Mairaj
Vol 4, Issue 2
editor.mairaj@gmail.com https://www.mairaj.pk
ISSN Online 2959-2089 ISSN Print 2959-2070

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Forgotten Women Diplomats in Pre-Colonial South Asia

Abstract
The diplomatic history of pre-colonial South Asia has traditionally emphasized the roles of kings, military commanders, and male political elites, leaving the contributions of women largely overlooked. This research examines the often-forgotten roles of women as diplomats, negotiators, mediators, and political advisors in pre-colonial South Asia, spanning the early medieval period to the Mughal era. Drawing upon historical chronicles, royal correspondence, travel accounts, inscriptions, and contemporary scholarly interpretations, the study investigates how royal women exercised diplomatic influence through marriage alliances, peace negotiations, succession politics, intercultural exchanges, and informal channels of governance. Employing qualitative historical research methods and feminist historiography, the article critically reassesses conventional narratives that have marginalized women's agency in political and diplomatic affairs. The findings suggest that women were not merely symbolic figures within royal courts but actively shaped interstate relations, conflict resolution, alliance formation, and imperial administration. Their contributions, however, were frequently minimized or omitted due to patriarchal historical writing, limited documentation, and the predominance of male-authored sources. By recovering these neglected historical actors, the study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of diplomacy and statecraft in South Asia. Furthermore, it demonstrates that women's political agency extended beyond domestic and ceremonial roles, influencing regional stability and governance in significant yet underappreciated ways. The article argues that integrating women's diplomatic contributions into mainstream historiography not only challenges established historical assumptions but also enriches contemporary discussions on gender, diplomacy, and political leadership. Ultimately, this research advocates for a broader and more balanced interpretation of pre-colonial South Asian history that recognizes women as influential participants in the making of political and diplomatic institutions.
Keywords: Pre-colonial South Asia; Women's Diplomacy; Feminist Historiography; Political Agency; Royal Women; Diplomatic History; Statecraft; Peace Negotiation; Marriage Alliances; Mughal Empire; Delhi Sultanate; Gender and History.

Introduction

Diplomacy has long been regarded as one of the principal instruments through which states establish alliances, negotiate peace, resolve conflicts, and protect political interests. Historical scholarship on diplomacy has traditionally focused on the actions of kings, emperors, military commanders, and male ambassadors, portraying diplomacy as an exclusively masculine domain. In the context of pre-colonial South Asia, dominant historical narratives have largely emphasized the political achievements of rulers, imperial administrations, and military campaigns while overlooking the significant yet often informal diplomatic roles played by women. As a result, the contributions of queens, princesses, royal mothers, noblewomen, and influential female advisors

have remained largely absent from mainstream historiography despite evidence suggesting that many of them exercised considerable political and diplomatic influence.

Pre-colonial South Asia was characterized by diverse political systems, powerful kingdoms, expanding empires, and complex interstate relations. From the early regional kingdoms to the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, diplomacy was not confined to formal treaties or military negotiations. Political marriages, religious patronage, courtly mediation, succession negotiations, and cultural exchanges formed equally important mechanisms through which states maintained stability and strengthened alliances. Women belonging to royal and aristocratic families frequently participated in these processes. Although they rarely held official diplomatic titles, they acted as trusted intermediaries between rival courts, negotiated peace during political crises, advised rulers on matters of governance, facilitated communication between competing factions, and influenced foreign policy through their social and familial networks.

Historical examples across South Asia demonstrate that women often exercised political authority beyond the boundaries traditionally assigned to them. Royal women such as Razia Sultan, Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Chand Bibi, and several Rajput queens contributed significantly to political negotiations, administrative decision-making, and interstate diplomacy. Marriage alliances arranged between ruling dynasties frequently depended upon the diplomatic agency of women, who not only symbolized political unity but also actively maintained relationships between their natal and marital families. Their correspondence, patronage of religious institutions, participation in court politics, and mediation during succession disputes illustrate that diplomacy in pre-colonial South Asia frequently operated through informal yet highly effective channels.

Despite these historical realities, the diplomatic contributions of women have received relatively limited scholarly attention. Traditional historical writing has generally privileged military achievements and formal political institutions while treating women's participation as secondary or symbolic. Much of the available historical evidence was produced by male court historians whose primary objective was to glorify rulers rather than document the political agency of women. Consequently, women's diplomatic interventions were either minimized, attributed to male rulers, or omitted entirely from official chronicles. This imbalance has contributed to an incomplete understanding of how diplomacy functioned within pre-colonial South Asian societies.

The emergence of feminist historiography and gender-sensitive historical research has challenged these conventional assumptions by questioning whose voices are represented within historical records and whose experiences have been excluded. Rather than viewing women solely as passive participants in dynastic politics, feminist historians argue that women exercised agency through both formal and informal political institutions. Diplomatic influence was often expressed through family networks, religious authority, patronage, mediation, cultural diplomacy, and strategic marriage alliances. Such perspectives broaden the definition of diplomacy beyond official embassies and interstate treaties, allowing historians to recognize diverse forms of political participation that have long remained invisible in conventional diplomatic history.

Furthermore, recent developments in historical methodology encourage scholars to utilize multiple categories of evidence, including inscriptions, memoirs, travel accounts, archival documents, regional histories, oral traditions, architectural patronage, and literary texts. These sources reveal that women frequently acted as political negotiators during periods of succession crises, military conflict, and imperial expansion. Their influence extended beyond palace walls

into broader questions of governance, regional stability, and interstate cooperation. Although their authority was often exercised indirectly, its political consequences were substantial.

Examining women's diplomatic roles is particularly important because it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of governance in pre-colonial South Asia. Diplomacy should not be interpreted solely through military treaties or official ambassadors; rather, it should also encompass the social, cultural, familial, and religious relationships that sustained political authority. Women occupied central positions within these networks, enabling them to influence decisions that shaped the political landscape of the region. Their contributions demonstrate that statecraft depended not only upon military strength but also upon negotiation, persuasion, alliance-building, and conflict resolution, areas in which women frequently played indispensable roles.

This study therefore seeks to recover the neglected diplomatic contributions of women in pre-colonial South Asia by critically examining historical evidence through the lens of feminist historiography. It argues that women should be recognized as active political actors whose diplomatic interventions significantly influenced regional politics, imperial administration, and interstate relations. By revisiting historical narratives that have traditionally marginalized women's political agency, the article contributes to a more balanced and inclusive understanding of South Asian diplomatic history.

Moreover, the study addresses an important gap in existing scholarship by integrating gender analysis into the broader history of diplomacy. Rather than treating women as exceptional figures, it examines their participation as an integral component of political institutions and diplomatic practices. Such an approach not only enriches historical knowledge but also challenges long-standing assumptions regarding power, governance, and leadership in pre-colonial societies.

