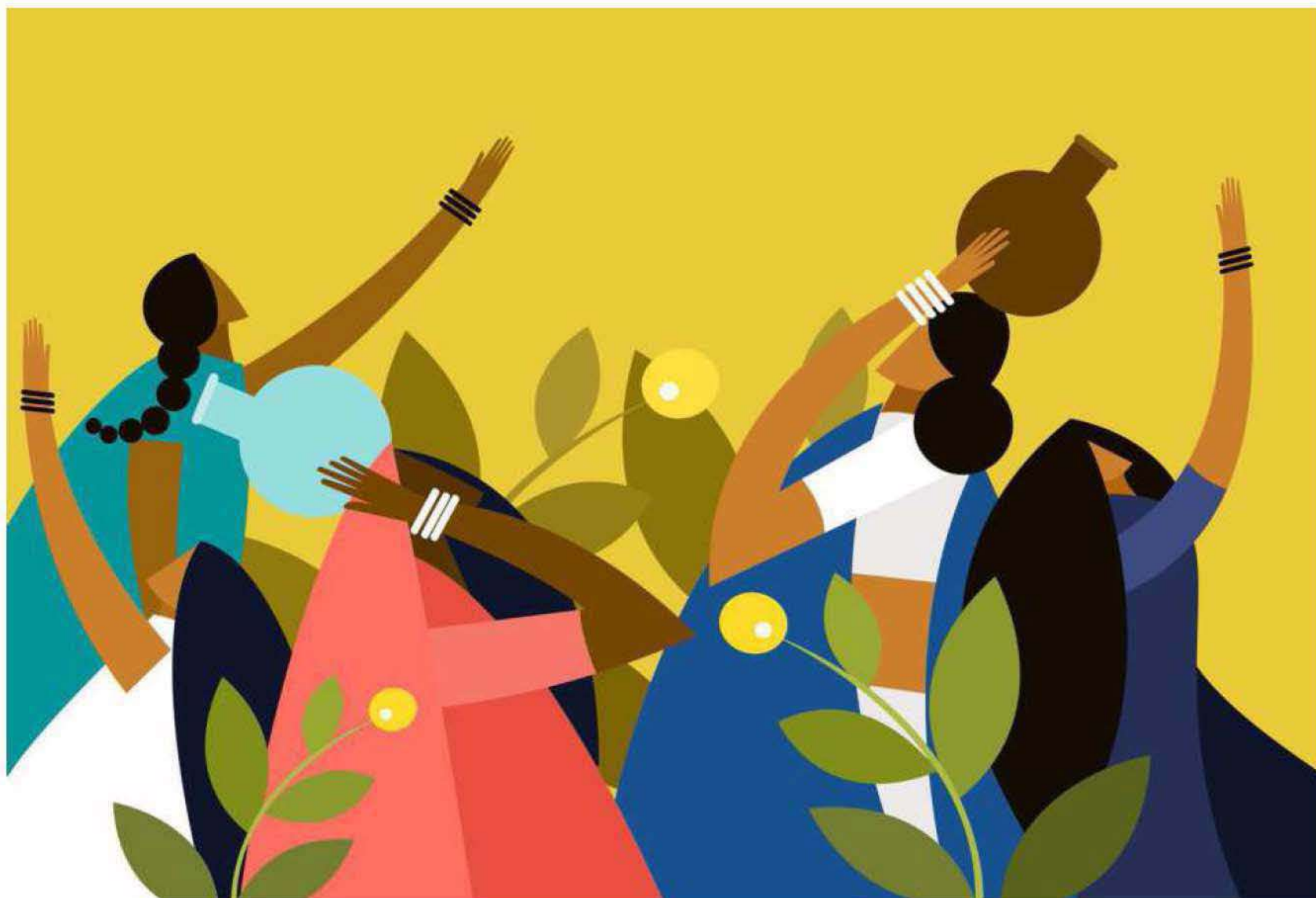
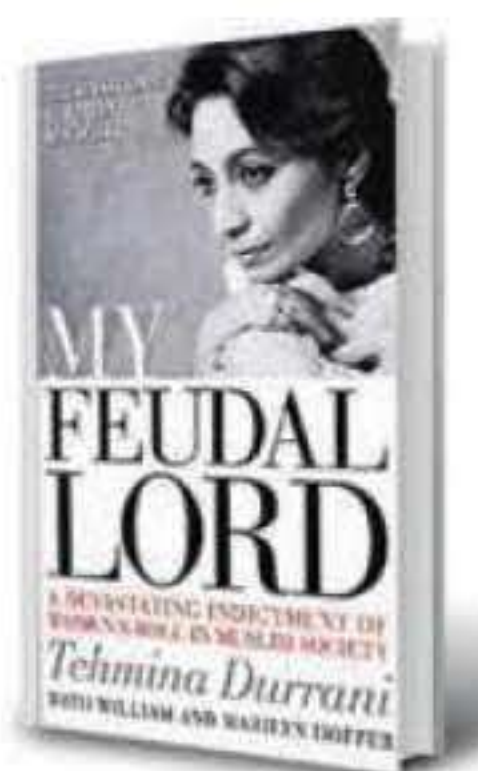
