

The Feminisms of Dharmic India

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the span of many thousands of years, Indian civilization has developed a rich variety of customs, traditions, norms, values, and philosophies that have illuminated the lives of those that belonged to it. Even within strictly regulated and defined social groupings, there are irreconcilable differences within that same group. The Brahmins fit this example well as they are in some regions forbidden to consume meat, like in Gujarat, whereas in other regions meat would be the staple of their diet, like those of Kashmir. It is in this diversity that the history of India should be framed and constructed. What is true in one place may not be in another, what unites a group may not make them uniform, and even the most ancient traditions show signs of evolution. The concept of Dharma, which incorporates everything from duties to ethics, is a fine embodiment of this principle. Dharma is the implicit philosophy for many Indians, especially those of the Dharmic traditions or religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. It is in this reality that I seek to situate my

investigation of womanhood in Dharmic India.

The popular discourses about India, especially the narratives of Dharmic womanhood, are oftentimes constructed in a disparaging fashion that reduces their history to being nothing more than the pawns of patriarchy. None of this is to say that the history of women has been idyllic, or that abhorrent impediments have not been placed before them. Like many Indian languages, Sanskrit literature is replete with misogynistic aphorisms. To quote Stephanie Jamison, “Other legal texts constrain her freedom on the same grounds. But anyone with a passing acquaintance with Sanskrit literature, indeed anyone who has studied first-year [sic] Sanskrit in the traditional way with the story of Nala and Damayanti, has met an entirely contradictory pattern”.¹ It is exactly that contradictory pattern of feminisms that the present paper seeks to explore. Here, feminism is not a movement or ideology rooted in the Occidental experience, but rather a term to recognize the natural expressions of agency by humans in the feminine context. What this investigation seeks to bring out and establish is a

¹ Stephanie W Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15.

narrative that reaffirms the reality that women have not only stepped out of the constraints of convention, including historical imagination, but stood up to make an impact on their worlds through various instances of agency (i.e. feminisms). This paper explores the feminisms of Dharmic India with a focus on marriage, faith, philosophy, education, occupation, politics, and warfare.

II. RESEARCH

Marriage is an important cultural and social institution that has evolved over time. During the Vedic period, where marriage was largely patrilineal and patrilocal, we find areas where women not only asserted themselves but were encouraged to do so. Take for example 14.1.44 of the *Atharva Veda* which states the following: “So be imperial queen when thou hast come within thy husband’s home. Over thy husband’s father and his brothers be imperial queen. Over thy husband’s sister and his mother bear supreme control”.² Here the wife, even though in a patriarchal institution, is encouraged to assert herself not just as an agent but as a

wife in the home of her husband's family. Another instance of female agency comes from the older Rigveda, where a grieving wife seeks to join her husband's funeral pyre; a reference to the “suicidal” custom of “Sati”. It is the wife who asserts herself by action but the Vedic seers that object to her brave but life-negating act.³ In the *Mahabharata’s* Adi Parva, another reference to Sati is found. It is when Madri joins Pandu’s funeral pyre, requesting that co-wife Kunti care for her children.⁴ Here again, there is no indication of pressure for Madri to carry out Sati, though the text’s tone is one of approval, unlike the Vedas. Continuing with the *Mahabharata*, two more stories indicate how female agency was received. The first story focuses upon a woman who boldly asserts her conception of marriage and place within it. The lady in this story is the Goddess Ganga in human form, with King Shantanu as the infatuated person. Ganga tells him that “I shall marry you in obedience to your wish, but on one condition. Whatever I may do, whether it pleases you or not, you shall leave me alone, and you must not speak harshly to me. As long as you observe this rule, I shall stay with you. But I shall leave you the moment you interfere with me, or

² Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans, *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, (1895)

³ Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans. Rig Veda: *Rig-Veda*, Book 10 HYMN XVIII. This incident is in reference to a hymn (10.18.8-10) in the RigVeda “Rise, come unto the world of life, O woman: come, he is lifeless by whose side thou liest. Wifehood with this thy husband was thy portion, who took thy hand and wooed thee as a lover. From his dead hand I take the bow to be carried, that it may be our power and might and glory.” Here a woman asserting herself is

not the issue for the sages, but the harm and loss of her life is; irrespective of gender human life is valued in the Vedic tradition. The quotation is Griffith’s translation.