Ultimately, recovering the stories of forgotten women diplomats is not simply an effort to acknowledge overlooked historical personalities; it is an attempt to reconstruct a more accurate account of South Asia's political past. Recognizing women's diplomatic agency reveals the multidimensional nature of governance and highlights the interconnected roles of gender, culture, and political authority in shaping historical outcomes. In doing so, this research contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to produce a more inclusive historiography that reflects the diverse actors who influenced the political and diplomatic development of pre-colonial South Asia

Literature Review

The study of diplomacy has traditionally focused on formal political institutions, interstate negotiations, military alliances, and the activities of kings, ambassadors, and political elites. Within South Asian historiography, diplomatic history has largely revolved around imperial expansion, warfare, administrative reforms, and foreign relations, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Consequently, the contributions of women to diplomatic processes have remained relatively unexplored. Recent developments in gender history and feminist historiography, however, have encouraged scholars to reassess conventional interpretations by recognizing women as active participants in political and diplomatic affairs rather than passive figures confined to domestic spaces.

Early historical scholarship on pre-colonial South Asia was primarily influenced by colonial historians who interpreted political history through the actions of rulers, dynasties, and military campaigns. Works by historians such as Vincent Arthur Smith (1917) and Stanley Lane-Poole

(1903) emphasized imperial governance and military achievements while paying little attention to women's political agency. Royal women were generally described in relation to their familial connections with male rulers, rather than as influential actors in governance or diplomacy. This approach reinforced the perception that diplomacy was an exclusively masculine sphere.

Following independence, South Asian historians expanded the scope of political history by examining administrative institutions, regional kingdoms, and socio-economic structures. Scholars such as Satish Chandra (2007) and Irfan Habib (1999) provided detailed analyses of the political organization of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Their works significantly advanced understanding of state formation, imperial administration, taxation, and political authority. Nevertheless, discussions of diplomacy remained centered on emperors, governors, military commanders, and court officials, while women's participation continued to receive limited scholarly attention.

The emergence of women's history during the late twentieth century fundamentally transformed historical research by questioning the absence of women from traditional historical narratives. Historians increasingly argued that the scarcity of women in political history reflected not their lack of participation but rather the biases inherent in historical sources and historiographical traditions. Gerda Lerner (1986) contended that women had always participated in political life, yet patriarchal systems of historical writing rendered their contributions largely invisible. Similarly, Joan Wallach Scott (1986) proposed gender as a valuable analytical category through which historians could better understand relations of power, authority, and political institutions. These theoretical developments encouraged historians to reinterpret political history by incorporating gender into analyses of governance and diplomacy.

Feminist historiography has been particularly influential in reassessing women's roles within pre-modern societies. Rather than viewing women solely through domestic or familial perspectives, feminist scholars have highlighted their political influence through informal institutions, kinship networks, patronage systems, and religious authority. Natalie Zemon Davis (1995) demonstrated that women frequently exercised political influence through mediation and negotiation despite institutional restrictions on formal authority. Although her research focused primarily on Europe, her conceptual framework has informed similar studies in South Asian history by encouraging historians to recognize diplomacy beyond official state institutions.

Within South Asian studies, Ruby Lal has made significant contributions to understanding women's political agency during the Mughal period. In Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World (2005), Lal argues that royal women actively participated in imperial governance rather than remaining secluded within the royal household. She demonstrates that women influenced succession politics, administrative decisions, court alliances, and diplomatic relationships through both formal and informal mechanisms. Her work challenges long-standing assumptions regarding the political isolation of Mughal women and provides important evidence of their participation in statecraft.

Similarly, Ellison Banks Findly's Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India (1993) illustrates how Nur Jahan emerged as one of the most politically influential women in South Asian history. Findly argues that Nur Jahan exercised authority over imperial administration, diplomatic negotiations, military affairs, royal appointments, and foreign relations during Emperor Jahangir's reign. Rather than functioning merely as an imperial consort, she became an influential political decision-maker whose authority extended throughout the Mughal Empire. This work demonstrates that women could occupy central positions within diplomatic and administrative structures despite prevailing patriarchal norms.

Research on Jahanara Begum has further expanded understanding of women's diplomatic roles. Scholars have shown that Jahanara served not only as a royal princess but also as a trusted political advisor, mediator between rival factions, patron of religious institutions, and representative of imperial authority. Her influence in court politics and interstate relations reflects the broader political significance of royal women within Mughal governance. Such studies illustrate that diplomacy frequently depended upon personal relationships, familial networks, and informal negotiations in which women played indispensable roles.

Historians have also examined the political leadership of Razia Sultan, whose reign challenges conventional assumptions regarding gender and political authority in medieval South Asia. Satish Chandra (2007) argues that Razia demonstrated considerable administrative competence while confronting resistance rooted primarily in elite political rivalries and patriarchal social attitudes. Although much scholarship emphasizes her military leadership, recent interpretations also recognize her diplomatic efforts to maintain alliances and stabilize the Delhi Sultanate during periods of political uncertainty.

Studies of Chand Bibi similarly illustrate women's diplomatic capabilities during times of military conflict. Harbans Mukhia (2004) and other historians note that Chand Bibi successfully negotiated with Mughal forces while simultaneously organizing military resistance against imperial expansion. Her political strategy combined diplomacy with military leadership, highlighting the complex nature of women's political agency during periods of interstate conflict.

Marriage diplomacy represents another important area within the literature. Historians including Ruby Lal (2005) and John F. Richards (1993) argue that dynastic marriages served not merely ceremonial purposes but functioned as strategic instruments of statecraft. Royal women often maintained communication between their natal and marital families, facilitated political alliances, and reduced tensions between competing dynasties. Through these relationships, women contributed significantly to long-term diplomatic stability despite rarely receiving formal diplomatic recognition.

Scholars have increasingly emphasized cultural diplomacy as an additional dimension of women's political influence. Catherine B. Asher (1992) demonstrates that royal patronage of architecture, religious institutions, literature, and charitable organizations enhanced political legitimacy while strengthening relations among diverse communities. Women's patronage activities frequently supported diplomatic objectives by promoting social cohesion, religious tolerance, and imperial prestige. These forms of cultural diplomacy broaden conventional definitions of political negotiation beyond formal treaties and military alliances.

Another important contribution to the literature concerns the relationship between religion and diplomacy. Richard Eaton (2000) argues that Sufi networks, religious patronage, and spiritual authority often complemented formal political institutions throughout South Asia. Royal women frequently supported religious scholars, shrines, and charitable institutions, thereby strengthening political legitimacy and facilitating communication between rulers and local communities. Their religious patronage often functioned as an indirect yet effective instrument of diplomacy.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing scholarship remains fragmented. Most studies concentrate on individual historical figures such as Nur Jahan, Razia Sultan, or Chand Bibi rather than examining women's diplomatic roles across multiple regions and historical periods. Furthermore, many works emphasize political biography instead of analyzing diplomacy as a broader process involving negotiation, mediation, alliance formation, and conflict resolution. Consequently, there remains limited comparative research investigating how women collectively influenced interstate relations throughout pre-colonial South Asia.

