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NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY ODISHA CENTRE FOR WOMEN AND LAW

BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

MAY 2025 EDITION



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NATIONAL



NORTHERN BARRIERS: WHY WOMEN'S FINANCIAL PROGRESS STALLS ABOVE THE VINDHYAS

BY SOHINI CHAKRABORTY

The investment gender gap that pervades India mirrors much more profound structural inequalities that extend far beyond mere access to finance for individuals. While remarkable growth is recorded in women's mean investment accounts at 23%, versus men's abysmal growth rate of a mere 5%, this remarkable achievement is really hiding vast imbalances that vary widely by region. The achievement in the country's northeastern region—where matrilineal traditions are deep and practiced—is of great and instructive significance to policymakers seeking to address these issues effectively.

It is noteworthy that growth in women's investments goes hand in hand with significant advancement in entrepreneurship, as evinced by the striking fact that women-founded startups have grown a phenomenal ninefold since 2017. Moreover, mounting evidence demonstrates that financial inclusion is essential to boosting the incomes of women and enabling them to build assets, particularly in the north.

That would mean that deployment of advanced digital financial services along with proper education that is culturally adapted and specifically formulated to overcome the particular hindrances encountered in various regions could unlock enormous economic potential. Such is particularly true in states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha where deeply rooted traditional gender mindsets continue to impose a limitation on the capability of women to manage their own finances and exercise their economic independence.

A concerning trend has emerged within India's growing investment sector. Recent statistics reveal a significant regional disparity in women's financial participation across the country. Data shows women in southern and northeastern states actively engaging in financial markets at record rates, while northern regions continue to show substantially lower participation levels. This regional divide represents an important but often overlooked aspect of India's financial inclusion landscape.

The northeastern states' remarkable performance in women's financial participation is a direct reflection of their matrilineal traditions, where women traditionally hold significant control over household finances, rather than being a product of random variation.

The gender investment gap in Northern India is a product of an intricate web of interrelated factors that hold development back. Though the phenomenal rise in demat accounts nationwide, which have gone up from 33 million to a staggering 143 million since 2021, is to be celebrated, it must be pointed out that women's representation in this money economy remains disproportionate, especially in the Hindi heartland.



Financial literacy is a major challenge. Though **AMFI held 24 investor awareness programs** among women this year, the programs hardly reach rural northern groups where they are most needed. Patriarchal social organizations greatly compound the problem. In a vast majority of families in the northern provinces, the onus of making economic decisions falls on the shoulders of male family members—this is in stark contrast to the patterns seen in the country's southern and northeastern provinces.

Electronic access is a key barrier to financial inclusion of women in northern India. Mobile banking in northern India is behind urban India and is a major area of concern. While nearly 80% of Indians access bank accounts via mobile and over 100 million rural users use digital wallets, northern and rural regions lag due to gaps in digital literacy, trust, and infrastructure.

A case study of 400 respondents in northern India found rising mobile banking use, but 65% cited security concerns, 45% faced transaction failures, and 30% reported poor support—hindering trust and broader adoption. Without special interventions such as cultural financial education and mobile-led solutions in regional languages, the North-South divide in women's financial empowerment will be irreversible. This divide is evident in the statistics, with northern states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha reporting female participation levels in stock market investments **below 20 percent** (15.4 percent, 18.2 percent, and 19.4 percent respectively), significantly lower than the national average of 23.9 percent and far behind leading northeastern states like Mizoram where women account for 44.1 percent of mutual fund assets under management.

Bridging India's regional financial gender gap demands immediate action from regulators and industry leaders, with targeted interventions needed to prevent northern states from being left behind in the nation's otherwise promising journey toward women's financial empowerment.

EMPOWERING CHANGE: FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN MAHAKUMBH 2025 REFLECTS SOCIETAL SHIFT

BY MANSVITA

The Mahakumbh 2025 has witnessed a historic moment with a record number of women participating in this grand spiritual event. For the first time, researchers have noted an exponential rise in female participation, i.e., over 40% of the devotees being women, particularly coming from urban areas. Women's groups, especially with women between the ages of 18-35 are attending independently, showing a massive shift in society. This shift has been attributed to better education, improved safety and changing social norms.