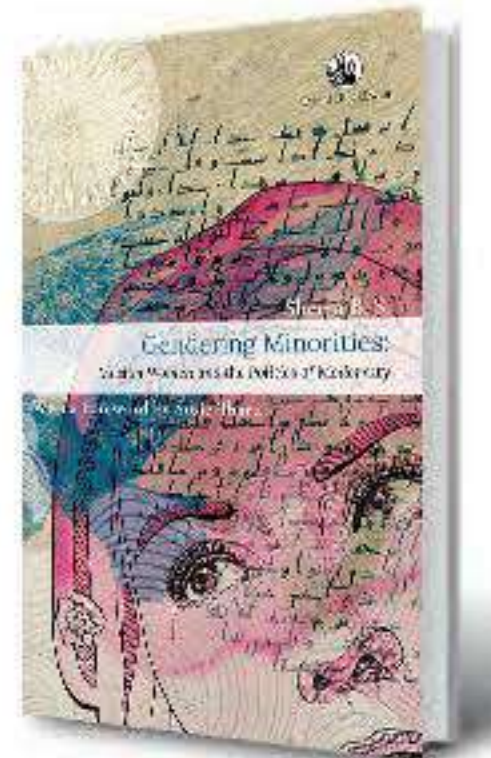
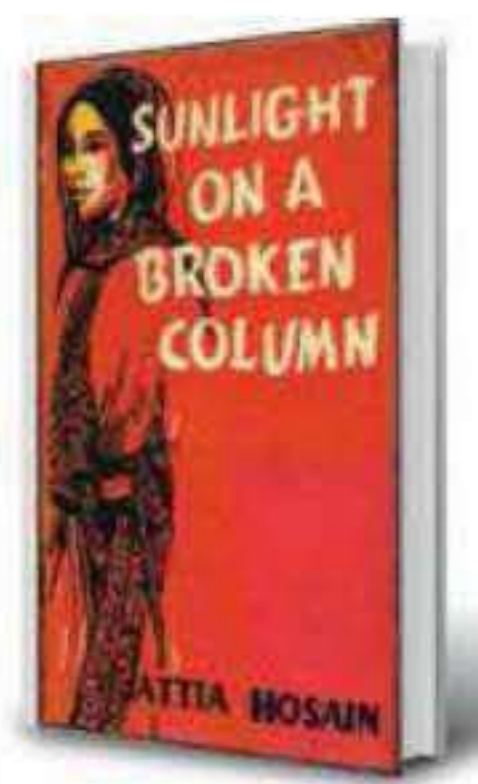


