

When we think of the South Asian subcontinent, what associations come to mind? Images emphasizing the region's beauty and exoticism may dominate—for example, the spectacular, marble-laden Taj Mahal, the breathtaking Himalayan Mountains, pictures of sacred cows

roaming the streets of big cities, or Hindu devotees bathing in the holy Ganges River.

Such superficial knowledge offers Americans little understanding of the complex reality of a subcontinent with more than a billion people. Oversimplified views of South Asian women are also common. Westerners tend to think of South Asian women in terms of oppression, a stereotype that belies the diversity in women's conditions throughout this region. Although problems with human rights for women (and men) do exist, as in many other parts of the world, what often gets overlooked is the progress women have made over the past fifty years:

- the many grassroots groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) created to empower women, such as SEWA, a trade union and social movement registered in India in 1972 that organizes poor, self-employed women workers;¹
- the success of the Grameen Bank, begun in Bangladesh in 1976, providing noncollateralized loans for women and men;² and
- the elections to high office of women of more privileged class backgrounds—in 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, the first woman in modern history to be elected prime minister of a country; Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India from 1964 until 1977, and 1980 to 1984; and Benazir Bhutto, prime minister of Pakistan in 1988, the first female leader of a modern Muslim country.

In this article, we consider South Asian women within the context of the history and geography of this region's religions and cultures and offer insights into the progress women have made over the past fifty years toward greater control of their lives. We challenge the notion that South Asian women's stories can be reduced to tales of oppression, and suggest sources teachers may find useful to convey the diversity of women's lives in this region. Many South Asian women have gained educations,

Teaching about South Asian Women: Getting Beyond the Stereotypes

By Vaishali Patel and Margaret Smith Crocco

joined the labor force, and held political power at local and national levels. We conclude our analysis by discussing the novel *Shabanu*, a popular means for teaching about South Asian women in social studies classrooms, a book that, unfortunately, may both reinforce stereotypes and treat Muslim girls in an ethnocentric fashion.

Brief Background on the Subcontinent

Although the term *South Asia* often serves as shorthand for the three largest countries in the region, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the label also applies to a larger set, including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and the Maldivian Islands.³ Here, we concentrate on India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. With a population of more than a billion, India is much larger than its closest neighbors, Pakistan with a population of 145 million, and Bangladesh with a population of 140 million.⁴ India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are all rich in cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity, the result of a long history reaching back almost five thousand years. Despite the distinct nations that have emerged in the twentieth century, in this region, histories, religions, and cultures are all intertwined.

These nations trace their roots to what has been called the "Indo-Aryan" civilization, which came out of Central Asia and took hold in South Asia around the Indus River Valley. This civilization's identity has remained intact through repeated invasions, although many of the invaders' customs and beliefs have been inte-

grated into South Asian culture. For thousands of years, ethnic groups headed by princes, or maharajas, maintained their sovereignty. Only gradually under British colonial rule dating from the eighteenth century did the idea of India as a nation emerge. India embraces cultural and linguistic differences as vast as those found within Europe. For example, Bengalis in India's northeast are as different from Gujaratis in the west as are Italians from Swedes. The difference is that India, since the 1940s, has functioned as a single political entity, while Europe is just beginning to take steps toward political unification.

Two years after World War II ended, on August 14, 1947, Pakistan claimed victory after a long struggle to become an independent Muslim nation. But a thousand miles of Indian territory divided East and West Pakistan. India declared independence the next day, after the decades-long struggle of Gandhi and his supporters. Later, East Pakistan would become an independent state and be renamed Bangladesh, and West Pakistan would become simply Pakistan. The partitioning of the subcontinent, however, fueled an enormous migration of more than eleven million Hindus and Muslims, as well as a tremendous wave of violence resulting in more than half a million deaths.⁵ The violence continues to this day, erupting sporadically in Kashmir, a region sought by both Pakistan and India.

