

Prabha

The Prabha Khaitan Foundation Chronicle

प्रभा



March 2020 | Issue 12

Strong women lift each other up. In this edition, 10 incredible achievers share with us their journeys of self-discovery, epiphany, hardship and triumph, inspiring us to live our best lives, and on our own terms.

Superheroes

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Prabha
खैतान

Literature in the Virtual World

"In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: It goes on." – Robert Frost.

As I sit in the confines of my home writing the editorial, the poet's words ring with truth. So here we are, making the most of the time we have been bestowed with. These are very trying times and we have had to postpone all our events in India and abroad in compliance with health norms, but that has not deterred us from reaching out to our patrons. Ensuring that you get to attend our sessions and activities from within the safety of your homes, we have endeavoured to go virtual.



MANISHA JAIN
Communications & Branding Chief,
Prabha Khaitan Foundation

The Foundation has always been a strong advocate of women's empowerment and has been dedicating its efforts to reach out and motivate women to unveil their talents and skills. To celebrate International Women's Day, we have featured some of the country's finest and most accomplished women writers in this edition of the newsletter. We would like to thank Siyahi for helping us curate the same. The writers have shared their thoughts and views on woman-centric issues and also hope to inspire more women to come forward with their skills and talents.

The next issue of the Newsletter will cover some of the amazing work Ehsaas Women are undertaking in their respective domains to attend to the lesser privileged during these trying times. The Foundation, too, is doing everything possible to reach out to those in dire need. We have many enthralling events and sessions lined up, waiting to lift your spirits in the coming days. Do stay tuned, and keep writing to us at newsletter@pkfoundation.org.

In the meantime, Stay Home and Stay Safe.

SNAPSHOT OF THE MONTH



Late Dr. Prabha Khaitan receiving an award from the then President of India, Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma. On the occasion of International Women's Day, we look back at the founder of the **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** and pay tribute to the courage, fortitude and quest for equality that she embodied in her life and work. One of the pioneers of the women's empowerment movement in India, Dr. Khaitan was a visionary who was truly ahead of her time, be it in education, entrepreneurship, philanthropy or championing the cause of feminism.

Happy Birthday

Prabha WISHES **EHSAAS** WOMEN
BORN IN APRIL



16th April

Nilisha Agarwal



25th April

Sangeeta Datta



27th April

Shelja Singh

सहयोग




Prabha Khaitan Foundation and SHER joined hands to celebrate World Wildlife Day 2020 (March 3) in a very special way at The Conclave, Kolkata, amidst an august gathering of forest officers, those working in the field of wildlife conservation and educationists. The evening honoured Dr Pradeep Vyas IFS (Rtd), who has been a pioneer in the field of wildlife and biodiversity conservation. He has been one of the most acclaimed foresters of West Bengal throughout his long tenure in the Forest Department for over 30 years.

Picture: Joydip Kundu felicitating Dr Pradeep Vyas (left)



Journeys of Self-discovery, Epiphany, Hardship and Triumph



"I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman." ~ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

No longer anonymous, women have come a long way on their journey to freedom and equality. Women writers, especially, are bolder than ever, speaking about their lives and the realities that many others still live with. The women featured here are all accomplished writers whose works cover a variety of topics, from film to food to feminism. On the occasion of International Women's Day, these ladies have written about their journeys as writers and women, what it means to be a woman, and the influence their experiences have had on their lives and careers. Ultimately, each of these women embodies the same spirit that one hopes to see in women everywhere.

As Maya Angelou once put it, "I am a woman phenomenally, phenomenal woman that is your grandmother, that is your mother, that is your sister, that is you and that is me."

**The views and opinions expressed by the authors are their own and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Foundation.*



Universe Exists Because She exists

Dr Sonal Mansingh



In India, as in every ancient civilisation, Mother Goddess was at the centre of religio-philosophic and cultural traditions. Fortunately, even today India worships Mother Goddess in a separate festival of nine days called 'NAVARATRI', literally nine nights of Devi. In every part of the Indian subcontinent, people worship and celebrate the Goddess and her many forms with love, faith and deep devotion.

SHAKTI i.e. Devi is responsible for Creation, Cosmic Existence and Liberation, therefore the three attributes of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh are inherent in Her alone.

Known to millions by many names DEVI is — Saraswati: Goddess of Learning, Lakshmi: bestower of prosperity, Durga: slayer of evil forces, Bhadra: auspicious, Vidya: wisdom, Trupti: fulfilment, and millions others. Every aspect of mini and mega microcosm is permeated by Her energy.

She exists in a state of SWATANTRYA i.e. depending on nothing and no one; rather, the universe exists by

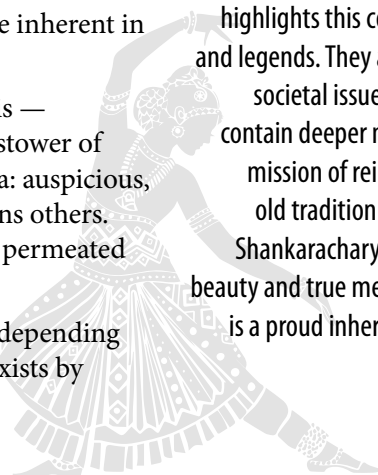
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This primordial cosmic energy is worshipped as the Divine Mother, who sets in motion the wheel of manifestation. She bestows her healing spirit into the womb and regenerative energy of the females of every species.

Every atom of space is imbued with Energy = Oorja = Shakti i.e. the reason for Creation to exist.