⁴ Chakravarthi V Narsimhan, trans. *The Mahabharata* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 23. Adi Parva: “Thereupon Madri ascended Pandu’s funeral pyre, asking Kunti to bring up her children with kindness and love.” Here the usage of the word “ascending” implies going up and not literally. This is the basis for my interpretation of the text’s approval.

reproach me with harsh words”.⁵ King Shantanu accepts these rules and proposes marriage. Note how the idea of a female (even if Goddess in human form) exerting her interest and basis for marital union is unproblematic. Moreover, what should be appreciated is the fact that an ordinary woman is the one who sets the rules for marriage before a mighty monarch, the text does not treat this as abnormal; it appears perfectly natural for a lady to express herself without being submissive, as is sometimes assumed of women from antiquity. The second interesting story from the *Mahabharata* takes place in the Udyoga Parva where a woman’s sexual freedom is not only respected but seen as normal. In the Udyoga Parva two categories of sons are given: One is called Kanina and the other is called Sahodha, the former is one where a son is born out of wedlock but soon after the mother marries the biological father.⁶ What is interesting in this story is that extramarital copulation is not a matter of shame nor is the woman seen negatively for having done so.⁷

Furthering the discussion of women in society and marriage, I will address other instances of feminisms

with a brief focus on property and athletics. Starting with sports, it seems that in the Vedic period women did participate in “warlike” sports such as chariot races. This is indicated in the story of Mudgalani and her husband (Mudgala) who participate in some kind of a sporting competition.⁸ Mudgalani is celebrated for having won the competition for herself and her husband.⁹ What this story indicates is that women not only participated in sporting events but were also recognized for winning. Neither in the *Vedas* nor in the works of scholars who interpret this story is there any hint of displeasure or surprise at the idea of a female being in sports or getting acclaim for it. Also, it appears that marriage does not preclude women from participating in sports as Mudgalani is married to Mudgala. Aside from sports, married women did appear to have property rights. In the 11th century text *Samaya Matrika*, set in Kashmir, there are numerous instances of females acquiring property. One instance, though negative, is the following case: “After gaining control over all his property, she wanted him dead and with this in mind, incited him into a conflict with his kinsmen.”¹⁰ The

⁵ Narsimhan, *Mahabharata*, 6

⁶ Narsimhan, *Mahabharata*, 110. Udyoga Parva: Direct quote: “The two classes of sons called Kanina and Sahodha who are born by a girl before her marriage have for their father the man who marries their mother subsequently”

⁷ This is very similar to the attitude found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (6.4.12) where a prescription is given to a husband to punish a lover (of his wife’s) that he hates. In this story, like the one above, women are not shamed for extramarital coitus nor for having lovers even when married. The Upanishadic story is

one where the husband targets a lover he does not like, not the idea that his wife has a lover. The issue is with a particular person not with the idea of a wife having a lover. Patrick Olivelle’s *Upanisads* page 89.

⁸ Swami Madhavananda, *Eminent Indian Women from the Vedic Age to the Present* (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2005), 42. The book cites *Rig Veda* 10.102

⁹ Stephanie W Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*, 109-110.

¹⁰ Ksemendra, AND Haksar, trans, *The Courtesan's Keeper: a Satire from Ancient Kashmir* (New Delhi, Rupa, 2008), 11.

story further elaborates that the wife does indeed get the property she sought to get. Another interesting case within the *Samaya Matrika* is a story of widowhood, Sati, and inheritance. When a wife's husband dies, she pretends to sit upon the funeral pyre as if she is about to carry out Sati to the alarm of both her in-laws and government officials. The story concludes with "on the orders of the king she was given possession of her husband's wealth. The Royal officers begged her to live on, which she agreed to do".¹¹ Here, what is interesting is that not only are government officials willing to provide the female property rights, they do so in fear of her committing Sati. This appears to evidence an aversion to the custom, irrespective of its prestige, in favor of her life which only further shows that female lives were seen with importance. In another case, there is a woman who ends up in a property dispute with her husband's son and takes him to court, where she wins the case.¹² From these cases, it is clear that married (and widowed) women did have property rights which they asserted. Further discussion of wealth will be carried out in the discussion of occupations and education.

