

Prabha

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The Prabha Khaitan Foundation Chronicle

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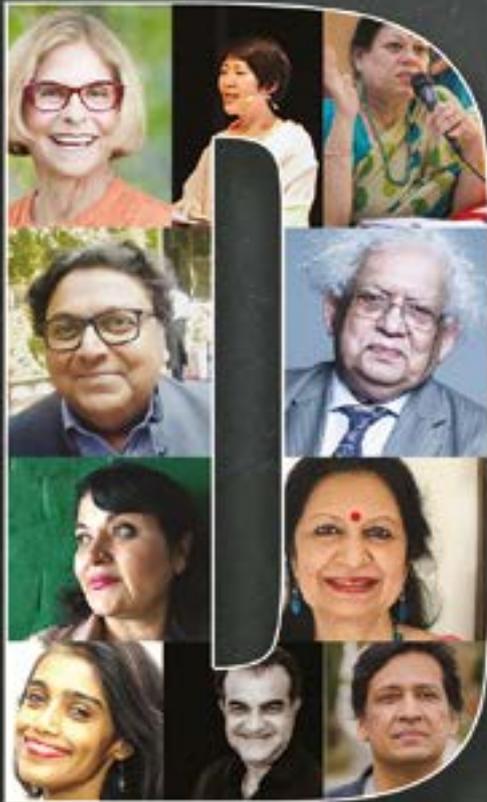


“Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilisation.”

Mahatma Gandhi’s words ring true as the world comes together, despite differences, to deal with the pandemic.

What do we mean by diversity? 18 authors explore the concept in this edition.

Delving



into

DIVERSITY

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Prabha
खैतान



MANISHA JAIN
Communications & Branding Chief,
Prabha Khaitan Foundation

Small Steps Towards a New Way of Life

"It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop." – Confucius

That is exactly what the world is doing at present — taking small determined steps to keep moving and settle into the new kind of life. The Foundation, too, has worked tenaciously to keep the morale and spirit of patrons up and going. The platform of interaction may have changed but the essence of our endeavours has been familiar. In fact, we have been able to reach out and connect with a larger group of like-minded literary enthusiasts. The newsletter's digital format, too, has been well received allowing readers to view all the sessions with just a click.

As we mentioned, the world is undergoing some tumultuous changes where disparate people are coming together. Post COVID-19, freedom is set to take on a new meaning while diversity has become even more important. We are featuring articles from some very prolific authors, illustrating the significance of diversity and how it stands to create an essence of freedom from within. Anju Ranjan, consul general of India in Johannesburg, has also penned an article for this issue.

This edition of the newsletter will also take you beyond the famous pearls of Hyderabad and unveil the legacy of the Bidri craftsmanship and unfold traditional cuisines of the region that the Foundation efforts to revive through the sessions. Our amazing team of **Ehsaas** Women continue to carry forth the task of touching and changing lives with their dedicated endeavours. This edition of the newsletter continues to salute these incredible ladies and their various selfless undertakings that seek to make a change.

Do keep writing to us and sharing your thoughts and experiences. In order to keep abreast of information on events and activities you can log into our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. We await your words at newsletter@pkfoundation.org.

Do be cautious and stay safe.



[SNAPSHOT OF THE MONTH]

We thank WWF India for appreciating our efforts. The kind words will motivate us to grow more responsible and do our best for the planet. We also look forward to more associations with you. #Rahat

Happy Birthday

Prabha WISHES **EHSAA**S WOMEN BORN IN JULY

2nd July



Sheetal Khanna

6th July



Sujata Sabnis

14th July



Anshu Mehra

14th July



Vinnie Kakkar

14th July



Aanchal Garcha



Celebrating Freedom in Diversity

We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their colour.

— Maya Angelou

The world today is undergoing a significant change where people irrespective of religion, race, colour, creed and class are coming together to deal with a crisis of immense magnitude.

The meaning of freedom is changing post COVID-19 and the word diversity has become part of a new collective consciousness. Keeping that in mind, 18 writers have penned their thoughts on the importance of diversity and how it creates a sense of freedom in our hearts.

Freedom and Diversity are Shields

Ashwin Sanghi

Two words that often appear together are *freedom* and *diversity*. This is not surprising because they are interlinked. It is freedom that fuels diversity; and it is diversity that protects freedom.

Let's start with freedom. It usually implies the right to think, speak or act as one wants without hindrance or restraint. But in the context of nationhood, it has generally come to mean liberalism. In Latin, the word 'free' translates to *liberalis*. And it is from *liberalis* that one derives the word *liberal*. Thus, freedom is inextricably linked to the rise of liberalism.

Until the 20th century, most countries were either monarchies, dictatorships or colonies of the former two. But the end of World War II heralded changes around the globe. Many countries and colonies morphed into liberal democracies. The values encompassed within the broad term 'liberalism' include individual rights, democracy, free markets, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, gender equality, racial equality and separation of church and state.

Judging by the components of liberalism, one sees that diversity is an integral part of it. But what exactly do we mean by 'diversity'? Diversity is often defined as the condition of being different. Broadly, it implies appreciating that each human being is unique and valuing the differences between individuals. Those variations could be on several dimensions including religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, economic status, caste, political leanings, sexual orientation, age, community or several other criteria. Diversity is about not only appreciating those differences but also celebrating them. The concept contains an implicit understanding that the sum total of differences is better than an aggregate of uniformity.

But in the context of the 21st century, why are freedom and diversity so important. Simple, really. Freedom and diversity are the best shields against fundamentalism. I see fundamentalism as the attempt to impose a single truth on a plural world. One can observe fundamentalism in



all walks of life. Religious fundamentalism is the most obvious example, but political fundamentalism is no less dangerous. The Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia and the totalitarianism of the Communist Party of China are facets of fundamentalism.

Liberalism was meant to be a solution to such fundamentalism. Alas, liberals spawned their own fundamentalists. To understand what I mean, look at the contradictions within the liberal narrative itself. While preaching liberalism at home, America was supporting dictatorial and monarchial regimes in the West Asia that suppressed women's rights, killed homosexuals and punished non-Muslims. Great Britain was teaching the world about liberalism while it drained 45 trillion dollars from India during 173 years of colonial rule. France gifted the Statue of Liberty to America (the ultimate gift symbolising liberalism) while colonising Algeria and Indo-China. Mahatma Gandhi, the messiah for equality and religious tolerance was happy to support the Khilafat Movement ostensibly aimed at reviving the Ottoman caliphate. Liberals let down liberalism. What we got was illiberal liberals.

In effect, we have a world that claims to be free but actually isn't because we have fundamentalists at one extreme and we have illiberal liberals at the other end. We need to find a way to occupy and enlarge the middle ground. That is the only way that we can defend freedom and diversity.

We have seen time and again in history that the effort to homogenise has resulted in terrible consequences. Adolf Hitler's attempt to fashion an Aryan super-race resulted in the extermination of 6 million Jews. Mao Zedong's efforts to subsume everyone into a communist utopia killed around 30 million people. Winston Churchill may have saved England from fascism but his attitude of racial superiority allowed millions of Indians to starve to death during the Bengal Famine (an act no less horrendous than genocide). Stalin's purge of property owners and ethnic minorities killed around 1.2 million people. More recently, Islamist extremism killed 84,000 people in 66 countries owing to the actions of 121 extremist groups in a single year alone. Fundamentalism in religion, politics, history, culture, science or any other field is dangerous. Freedom and diversity are the first line of defence against it.

The Upanishads talk of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the notion that the world is one family. Dharmic thought has always embraced multiple truths — 33 million deities can be part of the same family; even Jesus Christ can be an avatar. You could be Aastik or Naastik, Shaivite or Vaishnavite, vegetarian or meat-eater, fire-worshipper or idol-worshipper... all are welcome. You may think that the Shiv Linga is a stone and I may think that a stone is a Shiv Linga, both of us are welcome. There can be unity in diversity.

On America's national seal is the motto *E pluribus unum*. Translated from Latin, it means "out of many, one". Just take a look at the trajectory of the US in the 20th century and you would see that diversity has had a significant role to play. A few years ago, a study surveyed the top 1500 companies in the S&P and found that female representation in top management led to an average increase of \$42 million in firm value. A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that cultural diversity actually spurred the economic development of a country. So diversity turns out to be profitable too, not that today's politically-charged climate would allow the Trump administration to admit it.

The US is often called a "melting pot". Given that it is a country of immigrants, the idea was that the beliefs, customs and cultures of diverse groups would blend together over time and lose their distinctions. But today, observers prefer to call it a "salad bowl". The individual ingredients of a salad do not blend into one but they aggregate into something that can be quite delicious (with

each component retaining its original flavour). This has been a predominant feature of India too.

India has 122 major languages and 1,599 other languages. In matters of faith, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and even Judaism co-exist. Travel from North to South and one experiences a dramatic change in the culinary experience. We are racially diverse, too, with Indo-Aryans, Dravidians, Mongoloids, Turko-Iranians, Scytho-Dravidians and many other racial combinations. Economic disparities between states abound. And yes, that diversity has often been the cause of problems. There have been countless cases of Hindu-Muslim riots, language agitations and caste-based violence. Just observe the racial fault lines of America or the backlash against immigrants and one understands the difficulties of managing diversity.

In effect, we have a world that claims to be free but actually isn't because we have fundamentalists at one extreme and we have illiberal liberals at the other end. We need to find a way to occupy and enlarge the middle ground. That is the only way that we can defend freedom and diversity

Forget nations, even in corporate cultures, one cannot expect to toss in diversity, press a button and get an improved result. But remember this: the lack of diversity can be even more treacherous. Differences in political opinion preserve democracy; differences in ability encourage meritocracy; differences in faith prevent theocracy; and differences in power prevent aristocracy. William Sloane Coffin, the clergyman turned civil rights crusader correctly observed, "Diversity may be the hardest thing for society to live with, and perhaps the most dangerous thing for a society to

be without."

Ashwin Sanghi ranks among India's highest-selling English fiction authors with two *New York Times* bestsellers — *Private India* (sold in the US as *City on Fire*) and *Private Delhi* (sold in the US as *Count to Ten*) with James Patterson — to his name. His other famous novels include *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant*, *The Krishna Key*, *The Sialkot Saga*, *Keepers of the Kalachakra* and *The Vault of Vishnu*. He also mentors, co-writes and edits titles in the immensely popular *13 Steps Series* on subjects as diverse as Luck, Wealth, Marks, Health and Parenting.

Sanghi is a winner of the Crossword Popular Choice Award 2012, Atta Galatta Popular Choice Award 2018, WBR Iconic Achievers Award 2018 and the Lit-O-Fest Literature Legend Award 2018. He lives in Mumbai with his wife, Anushika, and son, Raghuvir.

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Coronavirus – an Equaliser and a Reminder

Amandeep Sandhu



The difference between an epidemic and a pandemic is that of scale. While epidemics are contained within a region, however large, a pandemic affects the whole world. Until a vaccine is found or a line of treatment is established, all of us citizens of the world are vulnerable to an epidemic. Each of us, any of us, can catch the disease and our response to it, our fatality rates, depend solely on our immunity and how we respond to whatever medicine is prescribed and available. The medicine is, more or less, a probable line of treatment. There are no guarantees.

Since the coronavirus outbreak has now spread beyond all sorts of boundaries, it is considered a pandemic. That is also why this pandemic is a great equaliser. In fact, the greatest equaliser we have encountered in our lifetime. What this means to us in India — hugely diverse in terms of religions, caste, and class, with an economy layered between formal and informal, with informal forming the big bulk — is that our national response and then the global response to the pandemic demands we all stand together. We will need to overcome the coronavirus outbreak together without mutual discrimination and differences.

The coronavirus outbreak is an opportunity for us in India to fix what we have neglected while pursuing neoliberal policies over the last three decades — our broken down public health system. How well we rise up to the challenge will define how we reach the last citizen of the nation and contain the coronavirus spread. That is simply because until the last citizen is cured or immune, we all run the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Yes, it is true that as a nation we are currently dealing with the coronavirus outbreak haphazardly. While the lockdown paralysed the whole country, we did not do what was required: ramp up and rebuild our public health

system. Sadly, we did not do that. Once the effect of the lockdown on the economy was dire, we unlocked, and the cases started spiralling. We are now in the midst of the pandemic graph rising and we have no sense of when we will reach peak, when the graph will taper, if we would ever be able to flatten the curve, contain the outbreak.

The coronavirus outbreak is an opportunity for us in India to fix what we have neglected while pursuing neoliberal policies over the last three decades — our broken down public health system

At present, some states are doing better than others, but everyday figures keep reminding us we are all in this together. We will remain together until either a vaccine is found or a perfect line of treatment is established. Even then it depends on the government's policy on whether the have-nots of whatever religion, caste, class, and gender can access the drugs. If they remain deprived, we all remain at risk.

That is how the coronavirus outbreak has placed us on a razor's edge. How we negotiate the razor's edge remains to be seen. The writing is on the Wall — improve or perish, no one is immune. The coronavirus is indeed a great reminder to a nation like India, provided we learn our lessons.

I truly hope we do.

Amandeep Sandhu was born in Rourkela, Odisha. He completed his Master's in English Literature from the University of Hyderabad. He worked as a journalist and later as a technical writer. His first two books were autobiographical fiction: *Sepia Leaves* and *Roll of Honour*. For the past few years, he has written for the media and contributed to anthologies. He now lives in Bengaluru, Karnataka. *Panjab: Journeys through Fault Lines* is his first non-fiction book.

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The Great Beyond

Diana R. Chambers

I was born in a Los Angeles suburb — very quiet, very white. Even at a young age, I felt the lack, and I needed something to fill it. My eyes turned towards the great beyond.

To books. Thanks to my mother, I visited the library every two weeks and always came home with an armful. Sometimes my literary journeys took me to distant lands or back into the past. I became enamoured of Marco Polo. I yearned to break free of my narrow confines.

I did, finally, at UC Berkeley, with its wordly population. I sampled naan, tortillas, crêpes, music from Iran and South Africa, films from India and France. The summer before my junior year, I travelled to Europe and Morocco — my first foray into the great beyond. I wandered the Paris streets in dazed wonder. My schoolgirl French gave me a small entrée and, hungry for more, I vowed I'd return one day for a longer stay.

Likewise, Morocco stuck with me. I discovered the marvels of Islamic architecture, the archways and intricate tiles. And the bazaars! I spent my days exploring every twisty lane, getting lost, but always finding my way back to the same fruit merchant. In my tiny Tangier hotel room, I ate bag after bag of oranges; their mesmerising colour and flavour still dazzle my brain. Here, I learned to bargain and would later seek out the bazaars of Istanbul, Peshawar, and, of course, Delhi — explorations that found their way into my books.

Those first travels beyond the border transformed me. Back at Cal, I declared an Asian art history major. After graduation, I returned to live and work in Paris for two years. Three years later, fate brought me to India, which led to a trajectory that changed my life — and eventually to my historical novel, *The Star of India*, published Spring 2020 by Penguin Random House India.

For this piece, I was invited by the **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** and the Siyahi

Literary Agency to write about freedom and diversity. Sometimes I don't know what I think until I write it, but I can see from these few words how interlinked these concepts are in my psyche. I take great joy in crossing borders, especially on foot, as I did once between Soviet Georgia and eastern Turkey. Travel means connecting, and that's when I feel most alive and free. Even at home, I remain a citizen of the world.

However, this surreal Year of the Plague has shown the limits on our freedoms. As an American, I have sometimes (often) felt at odds with my culture. I am more outward-turning than many of my countrymen and women, and, during this pandemic, I've been disappointed by those who see mask-wearing as an infringement on individual rights. Certainly our freedoms have been infringed on — by the virus itself. We have all suffered, and all need to pull together.

Our only course is to live each day and look to the future. I will certainly travel again. After all, I have a 10-year Indian visa! I received it two years ago, for my first visit to south India, to research for another novel. We were there during Pongal, the harvest festival, and were invited to a special ceremony at our hotel in Ooty. I'd always wanted to visit this famed hill station because the Cooch Behar royal family in my novel used to go there every year. We arrived by the historic "toy train" — the Nilgiri Mountain Railway, one of the last narrow-gauge steam trains in the world, on one of the steepest terrains. The tiny cars were filled with holiday-going families, and everyone was in fine spirits. We shared food with our fellow travellers, and our carriage was visited by the station master/mistress who had helped us find scarce seats. Part of a renowned family of musicians, she performed a beautiful vocal that made me shiver and rejoice at our good fortune. It was a magical moment.

I always say I spent another life on the Silk

Road. My first web domain was *silkroad.org*. In those idealistic early days, I saw the World Wide Web as the modern Silk Road, linking diverse peoples and cultures. As much as we know the dark side of the internet, it has nonetheless brought us together in ways that don't require passports and visas. I had been on my way to France (for future book research) when COVID cancelled my trip. However, I see now that I have spent it in India!

Sometimes I don't know what I think until I write it, but I can see from these few words how interlinked these concepts (freedom and diversity) are in my psyche. I take great joy in crossing borders, especially on foot, as I did once between Soviet Georgia and eastern Turkey. Travel means connecting, and that's when I feel most alive and free. Even at home, I remain a citizen of the world

For the publication of *The Star of India*, I've connected via email, Zoom, and WhatsApp with many talented and fascinating individuals I'd have never met otherwise. Dedicated publishing personnel, agents, journalists, a descendant of the Cooch Behar royals, a film star, a director — and readers! While it is true that we are isolated behind closed borders, we nonetheless experience this horror as one world. Despite all our differences, we understand each other in quite a deep way now. Our lack of physical freedom has expanded our spiritual connections. We'll need to remember this period when we reconfigure our shared world into the new post-COVID reality.

Diana R. Chambers was born with a book in one hand and a passport in the other. She earned a university degree in Asian Art History and has travelled frequently to the region. Eventually, her road led to scriptwriting — and Hollywood, where she met Nancy Valentine and learned of her great love affair with the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Drawn to the dramatic historical period, Diana knew this was a story she had to write. Beside numerous screen- and teleplays, she is the author of *Stinger*, a spy thriller set in Afghanistan and Pakistan. *The Star of India* is her debut book.

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Namaste Diversity

Easterine Kire

The great irony is that although India is a land where immense diversity is found — in its geography and ecology, in its ethnicity, cultural expressions and religious beliefs, and in people's political convictions, yet there is no room for diversity in the emotional fabric of the country. The engine of India's rich diversity is running on an empty tank.

When did words like 'mainstream' and 'mainland' become a part of our vocabulary? Possibly ever since India got its independence. These are being used as words that hold up a certain value system for all regions to measure themselves against. I can't help but interpret the philosophy behind this mindset as a systematised effort of homogenising all that is diverse in the areas far from the mainland, and forcing them to assimilate with the mystical mainstream, so that some political leaders can claim that 'national integration' has been achieved. An impossible task, and doomed to failure.

The unexamined continual use of these terms has helped to create the demon of otherisation. People who are seen as 'not fitting in' — people who have different food habits, people who dress different, think different, look

different — are otherised repeatedly in Indian metropolises. It's a virus doing its rounds in the rural areas of the 'national mainstream' as well.

Diversity is the physical, cultural, social reality of India, its natural resource, yet we don't understand diversity in India. We don't know that living with diversity means living in a manner that is respectful towards the diversity in our fellow citizens. Rather, we see diversity as an infestation requiring an exorcism by societal actions of condemnation and accusation — the majority calling out the minority. There have been just too many cases of citizens trying to thrash out the diversity they think they see in other citizens.

We don't deserve diversity, our resource, because we haven't learned how to respect it, how to honour it, how to appreciate and value it.

We have systematically reduced diversity to stereotypes and let the stereotype win again and again. We have nurtured and let hate speech dictate actions. We have allowed bias to define regions. And you have permitted your mind to be occupied by the prejudices of others.

We are different from each other, live with it. It's a fact of life. Even in the same family, there are some children who do not like coriander or onion, it's as basic as that. Your neighbour is different from you, respect that fact; respect other people's right to eat differently from you, dress differently and most of all, think differently and believe differently. Your refusal to respect their right to choose ends in a one-way street of intolerance and persecution.

Stop using stereotypes to understand a region, a race and a people. No national 'mainstream' with 'my way or the highway' attitude can survive for long.

Stop using the stereotype of diversity in unity to understand diversity. Don't tolerate it, tolerance is not good enough. Don't accommodate it, accommodation smacks of smugness. Accept it. Celebrate it if you

can. That's far better than trying to achieve homogenisation by issuing governmental orders for aberrant customs and food habits and cultural practices to be discontinued? How does it hurt you if people eat or do not eat a certain food? How does it hurt your faith when a mosque or a church or a temple comes up in your neighbourhood? Is your faith so weak that you have to destroy the diverse faith of others by demolishing their places of worship to ensure you do not lose your own faith?

What does diversity really mean?

Let's try this once more: diversity is not abnormal or deviant or threatening. It is the rainbow strands that God weaves into the warp and woof of life to lift it out of the mundane. It is revered by those who have learned to embrace it because it is worth revering. Namaste diversity.