Despite efforts to align geography with religion, diversity still exists, especially within India. Table 1 captures some of the religious,



Scott Van Tatenhove

Women visiting the Taj Mahal in Agra, India.

ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the three nations.⁶

Women of South Asia

Women of the subcontinent have a range of life experiences, with dramatic differences found between women in rural, generally impoverished regions, and those with economic resources in urban areas.⁷ As previously mentioned, women have served at the pinnacles of power in each of the major countries of South Asia. In recent years, the institution of *panchayati raj*, which established quotas for women in government throughout India, has brought more than a million women in rural areas into politics.⁸ Political reform reserving one-third of local government seats for women has also occurred in Pakistan: “There is now new space for women, which gives them legal and political entitlement for the first time,” said women’s rights activist Baela Jamil when Pakistani General Pervez Musharraf introduced this program in 2001.⁹

From their inception, the modern constitutions of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have promoted equal rights for men and women and established laws making primary education mandatory for both. All three countries ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).¹⁰ Despite these

advances, many South Asian women continue to face injustices, and in some cases are denied basic rights.¹¹ Cultural traditions, often tied to religion, play a dominant role in determining the lives of women. The most well-known cultural tradition Westerners associate with India is the caste system, which is believed to have originated as a way of defining social and economic distinctions. The system is closely related to Hindu beliefs, but some Muslim societies also have caste-like categories, which are based on traditional occupations.¹² Today, the caste system is somewhat more fluid, as modern travel and occupational demands have brought people of every group into close contact. In urban areas, caste distinctions have become markedly less important than they once were.

Despite continuing problems, many South Asian women have entered the workforce and gained advanced educations over the past twenty years. For example, the Indian state of Kerala has the highest per capita proportion of women and men with master’s degrees of any comparably sized region in the world.¹³ Women constitute half of all Keralan teachers (the national average is 25 percent), and the first Keralan woman graduated from medical school in 1915.¹⁴ Across India, many women are tenured professors in universities, more so than at many elite U.S. universities.¹⁵

Putting South Asian women’s lives into a comparative perspective helps provide a clearer picture about the status of its women. Several materials may assist the teacher with this process. An excellent resource, Joni Seager’s *The State of Women in the World Atlas*, provides colorful, graphic portrayal of data from all regions of the world about marriage and divorce rates, preference for male children, domestic violence, and other topics.¹⁶ Likewise, the United Nations “Cyber-SchoolBus” site provides links to resources with voluminous data about women worldwide.¹⁷ In the classroom, fiction and nonfiction narratives as well as guest speakers can bring the voices of South Asian women themselves into classrooms. Such approaches highlight the variety of experiences that are often eclipsed by statistics.¹⁸ Finally, because so many discussions about South Asia in the West have focused on economic development, promoting strategies that often disempower women, teachers may profit from background reading that considers economic development in more women friendly terms, such as Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom* and Martha Nussbaum’s *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*.¹⁹

For students, young and old, literature provides an excellent means of gaining insight into distant cultures. Nevertheless, social studies teachers must approach fiction with a certain degree of caution. Literary representations inherently focus on the particular. As such, novels may promote stereotypes when read without the benefit of multiple sources of information about a culture.

Controversial Literature

Literature on South Asian women has grown markedly over the past thirty years. An early, classic work on Indian women is Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, named a Notable Book of the American Library Association when it was first published in 1955.²⁰ A moving and beautifully written story featuring Rukmani, a woman striving to hold her family together in the face of modernization, this book has been criticized by postcolonial feminists for reinforcing the notion of suffering as central to women's role. Such works are contrasted with recent fiction presenting "changing images of Indian women," such as Anees Jung's *Unveiling India*, Anita Desai's *In Custody*, and Chitra Fernando's *Three Women*.²¹ Unfortunately, many teachers would find the latter books unsuitable for young students.