In this paragraph, I will address education and the occupations of women. The best place to begin regarding education are the Upanishads, a vast "compendium" of philosophical knowledge. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the following is said, "I want a learned daughter who will live out her full life span"¹³ Here, what is impressive is that a parent is wishing for the birth of a learned daughter, which plainly implies scholarship, not just "real world" training in trades or technical subjects. Considering that the Upanishads know of such women, Gargi for example was a philosopher, it would not be incorrect to assume that the parent desired to see an educated daughter that could have been a philosopher, linguist, theologian, and so forth. Prior to the Upanishads, in the Vedic era, there is some indication of women being educated, even if in a patriarchal paradigm. According to Swami Madhavananda, Vedic girls would have received education at home with a father, brother, or uncle serving as the educator.¹⁴ Some Vedic girls might have gotten educated at schools called "Chatrashalas" taught by female teachers.¹⁵ Apart from trades, crafts, and familial education, there is some indication that women were educated in

¹¹ Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 12.

¹² Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 13. To quote the story: "But he also had sons, and when they prevented her from selling his house, she went to court." and "There she seduced the magistrate and bribed the court officials who got together to arrange a fraudulent disposal of the property, so that she won the case and obtained possession. She then sold the house and appropriated everything it fetched." On

page 69 there is another similar case, but without the unethical practices.

¹³ Patrick Olivelle, trans, *Upanishads A New Translation* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 90. Full quotation: "I want a learned daughter who will live out her full life span" - "if this is his wish, he should get her [his wife] to cook that rice with sesame seeds and [the] two of them should eat it mixed with ghee".

¹⁴ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 31.

¹⁵ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 31.

institutions dedicated to the arts. For example, in the *Mahabharata's* Virata Parva, there is a sign that schools for women did exist. The evidence for this is provided in the following quotation "There is a dancing school which Virata has built: the girls dance there during the day."¹⁶ This provides evidence that at the very least artistic education was accessible to female students. According to Swami Madhavananda, there were two categories of educated women in ancient India, "Sadyowaha" and "Brahmavadini". The Sadyowaha were educated but married whereas the Brahmavadini was not only educated but continued to advanced studies, skipping marriage.¹⁷ Here it is clear that at least some women in ancient India received the highest education possible without needing to be married. Other examples of highly educated women include: Oduvva Tirumalamba (poetess), Ramabhadramba (historian), and Queen Gangadevi (author). Tirumalamba for example was considered a genius, being an excellent musician and grammarian with a strong command of rhetoric, philosophy, epic literature, poetry, and drama.¹⁸ Ramabhadramba was an educated historian who authored a

historical poem called *Raghunathabhyudayam* which was 12 Cantos long.¹⁹ The example of Queen Gangadevi provides a woman who is educated and wrote a historically important document in Sanskrit called *Madhura Vijayam* where she celebrates the military exploits of her husband, King Kumara Kampana.²⁰ Further evidence for female education is indicated in the fact that a woman is supposed to have authored a medical treatise on women's diseases which was later translated into Arabic.²¹ The *Arthashastra* is a legal text associated with the Mauryan Empire (4th century BCE) that advises the government or king to invest in the education of underprivileged women. The text encourages state-subsidized teachers for prostitutes, female slaves, and actresses.²² The subjects taught by the teacher included: singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, reading, acting, writing, painting, making perfumes and garlands, and how to do shampooing.²³ This clearly indicates that a government's responsibilities encompassed educating disadvantaged women. As has been shown, the education of women is very much a part

¹⁶ Chakravarthi V Narsimhan, *The Mahabharata* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), 78.

¹⁷ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian*, 20

¹⁸ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 96. Accordingly the book indicates she knew numerous scripts and coined the largest word. She was employed in the court of King Achutyaraya where she produced many works.

¹⁹ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 96. For further information see dissertation by Mudigonda pages 2,3,5,8, 89, 92, and 118.

²⁰ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 95. Further information on her read Jackson chapter 4 and Chandrababu page 230.

²¹ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 36. Swami Madhavananda points out that female doctors were very rare and were largely doctors' widows. The medical treatise is not explicitly named.

²² R Shamasastri, trans, *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (1915), 179.

