

Indian Women- Literature Interface

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Abstract

Literature is the mirror of society and women are an important part of society. What women learn goes into the family and hence it is important that women become more and more aware and educated. Literature is a medium that does this. But are Indian Women interfaced with Literature. The poor literacy rates and the socio-economic condition of Indian women in past and even now prevent literature from illuminating their lives. This paper peeps into different aspects of the Indian Women, Literature interface. Starting with the status of women from ancient times till date, we explore their writings and impact thereof on society, we shall also find out how literature benefits and shapes society, is literature reaching Indian women in the same intensity as men, and what could be a way forward.

Key Words: *Indian Women, Indian Women writers, Literature and Indian women, women in Indian society*

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A few days ago, I was at a social function where I got introduced to Dr. Darshini Dadawala and the meeting ultimately culminated in this paper!

Dr. Darshini is an associate professor at M S University, Baroda, and teaches Gujarati Literature. She founded an NGO called Samvitti which is dedicated to interfacing women in literature. I was reminded of my passion for parapsychology (a subject close to my heart) when I discovered her passion when she was talking about the growth of her creation of the NGO. She is doing a remarkable job in bringing women close to literature in and around Baroda where she organizes storytelling sessions in localities of have nots to create awareness amongst women folk and also arranges stage shows, nukkad solo act shows, shows in shopping malls, interacts with handicapped girl children, etc.. wherever she could attract the attention of womenfolk and is overjoyed to see results of her interfacing efforts.

I was enthralled by the glow on her face when she was making me acquainted with the activities of her Brainchild –Samvitti. I felt a sense of brotherhood because the same glow must have been observed in my face by the intelligentsia of Parul University when I was sharing with them my learnings about my passion-Parapsychology.

Basically, I am a researcher primarily researching Parapsychological topics-Telepathy, Clairvoyance, Precognition, Psychokinesis, and life after death. But with a hunger for research, I have been successful in researching other topics, namely, Psychology, Philosophy, Social Sciences, and Management. And today the interest created by Dr. Darshini has pushed me to explore an interface between Literature and Indian Women and I am before you with this paper. I researched the topic and discovered that there is a wealth of knowledge on this topic. What this paper captures is only the tip of an iceberg.

Let us briefly understand what is Literature before proceeding further in the paper-

Literature broadly is any collection of written work, but it is also used more narrowly for writings specifically considered to be an art form, especially prose fiction, drama, and poetry. In recent centuries, the definition has expanded to include oral literature, much of which has been transcribed. Literature is a method of recording, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and entertainment, and can also have a social, psychological, spiritual, or political role. Literature, as an art form, can also include works in various non-fiction genres, such as biography, diaries, memoir, letters, and essays. Within its broad definition, the literature includes non-fictional books, articles, or other printed information on a particular subject.¹

In this paper, we shall look into the history and explore the status of Indian women from ancient times to modern times, Indian women's place in literature, and their contribution to literature. We shall also explore what is the impact of literature on society, how are people benefitted from literature and we shall interface it with Indian women by understanding how they have contributed to literature, how their writing has impacted the society, whether literature has reached both men and women equally or women lag behind in accessing literature and if yes, what factors prevent them equalling men in this area. Finally, we shall look for a way forward for increasing awareness of literature on Indian Women.

Before looking into the interfacing of Indian women with literature in past or now, it will be logical to first understand the status of Indian women in ancient times and how changes happened as history advanced.

Today we are in an era where women are keeping pace with men in every field and in a true sense they are liberated. When we were kids, say 65 years ago, women were not so liberated and I remember when I passed out from college and was appearing in written test and group discussions for a job in MMTC, a government organization, the topic of debate was, "should women be allowed to apply for a job". The majority of debaters were of the opinion that it was appropriate that only males should apply for a job because they were the bread earners for the family and women were supposed to look after the family and if they apply for the job and get selected, they will be depriving one family whose male member will miss the chance. I could not contribute much to the debate because all the time my mind kept thinking if this view was correct then why do we have so many girl students in our classes!!...

During those times, the girls followed the dress code- unmarried girls will wear a salwar Kameez and a dupatta was a must and married women will wear the sari. A woman in a sari was considered a married woman by unwritten laws. No jeans / T-shirts for girls at that time!

They will not move out of the house without a male escort at night. Talking to males who were not related was Ok when in the company of others but secluded talks between an unrelated male and female were considered a taboo. The females lived under the protection of males.

Virginity was considered a precious treasure that girls carried to husbands in those days but the situation has changed now. A recent **Telegraph-Mode** survey conducted among collegegoers, students, and call center employees in the age group of 18 to 28 in Chennai shows that while most women still believe they are expected to be virgins till marriage, many have started questioning the belief. One out of two people thinks it's unfair that men can have sex before they marry, but women are expected to be virgins. About 56 percent of the respondents believe it is time men stopped expecting intact hymens in their brides. And an overwhelming 83 percent think virginity is overrated.²

Women were not liberal then but the situation has changed now. We have now come to an era of live-in relationships.

Let us see what was the situation prevailing in ancient India:

Women in ancient India

Naresh Rout³ describes the status of women in Ancient India –

During the ancient period of India, women played a significant role. The Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society. Their condition was good. The women were provided an opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standards. There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was most common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no sati system or early marriage.

But from enjoying free and esteemed positions in the Rig-Vedic society, after this period, in the latter part of the Vedic period, women started being discriminated against in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, widow burning, purdah, and polygamy further worsened the women's position.

The status of women deteriorated very badly after the Rig Vedic period and they were treated badly. The epics and Puranas equated women with property. Even Buddhism did little for women. Though the Maurya kings often employed female bodyguards, spies, and 'Stri- adhyaksha mahamatras', their status was still quite bad. Upper caste ladies had to accept the purdah. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without their husbands' permission.

They became worse off in the Gupta period. The Smriti shastras abused them; Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth, and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and sati, prostitution and the Devadasi system became widespread.

We have come a long way since those times and seen the status of modern women in paragraphs just before discussing the status of women in ancient India.

Learning about the status of women folk in Indian society was needed to have enlightened knowledge about their inclination toward literature which we shall be covering in this paper.

Let us now come to the main topic – Literature-Indian women interface.

Interfacing Indian Women with Literature

We start with getting acquainted with women writers from ancient times to modern times -

literature amongst women in ancient times.

Naresh Rout³ says,

"The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies.

There were two types of scholarly women — the Brahnavadinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned female students studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained a spinster-to study religion and philosophy. Often, Buddhist nuns

composed hymns. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts.” It is heartening to note that in ancient times, even though women were bound in shackles in the patriarchal society, their minds could not be kept captivated and they were associated with literature, music, and arts. Urmi Chanda -Vaz⁴ adds further to the above inclination of women to literature by adding a list of women writers during ancient times:

“The wonderful anthology *Unbound (2015)*, edited by Annie Zaidi, reminds us, that the earliest written records of “breakaways” are those of Buddhist nuns from the *Therigatha*. Some of these poems were composed as early as the sixth century BCE, and are voices of those women who chose their spiritual aspirations above everything else. Advocates of the “great tradition of ancient Hinduism”, of course, like to present Vedic characters such as the sages Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra as the first examples of feminist liberals, but there is little evidence of these women have actually existed or having written anything. However, there’s no harm in finding some gleeful inspiration from their stories of standing up to snooty male Brahmin scholars.

