



Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, V: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century

From Brand: The Feminist Press at CUNY

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These ground-breaking collections offer 200 texts from eleven languages, never before available in English or as a collection, along with a new reading of cultural history that draws on contemporary scholarship on women and India. This extraordinary body of literature and important documentary resource illuminates the lives of Indian women through 2,600 years of change and extends the historical understanding of literature, feminism, and the making of modern India. The biographical, critical, and bibliographical headnotes in both volumes, supported by an introduction which Anita Desai describes as “intellectually rigorous, challenging, and analytical,” place the writers and their selections within the context of Indian culture and history.

Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century includes songs by Buddhist nuns, testimonies of medieval rebel poets and court historians, and the voices of more than sixty other writers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. Among the diverse selections are a rare early essay by an untouchable woman; an account by the first feminist historian; and a selection from the first novel written in English by an Indian woman.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

While the introduction's history of feminist literary criticism is often tangential, with its rehashings of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the selections themselves (derived from 10 regional languages and English) and the editors' accompanying essays give valuable insight into 2500 years of daily life on the subcontinent, subtleties of caste and religion, and the legacies of language from pre-Aryan through the Vedic age, the Mughal empire, up to the penultimate days of the Raj. The literary quality of many of the writers, such as Swarnakumari Devi (once a leading figure in modern Bengali literature but later eclipsed by her younger brother, Rabindranath Tagore), is notable. While Tharu, an English teacher at the Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad, and Lalita, a political scientist, present a number of obscure writers, they never yield to the inaccessible. Few women could be more remote from us than Sumangalamata, a 6th century B.C. Buddhist nun, but still her sentiment is familiar: "A woman well set free! How free I am, / How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery. / Free from the harsh grip of hunger, / And from empty cooking pots, / Free too of that unscrupulous man."

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From Library Journal

This volume is an enlightened and lengthy project--locating, identifying, and translating Indian women's writings produced over 2500 years. The research is painstaking and the selections of almost infinite variety and interest, the subject matter convincingly illuminating the exceedingly difficult roads to recognition the women of India have had--and still have--to travel in order to escape the yokes of marriage, politics, and custom. Eleven editors supervised these remarkable selections of letters, poetry, fiction, and autobiography written in Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu, first assembling 600 writers and then choosing 140 for translation by 70 scholars. Writers included are nuns, court historians, polemicists, poets, and memoir and fiction authors. Many archaic and destructive traditions are explained, such as the horrifying ritual of suttee (sati). Praiseworthy headnotes and detailed biographical and critical discussions are included. This admirable collection is a monumental achievement.

- *Glenn O. Carey, Eastern Kentucky Univ., Richmond, Ky.*

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Review

"When you read the riches within these covers, you'll know that a Western male bias has left all of us culturally deprived. No library or school or caring reader should be without this volume." —**Gloria Steinem, author of *My Life on the Road***

"This splendid anthology makes visible for the first time the contours of a veritable subcontinent of women writing. The selections are wise and revealing; the introduction, meticulous and seminal. It should establish once and for all that in the study of Indian cultural history the importance of gender, far from being marginal, is profoundly structural." —**C.M. Naim, founding editor of *Journal of South Asian Literature***

"This volume is remarkable for the extensive research that has unearthed hitherto unknown texts, the sensitive translations, and the informative, analytical, and elegantly written introductions to each section. Without simplifying the complexity and heterogeneity of India, this anthology makes its literature accessible

even to those outside its culture. The rich and diverse material—mystical and earthy, joyous and sad, serious and funny—opens out a densely textured, vibrant world that does not always confirm Western notions of Indian women." —**Meenakshi Mukherjee, author of *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English***

"This rich and various collection of women's voices from different South Asian eras, languages, and social conditions is much more than a dutiful supplement to an imaginary library of world literature. Responding to American feminist literary theory as well as the long history of British interpretations of Indian culture, *Women Writing in India* is a bold critical statement and a work of original and far-ranging discovery." —**David Lelyveld, author of *Aligarh's First Generation***

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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