

FEMALE AUTHORSHIP AND LITERARY AGENCY IN CLASSICAL SANSKRIT TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how women's authorship and literary agency are recorded and represented in a corpus of classical Sanskrit writing. It combines a bibliographic audit with content coding of 17 purposively selected textual units: four attributed anthology verses associated with Vijjikā, Śīlābhaṭṭārikā, and Vikaṣanītibā; nine canto-level units from Gaṅgādevī's Madhurāvijayam; and four structural units from Tirumalāmbā's Varadāmbikāpariṇaya Campū. The analysis distinguishes authorial agency the power to compose, evaluate, frame, and claim literary authority from diegetic agency, the speech, desire, judgment, or action granted to women inside a text. Each unit receives one primary agency code and binary markers for explicit authorial self-positioning and female-character or speaker agency. Descriptive findings show that affective or erotic voice is the largest category (5/17, 29.4%), followed by political-historical narration (4/17, 23.5%), authorial self-fashioning and dynastic/reproductive framing (3/17 each, 17.6%); objectification and supernatural plot intervention appear once each. The genre comparison suggests that short attributed verses preserve compact female-coded voices, while the longer court poems create broader authorial and political reach without consistently granting their female characters equivalent autonomy. These patterns support a qualified relationship between archive and agency: the form of preservation shapes what can be observed, and attribution does not make lyric speakers autobiographical. The study is exploratory, not a census of Sanskrit women's writing; its small, purposive sample and single-coder judgments preclude inferential claims. It contributes a transparent coding framework, five data tables, five figures, and an accompanying observation-level dataset, and argues for future philological, manuscript-based, and collaborative coding of women's Sanskrit literary production.

Keywords: Classical Sanskrit literature¹; Female authorship²; Literary agency³; Women poets⁴; Anthologies⁵; Court poetry⁶; Gender⁷

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Historical and conceptual scope

“Classical Sanskrit” names both a literary formation and a language of courtly intellectual production; it does not designate one uniform period or social world. This paper uses the term narrowly for selected Sanskrit compositions and attributed verses from approximately the seventh through sixteenth centuries, while recognizing that the last case belongs to early-modern court culture. The sample follows the documentary trail from short verses attributed to Vijjikā, Śīlābhāṭṭārikā, and Vikāṇitambā, preserved through anthologies and poetics, to Gaṅgādevī’s fourteenth-century Madhurāvijayam and Tirumalāmbā’s sixteenth-century Varadāmbikāpariṇaya Campū [1]–[8], [13]–[18]. These works make visible different authorial situations: lyric attribution without a surviving book-length work; an epic whose author names and evaluates predecessors; and a courtly campū whose authorial voice sits beside a romance and dynastic narrative. The study excludes Vedic women seers, Pāli and Prakrit corpora, vernacular bhakti, and modern Sanskrit writing. “Agency” therefore refers to observable textual acts authorial framing, intellectual judgment, desire, speech, decision, or political narration not to a general estimate of historical freedom. This definition prevents a first-person heroine from being treated automatically as a transparent autobiographical record. Premodern Sanskrit’s cosmopolitan circulation intersected with regional courts and household networks; access to high literary production was mediated by education, patronage, kinship, and manuscript survival, not language alone [21]–[25]. The cases selected here are therefore elite and court-linked, and cannot stand for every woman, caste, region, or linguistic community.

1.2 The authorship problem

The surviving record is uneven. The widely cited inventory of women poets is largely assembled from anthologies, rhetorical treatises, and later compilations; Shah’s estimate of roughly 33 poetesses and about 140 attributed verses is a historiographic reconstruction, not a census of all compositions once written [1], [2], [5]. An anthology preserves a stanza because a compiler valued it, but can remove its original sequence, add a name variant, or place it under a category that frames its speaker as a “wanton” or adulteress [3], [4], [5]. A named attribution is meaningful evidence of reception, yet it is not equivalent to a verified autograph or secure biography. Conversely, the longer works by Gaṅgādevī and Tirumalāmbā establish a more legible authorial scale, but their plots remain courtly and dynastic: an author can exercise high compositional authority while women characters have restricted roles. This distinction matters because “female authorship” and “female representation” are related but not interchangeable variables. Literary agency may lie in selection of genre, control of narrative, criticism of predecessors, and political memory; it may also appear inside the story as a woman’s desire, speech, or intervention. Neither kind should be collapsed into a simple feminist/not-feminist label. Royal or courtly position could supply literacy, leisure, patronage, and access to manuscript exchange, while also tying a woman’s public voice to dynastic interests. Surviving texts reveal opportunity and constraint, but rarely permit direct reconstruction of ordinary women’s education or reading practices [9], [22], [24], [27].