Stop using stereotypes to understand a region, a race and a people. No national 'mainstream' with 'my way or the highway' attitude can survive for long

Easterine Kire was born in Kohima, Nagaland. She studied at the North East Hill University and received a doctoral degree in English Literature from the University of Poona (Savitribai Phule Pune University). Her works include poetry, novels, short stories and children's books. In 2003, She wrote the first Naga novel in English, *A Naga Village Remembered*, which has since been reprinted by Speaking Tiger (2018) as *Sky is my Father*. In 2013, she was awarded the 'Free Word' prize by Catalan PEN, Barcelona. Her novel, *When the River Sleeps*, won *The Hindu* Prize for Best Fiction in 2015, and the next novel, *Son of the Thundercloud*, won the Tata Book of the Year (2017) and the Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2018. Her latest novel, *A Respectable Woman* was awarded Printed Book of the Year by Publishing Next in 2019.

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Back to the Roots

Ira Pande

This long lockdown has been a time to reflect over many issues: life and death, of course, but equally on the need to take time off and reimagine our own lives. It is evident now that the world will never be the same for most of us and that many things we took for granted may no longer be considered fixed and unchanging. So, just as we need to throw out old clothes, furniture and books to declutter our everyday lives, I have learnt painfully that we need to declutter our minds and relationships in order to distil the wisdom gathered over a long life into a guide to the future.

Since I have been deeply involved with the business of reading and writing, it is here that I have discovered a world that had so far been invisible and hidden from my consciousness. Old novels, poems, letters, photographs — all these reminded me of what I was before I got caught up in the everydayness of the present. I also learnt that I was far more innocent and trusting in that old life. Perhaps this was because that old world was pegged on unchanging values and certitudes. It was peopled with beloved parents, aunts, teachers and friends whom I have lost along the way. Above all, it spoke to me in so many languages that it brought home how important it is for me now,

at almost 70, to find those lost voices and languages once more. The wisdom of so many tongues, in stories, songs and films has enriched me and made me who I am now. I cannot allow my memory to wipe out those valuable sounds. My respect for *bhasha* writing has grown exponentially and I now read almost as many books in non-English languages whenever I can lay my hands on a good translation. Believe me, some of our postmodern writers are far ahead of those much-valorised Western authors.

When we speak of diversity and the need to make the world more inclusive, we sometimes forget that language plays a central role in creating that utopia. In our own country, with its obsessive worship of an 'English-medium' education, we have cast away the tools that made this country so great in the past. Indigenous knowledge systems, religious texts, epic stories, local dialects, aphorisms and clever rhymes and *sutras* — these were the threads that bound together all our diverse castes and classes of people. Our society, however, became more and more obsessed with a national language, a national identity and a drab, high-minded monoculture that excluded irreverence and debate. All those delightful rivulets of minor dialects that created Hindi as the lingua franca of the Indian heartland were cast aside as a self-important state-sponsored and pompous Sanskritised version was thrust upon us. The lilting cadences of an Avadhi and *purabiya*, or the heart-wrenching folksongs of Bihar and eastern UP, were callously dismissed as the language of the Bhaiyas who came as migrants from those dark regions to live in urban slums and *chawls*. Up to the time when film songs were written and composed by people who had migrated to Bombay from those areas, these memorable compositions could be heard in the films of the 50s and 60s. Along with the folk songs that music directors

such as an SD Burman or a Salil Chowdhury brought from Bengal, they are the film songs we still hum today. However, somewhere by the 70s and 80s, these lilting tunes began to fade as the hip-hop throb of a 'modern' and pop music started asserting itself. Ironically, the throaty cabaret numbers, the sexy double-entendre love songs that replaced them as item numbers were themselves pushed out by bhangra rap and Indi-pop.

When we speak of diversity and the need to make the world more inclusive, we sometimes forget that language plays a central role in creating that utopia. In our own country, with its obsessive worship of an 'English-medium' education, we have cast away the tools that made this country so great in the past

It was the same story elsewhere. The home remedies that grandmothers and old family retainers brewed to cure simple colds, coughs, tummy upsets and headaches were soon dismissed as hocus-pocus in favour of drugs that acted instantly. Heaven knows what harm we did as we merrily ingested them and popped pills. That these were often dished out by some local quack was overlooked as western medicine slowly drove Ayurveda, Unani, Siddh and homeopathy out of our lives. It is supremely ironic, therefore, that we are slowly going back to those lost systems in search of potions and *kadhas* that

will boost our immunity against COVID-19. Turmeric, ginger, methi, cinnamon: these are gaining new respect in Indian homes.

So if there is one way to survive future shocks, it is this: keep the windows of your mind open and let knowledge flow in from everywhere. Before we laugh at the strange accents of people, or make fun of their clothes, remember we may be different from each other in a myriad ways but what will keep us together is a shared heritage.

Ira Pande is an author/translator, based in Noida. Among my translated works is Prabha Khaitan's autobiography *Anya se Ananya*, which was published by Zubaan as *A Life Apart*.



When the Boxes Broke

Jane De Suza

You're doing what?' Eyebrows shot through hairlines when I announced that I'd be leaving my lucrative MBA degree, earned through blood, tears and very competitive tests — to start writing. No one did that in midtown India in the Nineties. You clutched on to the safe, to the proven, you didn't stray.

Decades later, I funnelled the waywardness of a differently wired, lateral-thinking child into my book *Flyaway Boy*, and to my delight, found echoes from every corner of the world. 'That's me,' said each of the reviews. 'I don't fit. And I don't want to fit into a box.' Messages, reviews, award listings only proved that the one-size-fits-all age was over.

Doors have opened to different paths, to opportunities, to courage. It doesn't take a battle to announce that you want to be different. Because we now celebrate it. We now know that the differences between humans is what makes us human, what separates us from machines. The CXO who leaves the boardroom for a small studio where she's gone back to her dream of singing. The die-hard banker who's started a school. The lifelong engineer who's taken

up counselling. The housewife who, after 15 years, does her MBA. We're redefining success and slashing our way through the tall grass on the roads not taken.

'You're not laughing?' Back again to a couple of decades ago to when I started my career. I sat in a pub, chewing stale peanuts, where I neither smoked nor drank nor got drunk enough to find the locker room jokes funny. Yet, working life was defined as being part of the big boys' club, partying, dining out, backslapping over the raunchy jokes or risking being shrugged off as 'that woman won't understand'. To support a sisterhood, who was judged by these standards, you tried hard to be one of the guys.

And fast forward to a quick trip around the world today. Diversity has entered our offices — cubicles, coffee rooms, glass cabins. With a fist-pumping, pink-lipsticked vengeance. Women ratios in the workforce have been inching ahead, year after year. #MeToo waves sashed right over the sleazy banter (because honestly, most women don't find anything hilarious in constantly joking about our body parts). And world over, women got the freedom to reach positions of power without having to bend their principles or anything else.

'But they are not like us.' The biggest celebration of diversity is one I'm keeping for last. It is the toughest to pull off, and we're still a work-in-progress world over. But we're getting there. I'm talking about the walls that keep religions, races, colours discriminated against. The ones that demand, 'But how can you marry him when he's not of our caste?' and the ones that say, 'We cannot eat at their table.' The ones that say that people who live in one country should eat, pray and behave in only one way. That's the wall that's taking longest to break down because it's been built over centuries. Black Lives Matter, Migrants Matter, People

Doors have opened
to different paths, to
opportunities, to courage.
It doesn't take a battle to
announce that you want to
be different. Because we now
celebrate it. We now know
that the differences between
humans is what makes us
human, what separates us
from machines.... We're
redefining success and
slashing our way through the
tall grass on the roads not
taken

Who Are Not Like Me Matter. We're chipping away at it, each of us, by writing, nudging minds, creating films, protesting dictatorial moves, linking arms with each other. When that wall falls, and in the next generation or the next, it will — when we merge like waters from the rivers and seas across the world — then we will be free.

Jane De Suza is the author of books that combine humour with thought-provoking insights, from *Flyaway Boy*, the *SuperZero* series and *Uncool* for children to *The Spy Who Lost Her Head* and *Happily Never After* for adults. She is a columnist with *The Hindu* and had a parenting column for *Good Housekeeping*. De Suza is a management graduate from XLRI and has been Creative Director with top ad agencies, is co-building an app, runs workshops and consults. She lives in Singapore.

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A Decline of Diversity in the Time of Coronavirus?

Kishwar Desai

Diversity of opinion, culture and ideas seems to be declining now in the time of pandemic — and what is increasing is isolationism and poverty — both physical and mental, as people are locked down individually. All men and women are islands now — out of choice. The excitement of years of enjoying diversity — of language, culture and heritage was something best expressed in a more intimate environment when we could rub shoulders and kiss with breaths intermingling. Now with social distancing and online meetings — diversity is something we cannot explore, and is best avoided. We can only meet those we are familiar with. Only within a charmed bubble.

The recent uprising in America, Black Lives Matter, following the killing of George Floyd by a white police officer who pushed his knee onto his neck, was an explosion of rage, of angry and restless people getting together after months of despair and private pain. With the pandemic, the differences between communities, the rich and the poor, have been further heightened because the world has become so still and frozen — that the lines of deep discrimination — the bias, the prejudice or the stigma even in the so-called 'land of the free' were even more sharply delineated. Ironically, the pandemic does not accept

diversity — it will kill rich and poor, black and white alike— but oddly enough, it does treat the Blacks worse than it does the Whites. And it treats the poor and vulnerable even worse.

Elsewhere too, my concern is that mental and physical isolationism has incubated the rise of suspicion towards other cultures and communities — if the enemy is unseen, it is often easier to blame the "other".

In a world where nations are moving towards protectionism and inward looking policies — social distancing from all "others" may soon be considered the only safe way forward. What does it mean for the future of diverse cultures, when a tiny virus has forced us to rethink centuries of close bonds?

The impact has been at the local level as well as the global level.

Again we see that the US, by disallowing visas to foreigners for work, or now for students from abroad, is halting migration which has been the biggest contributor for diversity. Unless people migrate and mingle how can ideas cross pollinate? Globalisation, which led to immigrants arriving in different countries for better prospects, is not a new concept. Sometimes this has had very mixed results. Avaricious immigrants colonised India and other countries — but it also meant that the foreign rulers left behind some legacy of language and institutions and would absorb the local cultures and beliefs in a reverse osmosis. In turn, the leaders who brought India its independence had migrated abroad to study — and an acceptance of diversity was one of the first lessons the erstwhile colonisers would also learn once the country broke free. Diversity grows freely with acceptance — even if under the surface the darkness of racism has continued to linger through the decades.

I am also concerned that this forced

isolationism has led to the decline of diversity in public opinion once we move more and more online due to the virus. No matter what we say about the internet being a great social leveller — it is also where only the most strident voices dominate and often the voice of reason or reconciliation is lost. Most of the discourse can quickly become like a lynch mob as all platforms (if you want to make an impact) are public.

Thus if you voice a different opinion you are a mole in the rat pack.

Personally, I have enjoyed the isolationism as I was able to complete my new book and spend time with my family — it also gave me the freedom to retract from the world, and enjoy my inner diversity! Because frankly, what I see out there — during this pandemic — the fear of the "other" will not allow us to easily slip back to being what we thought was "normal". So diversity, goodbye — but please come back soon.

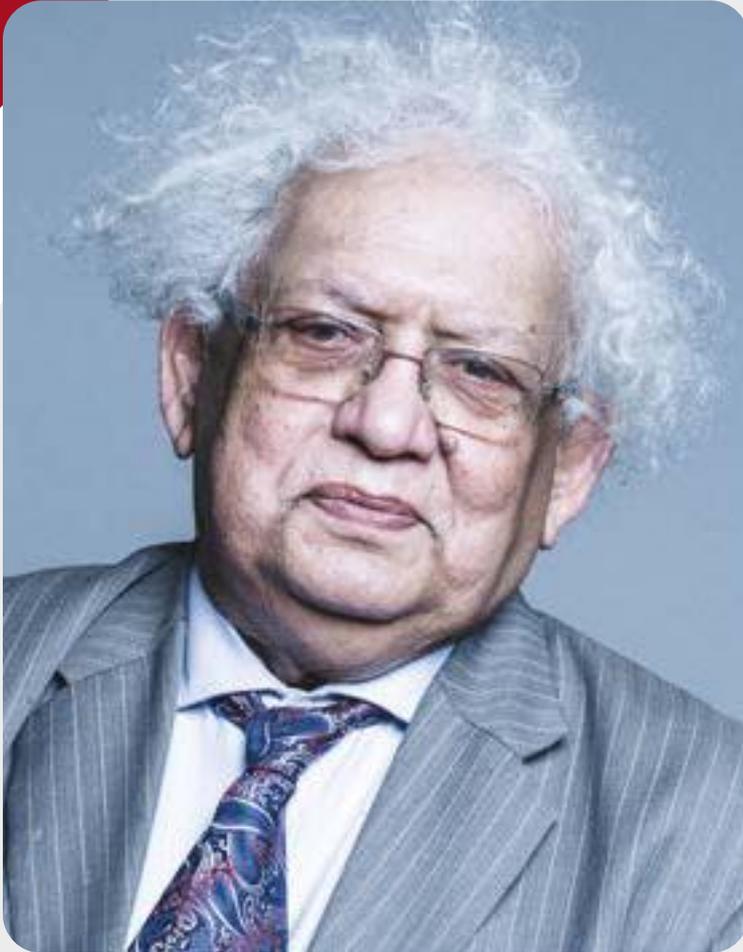
Kishwar Desai is an award-winning author and playwright who writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her

sixth book, *The Longest Kiss*, a biography of the iconic superstar of the 1930s, Devika Rani, will soon be published. Her play about the actor: *Devika Rani, Goddess of the Silver Screen*, ran to packed houses, receiving standing ovations across India. She is the Chair of The Arts And Cultural Heritage Trust that set up the world's first Partition Museum, at Town Hall, Amritsar. Her first novel *Witness the Night* won the Costa First Novel Award in the UK, in 2010, and is being made into a web series. Her play *Manto!* won the Omega-TAG award. She worked in television as an anchor/producer, and Channel Head, before becoming a writer.

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(In)equality of the Virus

Meghnad Desai

Much of human history is a history of unfreedom. The idea that a people or a community, or, even the more modern expression, a nation, could be free is not more than 300 years old. Before then, we had emperors and kings and lords. Nations were defined as people or citizens as against subjects of kings, first in the US and then in France in the 18th century. But even then, the nation did not comprise all the people living within it. Women and 'foreign races' were excluded. It is necessary therefore to keep separate the idea of *independence of a nation* from that of the *freedom of the people*.

It is also a history of humanity gathering in different 'communities' with each community separating itself from the other, often in a hostile fashion. A community defined itself to distinguish its own few from the many 'others'. As was said, me against my brother, my family against the neighbour's family, my village against all other villages, my nation against all others.

It has taken us centuries to realise that diversity is a strength, not a divisive weakness. Even so, we have a lot farther to go to fully realise what that means.

India became independent of foreign rule in 1950

when it became a Sovereign Democratic Republic. Until then Indians were ruled by kings of various kinds. The people were not free. Today, India is the largest and most diverse country in terms of the number of people. China has more people but the diversity is much less there with the Han people an overwhelming majority. Other similarly large countries are the US and the European Union which is not a single country but hoping to become one with the slogan "ever closer union".

The European Union comprises 27 'nations' (28 till the UK decided to Brexit) with a population of 500 million and 4.5 million square kilometres and 24 languages. These 27 countries were never under a single rule. If anything, the history of Europe is one of countries at constant warfare with each other until 1960 when six countries decided to forge a union. Europe is an old civilisation as India and China are. It is diverse in terms of nationalities, religious sects, ethnic identities and histories. It was the incessant warfare over the centuries, including two World Wars, which convinced Europeans that the time had come to cherish and celebrate their diversity if further blood bath was to be averted.

India has a different history. The idea of India as a

civilisation is timeless. But for centuries, Indian history was a story of battles between kings and communities and regions. Occasionally, one emperor or dynasty ruled over a substantial part of the territory but never over what we now know as India. When the empires broke up, inter-regional battles resumed.

India began to make a virtue of its diversity only in the last 200 years or so. It made itself consciously a nation when fighting British rule. Even now the knowledge of south India is sparse in north India and the people in the Northeast wonder whether the people of 'the mainland' care about them. There is a constant desire to have a single language, a single identity, a single nationality which generates a lot of latent, and occasionally open tension. Free Democratic Diverse India has been an exhilarating experiment but it is not yet a finished product.

The US is yet another story of freedom and diversity. Unity in diversity, India's slogan, was proclaimed in 1776 at the founding of the USA E Pluribus Unum. It is a country predominantly of migrants who came from Europe, firstly Western Europe and then Eastern Europe, China and then the rest of Asia. Black Africans came involuntarily as slaves and the original inhabitants — Native Americans — suffered serious military assaults for centuries and now are a small minority. America could have been a multilingual country with every European, Native American, many African and some Asian languages spoken. But the decision of the first lot of immigrants from England prevailed to make America an English speaking country. America may boast it is a melting pot (or a tossed salad) but its diversity has been truncated severely. If even today, people have to be reminded Black Lives Matter, that is because people may be free but they are not equal. They may be diverse but not equally American despite the Declaration of 1776 that ' All Men (!) are created equal.'

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The coronavirus has hit every country and every community worldwide. It brought home to us, almost simultaneously the old Sanskrit adage *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is a family) but with a warning that even within a family social distancing is necessary to avoid infection. It has also made us aware that while we are all equally likely to be infected, it is no surprise that it is the 'other' people — the poor, the racially discriminated, ethnically despised minorities, women and children, the migrant worker — who have paid the price in higher mortality. Across the world, it is not the common humanity which has suffered whatever the global numbers. It is the 'lower depths', to use Gorky's expression, who have paid the heavy price.

The challenge then of the coronavirus is to create as much as possible a diverse, free but also equal society. This equality is not just economic equality but also social equality. Equality of respect without regard for gender, wealth, sexual orientation, race, religion, language, history, caste, first within each of our nations and then across the world.

Whether you are Black or Native American, Uighur or a Falun Gong worshipper in China, Dalit or a Muslim refugee in India, Rohingya in Myanmar, Palestinian in Israel, or a woman anywhere in the world, you should be free to lead the life you wish to, bring up children into a better world and be proud to belong wherever you think you belong.

It may yet happen if we all work for it.

Lord Meghnad Desai has written over a hundred books including *Marx's Revenge*, *Nehru's Hero: Dilip Kumar in the Life of India*, *The Rediscovery of India* and a novel, *Dead on Time*. Few of his published works are *Who Wrote the Bhagavad Gita?*, *Pakeeza*, and *Hubris: Why Economists Failed to Predict the Crisis and How to Avoid the Next One* published in India by HarperCollins. His latest book is *The Raisina Model* published by Penguin.



Freedom and Diversity: Some Musings

Malashri Lal

The Dalai Lama's words turn meaningful once again: "Every day, think as you wake up: Today I am fortunate to be alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it." Confined to our homes during the pandemic, we are seeking a new understanding of freedom. It can no longer be described in physical terms, so we must turn inwards and take each day as an opportunity for redefining our relationship with the world around us. Freedom is that of thought — and it scans our memory showing up priorities that don't yield much anymore, freedom is that of action within the ambit of home as we discover the joy of fresh cooked meals and well-tended gardens, freedom is that of digital connectivity and one learns to choose whom to interact with.

But the mind in its freedoms will fly out to larger concerns of diversity which relate to the suffering humanity experiencing the pandemic in different ways: suffering loss of life, jobs, monetary security, cultural cohesion. From the global diversity filtering into our consciousness through the television screen we might focus on the changing patterns of diversity in our own country, even our own city. As a resident of Delhi I had imagined this city to be inclusive — a melange of people who had submerged their regional identities to become urban, cosmopolitan. The lockdown shattered that illusion of amicable diversity — identities were revealed to be severely

divided by money, employment, gender, region and religion. As a feminist scholar, I tried to track the stories of the women migrants and found they were allowed no choice, either at the time of coming from the smaller towns to Delhi, or leaving Delhi now to return to their "home town". They followed their men, aiming to reach their destination by train, bus, truck or walking. Some gave birth by the roadside or in trains and railway platforms, as though their bodies were mere containers of their biological destiny. Did they have any "freedom" I wondered.

Questions beset the mind. Freedom comes from inner re-orientation, the new diversity emerging outside is in need of succour. How does one bridge the gap? I neither wish to be solipsistic nor reckless. Rabindranath Tagore probably knows a direction, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." The health workers, the "COVID warriors" as we have taken to calling them, are addressing this diversity. Risking their lives and families, they are serving the multitudes filling up the hospitals, railways stations, quarantine centres, the care clinics — upholding the forgotten ideal of "service is joy". They serve without making regional or other distinctions — rich or poor, young or old. But the women — are they being looked after in this new diversity? I interviewed a few domestic workers who were compelled by their husbands and sons to make that long trek "home". Unfortunately such women still do not have a voice in the decision making. In fact their earnings and savings were pooled into the cost of the perilous journey. Along the way they continued to be responsible for the family meals and the children. From being wage earners in Delhi, they would become domestic dependents in their husband's "home", not a fate they were looking forward to.