Women are now not just attending but also actively participating in spiritual talks and discussions with saints and religious leaders. This is an indicator of how the role of women in India's cultural and religious sphere is changing on a large scale.

Prof. Badri Narayan and Dr. Archana Singh from the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute formed a research team that has been actively inspecting this specific social transformation. The team observed that women no longer only travel to the along with families, but they also travel alone and in women groups. Women have begun attending religious activities alone and with confidence.



Dr. Archana Singh says that this change reflects that women enjoy access to education, greater social security, and a change in social mind. According to her, due to this, *“Women are free to travel alone and feel secure and comfortable enough to go to huge public gatherings like Mahakumbh. Unlike earlier when their religious life was more of domestic rituals, women are now exploring spirituality on a much broader scale.”*

What makes this moment even more special is the way religious institutions have responded to this change. Dr Preeti Yadav, another researcher, highlighted that many women are now actively engaging in conversations with saints and religious leaders at Akhadas. This interaction is advantageous both to women and spiritual leaders. They are now open to having women participate in discussions about religion and spirituality. Many women are asking questions, engaging in spiritual dialogue, and becoming part of conversations that were earlier reserved only for the men.



Mahakumbh 2025 is not merely a religious event, it is a social gathering and a vital platform for exchange and evolution of ideas. The Mahakumbh of 2025 has marked a defining shift in women empowerment and social transformation. The increase in the number of women devotees at Mahakumbh 2025 is much more than what had been earlier anticipated. It indicates the changing attitudes, heightened social self-esteem, and the inclusivity of women in the areas traditionally dominated by men.

The increasing participation of women at such a grand occasion is indicative of their active voice and role in public, spiritual, and cultural life. It is a powerful reminder that faith and tradition evolve best when inclusive.

SUPREME COURT REINSTATES TWO WOMEN JUDICIAL OFFICERS EMPHASISING THE NEED FOR SENSITIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

BY ANANYA SONAKIYA

The recent ruling of the Supreme Court in Sarita Choudhary v. High Court of Madhya Pradesh concerning the reinstatement of the services of two dismissed women judicial officers has furthered the Court's objective of gender equity and judicial accountability. The case becomes a landmark whereby the Court has not only provided justice to the individuals affected, but also reinstated faith in the judicial system, which establishes itself as a gender-neutral institution.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

The two officers, Aditi Kumar Sharma and Sarita Chaudhary, had joined the Madhya Pradesh Judicial Services in 2018 and 2017, respectively. However, during their probation period, their services, along with those of four other women judges, were terminated by the state government, citing reasons of "unsatisfactory performance". Later, three of the affected officers wrote directly to the Chief Justice of India, alleging that their termination had been in contravention to recruitment rules. The apex court took *suo motu* cognisance of the case and asked the learned court below to reconsider the terminations.

Following this order, the Madhya Pradesh High Court reconsidered the cases and subsequently reinstated four of the six terminated officers in August 2024, but Sharma and Chaudhary remained dismissed. While denying their reinstatement, the court below contended that Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) of the officers contained adverse remarks relating to their suitability and overall performance.

On the other hand, the officers countered the allegations, contesting that there had been no timely communication of the adverse remarks mentioned in the ACRs. They also argued that the previous complaints had either been closed or found to be legally untenable, rendering their termination by the High Court arbitrary and in violation of principles of natural justice.

THE SUPREME COURT'S OBSERVATIONS

While ruling in favour of the petitioners by reinstating their services with all the consequential benefits, including the continuity of services and restoration of seniority, the Supreme Court also made certain critical observations regarding the need to create a more inclusive and sensitive work environment, particularly for female officers facing health and personal challenges.