²³ Shamasastri, trans, *Kautilya*, 179.

of the Dharmic heritage, irrespective of whether it was equal to that of men or not.

Like in education, there is a history of women participating in the economic sphere of life. Considering the strong agricultural nature of India, it would not be wrong to assume that most women were restricted to domestic and possibly agricultural contributions to society. The primary issue with that assumption is that it does not capture the wide array of work taken on by women and the economic impact of such endeavors. In the Vedic period, for example, apart from partaking in the agricultural duties women were also said to have engaged in the manufacturing of bows, arrows, baskets, and cloth.²⁴ In the *Arthashastra* the following is said about women and work, “Those women who do not stir out of their houses (anishkanyah), those whose husbands are gone abroad, and those who are cripple or girls may, when obliged to work out of subsistence, be provided with work (spinning out threads) in due courtesy through the medium of maid-servants (of the weaving establishments)”.²⁵ Here we have a few reasons enumerated as to why women would decide to join the workforce. Also discussed is the compensation based on

the quality of work produced by the female workers, which indicates that their work was both valued and evaluated.²⁶ In this particular context, it should be noted that women also engaged in work beyond the textile industry. In the *Arthashastra* itself female spies, guards, assassins, and so forth are mentioned. Women also seemed to take on other positions such as astrology and fortune-telling.²⁷ Throughout various texts other occupations by women are mentioned but will not be discussed here for sake of brevity. The final occupation to be discussed is prostitution, which reveals quite a lot about society. In the *Arthashastra* the following is stated “A prostitute shall pay 24,000 panas as ransom to regain her liberty”.²⁸ For a prostitute to be required to pay such a heavy fine is not an indication of governmental tyranny but rather a reflection of the high income earned by prostitutes. Further indication of this is found in the *Samaya Matrika* where prostitutes are described as earning a high quantity of wealth. Take for example a prostitute named Mulhana, she is described as wealthy enough to attain fine clothes [like luxury silk from China] and jewelry because of the income generated by a large clientele.²⁹ In another story, a prostitute named Shashankalekha is able to afford a beauty

²⁴ Swami Madhavananda, *Eminent Indian Women*, 29.

²⁵ Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 162.

²⁶ Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 163. Also interesting is that the protection of female workers from even unwarranted gestures is mandated, while a superintendent that does not follow labor guidelines is required to be promptly punished.

²⁷ Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 17. In this case the female is not actually an astrologer but a charlatan conning money from clients. But even this is indicative that women were able to participate in this occupation as it would not be a successful scam if women were not permitted to be astrologers.

²⁸ Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 177.

²⁹ Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 10.

treatment before meeting her lovers.³⁰ An early piece of advice given to a prostitute is to get a mother (manager) who will manage finances and deal with tax collectors.³¹ Here women, possibly retired prostitutes, are recruited to provide advice and managerial functions to other prostitutes.

From the physical to the metaphysical, here I will address women in philosophy with a focus on discourse and debate. As mentioned above, the Upanishads are aware of female philosophers. Here I will briefly address the philosophers Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi. In a debate with the famed philosopher Yajnavalkya, Gargi states the following, "I rise to challenge you Yajnavalkya, with two questions, much as a warrior of Kashi or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge an enemy. Give me the answers to them!"³² What is impressive here is not only that a female philosopher is debating a male but that she is doing so with boldness and aggression. No indication in the surrounding paragraph emphasizes her gender or constrains her in any way because of it. Hence in this specific context, it would be fair to regard this as both an equitable and equal situation regarding gender. Another instance is also with Yajnavalkya, but

this time with his philosopher wife Maitreyi. She asks of him "What is the point in getting something that will not make me immortal? Retorted Maitreyi." to which Yajnavalkya states "You have always been very dear to me, and now you have made yourself even more so! Come, my lady, I will explain it to you."³³ Here it is also revealing that a wife can ask her husband meaningful questions on philosophy and not only be welcomed for it but appreciated all the more for it. This represents a fundamental appreciation of women as rational fellow humans. The final philosopher to be discussed here is Yakini Mahattara, a 'nun' in the Jaina tradition. She is credited with defeating a boastful Brahmin scholar in a debate after he claimed to be unbeatable.³⁴ The boastful Brahmin is Haribhadra Suri, a highly educated Brahmin who was well versed in various scriptures, logic, philosophy, and Yoga.³⁵ What is impressive here is that Yakini Mahattara was able to defeat such an erudite scholar and make him into her disciple. Equally fascinating in that story is how Haribhadra Suri changes his name to "Yakini Mahattara Sunu" or "Yakiniputra" meaning son of Yakini. What these female philosophers have shown is that not only did women participate in philosophy at various times but did so as equals without misogynistic suspicion; two cases

³⁰ Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 52.