Another limitation concerns the nature of historical sources. Much of the available evidence originates from court chronicles written by male historians whose primary purpose was to celebrate rulers and dynasties. These sources frequently minimized women's political contributions or represented their influence indirectly through male relatives. Feminist historians therefore advocate reading historical texts critically by examining omissions, symbolic language, correspondence, architectural patronage, travel narratives, and administrative records alongside traditional chronicles. Such approaches enable historians to recover forms of political agency that remain obscured within conventional historical writing.

Recent scholarship in global diplomatic history has also encouraged broader conceptualizations of diplomacy. Historians increasingly recognize that diplomacy extends beyond official ambassadors and state treaties to include informal negotiations, kinship networks, cultural exchanges, ceremonial interactions, and religious patronage. Applying this expanded framework to South Asian history provides greater opportunities for recognizing women's contributions to interstate relations and political governance.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates growing scholarly recognition of women's political influence in pre-colonial South Asia. However, significant gaps remain regarding their collective diplomatic roles, comparative historical significance, and contributions to interstate politics. Much of the available scholarship remains biographical or regionally specific, leaving insufficient analysis of diplomacy as a gendered political institution. This study seeks to address these limitations by synthesizing evidence from multiple historical periods and examining women as active diplomatic actors who shaped political alliances, negotiated conflicts, mediated succession disputes, and contributed to the broader development of statecraft in pre-colonial South Asia. By integrating feminist historiography with diplomatic history, the research aims to produce a more inclusive interpretation of South Asia's political past.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Feminist Historiography as its primary theoretical framework, complemented by perspectives from the New Diplomatic History approach. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for examining the often-overlooked diplomatic roles of women in pre-colonial South Asia. Rather than treating diplomacy solely as a formal activity conducted by kings, ambassadors, and state officials, these approaches recognize that political influence was frequently exercised through informal networks, kinship relations, cultural exchanges, religious patronage, and interpersonal negotiations. Consequently, they enable a broader understanding of diplomacy that incorporates the contributions of royal and elite women.

Traditional historiography has generally portrayed political power and diplomacy as masculine domains. Historical narratives have focused predominantly on wars, treaties, territorial expansion, and the decisions of male rulers, leaving little room for understanding how women influenced political affairs. Feminist historiography challenges this perspective by arguing that historical knowledge is shaped by the biases of those who record history. Since most pre-colonial chronicles were written by male court historians, women's political contributions were often ignored, minimized, or represented only in relation to male rulers. Therefore, the absence of women from diplomatic history should not be interpreted as evidence of their political insignificance but rather as a consequence of patriarchal historical writing.

Joan Wallach Scott (1986) argues that gender is not merely a biological distinction but a social and political category that structures relations of power. Applying Scott's framework to pre-colonial South Asia allows this study to investigate how gender influenced access to political

authority while simultaneously recognizing the alternative avenues through which women exercised diplomatic influence. Royal women often lacked formal governmental positions, yet they participated in political negotiations through marriage alliances, mediation, court patronage, succession politics, and advisory roles. Their influence demonstrates that diplomacy functioned through both official institutions and informal political relationships.

Gerda Lerner's (1986) concept of patriarchal historical exclusion further strengthens this theoretical perspective. Lerner contends that women have consistently participated in political and social life throughout history, but historical narratives have systematically marginalized their achievements. Her work suggests that historians must critically examine existing sources to uncover women's hidden contributions rather than relying exclusively on official political records. This approach is particularly relevant to pre-colonial South Asia, where court chronicles often celebrated emperors while providing only limited information regarding the political agency of queens, princesses, royal mothers, and noblewomen.

The study also incorporates the principles of the New Diplomatic History, which significantly broadens the conventional understanding of diplomacy. Unlike traditional diplomatic history, which focuses primarily on treaties, ambassadors, and interstate negotiations, the New Diplomatic History emphasizes the social, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions of political interaction. Diplomacy is understood as a continuous process involving communication, mediation, symbolic representation, gift exchange, religious patronage, ceremonial practices, and family networks. This broader conceptualization is particularly valuable for studying women's diplomatic roles because much of their political influence operated through informal rather than institutional channels.

Within pre-colonial South Asia, political marriages illustrate the relevance of this theoretical perspective. Marriage alliances were not merely dynastic ceremonies but strategic diplomatic instruments that strengthened interstate relations, reduced military conflict, and secured political legitimacy. Royal women often became intermediaries between their natal and marital dynasties, facilitating communication, maintaining alliances, and mediating disputes. Similarly, women exercised diplomatic influence through charitable patronage, religious endowments, architectural sponsorship, and support for scholars and spiritual leaders. These activities promoted political stability, strengthened imperial legitimacy, and fostered relationships among diverse communities.

The concept of political agency also plays a central role in this study. Rather than defining agency solely in terms of formal governmental authority, contemporary feminist historians argue that individuals may exercise power through negotiation, persuasion, mediation, and social influence. Accordingly, this research interprets diplomacy as a multidimensional process in which women actively shaped political outcomes despite institutional constraints. Their participation in succession disputes, peace negotiations, court politics, and cultural diplomacy demonstrates that political authority frequently extended beyond official state offices.

By integrating Feminist Historiography with the New Diplomatic History, this research develops an analytical framework capable of recognizing women's visible and invisible contributions to diplomacy. It enables the study to move beyond traditional state-centered narratives and instead examine diplomacy as a complex political process involving multiple actors and diverse forms of authority. Consequently, forgotten women diplomats emerge not as historical exceptions but as integral participants in the governance and diplomatic practices of pre-colonial South Asia.

Research Gap

Although scholarship on South Asian political history has expanded considerably over the past several decades, significant gaps remain regarding women's diplomatic roles in pre-colonial societies. Existing historical studies primarily focus on imperial administration, military campaigns, economic institutions, and dynastic politics, while diplomacy continues to be interpreted largely through the actions of male rulers and official ambassadors. As a result, women's participation in political negotiations has received relatively limited systematic analysis.

One major limitation of the existing literature is its strong emphasis on individual biographies. Historical figures such as Nur Jahan, Razia Sultan, Chand Bibi, and Jahanara Begum have attracted scholarly attention because of their exceptional political influence. However, these studies often examine them as isolated personalities rather than as representatives of broader patterns of women's diplomatic participation. Consequently, little comparative research investigates how royal women collectively contributed to interstate relations, alliance formation, conflict resolution, and governance across different regions and historical periods.