By contrast, Suzanne Fisher Staples's *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, a tale of Pakistani girlhood, has grown tremendously in popularity since its publication in 1984.²² Numerous teaching applications can be found on the Internet testifying to its classroom utility. Set in Pakistan's Cholistan Desert, the book tells the story of twelve-year-old Shabanu and her older sister Phulan. *Shabanu* has won numerous awards and, at the time of its publication, reviews in *The New York Times* lauded the book for its "verisimilitude," "authenticity," and the sensitivity and admiration shown toward Pakistani culture.²³

The book's jacket offers this enticing description:

Dignity or dishonor?

Life is both sweet and cruel to strong-willed young Shabanu, whose home is the wind-swept Cholistan Desert of Pakistan. The second daughter in a family with no sons, she's been allowed freedom forbidden to most Muslim girls. Yet her parents soon grow justifiably concerned that her independence and disinterest in "women's work" will lead to trouble.

As tradition dictates, Shabanu's father has arranged for her to be married in the coming year. Though this will mean an

Hindu 81.3%, Muslim 12%, Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.9%, Other (Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, Jewish) 2.5%

Large variety of Indo-Aryan 72%, and Dravidian 25%, Mongoloid, tribal groups and other 3%	English and Hindi (official), 15 other official state languages, over 800 dialects	Pakistan	Muslim 97% (Sunni 77% and Shi'a 20%), Christian, Hindu and other 3%
Punjabi 58%, Sindhi, Pashtun (Pathan), Baloch, Muhajir (immigrants from India at the time of partition and their descendants) and Baluchi	Urdu (official), English (used in government and by elite), Punjabi, Sindhi, Siraiki, Pashtu, Balochi, Hindko, Brahui and other minor languages	Bangladesh	Muslim 83%, Hindu 16%, Other (non-Bengali) Muslims 1%
Bengali 98%, tribal groups, non-Bengali Muslims	Bangla (official, also known as Bengali), Urdu, English		

end to her liberty, Shabanu accepts it as her duty to her family. Then a tragic encounter with a wealthy and powerful landowner ruins the marriage plans for her older sister, and it is Shabanu who is called upon to sacrifice everything she's dreamed of. Should she do what is necessary to uphold her family's honor—or should she listen to the stirrings of her own heart?

Despite the book's popularity and positive reviews, many Pakistani teachers and Islamic organizations have reportedly decried the story's stereotypical representations and counseled teachers not to use it. These objections highlight the challenges to social studies teachers of cross-cultural teaching. The Arab World & Islamic Resources & School Services (www.awaironline.org) organization calls *Shabanu* "colonial literature," not only because it was written by a white woman but because it "takes an essentially American story and sets it in a Muslim country." The Council on Islamic Education (www.cie.org) finds the book at fault for depicting the "worn-out 'who will I marry' story line which authors use to rope in every adolescent reader." The South Asian Women's Network (www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet) characterizes the book as a romantic work that "universalizes the interests and desires of young Pakistani women on the model of American female adolescents." They conclude, "One also hopes the children reading this don't all grow up to be *60 Minutes* or *20/20* correspondents who dramatically

produce yet another installment in the saga of 'Women, from the heart of Islam,' battling cultural forces to follow their own hearts." The Islamic Networks Group (www.ing.org) feels the book is "counterproductive," if the aim of multicultural literature is "to broaden students' horizons and make them less intolerant and susceptible to stereotyping."

Using *Shabanu* responsibly, especially in a social studies classroom, means having to work hard to dispel the notion that all women of South Asia or Islamic faith are at the mercy of tyrannical fathers or an oppressive religion. Of course, this is not to suggest that such stories could not occur, simply that accuracy demands setting such stories within the broader context of women's lives across the South Asian subcontinent. Teachers need to engage stereotypes and misconceptions actively by devising strategies that explore the diversity within a culture, in this case, by showing how Pakistan has distinct rural and urban living environments, that women have made political and economic gains in Pakistan, and that all Muslim fathers do not beat their daughters or marry them off to old men.

