

CURRICULUM MATERIALS REVIEWS

Women in India Lessons from the Ancient Aryans Through the Early Modern Mughals

BY LYN REESE

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The recovery of women's history is an interesting story in itself. Some early scholars argued that women didn't act in history or produce intellectual products (literature, art, philosophy, etc.) because they weren't as capable as men. That's long gone, and by the twentieth century apologists insisted women were of course intelligent enough, they'd just been thwarted. This is the famous "Shakespeare's Sister" argument proposed in 1928 by Virginia Woolf in a series of Cambridge lectures. The reason, according to Woolf, that important women didn't exist in the past is that social constraints prevented women with talent and innate superiority from succeeding. Feminist scholars the generation after Woolf uncovered proof that women had indeed been important in past cultures, yet bemoaned the fact that all texts and evidence were lost. In the last twenty years, however, tremendous energy has gone into the rediscovery of a plethora of surviving evidence (ignored by earlier writers of history) showing women's cultural impact. Like the purloined letter, it was in front of us, and we just needed to look for it.

The series, *Women in World History Curriculum*, has taken on the project of writing back into our records the stories of women who were written out or ignored. This project does double duty by informing readers about two neglected topics in American curriculums: the history of women and the culture of South Asia. Many of us, at all levels of education in the United States, find ourselves teaching materials that we never formally studied ourselves. That is why this series is so helpful. Lyn Reese's *Women in India* curriculum unit is fourteenth in a series that aims to confirm "women's universal role in the creation of community, culture, and civilization" (1). The text is primarily a teaching resource, and the author is careful to show how the units align with and enhance concepts, themes, and skills found in sixth through twelfth grade state and national social science guidelines. Reese makes a point of showing how the materials can conform to state standards of teaching by placing women into larger educational rubrics and offers a helpful listing of intended outcomes. The audience is thus primarily teachers and curriculum developers—and the students to whom the materials are given. That said, there is much here interesting to any reader uneducated in non-Western materials. The book is supported by an interactive web

site, <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/>, which offers additional information and teaching resources.

The format is clear and straightforward with introductions to units and to individual works. The wide span of time covered and the multiplicity of Indian cultures are handled by dividing units into categories of women: goddesses, epic heroines, women in culture, nuns and saints, warriors and rulers. The book begins with general time lines, maps, etc., and closes with a comprehensive glossary and bibliography. The strength of this book is its variety of approaches: first in the diverse texts selected and second in the wide range of learning skills addressed. The selections presented cover various time periods, cultures, and genres, and as expected, many important and canonical works appear. In addition, as Reese points out, selections go "beyond a reliance on traditional historical sources in an effort to provide understanding (of) some of the traditions and contradictions that help inform the lives of women in India today" (1). The mixture of epics, revelations, poems, stories, and modern pieces offers good resources for a variety of learning levels. The history of Bahina Bai is misrepresented, however. While the introductory text says she "left home over the violent opposition of the much older man she was forced to marry" (71), Bahina in fact is an important saint because she stayed in the family with her abusive husband and practiced her mysticism within those constraints.

The variety of skills students are guided to acquire is excellent. Some exercises are aimed at comprehension skills, always an important first step. But also, a considerable part of the unit aims at the sophisticated upper level objective of understanding the complexities of history. The readings challenge students to consider conflicting and ambiguous attitudes toward women. An even more advanced objective asks students to consider the difficulties of interpreting historical evidence. For example, the text poses this question for students: "Was the Vedic age a golden time for women?" One caution, however to teachers. The text has some editing glitches: "suppose" rather than "supposed" appears on 91; what should be "intellect" is "intellectual" on 51. These shouldn't appear on handouts for students.

Reese maintains a consistent focus on the continuities she is pursuing in this curriculum unit. As a collection, the readings are cleverly chosen to reverberate off of each other. The book neatly traces how the Indian past has connections to other pre-modern cultures, how the Indian past informs modern India, and how the Indian past has helped produce the world we live in.

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