This course uses gender as a category of historical analysis, focusing on gendered relationships within medieval Indian society. With women having been rendered largely invisible in history, it seeks to construct history from their vantage-point. This would involve unpacking the concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” in medieval society, how these related to one another, how they constituted society, and a mapping of processes that had a bearing on their relative position during the medieval period of Indian history. The purpose is to demonstrate that such a history is central to building a more complete picture of the evolution of Indian society from the 13th to the 18th centuries. Implicit in this approach is the belief that a gendered perception of history may suggest a paradigmatic shift in the trajectory of medieval Indian historical developments, and perhaps alter current perceptions of the high and low points of this period.

1. Problems and Possibilities in Recovering and Representing the Female Voice
Patriarchal ideologies and male hegemony over the creation of knowledge built gender into the construction of medieval sources, both marginalizing and colouring the knowledge of women’s experiences, aspirations and worldviews. With almost all sources penned by men, retrieving women’s history has been difficult, but full of potential. The androcentricity of the Perso-Arabic works and orientalist perceptions of European travel accounts has made the task daunting; asking different sets of questions, however, and re-reading these conventional sources against the grain, as well as recovering new sources such as paintings, architectural sites, literary and medicinal texts, and archival records, and comparing the range of insights they offer, would help weave women and represent their life-worlds in medieval Indian story.

Specific Themes to be Discussed:
   a) Defining sex, gender, power, and gender relations
   b) The invisibility of women in different genres of sources, and in secondary works
   c) Nature of Perso-Arabic sources; a woman’s voice in Gulbadan Bano’s Memoirs
   d) The “other” in orientalist perceptions of European travel accounts
   e) Reflections of women in paintings and medieval literary texts
f) Architectural sites and what they reveal on women’s lives

g) Medieval Medicinal Texts and the Female Body

h) Court records as sources on the lower castes

2. The Evolving Notions of “Masculinity”, “Femininity”, and Politics

Medieval Indian, as much as any other society, threw up its own culturally-specific models of patriarchies, with particular notions of appropriate “masculine” and “feminine” roles and conduct. Were Razia Sultan’s quick dethronement despite her competence, Rudrama Devi’s upbringing and designation as a son, Rani Durgavati’s training as a warrior, or Chand Bibi’s self-confidence in taking on the Mughal might distinct reflections of the above? What kind of patriarchal traditions did Babur and Humayun bring to Hindustan, and what was Akbar’s vision for his household and its women? How do we reconcile his progressive ideas against child marriage, polygamy, widow immolations and slavery with his officially designating women of the Mughal household as veiled (pardeh-giyah), and move to strictly separate courtly and domestic spaces and segregate them into a sequestered Ahl-i-bait? Why were Jahan Ara, Raushan Ara and other princesses not allowed to marry? And how did royal women during Jahangir, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb and their successors respond to imperial constructions of the feminine normative? Sources indicate their contestations in diverse forms, with women resorting to multi-faceted activities to reduce their dependent status. Dabbling in politics and creating for themselves a space between the “public” and the “private” spheres was one such means of asserting their identities.

Specific Themes to be Discussed:

a) Evolution of the notion of masculinity under medieval rulers
b) Razia Sultan and political authority
c) Rudrama Devi- the Female King of Warangal, Rani Durgavati of Gondwana and Chand Bibi of Ahmadnagar
d) Akbar’s transformation of the harem into the Ahl-i-bait; the role of eunuchs
e) Mughal women’s negotiations for political space - from Maham Anaga, Hamida Bano, Gulbadan Begum, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahan Ara, Roshan Ara, Dilras Bano, Zebunissa, the courtesan Lal Kumwar

3. Negotiating Patriarchy through Economic Endeavours

Generating resources for economic sustenance was another means of securing their position. Women from the royalty possessed vast material resources, participated in commercial ventures to be materially independent, engaged in constructing buildings, and even made charities from their own resources. Women from the labouring groups struggled against patriarchy and poverty simultaneously, and despite being handicapped by a gendered division of labour, denial of access to tools, lower wages and denial of control over what they helped to produce, they strove for subsistence and enhancement of their spaces. Women’s bodies were valuable resources that they possessed and that men sought to control, and these were used for different ends.

Specific Themes to be Discussed:

a) Women’s work and participation in the “public” sphere: Royal women’s management of jagirs, shipping and commerce, and building activities
b) Artisanal women’s gendered division of labour and its invisibility
c) Women from agrarian and pastoral communities and their role in family economies
d) Concubinage, prostitution, dancing girls, and women slaves  
e) Women’s property rights

4. Dissent, Resistance and Protest
Equally, religion allowed a space for subversion, and the pursuit of spirituality became a powerful form of women’s cathartic self-expression during the period. With the spread of devotional religions, both Vaisnavaite and Saivite, in Medieval India, many rejected familial pressures and embarked on spiritual journeys, even leading spiritual movements. Their use of the vernacular medium made them an integral part of the popular culture, and on a pan-subcontinental scale, one witnesses women saints disregarding hierarchies of gender, caste, and religion. In the process, they re-conceptualised religion and carved out a space for themselves both within and without, and above the social order.

a) Women saints Karaikkal Ammaiyar in 7th century Tamil Nadu,  
b) Akka Mahadevi in 12th century Karnataka,  
c) Lal Ded (Lalleswari) in 14th century Kashmir,  
d) Meera Bai in 16th century Rajasthan,  
e) Bahina Bai in 17th century Maharashtra

5. Caste/Community Dimensions of Patriarchy and Gender Relations:
Gender was only one of the multiple axes of social inequality, its intersection with caste and community a widespread feature of medieval Indian society. Patriarchal structures, customs and institutions varied among different castes and tribal societies, across regions. Specific ideological and material rationale caused different social strata to develop distinct conceptions of wifehood, motherhood, love, sexuality and filial relationships. These multiple manifestations of gendered relations, characterized by distinct norms established separateness between the high-born and the low-born. Norms and traditions specific to elite Hindu and Muslim societies, and those common in the lower castes and tribal societies may appear contrasting, and the degrees of subordination varied; what remained a universal agenda, however, was the subordination of women, and the state in most cases was complicit in the accomplishment of this objective.

Specific Themes to be Discussed:

a) Women lynchpin for integrating lineages and kinship networks: Marriage customs and women’s subordination  
b) The state’s enforcement of customary laws and nature of intervention in domestic matters – in Medieval Rajputana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal  
c) Brahmanical patriarchy in Peshwa Maharashtra-child marriages, ascetic widowhood and Dharma Shastras  
d) Rajput societies - female infanticide, dowry, polygamy, ghunghat, jauhar, sati  
e) Islamic societies, the Qazi and the Shariat-meher, purda, harem  
f) Lower castes and tribal societies -bride-price marriages, legitimacy of divorce and remarriage, widow remarriage, and customary laws-reet, rasm, riwaj

Readings

General:
1. Altekar, A.S. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (Delhi, 1982).

Theme 1.
11. Teltscher, Kate. India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India 1600-1800 (Delhi, 1985). Chap. “Indian Women: The Seventeenth Century European Fantasy”.

Theme 2.

**Theme 3.**


**Theme 4.**

15. Zelliott, Eleanor and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (eds.) *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon* (New Delhi, 2005).

**Theme 5.**

15. Zaidi, Sunita. “Women or Muslim Women in Medieval India” in Hajira Kumar (ed.) *Status of Muslim Women in India* (Delhi, 2002).