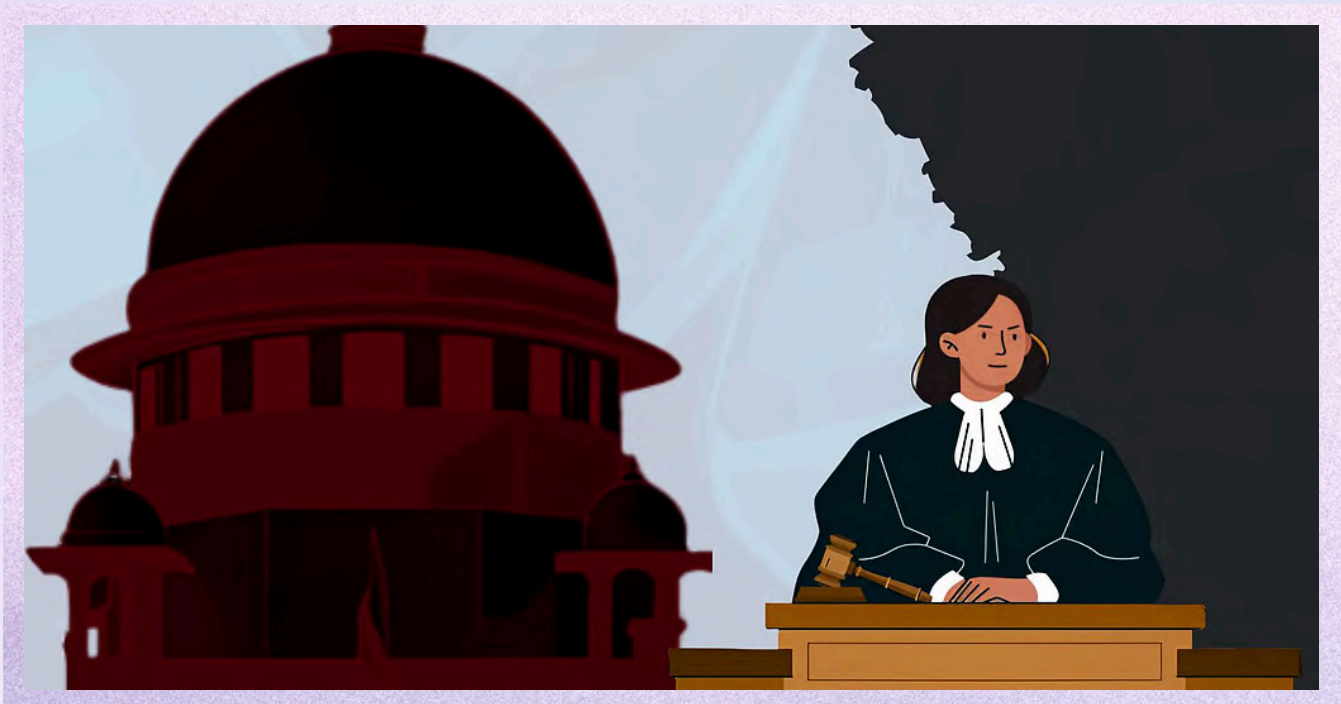
The Court also criticised the opaque manner in which adverse remarks were recorded and communicated, asserting that fair procedural safeguards are vital even during probation.

It further observed that such kinds of terminations are merely punitive and stigmatising, and ruled that, “when termination is by way of punishment, the concept of stigma would arise. If a punishment casts a stigma on the competence of an employee, it can affect their future career.”

Consequently upon recognising the unique challenges faced by women judicial officers, the Court stated that institutions must not operate in an insensitive manner by, ignoring the gendered realities. Gender Sensitivity must necessarily be a part of the **administrative assessments** and peer reviews. The unconscious bias and lack of mentorship prevalent in the legal profession often hinders women’s professional growth and development.

The Court emphasised that “while gender is not a rescue for poor performance, it is a critical consideration which must weigh for holistic decision-making at certain times and stages of a woman judicial officer.”

The Apex Court’s ruling comes at a time when there has already been the **underrepresentation of women** in the higher judiciary, and the need for structural reforms continues to be a subject of national debate. The judgment serves as a broader message to all the other institutions and High Courts, ensuring that assessments of women professionals do not become mere formalities based on prejudices and stereotypes.