It would be many more centuries before Indian women would start demanding and actually getting some literary agency. These were, of course, women outside the ambit of society, who, having cast off the weight of being a man’s property, found their voices. The *Bhakti Movement* became a level playing field and yielded stars like *Andal* (seventh or eighth century CE), *Akka Mahadevi* (twelfth century CE), *Lal Ded* (fourteenth century CE), and *Meerabai* (sixteenth century CE), among others. Though primarily devotional and directed towards male gods, their poems reflect an autonomy of spirit in a society that expected only convention and obedience from them. In their rejection of conventional gender roles and attributes, they set the earliest examples of feminism in action.

The ancient women literary figures were attached to poetic leanings toward God and verses written by Meerabai are relevant even today and we chant these verses and get immersed in holy spirits.

Later even Muslim Women writers also rose to prominence-

Zany at the zenana

Close on their heels came some fiery Mughal women, brandishing their unique brand of feminism (as shocking as it sounds to a nation being increasingly blinkered by the *Hindutva* narrative). Despite their largely cloistered existence, some of the Mughal princesses and queens lived on their own terms and left behind records for us to read and draw inspiration from. Remarkable among their written records are *Ahval-I Humayun Badshah* by **Gulbadan Begum** (sixteenth century CE) – making her perhaps the first female historian of the Mughal court. *Gulbadan Begum’s* writing, though largely chronicling the life of her brother, emperor Humayun, offers interesting perspectives on life within the zenana and even mentions a ladies-only Mecca tour that she and her associates went on.

The writing was also among the many talents of the great empress *Nur Jahan* – she is known to have written poetry, though not much of it survives. Like her, *Padshah Begum Jahanara* too was renowned for her autonomous ways and love of all things literary. She not only wrote but also commissioned compositions and translations of several works. A renowned Sufi *faqirah* (ascetic) herself, she wrote ***Risālah-i-Sāhibīyahwas*** – a biography of her chosen spiritual master, *Mullah Shah* – and *Mu’nis al-Arwā*, a biography of the great saint, *Moinuddin Chisti*.

Her niece ***Zeb-un-Nissa*** followed in her footsteps and became an accomplished scholar, a patron of the arts, and a poetess. Committed to the arts, she composed voluminous works of poetry including ***Diwan-i-Makhfi*** (posthumously published), ***Monis-ul-Roh***, ***Zeb-ul Monsha’at***, and ***Zeb-ul-Tafasir***.”

Coming to the last few centuries from ancient times, let us get acquainted with women writers during past centuries, and then we shall take up contemporary modern women writers. The century wise details are sourced from Wikipedia⁵

Indian women writers from the 17th Century

Bahinabai (1628–1700 AD) or Bahina or Bahini

She is a Varkari female saint from Maharashtra, India. She is considered a disciple of another Varkari poet-saint *Tukaram*. Having been born in a Brahmin family, *Bahinabai* was married to a widower at a young age and spent most of her childhood wandering around Maharashtra along with her family. She describes, in her autobiography *Atmamanivedana*, her spiritual experiences with a calf and visions of the Varkari’s patron deities *Vithoba* and *Tukaram*. She reports being subjected to verbal and physical abuse by her husband, who despised her spiritual inclination but who finally accepted her chosen path of devotion (*bhakti*). Unlike most female saints who never married or renounced their married life for God, *Bahinabai* remained married her entire life. *Bahinabai’s* *abhyanga* compositions, written in Marathi, focus on her troubled marital life and the regret of being born a woman. *Bahinabai* was always torn between her duties to her husband and her devotion to *Vithoba*. Her poetry mirrors her compromise between her devotion to her husband and God.

Habba Khatoon (born Zoon; 1554 – 1609; sometimes spelled Khatun),

She was also known by the honorary title *The Nightingale of Kashmir* and was a Kashmiri Muslim poet and ascetic. She was the wife of Yousuf Shah Chak, the last Emperor of Kashmir. Habba Khatun composed songs in Kashmiri. It is claimed that she introduced "loal" to Kashmiri poetry, "Loal" is more or less equivalent to the English 'lyric'. It conveys one brief thought. Braj Kachru states that Habba Khatun and Arnimal "perfected the loal form of Kashmiri poetry"

Roshanara Begum (3 September 1617 – 11 September 1671)

She was a Mughal princess and the third daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. She was contemporary to Zeb-un-Nissa discussed in the paragraphs on Moghal Women writers.

Indian women writers from the 18th Century

Mah Laqa Bai (7 April 1768 – August 1824), also known as Mah Laqa Chanda

She was an Indian 18th-century Urdu poet, courtesan, and philanthropist based in Hyderabad. In 1824, she became the first female poet to have a diwan (collection of poems) of her work, a compilation of Urdu Ghazals named *Gulzar-e-Mahlaqa*, published posthumously.

Anurupa Debi (9 September 1882 – 19 April 1958)

She was one of the most reputed female novelists in Bengali literature in the British colonial era. She was also an eminent short story writer, poet as well as a social worker. Debi was one of the first female writers in Bengali literature to gain considerable prominence and popularity.

Manorama Thampuratti

She was an 18th-century Sanskrit scholar. She belonged to Kizhakke Kovilakam of Kottakkal, a branch of the Zamorin dynasty of Kozhikode. Being a member of the royal family, she was fortunate to get a traditional Sanskrit education, which was not common for women at that time. She mastered the language and so got access to the treasure of knowledge on various *sastras* at a young age. She composed several verses in Sanskrit and was known all over Kerala as a gifted poet. However, except for a few shlokas, not much is available of her work.

Indian women writers from the 19th Century

Annie Besant (née Wood; 1 October 1847 – 20 September 1933)

She was a British socialist, theosophist, women's rights activist, writer, orator, political party member, educationist, and philanthropist. Regarded as a champion of human freedom, she was an ardent supporter of both Irish and Indian self-rule. She was also a prolific author with over three hundred books and pamphlets to her credit. As an educationist, her contributions included being one of the founders of the Banaras Hindu University. For fifteen years, Besant was a public proponent in England of atheism and scientific materialism. Besant's goal was to provide employment, better living conditions, and proper education for the poor.

Sarojini Naidu (13 February 1879 – 2 March 1949)

She was an Indian political activist and poet. A proponent of civil rights, women's emancipation, and anti-imperialistic ideas, she was an important figure in India's struggle for independence from colonial rule. Naidu's work as a poet earned her the sobriquet 'the Nightingale of India', or 'Bharat Kokila' by Mahatma Gandhi because of colour, imagery, and lyrical quality of her poetry.