1.3 Questions and contribution

The paper asks three questions. First, how does the preservation format anthological fragment or sustained courtly composition shape the kinds of female agency that are recoverable? Second, how do the selected texts distribute authorial self-positioning, female-coded voice, dynastic function, erotic display, and political-historical narration? Third, where do the patterns converge with or challenge earlier studies of Sanskrit

poetesses? The working expectation is not that a long poem necessarily grants women more freedom. Rather, short lyric can intensify desire and first-person voice, while an epic or campū can enlarge a woman author's authority as a connoisseur, narrator, or historian even when its heroine is organized around marriage, kinship, or male sovereignty. The contribution is a small, auditable content-analysis pilot, not a claim to recover a representative population. It specifies its 17 units, defines the coding rules, reports denominators beside every percentage, and supplies the coded data with the paper. This permits readers to contest particular classifications without mistaking descriptive counts for statistical proof. By comparing voice, authorship, and archival transmission separately, the study tests how evidence can support a more precise history of women's literary agency in Sanskrit [5]–[12], [21]–[28]. These expectations are descriptive, not population-level hypotheses. The study asks what agency is legible in each preservation form and what becomes invisible when scholars move from a named poet to a speaker. This distinction allows comparison without ranking genres as more or less emancipatory in advance.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The first modern task in recovering Sanskrit women's writing was bibliographic. J. B. Chaudhuri gathered verses and textual notices attributed to women, while V. Raghavan's survey traced poetesses across Sanskrit and Prakrit sources [1], [2]. These collections remain indispensable because the medieval anthologies rarely preserve continuous authorial archives. Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakośa*, for example, presents court verse through topical sections and authorial ascriptions, a structure that preserves aesthetic memory while detaching poems from their original settings [3]. Lienhard's history of Sanskrit, Pāli, and Prakrit poetry situates the *muktaka* and anthology tradition as a major literary form rather than a deficient substitute for epic or drama [4]. Yet early catalogues also carry editorial assumptions about women's identity, sexuality, and literary capacity; they must be treated as evidence of reception as much as evidence of original composition. Shalini Shah's work is the most influential gender-centered interpretation of the early-medieval poetesses. Her article identifies approximately 33 women poets and around 140 extant or attributed verses, while stressing the instability of authorial identity and the restricted survival of short lyric [5]. Her later book reads many women's poems through a "prema" tradition, emphasizing reciprocal emotional attachment and women's articulation of desire against a convention in which women are frequently positioned as objects of *śṛṅgāra* [6]. This framework makes the erotic and affective force of the poems legible, especially in verses attributed to *Vijjikā*, *Śīlābhāṭṭārikā*, and other anthology poets. Pal likewise retrieves women writers, summarizes their themes and styles, and argues for their place in a literary history that has often rendered them marginal [7]. These approaches correct the male-centered canon, yet risk treating women's poetry as uniform and the female-coded speaker as an author's transparent record.

Geddes directly complicates that move through close readings of *Vijjikā*'s poetry and the debated play *Kaumudīmahotsava*. She argues that women authors could engage classical Sanskrit conventions and write for learned courtly audiences, rather than inhabiting a wholly separate aesthetic [8]. Her emphasis on the gap between authorial identity and textual voice is central to the present coding. The play's authorship remains disputed and is therefore not included in the core sample. This exclusion reflects a conservative evidentiary rule: suggestive feminine grammar or a reconstructed name is insufficient to assign an observation confidently to a

historical woman. Scholarship on longer works expands the record beyond anthology fragments. Gaṅgādevī's Madhurāvijayam is a nine-canto court epic that remembers the Vijayanagara campaign in the Tamil south. Its editions and literary studies discuss its poetics, political program, historical value, and manuscript limitations [15]–[20]. It places an authorial voice inside the very Sanskrit conventions associated with royal eulogy, and its account of the Madurai goddess's appeal makes a female divine figure a narrative catalyst. Tirumalāmbā's Varadāmbikāpariṇaya Campū is both romance and dynastic text. Suryakanta and Reddy provide editions/translations, while Sudyka's recent work examines its structure, political memory, and unusually elaborate battlefield description [10]–[14]. These studies show that a woman's command of Sanskrit kāvya need not be inferred from erotic subject matter alone; it is also visible in political narration, intertextuality, descriptive technique, and control of genre. The broader historical frame is supplied by scholarship on Sanskrit as a transregional language of political and aesthetic power. Pollock's account of the Sanskrit cosmopolis and his edited volume on South Asian literary cultures explain why Sanskrit composition could confer authority across courts and regions [21]–[23]. Ali's study of early medieval courtly culture clarifies the institutions and patronage networks that sustained literary production [24]. Bronner and Shulman stress that Sanskrit remained dynamic amid vernacularization rather than simply disappearing as a "classical" language [25]. Peterson's study of court epic and the Sanskrit aesthetic treatises of Bharata and Ānandavardhana provide useful formal contexts for reading rasa, suggestion, and narrative design [26], [29], [30]. Roy's gender history and Tharu and Lalita's influential anthology of women's writing caution that recovery is shaped by the archive and by modern editorial selection [27], [28]. The gap addressed here is methodological: scholarship richly interprets individual works, but few studies show a transparent, small-scale comparison that separates authorial authority from character agency, records the unit of analysis, and tests how preservation form conditions the evidence. The present pilot does not replace philology; it makes its interpretive decisions inspectable.

3. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study combines text-centered content analysis with a bibliographic audit. "Empirical" means claims are tied only to identifiable, coded textual units rather than questionnaires or population-level statistics. The corpus contains five author cases across three forms: Vijjikā, Śīlābhāṭṭārikā, and Vikāṭanītambā in anthology verse; Gaṅgādevī's Madhurāvijayam; and Tirumalāmbā's Varadāmbikāpariṇaya Campū. The period range is approximately the seventh to sixteenth centuries, deliberately crossing what are often separated as classical and early-modern Sanskrit production. The sampling frame was limited to texts with a named female attribution in a published edition or established anthology, and to passages discussed in the cited scholarship. Kaumudīmahotsava was excluded because its authorial attribution is debated [8]. The 17 observations comprise four anthology verses, nine canto-level units from Madhurāvijayam, and four structural units from Varadāmbikāpariṇaya. These are passages or narrative units, not 17 separate works, authors, or statistically independent samples. The unit of analysis is a short verse or a thematically coherent canto/structural segment. A codebook assigns one primary agency channel to each unit: A, explicit authorial self-fashioning or literary judgment; D, desire or affective voice; R, reproductive or dynastic framing; P, political-historical narration; O, eroticized representation in which women are primarily spectacle; and X, a female supernatural figure's plot-catalyzing intervention. Two additional binary markers are recorded independently. AF marks explicit authorial self-positioning in the selected passage, such as a poet's self-naming or stated literary learning; FV marks a

female-coded speaker or character exercising voice, desire, judgment, exhortation, or action. FV is not evidence that a lyric speaker is the historical poet. For long works, canto descriptions and passages were checked against Sanskrit editions and English translations; anthology observations were checked against Chaudhuri, Ingalls, Shah, and Geddes [1], [3], [5], [8], [13]–[17]. Where scholarship reports a disputed or variant attribution, the paper retains the conventional attribution but flags its limits. One mutually exclusive primary code was used to make category totals sum to the sample size; the two binary markers may coexist with any primary code.

Collection proceeded by recording author, text, period, genre, preservation pathway, locator, source reference, primary code, AF, and FV in an observation-level CSV. Two passes were made: first to extract the unit and its context; second to assign codes using the operational definitions above. Frequencies, percentages, and genre cross-tabulations are descriptive only. Percentages use $n=17$ or the relevant genre denominator, and no significance test is reported because purposive selection, small sample size, textual heterogeneity, and single-coder interpretation violate inferential assumptions. A marker is assigned only when supported by an explicit feature in the selected unit; absences mean “not present in this sample segment,” not “absent from the work.” Translation mediation, manuscript loss, and modern editorial framing remain material limitations. There was no human-participant survey, no attempt to estimate the number of historical women writers, and no claim of inter-rater reliability. The dataset is intended to make interpretive choices reproducible and revisable; a future extension should collate manuscripts, examine original Sanskrit against multiple translations, and use at least two independent philologists to calculate agreement.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The evidence was collected from published Sanskrit editions, translated texts, anthology studies, and focused scholarship; no present-day respondents were surveyed. Table 1 identifies the cases and their archival pathways. The distinction is consequential: anthological attribution preserves a short poem but often not its original sequence, whereas the longer works preserve a large authorial architecture even when the surviving text is incomplete or court-centered. Figure 1 plots the broad, contested chronology.

Table 1: Core cases, genre, attribution basis, and number of sampled units

Author case	Approximate period	Form / work	Attribution and preservation evidence	Units
Vijjikā	c. 7th–9th c.; debated	Muktaka / anthology lyric	Named/variant ascriptions in later anthologies; no continuous authorial book in this sample	2
Śīlābhaṭṭārikā	c. 7th–9th c.; debated	Muktaka / anthology lyric	Verse attributed in anthologies and poetics; biography and date remain uncertain	1
Vikaṭanitambā	Before 9th c.; uncertain	Muktaka / anthology lyric	Abhisārikā verse attributed in anthology scholarship; no continuous work in this sample	1
Gaṅgādevī	14th c.	Mahākāvya: Madhurāvijayam	Author named in the work’s colophon; long text transmitted with lacunae	9
Tirumalāmbā	16th c.	Campū: Varadāmbikāpariṇaya	Authorial attribution in the text and editions; historical identity details debated	4

Note: “Unit” means a coded passage or structural segment, not an independent work. Dates for the anthology poets are intentionally broad; the table does not resolve disputed identifications. Sources: [1], [3], [5], [8], [13]–[17].