The social churning and the inner upheavals have generated a new vocabulary for freedom and diversity, our individual link between the self and the 'other'. The pandemic is an ongoing journey, not just for the migrants but for each of us. A small inner voice asks repeatedly, "Who

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am I and where do I belong?" Guru Nanak's words of wisdom answer somewhere: "Dwell in peace in the home of your own being".

Malashri Lal, professor (retd) in the English department, University of Delhi, has authored and edited 15 books, including *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology, Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey through Translations* and *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love*. Her specialisation is in literature, women and gender studies. She has been a senior consultant to the ministry of culture, and member of international book award juries including the Commonwealth Writers Prize, London. Lal is currently Member, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi (government of India), and serves on the advisory committees of several universities.

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Post Pandemic: Through the Gender Lens

Meera Khanna

Diversity and freedom are interlinked, interconnected and interfaced. The capacity and the liberty to be diverse, to be different in thought or action constitutes the basis of freedom. On the other hand, societies that enjoy freedom are those where diversity is accepted not as a "weird" phenomenon but as a natural corollary of human civilisation.

Democracy, the touchstone of political freedom, functions best with disparate, diverse and often dissenting voices. Cultural freedom gives the social acceptance of diverse traditions and customs. Freedom to access legal protection arises from the multi-faceted, multifarious dimensions of conflict that arises in the narrative of human affairs.

When nature itself is never ever homogenous, then humans have every right and liberty to be diverse.

Having said that, women, seen figuratively and otherwise as the "subalterns" are forced overtly and covertly to subsume their diversities of thought, action, word, behaviour within the narrow parameters of patriarchal conformism. While this indicates a horrifying non-acceptance of diversity, it impinges on the human right to freedom. Why else would women, who stand up to be non-conformists, be routinely killed, raped or humiliated in many regions of our country? Patriarchal power dynamics is self-sustaining only if the victims are caught and kept in the tight straitjacket of conformism, where diversity is destroyed in the name of tradition, culture, social acceptance or glibly as "protection" of honour. It is not mere coincidence that in societies and nations where freedom is an euphemism, homogeneity is the currency for survival.

We are living in unprecedented times. The pandemic has impacted human civilisation on the planet in unexpected ways, practically paving the way for a new world order and a new "normal". The pandemic has been a leveller at a magnitude that even the two World Wars did not touch. It is no longer the developed North versus the underdeveloped South, but nations with higher incidence of COVID-19 (which mainly include the developed nations) versus those with lesser incidence. It is no longer a question of reaching out but of containing within.

Women's lives have been impacted in a multitude of ways. Working women have suddenly been told that 'work from home' and 'flexi timings', for which countless representations were made, is the new norm. Women now are 'free' to work on their clock and not by the hugely man-friendly clock of the normal work-day world. For once the diverse demands of a woman's work life has been factored not out of sensitivity but as a necessity. The pandemic has freed women from the daily commute and the distressing experiences of travelling in crowded public transports. It has also freed women from the pressures of power dressing particularly in the corporate world.

But there the freedom ends.

The daily reality of many members of households stuck at home for an indefinite period of time means that the demand made on women in the diverse roles that they fulfil is inordinately high. It means women having to attend to routine caregiving of so many more members, managing food so many more times per day, and attending to the increased burden of housekeeping; procuring higher volumes of potable water, especially

in areas of water scarcity, etc. Here contradictorily women lose their freedom and suffer time poverty in the diversity of their roles.

Oxfam's annual early 2020 Davos report, Time to Care, estimates that 2.3 billion people will need care by 2030, 200 million more than in 2015, including 100 million more older people and an additional 100 million children aged 6 to 14 years. Care work, unpaid or underpaid, is generally not visible, greatly undervalued and typically taken for granted. It is often not considered real or proper 'work', with spending for care work considered a cost, not an investment. The majority of caregivers are women. With loss of jobs post the pandemic, more women are likely to be stuck at home giving care that is unpaid for, taken for granted, which further curtail their independence, mobility and participation in decision making, thus reinforcing her supplementary status.

More than 90 per cent of employed Indians work in the informal sector and stand the risk of losing their jobs. Of all women who work, 94 per cent work in the informal sector and will bear the brunt of going incomeless. A similar financial threat grips the men of the same households, creating a simmering volcano of fear, insecurity, frustration and uncertainty. This, in patriarchal cultures, commonly leads to an expression of violence upon those incapable of retaliation like the elderly, children and the women of the household. Domestic violence has gone up by 60 per cent from the anecdotal evidence available. The COVID crisis has already begun to leave in its trail a chain of gendered consequences, including an increased risk of domestic violence. Violence is a huge threat to a woman's human right to live with dignity, to a life free from violence.

Aid groups warn that forced child marriages could be on the rise globally due to school closures, food insecurity, and economic uncertainty triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ethiopia, more than 500 girls have been rescued from forced marriages since March, while anecdotal evidence suggests spikes in

other countries such as Afghanistan, India, South Sudan, and Yemen. The United Nations Population Fund, has predicted that the anticipated economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, along with disrupted efforts to end child marriage, could result in some 13 million more child marriages in the next decade. This is the consequence of the pandemic, restraining the freedom of girls to study and learn life skills and conversely constraining them from even exploring their diversity in terms of talents and capacities that they are capable of.

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It is indeed a grim picture. But crisis and conflict have always brought in its wake multi-layered vulnerabilities for women. Is this the new 'normal'? Where freedom is a threat to community health and needs to be constrained. Where diversity is to be contained in the interests of national health.

Perhaps not. Perhaps the cosmos has given us an opportunity to rewrite a more just narrative of human civilisation; one that respects diversity and acknowledges freedom. This is the time when we can hit the reset button on the earth's computer or rewind.

I hope for the future of human civilisation we hit the reset button.

Meera Khanna has written on gender-based issues for newspapers and magazines. Her poetry and blank verse in English on women's empowerment has been choreographed into classical dance format. She is the author of *If there be a Paradise*, a book of poems on Kashmir; *In a State of Violent Peace* based on 14 narratives of those who have seen the genesis of the conflict in Kashmir; and *Breaking Paths*, a collection of stories of ordinary women who find the courage within themselves.

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Staying Ahead of the Curve — The Diversity Factor

Mukul Deva

Even in the best of times, organisations that flourish the most are those with high levels of diversity *and* an enlightened leadership team that knows how to leverage this diversity. The reasons for this are fairly obvious — life consistently presents a multitude of new opportunities and challenges, which need a variety of viewpoints and skills to seize or overcome. However, if not properly tapped and harnessed, diversity can easily become a highly contentious problem; which is why the need for enlightened and inspiring leaders.

If this is so straightforward and obvious then why doesn't every organisation tap in on it? The reasons for this are too numerous to enumerate. However, let us take a few of the more obvious ones.

Firstly, common sense is *NOT* the guiding light which most of us assume (and wish) it would be; more often than not, the obvious simple things get overlooked *because* they are simple and common sense.

Secondly, the quest for enlightened leadership is timeless and that is unlikely to change any time soon. Ever-changing situations require leaders to keep

evolving, growing and acquiring new skill sets. This is seldom easy. And just as one starts believing we have managed a handle on it, along comes a crisis (like the current pandemic) which throws the brief status quo out of the window.

Thirdly, there are a host of very deep-seated taboos and mindsets, which will need to change — regarding the place of women in society and women in the workplace. This is problematic even today in very evolved societies. So you can well imagine the state in a culture as superstitious and religion-based as is the case for India. *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* gets lip service even from the fathers of most *betis*. And no, I am not referring to the educated people like you who are probably reading this, but to those in the millions of small cities, villages and mindsets where the bulk of the Indian population resides. You will probably hate me for saying this but do think about it.

One of the main reasons why it is challenging to get the right diversity balance was best narrated to me by the country head of an MNC I was coaching. He shared with me that he was not happy even though he had met all the diversity and inclusion targets assigned to him by global HQ; he now had *equitable* gender, race and colour representation, even on the board. However, he added, *that* is not the solution. When I requested him to elaborate, he did. 'You see, Mukul, just to give you an example, though I have an almost equal number of men and women on the board now, the problem is that each and every woman on the board is doing two jobs, one at work and one at home. Whereas, every single man on the board is doing just one since their wives handle the domestic front.'

Now, I have no idea what the situation is in

your life, dear reader, however, do take a look. If you're a man, please check if you're pulling your weight on the home front, *especially* if you have a working wife. And if you're a woman, please reflect if you are asking for help in time and ensuring other family members carry a part of the load.

Mind you, I am not suggesting that all work gets divided 50-50; that would be ideal, but I am not sure if Life delivers enough good days to let 50:50 survive.

What then is the solution? Probably the most practical one is the #EachOneEnlightenOne approach — where all of us try to do whatever we can to get the right balance. And enlighten at least one person to do the same.

If that doesn't appeal to you, then you could follow the omnipotent and omnipresent approach of the current national ruling dispensation — blame the past. Or the Opposition; in this case, the other gender. Neither work, but boy, they are so emotionally satisfying.

As for freedom — in India — in this day and age and prevalent hate-charged, divisive climate — don't even get me started.

Mukul Deva is an alumnus of La Martiniere College Lucknow, ex-Indian Army officer, successful entrepreneur and internationally bestselling author of the *Lashkar* and *Ravinder Gill* series. He is a globally sought-after keynote speaker, executive coach and mentor.

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Our Shifting Foundations and Solo Flights

Neelum Saran Gour

Just as lives, all over the planet, have undergone a shift in these COVID-19 times, so has the range of connotation of many of our essential words. Freedom and diversity are words whose meanings have somewhat reinvented and extended themselves contextually. Diversity is one of those words that have existed in our cultural vocabulary to the point of platitude. We are all too familiar with its semantic resonances — wealth of variety, regional, religious, linguistic, aesthetic, topographical, ethnic — all the vast kaleidoscope of plurality, difference and co-existence that makes up the fabric of our civilisation. But whereas our cognitive templates of the word diversity so far held images of cultural expression or regional variation, the COVID experience has suddenly updated the template to include a demographic shift.

Culture has ever had an on-stage presence and an off-stage back-support system. Literature, the visual and plastic arts, the achievements of science and economics and philosophy and all the gamut of soaring human expression and expertise was mostly the business of the elect, the chosen, the patently visible. The backstage was made up of the invisible, the relatively lesser beings, the cogs in the giant machinery of civilised and progressive life, the insignificant, if indispensable, and nameless workforce that made the higher life at all possible. For every scientist, artist, economist, writer, film-maker or achiever, there were dozens of anonymous beings who enabled and facilitated the science, the art, the creativity. COVID-19 has violently ruptured this cosy hierarchy of

relevance and merit. As has been so frequently aired in recent weeks, where would we be without our delivery boys, our migrant labour force, our municipal cleaners, our grocers and home-service squads? To say nothing of all those whom so far we took as given and whom we have had to do without — our plumbers, electricians, mechanics, our domestic help. In a society that was traditionally structured around caste and class, relying on the outsourcing of most jobs necessary to the full realisation of our civilisational splendour, a massive reorganisation of work, a redistribution of energies, is in the offing, because I do not believe that it will be the same world order that will re-emerge once the cure is found and the vaccine is made available.

There have been vital lessons that we as a class have learnt during the past few months. That our freedom to create is the consequence of our silent support systems made up of those who do not enjoy similar freedoms. That nature is still all-powerful and can reverse what humankind has secured over centuries in just a matter of weeks, that nature has indwelling corrective and regenerative mechanisms that no one could have anticipated after the degree of environmental damage that has been witnessed. That the diversity of human contribution has got to go beyond our blinkered hierarchies and respectfully extend to those who have always made our civilisations operable. Not merely extend but recognise with concrete remunerative revision.

I recall a scene from Boris Pasternak's novel *Dr. Zhivago* that I teach my post-graduate students. Yuri

Zhivago has to have a metal stove repaired. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution has recently transformed vast swathes of Russian life, especially for the privileged, and the new contraption, sooty and defective, must replace the massive porcelain stove which consumed much more fuel in the old days and has become impractical. A stove mechanic is called and as he works on the stove, Yuri is amazed to discover that he is an ex-scholar of philosophy, an authority on aesthetics theory, and the two discuss Croce as he attends to the job. The stove is never properly repaired, a potent symbol of the social order, but the rescrambling of class and profession is acutely depicted. At another point in the same novel, there is mention of the wives of professors baking loaves of bread to sell because the social order has undergone a drastic reshuffle. Nothing so drastic for our present exigency but some kind of similar rethinking, not voluntarily undertaken but under the pressure of necessity, a different kind of necessity, might emerge.

If the precious luxury of quality time and leisure for creative pursuit is forfeited, a new dynamism and creative agency shall be born as we take greater control of our lives, as we know freedom from outsourcing to others, as we recognise and respect the diversity of contribution of those others and either pay them more in proportion to our dependence or train ourselves to be free of our dependence on them. When Mahatma Gandhi first returned to India after his stint in South Africa, he attended some meetings of the Servants Of India Society in Bombay. He was astonished that those who spoke eloquently about being servants of the country's cause could not do without servants themselves. The homespun simplicity of Gandhi's life, its very rudimentary creature comforts, no matter how much jeering it may have provoked from hostile critics, demonstrates the dedicated reduction of needs that itself spells a certain kind of freedom. COVID-19, to some extent, has unraveled the consumerist bubble that we were giddily inhabiting with a kind of feverish frenzy in the last decade. Inversely, this translates as freedom too, this rewinding of the reel, this reawakening to the peace of minimising needs, simplifying our lives. And this is not moonshiny idealism but practical realisation learnt the hard way.

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But freedom has acquired another meaning in these strange times, a breathtaking, path-breaking, hugely enriching one. The virtual world has been with us a long time but never before has there been such an explosive hyperactivity of online events — seminars, plays, films, literary and musical programmes. The breaking down of the location barrier has facilitated the possibility of being part of things and experiences one could never have been able to partake of and this has proved to be an anti-gravity zoom into the stratosphere of global intellectual and creative membership. All the world *is* a stage, very literally, and all of it can be experienced at the click of a device.

The consequences of mental expansion are stupendous, as we are all excitedly discovering. This is a kind of freedom earlier generations have not known and although technology imposes its own constraints — as, for example, the compulsion to squeeze a musical *khayal* into a three-minute gramophone record had been deeply disorienting to musical maestros in the early days of the gramophone industry — the loss is abundantly compensated by the scale and diversity of enlightening exposure that the new medium and the forced isolation have brought. This phenomenon is here to stay, as art and science and knowledge travel across ever-widening vistas to access ever-larger audiences drawn from extensive and diverse populations. Freedom and diversity converge in a great expansion of awareness never before anticipated or experienced.

Neelum Saran Gour has authored six novels, four short story collections, two books of non-fiction, and has translated her works from English to Hindi. Her work has appeared in numerous Indian and international collections. She has been a book reviewer for Indian and international journals and papers and is also a columnist. Her latest novel *Requiem In Raga Janki* won *The Hindu* Fiction Prize for 2018. She is a professor of English literature at the University of Allahabad.

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Apun ka Taste of Freedom

Rashmi Uday Singh

What you're holding in your hands is an open invitation to taste freedom, to savour its flavour. You'll agree with me when I say that each one of us has our own idea of what makes our spirits soar, our own definition and concept of "freedom". Mine is to be no longer shackled and tyrannised by the endless list of carnivorous dishes looming menacingly on the menus, globally. Whenever I travelled, it was a checkmate for me. It was either these or salads and bread (cheese, if I was lucky). No choice. I had no freedom to choose for the past 30 years, as I ate my way through the world. It was all part of my job as a food critic for print and television. As was tasting anything from ants to alligators. I did it as I had to. But I've been brought up with my *naani ma* telling me not to "have a *shamsaan* (graveyard) in my tummy". I'm an admirer of George Bernard Shaw who thundered, "A man of my spiritual propensity does not eat corpses". I used to be a believer of eco-friendly and healthful eating, but I was beginning to feel strangled. And then came that elusive taste of freedom in the most unexpected of places, in the carnivorous capitals of the world.

Paris, the seductively beautiful city, has always been my first love. But not its signature slimy frog's legs and fatty foie gras, please! Going against all advice and investing two years researching (read eating) and writing the world's first vegetarian guide to Paris was the most exuberant taste of discovery and freedom I ever tasted. Whoa! What an assortment of choices! It was a revelation to know that not just the committed pure vegetarian, macrobiotic and whatnot, but even the mighty Michelin-starred temples of gastronomy can whip up the most amazing flavours out of vegetables.

The youngest Nouvelle cuisine chef Guy Savoy's signature dishes are pure vegetarian. Alain Passard's plant-based masterpieces are the stuff of

legends. Alain Ducasse's name shimmers with the highest number of Michelin stars in the world, and vegetables play a stellar role on all his menus. This taste of freedom has been served to me in the most soul-soaring forms.

A simple dry cabbage leaf embracing a gorgon fruit cooked with sesame sauce. It's one of the many auspicious courses in the stylish, decorated with antiques, three-floored restaurant. It's a (hold your breath) pure vegetarian Michelin-star restaurant in Shanghai.

Next delicacy is my favourite dish 'Singing the mountains' from Milano. Strip away the fact that this pure vegetarian restaurant cooks without any garlic, onion, or egg, peel away its gluten-free, dairy-free, vegan claims, and what you have is a deliciously great restaurant. It makes you believe that 'Singing the mountain' (dish's name) truly has a lyrical quality about it.

Joia's dishes are musky and heady with truffle and have harmonious quality leek. They are made even more melodious with velvety beans patè, mountain celery, and nutmeg soft froth. This sensation of pure freedom continues to spring up in my mouth like streams of gurgling pure joy. Be it meat-eating Poland's Warsaw as undoubtedly the vegan restaurant capital of Europe, or Berlin with its gourmet vegetarian food. Tokyo doesn't fail to surprise either. Russia's pure vegetarian restaurant run by a Russian woman who serves food without onion and garlic. But the biggest surprise is the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the world, Hiltl. This 130-year-old restaurant in Zurich is owned and run by the Swiss family, Hiltl. Feasting on plant power, in all its gourmet glory managed by the bearded young Rolf Hiltl is a memorable experience.

But out of the experiences I've had, the most fun was filming with Gordon Ramsay for Channel 4's *Great Escapes*. I was paid thousands of pounds to be rude to the emperor of rudeness,

the chief of *Hell's Kitchen*. I not only took him to Café Madras in Mumbai's Matunga for a vegetarian lunch but also sent him to Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev's ashram to learn vegetarian cooking. I even set a challenge for him to cook a vegetarian meal for my high-profile guests. The best part of it all was that I was given the freedom to tell him like it is. With great pleasure, I informed him (with the BBC cameras whirring) that he has a bad temper because of what he eats. I told him that his food preferences were 'hellish' (*Tamsik*, red meat, organ meat, etc) and not pure (*Sattvik*, vegetables, etc) and energy-giving (*Rajasvik*) food. I am not sure if I managed to give him any food for thought. But, for me, that was surely a taste of freedom, in every sense of the term.

Balle! Balle!

Rashmi Uday Singh has been a trailblazer in the fields of food, vegetarianism and health for over three decades.

A TV host, and author of 40 books and a Gourmand World Cookbook Award winner, several prestigious international awards have been conferred upon her, including the Chevalier knighthood from the

government of France. Singh

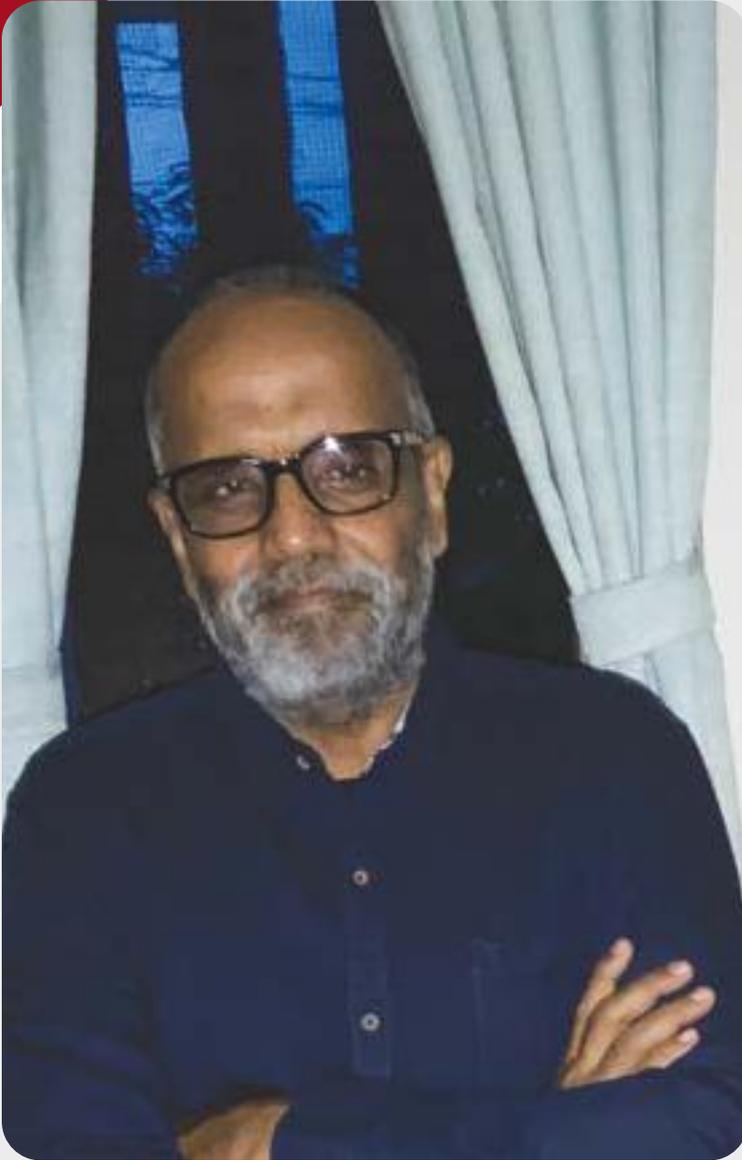
has many firsts to her credit, including India's first-ever city restaurant guide and the world's first vegetarian guide to Paris. She writes weekly columns for *The Times of India's Bombay Times* and *Chennai Times* and other national and international publications on food and health.