The landmark judgement delivered by the Supreme Court in this case not only remedies the administrative wrongdoing but also sets a precedent for future judicial appointments and removals. The emphasis laid on the greater need for fairness, equity, and inclusivity reinstalls faith in the very institutions that uphold the rule of law. The ruling has ignited hopes for systemic reform, ensuring the development of a stronger and truly just judiciary.

GENDER GAP IN THE HIGHER JUDICIARY

BY VIBHA VAIKUNTANATH

India as a democracy has three arms that deal with lawmaking, implementation, and interpretation of laws respectively—the legislature, executive, and judiciary. Considering that women make up almost half of the country's population, it is only logical and fair to expect that this half of the population's concerns, interests, and rights are rightfully represented at various stages of decision making. But the picture we see at the higher levels of the judiciary cuts a sorry figure. Women consist of only 6.06 percent of judges in the Supreme Court, and only 14.4 percent of judges across all twenty five High Courts of the country. In early February this year, the Supreme Court had passed a number of orders under Article 142 of the Constitution directing the Advocates' Association (Bengaluru) to implement reservation for women in the Treasurer post as well as 30 percent in the Governing Council. The court observed that women must be provided equal opportunity, and associations must move away from the idea of being 'an old men's club'. On a similar line, the Collegium must also consider introducing reservations in the higher judiciary for the same reasons.

Women's concerns, from the very rudimentary levels such as whether there are clean toilets in district courts, to the more complex question of bias in appointments by the mostly opaque Collegium system, need to be systematically addressed - for the very simple reason that women deserve the basic right to non-discrimination on the basis of sex.

The lack of policies to support survivors of sexual harassment, such as the former CJI Ranjan Gogoi's case brings to the forefront the difficulties that women face.

Reservations for women in the higher judiciary should be the starting step towards realizing equality of representation. This must be coupled with gender balanced recommendations as well, which is all the more pertinent now, as there remain only two female judges in the apex court today—Justice B. V. Nagarathna and Justice Bela M. Trivedi. Replacing retiring women judges with other women judges who are qualified can be another practice worth adopting. The Collegium system's overall opacity presents another hurdle in disclosure of vacancies, eligibility, and appointments to the judiciary. Research centers must actively keep track of the number of women lawyers, women lawyers in leadership positions, and female judges to enable awareness and accountability. The media still remains a powerful tool that can ensure that women's interests are not ignored, and continue to highlight the lesser known struggles that women in the legal profession face on a daily basis.



INTERNATIONAL



DECRIMINALISATION OF ABORTION IN BRITAIN

BY AASHRA PATEL



In common parlance, we often refer to the United Kingdom (U.K.) as being associated only with England. However, the U.K. consists of four different countries - England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Until 2024, it was only in Northern Ireland that women did not have the right to an abortion.

The question of abortion is often met with moral and theological arguments rather than reasoning backed by scientific theories, findings of clinical trials or scientific data. But, what does the term 'decriminalisation' mean? How are the rights of an unborn child balanced with the interests of a living pregnant woman?

The Abortion Act, 1967 applies to England, Wales and Scotland and allows abortion to take place up to 28 weeks. This was further reduced to 24 weeks, but only if the woman's life is in danger, there is a severe fetal abnormality or the woman is at grave physical and mental injury. A Victorian-era law continues to penalise abortion under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861.

The proposal introduced by Labour MP Tonia Antiozzi seeks to amend this outdated law, decriminalise abortion and remove the criminal liability from women concerning their own pregnancy. This step has been backed by 50 cross-party MPs and several national healthcare organisations. The intention behind this is to consider abortion as a healthcare issue, rather than a moral or criminal one. However, public opinion in relation to this remains divided with 55% of respondents believing that termination of pregnancy after 24 weeks should remain illegal, and a mere 16% supporting the change.

While decriminalisation raises concerns regarding the potential increase in late-term abortion and lack of family planning, the positive side is that women will gain control over their own reproductive rights. Women, for centuries have had men make laws for their bodies, and the treatment of abortion as a health issue will improve the conditions of women by providing safer termination of pregnancies.