Sister Nivedita was born Margaret Elizabeth Noble (28 October 1867 – 13 October 1911)

She was an Irish teacher, author, social activist, school founder, and disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Sister Nivedita met Swami Vivekananda in 1895 in London and traveled to Calcutta in 1898. Swami Vivekananda gave her the name *Nivedita* (meaning "Dedicated to God") when he initiated her into the vow of *Brahmacharya* on 25 March 1898. In November 1898, she opened a girls' school in the Bagbazar area of North Calcutta. She wanted to educate girls who were deprived of even basic education. She died on 13 October 1911 in Darjeeling. Her epitaph reads, "Here lies Sister Nivedita who gave her all to India".^[4]

Savitribai Phule (3 January 1831 – 10 March 1897)

She was an Indian social reformer, educationalist, and poet from Maharashtra. Along with her husband, in Maharashtra, she played an important and vital role in improving women's rights in India. She is considered to be the pioneer of India's feminist movement. Savitribai and her husband founded one of the first modern Indian girls' schools in Pune, at Bhide wada in 1848. She worked to abolish the discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on caste and gender. She is regarded as an important figure in the social reform movement in Maharashtra.

A philanthropist and an educationist, Savitribai was also a prolific Marathi writer.

Kamini Roy (12 October 1864 – 27 September 1933)

She was a Bengali poet, social worker, and feminist in British India. She was the first woman honours graduate in British India. Roy supported younger writers and poets, including Sufia Kamal, who she visited in 1923. She was president of the Bengali Literary Conference in 1930 and vice-president of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad from 1932–33.

She was influenced by the poet Rabindranath Tagore and Sanskrit literature. Calcutta University honoured her with the Jagattarini Gold Medal.

Modern Contemporary Indian Women Writers

Urvashi Butalia (born 1952)

She is an Indian feminist writer, publisher, and activist. She is known for her work in the women's movement of India, as well as for authoring books such as *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from and the Partition of India* and *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir*.

Along with Ritu Menon, she co-founded Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house, in 1984. In 2003, she founded Zubaan Books, an imprint of Kali for Women.^[1]

In 2011, Butalia and Menon were jointly awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, for their work in Literature and Education

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (3 April 1903 – 29 October 1988)

She was an Indian social reformer and freedom activist. She was most remembered for her contribution to the Indian independence movement; for being the driving force behind the renaissance of Indian handicrafts, handlooms, and theatre in independent India; and for the upliftment of the socio-economic standard of Indian women by pioneering the cooperation. Several cultural institutions in India today exist because of her vision, including the National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Central Cottage Industries Emporium, and the Crafts Council of India.

She was a prolific writer who authored many books.

Ismat Chughtai (21 August 1915 – 24 October 1991)

She was an Indian Urdu novelist, short story writer, liberal humanist, and filmmaker. Beginning in the 1930s, she wrote extensively on themes including female sexuality and femininity, middle-class gentility, and class conflict, often from a Marxist perspective. With a style characterized by literary realism, Chughtai established herself as a significant voice in the Urdu literature of the twentieth century, and in 1976 was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India.

Tarla Dalal (3 June 1936 – 6 November 2013)

She was an Indian food writer, chef, cookbook author, and host of cooking shows. Her first cookbook, *The Pleasures of Vegetarian Cooking*, was published in 1974. Since then, she wrote over 100 books and sold more than 10 million copies. She also ran the largest Indian food website and published a bi-monthly magazine, *Cooking & More*. Her cooking shows included *The Tarla Dalal Show* and *Cook It Up With Tarla Dalal*. Her recipes were published in about 25 magazines and tried in an estimated 120 million Indian homes.

Though she wrote about many cuisines and healthy cooking, she specialized in Indian cuisine, particularly Gujarati cuisine. She was awarded the Padma Shri by Government of India in 2007, which made her the only Indian from the field of cooking to have been conferred the title.

Shobha De (born 7 January 1948)

She is an Indian novelist and columnist. She is best known for her depiction of socialites and sex in her works of fiction. In the 1980s, she contributed to the Sunday magazine section of *The Times of India*. She has since been a regular columnist for several newspapers. She has also written several popular soaps on television. She has authored many books.

Tarini Desai (born 22 December, 1935)

She is Gujarati short story writer from Gujarat, India. She started writing during her college life. Her first radio feature *Navratri* was presented from Baroda Centre of Akashvani in 1951. Her other radio feature was presented in 1962 in Bombay Centre of Akashvani. Her first story *Meeting* was published in *Chandani* magazine in 1966. Her short story *Kabaro Pan Chali Shake Chhe* was anthologized by Radheshyam Sharma in 1975.

Pag Bolta Lage Chhe (1984) was her first collection of fifteen short stories. *Raja Maharaja Je* (1992) has fourteen short stories centered around the subject of "illusion". *Maroon Jamli Gulabi* (2003) was her third collection of experimental stories. *Komal Pancham Ja* (2008) is her other story collection. She has written children's stories, *Chimpudada* and *Ganji Kanji ane Vanji*. *Tarinibahen Desai ni Shreshtha Vartao* is a collection of her selected stories. Her stories are analyzed in *Tarinibahen Desai ni Vartao: Aaswad ane Avbodh* is a book

where several scholars have analyzed and written on her stories. *Saat Taali Ramadati Kshano* is a collection of pen sketches.

She had acted in a small role in TV series *Prerana*.

Shashi Deshpande (born 19 August 1936)

She is one of the eminent novelists of contemporary Indian literature in English. Her work centers around women's lives in modern Indian society. She explicitly addresses Indian readers and makes them acquainted with atrocities inflicted on women through her writing.

Ashapura Devi (8 January 1909 – 12 July 1995)

She was a prominent Indian novelist and poet in Bengali. In 1976, she was awarded the Jnanpith Award and Padma Shri by the Government of India, D.Litt. by the Universities of Jabalpur, Rabindra Bharati, Burdwan, and Jadavpur. Vishwa Bharati University honoured her with Deshikottama in 1989. For her contribution as a novelist and short-story writer, the Sahitya Akademi conferred its highest honour, the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, in 1994.

Mahasweta Devi (14 January 1926 – 28 July 2016)

She was an Indian writer in Bengali and an activist. Her notable literary works include *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*. She was a leftist who worked for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people (*Lodha* and *Shabar*) of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh states of India. She was honoured with various literary awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award (in Bengali), Jnanpith Award, and Ramon Magsaysay Award along with India's civilian awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan.

Kamla Das (Born March 31, 1934- May31, 2009)

She was an Indian author who wrote openly and frankly about female sexual desire and the experience of being an Indian woman. Das was part of a generation of Indian writers whose work centered on personal rather than colonial experiences, and her short stories, poetry, memoirs, and essays brought her respect and notoriety in equal measures. Das wrote both in English (mostly poetry) and, under the pen name Madhavikutty, in the Malayalam language of southern India.