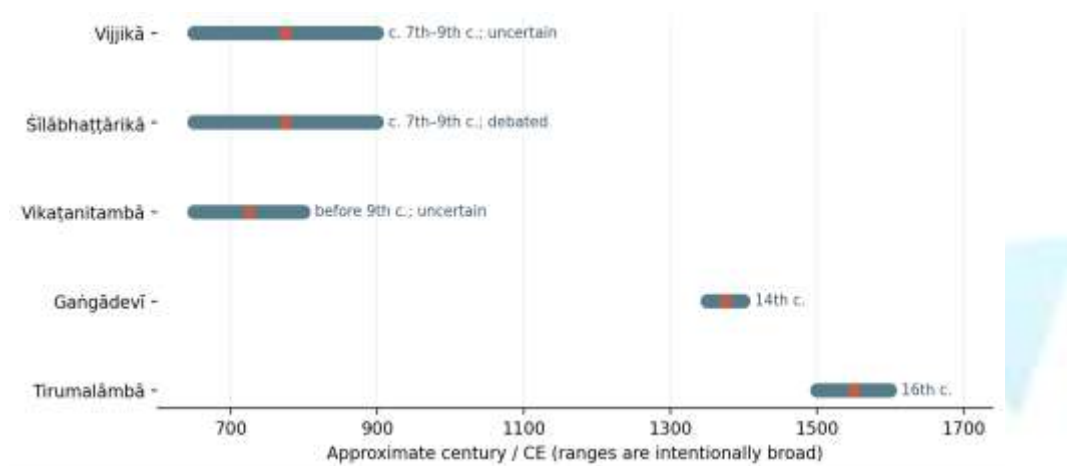


Figure 1: Approximate chronology of the five author cases

Table 2 lists all 17 observations and the primary code assigned to each. The four anthology observations are deliberately described as attributed verses, not securely autobiographical documents. The long-text units follow each work’s main structural movement, and the category is assigned to the predominant agency function in the sampled segment. AF and FV are separate markers; a poet’s authorship does not itself count as a female character’s agency. Figure 2 shows the number of coded units by form.

Table 2: Observation-level coding register (n=17)

ID	Author	Selected unit / locator	Primary code	AF	FV	Source refs.
AT1	Vijjikā	Self-naming reply to Daṇḍin; literary self-assertion	A Authorial self-fashioning / literary judgment	1	0	[1], [5], [8]
AT2	Vijjikā	Female-coded verse on erotic reciprocity/desire	D Desire / affective voice	0	1	[1], [5], [6]
AT3	Vikāṭānitāmbā	Abhisārikā answers fear with Cupid as her aid; female desire and initiative	D Desire / affective voice	0	1	[1], [5], [7]
AT4	Śīlābhāṭṭārikā	“Yaḥ kaumāraḥaḥ...”; female speaker’s recollection and desire	D Desire / affective voice	0	1	[1], [3], [5], [6]
MV1	Gaṅgādevī	Canto I: invocation, literary lineage, evaluation of poets	A Authorial self-fashioning / literary judgment	1	0	[15]–[17]
MV2	Gaṅgādevī	Canto II: Queen Devāyī’s pregnancy and childbirth	R Reproductive / dynastic framing	0	0	[15]–[17]
MV3	Gaṅgādevī	Canto III: prince’s formation, lineage, and marriage frame	R Reproductive / dynastic framing	0	0	[15]–[17]
MV4	Gaṅgādevī	Canto IV: campaign against southern chieftains	P Political-historical narration	0	0	[15]–[19]
MV5	Gaṅgādevī	Canto V: rule and political consolidation at Kāñcī	P Political-historical narration	0	0	[15]–[19]
MV6	Gaṅgādevī	Canto VI: courtly water-sports	O Eroticized	0	0	[15]–[17]

	vī	and eroticized queens	objectification			
MV7	Gaṅgāde vī	Canto VII: intimate, female-coded address and night description	D Desire / affective voice	0	1	[15]–[17]
MV8	Gaṅgāde vī	Canto VIII: Madurai's presiding goddess reports crisis and exhorts Kampana	X Female supernatural plot intervention	0	1	[15]–[18]
MV9	Gaṅgāde vī	Canto IX: campaign, battle, and victory narrative	P Political-historical narration	0	0	[15]–[19]
VP1	Tirumalā mbā	Epilogue: authorial learning and literary self-presentation	A Authorial self-fashioning / literary judgment	1	0	[13], [14]
VP2	Tirumalā mbā	First structural half: Narasa Nāyaka's military narrative	P Political-historical narration	0	0	[10]–[14]
VP3	Tirumalā mbā	Second structural half: Varadāmbikā's desire and separation	D Desire / affective voice	0	1	[10]–[14]
VP4	Tirumalā mbā	Marriage, childbirth, and dynastic succession	R Reproductive / dynastic framing	0	0	[13], [14]