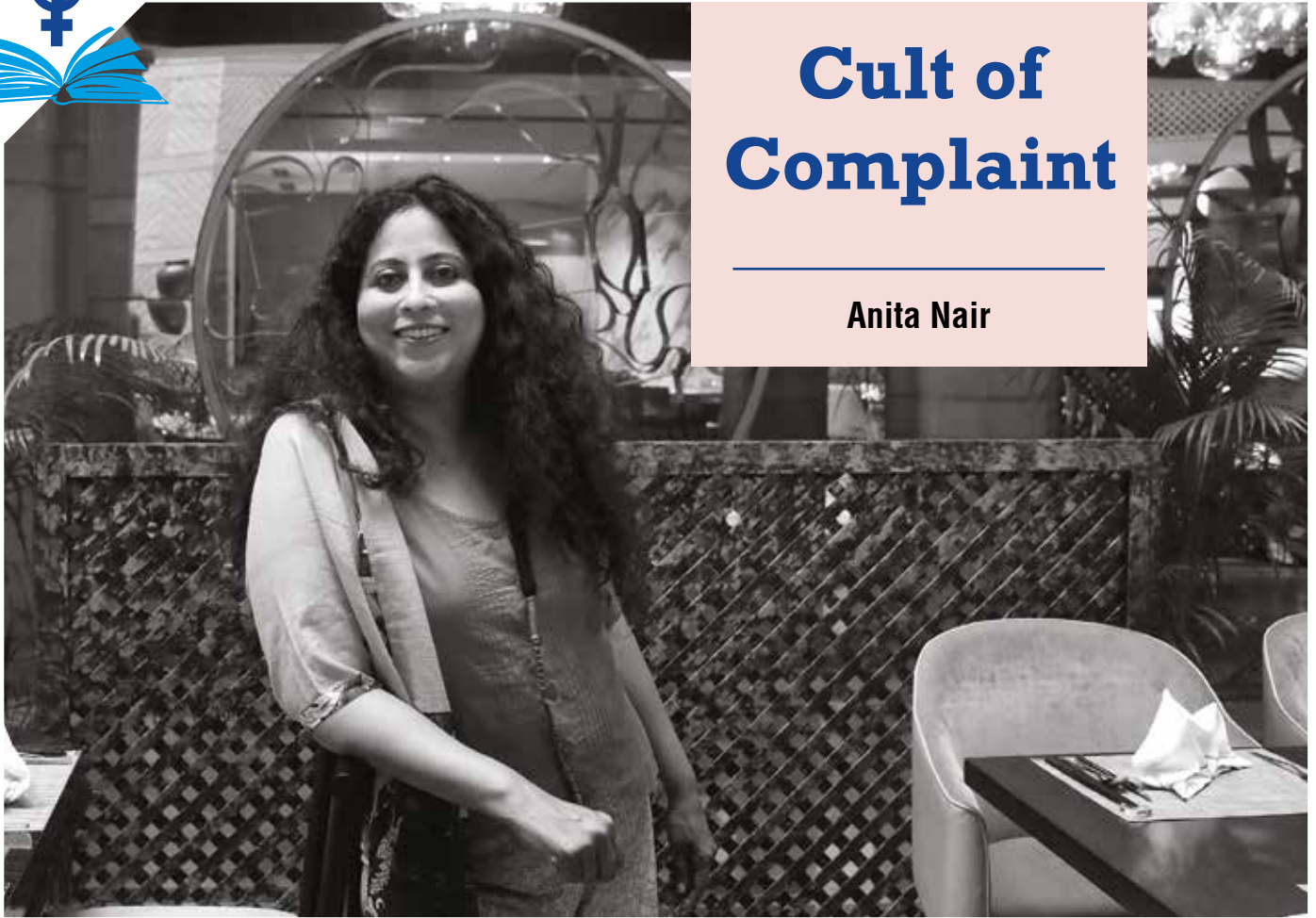
Through interpretation in narratives, songs and enactment, Padma Vibhushan recipient **Dr Sonal Mansingh**, in a riveting presentation, highlights this concept with selected texts from scriptures, myths, and legends. They are juxtaposed with contemporary issues because societal issues exist in every era of history and these narratives contain deeper messages of dealing with them. Sonal Mansingh's mission of reinterpreting sacred texts in secular times is also an old tradition in India. From Bharata in his *Natya-Shastra* to Adi Shankaracharya and Swami Vivekananda, all have explained the beauty and true messages contained in our legends. Sonal Mansingh is a proud inheritor of that great tradition. Dr Mansingh is also an Hon'ble Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha.





Cult of Complaint

Anita Nair



I share an office space with a digital agency in Bangalore. On the evenings I am there, the young men who are approximately half my age and I would huddle around a round table at about 6pm with mugs of tea and snacks. Since all of us there are from Kerala, I sometimes think it is a recreation of the Kerala tea *kada*, complete with tea, *kadi* and heated discussions on everything from Trump to Malayalam cinema to CAA to cricket to six packs to stray dogs to godmen to cultural trivia. Once in a while, they would pounce on me with a near sneer, "XYZ said that. Not surprising she did. She is a feminist like you!"

"Do you even know what feminism is?" I demanded the first time, in my most equable tone.

"Someone complaining about women's rights all the time as if no one else has any problems." One of them retorted. I didn't pursue the argument because these young men are champions of women's rights in their own way. They do so without the hashtag *#gendercritical* *#genderabolition* *#radfem* or *#womensliberation*.