Singh has been researching vegetarian dining for the past 15 years. Her pure vegetarian cookbook, *Around the World in 80 Plates*, won four international awards. She is currently researching for an international TV show on dining vegetarian around the world.

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Crisis and a Choice

Shashi Warriar

Growing up in a string of army enclaves in small towns and cities across the country, from Udhampur to Trivandrum — this was before it became Thiruvananthapuram — I was unaware of the diversity of the country, even though we travelled the length and breadth of it. In fact, I took the diversity for granted. Our neighbours came from all over the country, spoke many languages, followed many faiths, and made newcomers welcome. Every garrison we lived in had a temple, a mosque, a church, and a gurdwara. Among my more precious childhood memories is lining up for parshad in a gurdwara, collecting a lump of warm halwa in the right palm, watching the ghee run halfway down my forearm... I couldn't imagine living differently.

School, too, was a great unifier. I studied in a string of Central Schools, as they were called then, with classmates from all over, of all faiths. College was more of the same. In a hostel at the edge of the Thar desert, surrounded by what seemed an endless landscape of scrub and small sand dunes, we were a couple of thousand students from all over the country, again speaking all languages, following all faiths, some from well-off families and others not-so-well-off, and so on, united by the hunt for a degree.

And then there was music. It brought us together. We took for granted that Rashid Khan sang Krishna bhajans, or Bismillah Khan played them on his *shehnai*. Food was another unifier. In the early 1980s, in Bombay, before it morphed into Mumbai, we enjoyed cuisine of all kinds, Mughlai and Irani and Udupi and Punjabi and Keralite and Gujarati....

Then came 1984, and the pogroms of Sikhs. This was particularly horrifying because Sikhism was, in my limited experience, founded on generosity. It didn't end there. Ayodhya followed, and then Godhra. Human lives gone, monuments destroyed. Every such monstrous event brought the renaming into focus. In most cases, the new — or, indeed, revived ancient — names stood for a resurgence of regional pride, which, by itself, might have been a good thing. But it also stood for a narrowing of the vision, a retreat into an India that had become something less than inclusive. To my mind, increasingly, Madras and Bombay were Indian, but Chennai was Tamil and Mumbai was Marathi. That narrowing of the vision seems to continue to this day, with Calcutta becoming Kolkata and Allahabad Prayagraj. The list is endless. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a move to rename New Delhi Naya Dilli, or something of the kind.

With the coming of the coronavirus, our vision seems to have narrowed even more. The uncertainty and isolation that followed the pandemic have fanned the resentment and suspicion that people have of others of different ethnicity — people from the Northeast, for instance, or for Muslims.

The ancient Greeks spoke of three kinds of people. There were idiots, who weren't unintelligent or retarded, but were selfish, and thought only of themselves, to the exclusion of everyone else. Then there were the tribespeople, who thought only of their little group and their group's interests, who were suspicious of "outsiders", always willing to go to war with other groups, and who therefore idealised warriors. And finally, there were citizens, who considered social interests on a much larger scale, who were aware of their rights as well as

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their responsibilities, and who were willing to fight for their rights without infringing on the rights of others, and who idealised the notion of citizenship.

Now, in the face of the greatest crisis of this century, or perhaps since Independence, we have a choice. We can be idiots, tribespeople, or citizens. Which will we be?

Shashi Warriar grew up in half a dozen garrison towns where his father, a soldier, was posted and got a degree in economics from BITS, Pilani. After a decade and a half of trying different careers in consulting, journalism, computing, teaching, management, and loafing, he settled down to write fiction. He has written thrillers, satires, fairy tales, literary fiction, and a semi-fictional biography of the last hangman of the erstwhile state of Travancore.

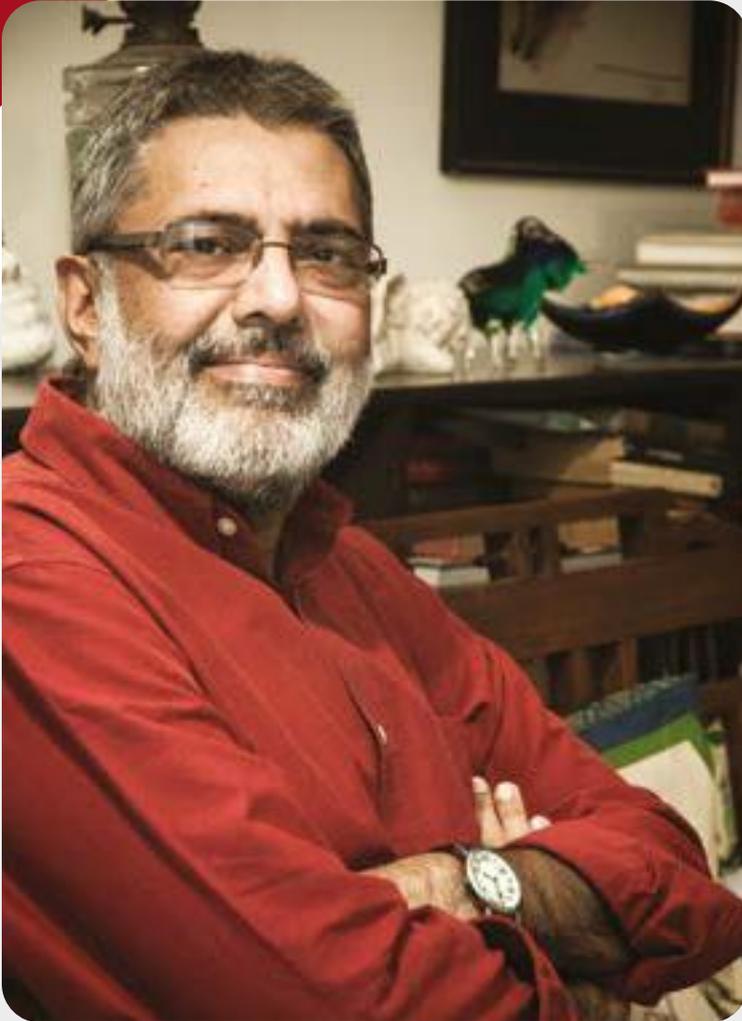
His current projects include a novel set in Odisha's Malkangiri, where Maoists are active and a mental travelogue built around a six-week, 11,000km motorcycle ride around India.

He lives in Mangalore, close by a beach, with his wife Prita and their menagerie, which at present consists of two dogs who are members of their pack, two more dogs who are associate members and turn up only at mealtime, and a cat that sleeps most of the day.

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 @ShashiWarrier



India is a Tapestry of Many Colours and Weaves

Sidharth Bhatia

Jawaharlal Nehru is not a name that is much in use today, except in uncomplimentary terms, but his contribution to the building of modern India cannot be wished away. Apart from the institutions he built, the infrastructure he helped create and the scientific temper/*temperament* he inculcated, his liberal and democratic values, one of his most abiding legacies is the message that he repeatedly gave his fellow citizens: Unity in Diversity.

India, he often said, was so varied and colourful — hundreds of communities, thousands of dialects, multiple religions — that the only way we could all live together was by accepting this diversity and allowing everyone to celebrate their own cultural identity. There was no option but to accept these differences and let everyone be, because only that way we could achieve social harmony, peace and therefore, unity.

In simple terms, intolerance of someone because of any of these differences could only lead to disaster and, ultimately, disunity. History is full of instances

where insistence on racial and ethnic purity has led to violence and bloodshed and even the break-up of a country. The Nazis in Germany strongly believed that they were a superior race and that others, especially Jews, were enemies and therefore had to be exterminated. Millions of lives were taken by throwing Jews into gas chambers. Closer to our times, Rwanda and the civil war in Yugoslavia are salutary lessons about what happens when ethnic hatred takes over.

The idea of India has held true over the centuries and the modern Indian state is a good example of how communities can live together harmoniously and be knitted into a country.

There are not many countries, especially large, that have this kind of social complexity. The United States is a good example: every kind of ethnicity and religion is present in that vast land and each one has complete freedom to practice what they believe in.

This is not borne out in daily life, however.

Racism, societal and institutional, is rampant and even affirmative action and other legal guarantees have not changed the situation on the ground. Police brutality on Blacks is well documented and stories of everyday racism show that no amount of laws make a difference — ultimately it is social attitudes that need to change.

The countrywide outburst of protesters against the killing of an innocent man by the police — who sat on him till he died — has shown that Blacks have had enough. Under the banner of 'Black Lives Matter', tens of thousands of people marched in the cities (and got international solidarity), despite the fears of COVID-19 and the lockdown. It has caused great social turmoil and it is not going to stop here.

Here in India, we have the Indian Constitution, a fine document that created the Indian Republic, and which emphasises equality and forbids discrimination on religious or any other grounds. In several ways, it is this belief in the sanctity of the Constitution's values that has sustained our unity. But maintaining this unity is not always easy — there are threats, internal and external. Inimical forces from outside have tried hard for decades to destabilise that harmony, but despite all their attempts, have not succeeded in damaging the basic structure. Indians have not succumbed to any of these provocations. But it is the enemy within that is more dangerous.

Since Independence, we have seen outbursts that have tried to challenge this harmony and unity. Ethnic conflicts are not unusual in countries and in a large, multi-dimensional nation like ours, some disaffection is bound to happen. Often, these have been violent, and dissidents have taken up arms, leading to killings, as in some states in the Northeast and Kashmir. The movement for Khalistan was another of these iterations. The state's response has been strong, sometimes disproportionately so. But India has also shown a remarkable ability to co-opt, absorb and even settle such dissidence, in a way that is mutually acceptable.

The Indian genius lies in the ability of its people to let in new people, ideas and influences and make them

our own. For millennia, large numbers of people have arrived, some as traders, others as curious travellers and still others as invaders. All of them, even those who did not eventually settle here, brought with them their food, knowledge and culture and took back the same from here. It has added to that fascinating mix that is India.

Unfortunately, there are threats to our cherished notion of Unity in Diversity. Chauvinistic elements are rising, fast, and trying to impose their brand of 'Indianness' on the rest of the population. They want to 'unify' the nation but on their terms — this implies that everyone else recognise the dominance of one majority religion — Hinduism — and cultural norms. Ironically, Hinduism is a religion and a way of life that is fluid, informal and uncodified, allowing each practitioner to create his or her own mix of divinities and practices. There is no 'one' way of expressing the religion and never has been. But Hindutva (Hinduness), does not believe in that.

The dangers of this are obvious. It will create more than one class of citizenship, which is antithetical to the very notion of equality and is completely unconstitutional. It is dangerous too, because it will inevitably cause social upheaval that will be very difficult to manage. The very idea of what we think India is, will be demolished.

We cannot and should not accept that. The Indian tapestry is made of many colours and weaves. It is precious to all of us. It has shown resilience, despite wear and tear, but it needs to be protected all the time. Causing any damage to it will harm every one of us—we must never allow it to happen.

Sidharth Bhatia is an author and journalist. He is the Founder Editor of *The Wire*, an independent digital news platform.

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Blurring the Lines Between Them and Us

Sonia Bahl

Words are worlds.

Take diversity, for instance. The dictionary says it is 'the condition of having or being composed of differing elements' and then moves to further sub-explanations. The description works brilliantly for flora and fauna, cuisine, fashion even, but it falls abysmally short when we apply it to humans.

Not too long ago, we were either born into a world that took it for granted or dreamed of a safer world because of it. In the new world, 'diversity' has been repackaged. It comes with a swathe of emotions, it extrapolates, it demands examination, and like a superhero, even when it gets hit by a bus, it gets up, dusts itself off, and gets ready to fight again. It reverberates through the world: from Minneapolis to Kashmir, from college campuses to corporate boardrooms. Louder and more loaded than ever before. On some days it's fraught and on some days it's a box to check off. On most days, it's worn from overuse.

Starting from the Indian Constitution to the American promise of being the land of the free and liberty to all, it's an unequivocal invitation and a promise of full-blown protection — to be you. Never to be discriminated against based on race, ethnicity, colour, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

It's an unimpeachable premise. But the story rarely sticks to the narrative — actors refuse to follow the carefully crafted script. If only laws and decrees made the schoolyard bully (or the movie mogul) inhale and imbibe the spirit of the Dalai Lama, the scenes may have a chance of playing out fairly and with natural verve. But for now it often feels forced: a prescribed medicine that must be swallowed.

Figuring out how to keep our promises is as complicated as it is simple. Seeing *them* as *us*. That's it. That's all it should take. The assemblers of constitutions and laws handed us pitch perfect maps to forge our way into a fair world. The well-intentioned constitutional cartography has mostly ensured we don't lose our way but the question

remains: are we there yet? We know where we want to go, we're on the right track, detours et al, but why does it feel like we're miles from home?

What does it take to walk in the same direction?

I'm acutely aware, when you've spent more than half your life living and working abroad, in dramatically different geographies, never struggling to assimilate or be accepted, your experience of diversity is richer and infinitely more rewarding than most. Your girl's classroom on most days consisted of 16 children, each from a different country — a mini UN. She'd call herself French when we lived in Belgium and a returning Zulu warrior princess when we lived in South Africa. By the time she was seven, she found it quite normal that one of her close friends had two fathers. She instinctively chose England to attend college, even though she's only ever attended American schools, has a Singapore passport, an American accent, and Indian genes.

She ought to be the poster child for diversity?

Only, let's not forget, all of this played out in a perfectly controlled environment — your best friend might be Brazilian, your neighbour Puerto Rican, you partake in your Indonesian lunch buddy's gado-gado, but you all live and breathe in the comfort of an all-embracing bubble: the perfectly diverse expatriate life. Everyone belongs.

In the real world, long-marginalised people fight and bleed to belong. Different doesn't always get invited to the party. And often, when they do, it's because the guest list *must* look balanced. You may get into the room and still feel profoundly alienated: downplay, cover up, and mask up to fit in. As Verna Myers said: diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being asked to dance.

We're dancing as best as we can. Social media amplifies the battle cries: #prideparade, #CAA, #OscarsSoWhite, #BLM, #BAIM #womenempowerment #smashthepatriarchy and this builds invaluable — jump on the bandwagon? — awareness. But isn't the algorithm of belonging far more complex than hashtags? And we already know that the great leaps only come when we do

what we must do when nobody is watching.

Does it help or hurt the cause that a surreal dichotomy is unfolding before our eyes: as the voices for inclusion rise to a crescendo, the pandemic is forcing us to shrink our worlds. Caution, suspicion, and distance have become the new currency. Sticking to our people and our homes is the new prescription. Demarcations and borders are the placeholder vaccine.

As a writer, semantics will never cease to matter. Can we change the dictionary description of the word diversity? Can we add belonging, being, including?

As a storyteller, I'm always drawn to the hero's journey. I'm looking for a twist in the plot where every single person has skin in the game, irrespective of what colour that skin might be.

I'm hoping then we can blur the lines between *them* and *us*. I'm told the most effective way of doing that is to travel. Travel eighteen inches, from your head to your heart.

Sonia Bahl was born and raised in Kolkata, and has lived and worked in Mumbai, Delhi, Jakarta, Miami, Brussels, Johannesburg, and Singapore. She spent a huge chunk of her days and sleepless nights in advertising then took a leap of love and faith from writing 30-second commercials to writing screenplays for feature films. Sonia has written *Noblemen* (streaming on Netflix) and *Sitara* (in production), and has been commissioned to write a live-action animation feature film. Her first novel, *The Spectacular Miss*, has been optioned for adaptation by a leading Bollywood studio. Her second novel, *A Year of Wednesdays* was released in 2019. Sonia writes — and rewrites — in Singapore, where she lives with her itinerant daughter, honorary proofreader husband, and made-for-the-movies golden retriever.

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Trees, Humans, Viruses and Related Matters

Tabish Khair

You would imagine that a species of trees — say, a hundred beeches standing in the same forest — would be genetically almost identical. That is what they seem to us, human beings. Most of us cannot even see the difference between species of trees, let alone their individual members! On the other hand, we seem so diverse to ourselves. We merrily persecute and kill other human beings on the basis of 'glaring' differences of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. But actually individual trees — of the same species — are much more genetically diverse than human beings across the entire world.

Does this surprise you? It shouldn't, if you have understood how evolution works. No, not how journalists and popular writers say it works, but how it actually works. There are two major reasons why individual trees of the same species contain more genetic diversity than the entire human species. First, trees are millennia older than us. Second, trees, once their seeds germinate, are much less mobile. The first factor means that genetic divergence has had

greater time to accumulate in trees. But the second factor is just as important: because trees cannot run away from a danger or an environmental crisis, they need more variety in order to survive. For instance, if a range of trees in a forest is threatened by climatic changes in the region or even a kind of pest, then it pays to have individuals whose genetic difference might enable them to survive.

In short, diversity is the key to survival in evolutionary terms. The human version of the myth — 'the survival of the fittest' — is based on hubristic anthropocentrism. It assumes that we are so much in control of ourselves and our environment and the universe that we can decide and choose what is 'fittest.' This is nonsense. The factors that affect life on earth are too uncertain and too diverse to be fully controlled: they include everything from a mutation in a cell to a virus to a flood to a shift of tectonic plates to meteorites to the sun... and beyond. Any kind of singular 'fitness' is bound to fail sometime. Hence, life survives by providing diversity, so that at

least some of the varieties are likely to survive a crisis. What applies to 'life' also applies to the various species of life.

Take the human body: it contains 30 trillion human cells. It also contains 40 trillion microbes, including bacteria. This human microbiome is now recognised as fulfilling vital biological functions. We need some of these microbes. We cannot simply wash our hands off our microbes.

We do not really know how many viruses inhabit us, but we know that they are far more in number than the microbes. This virome is also central to the organism, including the human organism. It looks like we cannot even just wash our hands of our viruses, or not too blithely in any case.

In short, human cells are in the minority in the human body. And this can be said of any other multicellular organism. The human immune system, as science writer Ed Yong notes, is not like an army; it is more like a thermostat keeping a room's temperature at the most comfortable level. The human body is essentially a kind of ecosystem: not a space of essential 'purity' as we assume, but a space of great 'diversity.' So are all other complex biological organisms.

Today, as we are once again deploying the usual war metaphors to 'combat' the novel coronavirus, this is easy to forget. The kind of violence that the novel coronavirus inflicts on around 10 per cent of the people infected with it is media-enticing spectacular: high fever, breathing trouble, even death. This fits into the media tendency to focus on fast spectacular violence, often at the cost of what Johan Galtung called "structural violence" and what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence." But it is necessary to remember that most viruses and microbes do not cause us any violence under normal circumstances, and many are central to our proper functioning as biological organisms.

It might be necessary to "kill" a were-virus like the novel coronavirus with the silver bullets of drugs and vaccines, but it is just as necessary — more so in the

longer run — to ensure that our bodily ecosystems are properly maintained in their diversity. This cannot be done only with the help of drugs and vaccines, which are drastic if necessary solutions to drastic but rare problems. It needs a more symbiotic and long-term effort, a slower effort involving the ecosystems of our bodies and the larger ecosystems within which our bodies survive. The war metaphors of drugs and vaccines need to be replaced by gardening metaphors. Our penchant for speed — which itself has been speeding up throughout the Capitalist Age and has reached dizzying levels under Neoliberalism — needs to be replaced by a recognition of process. Not progress, which is often a subjective definition, but process, which involves a mutual recognition of the intricate relationship of space and time in the complex matrix of continuity, diversity and change.