³¹ Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper* 7. Also on 74 a courtesan is warned about the danger of female bandits; which indicate that women also may have engaged in banditry or criminal activities, much like the infamous or famous Phoolan Devi, a well known female bandit of 20th century India.

³² Patrick Olivelle, trans, *Upaniṣads A New Translation* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 44

³³ Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 69

³⁴ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 78.

³⁵ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 78

indicated equality with the third showing excellence.

In the sphere of theology and religion women have played a larger and more impactful role. For example, Lalleshwari (Lal Ded) was a prominent poetess, yogini, and saint of the Kashmir Shaiva tradition whose influence is still felt. She authored some 200 exquisite Vakhs (aphorisms/poems) in Kashmiri which are said to be as majestic as they are insightful.³⁶ On the opposite side of the Indian subcontinent, we have Karaikkal Ammaiyar who was one of the earliest Tamil poetesses who also had a very profound impact upon Tamil Shaivism.³⁷ She was in many respects like Lal Ded up north, as both were prominent artists from the Shaivite traditions and are venerated as saints by Tamils and Kashmiris respectively. Impressively Ammaiyar prayed to go from exceeding beauty to utter ugliness, as a sign that she placed importance on ideas and principles as opposed to her own physicality. Another revered Tamil poetess was Avvai who was known for artistic yet sagacious poetry that emphasized (religious) ethical values; her poetry was directed to the commoner.³⁸ Mirabai, the next figure, is unlike the aforementioned ladies in that she went well beyond her own region to

become a pan-Indian and timeless icon. Her home state may be in today's Rajasthan, but her fame is fully Indian with films and serials depicting her life while daily recitals of her devotional poetry are commonplace.³⁹ Unlike even the male saints of the Bhakti movement, Meerabai has outshined all of the saints with her songs and poems being recited regularly with new renditions coming out frequently by the latest singers. Antal is the only other saint/poetess that comes remotely close to Mirabai's record, though still distant.⁴⁰ Antal does not have as wide an audience and appeal as Mirabai did but nonetheless left an influence on her region. A common pattern among all these women is that they have left a truly profound impact as religious leaders in their respective sects to such a degree that their personalities are almost inseparable from the sectarian or regional identities.

Religion is not the only place where women have shown leadership, as there is a long tradition of women contributing to the political arena. Some examples include: Vijaya-Bhattarka of the Chalukya dynasty (7th century CE), Queen Sugandha of Kashmir (10th-11th century CE), Akkadevi (11th century CE), Queen Malidevi (11th century CE), and

³⁶ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 85. Professor Braj B. Kachru provides a more detailed account of her life and works in his article on the Poetess and Kashmiri Poetry.

³⁷ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 85. Also see Sisir Kumar Das's *A History of Indian literature 500-1399* pages 31-32 for more detail.

³⁸ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 91-92.

³⁹ John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2010), 120-121.

⁴⁰ Vidya Dehejia, *Āṅṭāl. Āṅṭāl and her path of love : poems of a woman saint from South India*, (New York Press, 1990)

Queen Lakshmidēvi (12th century CE).⁴¹ With the arrival of the Common Era it becomes increasingly common to see female administrators and political assertion as opposed to prior (before the common era) where such women were rare at best. The discussion on female political administration will begin in Kashmir, with an analysis of Yashovati, Didda, and Sugandha. Yashovati was the Queen and consort of the King Damodara who was killed by the Yadava leader Krishna.⁴² After the slaying of Damodara, Krishna appointed Yashovati as the ruler of Kashmir with the help of the court's Brahmins; this move was to the displeasure of the royal advisors who rejected the coronation of a woman.⁴³ In order to appease the offended advisors and ministers of the royal court, Krishna cited the *Nilamata Purana* to remind them that Kashmir was the land of the Goddess Parvati; a land that was itself the incarnation of the Goddess.⁴⁴ According to the *Rajatarangini*, this is what follows "The eyes of men which [before] showed no respect for women as [being only] objects of enjoyment, looked [after Krishna's words] upon her (Yashovati) as the mother of her subjects and like a goddess."⁴⁵ What this story reveals is that it was unheard of, at least