Stereotypical views of South Asia or Islam can be particularly troublesome for South Asian or Muslim students in American classrooms. As one Pakistani student explained, *Shabanu* is "not just literature; it has an effect." As more students come into U.S. schools from distant and unfamiliar cultures, teachers sensitive to the challenges of "going global" should



An election officer marks the finger of former Sri Lankan prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike after casting her vote on October 10, 2000. Bandaranaike, eighty-four, the world's first woman prime minister and former three-time Sri Lankan prime minister in a political career spanning four decades, died while on her way back to Colombo after casting her vote.

ensure that the images fostered in their classrooms illuminate the range of experiences and practices within any one culture, highlight the difference between religion and culture, avoid ethnocentrism and stereotyping, and keep open the possibility that children and adults in other societies may be quite different from American children and adults—in what they believe, how they act, and what they assume to be “natural” about the human condition. 📖

Notes

1. For an excellent analysis of SEWA and other women's organizations from a comparative, feminist perspective, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 61.
2. However, recent research suggests that 70 percent of the 120 female borrowers in one study reported verbal and physical aggression from male relatives after taking out loans. See www.idrc.ca/reports/prn_report.cfm?article_num=264.
3. For useful resources on the entire region and individual information/links by country, see the South Asia Resource Access on the Internet (SARA) site at www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/southasia/cuvl.
4. Population figures taken from the CIA World Factbook, 2002 (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook).
5. Robert Hardgrave, “India: The Dilemmas of Diversity,” *Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 4 (October 1993), retrieved from asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/countries/india/Hardgrave.html;

6. Encarta Online India Article (www.encyclopedia.com); see also, Donald Johnson and Jean Johnson, *The Subcontinent of India: Regional Studies Series* (Paramus, N.J.: Globe Book Company, 1993), 55-69; and Anne Murphy, “Historical Overview of South Asia” (New York: Asia Society, 2002), www.askasia.org/teachers/Instructional_Resources.
7. Information in the table was retrieved from CIA World Factbook, 2002 (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook); and Encarta Online, articles on India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (www.encyclopedia.com).
8. For general background information on women in India, see, for example, Doranne Jacobson and Susan S. Wadley, *Women in India* (New Delhi, India: Manohar, 1986). Numerous websites concerning NGOs and other groups related to women's empowerment in this region can be found. Here are a few: Tamilnadu Corporation for Development of Women, www.tamilnaduwomen.org; Kali, a women's books publisher, www.kalibooks.com; Working Women's Forum, workingwomensforum.org; Pakistan Women Lawyers' Association, www.pawla.sdnpc.org; and All Pakistan Women's Association, www.un.org/pk/unic/apwa.htm. Likewise, sites concerned with human rights, such as Human Rights Watch, also carry regular reports about women's status. See, for example, on Pakistan's women, “Pakistan: Women Face Their Own Crisis” (October 1999) at www.hrw.org/press/1999/oct/pakpr.htm or the interactive forum, HumanscapeIndia, at www.humanscapeindia.net, or the Center for International Education's Universal Voices: Online Human Rights Internet Guide, available at www.uwm.edu/Dept/

CIS/humanrights.