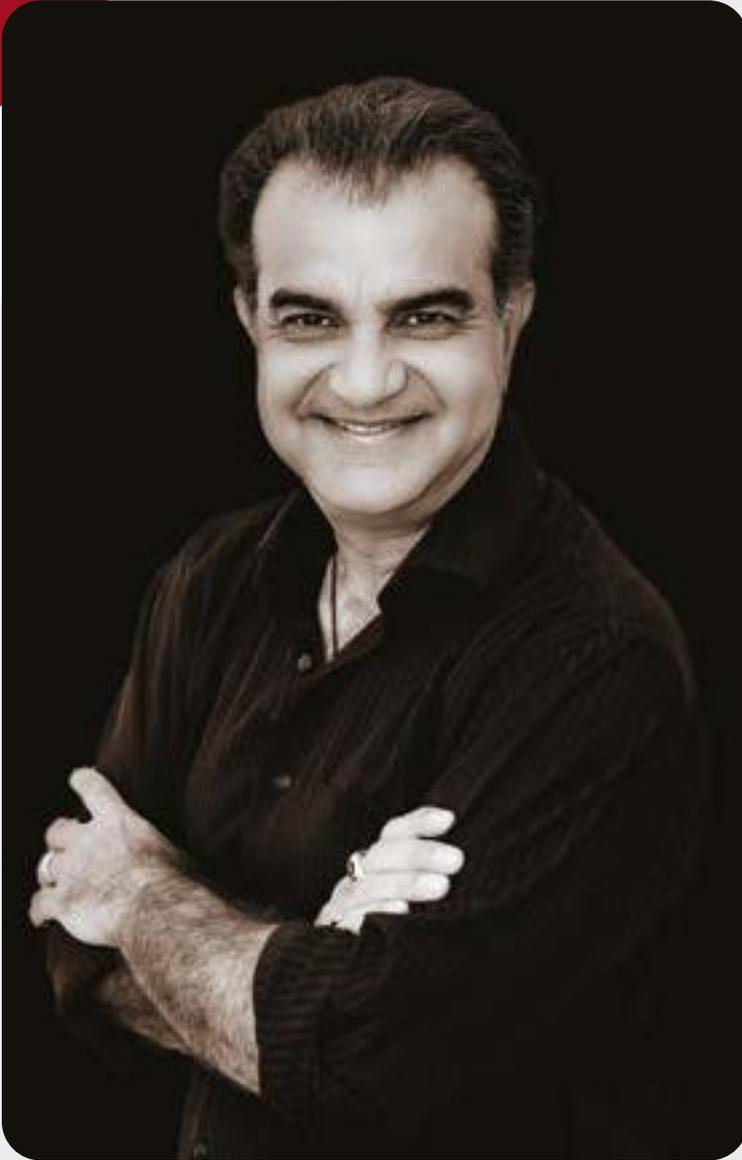
We talk of the need to recognise diversity in cultural and political life. But this is only an aspect of a greater need: the need to recognise diversity on earth. As a species, we have mostly failed to see this need.

Tabish Khair is the winner of the All India Poetry Prize and the AK Singh Memorial Award. His books have been shortlisted for about 20 awards, including the Encore Award (UK), Vodafone Crossword Award (India), Hindu Best Fiction Prize (India), Man Asian Literature Prize (Hong Kong/UK), DSC Prize for South Asia (UK/India), Aloa Prize (Denmark), Prix de l'Inaperçu (France) and the Sahitya Akademi Award (India). His novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, was dubbed "unmissable" by the *The Times* and "irreverent, intelligent, explosive" by *The Independent*. It was a *New Statesman* book of the year and an *Irish Times* paperback of the week, and described as the 'best' post-9/11 novel by the *New Republic*. His recent works include *Jihadi Jane* and *Night of Happiness*.

Diversity is the key to survival in evolutionary terms. The human version of the myth — 'the survival of the fittest' — is based on hubristic anthropocentrism. It assumes that we are so much in control of ourselves and our environment and the universe that we can decide and choose what is 'fittest.' This is nonsense. The factors that affect life on earth are too uncertain and too diverse to be fully controlled...

Follow him on:

 <https://www.facebook.com/Tabish-Khair-218477166345>
 @tabish_khair



You Need All Seven Colours In a Rainbow

Vish Dhamija

Diversity. For most people it's just another word in the dictionary, somewhere between *distance* and *divinity*. Ironical, since it can be best described as the distance between two individuals. Or the differences between them.

I have been fortunate to have lived in various parts of the world, and seen as homogeneous or diverse, on separate occasions. I have been indistinguishable in some parts of India, and distinct in others. It goes without saying that I add to the diversity in London, where I live today. I'll tell you what I prefer to be, a little later.

Diversity can refer to any difference. Race, religion, language, thought, gender, culture, sexual orientation, to name a few. Unfortunately, most business corporations — and I talk from experience — think of it as another tick in the box. They hire minorities because it suits them, looks good on the corporate brochure. And the homogeneous majority, over time, learns to tolerate the diverse minority. And that is where they miss the big picture. They hire people from disparate backgrounds, and then expect them to harmonise with the majority. They pull out some HR agenda to promote people based purely on diversity. In either case, you lose the very essence of diversity. You learn nothing new. You attain nothing.

Imagine if the world had closed its eyes to yoga. Or meditation. Or attempted to change

these ancient principles? Or if we, in India, had been too stubborn to adopt the English language. Yes, some people might think of English as a vestige of colonialism, but the fact remains that it's the business language of the world today and, economically we would have lost out immensely if we had ignored the English language.

The world has always been in awe of Indian diversity. Time and again, the question — how a country, as large as ours, as diverse as ours, continues to remain a single entity? Which other country can boast that they have over 450 languages? In which other country do they have more religions coexisting? In India they don't merely coexist, they thrive. We don't flourish despite the diversity, but because of it. Can you even imagine one language, one religion? It would be an extremely dreary world if it were monochromatic.

Diversity is like the colour in your painting.

If there is one thing that COVID-19 has taught us, it's accepting the fact that we are one, despite the differences on the surface. Would you or I have refused treatment from a doctor if they belonged to a different race or culture? Would you or I have refused blood from someone if they were of a different religion or spoke a foreign language? You don't have to answer that.

The differences cited between you and others are not real. It's something you've been brainwashed into seeing and believing. It is a convenient tool for politicians and religious leaders to exploit.

Allow me to bowl you a googly. You can either believe in God or believe in the political borders that humans had sketched on this earth over the years. You cannot do both, since God never created countries—the Almighty created the world as one. Our skin colours are different, since the creator didn't want the painting to be colourless and monotonous. We have various faiths for people to select their own paths to find inner peace and fulfilment. Our road isn't any better than theirs or vice versa. We are not superior or inferior to anyone. Red isn't better than pink. Mango isn't better than pineapple. Idli isn't better than samosa. Like us, they are just different, diverse.

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I mentioned I'll tell you what I enjoy more, and yes I enjoy diversity. It's the splash of colour I take delight in. I stood out in Chennai when I lived there, just as I stand out here in London. The fabric of my life gets more colourful every day, and I enjoy it. I'm extremely proud of it.

Remember, *diversity* originates from the word *verse*. Imagine, what would have happened if the poet never altered the course of the *verse*?

Vish Dhamija is a British-Indian crime-fiction writer of nine novels. The Indian Press calls him "India's John Grisham"—for stimulating the genre of legal fiction in India. He is also termed "India's Best Page-Turner" and one of the 10 most popular Indian thriller authors. He is the only writer of Indian origin listed among the major legal thriller authors of the world. He writes psychological thrillers too.

Abundantia Entertainment has acquired the rights to Dhamija's much sought-after *Rita Ferreira* series (*Bhendi Bazaar*, *Doosra* and *Lipstick*) to be adapted into a multi-season, premium original digital series. Vish lives with his wife, Nidhi in London.

Follow him on:

 <https://www.facebook.com/veedhamija>
 @vish_dhamija

Music that Cares

Music and poetry from across the world strung together a chorus of support for those devastated by Amphan, the super cyclone that swept through Bengal and Odisha in May.

Musician duo Sourendro-Soumyojit took their annual World Music Day celebration to the heart of the Sunderbans with Be For Bengal, a musical initiative for Amphan victims — a fundraiser concert that promised to stand by thousands.

Twenty-five artistes from India and abroad took part in the exclusive virtual concert, performing from their homes amid the lockdown.

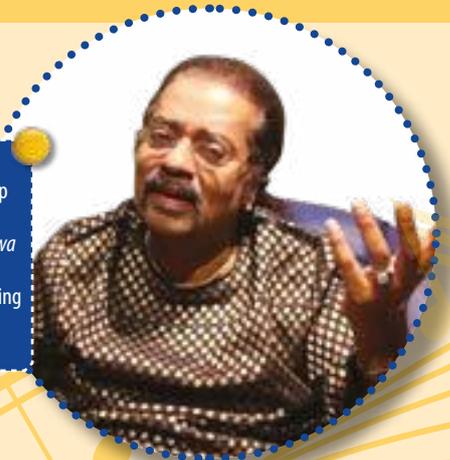
"We were happy to explore the positive side of

the lockdown through music. With auditoriums shut, we explored a new dimension of musical performances and created a platform where music could help care for people. At one point, we had thought we would not be able to host the World Music Day concert this year, but seeing the havoc Amphan had wreaked, we came up with this idea where music and art united to help people," Soumyojit said.

The virtual concert featured Meeryung Hall, wife of former US consul general Craig Hall, and singer, songwriter and producer Stephan Stoppok and pianist Martin Kuebert from Germany. Hall presented *Amazing Grace*, a prayer for peace, all the way from Florida. Stoppok designed a Tagore song with 12 string guitars,



Rashid Khan opened the concert with *Aaoge jab tum sajna* in raga Maajh Khamaj



Hariharan wrapped up the evening with his magical hit *Jhonka hawa ka* from *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, interpreting it as a ghazal



Sourav Ganguly and Leander Paes came together to present Tagore's *Where the Mind is without Fear* in Bengali and English





Sapno ki Rani Sharmila Tagore inspired people to come forward for help, requesting all to take more such initiatives and went on to recite a poem of inner strength



Aparna Sen



Soumitra Chatterjee

bringing a touch of world music, and Kuebert teamed up with singer Benny Dayal from Mumbai for the hit *What a Wonderful World*.

From Bengal, cricketer Sourav Ganguly teamed up with tennis ace Leander Paes to present Tagore's *Chitto jetha bhoyshunyo* (*Where the mind is without fear*) in English and Bengali. Rashid Khan opened the concert with his rich baritone while Kaushiki Chakraborty cast a melodious spell on the evening. L. Subramaniam's soulful strains on the violin were complemented by Kavita Krishnamurti's impeccable rendition of *Ami tomaro shonge bendhechhi amaro praan*. Actors Soumitra Chatterjee, Aparna Sen and Jeet Gannguli, singers Srabani Sen and Nachiketa, and Saikat Biswas and industrialist Harshvardhan Neotia livened up the concert with their performances. City boy Saikat Biswas sang *Ekla cholo re*.



Usha Uthup mesmerised the audience with old time classic *Smile*



Vidya Balan remembered Rituparno Ghosh with his poem, *Khela*, and shared her memories of the filmmaker



Filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj recited his own poetry *Main hi tha*



Sourendro and Soumyojit welcome the audience from the backwaters of the Sunderbans





Meeryung Hall, the former US consul general's wife, presented *Amazing Grace* from Florida



German singer, songwriter, producer Stephan Stoppok designed a Tagore song with 12 string guitars, bringing a touch of world music



Jeet Gaanguli performed two of his compositions with the same musical structure from *RAAZ Reboot* and a Bengali movie



Papon sang his cult hit *Moh moh ke dhaage* in a soundscape designed by Sourendro and Soumyojit that gave it a completely new feel



Harsh Neotia recalled Tagore's iconic *Ekla chhole* in English, with Saikat Biswas singing the Tagore song in a contemporary soundscape



Kaushiki Chakraborty performed the famous Meera bhajan *Mharo Pranam*

Sharmila Tagore, who recited Tagore's *Bipode more raksha koro*, which speaks of courage and strength of the soul, said, "I grew up in 'Calcutta', that's what the City of Joy used to be called those days, and then moved forward with the curves of my life to live in newer places with adventures and quests to find myself. But the pulse of Bengal has always drawn me back. Bengal will always have a very special place in my heart. I read about the sufferings of so many people who have lost their homes and livelihood. If music, poetry and art can bring relief to them, I wish I could do more."

Bollywood, too, joined the cause. Vidya Balan charmed the audience with a Bengali poem by Rituparno Ghosh while Vishal Bhardwaj sent a strong message with his poetry on communal harmony. Rekha Bhardwaj, Papon, Hariharan, Rahul Deshpande, T.M. Krishna and Anweshaa also joined the musical journey.

Innovative presentation by the hosts made it a memorable experience for both the artistes and the virtual audience. "This is a novel way of presenting



Kavita Krishnamurti touched hearts with her sweet rendition of a Tagore song



Benny Dayal (right) from Mumbai and Martin Kuebert from Germany collaborated for the hit *What a Wonderful World*



Sundeep Bhutoria thanked all the illustrious performers

Suvankar Sen,
executive
director, Senco
Gold and
Diamonds



Nachiketa
sang his hit
Nilaanjana to
a guitar



Anweshaa
sang the
Bengali
version of
Hridayanath
Mangeshkar's
*Mogara phul
laa*



a musical concert. We tried to make it as good as a stage show that you see on the internet or on television from home. The donors enjoyed rare and exclusive performances of their favourite artistes and were happy to be able to support Amphan victims simultaneously. World Music Day celebrations couldn't have been better and we shall move on to more projects that support people in this dark hour," Sourendro said.

Rahul Deshpande presented a
Hridayanath Mangeshkar classic,
Mogara phul laa



The concert pledged to take care of the food supplies of 10,000 people and restore 1,000 homes.

Rahat, an arm of **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** that has been doing significant work in rehabilitation and relief, was associated with the unique initiative. The Foundation has been providing assistance to the less privileged during the pandemic and caring for canines on the streets, besides rebuilding lives devastated by Amphan.

Rekha Bhardwaj sang *Ek woh din bhi the*,
her hit from *Chachi 420* composed
by Vishal Bhardwaj with amazing bass
lines from Mayukh Sarkar



Young talent
Saikat Biswas
sang *Ekla
chalo re*



Srabani Sen charmed the audience
with Tagore's *Amar mukti* with
Stephan Stoppok from Germany



Carnatic classical legend
TM Krishna solefully
rendered *Jagad-O-
Dharana*



Violinist L.
Subramaniam
presented a short
raga



Bingo! I Have Got the Answer

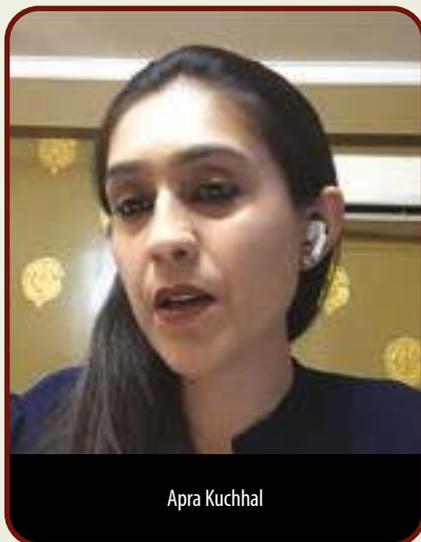


It was a full house with 35 **Ehsaas** women taking part in a virtual game of tambola conducted by actress Tisca Chopra.

To add a twist to the popular game, numbers were replaced by words on the tickets. The game was played on the lines of a quiz with Chopra firing questions every time a participant scratched off a word from her ticket.

Once Chopra shot off the poser, the participants scratched the words on their tickets. The answers, if there on the sheet, had to be scratched off.

As the session began, Chopra shared that she was missing her girlfriends and was excited to play one of her favourite games with the **Ehsaas** women.



Apra Kuchhal

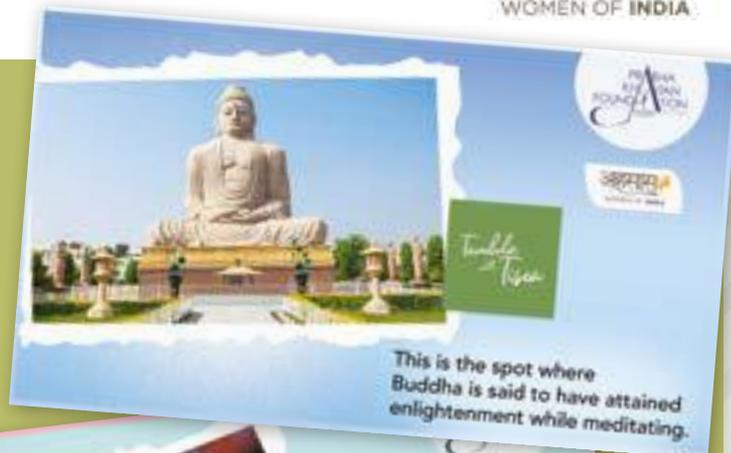
I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you for your dedication to this beautiful cause and the Foundation.

— Priyanka Kothari



Thank you for a well-organised tamblola session with Tisca. Thank you Prabha Khaitan Foundation.

— Seema Singh



"I am delighted to be here to play one of my favourite games with you all. I know it is not easy dealing with the housework, husband and children. I just want to say that you are all rockstars and my big hug to you all. Thank you to the organisers for such an event at a time like this and to all the women for taking out time and being here today," the actress said.

The questions were based on art, literature, culture and films besides activities of **Prabha Khaitan Foundation**. Sample these: Who anchored *Khana Khazana*, the longest-running cookery show of its kind in Asia?' (Sanjeev Kapoor), What is the name of the monthly newsletter by **Prabha Khaitan Foundation**? (Prabha) and The contemporary version of the ancient Indian game Chopad involves four tokens and a die. Name the game as we know it. (Ludo)



What was the name of my (Tisca Chopra) character as Ishaan Awasthi's mother in Taare Zameen Par?



Neelam Seolekar

Thank you and your team. I was left with just one query about Qutab Minar. How frustrating when I knew most of the answers. But it was a good game and Tisca was great. She conducted the event very well, punching in questions for T at the right junctures.

— Sangeeta Datta



Shazia Ilmi

Some of the questions were based on visual clues. A visual of a Kathakali dancer was accompanied by the question "For the Kathakali dance form, what does the Chouttikaran use rice flour and *chundapoovu* for?" (make-up). A picture of Bodh Gaya was shown and the participants asked which is the place where Budha attained enlightenment? (Bodh Gaya)

The lockdown, too, inspired a poser — This well-known, traditional Indian greeting has gained popularity during social distancing (namaste).

In between the rapid questions, host and honorary convener, Rajasthan and central India chapter, Apra Kuchhal, exchanged notes with Chopra on the lockdown and how she was keeping herself occupied.

Chopra, grand-niece of Khushwant Singh, spoke fondly about how her family had an intrinsic

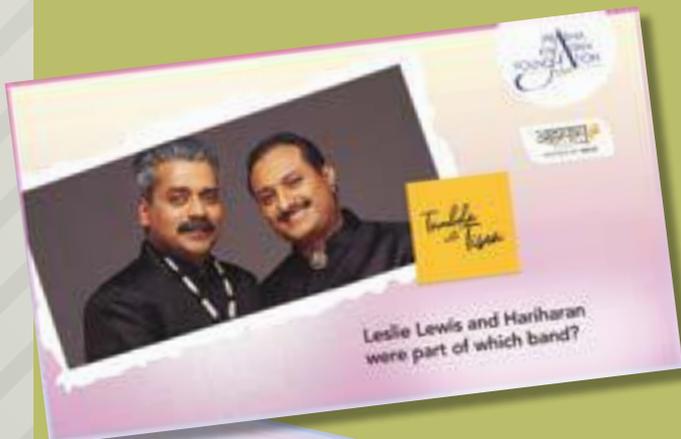
Thanks a lot. I appreciate your effort; it was a new experience for me to play virtual tambola with a beautiful concept. Looking forward to many more in the coming days.

— Garima Tiwari



I had a great time playing tambola with Tisca and the Ehsaas women. It was a very well-organised programme..

— Anantmala Potdar



The Tambola Session with Tisca Chopra was a huge surprise. Instead of mechanically striking off numbers on the tambola ticket we were wracking our minds for the correct answers to the questions. We had to be alert and quick. The game was interspersed with interesting anecdotes from Tisca. Thank you Tisca, you were like a fresh breeze.