Code legend: A = authorial self-fashioning/literary judgment; D = desire/affective voice; R = reproductive/dynastic framing; P = political-historical narration; O = eroticized objectification; X = female supernatural plot intervention. AF = explicit authorial self-positioning; FV = female-coded voice/character agency marker. A zero means the marker is absent from that sampled unit, not from the entire work. The four anthology units are illustrative attributions, not exhaustive author catalogs. Sources: [1], [3], [5], [6], [8], [13]–[19].

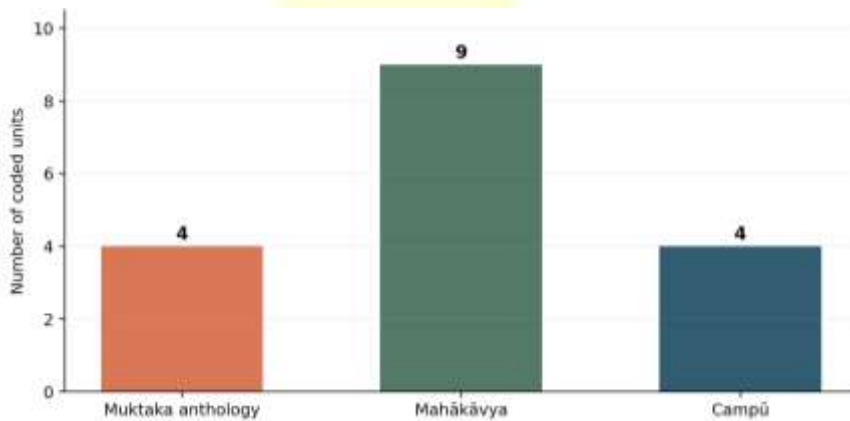


Figure 2: Coded sample size by literary form (n=17)

In Table 3, affective or erotic voice is the most frequent primary code (5/17, 29.4%), and political-historical narration is next (4/17, 23.5%). Authorial self-fashioning and reproductive/dynastic framing each account for 3/17 (17.6%). Objectifying depiction and supernatural intervention each appear once (5.9%). These are sample proportions, not estimates of all Sanskrit literature. Figure 3 visualizes the same distribution.

Table 3: Primary agency-channel counts in the coded sample

Code	Operational label	Units	Share of n=17
A	Authorial self-fashioning / literary judgment	3	17.6%
D	Desire / affective voice	5	29.4%

R	Reproductive / dynastic framing	3	17.6%
P	Political-historical narration	4	23.5%
O	Eroticized objectification	1	5.9%
X	Female supernatural plot intervention	1	5.9%
Total	One mutually exclusive primary code per unit	17	100.0%

