

## Plain tales of bonnets and bahus

The two new books continue a 200-year tradition of female travel writing from and about India, albeit in a different, more romantic vein:

### THE ORIGINAL WOMAN TOURIST

Maria Graham came to India in 1808 as the 23-year-old daughter of a British naval officer posted to Bombay. Her first book, *Journal of a Residence in India*, was recounted the three years she spent here. She followed this with *Letters on India*. In *Journal*, she recounts a visit to the harem of "Shahab o'dien": "We ascended to the women's apartment by a ladder, which is removed when not in immediate use, to prevent the ladies from escaping, and were received by the cazy's wife's mother... Shahab o'dien's mother, and the rest of his father's widows, were first presented, then Fatima his wife... They all crowded round us to examine our dress... I was not sorry that they so openly expressed their curiosity, as it gave us a better opportunity of gratifying our own..."

"Prepared as I was to expect very little from Mussulman ladies, I could not help being shocked to see them so totally void of cultivation as I found them. They mutter their prayers, and some of them read the Koran, but not one in a thousand understands it. Still fewer can read their own language, or write at all, and the only work they do is a little embroidery. They thread beads, plait coloured threads, sleep, quarrel, make pastry, and chew betel, in the same daily round; and it is only at a death, a birth, or a marriage, that the monotony of their lives is ever interrupted."

Graham's books are significant because they "provide a more private view of events and activities than the published books are able to," says Dr Betty Hagglund, research fellow in English at Nottingham Trent University, England, who is working on a project on Graham and women's travel writing in the 19th century. "They offer insights into the relationships between various groups of people, both British and Indian, that Graham encounters while travelling."

### THE ONE WHO EMBRACED AND WROTE ABOUT KARMA COOL

In 1937, Swiss travel writer Ella Maillart wrote about India in *Forbidden Journey—From Peking to Cashmir*. Another of her books, *The Cruel Way*, published 10 years later, told of a journey from Geneva to India via Persia. Maillart saw India as one of gurus and ashrams. Three years before her death in 1997, she visited Goa. She spent her last years reading about India and Indian religions.