently cited item is a stone pillar inscription at Eran, in present-day Madhya Pradesh, dated in the year 191, generally read as 510 CE, in the time of Bhānugupta. It records that Goparāja fought a great battle and went to heaven, and that his devoted wife entered the funeral fire Fleet (1888), Fleet and Bhandarkar (1981). The inscription is routinely described as the earliest epigraphic evidence for satī in India.

The record has limits that are easily overlooked. It describes the act of one woman; it does not use the word satī or any term for an established practice, and nothing in it indicates a prescribed custom or a social expectation. The circumstances of the battle have also been read differently in the two editions. Fleet's translation of 1888 leaves the enemy unspecified, which left room for conjectures about an encounter with the Hūṇas, whereas the revised edition of 1981 reads the opponents as the Maittras, thought to be the Maitrakas Fleet and Bhandarkar (1981).

None of this disproves the traditional identification of the inscription as an early instance of widow immolation. It shows that a single record, composed on the occasion of a death in battle and silent about custom, can establish that the act occurred by 510 CE but cannot establish that it was an institution. On the traditional reading, the inscription is the earliest surviving epigraphic trace of the practice, though not necessarily its origin, which may lie earlier in forms that left no trace.

## 3.8. COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

Why a society that appears in its earliest records to have allowed women considerable latitude should have moved towards the constrained position visible by the end of the Gupta age has been explained in two main ways. Altekar (1938) located the cause chiefly in external pressure, including foreign incursions, and in social conservatism, an explanation that is external and contingent. Chakravarti (1993) proposed a structural account, in which the subordination of women's sexuality was institutionalised in the Brahmanical codes to preserve patrilineal succession and caste purity, so that caste and gender hierarchies were closely interconnected. The configuration is now usually described as Brahmanical patriarchy, and Chakravarti (2003) develops it with particular attention to endogamous marriage. Roy (1999) brings the debate together in a single volume, which reprints Altekar's later essay, Chakravarti's critique of the Altekarian paradigm and Horner's study of almswomen, and adds essays on women and the economy.

The two accounts are not incompatible. External pressure of the kind Altekar emphasised may have accelerated a transformation whose deeper logic lay in the relationship between caste endogamy, inheritance and the regulation of women's sexuality. Both accounts nevertheless describe a single downward movement, and the evidence assembled here does not support that shape.

## 3.9. CONCURRENT TRENDS IN THE NORMATIVE AND DOCUMENTARY RECORDS

The record shows two trends running at the same time. Within the propertied Brahmanical household, women's ritual independence, access to formal learning and scope for choice in marriage appear to have narrowed, and the normative literature that documents this narrowing became more detailed and more confident over time. Outside that household, and during the same centuries, women appear in the documentary record as donors and as nuns in substantial numbers that the normative literature gives no reason to expect. The two trends are connected, and it is plausible that urbanisation and the growth of monastic institutions created channels through which women with disposable wealth could act and be recorded just as household norms were hardening. Strīdhana lay between the two, since it was a form of property consisting largely of movable goods and thus of limited

productive use, which nevertheless supplied the kind of resources that donative patronage required.

## 3.10. THE PERSISTENCE OF THE GOLDEN-AGE THESIS

The persistence of the golden-age thesis is partly explained by the work it performs outside the discipline. A narrative in which indigenous society was once egalitarian and was corrupted from outside can be used to argue for reform, to deflect criticism or to assign responsibility for present inequality to a foreign agent. Chakravarti (1988) traced the thesis to the nineteenth-century encounter with colonial criticism, and the uses just described are consistent with that account of its function. Historians are under no obligation to supply a usable past, and the evidence examined here does not supply one.

## 3.11. DIFFERENTIATED RECONFIGURATION

To describe the pattern as a decline is to flatten it, and the term differentiated reconfiguration is used here for that reason. It also accounts for the source problem with which this paper began, since much of what reads as decline is the replacement of texts that idealise by texts that legislate, at the point when a third kind of record, epigraphy, begins to preserve what the other two do not.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This paper asked whether the surviving evidence supports the thesis of a high position lost or its structural critique, and it finds that neither account fits the record without qualification. The early Vedic record attributes hymns to women, preserves them within the canon, and shows women choosing partners and taking part in assemblies, although it does so in texts that idealise and do not describe. The later Vedic and Dharmaśāstric material shows a gradual and then explicit narrowing, formalised in legal texts that combine conditional reverence with far-reaching subordination, while the epics hold both positions at once. Buddhism and Jainism opened a partial alternative, and the Therīgāthā preserves the voices of Buddhist nuns. The Greek and Arthaśāstra notices present women as instruments of the court, and the treatise that describes this most fully dates from a period later than the Mauryan.

Applying to each category of source the question of what it can support, the paper finds that liturgical and pedagogical texts show what was culturally intelligible, legal texts show what jurists wished to regulate, and inscriptions show what identifiable women did with their own resources. On this test the apparent decline is partly an effect of the shift from idealising to regulating texts, and two items that have been made to carry more than they can bear weigh less than the interpretations built on them require. The Greek notice of the royal guard records women purchased from their fathers, and the Eran inscription, which on the traditional reading is the earliest surviving epigraphic trace of widow immolation, records one woman's act without naming a practice or a custom.

The Altekarian and structural explanations are better treated as compatible than as rivals. The evidence supports a differentiated reconfiguration, in which what women lost and what they gained were unevenly distributed across class, region and institutional setting, and this describes the position of women in ancient Indian society more closely than the idea of a general decline. On this reading, the deeper

mechanisms lay within Indian society, in caste endogamy, the transmission of property through sons and the consolidation of the early state, even where external pressure of the kind Altekar described may have hastened their operation. Two qualifications follow. The documentary evidence for female patronage belongs to the three centuries on either side of the Common Era, and whether the same pattern continued into the Gupta period remains open. The narrowing described in the normative sources concerns propertied, upper-varṇa households and cannot, on present evidence, be generalised to the wider population.

The relationships examined here, between reverence and restriction, religious agency and legal subordination, and economic concession and real autonomy, were negotiated in these centuries without resolving into a single direction of change.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier and considerably shorter version of this paper was presented at the 5th Paramhansa Yogananda International Conference on "Towards a Global and Multidisciplinary Understanding of Spirituality and Science in Contemporary World," organised by the Department of Music and the Department of Commerce, Vallabh Government College, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, in association with Pratibha Spandan Society, Shimla, on 23–24 February 2024. The present version has been substantially revised and rewritten, with a restructured argument and a new source-critical framework. It has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by any other publication.

The authors declare no conflict of interest and received no external funding for this research.

The authors used the Internet Archive, Google Scholar, and other relevant sources to search for and review the literature. Grammarly was used to assist with language editing and grammatical correction. The authors carefully reviewed the manuscript and take full responsibility for its content, accuracy, and conclusions.

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