8. A variety of sources can be found on this subject. A book dealing with this subject will be published in 2003, Amal Mandal's *Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions* (New Delhi, India: Kanishka Publishers). Numerous websites are also available. See, for example, the excellent site, www.reportingpeople.org, with ongoing coverage of topics related to women of India, such as *panchayati raj*, gender, education, health, and empowerment. Also, see the UN Development Programme report “Women in Panchayati Raj: Grassroots Democracy in India,” with case studies of rural women's experiences with leadership, at magnet.undp.org/events/gender/india/VYASULU3.htm. The authors are grateful to Erin Bailey for pointing out the extent and significance of the panchayati raj program. Note also the work of the international organization The Hunger Project, www.thp.org, and its initiatives in coordination with the women's groups in both India and Bangladesh.
9. Farhan Bokhari, “For Pakistan's Women, Election Quotas Are a Start,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (May 31, 2001). Accessed online at www.csmonitor.com/atcsmonitor/specials/women/politics/politics053101.html.
10. Joni Seager, *The State of the Women in the World Atlas*, 2nd edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).
11. Kumudhini Rosa, *Women of South Asia* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Gala Academic Press, 1995), 1.
12. Encarta Online, India article (www.encyclopedia.com).
13. *Women: A World Survey* (Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, 1995) and *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* (New York: United Nations, 2000).
14. Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106. Bulbeck also discusses the Indian grass roots organization Mahila Mandal, which in the past ten years has devoted much of its energies to women's issues. See page 202.
15. Bulbeck, 43.
16. Seager, *The State of Women in the World Atlas*.
17. Check out this site at www.un.org/Pubs/Cyber-SchoolBus/.
18. One source for getting at the diversity of women in India is Annes Jung, *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987). Also, check out the work of iEARN, the International Education and Resources Network, which is a “non-profit global network that enables young people to use the Internet and other new technologies to engage in collaborative educational projects that both enhance learning and make a difference in the world,” from the iEARN webpage at www.earn.org.
19. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*.
20. Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (New York: Signet Classic, 2002).
21. See, for example, the website The Literature & Culture of the Indian Subcontinent in the Postcolonial Web, at www.victorianweb.org/post/india/literature/sm12.html; Jung, *Unveiling Women*; Anita Desai, *In Custody*; Hammondsworth (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books: 1985); and Chitra Fernando, *Three Women* (Colombo, Sri

India

- Lanka: Lake House Investments, 1983).
22. Suzanne Fisher Staples, *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* (New York: 1984). Check out the SASIALIT listserv that provides discussion of contemporary literature of South Asia. To subscribe, contact sasialit-request@rice.edu.
 23. Maurya Simon, "Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind," *The New York Times* (November 12, 1989).

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Table 1. Diversity in South Asia

	Religions
Ethnic Groups	Languages

Stereotypes of South Asians. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Stereotypes against South Asians have a long history. In 1914, Indians on the steamer Komagata Maru in Vancouver, Canada were stopped, denied a chance to disembark for two months, then forced to go back to India due to stereotypes held against them.[1]. Stereotypes of South Asians are broadly believed impressions about individuals of South Asian origin that are often inconsistent with reality. [^] ^a Stereotypes Western Women Have About Asian Men | [ë™ì-ë, "ìžë" "ì— ë€í•œ ì,œì-ì—-ìžë" "ì ê³ ì •ê'€ë... | èÿ¿æ'ã@ãÿ³æ€\\$ã-ã,çã,ã,çãºç"•æ€\\$ã«ãã,ã|ã©ã†æ€ã£ã|ã,ãã@.](#)

Transcription. Hi I'm Liv and I'm here with my friend, Kei, from Asian Boss. South Asian guy here, and I'm afraid you're wrong. South and East Asians are more similar than you stated, in particular East Asian men are, in addition to being stereotyped as nerdy/effeminate, are also conversely seen as controlling/patriarchal by Asian women (which ironically, happens when Asian women are criticized for fetishizing white men). [permalink.](#) [^] [\[â€"\]Cease2Resist 0 points1 point2 points 1 year ago \(0 children\).](#) See, that's different, and the question becomes what they dislike about Asians. [permalink.](#) [embed.](#) At a recent get-together, a Russian friend of mine shocked a few Indians by saying he doesn't drink. [^] ^œ You may get some pleasure out of consuming alcohol, I don't, [^] he said, to shocked expressions. 2. The land of giants and homogenous people. [^] My response is rather simple. [^] ^œ You have a far greater chance of getting shot in South Bombay in an encounter between the underworld and the police than you do in a Russian city. [^] Since bilateral trade is witnessing a slow and steady growth, more Indian businessmen visit Russia and realise that the mafia does not have some kind of stranglehold on small and medium-sized businesses and this is just a myth in 2014. 4. Communists. This is by far the most cringe-worthy of all stereotypes about Russians.