NASA'S FIFTH ALL-FEMALE SPACEWALK: A MILESTONE IN SPACE EXPLORATION

BY SUPRIYA KUMARI

A significant step toward gender equality in space exploration programs was taken on May 1, 2025, when NASA astronauts Anne McClain (Army Colonel, veteran astronaut) and Nichole Ayers (Air Force Major, first-time spacewalker) accomplished the fifth all-female spacewalk aboard the International Space Station (ISS).

Lasting nearly 5 hours, 44 minutes the key objectives of the space walk were to install a mounting bracket for Roll-Out Solar Array (IROSa) to increase the power supply of ISS as a whole, relocate the communications antenna to improve the spacecraft docking communication system efficiency, install jumper cables to provide power connection between U.S. and Russian modules, from the truss to the Russians Orbital Segments(ROS) and remove the oval micrometeoroid cover bolts. Despite a brief delay due to a glove issue, the team executed all objectives with precision and contributed to the ongoing enhancement of the station's infrastructure.

In addition to helping to maintain and improve the International Space Station (ISS) , the mission's successful completion will serve as motivation for future generations of women in STEM.

This spacewalk continues NASA's commitment to diversity and inclusion in the space sector. Of the 47 astronauts currently serving with NASA, 20 are female, bringing women's share to over 43% of NASA's active astronaut corps. Each such mission is a step forward in breaking barriers. *"This mission reflects the progress we've made in ensuring women have equal roles in the future of space exploration,"* said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson.

NASA's Artemis program promises even greater milestones, with astronaut Christina Koch set to become the first woman to orbit the moon. Missions like this spacewalk are paving the way for a new era of space leadership—one that includes and uplifts women from every background.

ASTRONAUT SPOTLIGHT

Anne McClain

(Colonel, U.S. Army), NASA Astronaut

Background: Army colonel, helicopter pilot

Previous spacewalks: 3

Fun Fact: Was originally scheduled for the historic 2019 walk that was reassigned due to suit sizing issues.



Nichole Ayers

(Major, U.S. Air Force), NASA Astronaut

Background: Air Force fighter pilot

Spacewalk debut: May 1, 2025

Fun Fact: Trained with NASA's Artemis team for deep space missions.



FEMINISATION OF CLIMATE VULNERABILITY

BY ABHILIPSA NAIK

The Beijing India Report 2024, was released to mark 30 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and provides a detailed account of India's advancements in promoting gender equality. However, it pays marginal attention to the deepening link between gender inequality and climate change; an omission that is particularly significant given the disproportionate impact of climate crises on women, especially those in rural and climate vulnerable regions. This limited focus overlooks the urgent need to integrate gender responsive approaches into climate policy and action.

Women are disproportionately affected by climate change, particularly in disadvantaged and rural areas. The burden of water collection limits their time for education and employment, while also increasing exposure to food insecurity and unsafe water. In India, anaemia affects more than half of expectant mothers. Losses in caregiving and agriculture reduce financial independence and exacerbate poverty. Climate induced displacement further exposes women to exploitation and insecurity. Gender-inclusive climate policies and support systems are therefore desperately needed, as women make up 80% of climate migrants.



Due to their community-based governance, adaptation frameworks, and ancestral knowledge, women are a major contributor to climate resilience and adaptation. In tribal regions, food security is supported through the preservation of native seed varieties. In cyclone-prone regions like Odisha, women spearhead disaster preparedness initiatives. In Rajasthan, women manage common property resources such as water and forests. Additionally, women contribute in managing wastes, promoting clean energy, and practicing eco-friendly agriculture.

Lastly while rural and indigenous women protect forest-based livelihoods and lessen migration brought on by climate change, urban women address pollution and health hazards. Women are important agents of climate action because of initiatives like Rajasthan's solar-powered cooperatives, which demonstrate how they combine economic empowerment with environmental responsibility. Climate resilience and sustainable development cannot be achieved without empowering women. Their leadership and expertise need to be integrated into all spheres of climate policy and action.