Another gap concerns the conceptualization of diplomacy itself. Traditional diplomatic history generally defines diplomacy in terms of official embassies, treaties, military alliances, and foreign policy. Such a narrow definition excludes many forms of informal political activity through which women exercised influence. Marriage diplomacy, religious patronage, cultural exchange, mediation between rival factions, succession negotiations, and courtly communication remain underexplored despite their importance in maintaining political stability. Expanding the definition of diplomacy therefore reveals dimensions of political history that have long remained overlooked.

Furthermore, much of the available historical evidence originates from male-authored court chronicles that prioritized imperial achievements and military victories. These sources frequently ignored women's political activities unless they directly affected the reign of a ruler. Consequently, historians relying exclusively on official chronicles have often underestimated women's agency. There remains a need for research that integrates multiple historical sources, including travel accounts, memoirs, inscriptions, correspondence, regional histories, literary texts, and architectural evidence, to reconstruct women's diplomatic contributions more comprehensively.

Finally, relatively few studies combine feminist historiography with diplomatic history to examine gender and diplomacy simultaneously. While feminist historians have documented women's political influence and diplomatic historians have analyzed interstate relations, these fields have rarely been integrated within South Asian historical scholarship. This interdisciplinary gap limits understanding of how gender shaped diplomatic institutions and political decision-making in pre-colonial societies.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining women's diplomatic roles across multiple historical periods within pre-colonial South Asia through the combined perspectives of Feminist Historiography and the New Diplomatic History. By expanding the definition of diplomacy, critically reassessing traditional historical sources, and highlighting women's political agency, this research contributes to a more inclusive and balanced understanding of South Asian diplomatic history. It also demonstrates that women were not peripheral participants in governance but active diplomatic actors whose contributions significantly influenced political stability, interstate relations, and the evolution of statecraft.

Research Questions

This study seeks to investigate the overlooked diplomatic contributions of women in pre-colonial South Asia by addressing the following research questions:

What diplomatic roles did women play in the political and administrative systems of pre-colonial South Asia?

How did royal women influence interstate relations through marriage alliances, mediation, political negotiations, and court diplomacy?

In what ways did informal diplomatic practices enable women to exercise political authority despite patriarchal social structures?

Why have the diplomatic contributions of women been marginalized or omitted from mainstream South Asian historiography?

How does the application of Feminist Historiography and the New Diplomatic History reshape our understanding of diplomacy and political agency in pre-colonial South Asia?

What lessons can contemporary historians derive from reassessing the diplomatic roles of women in pre-colonial South Asia?

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine the forgotten diplomatic roles of women in pre-colonial South Asia and reassess their contributions to political governance and interstate relations.

The specific objectives of the study are:

To identify the formal and informal diplomatic roles performed by women in pre-colonial South Asia.

To analyze how royal women contributed to political negotiations, peacebuilding, alliance formation, and conflict resolution.

To examine the influence of marriage diplomacy, religious patronage, cultural diplomacy, and court politics as mechanisms through which women exercised diplomatic authority.

To investigate the historical, social, and historiographical factors that led to the exclusion of women's diplomatic contributions from dominant historical narratives.

To apply Feminist Historiography and the New Diplomatic History in order to reinterpret women's political agency within pre-colonial South Asian diplomacy.

To contribute to a more inclusive and gender-sensitive understanding of South Asian diplomatic history by integrating women's experiences into mainstream historical scholarship.

The achievement of these objectives will provide a broader understanding of diplomacy in pre-colonial South Asia by demonstrating that political negotiations were not confined to formal state institutions or male rulers alone. Instead, women actively participated in shaping diplomatic relations through multiple formal and informal channels, thereby influencing governance, political stability, and interstate cooperation.

Historical Analysis / Findings , P1

Women's Diplomatic Roles in Early South Asian Kingdoms

Historical evidence demonstrates that diplomacy in early South Asian kingdoms extended beyond formal negotiations conducted by kings and military commanders. Political authority was sustained through a complex system of alliances, kinship networks, religious patronage, and ceremonial exchanges in which royal women frequently played influential roles. Although early historical chronicles rarely identified women as official diplomats, numerous accounts indicate

that queens, princesses, and royal mothers participated in negotiations, mediated disputes, facilitated alliances, and strengthened interstate relations. Their diplomatic contributions were embedded within the political structures of kingdoms and often operated through informal channels that have received limited attention in conventional historiography.

The political landscape of early South Asia was characterized by the coexistence of numerous kingdoms whose survival depended upon cooperation as much as military strength. Interstate diplomacy commonly involved marriage alliances, tribute arrangements, religious patronage, and ceremonial exchanges. Royal women became central figures within these diplomatic processes because dynastic marriages created enduring political relationships between ruling families. Rather than functioning merely as symbolic representatives, many women actively maintained communication between their natal and marital courts, reducing tensions and promoting political cooperation.

Historical inscriptions from various dynasties suggest that queens also exercised influence through charitable patronage and administrative participation. Their sponsorship of temples, educational institutions, and welfare projects enhanced the legitimacy of ruling dynasties while strengthening relationships between political authorities and local communities. These activities contributed to political stability by fostering public support and reinforcing the moral authority of rulers. Consequently, diplomacy in early South Asia cannot be understood solely through military treaties but must also include social and cultural interactions in which women played indispensable roles.

Royal mothers occupied another significant diplomatic position. During periods of succession disputes or political instability, they frequently served as mediators between competing factions within royal courts. Their senior status, familial relationships, and political experience enabled them to negotiate compromises that prevented prolonged conflicts. Although these interventions rarely appeared as formal diplomatic missions, they significantly influenced the continuity of political institutions and dynastic stability.

Women's participation in diplomacy also extended to regional trade networks. Merchant communities often depended upon royal patronage to maintain secure commercial routes connecting different kingdoms. Through charitable foundations, religious patronage, and court sponsorship, elite women contributed indirectly to economic diplomacy by encouraging peaceful relations among neighboring states. Stable commercial exchanges strengthened political alliances while promoting mutual economic interests, further illustrating the multidimensional nature of diplomacy during this period.

Despite these contributions, surviving historical evidence remains uneven because much of the documentation originated from male court historians whose narratives prioritized military victories and royal achievements. Consequently, women's diplomatic activities frequently appear only indirectly through descriptions of court ceremonies, succession negotiations, or marriage alliances. Feminist historiographical approaches therefore become essential for recovering these overlooked dimensions of political history.

Diplomatic Influence During the Delhi Sultanate

The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate marked an important transformation in the political organization of northern India. Between the thirteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Sultanate experienced frequent military campaigns, territorial expansion, succession crises, and political rivalries. Maintaining political stability required continuous diplomatic engagement both within the ruling elite and among neighboring kingdoms. Although formal diplomacy remained

dominated by male officials, women exercised considerable influence through mediation, advisory roles, dynastic alliances, and court politics.