Mridula Garg (b. 1938)

She is an Indian writer who writes in Hindi and English languages.^{[1][2]} She has published over 30 books in Hindi – novels, short story collections, plays, and collections of essays – including several translated into English. She is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (16 August 1904 – 15 February 1948)

She was an Indian poet. One of her most popular poems is "Jhansi ki Rani" (about the courageous Queen of Jhansi). Chauhan authored a number of popular works in Hindi poetry. Her most famous composition is *Jhansi Ki Rani*, an emotionally charged poem describing the life of Rani Lakshmi Bai. The poem is one of the most recited and sung poems in Hindi literature. An emotionally charged description of the life of the queen of Jhansi (British India) and her participation in the 1857 revolution, it is often taught in schools in India. A couplet repeated at the end of each stanza reads thus:

बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी,
खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी।।

This and her other poems, *Jallianwala Bagh mein Vasant*, *Veeron Ka Kaisa Ho Basant*, *Rakhi Ki Chunauti*, and *Vida*, openly talk about the freedom movement. They are said to have inspired great numbers of Indian youth to participate in the Indian Freedom Movement.

Nayantara Sahgal (born 10 May 1927)

She is an Indian writer who writes in English. She is a member of the Nehru–Gandhi family, the second of the three daughters born to Jawaharlal Nehru's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit.

She was awarded the 1986 Sahitya Akademi Award for her English novel *Rich Like Us* (1985).

Though part of the Nehru family, Sahgal developed a reputation for maintaining her independent critical sense.^[6] Her independent tone, and her mother's, led to both falling out with her cousin Indira Gandhi during the most autocratic phases of the latter's time in office in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Gandhi canceled Sahgal's scheduled appointment as India's Ambassador to Italy within days of her return to power. Not one to be intimidated, Sahgal in 1982 wrote a scathing, insightful account of Gandhi's rise to power.^{[7][8][9]}

Malti Joshi (born 4 June 1934)

She is an Indian novelist, essayist, and writer, who writes primarily in the Hindi and Marathi languages. She was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honours, in 2018.

Anees Jung (born 1944)

She is an Indian author, journalist, and columnist for newspapers in India and abroad,^[3] whose most known work, ' Unveiling India ' (1987) was a chronicle of the lives of women in India, noted especially for the depiction of Muslim women behind the purdah.

Mrinal Pande (born 26 February 1946)

She is an Indian television personality, journalist, and author, and until 2009 chief editor of Hindi daily *Hindustan*. Mrinal Pande has taught at the Universities of Allahabad, Delhi, and Bhopal before switching to journalism in mid 1980s . She has edited well-known Hindi periodicals, *Vama* and *Saptahik Hindustan* for the Times of India and the Hindustan Times group respectively.

Amrita Pritam (31 August 1919 – 31 October 2005)

She was an Indian novelist, essayist, and poet, who wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. A prominent figure in Punjabi literature, she is the recipient of the 1956 Sahitya Akademi Award. Her body of work comprised over 100 books of poetry, fiction, biographies, essays, a collection of Punjabi folk songs, and an autobiography that were all translated into several Indian and foreign languages.

Pritam is best remembered for her poignant poem, *Ajj aakhaan Waris Shah nu* (Today I invoke Waris Shah – "Ode to Waris Shah"), an elegy to the 18th-century Punjabi poet, an expression of her anguish over massacres during the partition of India. As a novelist, her most noted work was *Pinjar* ("The Skeleton", 1950), in which she created her memorable character, *Puro*, an epitome of violence against women, loss of humanity and ultimate surrender to existential fate; the novel was made into an award-winning film, *Pinjar* (2003).

Suzanna Arundhati Roy (born 24 November 1961)

She is an Indian author best known for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), which won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997 and became the best-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author. She is also a political activist involved in human rights and environmental causes.

The above is not an exhaustive list, there are many more women writers and the list is quite long. The matter of fact is that literature is not limited to men but is equally ruled by women. Equality of gender is proposed in our constitution but still, this equality is not attained in many ways if we consider Literature, we can definitely say that women are not behind men in literary acumen.

So far we have covered some aspects of the Indian Women-Literature interface. We studied the status of women in our society from ancient to modern times and understood that there is a major difference between men and women in our Indian society. The difference which was colossal in old times is now reducing and in modern times women are nearing equality with men at least in the literary field. We have devoted a lot of pages to get acquainted with women writers which is an important aspect of interfacing Indian women with literature as we find Indian women had taken to contribute to literature from time immemorial and they have contributed to literature immensely.

We now move on to the next aspect i.e., how literature has impacted women. But here I should point out that literature does not, normally distinguish readers on basis of their gender unless the topic is solely for one sex- which normally would be some educative or medical-related topic, not the general literature. When we talk about general literature, be it poems or story books or books on social aspects, it is not intended for a specific gender. So literature created may impact both men and women in the same way. The only difference is the ultimate resulting impact which will certainly lie in the content of literature but will also depend on whom it is able to reach. The impact on women may be less if fewer women reach the literature. We shall examine this aspect whether women reach literature in lesser numbers than men. But first, let us see the impact of literature on its readers (both males and females) due to the material contained in the literature. Shall we say let us first examine how literature impacts its readers and hence society?

Impact of literature on Society

Literature does impact society and this impact would be the same whether it is brought about by a male or a female writer because it is the content that impacts and not the gender of the writer. In fact, gender does not matter for literature's impact on society.

We have been reading literature since we were kids and it did provide us entertainment and awareness about worldly matters. Even new entertainment media which have mushroomed have not dislodged literature from its readers. Literature is of paramount importance for the development of modern society.

Literature possesses the capability to influence the minds of readers and make a lasting impression on their minds which might affect their attitude and behaviour. It is therefore no wonder that when it reaches a vast number of readers in the society, it can impact their attitudes and hence bring about a cultural change in the society.

The beauty of literature is that it is the reflection of the human self, containing within its realms the entire spectrum of sentiments and emotions that we feel or associate ourselves with. In a shorter way we can say that literature is a mirror and it reflects what is happening in the society; not only does that take cue from what is happening in society, it can render subtle suggestions to influence the society. How else, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem even now fills us with a sense of patriotism to the extent that we feel compelled to sacrifice our lives for our nation; how else, we are compelled to salute our defense personnel when we hear the song, " ऐ मेरे वतन के लोगों तुम आँख में भर लो पानी ..."

Yes, the literature does impact people and hence the society and the magnitude of the impact depends on the content of the literature.

A paper published in Education News⁶ elaborates on how literature influences us-

The many forms of literature manifesting themselves in the form of poetry, fiction, prose, drama, etc., unfold before our eyes the secrets of the big bright world. Literature broadens the horizon of the readers and helps them think out of the box.

Literature informs and entertains-Literature apart from being *a source of entertainment and information* has also become somewhat of a conversation striker in modern society. We often hear successful people talk about the important role played by books in molding their career choices and making them successful. Also, we can see the *importance of literature in society* in the form of many new technological innovations that are inspired by literature.

Literature helps us evolve-Not just fast-tracking our thought process towards the future, literature has this tremendous ability to take us back in time. Classics in literature transcend us to our past and we feel as if we are living and breathing in an entirely different world. Classics are also treasure troves of world wisdom, teaching us important lessons of life. History is not only about the past, but it is also indicative of our present and the future. In every period, there are different people and within them, different stages. We *evolve every day*, and without literature, we would know nothing about the past.

Literature Ignites the Mind-Literature is important because it ignites the mind. We obtain the capability to see the world we inhabit from an entirely different perspective. It gives us the ability to see the world with a fresh mind. Some of the common themes of literature like love, conflict, fear, loneliness, and growth connect the reader with these subjects and help develop an understanding of the self.