— Anvita Pradhan



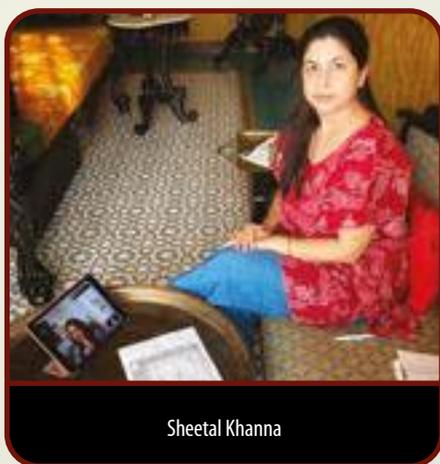
Malika Varma



Neelima Dalmia Adhar



Riddhima Doshi



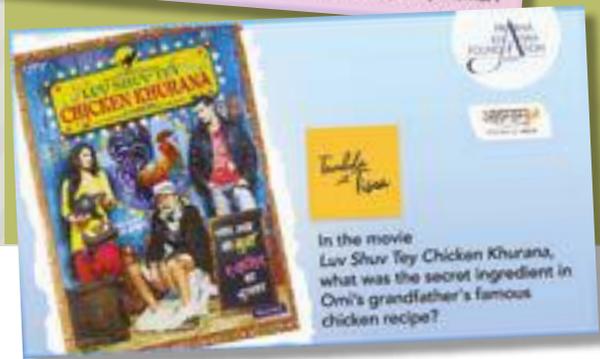
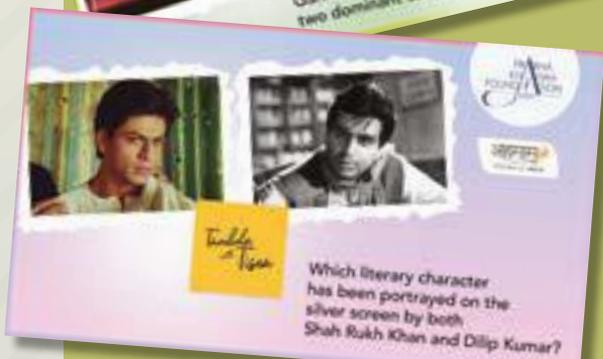
Sheetal Khanna



Archana Dalmia



Poonam Anand



relationship with the arts and how they supported her dreams of becoming an actor.

Asked about her role as the mother of a dyslexic boy in *Taare Zameen Par*, Chopra revealed what it was like to work with Aamir Khan and recounted in jest her annoyance at being made to dress like an "aunty" throughout the film.

The winners were declared in various creatively named categories such as Lock it Down (bottom line), Super Se Upar (top line), Charminar (four corners), Housefull (first house) and House Party (second house).

Shweta Bansal from Agra, Anantmala Potdar from Delhi, Kanak Rekha Chauhan from Lucknow, Riddhima Doshi from Udaipur, Nidhi Garg from Bhubaneswar and Anvita Pradhan from Patna were declared winners. All winners received Amazon vouchers. **Ehsaas Women of India** is an initiative to bring together women around the country who are doing exemplary work in the field of arts, culture and science. Speaking about the experience, Kuchhal said, "The element of quizzing added to tambola was a refreshing touch that turned out to be informative as well as fun. Tisca was great with the questions which came with visual cues and I look forward to more such initiatives by **Prabha Khaitan Foundation**."



Amita Nigam Sahaya

The Great Indian Wedding Story



Kiran Manral

Weddings bring with them chaos and joy and an opportunity to create everlasting memories. But the pandemic would change the Big Fat Indian Wedding for ever.

Author and gender activist Amita Nigam Sahaya was in conversation with Kiran Manral about all things wedding and her book, *The Shaadi Story*, at a virtual session of **An Author's Afternoon**.

Nigam Sahaya's book was inspired by a childhood memory of a family wedding, where her grandfather had to place his turban (symbolic of self-respect and prestige) at the feet of a cantankerous, drunk relative of the groom who felt he had been slighted. Amidst all the wedding gaiety, the mellifluous sound of the *shehnai*,

and fragrance of flowers, this incident left a deep mark on her mind. What bothered her the most was that the subservience and helplessness of the bride's family and the high-handedness of the groom's relatives, though unjust and inappropriate, seemed to be acceptable to everyone.

Just as *saptapadi* (seven steps) or *saat phera* (seven rounds) is a key ritual of Hindu weddings, where the bride and groom walk seven steps or go around the fire seven times together, *The Shaadi Story* reflects on and redefines the idea of weddings in seven structured

chapters. The book also throws light on seven different aspects of the quintessential Indian wedding.

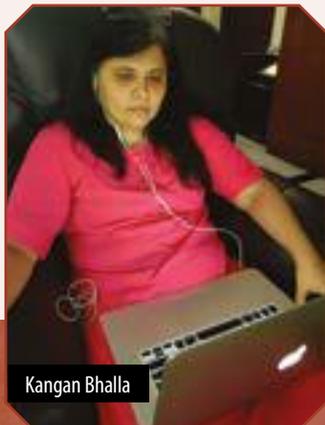
Drawing on ancient Sanskrit scriptures, Western philosophies, Bollywood movies and the voices of young Indians, it closely examines evolving ideas about love and relationships.

The author explained how societal roles delegated to men and women in ancient times were built on misogyny and patriarchal supremacy, and laced with cultural prejudices where the woman's only destiny was to "bear progeny" and silently support the men. She also pointed out that the image of the contemporary woman has since undergone a change. The number of women choosing to remain single has increased and marriage is no longer an institution of social acceptance or the ultimate goal in one's life. The author said women are now more vocal and aware of what they want from life.

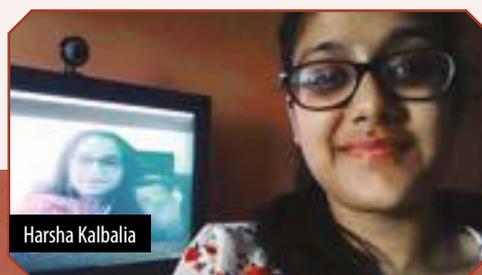
Traditional weddings, too, have evolved with time. One is bedazzled by the paraphernalia associated with the modern Indian wedding that often seems to emerge straight out of a Bollywood movie. But there are other young couples who prefer simple weddings as well.

Rituals and traditions, too, have witnessed subtle changes. Nigam Sahaya illustrated how many parents now refuse to perform *kanyadaan* (giving away of the bride) as they feel their daughters are not meant to be handed over. Concepts

The number of women choosing to remain single has increased and marriage is no longer an institution of social acceptance or the ultimate goal in one's life



Kangan Bhalla



Harsha Kalbalia



Esha Dutta

such as the *sangeet* or the exchange of *varmala* have undergone transformation as themed and destination weddings have gained popularity.

Nigam Sahaya explained how India's economic liberalisation had led to the spartan living ethos of the

middle class making way for aspirations fuelled by films and social media. As the angry young man phase gave way to over-the-top romantic films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* or *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, weddings in India became more elaborate.

The author made a few candid observations on the benefits and limitations of live-in relationships, which focus on partnership and companionship. Financial autonomy and parental support have enabled women to pursue their dreams and Nigam Sahaya believes that the idea that "marriage is a part of adult destiny" will soon become a myth. Young people are delaying marriage commitments to build careers and gain financial independence. Social media has also played an important role in this.

The session redefined the concept of an Indian wedding and provided an insight into how marriage as an institution has evolved.

Esha Dutta, **Ehsaas** Woman of Kolkata, rounded up the never-a-dull-moment session on behalf of the Foundation.

An Author's Afternoon is presented by Shree Cement Ltd in association with Taj Bengal, Kolkata

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 anauthorsafternoon.in



Sanjeev Paliwal

दुनिया भर में अपराध- कथाएं बेस्ट सेलर, नैना मनोरंजन के लिए लिखी: संजीव पालीवाल



Garima Tiwari

प्रभा खेतान फाउंडेशन की ओर से कलम बिलासपुर और रायपुर का यह ऑनलाइन आयोजन कई दृष्टियों से अनूठा था। न्यूज टेलीविजन की दुनिया से जुड़े लेखक संजीव पालीवाल अपने पहले उपन्यास नैना पर संवाद के लिए मौजूद थे। **अहसास** वूमन ऑफ बिलासपुर से जुड़ी डॉ गरिमा तिवारी ने **कलम** बिलासपुर और रायपुर की इस कड़ी में सभी का स्वागत करते हुए **कलम** का परिचय दिया। अतिथि वक्ता का परिचय देते हुए उन्होंने बताया कि संजीव पालीवाल वरिष्ठ पत्रकार हैं। प्रिंट मीडिया के बड़े अखबारों में काम करने के बाद उन्होंने टीवी में काम किया। देश के पहले प्राइवेट न्यूज टीवी स्टेशन टीवीआई का हिस्सा रहे। दूरदर्शन, आजतक, डीडी न्यूज, चैनल 7 व आईबीएन7 से होते हुए फिर से आजतक में वापसी की और वर्तमान में आजतक के सीनियर एक्जीक्यूटिव एडिटर हैं। उनसे बातचीत में सूत्रधार की भूमिका निभाई गौरव गिरिजा शुक्ला ने। शुक्ला अभिकल्प फाउंडेशन के साथ ही कई सामाजिक गतिविधियों से जुड़े हैं।

गौरव ने बातचीत की शुरुआत संजीव पालीवाल के तीन दशकों के पत्रकारीय अनुभव से किया और यह जानना चाहा कि उन्होंने नैना के रूप में इतनी खतरनाक विधा अपराध को ही क्यों चुना? पालीवाल का जवाब था, "बचपन से ही उन्हें अपराध कथा पढ़ने का शौक



It was a very enjoyable conversation. Sanjeev Paliwal gave unambiguous answers to all questions and chatted enthusiastically about *Naina* and other aspects of his journey. All the attendees commended the event. This month **Kalam Raipur** with its 46th edition completed five years.

— Gaurav Girija Shukla



Hearty congratulations on yet another successful episode of **Kalam**. It was delightful to hear Sanjeev Paliwal. We are happy that Hyatt Raipur is a partner of this initiative.

—Harkaran Singh, GM
Hyatt Raipur



Meena Gupta



Atul Sharma



Annapurna Tiwari



Abhijeet Tiwari

था। इसीलिए वह पत्रकार भी बने। दुनिया भर में अपराध कथाएं सबसे ज्यादा बिकती हैं। अपराध कथा लिखना काफी रोचक है। आप एक साथ ही अपराधी और पुलिसवाले दोनों की तरह सोचते हो। "मेरे लिए नैना के इन्वेस्टिगेशन पार्ट को लिखना सबसे ज्यादा कठिन था। इसी तरह हत्या के लॉजिक को सोचना भी मेहनत का काम था। मीडिया वाले हिस्से को मैंने जिया है, इसलिए उसे लिखना आसान था। "लोग प्रेम लिखते आपने क्राइम थ्रिलर लिखा?" गौरव के इस सवाल पर पालीवाल का कहना था, "नैना में रोमांस भी है। लेखन में बंटवारे के चलते भारत में क्राइम नहीं लिखा जा रहा है।" गंभीर और लोकप्रिय लेखन के विवाद पर अपनी राय जताते हुए संजीव पालीवाल का कहना था, "मैं साहित्य की दुनिया में नहीं जाना चाहता। मैं सिर्फ आज के लिए लिख रहा और क्राइम फिक्शन तक अपने को सीमित रखना चाहता हूँ। मैं अपने लेखन को पाठकों के ऊपर छोड़ना चाहता हूँ।" चेतन भगत का उदाहरण देते हुए उन्होंने कहा, "मैं सिर्फ मनोरंजन के लिए लिख रहा। जहां तक राइटर्स ब्लॉक की बात है, तो यह नैना लिखने के दौरान तो नहीं, पर उसके बाद जरूर महसूस हुआ। कुछ समझ नहीं आ रहा था, तो मैंने पढ़ना शुरू किया। मेरा मानना है कि आप किसी को पढ़कर उसकी कॉपी नहीं कर सकते। सुरेंद्र मोहन पाठक का जिक्र करते हुए उन्होंने कहा, "वह कई भाषाओं के जानकार हैं, जबकि मैं हिंदुस्तानी ज़बान का लेखक हूँ।"

"साहित्य में बेस्ट सेलर्स और किताबों के प्रमोशन को आप किस रूप में देखते हैं?" शुक्ला के इस सवाल के जवाब में पालीवाल ने दशकों पहले अखबारों के मुकाबले का उदाहरण देते हुए कहा कि प्रतियोगिता से लाभ ही मिलता है। आजतक चैनल की मार्केटिंग का उदाहरण देते हुए उन्होंने कहा कि लेखक की यह जिम्मेदारी है कि वह अपनी किताब की मार्केटिंग करे। दैनिक जागरण के बेस्ट सेलर सूची का हवाला देते हुए उनका तर्क था कि अगर यह सूची नहीं छपती, तो आप आज के दौर के युवा लेखकों का नाम तक नहीं जान पाते। दूसरी किताब लिखने के लिए उन पर कितना दबाव है? के जवाब में पालीवाल ने यह माना, "दबाव और चुनौति तो है। क्योंकि मुझे खुद को साबित भी करना है और प्रकाशक से मेरा दूसरी किताब का करार भी है। नैना पर वेब सीरीज के लिए काम भी हो रहा है।"

दर्शकों में बिलासपुर से अभिजीत तिवारी ने नैना नाम रखने के पीछे की वजह पूछी? तो पालीवाल का जवाब था, "मैं चाहता था कि इस नाम का कोई एंकर न हो।" रायपुर से अतुल शर्मा का सवाल था कि आम पाठक तो पुस्तक-समीक्षा से तय कर लेता है कि किताब कैसी होगी। इससे बचने के लिए क्या करना होगा? पालीवाल का जवाब था, "इसके लिए ज्यादा से ज्यादा किताबें पढ़कर पाठक को अपनी समझ खुद बनानी होगी।" संजय शुक्ल के सवाल के जवाब में पालीवाल का कहना था, "किसी वेब सीरीज या मीडियम के आने से किताबों पर असर नहीं होगा। पर लेखक को इन चुनौतियों से जूझने के लिए लगातार अच्छा लिखना होगा।" प्रणव तिवारी ने पूछा कि आप मनोरंजन के अलावा नैना से क्या कोई संदेश देना चाहते हैं? पालीवाल का उत्तर था, "मैंने मनोरंजन के अलावा एक ऐसी दुनिया के बारे में लिखा है, जिसके बारे में लोग नहीं जानते।" श्रोताओं में शामिल आलोचक अनंत विजय का सवाल था कि अगर आप टिकटॉक से मुकाबला करना चाहते हैं तो क्या उसमें अश्लीलता होगी? पालीवाल का कहना था, "जरूरी नहीं कि मनोरंजन में अश्लीलता हो। मेरा मानना है कि वेब सीरीज में गालियां हैं, जो नहीं होनी चाहिए।" रीतू सिंह का सवाल था कि लेखक अपनी किताबों की ओर पाठक को कैसे आकर्षित करे? संजीव पालीवाल का जवाब था, "अच्छे लेखक की तलाश प्रकाशक को भी होती है। आपने अच्छी किताब लिखी है तो उसे जरूर मौका मिलेगा।" यह बातचीत और लंबी चलती पर समयसीमा के चलते इसे समाप्त करना पड़ा।

Kalam Raipur is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Hyatt Raipur and Abhikalp Foundation

Kalam Bilaspur is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Nayi Duniya, Abhikalp Foundation and Ehsaas Women of Bilaspur

India, Abroad and at Home



Praveen Kumar Jha



Balendu Dwivedi

Virtual platforms have brought the world closer. Norway-based doctor, author and music enthusiast Praveen Kumar Jha joined writer Balendu Dwivedi from Lucknow for the **Kalam** Gurugram session.

Jha began writing and debating in his student days but it was only after he settled down in Norway that he started writing seriously. Jha made a conscious decision to write in Hindi to remain connected with his mother tongue.

One of the greatest influences on Jha has been his grandfather, the first person to record in Maithili for (the then) HMV.

The young Jha enjoyed hanging out with friends in college, sharing and talking music. Jha believes that *shastriya sangeet* (classical music) should be referred to as *Bharatiya sangeet* or *Hindustani sangeet* because it has its roots in folk music. He discussed the richness of various cultures such as the *baithak gaana*, *chautal gana* and Caribbean *birha* that have roots in folk music. His book *Wah Ustad* is dedicated to his love for music.

Jha made a conscious decision to write in Hindi to remain connected with his mother tongue

Missing out on more travel because of duties at the hospital.

Speaking about the pandemic, Jha said migrants contribute greatly to the country's economy and deserve more help. He hoped that they would return home with time and highlighted how migrants in the UK are in better condition. It is crucial that migrants unite and form an association to take care of their welfare. A code of law should be framed so that their basic rights are defined and protected, he said.

Jha also spoke about his book *Coolie Lines* that defines the ethos of Indian lives and deals with the idea that Indians abroad are more Indian than Indians at home.

Kalam Gurugram is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Dainik Jagran, Vani Foundation and Ehsaas Women of Gurugram

Jha's innate passion for discovering new places inspired him to pen a travelogue. His only regret:



Aradhana Pradhan

Poetry Powers Women



Artinder Sandhu

Author-poet Artinder Sandhu's love for the written word was born when she was just eight. From penning patriotic poetry to experimenting with newer themes, Sandhu shared her literary journey at an online session of **Aakhar**.

The session hosted by Majha House, a platform for the promotion of arts and culture of the city of Amritsar, saw Sandhu in conversation with Jasmit Nayyar, **Ehsaas** woman of Amritsar and former principal of Saroop Rani Government College in Chandigarh. Sandhu also recited her works all through the session.

"*Aakhar* is an initiative of Majha House to promote Punjabi literature and language. We organise a session on Punjabi writing and poetry every second month, and today is the fourth event in this series," Dr Arvinder Chamak, a member of Majha House, said while introducing the session.

Sandhu has published 14 books of poetry, including *Apne To Apne Tak*, and has a vast readership spread across Punjab, the US and Canada.

A science graduate, Sandhu always felt a deep bond towards poetry. She said her background in science helped her observe things objectively. She confessed that she once wrote a poem comparing a woman to an amoeba, as both are the origins of life!

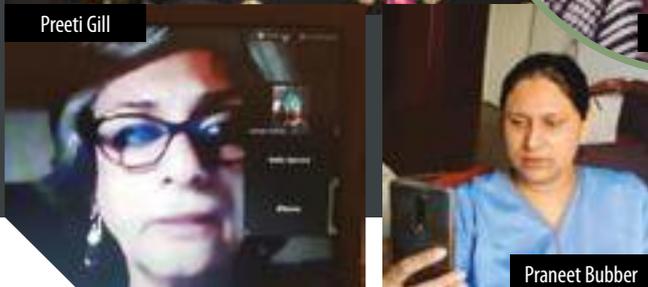
The poet went on to reminisce how her words took on a feminist edge as the pen became her tool to question the position of women in society. Sandhu added that she once came across a woman whose life story opened her eyes to the atrocities that women are often subjected to and that she had been unfamiliar with because of a liberal upbringing.

Sandhu stressed the need for men to empathise with women to further the cause of women's empowerment.

A fan of Baba Balwant Singh, Sandhu said: "Through the quarterly literary magazine *Ekam*, we highlight and promote writing that is women-centric, glorifying the role of women in our lives, trying to make people appreciate and respect women."

The session ended with a thank-you note from Preeti Gill, the founder of Majha House.

Aakhar Amritsar is presented in association with Majha House



Preeti Gill



Jasmit Nayyar



Praneet Bubber



A Writer of Many Moods

Writing, for Jerry Pinto, is like "going on a long hike". The award-winning writer, poet, translator and journalist was at the first online session of **The Write Circle Raipur** moderated by Kalpana Choudhary, educator and **Ehsaas** Woman.

The session began with a recitation of Pinto's much-loved poem, *Tickle Me, Don't Tickle Me*. The poem reflects on how today's parents crowd their children and stunt their inner selves. Parents, Pinto said, should be the guiding power but not the goading agent.

His first novel, *Em and The Big Hoom*, had been a catharsis of sorts and an unburdening of the story of his mother who suffered from bipolar disorder. The book won *The Hindu* Literary Prize and the Commonwealth Book Prize.

It was a friend who discovered Pinto's literary talents and volunteered to be his agent to get his work published. His friend's faith in his work prompted Pinto to venture into the world of words.

Pinto advised amateur writers to write without fear and to think of themselves as masons who lay bricks, putting down one word after another. He believes that struggle is good as it brings out the best in a writer.

Speaking about his book *Helen: The Life and Times of an H-Bomb*, Pinto said he had wanted to unveil the woman behind the glamorous razzmatazz and scintillating dances. Helen had made her own place in the film world and was never considered an "item girl".

Pinto is especially proud of *A Book of Light*, a culmination of dark experiences shared by many. The tales



Jerry Pinto



Kalpana Choudhary

are gripping, yet emotional. He stressed the need to address mental health issues and not hide them in fear of upsetting

the picture-perfect family image. "Do what you can do best to heal the world," he said.

Murder in Mahim, he disclosed, was inspired by his anger against Article 377 and was his attempt to get into and decode people's minds. He ended by saying that every thinking Indian should interrogate his or her privileges.

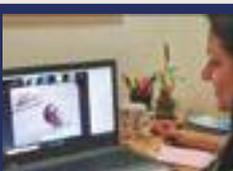
The session ended with an interactive session.

Hosting author Jerry Pinto for a virtual session was a delightful learning experience for us and a great opportunity for the literary enthusiasts in our city. Among many takeaways from the session, we loved it when he talked about how a writer's work is much like a mason's, building words upon words and distilling the essence. The overall response from our viewers was positive and it was hugely satisfying for us to be able to bring them to this session amid uncertain times.

—Ehsaas, Raipur

Harkaran Singh,
GM of Hyatt Raipur

Shrishti Trivedi



Kirti Kirdatt



Aanchal Garcha

The Write Circle Raipur is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Hyatt Raipur and Ehsaas women of Raipur

Tale of Lost Tribes



Nidhi Dugar Kundalia

The lives of the marginalised, their occupations and tribal heritage were in focus at **The Write Circle** with author Nidhi Dugar Kundalia.