Later that night, I tossed the thought around in my head. Much as I hated admitting it, I kept returning to the word "complaint" in that carelessly tossed description. For, they were only responding to what the greater populace

had come to associate feminism with. A group of women with clenched fists and strident voices that no matter how reasonable in its demands, bore a note of a whinge, the shrillness of defensiveness and a victim-like stance.

Several years ago, I was invited to attend a workshop along with women writers drawn from many parts of the country. I was one of the youngest there. As the introductions flowed, I began to feel more and more restive. Each one of the writers there had had to face a great deal of personal distress. However, what made it uncomfortable was the subtext that the impediments faced by them as women had curtailed their growth as writers. I don't believe that only great tragedy can beget great art. Nor do I believe that strident feminist thought owes its beginnings to the deep-rooted anguish of having been the victim of male hegemony. But nor can I accept whole-heartedly the sometimes-to-the-point-of-absurdity militant stance of the privileged millennial feminist.

When I wrote *Ladies Coupe* almost 16 years ago, I knew for certain what I was doing. I, like many women of my generation, had read Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, and their ilk. But my feminist influences, if I had any, were Rebecca West, Marilyn French and Maya Angelou. Their

writings had shown me a perspective that went beyond gender issues. And so I knew *Ladies Coupe* would not be about feminism because there was a dichotomy between what I considered feminism, namely "a woman's right to be a woman without losing her dignity or giving up her right to equality", and universally accepted feminist theories and practices.

What I wrote is a book of stories about women and how a woman cannot make a place in the society until she makes a place for herself in her own mind. I took the right to show the quality of strength in a woman and the chance to portray my stance on women's rights. However, it was immediately labelled a "feminist novel" in many parts of the world; and one small part of me was, of course, gratified at the notion that I may have written what is being considered as an important feminist novel. But a greater part of me remains puzzled to this day. If this too was celebrated as feminism, why are feminists still seen as haridans on the loose? The eternal complainers who take offence at the slightest provocation?

A biologist friend said to me, "men and women are different. I am not saying one is better than the other. But the biological truth is we are constructed differently and we will be different." Had this truth somehow bypassed our sisterhood?

As I worked on the edit of my last novel, *Chain Of Custody*, I had a few run-ins with a young copy editor who thought my character, Inspector Gowda, a product of his upbringing and social circumstances, mustn't be allowed to make anti-feminist statements. The young editor thought I was politically incorrect. I continued to edit my novel as I deemed fit, for literature is not born out of sitting on the fence or political correctness. Nevertheless herein lies the truth why feminism is being seen as a cult of complaint. Anything that is representative of a male point of view is condemned as a patriarchal tool to suppress the woman. And it is this point of view that has eaten into the heart of feminism, making it seem like a religion of fanatics; a religion that cannot withstand close scrutiny.

In an article titled *101 Things Feminists say are Sexist* published in the *Daily Wire*, I came upon such gems:

There are no menstruation-themed emojis so... sexism.

Fathers calling their daughter "princess" or treating them "special" in any way is a form of "benevolent sexism".

Apparently, telling a woman she has "nice handwriting" is sexist. The reason why it's "sexist" is unknown, as it was fussed over by feminists in Bristol without so much as an explanation.

I cannot but help wonder if we women in our effort to establish our place under the sun have blinkered ourselves to limit our vision. At what point did strident advocates of feminism come to confuse it with sexism? That sexism is blatant, offensive and makes its appearance everywhere is a universal truth. But are we losing our perspective entirely and seeing ourselves as the constant victims of the male gaze?

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It seems to me that the real victims of male cruelty are languishing somewhere in back rooms and shadowed zones with not a tiny glimmer of hope for change even as we, their strident sisters, take umbrage for what we consider a threat to our place in society.

It would do us, avowed feminist or closet feminist — for how can any woman not want to be treated equally and fairly — good to remember that the need of the hour is for women to uplift women from their lives of quiet desperation and give them a voice rather than tilt at windmills.

Anita Nair is the bestselling and critically acclaimed author of the novels, *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupé* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014), *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* (2015) and *Eating Wasps* (2018). She has also authored a crime series featuring the character, Inspector Gowda. Nair's other books include a collection of poems titled *Malabar Mind* (2002), a collection of essays titled *Goodnight and God Bless* (2008), six books for children, two plays and the screenplay for the movie adaptation of her novel *Lessons in Forgetting*, which won the National Film Award in 2013.

She has received the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Crossword Prize, the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize and the Lit O Fest Literary Legend Award, among other awards. Her books have been translated into over 31 languages around the world. She is also the founder of the creative writing and mentorship programme, Anita's Attic.



My Journey as a Woman

Arshia Sattar

If I am ever asked who or what I am, my answer is always, "I am a woman." It is my first identity, well before writer, teacher, Indian, daughter, wife, friend or any of the other ways in which people define me. Placing that identity first has obviously come from the life that I've been able to live. That life has been predicated on and defined by the freedom to make my own decisions and my own choices.

I'm going to be 60 years old in 2020 and so, I think I can safely say that I've spent a good many years on Earth. I have lived in many different Indian cities, I have studied in the US and I have had many opportunities to travel in my own country and outside, all of which I grabbed with both hands. So, I can also safely say that I've seen more than my own backyard. All of this has been because of privilege and good fortune but not ever because of wealth. My parents were, and I remain, essentially middle-class in terms of what we earn.

And I think that is precisely what has defined my journey — not the money I've had but the choices that I was free to make.