Literature helps in Understanding Humanity-Humanity is all about helping and taking care of people who need caring, love, and our attention. Literature helps in understanding human nature and conditions that impact human thinking and shape our behavior. Numerous human cultures, beliefs, and traditions were borne out of literature. Literature down the ages have known to give voice to the people and helped them express their opinions more forcefully, which in turn strengthens the foundations of humanity.

Literature Educates and teaches new things-For the majority of us, we first encounter literature in school. This is important as the habit of reading and writing are ingrained in us from an early age. We connect with the characters in the book, with the themes and messages broadening our horizons and helping us critically think and analyze situations we encounter in our daily lives. Every year, over 130 million books are published across the world. They create a bridge to learning something new.

The impact and *importance of literature* in modern society are simply incredible. The author uses the magic of words to open up our minds and show us a way to understand the world in a better way.

Literature also helps us better comprehend modern-day issues like human conflict, wars, and suffering.

Literature is a reflection of how society works, and functions. In the modern world, **the role of literature in society** assumes added significance because of the impact it creates by shaping our thoughts and behavior.

Literature does impact us all. Just imagine if we did not have books or other forms of literature, how would our growth have been? We would have learned only what we would have personally experienced while adding years to our lives. We would have been frogs in well, knowing only the things which are happening to us. Mankind

would not have progressed; we could not have reached the moon as the knowledge would stop expanding. Through literature we know the world better and are more aware and knowledgeable and are able to progress and not only progress but can keep pace with progress.

Manal Ismail⁷ adds more to the impact of literature on society- Literature has had a major impact on the development of society. It has shaped civilizations, changed political systems (Das Kapital-Karl Marx), and exposed injustice.

Literature gives us a detailed preview of human experiences, allowing us to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. "We can only analyze a character once we understand and look beyond the obvious," Farooqi said. "We learn not to judge a character based on appearances because more than any other field of study, literature openly acknowledges the unreliable nature of appearances."

Literature also allows us to question some of our most prominent beliefs and examine our lives, giving them deeper meaning.

Farooqi used the book *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse as an example of how literature works to expand our minds and give us a greater understanding of the world.

"When confronted with such works, we automatically question our beliefs, values, morality, and the infinite," he said.

Sophie Austin⁸ is of the view that literature is the mirror of society and it brings out the human conflict prevailing in the society, it is also educative and creates profound awareness about the world through a peep into literature about the history of the world. History is not only a gateway to the past, it's also suggestive of our present and the future. Within every time period lies different people and within them, different stages in our ever-growing culture. Each individual before was a product of their own time. As a species, we evolve every day and without that timestamp that literature gives us, we would know nothing about the past.

Kakarla Sai mitravinda⁹ brings forth an important point -how Literature pushes you to become a better superior person! As per him, literature cannot in itself make us superior individuals, yet it can help us in that mission. Astuteness can be characterized as aptitude in living. By looking at artistic Literature, its accounts, and its messages, we can increment in our comprehension of how to live. We figure out how to perceive what is solid and damaging on the planet, and we are tested with shamefulness and its results.

The above discussions reveal that Literature impacts our lives in a profound way and not only does it give us information and provide entertainment, but it also does constructive work to evolve mankind and improve cultures and societies.

The major takeaways from the above discussions are: -

- Literature is a mirror of society, it reflects its face and paves ways to remove aberrations, conflicts, and nurtures improved evolution
- Literature is educative, teaches us newer things, and creates profound awareness of the world where we live in
- Historical literature makes us aware of the past, springs up the follies of the past, and paves way for a better future
- Literature expands our minds, broadens our vision, and brings clarity to thoughts
- Literature prompts us to question our existing beliefs, pushes us to evaluate their correctness, and encourages us to reach a correct perception and amend our way of thinking if needed.
- The most important impact is that it results in shaping civilization, evolving it, in bettering it and the process is continuous because literature itself evolves with time
- Literature can bring revolution as is evident from the impact of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx which resulted in changing the political systems
- Literature exposes injustice, conflicts and ignites our minds to seek ways to eliminate these
- It makes us understand humanity and prompts us to contribute our bit to its improvement
- Literature makes us better people and hence helps in shaping a better society.
- Literature informs and also entertains.

The influence of literature on us and society is tremendous and may have many more facets not captured in the above list. In a nutshell, we can say that Literature shapes and improves the world at large.

The impact of literature is there irrespective of the gender of the people who were the authors of the literature. Literature authored by Indian women had all the above impacts and maybe many more. Let us see how women writers in India influenced the Indian Society.

Impact of Indian Women writers on the society

In the earlier part of this paper, we have compiled a list of Indian Women Writers (the list was not exhaustive and there are many more writers who could not be accommodated for want of space) and had provided a glimpse of their work which revealed the topics on which they wrote and that must have given some idea about their impact on the society.

The impact on society by ancient women writers can be felt even now when we enjoy the devotional poems written by Meera bai even now. **Meera Bai** surfaced in the sixteenth century but much before that there were women poets who had influenced the society through the bhakti movement which had become a level playing field and yielded stars like **Andal** (seventh or eighth century CE), **Akka Mahadevi** (twelfth century CE), **Lal Ded** (fourteenth century CE).

The details available about the ancient women writers are of the above poets who had shunned the society but had impacted it greatly with the **Bhakti Movement**.

Coming to modern times, We can't forget **Annie Besant** of British origin, a writer from the 19th century, a great writer who not only left her imprint through her writing but by her social work of tremendous importance. She wrote over three hundred books She was a British socialist, theosophist, women's rights activist, writer, orator, political party member, educationist, and philanthropist. Regarded as a **champion of human freedom, she was an ardent supporter of both Irish and Indian self-rule**. As an educationist, **her contributions included being one of the founders of the Banaras Hindu University**. Society will be ever grateful to her for the services rendered to the Indian people.

Another writer of foreign origin who impacted society by contributing to education was **Sister Nivedita born Margaret Elizabeth Noble** an Irish teacher, author, social activist, school founder, and disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She impacted society through her writings and also for the tremendous efforts undertaken by her for girls' education. As early as 1898, she founded a school for girls in Calcutta. Her contribution to women's education was immense.

A similar exemplary impact was by **Savitriben Phule**, an Indian writer who also worked untiringly for the upliftment of women and for educating them. She is considered to be the pioneer of India's feminist movement. Savitribai and her husband founded one of the first modern Indian girls' schools in Pune in 1848. She worked to abolish the discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on caste and gender. She is regarded as an important figure in the social reform movement in Maharashtra. Her impact on society can't be forgotten

Some contemporary Indian women writers are worth discussing for the impact that they inflicted on our society; we shall discuss some of them in detail in the paragraphs to follow:

Dr. Racheti Anne Margaret¹⁰ speaks about **Arundhati Roy** as the luminary among contemporary women writers. She is one of the women writers who wrote about the plights of the downtrodden and the suppression of women in a male-dominated world and the influence of Marxism on the lives of the downtrodden. When women writers maintained their reservations in offering a critical evaluation of Indian politics, Arundhati Roy emerged as a beacon of light to guide the Indian women writers. She has got overwhelming reception with *The God of small things* (1997), which has put her at the forefront of all the other writers. Her success with just the publication of her single book has already placed her on equal terms with Salman Rushdie and others. Moreover, she has surpassed even Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. The characters are entirely imaginary, with no factual correspondence to real-life characters. Arundhati Roy mentions the Veteran Marxist E.M.S Namboodaripad by name but proceeds to invent fictions about him, which led to widespread protests in Kerala, the state where he headed the first elected Communist Government in world history. It is also a comprehensive protest novel, which describes atrocities against the powerless, children, women, and untouchables.