ADVANCING DIGITAL AND FINANCIAL INCLUSION OF WOMEN: 69TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

BY KAVYA JINDAL

As the world marks three decades of the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, global leaders gathered at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to discuss new approaches to advance women's economic empowerment through digital and financial inclusion. The high-level Ministerial Roundtable on 12 March, co-hosted by the Government of India and UN Women during the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69), brought together ministers and representatives from around the world around the world to share national experiences, policy models, and strategic priorities aimed at narrowing the gender gap in the digital and financial sectors.

At the heart of the discussion was the issue of digital poverty, a growing challenge exacerbating existing inequalities. Speakers at the event, including Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women, emphasized that while digital platforms and financial tools offer transformative opportunities. The roundtable explored how digital public infrastructure (DPI) can be harnessed as a bridge to development rather than a barrier, particularly for women in low-income and rural communities.

India, for instance, highlighted its flagship digital infrastructure model, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), which has facilitated the financial inclusion of millions of women, enabling them to manage savings and investments through mobile platforms. At a policy level, India has raised its gender-responsive budgeting allocation to 8.8 percent of the national budget in 2025–26, amounting to USD 55.2 billion, signaling the country's continued commitment to women-led development.

Similarly, other nations have adopted innovative fiscal strategies. Morocco's Finance Law integrates gender-responsive budgeting, to ensure that public resources address gender disparities. In Indonesia the government recognized the pivotal role of women in MSMEs, where 64.5 percent of businesses are women-led, underscoring the need for digital tools tailored to their unique business needs.

While these national strategies show promise, certain limitations persist. The definition of digital inclusion and what constitutes "gender-responsive infrastructure" remains broadly framed, with little clarity on benchmarks or enforceable obligations for private digital service providers. Additionally, the absence of consistent global standards on digital safety and financial literacy for women leaves significant scope for policy ambiguity.

Additionally, financial inclusion initiatives often overlook the nuanced challenges faced by women in marginalized or minority communities, where social restrictions, low literacy rates, and limited mobility prevent equal access to digital tools. Without localized strategies and intersectional approaches, national policies risk being *“inclusive in theory but ineffective in practice”*.

The intent behind this initiative is clear: to bridge the gender gap in digital and financial sectors and promote women’s economic and social empowerment. However, the real challenge lies in whether existing digital infrastructure initiatives and financial inclusion programs can effectively address the diverse barriers women face globally.

While improving access is crucial, it must go hand-in-hand with addressing financial literacy gaps, which remain disproportionately high for women in most countries. Without adequate education, digital financial tools risk reinforcing dependency on intermediaries and deepening existing inequalities.



Additionally, initiatives focused solely on access often overlook the pressing concerns around online safety, data privacy, and women’s control over their digital assets particularly in informal economies where **legal safeguards** are limited.

To address these shortcomings, governments could establish enforceable digital safety standards, making women’s data privacy a mandatory feature of financial services. Introducing women-only digital platforms and financial networks could also create safer, more targeted spaces to meet their specific needs. Moreover, partnerships with community organizations, women’s cooperatives, and grassroots initiatives could help bridge the digital divide where large-scale infrastructure projects alone may fall short.

As CSW69 progresses, it is evident that while digital and financial inclusion policies are essential to achieving gender equality, their success will depend on how well they are implemented and localized. Global experiences show that top-down policies without community engagement often fail to reach the most marginalized populations of women.

Countries like India, Qatar, Morocco, and Indonesia offer promising models, but to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth, governments must balance ambitious digital infrastructure projects with practical, **ground-level interventions**. This includes investing in financial literacy programs, localized digital infrastructure, legal safeguards for data privacy, and women-centric digital networks. The discussions at the Ministerial Roundtable emphasized the importance of sustainable, predictable funding for UN Women’s initiatives, recognizing that achieving gender equality demands long-term, consistent investment. As nations look toward implementing their Beijing+30 commitments, the true test will lie in turning these policy dialogues into actionable reforms that leave no woman behind.