Dugar Kundalia was in conversation with Vaidehi Singh at the virtual session presented by **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** that centred around the two books — *The Lost Generation: Chronicling India's Dying Professions* and *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's Isolated Tribes*.

The session began with Dugar Kundalia speaking about her inspiration for her latest book, *White As Milk and Rice*, released right before the lockdown. The author narrated how she came across a tribal woman named Birsu and how her many tales about her life, culture and heritage broke the shackles of reluctance Dugar Kundalia had initially felt about documenting tribal life as an outsider.

The author said she strove to lend an empathetic voice to her narrative to portray the deep-rooted alienation tribal communities feel because of prolonged victimisation. She went on to read an excerpt from her book about Kanjar, a nomadic tribe from Rajasthan.

Speaking about the need to safeguard the rights of tribals, Kundalia said, "If the jungle is the heart, the tribals are its heartbeat."

Her first book, *The Lost Generation*, is about the *rudalis* (professional mourners) of Rajasthan, the *ittarwalas* (perfume-makers) of Hyderabad, and the Godna tattoo artists of Madhya Pradesh — all indigenous professional sects that have been disappearing in the face of rapid modernisation.

Dugar Kundalia wished she could preserve the professions without the infringement of class discrimination but admitted that segregation might not be possible.

The session ended with enthusiastic questions from the audience that the author answered. She also urged everyone to buy books from independent bookstores to ensure their survival in these hard times of the pandemic.

The session was opened and closed by Mita Kapoor, CEO of Siyahi.

The Write Circle Jaipur is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Siyahi, Spagia and Ehsaas Women of Jaipur



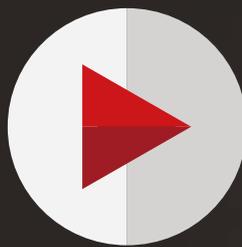
Vaidehi Singh



Mita Kapoor



Love, Religion and Politics



The many faces of Ram were revealed in an online session of **Kalam** Mumbai with author-politician Pavan K. Varma.

Varma, a former spokesperson of the ministry of external affairs and press secretary to the Prime Minister, has written 24 books. He was in conversation with Karishma Mehta, **Ehsaas** Woman of Mumbai.

The gripping session began with discussions on two of Varma's books — *Adi Shankaracharya: Hinduism's Greatest Thinker* and *The Greatest Ode to Lord Ram: Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas*. The author spoke about the Advait School of thought propounded by Adi Shankaracharya.

Varma said *Ramcharitmanas* was not just about storytelling, it also revealed various layers of Hinduism.

On the differences in the love stories of Radha-Krishna and Ram-Sita, Varma said while divinity was the basis of Radha-Krishna's relationship, Ram-Sita were a married couple and Sita a devoted wife. Ram is referred to as *maryada purushottam* or the ideal man, who is the role model, whereas Krishna was referred to as *lila purushottam*.

Varma narrated how Ram broke down in front of Lakshman when Ravan abducted Sita, reflecting his love for his wife. But he admitted that there were instances of gender inequality and patriarchal dominance in the ancient text, adding that some such sections may have been later additions to Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

"Ram was not a passive god," said Varma. He said the image of Ram had been contorted for political gain. Ram's message to Bharat, he said, was that there is no greater faith or religion than the welfare of others and no greater evil than hurting others.

Varma said he is currently working on his next book on Hindu civilisation.

Kalam Mumbai is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Lokmat, ITC Grand Central and Ehsaas women of Mumbai.

Divinity was the basis of Radha-Krishna's relationship, while Ram-Sita were a married couple and Sita a devoted wife



Pavan K. Varma

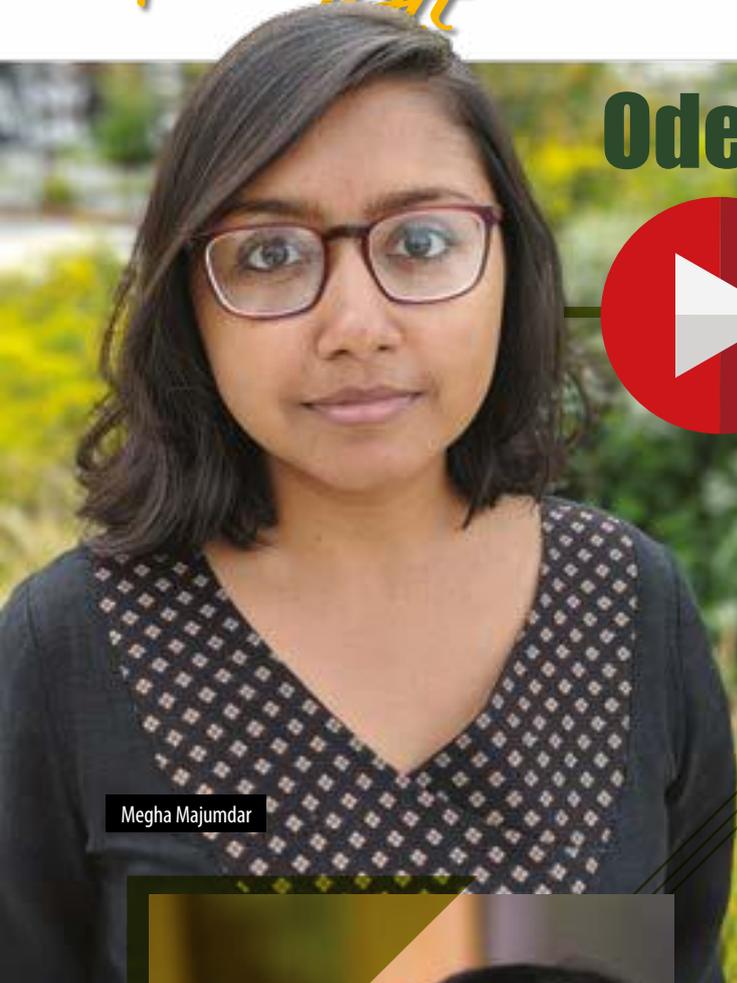


Karishma Mehta



Swati Agarwal

Ode to Home, from Faraway



Megha Majumdar

Kolkata, the city of her birth, is Megha Majumdar's muse but living and writing away from home has only sharpened her focus on the many facets of the city she grew up in.

The New York-based debutante author and associate editor of *Catapult* spoke about her book, *A Burning*, at the second virtual session of **Kitaab** hosted by **Prabha Khaitan Foundation**. She was in conversation with author Nilanjana Roy. **Ehsaas** Woman Amita Munot welcomed the author and opened the session.

A Traub scholar at Harvard University, Majumdar graduated from John Hopkins University with a degree in social anthropology.

A Burning, which has received rave reviews across all platforms in the country, revolves around three characters whose lives undergo various transitions in the current socio-political backdrop.

Majumdar said she owed her sensibilities to the love for reading, sense of humour and passion for seeking out libraries and second-hand bookshops that are characteristic of Kolkata.

Each of Majumdar's characters is a strong entity — be it Jeevan, an ordinary Muslim woman who is accused of inciting a terror attack, or the bold Lovely, a eunuch who dreams of being a movie star.

The author admitted to be an obsessive rewriter, having gone through multiple drafts in four years to bring out the voices of her characters. "The hours immersed in writing have been fulfilling and rewarding," she said.

Majumdar began writing in her school and college days and was a regular participant in essay competitions.

Her message to aspiring writers was to write about things that moved them.

Ehsaas Woman Amita Munot concluded the session with a thank-you note.

This Kitaab is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Penguin India



Nilanjana Roy



Sangeeta Datta



Shakshi Bhansali

वो नहीं मेरा मगर उससे मुहब्बत है तो है – दीप्ति मिश्रा की ग़ज़ल से गुलजार रही एक शाम



Dipti Misra

यह शायरी और ग़ज़ल से लबरेज लंदन का एक दिन था। प्रभा खेतान फाउंडेशन ने यूके हिंदी समिति, वाणी फाउंडेशन, ब्रिटिश काउंसिल और वातायन के सहयोग से दीप्ति मिश्रा के साथ कलम का आयोजन किया। 26 जून को लंदन के समयानुसार 5 बजे भारतीय समय रात्रि के साढ़े 9 बजे वेबिनार पर ब्रिटेन के विभिन्न स्थानों के आमंत्रित श्रोता अपनी प्रिय लेखिका दीप्ति मिश्रा को सुनने के लिए मौजूद थे।

मिश्रा बहुमुखी प्रतिभा की धनी लेखिका, कवयित्री, शायर, ग़ज़लकार व अभिनेत्री हैं। ग़ज़ल व नज़्मों की उनकी कई किताबें आ चुकी हैं, जिनमें बर्फ़ में पलती हुई आग, हैं तो हैं, बात दिल की कह दें और वहां वहां कहां को खूब सराहा गया है। उनकी रचनाएं हिंदी, उर्दू की पत्र-पत्रिकाओं में समान रूप से छपती रही हैं। कई गीत व ग़ज़लें हिंदी फिल्मों व टेलीविजन धारावाहिकों में भी शामिल किए गए। हसरतें नामक अलबम में गुलाम अली द्वारा गाई गई इनकी नज़्में व ग़ज़लें, जीआईएमए अवार्ड में बेस्ट फोक अलबम के लिए भी नामित हुए थे। कविता कृष्णमूर्ति और हरिहरन जैसे लोग उनकी ग़ज़ल व गीतों को अपनी आवाज दे चुके हैं।

आरंभ में कार्यक्रम के संचालक पद्मेश गुप्ता ने मिश्रा का स्वागत किया और कहा कि लंदन में इस समय दोपहर खिली हुई है। मिश्रा के संक्षिप्त परिचय के साथ उन्होंने बताया कि कलम लंदन की शुरुआत वर्ष 2017 में हुई थी। कोरोना के चलते इस साल कलम को ऑनलाइन आयोजित करना पड़ा, अन्यथा लेखक वहां अपने प्रशंसकों, पाठकों, साहित्यकारों के बीच सीधे मौजूद होते। हर व्यक्ति अपने आप में एक डायरी होता है कहते हुए पद्मेश गुप्ता ने मिश्रा से पहला सवाल यही पूछा कि उनके लेखन की शुरुआत कब हुई?

जवाब में मिश्रा ने बताया कि जब लिखना शुरू होता है डायरी बन जाती है। उन्होंने बताया कि “पापा मेरे शायरी के शौकीन थे। जो पत्रिकाएं आती थीं उनमें शायरी होती थी, उन्हें पढ़कर लिखने का शौक हुआ। काफिया मिलाना उसी समय शुरू हो गया था। पर पहली कविता बारहवीं में लिखी थी।” फिर क्या था? बात कविता की चली, तो फरमाइश हुई, जिस पर दीप्ति मिश्रा ने अपनी कई शानदार ग़ज़लें सुनाईं। जिनमें कुछ तो उनकी बेहद चर्चित थीं। चंद शेर से बानगी देखिए:

वो एक दर्द जो मेरा भी है, तुम्हारा भी
वही सज़ा है मगर है वही सहारा भी
तेरे बग़ैर कोई पल गुजर नहीं पाता
तेरे बग़ैर ही इक उम्र को गुजारा भी

हिंदी की कविताओं से उर्दू के शिखर तक की यात्रा पर इस प्रख्यात शायरा का कहना था, “मैं लखनऊ की हूँ। उर्दू मेरी जुबान है। मुंबई आने के बाद मुझे बाकायदा उर्दू में खिंची गया। जब आपको इतना प्यार मिलता है तो आप ग़ज़ल की खूबसूरती पर जाते ही हैं। यह ऊपर वाले का करम है कि मुझे यहां स्थान मिला।” मिश्रा ने यह भी कहा उर्दू और हिंदी में कोई फर्क नहीं। “मैं दोनों में सहज हूँ।”

फिल्मों में अपने गीतों के मुकाम को लेकर उन्होंने कहा, “हम लिखने के लिए लिखते हैं। हम फिल्मों के लिए नहीं लिखते। जो लिखते हैं वह फिल्मों, धारावाहिक में चला जाए, तो इससे कोई एतराज भी नहीं।” उन्होंने कहा कि “मुझे तो लगता है कि शेर और ग़ज़ल अपना मुकाम अपने आप तय करते हैं। एक कहानी सी होती है, कविता के



Padmesh Gupta

धाट्स होते हैं। सब्जेक्ट अपने आप अपने को चुनता है।” संचालक के अनुरोध पर उन्होंने फिर एक ग़ज़ल सुनाईं।

वो नहीं मेरा मगर उससे मुहब्बत है तो है
ये अगर रस्मों, रिवाजों से बगावत है तो है

इस दौरान उन्होंने अपनी प्रेम में डूबी एक हिंदी कविता सुनहली मछली भी सुनाई। संत मोरारी बापू अपने प्रवचनों के दौरान कई बार दीप्ति मिश्रा की ग़ज़लों व नज़्मों का उल्लेख ही नहीं करते बल्कि दीप्ति उनकी पसंदीदा लेखिका कैसे हैं? के बारे में इस ख्यातिलब्ध रचनाकार का कहना था, “हमारा संबंध मोरारी बापू से अंतर से है। बापू अपने वक्त से आगे हैं। जो कर्म के मठाधीश हैं वो उन्हें नहीं समझ सकते।” उन्होंने इस दौरान मोरारी बापू की पसंद की एक कविता भी सुनाई।

गुलाम अली और हरिहरन जैसे गायकों द्वारा उनकी ग़ज़लों, नज़्मों को आवाज देने पर अपनी प्रतिक्रिया में मिश्रा ने कहा कि “गीता मुझे बचपन में ही समझ में आ गई थी। कर्म करो तो फल मिलेगा। गुलाम अली साहब ने मेरी पूरी अलबम सुनाया है। हरिहरन जी का खुद से फोन आया। उन्होंने कहा मुझे आपकी यह ग़ज़ल गानी है। मैंने कहा गा लीजिए।”

बातचीत के दौरान मिश्रा ने फिल्मों, रेडियो, और टेलीविजन से जुड़े अपने अनुभवों को भी शेयर किया। उन्होंने बताया, “रेडियो से तो जब वह बीए में थी, तभी जुड़ गई थीं।। शदी के बाद दस सालों का एक विराम था। उसके बाद मैंने सोचा अब क्या? मैं हूँ कौन। तो मुझे दो ही चीजें आती थीं। एक्टिंग और लेखन। तो दोनों ही किया। मैंने सारी मेहनत फिर से की। दिल्ली में जीरो से शुरू किया। वही मुंबई में किया। वहां मैं एक्टिंग के लिए गई थी। पर जैसे मेरी राइटिंग को ज्यादा सराहना मिली।” उन्होंने यह भी कहा कि “मैं जहां होती हूँ, वहीं की होती हूँ। एक्टिंग, लेखन मुझे बराबर पसंद है।”

इस दौरान उन्होंने अपनी एक और पसंदीदा ग़ज़ल सुनाईं।

दिल से अपनाया न उसने गैर भी समझा नहीं
ये भी एक रिश्ता है, जिसमें कोई भी रिश्ता नहीं...

सवाल जवाब के सत्र में कलम लंदन के श्रोताओं ने मिश्रा से जमकर बात की। डॉ कृष्णा श्रीवास्तव ने मिश्रा की तारीफ करते हुए कहा, “जिनको सब सुनते हैं, वह आपको सुनते हैं।” उनका इशारा मोरारी बापू की तरफ था। कादंबरी मेहरा ने अपने लखनऊ होने का हवाला दिया, और कहा कि “हमारी जुबान एक है।” तितिषा शाह ने कहा कि “आपकी ग़ज़ल के सारे शेर दिल को छू गए।” उन्होंने टीवी और फिल्मों में काम करने में अंतर के सवाल पर पूछा। जय वर्मा का सवाल था “आप तरन्नुम में गाती हैं क्या?” जवाब में मिश्रा ने कहा “हम बहुत बेसुरे हैं।” आदेश पोद्दार भी इस बातचीत में शामिल हुईं। अंत में मिश्रा ने इतनी शानदार बातचीत आयोजित करने के लिए कलम लंदन के आयोजकों का आभार प्रकट किया।

Changemaker with a Heart

Empowering acid attack survivors to providing clean drinking water to the underprivileged, Arundeeep Plaha has worked tirelessly to change lives.

The **Ehsaas** woman from Oslo started the Indian Norwegian Community (INC) in 2014 with a project that reached out to acid attack survivors. To take forward the compassionate goal, the organisation collaborated with Reshma Qureshi, the face of Make Love Not Scars and an acid attack survivor herself. The campaign continues.

Prabha Khaitan Foundation's initiative, **Ehsaas**, is all about camaraderie and bonding among women from diverse spheres of life who come together to work tirelessly to promote and support several sections of the society. **Ehsaas** women embody courage and are always ready to step forward to help

Plaha's current mission is to ensure better living conditions for villagers in Rajghat, Rajasthan. She has started with supplying clean drinking water and is now working towards building a school and getting regular electricity supply.

Plaha believes that poverty is not an inevitable fate that has to be accepted. "Every person in this universe has the right to have access to basic amenities. Clean drinking water is one of them. And that is what we aim to bring to Rajghat," she said.

Her goal is to help the needy become self-sufficient so that they can live with dignity and security. Education, she believes, can help achieve the goal.

A believer in change, Plaha envisions INC as the wheel of metamorphosis. "If we help 20 persons today to be self-sufficient, they can help 10 ore in the same manner and the wheel of change will start to move forward, making the world a better place to live," she said.



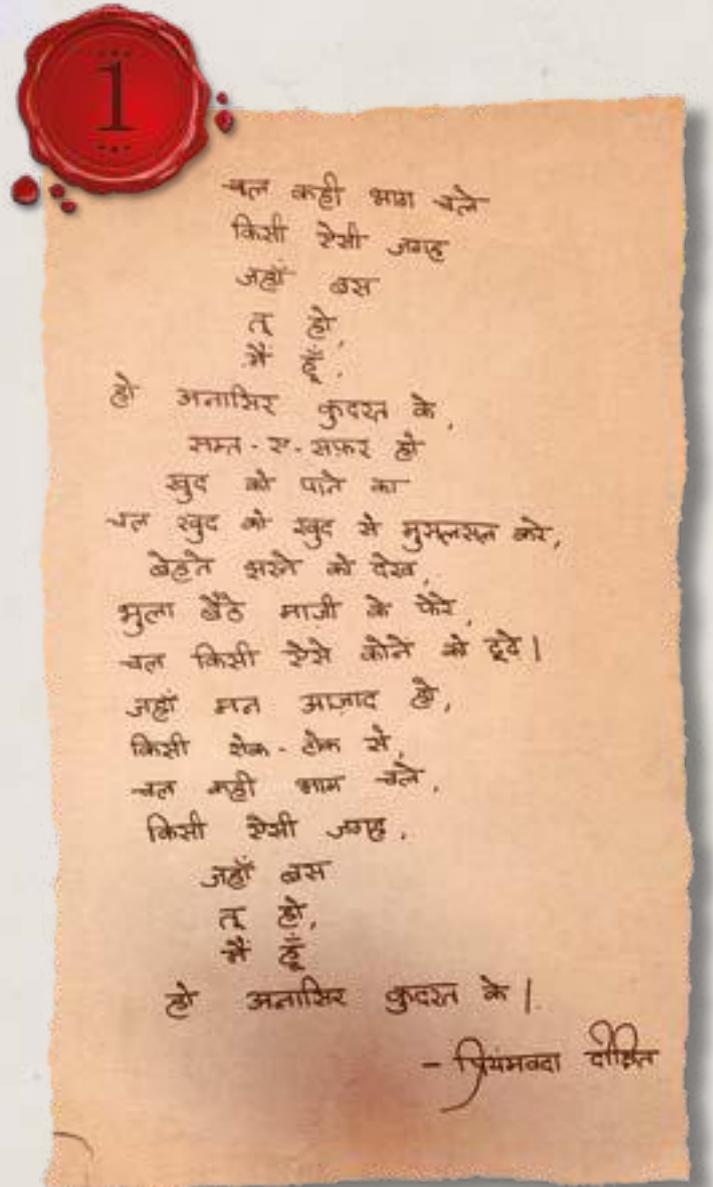
Arundeeep Plaha aka Maya

प्रभा खेतान फाउंडेशन और कविशाला की 'पोएट्री ऑन पेपर' में युवाओं ने दिखाई रुचि

प्रभा खेतान फाउंडेशन ने 'अपनी भाषा अपने लोग' वाली अपनी मुहिम के तहत आपदा को अवसर में बदलने का प्रयास किया और 'कविशाला' के साथ मिलकर ट्विटर पर एक ऑनलाइन अभियान *#PoetryOnPaper* नाम से चलाया। इस अभियान के तहत लोगों से अपनी लिखी कविता को हैशटैग — *#PoetryOnPaper* के साथ साझा करने के लिए कहा गया। यह अभियान कविता की मार्फत अपनी भावनाओं का इजहार करनेवालों के लिए एक बुलावा सा था। *#पोएट्रीऑनपेपर* के लिए लिखने वालों को इस वाक्य से प्रेरणा दी गई — 'आइए अपनी पुरानी यादों को ताजा करते हैं। चलिए कुछ लिखते हैं, और जुड़ते हैं अपने ही जैसों के साथ कागज पर लिखी प्रतियोगिता में...'