Arundhati Roy is the only novelist, who while being an activist, is constantly writing about social problems. Her monograph, *The Greater Common Good* (1999) reveals the truth about the Narmada Project. The book also shows her talent as an essayist and social reformer.

Krishnaveni KP¹¹ gives an account of some more women writers who wrote on evils in society that tormented Indian women. **Shashi Deshpande** is another Indian women writer who is labeled as a feminist novelist who dealt with the problems faced by women in our patriarchal society. Through her works, she gave a detailed picture of women's issues, and the emotional and spiritual crises they encounter in this male-dominated society. The characters in her novel are having a quest for freedom and all they want is to come out of these oppressive

bonds and reconstruct all those norms and patterns of womanhood. She talks about the women's struggle to secure self-identity and self-respect.

Shashi Desh Pande's novel *That Long Silence* (1988) tells the story of Jaya, an Indian upper-middle-class housewife who retained her silence in Bombay throughout her life. Here she talks about the institution of marriage and its power to destroy the freedom of women. Through this work, she tries to reveal the fact that women bear the levels of oppression not only within the male-centered society but also within the institution of the family. In *The Binding Vine* (1993), the narrator-protagonist Urmila highlights the despair of two women, one is Mira, who is a victim of marital rape and the other is Kalpana, who is a brutally raped outside marriage. This is a novel that takes up the issue of rape both within and outside marriage.

Literature impacts society by exposing the evils in the society and Shashi Desh Pande is tremendously successful in baring the tortures inflicted on women in Indian Society. Her writings truly mirror the society we live in.

Another Indian women writer **Nayanthara Sehgal** portrayed the image of women who suffered due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society. Through her writings, she envisions a world that is based on equality and the virtues of women to be equally valued as that of men. Her Novel presents the image of Indian Womanhood. Women are the principal characters in her novels. She comments on the freedom of females. Her feminist voice is strong and louder which is the result of her unhappy married life. Sehgal's woman from *A Time to be Happy* (1957) to *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is all about the journey of women's struggle towards self-discovery. Motherhood is another category that has been critiqued and reviewed. Sehgal's portrayal of motherhood is framed by a larger discourse. Her focus is more on women and value structures.

Amrita Pritam was a very famous Punjabi writer who impacted society through her writings on women's issues. She was an Indian novelist, essayist, and poet, who wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. A prominent figure in Punjabi literature, she is the recipient of the 1956 Sahitya Akademi Award. Her body of work comprised over 100 books of poetry, fiction, biographies, essays, a collection of Punjabi folk songs, and an autobiography that were all translated into several Indian and foreign languages.

Pritam is best remembered for her poignant poem, *Ajj aakhaan Waris Shah nu* (Today I invoke Waris Shah – "Ode to Waris Shah"), an elegy to the 18th-century Punjabi poet, an expression of **her anguish over massacres during the partition of India**.

As a novelist, her most noted work was *Pinjar* ("The Skeleton", 1950), in which she created her memorable character, *Puro*, an epitome of violence against women, loss of humanity, and ultimate surrender to existential fate. Her work is immemorial as her writings reflected contemporary evils prevailing in society.

Powerful writer **Subhadra Kumari Chauhan** impacted Indians (both males and females) with proud patriotic enlightenment through her writings. Chauhan authored a number of popular works in Hindi poetry.

She was adept in writing poems that impacted Indians with a sense of patriotism.

Her most famous composition is *Jhansi Ki Rani*, an emotionally charged poem describing the life of Rani Lakshmi Bai. The poem is one of the most recited and sung poems in Hindi literature. An emotionally charged description of the life of the queen of Jhansi (British India) and her participation in the 1857 revolution, it is often taught in schools in India. This and her other poems, *Jallianwala Bagh mein Vasant*, *Veroon Ka Kaisa Ho Basant*, *Rakhi Ki Chunauti*, and *Vida*, openly talk about the freedom movement. They are said to have inspired great numbers of Indian youth to participate in the Indian Freedom Movement. **Her writings truly impacted society in a big way. Amongst women writers, her name is foremost among the writers whose writing had a great impact on society.**

Kamala Das, Malayalam pen name **Madhavikutty**, Muslim name **Kamala Surayya**, was an Indian author who wrote openly and frankly about female sexual desire and the experience of being an Indian woman. Das was part of a generation of Indian writers whose work centered on personal rather than colonial experiences, and her short stories, poetry, memoirs, and essays brought her respect and notoriety in equal measures. Das wrote both in English (mostly poetry) and, under the pen name Madhavikutty, in the Malayalam language of southern India.

Towing the same liberal views on sex was **Ismat Chughtai** who created a storm in society through her writings filled with topics on sex as felt by women. She wrote extensively on themes including female sexuality and femininity. She left an indelible mark on society through her writings aimed at middle-class gentility, and class conflict, often from a Marxist perspective. With a style characterized by literary realism, Chughtai established herself as a significant voice in the Urdu literature of the twentieth century.

Shobha de also falls under the same category who is best known for her depiction of socialites and sex in her works of fiction.

On the cooking front, **Tarla Dalal** became extremely popular due to her writings on cooking. She was an Indian food writer, chef, cookbook author, and host of cooking shows. She wrote over 100 books and sold more than 10 million copies. She also ran the largest Indian food website and published a bi-monthly magazine, *Cooking & More*. Her cooking shows included *The Tarla Dalal Show* and *Cook It Up With Tarla Dalal*. Her recipes were published in about 25 magazines and tried in an estimated 120 million Indian homes.

In a male-dominated society, it had been a serious effort for the women writers to show what society called the mechanics of patriarchy. The work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to these patriarchal assumptions. Still, Shashi Deshpande, Arundathi Roy, and the like represent their heroines defying patriarchal notions and they possess their own individuality and identity. They want to lead their life independently. They are bold, strong, and independent human beings. They want to live freely and fully. Through their novels, these women writers try to tackle the systems that oppress and subjugate women.

We have so far covered many facets that interface women with literature and have witnessed the remarkable impact of women writers on society and women. But still, has literature reached all the Indian women? Interfacing of Indian women with literature will remain half-done until literature reaches all the Indian women. Literature if not accessed amounts to not having it. We talked about the impact of literature on Indian Women and at that time we said that the content of literature does make an impact on society which includes women but more important is whether literature reaches Indian women. The literature has not reached a substantial portion of women folk in India

Factors preventing interfacing Indian Women with Literature

The reason for the lack of reach of literature to Indian women is evident. To access literature, one has to be literate. It is sad to note that while Indian women have evolved tremendously since ancient times and are more aware than in old times, all of them are still not literate.