From when I was a child, my parents bought me books, books, books before anything else. That was my first exposure to the fact that there are other ways to live and other ways to think about life. But it also taught me that whether we are Indian or Chinese or from Peru or Ghana, we all love our children, we all wonder about what happens when we die and we all laugh when someone slips on a banana peel. It made me realise that we are humans together, we occupy the same planet and we ask the same questions. That has made me live in the world with trust and the belief that understanding and compassion are the qualities we should develop in

So often, as girls, we are told not to do this and not to think that, not to wear this and not to go there. I was raised not to be afraid and to believe that whatever I wanted to do was worth a try.... The greatest gift my parents gave me was freedom — freedom to think and to be

ourselves, rather than suspicion and doubt.

All of this relates to the kind of woman I am. So often, as girls, we are told not to do this and not to think that, not to wear this and not to go there. I was raised not to be afraid and to believe that whatever I wanted to do was worth a try. I grew up in cities and without any extended family, so my parents and I could live the way we wanted, away from traditions, judgements and gossip. The greatest gift my parents gave me was freedom — freedom to think and to be. They were always there to answer questions and make suggestions, but they never told me what to do. My choices were always my own. And so, because I was never told not to go somewhere or not do something, I was able to spend my time and money to travel, to buy a book, go to a concert or a museum, to extend my education.

But, there have been many times when I was (and still am) unsure and scared, when I feel that the world is not my oyster. That is when I give thanks for all that I have and remind myself that because I have so much, it is my obligation to use my many freedoms to make at least one other woman's life better. Strength and hope both lie in solidarity — I will not be truly free until all my sisters are.

Arshia Sattar holds a PhD in South Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. A Fulbright Scholar (2010) and a Rockefeller Fellow (2009), she works with the classical literary traditions of the subcontinent and translates from Sanskrit to English. Her books include a translation of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, several collections of essays about the *Ramayana*, including *Lost Loves: Exploring Rama's Anguish* (2011), *Uttara: The Book of Answers* (2017) and *Maryada: Searching of Dharma in the Ramayana* (2020). She also writes for younger readers and has published *Adventures with Hanuman* (2009), *A Ramayana for Children* (2017) and *Garuda and the Serpents* (2018). Arshia writes about books for various publications and teaches classical literature at many institutions across the country and has co-founded and runs the Sangam House International Writers' Residency located in Bangalore.

Believe in Yourself

Bhawana Somaaya



People often ask if my journey as a woman has been difficult. I have never found an adequate answer to their question because I come from a home where my siblings and I were never subjected to gender discrimination, and therefore, if my sisters and I went through life blissfully, all credit for this goes to my parents.

In 1947, when my parents migrated from Karachi with six British-born children and arrived in Kutch and later, life was far from easy, but they were neither paranoid nor pessimistic. My older sisters were given equal opportunities as my brothers, as a result they were enrolled in a convent school and when the time came, joined the best college in Mumbai.

Almost a decade later, my sister and I were born, the first Indian citizens in the family and naturally admitted in the best school and later, the best college. The decision to choose our subjects, our friends, our clothes were entirely our own. My father purchased separate cupboards for my sister and me and made us responsible for our keys and our belongings.

When the time came, we were at liberty to choose our careers. After my graduation, I studied Law and Journalism simultaneously, but they let me decide if I wanted to become a writer or a lawyer and I admire them for that.

The real challenge for anybody begins when you start working, because then you are exposed to the outside world, your colleagues, your peers, your competitors. In those days, the building we lived in was fairly conservative, in the sense that the neighbours were forever curious why I was always late from work. Not my parents though, they understood the deadline pressures. More important, trusted me and that is all that mattered.

Over the decades, as I crossed many milestones in my career, people time and again asked me if I faced exploitation at the workplace. Did I have to work harder because I was a woman? Was I denied opportunities? Was I subjected to compromise? The answer to all these was 'No'. I have never felt slighted, deprived of any opportunity ever, and galloped through my career and life totally

Did I have to work harder because I was a woman? Was I denied opportunities? Was I subjected to compromise? The answer to all these was 'No'. I have never felt slighted, deprived of any opportunity ever, and galloped through my career and life totally unselfconscious of my gender

unselfconscious of my gender. I mean I enjoyed being a woman but never flaunted it for a crusade or a favour.

The betrayal, if at all, came from a stranger and mostly in public spaces, where a coward tried getting fresh in a crowded bus or train and because you were young, you kept quiet. Today, one would explode, and one does not any longer travel by public transport but there are so many girls who do and they handle it so much better.

In my experience, gender has always been an issue with the perceiver, it is always outsiders who are judging you. The common lines thrown at me over the last many decades include, "Isn't show business a jungle world, so how does somebody as fragile as you fit into the man's world?" I'm foxed. I mean, how did they arrive at this conclusion? An editor once pointed out to me that I needed to be audible because at the moment he could hear glass bangles in my writing. That I was sensitive was being hurled as an accusation at me.

I did not justify myself or my writing and continued to think and write the way it came naturally to me. In my opinion, being yourself is the only way to lead your life. That is how my parents raised us and that is how we embraced the world, so believe in yourself and the world will believe in you.

Bhawana Somaaya has been writing about Hindi cinema for over 35 years. She is a film critic, columnist and author of 13 books, including biographies of Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini. Her books are a point of reference for students of cinema at Whistling Woods, Manipal University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. She was on the advisory panel of the Central Board of Film Certification, and is attached to Tigerland India Film Festival and Dhai Akshar, an educational centre for underprivileged children. Somaaya is currently the Entertainment Editor at 92.7 Big FM radio channel. Her latest books are *Once Upon A Time in India: A Century of Indian Cinema*, and *Keshava: A Magnificent Obsession*. *Letters to Mother* is her recent poetry translation.