LITERATURE AND ENTERTAINMENT



BANU MUSHTAQ'S 'HEART LAMP' WINS THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2025

BY LAVANYA

In a historic first for Indian regional fiction, Indian lawyer, writer and activist Banu Mushtaq has become the **first author writing in Kannada language** to win the 2025 **International Booker Prize** with her short story anthology “Heart Lamp”. Originally published in 1981 as ‘Naa Kanda Nammavaru’, the novel found new life, becoming internationally recognized through a strong English translation by Deepa Bhashti, who has become the first Indian translator to win the coveted prize. It is not only a literary feat but also a celebration of Indian literature's rich voices that are often undiscovered.



Banu Mushtaq, one of India's preeminent Muslim women writers today, has been widely acclaimed for her feminist literature. Her writing is deeply embedded in the politics and culture of Karnataka, where she has written at length on women's rights, education, and communal life dynamics.

The novel contains 12 short stories written by Mushtaq between 1990 and 2023 and draws on her own life as a Muslim woman, a teacher, and a thinker torn between the opposing demands of tradition and freedom. The novel depicts the women trapped in the hold of deeply rooted patriarchal ways but screaming out in desperation for dignity, education, and liberty. But the novel is not a lament; it is a vivid testament to resistance. In its emotionally charged storytelling, ‘Heart Lamp’ celebrates the indomitable will of women who refuse to be silenced.

The English version of the novel, well translated by Deepa Bhasthi, retains the richness, cultural depth, and power that are present in the original Kannada language. Bhasthi's translation is being heralded for its sensitivity, because it not only translates the words but also the emotional and political undertows that pervade Mushtaq's voice.

What is unique about 'The Heart Lamp' in the Indian literary canon is its unflinching adherence to feminist thought, which arises organically from experience. Mushtaq's writing is not founded on Western feminist paradigms, but rather a resistance that lies at the heart of her culture. Her anti-patriarchy is enmeshed with her religion and community, and with that a deep entwinement with her identity and an inherent sympathy with the people around her.

This subtle feminist perspective—observational, not adversarial—establishes Mushtaq's work as both literary and political. She brings to light the hypocrisy of a culture that prioritizes women's modesty over their rights, while also laying bare how women carve out their own trajectories under those restrictions. At a time when Muslim women in India continue to struggle with both internal and external marginalization, 'Heart Lamp' resonates with particular urgency and relevance.

The Booker's recognition of the novel is a signal of a larger movement within the literary establishment: a slow but resolute dismantling of the language hierarchies that have long privileged English and a few "global" languages. In awarding a novel composed in Kannada—a Dravidian language of over 40 million, but too often ignored in international literary circles—the Prize is celebrating the power of narrative in its many forms of language. This award is a badge of honour and at the same time a call to action. It calls us to transcend the limits of the English literary canon and approach vernacular literatures that not only interrogate prevailing paradigms but also subvert received values, presenting alternative world views.

Lastly, 'Heart Lamp' transcends being mere literature; it is a symbol. A symbol of how personal tales can speak to universal truth. A symbol of how a woman, penning her words in a corner of Karnataka, can light up the literary world with truth, empathy, and soft power. It is a moving reminder that literature knows no language when it is based on our shared humanity.



HARRIET BAKER'S TRIBUTE TO WOMEN WRITERS

BY DHAWNI SHARDA

Harriet Baker has won the £10,000 Sunday Times 2024 Charlotte Aitken Young Writer of the Year Award after being highly acclaimed for her debut text, "Rural Hours"; a biographical text focusing on Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann. In this book, Baker delves into the lives of the three women that were transformed after their relocation to the countryside.



Harriet Baker's "Rural Hours" is a significant exploration of the rural lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Rosamond Lehmann and provides a new lens for understanding how their experiences of the countryside influenced their lives and writing styles. The book occupies a unique space, somewhere in between biography, life-writing, and nature study to explore their different rural journeys, showing the transition in their individuality and as important to personal and creative identities.

Despite their shared literary prominence, Woolf, Warner, and Lehmann were only loosely connected, moving in overlapping circles without forming a definitive group. Baker's emphasis is not on their shared relations, rather the focus is on their countryside experiences.