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A celebration of women writers from the Indian subcontinent

On International Women's Day, we look at the profiles of some trailblazing South Asian women authors, from India to Bhutan to Bangladesh, whose writing takes a closer look at the way patriarchy, injustice and inequality in society function to confine and oppress women

Soma Basu

Several women authors of the Indian subcontinent have made a mark with their bold and incisive writing.

From the legendary Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the first woman Muslim writer from colonial Bengal, who wrote about the oppression of women and their liberation at a time when it was unthinkable to the crusader-writer Mahasweta Devi, inspired by the ordinary Adivasi, Dalit and the marginalised citizens, the region has given birth to many women writers who have challenged the absurdities of society and risen against its various challenges to their progress and upliftment.

There are quite a few books that examine patriarchal mindsets in society and highlight how women are held back by ignorance of their rights.

Sultanar Swapna written by Rokeya Hossain in 1905 is said to be one of the earliest depictions of a feminist utopia, wherein she speaks of role reversal to show society what women are capable of if given the opportunity.

Over the decades, many women writers in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh followed in her footsteps, seeking emancipation of women.

Holding a mirror to reality

Attia Hosain was among the first Indians who wrote in English, holding a mirror to reality. Her only published novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), gives a perspective on Partition, nationalism and her awakening into feminism. Even after

more than 60 years of its publication, the book is relevant because it captures disdain for shallow patriotism via a 15-year-old protagonist, impacted by Partition. Though the story begins with the syncretic spirit of undivided India and is built on the over-arching frame of the freedom movement, it is also the teenager's life story amid upheavals; how she battles to emancipate herself from the shackles of religion and convention, given the political rhetoric of hatred over the separation of India and Pakistan. The chilling resonance with contemporary India cannot be glossed over.

Cracking India (1991) by Bapsi Sidhwa, the Pakistani novelist with Gujarati-Parsi roots, is another Partition story, with the eruption of religious, ethnic and radical violence thereafter. Partially autobiographical, it talks about the unique position of Parsis in Lahore and in India and how the community left an indelible impression in places that were communally transformed in no time. Books like these, which recall the forgotten values of humanity even in the time of hate, are necessary reading for the times.

Likewise, Bangladeshi writer Tahmima Anam's first novel, *A Golden Age* (2007), tells the story of her country's war of liberation through the eyes of one family and how the main character, a widow and a mother, struggles with finding her own identity and understanding the passionate nationalism of her children who get embroiled in the civil war.

Born to Punjabi parents in London, Tasha Suri's debut novel *Empire of Sand* (2018) is a Mughal-India inspired fantasy

that navigates patriarchy, caste, arranged marriage and religious extremism. With the young woman protagonist setting out to save the world from dark and devastating machinations, it is a tribute to the fierce and silent strength of women that is easy to identify with.

Rights and reconciliation

Women writers over the years have expressed their suffering in different voices.

Pakistani author Tehmina Durrani, now married to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, shocked everybody with the sensational exposure of her politically famous husband Mustafa Khar, accusing him of abuse for years. In her 1991 autobiography *My Feudal Lord*, she wrote men like Khar derived power from the distorted version of Islam that was unfortunately supported by society, and women themselves. She was brave enough to vividly describe the intense abuse she suffered but paid a heavy price for it as she was shunned by her parents and society. It made her stand up for women's rights. The book has been translated into 40 languages and has won many awards.

To know about the inception of women's rights movement in Nepal, a must-read is *Yogamaya* (2018) by Neelam Karki Niharika. The book captures the journey of an activist who remarries twice to dare the autocratic Rana regime, which banned widows from marrying, and in the process plays an instrumental role in abolishing Sati Pratha (the act of self-immolation on the funeral pyre of a husband) in 1920. Protesting the

oppressive policies against women and their rights, the activist commits mass suicide with 67 disciples in 1941. Yogmaya is considered the icon of freedom for women trying to go beyond confined boundaries of gender and reclaim their space in society and explore their unique self without the fear of social stigma and discrimination.

Faculty at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, B.S. Sherin's writings deal with the troubled political existence of Muslim women in India. In *Gendering Minorities* (2021), she explores the politics of modernity that puts Muslim women at the receiving end of mainstream violence and extremism. While examining Muslim women's negotiations with their cultural and religious identities, she also analyses the exclusion and homogenisation of women and the unsaid ban on their progress.

A search for women writers in Bhutan brings up Kunzang Choden. She is the first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English, *The Circle of Karma* (2005). It takes place in the 1950s, in the initial period of imperially regulated modernisation in Bhutan. The main character is forced to deal both with the traditional and restrictive gender role and a new kind of sexism she faces with men gaining economic freedom.

Women suffer because of their identity and when visceral realities circumvent their lives, they make us rethink what it means to be a woman.

No matter which part of the globe she belongs to, the need to speak for herself is cathartic because a woman writes to bring the world closer.