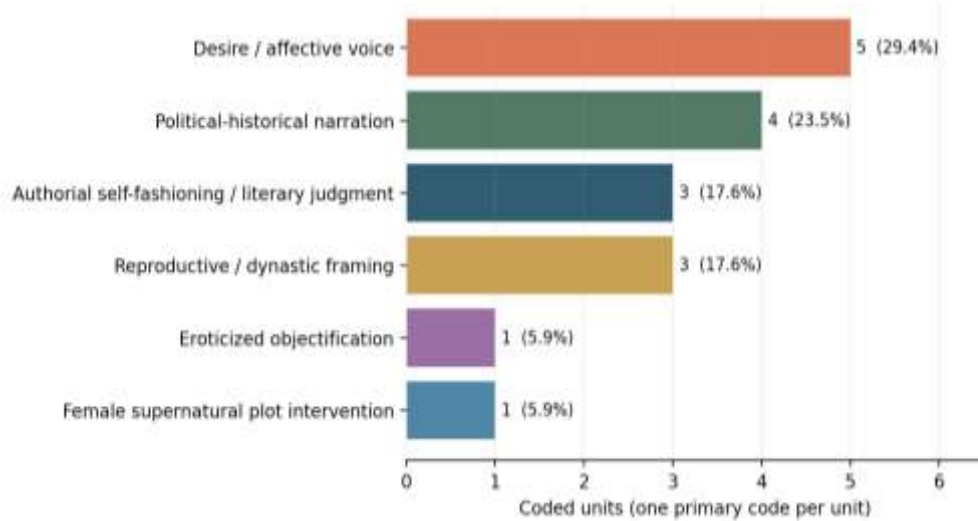


Figure 3: Primary agency channels in the coded sample

Table 4 shows how the distribution shifts by form. Three of four muktaka units are coded D, but this concentration partly follows the purposive selection of widely discussed lyric examples. The mahākāvya sample includes political history, dynastic framing, erotic spectacle, authorial framing, affect, and a supernatural female intervention. The four campū units divide evenly among authorial self-positioning, politics, desire, and dynastic framing. Figure 4 displays these counts as a heat map; no causal inference is warranted from this small, intentionally balanced sample.

Table 4: Primary agency codes by literary form

Form	n	A	D	R	P	O	X
Muktaka	4	1	3	0	0	0	0
Mahākāvya	9	1	1	2	3	1	1
Campū	4	1	1	1	1	0	0
Total	17	3	5	3	4	1	1

Row percentages are: Muktaka A 25%, D 75%; Mahākāvya A 11.1%, D 11.1%, R 22.2%, P 33.3%, O 11.1%, X 11.1%; Campū A, D, R, and P 25% each. These proportions describe only the sampled segments.

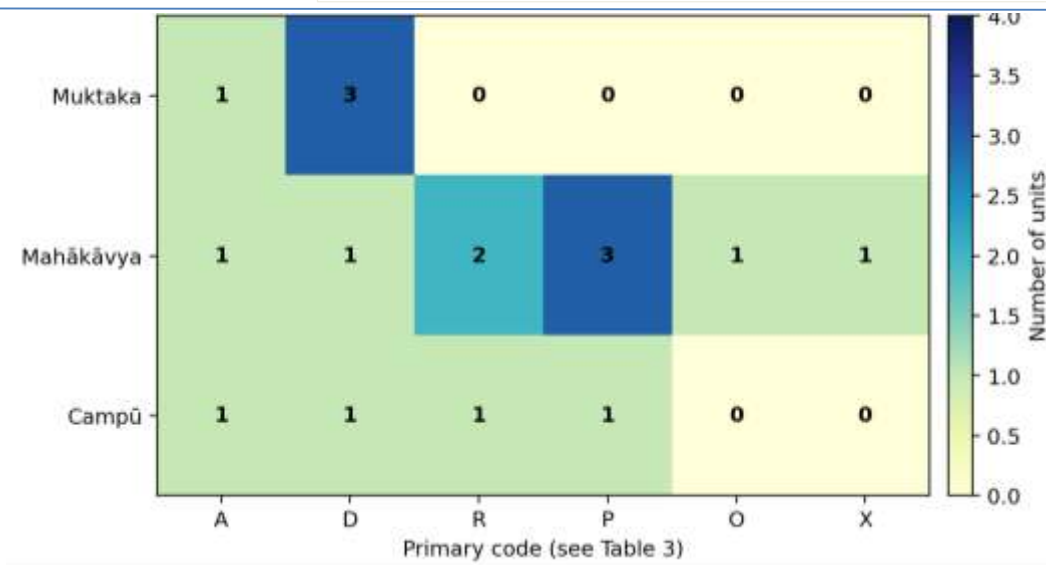


Figure 4: Agency-code counts by literary form

Table 5 isolates a key relationship. Explicit authorial self-positioning (AF) appears in one unit per genre (3/17, 17.6%), whereas a female-coded voice or character marker (FV) appears in six units (35.3%). The two measures are not interchangeable: women may author a text whose heroine is silent or dynastically framed, and an anthology may preserve a first-person female speaker while revealing almost nothing about the author's life. The central result is therefore not a simple correlation between female authorship and female autonomy, but a genre-conditioned difference in what the archive lets researchers observe. Figure 5 visualizes this separation.

Table 5: Separate indicators of authorial and diegetic agency

Form	Units	AF: explicit authorial self-positioning	FV: female voice/character marker
Muktaka	4	1 (25.0%)	3 (75.0%)
Mahākāvya	9	1 (11.1%)	2 (22.2%)
Campū	4	1 (25.0%)	1 (25.0%)
Overall	17	3 (17.6%)	6 (35.3%)