Strength, Intuition, Kindness, Compassion

Karen Anand

Success in my case was undoubtedly linked to good looks and the ability to communicate well. This was irrespective of gender. I have been blessed with both from an early age. Intelligence and an eagerness to probe and ask questions also helped. I have never felt "second class" or in any way inferior, probably because I plough through life not noticing these things.

I was born in Bombay but grew up in a suburb of London. Life was comfortable but not privileged. I did well at school, excelled in subjects I liked — Art, English, History and French. I did really well in Chemistry till I was 16 only because I liked the teacher. Being reasonably good academically, the girls' school run by Dominican nuns I went to insisted I apply for university. They were very keen on academic brilliance, and getting their girls into

top British universities was their goal. I was accepted into Cambridge but didn't go. I was more interested in Paris and the Sorbonne and all that life had to offer across the Channel.

At university, we were equal with our male friends. As part of the degree course, I spent many months in Paris and Russia. Being a woman in both places helped. It certainly didn't hinder. I returned to India in the mid-'80s not quite sure of what I was going to do. In Europe I had some ideas — either work for an international organisation or a magazine. I had already interned at *ELLE* in Paris. In India, my options were limited. I spoke no Hindi and the media industry wasn't as developed then. I was interested in writing, dabbled in cooking and thought about restaurants. In fact, being a woman opened many doors — I started writing on film, since I had an "in" through my husband who was a filmmaker, and on food since I was a reasonable cook and people were excited about foreign cuisines.

I became a member of a prestigious club in Mumbai. I had 2 children and I started a restaurant called the Salad Bar in Bombay... all within the space of a few years. I was then offered to anchor what became a top-rated TV food show, the *Good Food Guide*. I was a useless presenter at the beginning but I worked hard, listened and learned. We stumbled our way through episodes and topics. Those were early "cowboy" days. I think TV is a good industry for women. The only dishonesty I faced was from executives, both women and men, who often didn't tell you the truth. The problem was never gender. It was jealousy and ambition.

I was young, naive and very lucky. I was mentored by Peter Mukerjee, who was then the head of Star TV. There were no strings attached and no agenda. He was hungry for success and saw food as the new star on the block. He was right. I was a good fit and at the right place at the right time. I once heard a motivational speaker say, "LUCK means LABOUR UNDER

CORRECT KNOWLEDGE". Maybe subconsciously I did. But there is no getting away from the fact that people helped me and were unconditionally supportive.... spouses (past and present), friends and colleagues. If there was negativity and deceit, I didn't see it until much later. I worked hard and with sincerity and as a result, have very little patience today for mediocrity, laziness and entitlement.

Having my back against the wall after a relatively smooth 35 years (after the death of my first husband) was probably the most difficult moment of my life. I had just started on my career path and nothing prepared me for the emotional difficulty, financial insecurity and deceitful, greedy people I encountered.

I found love again, moved out of Mumbai to Pune and continued a successful career in TV, restaurant consultancy and menu and recipe work for corporates like Britannia and Pepsi. The second time I faced any kind of struggle was several years later when we were hit hard by a smooth-talking business partner who turned out to be a crook. These are life lessons and if you survive them, you come out stronger and wiser.

We as women, should use the advantages we have — strength, intuition, kindness and compassion. Life can be a roller coaster. There is no way you can prepare yourself for both the highs and lows. There is no prescription for success and happiness. But these four qualities will definitely help.

Karen Anand has been described as "something of a food guru, influencing the way people eat and perceive good food" in India.

In addition to writing extensively on the subject of food and wine for over 25 years, Karen has also set up a factory producing gourmet food products under her own brand, run a successful chain of food stores, had a niche catering business, anchored top-rated TV shows, started a Gourmet Academy and consulted for multinationals, international hotel and restaurant chains and F&B brands entering the Indian market. She works internationally and has contributed to restaurant projects in the UK, in particular the hugely successful Bombay café in London, *Dishoom*.

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My Journey with the Discovery of Words

Paro Anand

Through my childhood, I struggled with finding a cause to celebrate, a reason to be proud of myself. I yearned for the elusive prize of success and was made to feel so. Not by my parents so much, as by my school. Once, I had participated in an inter-school play competition and scored first prize as best actor. I rushed to class, holding a rare trophy in my hands, glowing. The teacher congratulated me, yes. But her next

words, "Now, if only you could do as well in studies..." crushed me. I felt the glow fade and my high deflate. The message I received was that if you were good at studies, you were something. If not, you weren't. And I wasn't.

I had a wonderful imagination, it was true. But imagination was not a path to success, I was made to feel. Until I fell down the magical rabbit hole of words when I wrote my first story about a girl with a wild imagination who makes up a vivid story about having a pet monkey. The feeling that I had finally found my calling, my core competence, was one that I can never forget. And I treasure it every time it revisits me when I complete a story, a book. That sense of being proud of myself. At last.

That pride though took a turn down the road of humility. I joined the government, heading the National Centre for Children's Literature. A job that took me to villages where children had never even seen a book before. My brief was to set up libraries in these villages. Again, my pride told me that I was doing a good job. Until a girl came up to me and said, "We were living in a world of darkness — a world without books. And we were happy because we never knew about them. But now you've shown us this new world of books. We are going to finish reading these 100 books you are giving us. But once we've read them, don't expect that we can go back to that darkness. How are you going to get more books to us?"