The most prominent example is Razia Sultan, whose reign challenged conventional assumptions regarding women's political authority in medieval South Asia. Ascending the throne in 1236, Razia became the first woman to rule the Delhi Sultanate in her own right. Unlike many royal women whose influence remained indirect, Razia exercised sovereign authority over administrative, military, and diplomatic affairs. Contemporary chronicles describe her participation in political negotiations, provincial administration, and the management of elite factions within the Sultanate.

Razia's diplomatic leadership was particularly evident in her efforts to consolidate authority among competing Turkish nobles. Rather than relying exclusively upon military force, she sought to build political consensus through administrative appointments, negotiations, and strategic alliances. Her policies reflected an understanding that effective governance depended upon balancing the interests of influential political groups while maintaining central authority. Although resistance from sections of the nobility ultimately contributed to her downfall, much of this opposition stemmed from entrenched patriarchal attitudes rather than administrative incompetence.

The political environment of the Delhi Sultanate also enabled other royal women to exercise influence behind the scenes. Queens and royal mothers frequently advised sultans during succession disputes and acted as intermediaries between rival court factions. Their participation became especially important during periods when young or inexperienced rulers ascended the throne. Senior women within the royal household often possessed extensive political knowledge accumulated through years of court experience, enabling them to mediate disputes and maintain administrative continuity.

Marriage diplomacy remained another important feature of Sultanate politics. Alliances between ruling families and influential regional elites helped secure territorial stability and reduce the likelihood of military confrontation. Royal women served as crucial intermediaries within these alliances by maintaining relationships between different political households. Their correspondence, ceremonial visits, and familial networks strengthened trust between ruling dynasties and facilitated peaceful political cooperation.

Women also exercised diplomatic influence through religious patronage. During the Delhi Sultanate, rulers actively supported scholars, religious institutions, and Sufi saints to enhance political legitimacy. Elite women contributed to these efforts by sponsoring mosques, educational institutions, charitable foundations, and religious endowments. Such patronage strengthened relationships between the ruling government and influential religious communities while promoting social stability throughout the empire. Religious diplomacy therefore represented another important avenue through which women influenced political affairs without occupying formal governmental offices.

Court culture within the Delhi Sultanate further illustrates women's informal diplomatic authority. Royal ceremonies, receptions of foreign envoys, and celebrations of political alliances frequently involved the participation of elite women. Although official chronicles rarely described these activities in detail, ceremonial hospitality formed an important component of diplomatic practice. Women supervised court etiquette, gift exchanges, and cultural interactions that reinforced political relationships with visiting dignitaries and neighboring rulers.

Another important aspect of women's diplomacy involved succession politics. Transitions of political power often generated uncertainty, making mediation essential for preserving dynastic

continuity. Historical evidence indicates that royal mothers and senior queens occasionally intervened to negotiate compromises among competing heirs or influential nobles. Their familial authority enabled them to communicate with multiple political factions while preserving the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty. Such interventions reduced political instability and minimized the likelihood of prolonged civil conflict.

Nevertheless, women's diplomatic contributions during the Delhi Sultanate have received relatively limited attention within mainstream historical scholarship. Traditional narratives continue to emphasize military expansion, administrative reforms, and the achievements of male rulers while overlooking the informal political mechanisms that sustained governance. Even Razia Sultan, one of the most thoroughly documented female rulers in South Asian history, has often been portrayed primarily as an exceptional woman rather than as evidence of broader patterns of female political participation.

Applying the perspectives of Feminist Historiography and the New Diplomatic History reveals that diplomacy during the Delhi Sultanate operated through multiple interconnected channels. Formal negotiations conducted by rulers represented only one dimension of political interaction. Equally important were family alliances, court mediation, religious patronage, ceremonial diplomacy, and interpersonal networks in which women played active and influential roles. Their contributions strengthened political stability, facilitated negotiations, and supported the administrative functioning of the Sultanate despite institutional barriers that limited women's formal political authority.

Overall, the historical evidence from early South Asian kingdoms and the Delhi Sultanate demonstrates that women were significant diplomatic actors whose influence extended beyond domestic responsibilities. Their participation in alliance-building, mediation, succession politics, religious patronage, and court diplomacy illustrates the diverse mechanisms through which political authority was exercised in pre-colonial South Asia. Recognizing these contributions provides a more comprehensive understanding of diplomacy and challenges long-standing historiographical assumptions that have confined political agency to male rulers alone.

Historical Analysis / Findings , Part II-A

Women Diplomats and Negotiators in the Mughal Empire

The establishment of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century marked a significant transformation in the political and diplomatic landscape of South Asia. The Mughal court developed sophisticated administrative institutions, maintained diplomatic relations with neighboring kingdoms and foreign powers, and promoted cultural exchanges that strengthened imperial authority. While official diplomatic positions were occupied almost exclusively by men, royal women played indispensable roles in political negotiations, conflict resolution, succession politics, and imperial governance. Their influence was exercised through informal political networks, personal authority, and strategic decision-making, demonstrating that diplomacy within the Mughal Empire extended far beyond formal embassies and treaties.

Among the most influential women in Mughal history was Nur Jahan, whose political authority during the reign of Emperor Jahangir remains unparalleled. Historians argue that Nur Jahan was not merely the emperor's consort but an active participant in state administration and diplomatic affairs. She issued imperial orders, influenced administrative appointments, participated in discussions concerning foreign policy, and advised the emperor on matters of governance. Coins were even minted in her name, reflecting the exceptional political authority she exercised within the empire.

Nur Jahan's diplomatic abilities became particularly evident during periods of political instability. She negotiated alliances among competing factions within the Mughal court, mediated disputes between influential nobles, and helped maintain political cohesion during succession struggles. Her correspondence with provincial governors and court officials illustrates her involvement in decision-making processes that directly affected imperial administration. Rather than relying solely on military coercion, Nur Jahan frequently employed negotiation, persuasion, and coalition-building to preserve political stability. These strategies exemplify diplomacy as an ongoing process of relationship management rather than simply interstate negotiation.

Another prominent figure was Jahanara Begum, the eldest daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan. Following the death of her mother, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara assumed the position of Padshah Begum, becoming the highest-ranking woman in the Mughal court. This position granted her considerable influence over court affairs and enabled her to serve as an intermediary between members of the royal family and senior government officials.

Jahanara played an essential role in mediating conflicts among Mughal princes during periods of political tension. She sought to reduce rivalry within the imperial family by encouraging dialogue and compromise, recognizing that prolonged disputes threatened the stability of the empire. Although she could not ultimately prevent the War of Succession among Shah Jahan's sons, her efforts demonstrate that women actively participated in diplomatic conflict management within the royal household.

In addition to political mediation, Jahanara contributed to diplomatic relations through extensive patronage of trade, religious institutions, and urban development. She supported commercial networks connecting the Mughal Empire with Central Asia and the Middle East, promoted charitable activities, and sponsored the construction of markets, caravanserais, and religious buildings. These initiatives enhanced the empire's prestige while strengthening commercial and cultural relations with neighboring regions. Such activities illustrate how diplomacy often operated through economic and cultural interactions rather than formal political negotiations alone.