वैसे तो *#पोएट्रीऑनपेपर* प्रतियोगिता के लिए डेढ़ माह का समय तय किया गया था, पर लोगों ने इसमें जितना उत्साह और रुचि दिखाई, उसके चलते इसे जिस तरह से आगे बढ़ाया गया है, वह यह साबित करता है कि समय चाहे जैसा भी हो, लोग लेखन में रुचि रखते हैं; उन्हें बस कुछ प्रेरणा और उत्साह देने की जरूरत है। इस अभियान में 550 से अधिक लोगों ने हिस्सा लिया, जो गिनती की तुलना में लिखने के मौके के लिहाज से बहुत अच्छा है। खास बात यह कि लोगों द्वारा अपनी रचनाओं और कविता को इस मंच पर साझा करने का क्रम अब भी जारी है।

#पोएट्रीऑनपेपर अभियान की कविताओं को देखें, तो रचनाकारों की लेखन प्रतिभा का पता चलता है। पहली विजेता प्रियंवदा दीक्षित ने लिखा, 'चल कहीं भाग चले, जहां तू हो, मैं हू...', दूसरे विजेता नंदन के त्रिवेदी रहे, जिन्होंने गुजराती में जो लिखा, उसका संदेश था, 'कोरोना ने हमें संबंध, स्वास्थ्य, सेवा, साहस, अनुशासन, आत्मविश्वास, सावधानी, सतर्कता जैसे मसलों पर सोचने और करने का अवसर उपलब्ध कराया है'। तीसरी विजेता पल्लवी सोनी रहीं, जिन्होंने लिखा, 'सूरज ने सिखाया है, रात से लड़ना, तम को पछाड़ना...'



Stand Up for Fellow Humans



A 12-year-old girl lies on a hospital bed, angry burns covering every inch of her bare skin. Her heavily bandaged body, swollen lips and bruised eyes tell a silent tale of torture. She is not alone. Millions fall prey to trafficking and are brutalised across the world every year.

A Global Report on Trafficking in Persons launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) marks sexual exploitation as the most common form of human trafficking (79 per cent), followed by forced labour (18 per cent). Nearly 20 per cent of all trafficked humans are children.

Yet, many cases of human trafficking go undetected and the UN often refers to these as the "hidden figure of crime".

The UNODC defines human trafficking as "the acquisition of people by improper means such as force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them".

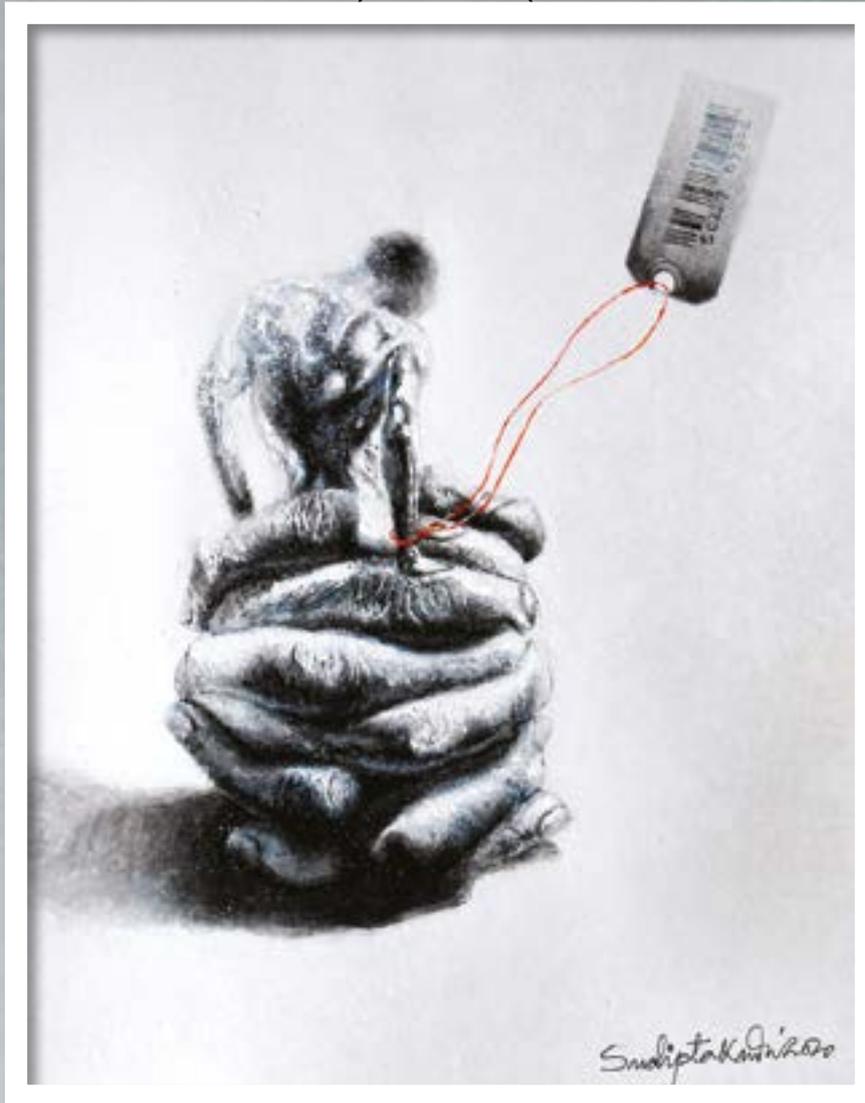
The Blue Heart Campaign was launched in 2008 as a global initiative to stir involvement and action

in all sectors of society. People were encouraged to wear the Blue Heart to show solidarity with trafficking survivors. The UNODC aims to make the Blue Heart an international symbol, representing "the sadness of those who are trafficked, while reminding us of the cold-heartedness of those who buy and sell fellow human beings".

The UN adopted the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons in 2010, and in 2013, July 30 was designated as the World Day against Trafficking in Persons to raise awareness on "the situation of victims of human trafficking and for the promotion and protection of their rights".

For more than 200 years, after the implementation of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, several such measures have been implemented to protect the rights of human beings and prevent trafficking in persons. But how much has the picture really changed?

Traffickers operate and thrive in both formal and

ARTWORK BY
SUDIPTA KUNDU

informal networks. The techniques used to recruit and trap targets are similar worldwide, playing upon the victim's insecurities. Often, the first step is offering the target a lucrative employment opportunity. Needless to say, most are false promises. And thus begins a vicious cycle of violence that involves physical and mental torture — captivity, whipping, rape and forced prostitution.

More often than not, the victims are sold many times over, sometimes also across borders. Even if they do manage to escape, they are ostracised from society because of the stigma attached to trafficking. Unable to return to their families, traumatised and helpless, survivors find themselves completely alone, without any means to sustain themselves.

Benjamin Franklin had famously said "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are." To preserve the innate dignity of our fellow human beings, we must lend our voice to the fight against human trafficking. While addressing the root

causes of this heinous crime is an important first step, reintegrating the victims of trafficking into society with compassion is of utmost importance, too.

In a world threatened by the novel coronavirus, first responders have been our saving grace. This year's World Day against Trafficking in Persons will witness the UN celebrating the first responders to human trafficking. These are the people "who work in different sectors — identifying, supporting, counselling and seeking justice for victims of trafficking, and challenging the impunity of the traffickers".

We at the **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** salute such fighters and remain committed to the cause in the hope for a better world in the years to come. Because in Maya Angelou's words, "When you do nothing, you feel overwhelmed and powerless. But when you get involved, you feel the sense of hope and accomplishment that comes from knowing you are working to make things better."

Regal Designs

Pearls and biryani are synonymous with Hyderabad but the city is also a treasure trove of several other exquisite handicrafts and culinary delicacies.

The **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** hosts several events, such as **Kalam** and **The Write Circle**, in this old city of the Nizams and every time the Foundation has tried to promote the local cuisine and crafts to help preserve the country's rich cultural heritage. Guest speakers invited to literary sessions in Hyderabad are gifted Bidri mementos and served *gavvalu* and *khajja*.

Bidri craft was born in the city of Bidar way back in the 15th century. It is said to be an amalgamation of Persian, Arabic and Turkish designs. The craft flourished under the royal patronage of Ahmed Shah Al Wali Bahamani, the ninth king of the Bahamani dynasty. Bidri work is said to have been inspired by Rangeen Mahal, a palace with intricate inlay work of mother-of-pearl built by Ali Barid. Many believe that the craft was first brought to India by Sufi Khwaja Moinuddin Hasan Chishti in the 12th century in the form of utensils.

Bidri work was initially used mostly to decorate the base of *hookahs* but gradually aristocratic households took to intricately decorated *abkhora* or *katora* (bowls), *aftaba* (ewer), *surahi* (water bottles), *pandaan* (boxes for betel leaves), spice boxes, *dibiya* (small boxes), *ugaldan* (spittoon), jewel boxes, *palang-pae* (cot legs), *mir-e-farsh* (weights for floor covering), *shamadan* (candelabras), *uddan* (incense burner), *gulabpash* (rosewater sprinkler),

rihal (bookstand) and *pushtkhar* (back scratchers). Traditional designs were mostly words from Arabic scripts, poppy plants, vine motifs, rose plants, *kothmiri* patterns and geometric patterns. Later, motifs influenced by the Ajanta caves became popular as well.

The secret to perfect bidri work is said to be the soil that lays the foundation of the craft. Soil from Bidar is suited best as it has great oxidising properties. The process of making these beautiful articles is complicated. Bidri work involves eight tedious stages of moulding, smoothening by file, designing by chisels, engraving by chisel and hammer, pure silver inlaying, smoothening again, buffing and finally oxidising by soil and ammonium chloride. The chemicals in the soil are believed to give



Bidri

Bidri articles their lustrous black colour. An alloy of zinc and copper, castor oil, silver, and copper sulphate are used to create Bidri products. The finished products are black with brilliant silver inlay, once polished in oil. The intricate designs, use of silver and the fact that most of the work is done by hand makes Bidri craft items costly. Innovative contemporary designs have made the craft popular internationally as well. Office stationeries, lamp shades, home décor items and tiles crafted in Bidri are much in demand.

From craft to gastronomy, *gavvalu* is a traditional sweet of Andhra Pradesh, usually made during Diwali. It has now gained popularity as a snack. *Gavvalu* means shells. The sweet is shaped like a cowrie shell and hence the name. The shell is made of flour and given a unique design with the help of a traditional wooden shaping tool or even a comb or fork. Traditionally, *gavvalu* would be soaked in jaggery syrup after being deep-fried but now sugar syrup is used as well. The shell-like shape of the sweet, with its grooves and hollows, allows it to hold a greater amount of syrup. This makes it flaky, rich and syrupy.

Another tea-time favourite is the Osmania biscuit. Like most of this region's cuisine, this cookie, too, has a royal connect. There are various stories about the biscuit's origin and how it got its name. Some believe the biscuit is named after Mir Osman Ali Khan, the seventh Nizam. It is said that he liked the biscuits made at a popular restaurant in Abids so much that every evening a car would travel there from Nazari Bagh to buy freshly baked biscuits. Others say the biscuits were named Osmania as they were first made by a group of dieticians at Osmania Hospital as energy-boosters for patients.

Though there is no fixed recipe for these biscuits and every bakery has its own variation, butter, milk powder, sugar, salt and flour are the main ingredients used. The dough is rolled into a huge slab and then moulds are used to cut the biscuits to shape before being baked. These biscuits with a flavourful blend of sweet and salty notes are best enjoyed with a cup of Irani *chai*. Most bakeries and hotels sell this delicacy and it is often the fastest-moving item.



Osmania biscuits



Gavvalu



Diana R Chambers

Royalty and Romance



Mandira Nayar

A maharaja, a young actress and a love story — author and script-writer Diana R. Chambers' new novel has all the ingredients of a bestseller.

The Star of India is a fictionalised account of the real-life romance between a rising young Hollywood actress and the Maharaja of Cooch Behar.

Chambers spoke about her book at a virtual session of **The Universe Writes** with journalist Mandira Nayar.

Chambers said she shared a deep bond with Nancy Valentine (the actress) and found the character of the mother-in-law, Indira, fascinating. She described Indira as a marvellous woman who broke many rules and rejected a very powerful maharaja to marry the ruler of a smaller princely state. Indira, Chambers shared, had pushed the



Mita Kapur

boundaries as much as she could and had she lived today she might have been a CEO of a top firm.

The women in Chambers' writings have often been intrepid characters derived from real life. She believes in women who claim agency and shaped Nancy to be such a character. Nancy had a naïve love for India born of a dream, but marrying the maharaja was a brave decision.

The author's first tryst with India was when she landed here during the Emergency. Asked about her travels to Cooch Behar, China, Vietnam, and other places, Chambers said travelling was one of the most exciting parts of writing a book. She recounted her failed attempt at travelling to the Khyber Pass and how she ended up exploring the local bazaar on foot, alone.

Asked about the difference between writing a screenplay and a book, Chambers said a movie had a bigger canvas, but a book allowed the writer greater freedom to explore.

The session ended with the exciting possibility of *The Star of India* being adapted for the screen. The print version of the book will be out in August, but the e-book version is available already.

The Universe Writes is presented by Shree Cement, in association with Siyahi





बेवफ़ा (एक छोटी कहानी)

मैं उसको हमेशा ऑनलाइन देखता था। आधी रात को भी वह एक्टिव दिखती, तो मुझे आश्चर्य होता ! यह कैसी लड़की है! फेसबुक स्टेटस में शादी- शुदा लिखती है फिर आधी रात को ऑनलाइन कैसे रह सकती है। उत्सुकता से आकर्षण बढ़ा। मैंने उसे फ्रेंड रिक्वेस्ट भेजा। उसने स्वीकार कर लिया।

पता चला कि वह अकेले विदेश में नौकरी करती है। पति भारत में हैं।

मुझे और भी तसल्ली हुई और मन को थोड़ा बढ़ावा मिला।

मुझे अनिद्रा रोग था। रात को मोबाइल ही इन दिनों जीने का सहारा बन गया था। हर किसी को हेलो बोल देता। मैसेंजर पर हाथ हिला देता। कुछ हमारी तरह बूढ़े और खाली बैठे लोग तो ही मिल जाते, और मेरी रात कट जाती।

आदतवश मैंने उसे भी हाई बोल दिया। उस समय वह ऑफलाइन थी। पर जब आधी रात हो गयी तो उसने हाथ हिलाकर प्रत्युत्तर दिया। मेरे अंदर जवानी हिलोरे लेने लगी।

पर मैंने मन को साधा —

धीरे-धीरे रे मना, धीरे सबकुछ होय,

माली सींचे सौ घड़ा, रितु आये फल होय।

फिर मैंने उसे गुड मॉर्निंग और गुड नाइट मैसेज भेजना शुरू किया। तीज-त्योहारों, और महत्वपूर्ण दिनों पर विश भेजा। उसका तुरंत उत्तर आता। धन्यवाद और हाथ जोड़े हुए ईमोजी।

लगता है, इसे भी साथी की तलाश है। अकेली रहती है न!

एक दिन मैंने उससे मैसेंजर पर बात करने की इच्छा जाहिर की।

‘क्या आपसे बात हो सकती है?’

‘मैं अभी ऑफिस में व्यस्त हूँ, शाम को बात करूँगी।’

मैं मूढ़ शाम का इंतजार करता रहा, जब उससे बात हो पाती।

थोड़ी झिझक भी थी। मेरे सामने के दाँत टूट गए थे जिसके कारण आवाज़ में हवा भर गयी थी। कहीं बात करने से यह राज खुल न जाय!

इसलिए मैंने टेक्स्ट मैसेज भेजना अधिक मुनासिब समझा।

आहिस्ता-2 हम रोज थोड़ा बहुत टेक्स्ट चैट करने लगे। वह बहुत अच्छी महिला लगती — दिल से भी और देखने में भी। पर अभी तक मैं पूछ नहीं पाया था कि वह चौबीसों घंटे ऑनलाइन कैसे रहती है? क्यों रहती है?

एक दिन वह नहीं दिखी, तो मैं बेचैन हो गया। कहाँ चली गयी वो? फिर दूसरा और तीसरा दिन भी बीत गया। गुड मॉर्निंग और गुड नाइट पर तो वह थैंक्स लिख देती थी पर मेरे चैट का जवाब नहीं देती थी। क्या हुआ ? उसके पति को पता तो नहीं चल गया ? पर वह तो आधुनिका है। अकेली रहती है — उसे किसी का क्या डर । क्या हुआ उसे ? कैसे पता लगाऊँ ?

हिम्मत करके मैंने मैसेंजर पर फोन कर दिया। रिंग होता रहा किसी ने उठाया नहीं। फिर दुबारा-तिबारा, बार-बार रिंग किया — कोई उत्तर नहीं।

दूसरे दिन, उसने सुबह-सुबह फोन किया। मेरा मन बल्लियों उछलने लगा। कथोपकथन इस प्रकार हुआ:

हेलो, कैसी हो मैं प्रसाद बोल रहा हूँ

‘जी नमस्ते। मैं अतुल बोल रहा हूँ, अरुणि का पति।’

‘सारी, मेरा उनको डिस्टर्ब करने का कोई इरादा न था, बस ऐसे ही हाल-चाल जानने के लिए फोन किया था।’

‘जी, धन्यवाद, अरुणि आपके बारे में बताती थी।’

‘मतलब?’

‘जी वह अब इस दुनिया में नहीं रही, वह कैंसर से पीड़ित थीं, और यहाँ जर्मनी में इलाज करवा रही थीं, पर सफल नहीं हो पायीं। चार दिन पहले हम लोगों को छोड़कर चली गयीं।’ अतुल सुबक रहा था।

‘क्या कैंसर था।’

‘जी गले का, अंत में बहुत दर्द होता था उसे पर दवा या पेनकिलर खाने से उसने मना कर दिया था। रात भर जागती और कराहती रहती थी। बहुत कष्ट में थी।’

‘कितनी उम्र रही होगी, उनकी?’

‘यही कोई चालीस साल।’

आह, फेसबुक और मैसेंजर का प्यार भी इतना दुखदायी हो सकता है!

अभी भी उसका फेसबुक अकाउंट खुला हुआ है। एक सप्ताह पहले ही बर्थ डे अलर्ट आया था। मैंने विश भी किया था। मैं आत्मग्लानि, आत्मपीड़न, शोक और अनेक अनाम दुःखी भावों से भर गया।

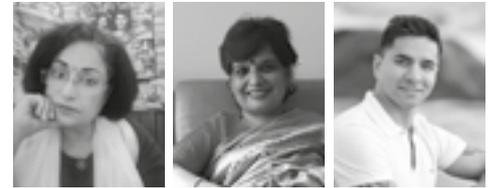
IN OUR NEXT ISSUE



Amandeep Sandhu Amish Tripathi Anand Neelakantan



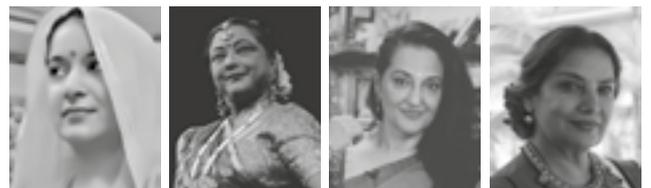
Anant Vijay Anu Singh Choudhary Bina Kak



Dipti Misra Kavita Kane Luke Coutinho



Nitin Gadkari Pavan K. Varma Piyush Mishra Pt Birju Maharaj



Saroj Bithu Saswati Sen Seema Anand Shabana Azmi



Sharda Jha Shubha Mudgal Vijay Trivedi Vikram Sampath

Guests	Events
Luke Coutinho	Kitaab Book Launch
Shabana Azmi	Ehsaas closed door session
Saroj Bithu	Aakhar Jaipur
Bina Kak	Reading of Vijaydan Detha's stories
Amish Tripathi	The Write Circle Delhi, Gurugram, Faridabad & Meerut
Pavan K. Varma	Kalam Kolkata & Pune
Piyush Mishra	Kalam Multi-city
Seema Anand	The Write Circle Raipur
Vijay Trivedi	Kalam Raipur, Bilaspur
Anu Singh Choudhury	Kalam Amritsar
Amandeep Sandhu	The Write Circle Ahmedabad
Vikram Sampath	The Write Circle Agra
Nitin Gadkari	Ek Mulakat Vishesh
Shubha Mudgal	Sur Aur Saaz Kolkata
Sharda Jha	Aakhar Patna
Kavita Kane	An Author's Afternoon Kolkata
Anand Neelakantan	The Write Circle Patna, Ranchi & Bhubaneswar
Pt Birju Maharaj & Saswati Sen	Ek Mulakat Vishesh
Anant Vijay	Kitaab Book Launch
Dipti Misra	Kalam Nagpur
Harry Potter Drawing Competition	Education For All

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