in Kashmir, for women to have been the rulers of a government. Krishna's evoking of the *Nilamata Purana* and the Goddess Parvati reveals that religious and textual conceptions of female importance overrides tradition to such a degree that even the staunchest opponents of female rule were quickly pacified; even the opponents begin to view her more respectfully as a goddess and mother. The next Kashmiri queen to be dealt with is Sugandha, who became queen when all the male heirs died.⁴⁶ She ruled effectively for two years (early 10th century CE) before she was assassinated by former bodyguards in a coup d'état.⁴⁷ The last Kashmiri Queen to be discussed is Didda, a powerful consort and ruler in the 10th century AD. Queen Didda is said to have been so influential that even as the King's *consort* her name was prefixed to his in the official royal coinage.⁴⁸ When she became the ruler of Kashmir, Queen Didda's governance brought peace and stability for the entirety of her reign; this was the result of her diplomatic and administrative acumen.⁴⁹ The next dynasty to be discussed, the Bhauma-Kara, was situated near what today is the state of Odisha. What is most impressive about this dynasty is that it was successively

⁴¹ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 36-37. On page 79 the argument is put forth that there were supposed to have been Strirajyas or female ruled kingdoms around the time of the *Mahabharata* with the *Jaimini Bharata* and Hiuen Tsang 7th century chronicles being used to bolster the claim. I am somewhat skeptical of the claim and have avoided its discussion.

⁴² M.A. Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī, A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr* (Manchester, Archibald Constable and Company, 1900), 14 and 72.

⁴³ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 14.

⁴⁴ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 14.

⁴⁵ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 14. The brackets in the quotation are those of Stein, not mine.

⁴⁶ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 207.

⁴⁷ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 207.

⁴⁸ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 104.

⁴⁹ Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 104.

governed by female leaders. The four queens that ruled one after another were the following: Queen Gauri-Mahadevi, Queen Dandi-Mahadevi, Queen Bakula-Mahadevi, and Queen Dharma-Mahadevi.⁵⁰ These women controlled the throne in a time that was marked with internal strife and external threats of invasion. Despite those tumultuous times, it appears that the women were able to maintain some semblance of stability that allowed for the regime to be passed on to the next ruler.⁵¹

The Virangana, a tradition of female warriors, includes fine examples of leadership akin to, if not surpassing, those in the purely political sphere. Though the Vedic era is not known for warrior women or ruling queens, there is the possibility that at least one such woman existed. Her name is Vishpala who is supposedly said to have had a leg severed in the middle of battle; Swami Madhavananda speculates as to whether this is in a sporting event or an actual battle.⁵² The *Rig Veda* verse in question is 1.116.15, which Griffith translates as “When in the time of night, in Khela's battle, a leg was severed like a wild bird's pinion, Straight ye gave Viśpalā a leg of iron that she might move what time the conflict opened.”⁵³ This translation

indicates that perhaps women, or just this one woman, participated in battle during the Vedic period. Other examples of women in warfare include: Queen Kurma Devi who organized resistance to the invasion of Qutbuddin in 1195; Rana (King) Sangha's widows Queen Karnavati, who rallied the troops to fight against the invading Sultan Bahadur Shah, and Jawahirbai who led the army and battled till her death defending a fort.⁵⁴ Another Rajput Virangana includes the widowed consort of King Samarsi (of Chittor) who died in the 2nd Battle of Tarain; soon after his death she headed a Rajput army to avenge her husband's death, however, she sadly met the same fate.⁵⁵ The last Rajput warrior woman to be addressed is the legendary Queen Durgavati of the prestigious Chandela dynasty. She married the “lower-status” Gond monarch, Sangram Shah, despite her father's disapproval.⁵⁶ This decision would ultimately make her the kingdom's ruler after the death of Sangram Shah. Queen Durgavati's reputation and legend is based on two primary actions: The first is her protection of the commoners, which included personally hunting down a tiger that threatened villagers; the second is her heroic demise in fighting off the

⁵⁰ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 81. More detail on page 23 of *The Muktesvara Temple in Bhubaneswar* by Walter Smith and page 51 of *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa* by Thomas E. Donaldson.