The poor Literacy Rate amongst Indian women is the first and foremost reason that Indian women are unable to access literature. While urban women are literate, literacy has not reached rural areas.

The literacy rate of Indian women is very poor when compared to Indian men and also when compared to women of other countries.

The following Census figures¹² will make this clear:

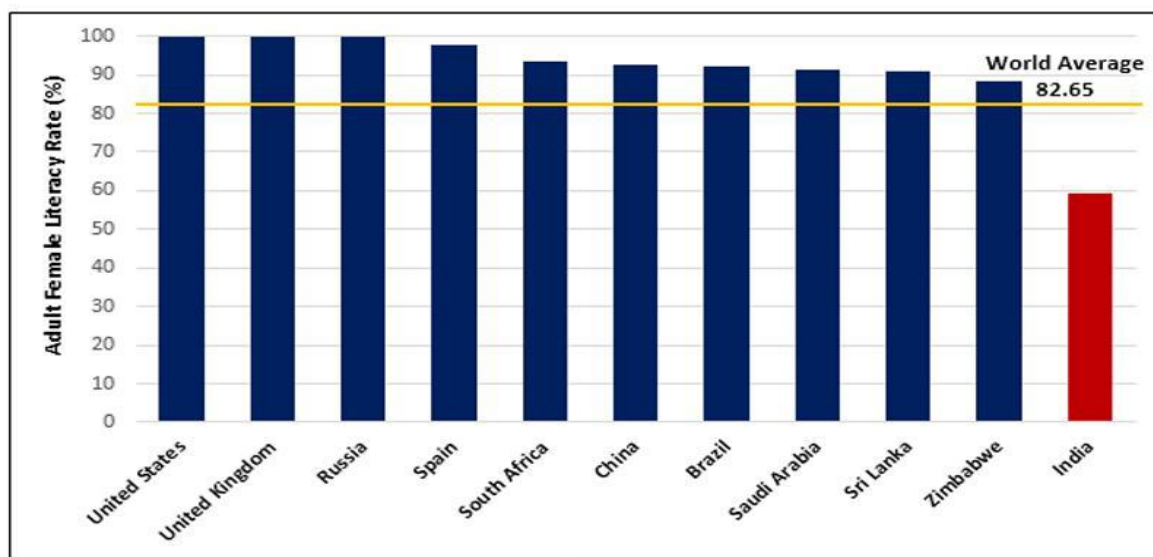
S.N.	Census year	% of female literacy	% of Male Literacy
1.	1901	0.6	9.8
2.	1911	1.0	10.6
3.	1921	1.8	12.2
4.	1931	2.9	15.6
5.	1941	7.3	24.9
6.	1951	8.86	21.16
7.	1961	15.35	40.40
8.	1971	21.97	45.96
9.	1981	29.76	56.38
10.	1991	39.29	64.13
11.	2001	53.67	75.26
12.	2011	65.46	82.14

Picture 1- Literacy rate in Men and Women in India since 1901

We were hardly literate at the start of the 20th century and it was only by 1961 that about half of the male population and about 15 % of the female population gained literacy. By 2011 about 82% of men have become literate whereas only 65% of women have achieved literacy. Figures for the 2021 census are yet to come out, but we can say that around 40% of women are still illiterate in India.

Women do not get interfaced with Literature mainly because a substantial portion of women are still illiterate and since literature can only be accessed if you are literate, women lag behind males when we find their link with Literature.

If we compare Indian women with other countries with respect to literacy rates, we find that other countries are far ahead. The following graph makes the picture very clear



Picture 2:- Literacy rate for women in different countries of the world (source Amit Kapoor and Anirudhh Dutta¹³)

While the overall world literacy rate for women is 82.5%, In India we have a women's literacy rate of around 60% only. Literature is most popular in the USA, UK , Russia, China, and other countries where the literacy rate is 100% or above 90%. We are far behind when compared to even Sri Lanka, our neighboring small country. Since around 40% of women in India are not literate, they cannot access literature. Illiteracy begets illiteracy and there is a snowballing effect. Since one is illiterate, he/she is bound to take up a manual job where earnings are little, and with little earnings, they prefer to educate sons and not daughters. Hence illiteracy multiplies women illiterates and keeps them away from reaching literature/

Thus, Poor Literacy amongst Indian women is the prime cause for a poor interface of Literature with Indian women. Illiterate people cannot access literature even if they wish to do so. But there is a segment of society where there is no wish to come near literature because they do not have an inclination for it. The cause for this is **socio-economic**.

Socio-economic reasons prevent women from interacting with literature.

Social Reason

The social cause for treating women as subordinate to their male counterparts is well brought out by Amit Kapoor and Anirudhh Dutta¹³ when they comment: -

Why is the girl child not receiving the same facilities as their male counterparts? To answer this, let's look at one common Indian proverb, 'raising a girl is like watering someone else's lawn'. From the start, girl children are seen as burdens rather than blessings, which will eventually move into the homes of their husbands. The deep-rooted culture of male domination and lack of awareness is the main cause of female illiteracy. The result is a low literacy rate among women in India.

To some extent, the backwardness of thought is removed in urban areas and we have come out from the traditional backward thoughts of the 1960s where we were debating whether women should apply for jobs as their selection would mean depriving a family of earning bread as the male bread earner of the family will be deprived of the job. We have come to an era where urban women are even surpassing their male counterparts in several fields and in current times urban families cannot live comfortably unless the wife is also employed in an office.













But not much has changed in Indian villages. The social thought prevailing in Indian culture puts women behind especially in the rural area where women are still not aware of their right to equality with men as provided by the Indian Constitution. The social backwardness of rural Indian women is one of the major causes of the poor interface of Indian women with Literature.

Economic Reason

Poverty is another reason for the poor interface of literature with people(including women)

Poverty is defined as a situation in which a person couldn't fulfill his basic needs like food, home, clothes, and drinking water. Hence, he is considered to be living in poverty. According to Niti Aayog, 25% of the population

in India is Poor. Every fourth person of the total population of India is in poverty. In the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2021 ranking, India is at 66 out of 109 other countries.¹⁴ Thus, poverty in India is a factor of concern as is seen from the figure 25% i.e., around a quarter of people in India are poor. The % of people living below the poverty line in some Asian countries as per World Bank figures is as below

Country	World Bank ^[9]	Year	Continent
 Afghanistan	54.5%	2016	Asia
 Bangladesh	24.3%	2016	Asia
 Bhutan	8.2%	2017	Asia
 China	0.0%	2020	Asia
 India	21.9%	2011	Asia
 Indonesia	9.8%	2020	Asia
 Malaysia	8.4%	2019	Asia
 Nepal	25.2%	2010	Asia
 Pakistan	21.9%	2018	Asia
 Russia	12.1%	2020	Asia, Europe
 Sri Lanka	4.1%	2016	Asia
 Thailand	6.8%	2020	Asia

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_percentage_of_population_living_in_poverty)

While China has no people below the poverty line, India has 21.9%, the same as Pakistan. Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bhutan do not have such % of poverty.