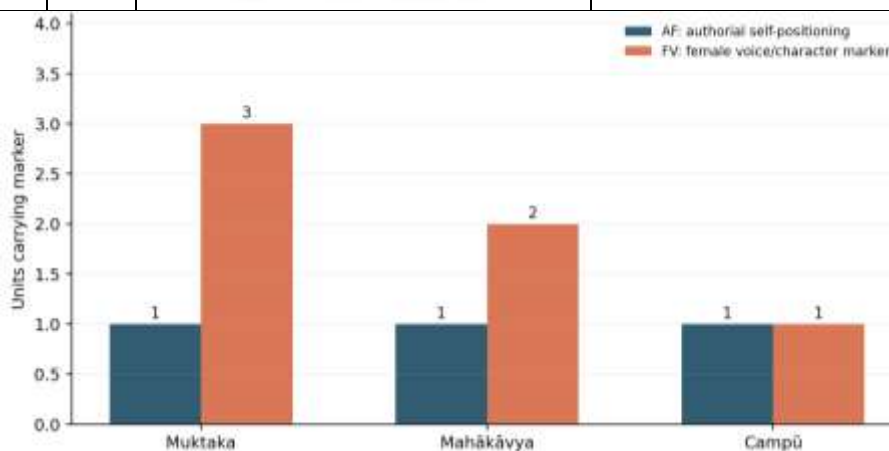


Figure 5: Authorial and diegetic markers are distinct

5. DISCUSSION

The data support a distinction between compositional authority and character-level agency. Across the 17 selected units, explicit authorial self-positioning occurs only three times, one passage in each genre group, while six units contain an identifiable female-coded voice or act. That difference is not evidence that authorial agency is weak: the marker AF is intentionally stringent and records only overt self-fashioning in the selected segment. A poet's control of diction, allusion, genre, and narrative sequence is real but not counted as explicit self-positioning. The results instead show that the evidence becomes more legible when the author names herself, evaluates literary predecessors, or appears in a colophon.

A point concerns interpretation of "female voice." A verse may be conventionally assigned to a woman poet while its speaker is a constructed persona, and anthologists may recategorize it for later readers. The strong D count in the sample thus refers to a text effect rather than a demographic fact. This distinction follows Geddes's caution about attribution and voice, and it tempers claims made from erotic subjectivity alone [5], [6], [8]. Affective voice concentrates in the anthology subset: three of four muktaka units express desire or relational subjectivity. Yet anthological visibility has a cost. A lyric preserved under an erotic rubric may make female desire legible while erasing the setting, addressee, and social occasion that would clarify its meaning. Reading voice as autobiography would overstate what the data can bear. In Madhurāvijayam, the larger form shifts attention to politics, dynastic representation, and the restoration narrative. The goddess's speech is the clearest female plot intervention; most other sampled episodes organize women around reproduction or courtly erotic display. The result is a split between Gaṅgādevī's high narrative authority and more restricted roles for women inside the court world she depicts. Varadāmbikāpariṇaya Campū complicates any simple progression from fragment to epic to early-modern narrative. Tirumalāmbā commands a mixed prose-verse form and gives extended space to political-military material, but the heroine's love and marriage remain embedded in royal lineage. The long form enlarges the author's representational scope without automatically transforming gender hierarchy. The concentrated narrative of Varadambika's desire counts as a meaningful voice, but not as evidence of independent political power.

These results also complicate a linear chronology of progress. The later campū does not automatically offer a more autonomous heroine than the earlier lyric, and the court epic's political scale does not erase its conventions of dynastic femininity. A genre may create new authorial opportunities while retaining inherited distributions of power. The key empirical relation is therefore between preservation form and evidence type, not between century and freedom. The tabulations should be read as structured prompts for close reading. The *n* is small, categories are interpretive, and the units are not random. The strongest conclusion is methodological: an archive's organization, textual scale, and attribution practices shape the kinds of agency that become measurable. Future research should expand the corpus, report disagreement among coders, compare original Sanskrit with translation choices, and examine manuscript survival and patronage alongside textual voice.

6. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DATA AND COMPARISON WITH PAST WORK

Shah's estimate of 33 poetesses and about 140 attributed verses emphasizes the fragmentary archive [5]. This study does not revise those totals: its 17 units are purposive passages, not a census. Three of four selected

anthology units receive the D code, echoing Shah's argument that erotic lyric makes women's desire especially visible [3], [5], [6]. Yet the selection favors well-known examples, so this pattern cannot establish what women wrote most often. Its value is to show how archival visibility and sampling choices shape a count. The study also complicates a rigid opposition between a feminine "prema" tradition and a masculine tradition of erotic objectification. In Madhurāvijayam, women's bodies and courtly pleasures can be rendered as spectacle, yet the poem also gives the personified goddess an explicit speech-act that redirects the plot. In Varadāmbikāpariṇaya, a woman poet deploys classical conventions to describe a heroine's mutual desire while also presenting male beauty and dynastic order. The same work can enable female-authored expertise and reproduce a courtly social hierarchy. This mixed pattern is compatible with Geddes's argument that Vijjikā and the author of Kaumudīmahotsava should not be forced into a singular female aesthetic; women writers could engage learned Sanskrit poetics and courtly audiences [8]. The present paper excludes Kaumudīmahotsava from its core data because authorship remains disputed, but its exclusion underscores Geddes's warning that feminine voice, authorial attribution, and historical identity require separate tests. The three AF markers also qualify an exclusively thematic approach to agency. Chaudhuri and Raghavan did the indispensable archival work of locating names and verses [1], [2], while Pal's survey helped make women's literary presence visible [7].