⁵¹ What evidences the political acumen of these women is the ability to obtain, retain, and govern their respective regimes. If these women lacked competence, they most likely would have faced internal insurgency and external invasions. The

ability to govern and peacefully transition power indicates that these women were skilled administrators and diplomats; doing so in difficult times indicates their extraordinary abilities.

⁵² Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 42.

⁵³ Griffith, *Rig Veda*, verse 1.116.15.

⁵⁴ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 37.

⁵⁵ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 37.

⁵⁶ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 84.

massive invasion by the larger Mughal Sultanate.⁵⁷ The final 3 Viranganas to be discussed span the 11th, 13th, and 17th centuries; they respectively are Princess Akkadevi, Queen Rudrama Devi or also known as Queen Rudramba, and Queen Chenamma. Princess Akkadevi of the Chalukya dynasty, henceforth simply Akka, comes from what today is the Indian state of Karnataka. Apart from the domain she inherited, Akka conquered hundreds of districts and villages which she ruled for a little over half a century (1010-1064CE).⁵⁸ Inscriptions remember Akka for being ferocious in battle and having female administrators from the village level upwards.⁵⁹ The next is the warrior monarch, Queen Rudrama Devi, henceforth just Rudramba. She hails from the Kakatiya Dynasty which claimed to be of Shudra origin and ruled for approximately three decades from either 1262-1295 CE or 1262-1289 CE (the dating is disputed).⁶⁰ Two wars define Rudramba's military career: the first is fighting off an insurgency at the start of her rule, the second is successfully fighting off an invasion by a Yadava king named Devagiri.⁶¹ The next and final Virangana to be discussed is Queen Chenemma the ruler of Keladi. Upon the

death of her husband, Queen Chennamma (henceforth Chenna) assumed the throne in the year 1677 and governed for 40 years.⁶² Chenna's reputation for leadership stems from her political fortitude and prowess in battle. After Chenna decided to provide asylum to Rajaram, leader of the Maratha rebels, she provoked the mighty Mughal Sultanate pursuing Rajaram. The provocation resulted in an attack by the Mughal Empire which deployed its larger army against Chenna's small domain. Queen Chenna routed the vastly larger Mughal forces swiftly and decisively in defense of her domain; a military tactic and maneuver that was supposed to have impressed even the notorious Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.⁶³

III. CONCLUSION

The women of Dharmic India, as this paper has shown, have a long and admirable history of contributing to India's culture and society through what I term as feminism. Feminisms are the natural expression of agency by women in various societal situations and functions. Within the present monograph I have argued that despite all the odds and impediments put before

⁵⁷ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 84. Also see page 114 of *Medieval India A History Textbook for class XI* by Professor Satish Chandra et al. for more detail regarding the life and battles of Queen Durgavati.

⁵⁸ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 93. Akka is said to have not only been an able administrator but one that invested heavily in education.

⁵⁹ Jyotsna K Kamat, *Social Life in Medieval Karnataka* (New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1980), 107-108.

⁶⁰ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 93.

⁶¹ Bonnie G. Smith, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 612-613. According to Smith, Rudramba reigned over the largest female ruled domain in the world.

⁶² Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 98.

⁶³ Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 98-99. Also see Radha Krishnamurthy's *Sivatattva Ratnakara of Keladi Basavaraja: A Cultural Study* which deals with the Queen and her story more extensively.

women, Dharmic India has a rich and extensive history of feminisms. My survey of feminisms has shown that women have contributed to fields such as but not limited to: philosophy, theology, faith, devotion, poetry, literature, history, scholarship, warfare, and political administration. Women, even in disadvantageous positions, have shown impressive expressions of agency. There is no doubt that women in India have faced and continue to face difficulties of all varieties, but as this history has shown, women have and will continue to show agency as a natural part of the human experience not an aberration from it. Though feminism as a term, movement, and theory are Occidental in origin, feminism is also a pan-human experience in the sense that assertion and agency are very much a part of the human experience.

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