I couldn't sleep that night. The girl had been absolutely right. I couldn't keep giving more books to the same villages, we had to reach far and wide. My team and I came up with the idea of making wall newspapers. A wall was designated to serve the purpose and children began to write their own stories, poems, thoughts and views. Children themselves were the best renewable resource

for stories. And this, for the first time, gave them a platform to express themselves. Reading what these children wrote, I was so moved by the power of their words. Their hopes, dreams, desires presented to the world for the very time. That's when I realised that the truth was a more effective tool than the stories I was making up.

The wall newspaper project grew to cover over 3,000 children across the country in 13 Indian languages. It is also recorded as a world record in the *Limca Book of Records*. We covered children in difficult circumstances — those battling challenges like conflict, terrorism, extreme poverty, marginalisation, those with special needs. And each time, their stories were heartbreakingly true and powerful.

This experience changed me as a writer. I turned to reality fiction, to voicing the stories of the voiceless, faceless children out there who battle in wars that they never started. Reality fiction tells stories of young people in crises. It was almost the first time that such stories were being written for younger readers. I have been described as "a writer with a big heart who dares to tell the truth". But, because I write for young people, the only taboo I impose upon myself is that I end on a note of hope — not necessarily a happily ever after tied up in a neat bow, but at least a glimmer that there is light at the end of a tunnel, no matter how dark it is.

Paro Anand is a Sahitya Akademi Award winner for children's literature, and is best known for her books for Young Adults such as *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*, *Weed, Like Smoke*, *Being Gandhi* and more. She runs the programme, Literature in Action, where she works with children through words and stories. She was invited to speak at Harvard University on "Disruptive Innovation in Children's Literature in India".

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The Beauty Epidemic

IRA TRIVEDI

On a hot and balmy evening in Mumbai, I stood frozen on a vast, glittering stage in front of 2,000 people, surrounded by cameras, blinded by spotlights, dressed only in a slinky swimsuit and unwieldy high heels. I was a finalist in the Miss India pageant, one of 30 women chosen from amongst hundreds of thousands of girls across the country. As a teenager, I would have sold a kidney to participate in the pageant (as it turns out, some pageant contestants actually do), but when I finally found myself standing centre stage, my conviction wavered. There I was, my body bared to a panel of middle-aged male judges. I was trying to formulate an answer to the question "What would you do to save the world?" It was around this time that I started to wonder how I had wound up here in the first place.

Like most Indian girls, I grew up enchanted by the myth of the Miss India pageant. Each year, you could find me glued to the TV screen, feverishly watching as

ordinary girls won the glittering crown and then waltzed into Bollywood success and stardom. Maybe it was those Cinderella-esque evenings. Maybe it was people telling me that I was "Miss India material" because I was tall and skinny. Maybe it was simply media propaganda, but I decided early on that when I grew up, I would be Miss India.

By the time I auditioned for the pageant, I was 19 and a junior at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, studying Economics and International Relations and aiming for a career in investment banking. At Wellesley, I was surrounded by ambitious, determined women who were fighting for LGBTQ rights; helping to rebuild communities in North Carolina after Hurricane Katrina; protesting Hindu-Muslim riots in India; and discussing Andy Warhol and Gaudí over chai-tea lattes.

Despite the expansion of my intellectual horizon, the myth of the Miss India pageant persisted. For reasons I

could neither understand nor articulate, I hadn't given up on my Miss India dream, even as my world had changed entirely since my childhood in the hinterland of India. Well, I made it to the pageant, but I stuck out like a sore thumb among the other finalists who had been grooming themselves for the pageant ever since they were children. I had a suitcase full of unstylish clothes (mostly collegiate sweatpants and hoodies). I could not walk a straight line in a pair of high heels. I did not know how to conceal my pores or pose expertly for photos in "skinny-arm pose." I had none of the requisite modelling experience of an aspiring beauty queen. And nothing was as I expected.

A far cry from the romanticised celebration of beauty, femininity, and humanity that I pictured as a little girl, the Miss India pageant turned out to be exploitative, misogynistic and cruel. Over the 40-day training period, I learned that the pageant perpetuated an impossible standard of beauty that preyed on us girls. We were sweet-faced pawns in a much bigger game involving media giants, billion-dollar cosmetics companies, and wolfish men employed by TV channels and media companies. These companies were receiving millions of dollars of free content, all while locking in their future participants and viewers: the millions of little girls who watched the pageant year after year, just as I had. Spellbound, awestruck, grossly misled. I didn't win the title of "Miss India," but I was exposed to a world that seemed wildly inconsistent with the feminist ideals that had been instilled in me during my years at Wellesley College. I knew the time had come to put away my stilettos and pick up the pen.

Fast-forward 13 years, and I am a recipient of the British Media Award, a bestselling novelist in India, and an internationally published non-fiction writer with by-lines in *Vogue*, *Time Magazine*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Forbes*. I also make regular appearances on CNBC, Al Jazeera, CNN, ABC, and the BBC as an expert on gender politics in India. In 2017, I was named one of the "BBC's 100 women" — a list of global women achievers.

Though I shed my beauty queen ambitions long ago, the pursuit of an elusive beauty ideal has remained a toxic, sometimes unconscious part of my life, as I know it is for countless women, world-over. It was the pursuit of this ideal that pushed me to an eating disorder, made me question my self-worth based on the colour of my skin, and led towards complex body-image and self-worth issues.

Beauty may only be skin deep, but the damages associated with it are not. The repercussions of the obsession with beauty are affecting the lives of women and men worldwide in astonishing and often incredible numbers — and with drastic, even deadly, results

Beauty may only be skin deep, but the damages associated with it are not. The repercussions of the obsession with beauty are affecting the lives of women and men worldwide in astonishing and often incredible numbers — and with drastic, even deadly, results. One out of every three girls does not engage in classroom debate because she does not like the way she looks. Thirty-four percent of five-year-old girls engage in deliberate dietary restraint at least sometimes. Twenty-eight percent of these girls say they want their bodies to look like the women they see in movies and on television.