Those catalogues tend to aggregate surviving works; this pilot instead codes a restricted unit-level sample. Gaṅgādevī's opening evaluation of earlier poets and Tirumalāmbā's epilogue self-presentation demonstrate authority as literary judgment and learnedness, while the long works show agency through control of narrative and selection of political history [14], [16]. These practices are not reducible to whether a heroine speaks. They also show why an author-level and a character-level indicator should not be collapsed into a single "agency score." The comparison with political and literary history sharpens the interpretation of the two longer works. Pollock describes Sanskrit as a cosmopolitan language of cultural power, and Ali's analysis of courtly culture explains the value of patronage and elite literary networks [21]–[24]. That framework helps account for the concentration of surviving female authorship among court-connected figures without treating royal status as proof of universal female access. Gaṅgādevī writes in a mahākāvya form that legitimizes the Vijayanagara project and narrates conquest through established conventions; her historical testimony is also a partisan courtly account. Aiyangar and Nilakanta Sastri situate the text within Vijayanagara history, but the poem's literary rhetoric should not be read as a neutral chronicle [19], [20]. Thus, the P code marks political-historical narration, not factual accuracy. The goddess's intervention is a textual event, not independent confirmation that a supernatural encounter occurred. Recent work on Tirumalāmbā makes the campū's mixed agency especially clear. Sudyka analyzes its unusual battlefield description and its two-part structure, showing how the work can devote substantial narrative space to Narasa Nāyaka's campaigns even though the title foregrounds Varadāmbikā's marriage [10]–[12]. The present coding agrees that military narration expands the poetess's formal and political range, but it also reveals the displacement of the heroine: only one of four selected campū units is coded as female affective voice, and the work's dynastic closure constrains the meaning of that desire. This is a segment-level result, not a claim that Varadambika is silent throughout the text. Gomez's study of Sundarī and Kamalā in eighteenth-century Tanjavur further cautions against treating courtly female authorship as a solitary royal exception; household collaboration, commentary, and regional language politics opened other

routes into Sanskrit intellectual production [9]. The present sample predates and largely excludes those collaborative cases, so its findings describe a narrow canon, not the full range of women's work.

Finally, the paper aligns with Pollock, Bronner and Shulman, and the classical aesthetic theorists in treating form as active rather than decorative [21]–[26], [29], [30]. The muktaka's portability enables a brief and forceful voice but makes context fragile. The mahākāvya and campū preserve sequence, allusion, and large-scale design but can subordinate women to dynastic narrative and courtly spectacle. The dataset therefore supports a qualified relationship: preservation form predicts the kind of evidence available, not an amount of historical freedom. Since all 17 units were coded by one analyst, independently sampled only within named cases, and partly read through translations, numerical differences should guide future philology rather than close debate. A stronger next study would collate manuscript witnesses, include works by women outside royal circles, preserve uncertain attributions as probabilistic categories, and use a multi-coder design. That extension could test whether the present pattern persists beyond these four well-documented names.

7. CONCLUSION

This exploratory analysis shows why female authorship and literary agency in Sanskrit should be studied as connected but distinct questions. In a purposive set of 17 units, affective or erotic voice is the largest primary category, but political-historical narration, authorial self-fashioning, dynastic framing, objectification, and supernatural intervention also appear. The genre comparison is the central finding: anthological verse makes compact female-coded desire visible while often obscuring context; long court compositions allow women authors to exercise greater control over learned form and political memory, yet do not consistently give their female characters equivalent autonomy. These data do not represent the full corpus, and the percentages should not be generalized beyond the sample. The analysis therefore supports neither an uncomplicated recovery narrative nor a claim that classical Sanskrit writing offers no female agency. Instead, agency is unevenly distributed across author, speaker, character, genre, and archive. A named attribution records literary reception; it does not prove autobiography. A woman author's command of courtly convention may coexist with patriarchal narrative structures. Future work should expand the corpus beyond royal and courtly cases, collate manuscripts, compare Sanskrit text and translation, and report independent coding agreement. By making its sample, definitions, and limitations explicit, this paper offers a revisable empirical starting point for a more nuanced literary history. New catalogues should preserve variant names, source locations, and uncertainty rather than flattening them into single records; searchable digital editions can help, but philological review must determine what names, voices, and colophons warrant as historical evidence, not assumption.

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