



# reading

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## BOOKS ABOUT INDIA

India is a land bursting with life and also with words. Indians writing in English have helped revitalize the contemporary novel, while many visitors to India have been inspired to create superb accounts of the country and its complexities. Here are just a few of the books that could accompany you on your own passage to India.

### Fiction

E.M. Forster. *A Passage to India* (1924)

A classic about the mystery of India and the arrogance of the British Raj. A British woman in the 1920s sets out to discover 'the real India' but an incident with a male Muslim doctor at the Marabar Caves changes everything. The 1984 movie is also well worth seeing.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala. *Heat and Dust* (1975)

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was a German-born Jew who found fame writing about India. While many of her novels deal, wryly and humorously, with middle-class Hindu families, this Booker Prize-winner revolves around an affair in the 1920s between a "proper British-woman" and an Indian nawab or prince. The film version was made in 1983.

Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake* (2003)

A readable and nuanced novel about Indian immigrants living in the US. A Bengali couple leave Calcutta to study and settle in America. We follow the cultural tensions and transformations that they and their American-born son face.

R. K. Narayan (trans.)

*Ramayana* (1973) and *Mahabharata* (1978)

These two ancient epic poems are foundational texts of Hindu culture, philosophy, and mythology. They are considered some of civilization's greatest literary treasures. Narayan, one of India's most acclaimed writers, took on the daunting task of translating and abridging them (the Mahabharata is often cited as the longest poem ever written) from ancient Sanskrit into modern, accessible, entertaining English. Many critics consider he succeeded spectacularly.

Arundhati Roy. *The God of Small Things* (1997)

A prize-winning best-seller, Roy's first novel tells in flashbacks and flashforwards the story of fraternal twins Estha and Rahel, and the tragedy that took place when they were aged seven. Set in the southern state of Kerala, it is filled with lush, sensuous imagery.

Salman Rushdie. *Midnight's Children* (1981)

Rushdie's extraordinary, exuberant piece of magic realism is the story of a boy born in Bombay on the stroke of midnight, 15 August 1947, the very moment that independent India comes into being. From thereon, Saleem's life (and his strangely-shaped nose) are intricately connected to the fate of the nation. A funny and justifiably famous book.

Khushwant Singh. *Train to Pakistan* (1956)

One of India's best-known writers provides a searing, intimate vision of the chaos and conflict following the 1947 partitions, as a Muslim-Sikh town on the new border between Pakistan and India descends into violence.

Seth Vikram. *A Suitable Boy* (1993)

It may be too big for your suitcase but Seth's 1350-page family saga captivates with its gentleness, wit, and empathy. Revolving around a mother trying to find a "suitable boy" for her 19-year-old daughter to marry, it reveals much about the impact of religious, caste and gender issues on contemporary India.



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### Non-Fiction

Katherine Boo. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012)

This account of striving and suffering in a slum near Mumbai's international airport vividly chronicles the world of those still living in abject poverty despite India's economic boom. Boo, an investigative journalist, focuses on Abdul, a young garbage seller, and the tragedy that unfolds when his family attempts to renovate the hut in which they live.

William Dalrymple. *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009)

The nine Indians Dalrymple portrays are each following a different religious path, from a Jain nun who decides to fast herself to death to a Dalit (or untouchable) who during a Hindu holiday becomes a dancer possessed by gods. Collectively, these stories constitute a gripping account of the diversity and centrality of spirituality in contemporary India.

Ramachandra Guha. *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (2007)

A superb study of independent India socially, culturally, and politically. It provides a balanced, innovative account of controversial issues such as the relationship between India and Pakistan. Guha finishes by arguing that India survives as a nation and a democracy because of its diversity and refusal to follow conventional models.

John Keay. *India: A History* (1999)

It's no easy task to cover 5,000 years of Indian history from ancient dynasties to a modern nuclear nation. Keay succeeds impressively, providing fascinating insights and giving full weight to India's regional diversity while still telling a coherent and readable story.

Amartya Sen. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (2005)

Sen, an economist, philosopher and Nobel Laureate, is one of the most admired public intellectuals of our time. In these essays, he debunks common stereotypes about India and narrow views about Hinduism while celebrating the national traditions of "public debate, intellectual pluralism and generosity."

Alex von Tunzelmann. *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (2007)

There are many worthwhile books about the fateful events of 1947 when the modern nations of India and Pakistan were created. This one is particularly enjoyable to read. It examines the relationships between five key players in the road to partition: the last British viceroy of India Lord Mountbatten and his wife Edwina; India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru; Pakistan's founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah; and M.K. Gandhi, the spiritual leader of India's independence movement.