

## **Awardee: Urvashi Butalia**

### **Publisher, writer and women's rights activist, India**

**For over forty years, Urvashi Butalia has worked to give marginalized social groups, particular women, in India a voice. As a feminist activist, she has worked for positive changes in laws relating to women in India and has been closely involved in reforms of laws dealing with dowry, marriage, sexual violence and sexual harassment at the workplace. She is a well-known and highly regarded essayist who writes for both national and international newspapers and magazines in India and abroad. Her particular subject is the situation of women in India on which she has also spoken at many conferences.**

Born in 1952 in the northern Indian state of Punjab, Urvashi Butalia studied literature in New Delhi and, for a short time, South Asian Studies in London. She taught at Delhi University for over twenty years and is currently a visiting professor at the newly founded Ashoka University. In 1984, together with Ritu Menon, she founded the first feminist publishing house in India, Kali for Women which, over the years, published books that have become contemporary classics in women and gender studies both in India and elsewhere. In 2003 she set up Zubaan (tongue, voice, language), an imprint of Kali which is today the leading publisher of women's writing in India. Zubaan publishes works by women from many of India's 22 languages, translating them into English and Hindi. Zubaan is unique in the Indian publishing landscape for being Independent, political, and completely committed to the cause of women. In its Young Zubaan series Zubaan has pioneered the publishing of books for young people on subjects that still remain difficult to address in India, such as alternative families, death, fundamentalism, disability and more.

Although not directly involved in politics, Urvashi Butalia is well-known throughout the country for her advocacy for the rights of minorities and for urging India and Pakistan to deal with the trauma of their violent pasts and espouse the road to peace. Her book of oral histories of the Partition of India in 1947 *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* is considered the most important work in South Asian history in the past two decades. Based on interviews with witnesses and survivors of the violence of that time, it documents how they lived through the political division of India during which a million lost their lives. This book, which remained on India's bestseller list for six months, has been translated into many Indian and international languages. Since 1997 Urvashi Butalia has written a regular column on Indian realities in *Lettre Internationale*.

Urvashi Butalia has participated in numerous international conferences as an organizer and speaker. Recently, she initiated Cross Border Conversations, a conference of European and Indian women writers, with eight European nations taking part. She was responsible for the co-design of a conference series promoting reading in India, which is carried out with the support of the Goethe-Institut, New Delhi. During the #Aufschrei panel discussion for International Women's Day in 2013, she discussed everyday sexism and sexual violence against women with the British feminist and blogger Laurie Penny, among others, at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Berlin. Urvashi Butalia is the recipient of several national and international awards, including one of India's highest civilian honours, the Padma Shri, in 2011. In 2002 she was made Chevalier des Artes et des Lettres by the French Republic.

## Quotes by Urvashi Butalia

“The women’s movement in India is one of the strongest in the world. It is very active and diverse. It has neither a dominant figure nor a dominant philosophy. Across the country there are hundreds of women’s groups that gather for specific projects but at the same time are also each pursuing their specific concerns. Since Independence, many laws on women’s rights have been enacted solely due to the dedication of the women’s movement, something that is not seen in other countries at all.” (Interview with Urvashi Butalia, Beate Hausbichler, “Aber wir Frauen leben hier”, *Der Standard*, 19.03. 2016)

“I’m an optimist. We Indian women will not take a single step backwards. We are ready for change. Things will only move forwards. We have a good base; at least on paper. It’s all the more difficult having a right-wing party in power, although, ironically, more women than ever before are in government. It will not be an easy fight.” (Interview with Urvashi Butalia, Anja Wasserbäch, “Wir sind in einer Umbruchstimmung”, *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, 23.01.2015)

“Though women still remain second-class citizens in our country, they’re no longer standing outside the door hoping someone will see them, instead they are demanding to be let in and listened to.” (Interview with Urvashi Butalia. Nilanjana Roy, *Al Jazeera*, 30.09.2015)

## Quote about Urvashi Butalia

“Urvashi Butalia is a writer, historian and founder of the first feminist publishing house in India. For many years she has been calling for more severe penalties for rape, dowry murders and violence against women. She has worked hard on her homeland, the old customs and rites, the ways of thinking that have eaten their way into the soul of the country.” (Karin Steinberger, “Das andere Indien,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26.09.2013)

## Publications (selection)

1992: *In Other Words: New Writing by Indian Women*, editor, with Ritu Menon, Kali for Women, New Delhi

1995: *Women and Right Wing Movements: Indian Experiences*, with Tanika Sarkar, Zed Books, London

2000: *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi

2002: *Speaking Peace: Women’s Voices from Kashmir*, editor, Kali for Women, New Delhi

2006: *Inner Line: The Zubaan Book of Stories by Indian Women*, editor, Zubaan Books, New Delhi

2015: *Partition: The Long Shadow*, editor, Zubaan Books, New Delhi

In German:

2006: *Frauen in Indien*, short stories, dtv, Munich

2015: *Geteiltes Schweigen. Innenansichten zur Teilung Indiens*, Lotos Werkstatt Verlag, Berlin

### **Awards**

1998: Best Woman Publisher of the Year for Kali for Women, Delhi State Booksellers and Publishers Association

2000: Pandora Award for Women in Publishing, London

2001: Oral History Book Association Award for *The Other Side of Silence*

2002: Chevalier des Artes et des Lettres, Republic of France

2003: Nikkei Asia Prize for Culture

2011: Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honours

2014: Bene Merito Medal, the highest medal of honour of Poland