Royal women also exercised influence during succession disputes, one of the most sensitive aspects of Mughal politics. Because succession within the Mughal Empire was not governed by strict hereditary rules, competition among princes frequently generated political instability. Senior women, particularly royal mothers and princesses, often attempted to mediate between rival claimants, negotiate alliances among influential nobles, and preserve dynastic continuity. Their familial relationships enabled them to communicate with multiple political factions, making them valuable intermediaries during times of crisis.

Women's diplomatic influence extended beyond the imperial household. Elite Mughal women maintained relationships with regional rulers, religious leaders, merchants, and foreign visitors through correspondence, patronage, and ceremonial exchanges. These interactions strengthened imperial legitimacy while fostering cooperation across culturally and politically diverse communities. Consequently, diplomacy within the Mughal Empire should be understood as a multidimensional process involving formal institutions alongside informal networks in which women played central roles.

Marriage Diplomacy and Political Alliances

Marriage diplomacy constituted one of the most effective political strategies employed by pre-colonial South Asian rulers. Dynastic marriages were carefully negotiated to establish alliances,

secure territorial peace, enhance political legitimacy, and strengthen interstate relations. Although women have often been portrayed merely as symbolic participants in these alliances, historical evidence demonstrates that they actively contributed to maintaining diplomatic relationships long after the marriages had taken place.

Within the Mughal Empire, matrimonial alliances with Rajput kingdoms represent one of the most significant examples of marriage diplomacy. Emperor Akbar recognized that military conquest alone could not ensure long-term political stability across northern India. Consequently, he pursued alliances with influential Rajput rulers through strategic marriages that promoted mutual trust and cooperation. Royal women who entered these alliances became vital diplomatic intermediaries between their natal families and the Mughal court.

These women maintained communication between different political centres, facilitated negotiations during periods of disagreement, and promoted mutual understanding between culturally distinct ruling elites. Their familiarity with both political environments enabled them to bridge differences that might otherwise have resulted in conflict. Marriage therefore functioned not merely as a ceremonial event but as a continuing diplomatic institution sustained through the political agency of women.

Marriage alliances also reduced the likelihood of armed confrontation. By creating kinship ties between rival dynasties, rulers established obligations of mutual cooperation and loyalty. Women frequently reinforced these obligations through ceremonial visits, correspondence, gift exchanges, and participation in important political occasions. Such interactions strengthened interpersonal trust among ruling families and contributed to regional stability.

The diplomatic significance of royal marriages extended beyond political alliances to questions of governance and imperial integration. Women who married into new dynasties often introduced cultural traditions, administrative practices, and religious customs from their natal kingdoms. This exchange enriched court culture while encouraging greater acceptance of political diversity within expanding empires. The Mughal policy of accommodating Rajput elites illustrates how marriage diplomacy facilitated both political cooperation and cultural integration.

Historical records further suggest that royal women occasionally advised rulers regarding relations with their natal kingdoms. Their knowledge of local political conditions, influential families, and regional customs provided valuable insights that informed imperial decision-making. Although such advice was rarely documented in official chronicles, its political importance is reflected in the relative stability of several long-standing dynastic alliances.

Marriage diplomacy also strengthened economic relationships between kingdoms. Peaceful political relations encouraged trade, commercial investment, and the movement of merchants across regional boundaries. Royal women supported these developments through patronage of markets, charitable institutions, and infrastructure projects that facilitated commercial exchange. Consequently, marriage diplomacy produced political, cultural, and economic benefits extending far beyond the immediate interests of ruling families.

However, the historical significance of marriage diplomacy has often been underestimated because traditional historiography has emphasized the decisions of male rulers while overlooking the continuing diplomatic work performed by women. Feminist historiography challenges this interpretation by recognizing royal women as active political actors whose influence extended throughout the duration of dynastic alliances. Rather than passive symbols of political agreement, they served as negotiators, communicators, cultural ambassadors, and mediators who sustained relationships between kingdoms across generations.

The historical evidence from the Mughal period therefore demonstrates that diplomacy operated through multiple interconnected channels involving formal political institutions, family networks, cultural exchange, and interpersonal negotiation. Women occupied central positions within these networks, contributing significantly to political stability, alliance formation, and imperial governance. Their diplomatic agency challenges conventional assumptions regarding gender and political authority while highlighting the broader social foundations upon which successful diplomacy depended in pre-colonial South Asia

Historical Analysis / Findings , Part II-B

Religious and Cultural Diplomacy

In pre-colonial South Asia, diplomacy was not confined to military alliances or political treaties. Religion, culture, education, architecture, and charitable patronage also served as important diplomatic instruments through which rulers established legitimacy, strengthened political relationships, and promoted social stability. Royal women played a particularly significant role in these forms of diplomacy because they possessed considerable influence over charitable activities, religious institutions, literary patronage, and cultural exchanges. These contributions enhanced the political authority of ruling dynasties while fostering cooperation among diverse religious and ethnic communities.

Religious patronage represented one of the most effective forms of informal diplomacy. Throughout the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, elite women sponsored mosques, shrines, schools, hospitals, wells, caravanserais, and charitable foundations. These institutions not only addressed public welfare but also strengthened the relationship between rulers and their subjects. By supporting respected religious scholars and spiritual leaders, royal women enhanced the legitimacy of the state and encouraged peaceful relations among different communities.

Jahanara Begum provides an important example of religious diplomacy. As a devoted follower of the Chishti Sufi order, she maintained close relationships with prominent Sufi scholars and financed religious institutions throughout the empire. Her patronage helped strengthen the connection between the Mughal court and influential religious communities, contributing to political stability during periods of uncertainty. Through religious endowments and charitable activities, she projected an image of compassionate leadership that reinforced imperial legitimacy.

Similarly, Mughal royal women actively promoted cultural diplomacy through architecture, literature, education, and the arts. They commissioned gardens, mosques, libraries, markets, and public buildings that reflected both imperial power and cultural sophistication. These projects became symbols of political stability and attracted scholars, merchants, artists, and travelers from different regions. Architectural patronage therefore functioned not merely as artistic expression but also as a diplomatic strategy that enhanced the prestige of the empire.

Women also encouraged intellectual and literary exchanges by supporting poets, historians, scholars, and religious thinkers. Such patronage facilitated the circulation of ideas across South Asia and beyond, strengthening cultural relationships with Central Asia, Persia, and the broader Islamic world. These interactions promoted mutual understanding and reinforced the international reputation of South Asian courts.

Charitable diplomacy constituted another important dimension of women's political influence. During periods of famine, war, or economic hardship, royal women organized relief efforts, distributed financial assistance, and supported public welfare institutions. These humanitarian activities strengthened public confidence in the ruling dynasty while reducing social unrest. In

this sense, charity served not only moral purposes but also political objectives by promoting stability and strengthening relations between rulers and society.