Between the ages of five and nine, 40 percent of girls say they wish they were thinner. I worry for the young girls who are growing up with social media as their mirror. This is not the world we want to live in, or bring them up in. Before the epidemic becomes endemic, we must stop it. But we must act fast, because the epidemic is spreading at cyber-speed.

Women today are more empowered, more educated, and more aware than ever before. Women are being encouraged to fight for their rights, to come out with their #MeToo stories of abuse, to fight sexual harassment, to stand shoulder to shoulder with men, to embrace their natural bodies, to shatter the glass ceiling, to change the world for themselves and for all the women who will come after them. It is therefore crucial that we chronicle the spread, effects, and consequences of the beauty epidemic around the world. I hope my books will be an inspiration to the millions of women who are affected by the beauty epidemic — the women who are looking for the courage to trust their own instincts, develop their personal potential, and come together to affect change.

Ira Trivedi is a writer currently based in New Delhi. Over the past 10 years, she has authored 10 books, including three bestselling novels. Her most well-known book is *India in Love: Marriage and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (Aleph 2014) on India's sexual revolution.

Ira writes for several publications in India and internationally and regularly speaks around the world at literature festivals, universities, and forums such as TED. She was nominated by *Foreign Affairs* for the prestigious Sigma Del Chi award for journalism. In 2017, she was named one of BBC's 100 women. When she is not writing, Ira can be found teaching yoga. She led over 45,000 people in New Delhi on the first International Yoga Day, where a Guinness Book of World Record was set for the largest yoga class in history.



Being a Woman and Staying Thus: Comfortable in my Skin

Mugdha Sinha

I

The fact that I am a woman never came across as a problematic gender construct or issue in an all-woman household, where the matriarch was a single mother, a fiercely independent, go-getter professional who made sure we — including my two younger sisters — were raised like warrior women.

A major part of my schooling happened in an all-girls' Irish Convent headed by nuns, from where I went on to another all-girls' college at Lady Sri Ram, with a feminist principal, hence the gender issues never cropped up except in academic discussions; never really as a challenge, because we were groomed to face the world, learning to drive a Rajdoot at age 11, a Contessa at 14, and there was always heavy indulgence in reading, along with equal insistence on sports and all art forms — painting, needlework, elocution, debating, dancing, drama — to hone the personality, *ardhnareshwar*-style, balanced in its masculine and feminine qualities.

That my mom was a cosmic consultant, heavily into metaphysics, and a lawyer by profession also helped immensely, and made for a deadly combo in spiritual-metaphysical fierceness, together with firm knowledge of our legal rights, that came in handy years later, when I entered service, got married, got widowed, and began to see the real world, and its people, much different from my hitherto protected, privileged and gender-agnostic upbringing.

II

With the UPSC results came the first gendered question, when a journalist interviewing me asked, quite innocuously, "How does it feel to be the second *lady* topper?" Did I feel like a lady's finger? No, but he got a piece of my mind, firm but polite.

This is a mindset, not just a one-off question, something I continue to encounter even now.

Early on in service, I was made to realise that different qualities were expected from officers, where the male officers were expected to be outgoing, dynamic and resourceful, the female officer could just, or rather should, be content with being hard-working, sincere and obedient, and if they were or aspired to have the best of both worlds, they were bound to be seen as 'home-breakers.' Patriarchy exists.

And yes, things do change.

When I joined service, I was told women officers get to do only one district, that too districts reserved for them, but I went on to

do four where, in two of them I was the 'first' 'Woman' Collector (sic) in Hanumangarh and Jhunjhunu, after almost 60 years of Independence.

I refused to dim my light, the world has learnt to adjust and in fact, has been pretty much appreciative of my values as a woman, and work as an officer.