Baker brings this focus to life through her textured prose, and the way she makes what seems to be an arbitrary selection of subjects into a coherent whole. By putting together these three lives, Baker not only points out surprising similarities, but also clarifies the differences that make each of them unique.

Baker's innovative approach shines through her use of unconventional materials such as Woolf's Asheham diary, Warner's detailed domestic records, and Lehmann's wartime writings. Through connections made between their 'rural time' and their 'literary length', Baker argues that these rural periods catalyzed new types of representation, new artistic forms.

For example, Baker posits that Woolf's brief diary entries made at Asheham could be read as a precursor to more experimental prose at the time, while situating Warner's life in Dorset as a radical and subversive project that parodied the domesticity of the time.

Of the three, Warner's story is perhaps most compelling. Baker identifies the physical and emotional work Warner undertook to shift a modest, and arguably ugly cottage into a place of delight that mirrored her sensibility.

In *Rural Hours*, the aspect of personal is political has also been reinforced, especially for women writers who were negotiating their identities in the constrained environments. By addressing the nuances of rurality - gardening, housework, and even bathing in copper bathtubs - Baker legitimises domestic acts as sites of creativity and resistance.



Baker's project also affirms the everyday aspect of women's contribution to the life and the literature is rooted in the ordinary. It further provides the view about how the literary pursuits of women are nurtured in countryside living. By using Woolf, Warner, and Lehmann's rural hour stories, Baker's work anchors their stories into a bigger narrative around gender, nature, and art. By using Woolf, Warner, and Lehmann's rural hour stories, Baker's work anchors their stories within a bigger narrative around gender, nature, and art. Through her evocative storytelling, Baker weaves a tapestry reminding us of resilience and creativity, and emphasising that women's stories hold deep lessons even in the most overlooked corners of their lives.

Baker perhaps shows through her work, that women's lives, and their voice matter in the ongoing project of reshaping how we interact with nature, notions of identity, and how we partake in the art of living.

THE WOMEN IN CINEMA COLLECTIVE'S PETITION AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE MALAYALAM FILM INDUSTRY

BY ADITI KRISHNA

In August 2024, the Malayalam film industry ('Mollywood') was exposed for its sexual harassment issues and terrible working conditions by the Hema Committee Report ('Report'). The Hema Committee had been set up in 2017 by the Kerala State Government, and was headed by retired Justice K. Hema. The Report highlighted the abysmal working conditions on movie sets in Mollywood which included a lack of toilets and changing rooms for junior actors, no food and water facilities, poor salaries, as well as no provided accommodation or transportation.



The release of the Report in itself was controversial. It had been submitted in 2019 but was only made public five years later, that is, in 2024. It is especially problematic since the Committee had been set up following the brutal sexual assault of actress Bhavana Menon by a group of men, one of whom was her co-star, Dileep. This attack caused the Women in Cinema Collective ('WCC'), an organisation for women, made up of women working in Mollywood, to petition the government to take action and address problems that women were facing in the industry.

On the other hand, the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists ('AMMA'), which includes reputed Malayalam actors, vehemently, **denied the allegations** vehemently stating that women were in fact provided with all the requisite facilities. Further, the **Report was only released** due to multiple claims by actresses in the industry of having faced sexual harassment by their male co-stars; mounting pressure ultimately led the government to set up a special team for investigation.

These events prompted the WCC to file a petition before the Kerala High Court in November 2024, **seeking guidelines for the regulation of the industry** until the state legislature enacts legislation on the matter.

The petition sought the enforcement of the fundamental rights to equality and dignity for actresses in the industry. The WCC submitted a "code of conduct" on suggestions for gender sensitisation, work culture, and behaviour. It also emphasised on a zero-tolerance policy towards of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, bias, and abuse. Finally, the plea sought the establishment of for an **independent regulatory commission** under the chairmanship of a retired High Court Judge and that such a commission should include a quorum consisting of 50% of women.



The Kerala High Court **ordered** production houses to form an Internal Complaints Committees (ICC) in compliance with the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. The Court also issued an order for AMMA to constitute a grievance redressal mechanism as per the **Vishaka guidelines**.

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