Women additionally contributed to diplomacy through ceremonial practices. Royal receptions, religious festivals, imperial celebrations, and gift exchanges frequently involved the participation of elite women who supervised court protocol and hospitality. These ceremonies reinforced political alliances and demonstrated the wealth, refinement, and stability of the ruling dynasty. Although such activities rarely appear prominently in official historical records, they formed an essential component of diplomatic culture in pre-colonial South Asia.

Collectively, these examples illustrate that diplomacy operated through multiple interconnected political, religious, cultural, and social mechanisms. Women's contributions to these spheres significantly strengthened interstate relations, imperial legitimacy, and internal political cohesion.

Reasons for Their Omission from Mainstream Historiography

Despite substantial evidence demonstrating women's participation in diplomacy, their contributions remain largely absent from mainstream historical narratives. This omission reflects historiographical traditions rather than historical reality. Several interrelated factors have contributed to the marginalization of women within South Asian diplomatic history.

The first and perhaps most significant factor is the patriarchal nature of historical writing. Most surviving chronicles of pre-colonial South Asia were written by male court historians employed by kings and emperors. Their principal responsibility was to celebrate military victories, administrative achievements, and dynastic legitimacy. Consequently, historical narratives focused overwhelmingly on male rulers while overlooking the political activities of women unless those activities directly influenced the reign of a monarch.

Second, traditional definitions of diplomacy have been excessively narrow. Diplomatic history has generally emphasized ambassadors, treaties, foreign ministries, and official negotiations between states. Since women rarely occupied these formal positions, their political contributions were excluded from conventional diplomatic scholarship. However, contemporary approaches such as the New Diplomatic History recognize that diplomacy also includes mediation, family alliances, cultural exchanges, religious patronage, ceremonial representation, and informal political communication—areas in which women frequently exercised considerable influence.

A third factor concerns the limited preservation of historical evidence. Personal correspondence, administrative records, and documents relating to women have often been lost through war, environmental damage, political change, or inadequate archival preservation. Consequently, historians have frequently relied on official chronicles that provide only fragmentary information regarding women's activities. This documentary imbalance has reinforced the perception that women played only minor political roles.

Colonial historiography also contributed significantly to the exclusion of women from political history. Many nineteenth-century European historians interpreted South Asian societies through Orientalist perspectives that emphasized authoritarian rulers, military conquest, and centralized administration. Women's political participation received little scholarly attention because it did not conform to prevailing European assumptions regarding diplomacy and governance. These interpretations influenced subsequent historical scholarship for many decades.

Another important reason lies in the tendency to portray influential women as exceptional individuals rather than representatives of broader historical patterns. Figures such as Nur Jahan, Razia Sultan, Chand Bibi, and Jahanara Begum are frequently described as extraordinary women

who overcame exceptional circumstances. While their achievements were indeed remarkable, presenting them solely as isolated exceptions obscures the wider diplomatic roles performed by many other royal women whose contributions remain undocumented or understudied.

Modern feminist historiography has challenged these traditional assumptions by arguing that historical silence should not be interpreted as historical absence. Instead, historians must critically examine how historical records were produced, whose voices they privilege, and which political activities they ignore. This approach encourages scholars to analyze inscriptions, architectural patronage, literary texts, memoirs, travel accounts, religious records, and regional histories alongside official chronicles to reconstruct women's political agency more comprehensively.

The findings of this research therefore demonstrate that women were active participants in the diplomatic life of pre-colonial South Asia. Their influence extended across political negotiation, conflict resolution, dynastic alliances, succession politics, religious patronage, cultural exchange, and public welfare. Although they seldom occupied official diplomatic offices, their informal political authority frequently shaped the success or failure of diplomatic initiatives.

Recognizing these contributions fundamentally transforms our understanding of South Asian political history. Diplomacy emerges not merely as a state-centered activity conducted by kings and ambassadors but as a multidimensional process sustained through family relationships, cultural interactions, religious institutions, and social networks in which women played indispensable roles. Recovering these forgotten women diplomats therefore contributes to a more inclusive, balanced, and historically accurate interpretation of pre-colonial South Asia.

Discussion

The findings of this study challenge the long-standing assumption that diplomacy in pre-colonial South Asia was an exclusively male domain. By examining the political activities of queens, princesses, royal mothers, and elite women across different historical periods, the research demonstrates that women exercised significant diplomatic influence through both formal and informal mechanisms. Their participation in mediation, dynastic alliances, succession politics, religious patronage, cultural exchange, and conflict resolution reveals that diplomacy functioned as a multidimensional process extending far beyond official embassies and interstate treaties. These findings support the central argument of Feminist Historiography that women's historical contributions have often been obscured by patriarchal modes of historical writing rather than by an actual absence of political agency.

One of the most significant findings of this research is that women's diplomatic influence was primarily exercised through informal political institutions. Unlike male rulers who occupied official governmental offices, women frequently relied on kinship networks, marriage alliances, personal relationships, religious authority, and court patronage to influence political decisions. Although these channels lacked formal institutional recognition, they often proved highly effective in maintaining political stability and facilitating interstate cooperation. This observation supports the arguments of Joan Wallach Scott (1986), who emphasizes that gender shapes access to political authority while simultaneously creating alternative forms of exercising power. The experiences of women in pre-colonial South Asia illustrate that political influence cannot be measured solely through official governmental positions but must also include informal processes of negotiation, persuasion, and mediation.

The study further demonstrates that diplomacy in pre-colonial South Asia was deeply embedded within social and familial relationships. Marriage diplomacy emerged as one of the most

effective instruments for establishing alliances among ruling dynasties. However, the findings indicate that royal women were not merely passive participants in these alliances. Instead, they actively maintained communication between their natal and marital families, mediated political disagreements, promoted mutual trust, and facilitated long-term diplomatic cooperation. These responsibilities required considerable political skill and demonstrate that women functioned as diplomatic intermediaries whose contributions extended well beyond ceremonial roles. Such findings broaden traditional definitions of diplomacy by recognizing family relationships as important political institutions.

The historical evidence relating to the Mughal Empire further strengthens this interpretation. Figures such as Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum exercised substantial influence over imperial governance through advisory roles, administrative participation, religious patronage, and political mediation. Their activities illustrate that women possessed both the knowledge and capability necessary for effective diplomacy. Nur Jahan's involvement in court politics, administrative appointments, and negotiations among competing factions demonstrates that women occasionally exercised authority comparable to that of senior government officials. Similarly, Jahanara Begum's mediation during succession disputes and her patronage of commercial and religious institutions reveal that diplomacy frequently operated through cultural, economic, and spiritual networks rather than solely through military or political negotiations.