Even though a lot of good work is done in eradicating poverty, we still have people who find it difficult to make two ends meet. Poverty pushes rural women to work round the clock, firstly as laborers in fields or at different places of work where they do manual labour and the remaining time goes into managing their household and looking after the family and there is no time left for other activities including surfing through literature. Rural literate women also do not touch literature due to paucity of time. Due to the pressing need, the rural girl child is deprived of education whereas to some extent the rural male child may get schooling and become literate but the girl child is not so fortunate. Thus, poverty is a reason for illiteracy and hence is a barrier to Indian women's literature interface.

In summary, we can say that the basic and most important reason which puts impediments in the way of Indian women interfacing with literature is **illiteracy** followed by their **poor socio-economic condition**.

Shall we continue to have such a poor interface between Indian Women and Literature or could something be done to improve upon it?

The most evident answer is that Illiteracy amongst Indian Women has got to be eradicated and the socio-economic condition of Indian Women has to improve.

By now we have covered a lot of ground by exploring various facets of the Interface of Indian Women with Literature and see the reasons for a poor interface. I shall be concluding the paper after looking into what could be done to improve the interface; let us explore the way forward: -

Way Forward for improving Indian Women- Literature Interface

The government of India has and is taking several steps to eradicate illiteracy:

Eradicating Illiteracy amongst Indian women

Chandan Kumar Singh¹⁵ gives details about the strategies adopted by the government for increasing female literacy-

- **Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao (BBBP)-** The government of India introduced a new scheme called Beti Bachao Beti Padhao on 22 January 2015, which will help in generating awareness and improving the efficiency of the delivery of welfare services meant for women with an initial corpus of Rs 100 crores. The Beti Bachao Beti padhao scheme is for the survival, protection, and education of the girl child. The prime objectives of this program are to bring a change in people's mindset toward a girl child on or after her birth. This is indeed a new and innovative step taken by the government of India to improve the condition of women in society. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao program is one step towards empowering girls through education. The objectives of the scheme are-
 1. Prevent gender biased selective elimination
 2. Ensure survival and protection of the girl child
 3. Ensure education of the girl child
- **Contribution of literacy campaigns to female literacy-**

The provision of educational opportunities for women has been an important part of the national endeavour in the field of education since India's independence. The government of India launched the national literacy mission in 1988 to eradicate adult illiteracy. The mission of this national literacy campaign is to create an environment where women demand knowledge and information, empowering themselves to change their lives, spread the message that education of women is a precondition for fighting against their oppression, and also highlight the plight of the girl child and stress the need for universalization of elementary education as a way of addressing the issue. The 1992 education policy envisaged free and compulsory elementary education of satisfactory quality for all children up to the age of 14 before India entered the 21st century. The Supreme Court in its 1993 ruling held that children had a fundamental right to free education.
- **Increased girls' enrolment in primary, secondary, and higher education**

The literacy campaigns have also motivated and encouraged women learners to educate their children, particularly girls by enrolling them in formal schools. The need to provide equal opportunity to both girls and boys has also the effect of generating greater demand for the quantity and quality of primary schooling. Primary and secondary education can bring literacy to the women but real empowerment will come from higher education in different fields. Higher education is the key that will bring women to the role of the decision-maker and that will also enshrine them with real empowerment. So we need to focus on these fields.
- **The girl star project-** This is a series of films that documents stories of girls from the most disadvantaged communities across five northern states who, through attaining education, have managed to break the shackles of socio-economic constraints to make a success of their lives and become self-sufficient. These young women have grown to become role models in their communities, who inspire younger girls to go to school and continue their education. The selection of characters for the films is from ordinary rural settings which the masses can identify with. These short films will be used as a tool at different levels- To motivate parents to ensure that their daughters go to school and do not drop out.

Not only the government but every literate citizen should contribute to battling the demon of illiteracy. Our motto should be "each one teaches one".

The government is doing its bit for improving the literacy condition of Indian Women. The government is also taking steps to combat poverty and is providing needed support to have-nots. All these programs will certainly improve the situation but these are long-drawn ambitious plans which may take years to show results and we have to continue supporting the government for these initiatives.

Can we do some more things in the meantime?

Many NGOs have come forward and are working for the upliftment of Indian Women. Some are dedicated to providing education to women to make them literate.

Educate Girls is an NGO dedicated to providing education to girls. Established in 2007, Educate Girls' is a non-profit organization that focuses on mobilizing communities for girls' education in India's rural and educationally backward areas. Strongly aligned with the 'Right to Education Act or the 'Samagra Siksha', Educate Girls is committed to the Government's vision to improve access to primary education for children, especially young girls. Educate Girls currently operates successfully in over 20,000+ villages in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. By leveraging the Government's existing investment in schools and by

engaging with a huge base of community volunteers, Educate Girls helps to identify, enroll and retain out-of-school girls and improve foundational skills in literacy and numeracy for all children (both girls and boys). This helps deliver measurable results to a large number of children and avoids parallel delivery of services. (<https://www.educategirls.ngo/>)

The impact is a similar NGO. Established in 2003, IIMPACT has identified a specific focus, developed a clear strategy, and proved the delivery model in terms of social outcomes as well as scalability. Educating the Girl Child has been shown to transform the community. Today IIMPACT educates close to 60,000 girls in more than 1500 villages across 11 states of India. (<https://www.iimpact.org/>)

Oxfam India advocates for the proper implementation of the **Right to Education** to achieve the goal of quality and affordable education for each child in India, especially marginalized children. They **reach out to the most marginalized communities in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Orissa where children, especially girls are deprived of their education and their rights**. They work with local partners in these states to educate children. Oxfam India aims to reduce poverty and discrimination by educating girls in India. (<https://www.oxfamindia.org/support-girl-child-education>)

These are only a few NGOs, there are many more who are working untiringly for educating girls in rural areas. In urban areas the situation is not very bad, it is a need of the hour to reach out to rural areas and educate girls. More and more NGOs must come forward and take this initiative which will hasten the government's effort of bringing literacy to women.

We can educate even illiterate girls/ women by bringing literature to them in the forms of dramas, skits, etc. I talked about **Samvitti** at the start of this paper. We discussed commendable work being done by them. Some women groups organize Kavi Sammellans and Goshthis to carry forward the work of integrating women into literature.

To reach illiterate women and to integrate them into Literature, NGOs apart from providing education should also use mass media to transform written literature into other expressive forms like nukkad skits, dramas, or films and must penetrate the rural sector with these instruments so that awareness is created amongst rural womenfolk and in spite of the handicap of illiteracy they learn about literature. A well-programmed, structured effort is needed in this direction and I am sure that enthusiasts for women's cause will discover innovative ways to make literature reach the uneducated illiterate women of India.

We need to educate them despite their illiteracy.

With these lines, I conclude this paper and in conclusion, I would share a popular thought that if you are educating a boy you are educating an individual but if you are educating a girl you are educating the whole family because the mother is the most precious guru of all the gurus !!

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