The findings also demonstrate that religious and cultural diplomacy constituted important dimensions of women's political influence. Elite women sponsored educational institutions, charitable organizations, architectural projects, and religious foundations that enhanced the legitimacy of ruling dynasties while strengthening relationships between political authorities and local communities. These forms of diplomacy promoted social cohesion, encouraged intercultural dialogue, and reinforced public confidence in government. Such activities support contemporary interpretations within the New Diplomatic History, which argue that diplomacy should encompass cultural representation, symbolic communication, and public engagement alongside traditional statecraft.

Another important contribution of this study concerns the relationship between diplomacy and political stability. Throughout pre-colonial South Asian history, periods of succession crises, military conflict, and administrative uncertainty frequently required mediation among competing political actors. Royal women often occupied unique positions that enabled them to communicate with multiple factions simultaneously. Their familial relationships, social status, and political experience allowed them to negotiate compromises that reduced tensions and preserved dynastic continuity. Although not all mediation efforts proved successful, the historical evidence indicates that women consistently contributed to political stability during periods of crisis.

The research also highlights the limitations of conventional historiography. One of the principal reasons for the historical invisibility of women diplomats lies in the nature of surviving historical sources. Most court chronicles were produced by male historians whose primary objective was to celebrate rulers and military achievements. Consequently, political activities performed by women were frequently ignored, abbreviated, or attributed to male rulers. This documentary imbalance has shaped historical scholarship for centuries, reinforcing the misconception that diplomacy was conducted exclusively by men. The present findings therefore support Gerda Lerner's (1986) argument that historical exclusion often reflects patterns of documentation rather than actual patterns of participation.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the value of applying Feminist Historiography to diplomatic history. Traditional diplomatic scholarship has concentrated largely on official ambassadors, treaties, and interstate negotiations, leaving limited space for understanding informal political practices. Feminist approaches encourage historians to examine family correspondence, architectural patronage, charitable foundations, religious networks, and courtly interactions as legitimate historical evidence of political agency. By incorporating these sources, the present research reveals a far more complex and inclusive picture of diplomatic practice in pre-colonial South Asia.

The findings also have broader implications for understanding gender and political leadership in historical societies. They challenge the assumption that patriarchal institutions completely excluded women from political decision-making. Although women undoubtedly faced significant structural constraints, they developed alternative strategies through which they exercised influence over governance, diplomacy, and state formation. Their experiences demonstrate that political authority is not always dependent upon formal office but may also emerge through social legitimacy, interpersonal relationships, cultural leadership, and moral authority.

Another significant implication concerns the interdisciplinary nature of diplomatic history. Combining historical analysis with feminist theory, political history, cultural studies, and gender studies enables a richer understanding of how diplomacy functioned within pre-colonial societies. Rather than treating diplomatic history as an isolated field concerned exclusively with foreign relations, this interdisciplinary perspective recognizes diplomacy as an interconnected process involving political institutions, cultural practices, religious traditions, and social relationships. Such an approach contributes to ongoing efforts within historical scholarship to produce more inclusive interpretations of the past. Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations. Much of the available evidence remains dependent upon surviving historical records that often provide incomplete or indirect information regarding women's political activities. The scarcity of personal correspondence, administrative documents, and autobiographical writings by women limits opportunities for reconstructing their experiences in greater detail. Future research may therefore benefit from examining archaeological evidence, regional archives, vernacular literature, inscriptions, and digital historical databases to identify additional evidence of women's diplomatic participation.

Comparative research may also provide valuable insights by examining women's diplomatic roles across different regions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Such studies could determine whether similar patterns of informal diplomacy emerged within other pre-modern societies and contribute to broader theoretical understandings of gender and international relations. Likewise, interdisciplinary collaborations between historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and digital humanities scholars may generate new methodologies for recovering marginalized historical voices. Overall, the findings of this study substantially broaden existing understandings of diplomacy in pre-colonial South Asia. Women were neither passive observers nor merely symbolic figures within royal courts. Instead, they functioned as negotiators, mediators, cultural ambassadors, religious patrons, and political advisors whose contributions significantly influenced interstate relations, dynastic stability, and imperial governance. Recognizing these contributions not only corrects important historiographical omissions but also enriches contemporary scholarship by demonstrating that diplomacy has always depended upon diverse actors operating through both formal and informal political institutions. Recovering the history of these forgotten women diplomats therefore represents an essential step toward

constructing a more balanced, inclusive, and historically accurate account of South Asia's political past.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

Integrate Women's Diplomatic Contributions into History Curricula: Universities and educational institutions should revise history curricula to include the political and diplomatic roles of women in pre-colonial South Asia, ensuring a more balanced and inclusive understanding of the region's past.

Promote Gender-Inclusive Historical Research: Academic institutions and research funding bodies should encourage interdisciplinary research on women's contributions to diplomacy, governance, and statecraft by supporting archival studies, translation projects, and collaborative historical research.

Preserve and Digitize Historical Sources: Governments, museums, libraries, and archives should prioritize the preservation, digitization, and public accessibility of manuscripts, inscriptions, correspondence, and regional records related to influential women in South Asian history.

Support Public History Initiatives: Museums, cultural organizations, and media institutions should develop exhibitions, documentaries, and digital platforms highlighting the diplomatic achievements of women to increase public awareness and historical literacy.

Encourage Comparative and Regional Studies: Future research should adopt comparative approaches that examine women's diplomatic roles across different regions of South Asia and other pre-modern societies to broaden understanding of gender and diplomacy in global history.

Adopt Gender-Sensitive Historiographical Approaches: Historians should employ feminist historiography and interdisciplinary methodologies when interpreting historical sources to reduce gender bias and recover the contributions of marginalized historical actors.

Implementing these recommendations will contribute to a more inclusive historiography, strengthen historical scholarship on South Asia, and ensure that the diplomatic contributions of women receive the academic and public recognition they deserve.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that women played significant yet frequently overlooked diplomatic roles in pre-colonial South Asia. Through political mediation, marriage alliances, succession negotiations, religious patronage, and cultural diplomacy, royal women contributed to governance, interstate relations, and political stability across different historical periods. Their influence extended beyond domestic responsibilities, challenging the traditional perception that diplomacy was an exclusively male sphere.

By applying Feminist Historiography and the New Diplomatic History, this research has shown that the marginalization of women in diplomatic history is largely a product of patriarchal historical writing rather than an absence of women's political agency. Recovering the contributions of figures such as Razia Sultan, Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, and Chand Bibi highlights the need to broaden conventional definitions of diplomacy and to recognize informal political practices as integral components of statecraft.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of South Asian history by demonstrating that women were active participants in shaping political and diplomatic developments. It calls for continued scholarly efforts to reassess historical narratives through

gender-sensitive approaches, ensuring that the contributions of forgotten women diplomats receive the recognition they deserve in both academic research and public history.

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