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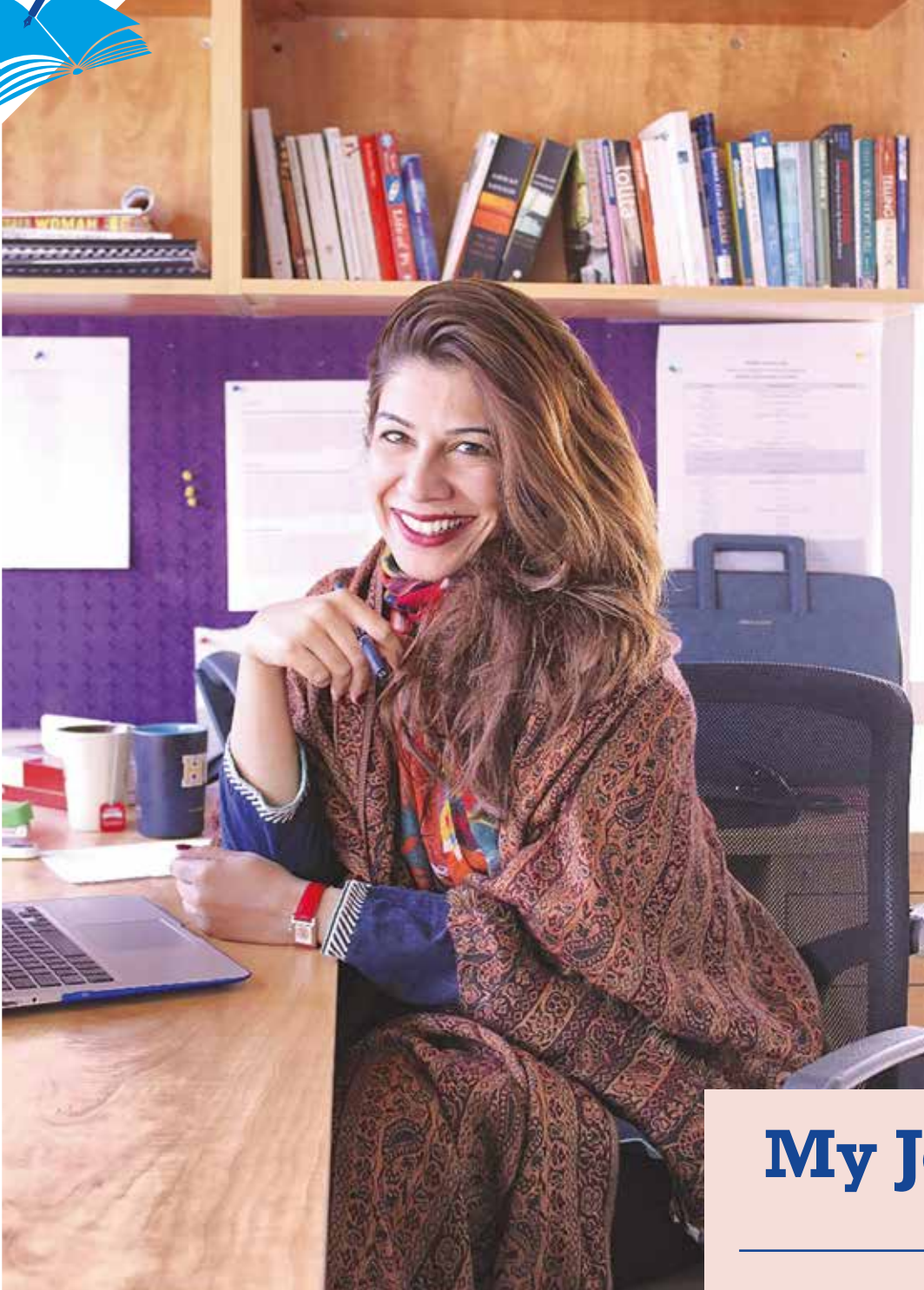
But, then not much has changed in many ways, except that blatant encounters have become more nuanced, subtle.

But with a plethora of legislation and discourse around women's empowerment, and a woman-centric approach, policies, including for rural women, mindsets, are changing even if slowly. But surely a lot more is desirable, still.

However, while 'bold' may be a personal attribute, it is not always seen thus and may carry some negative connotations in public perception, so there are pitfalls of being bold, in addition to being a woman who is single, with an amiable disposition and a friendly demeanour. It's too much for the patriarchal world, where their own insecurities and years of social conditioning translate into value judgement, but I have learnt to deal with it, best ignored.

And my only advice to all women out there is to just focus on yourself, be comfortable in your skin, the world will learn to adjust, eventually. Don't let the world change you, unless you want that change too. Change the world, instead.

Mugdha Sinha IAS, currently Secretary, Department of Science and Technology, is a poet of mixed pedigree and international travels. She doodles and creates meditative mandalas and paints wine-vodka bottles. An aesthete who lives to read, loves to travel, splurges on books and maintains a huge personal library. As the literary secretary of the IAS Association, Rajasthan, she regularly curates book-related conversations. Her poems have been previously published in *Sahitya Akademi's Journal of Indian Literature* and in *Femina* by its poetry editor, late Kamla Das. She has also been an International Executive Program Fellow at the Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley, USA.



My Journey

Sabyn Javeri Jillani

It is the journey that matters not the destination, the process not the publication; that is how I would describe my excursions into writing. I have always loved the written word. Perhaps because the spoken word was not always an option. I grew up in a house of paradox. My mother, the second wife to a rich and liberal Gujarati businessman, was conservative and spiritual, proud of her Muslim lineage that she could trace back to Arabia. She introduced me to silence. For her, it was the greatest virtue. My father on the other hand, was gregarious and full of life. He loved to talk, about his boyhood in Bombay, his migration to Pakistan

and his exotic travels. He had an opinion on everything and although he could be very serious at times, he never took life seriously. The one thing they had in common, perhaps the only thing, was their love of books. They both loved to read. It was the only time I saw my father quiet and my mother speaking freely as she often read aloud. Eventually I, too, came to love books — to the extent that when people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would say, "a writer".

As I grew older, fell in love, got married and had children, the dream withdrew. But it never died. In fact, it wasn't until Covid-19 slowed the maddening pace of life and forced us indoors and into self-reflection that I realised my dream of becoming a full-time writer would never come true.

I am a part-time writer, who writes in between bedtime and work deadlines. Although I have written many essays, articles, short stories, even a novel, as well as curated two anthologies, my writing happened in between raising my children, earning a living and putting myself through college to complete my education. It never took center stage. I never thought of myself as a "writer".

There are so many working mothers like me trying to balance work and family with creativity. Does that make our writing any less powerful or credible? We may not have time to refine our prose or ponder endlessly over sentence construction, battle with the inner critic or indulge a writer's block, but isn't that what makes a writer authentic in the first place?

Since the publication of my last book, *Hijabistan*, I have had many young women reach out to me and say they admire the things I write about. I have also received a lot of criticism from friends and reviewers who think I should be writing about reality as it *should* be rather than as it is. I think it is my circumstances of being rooted in reality, in the everyday, which grounds

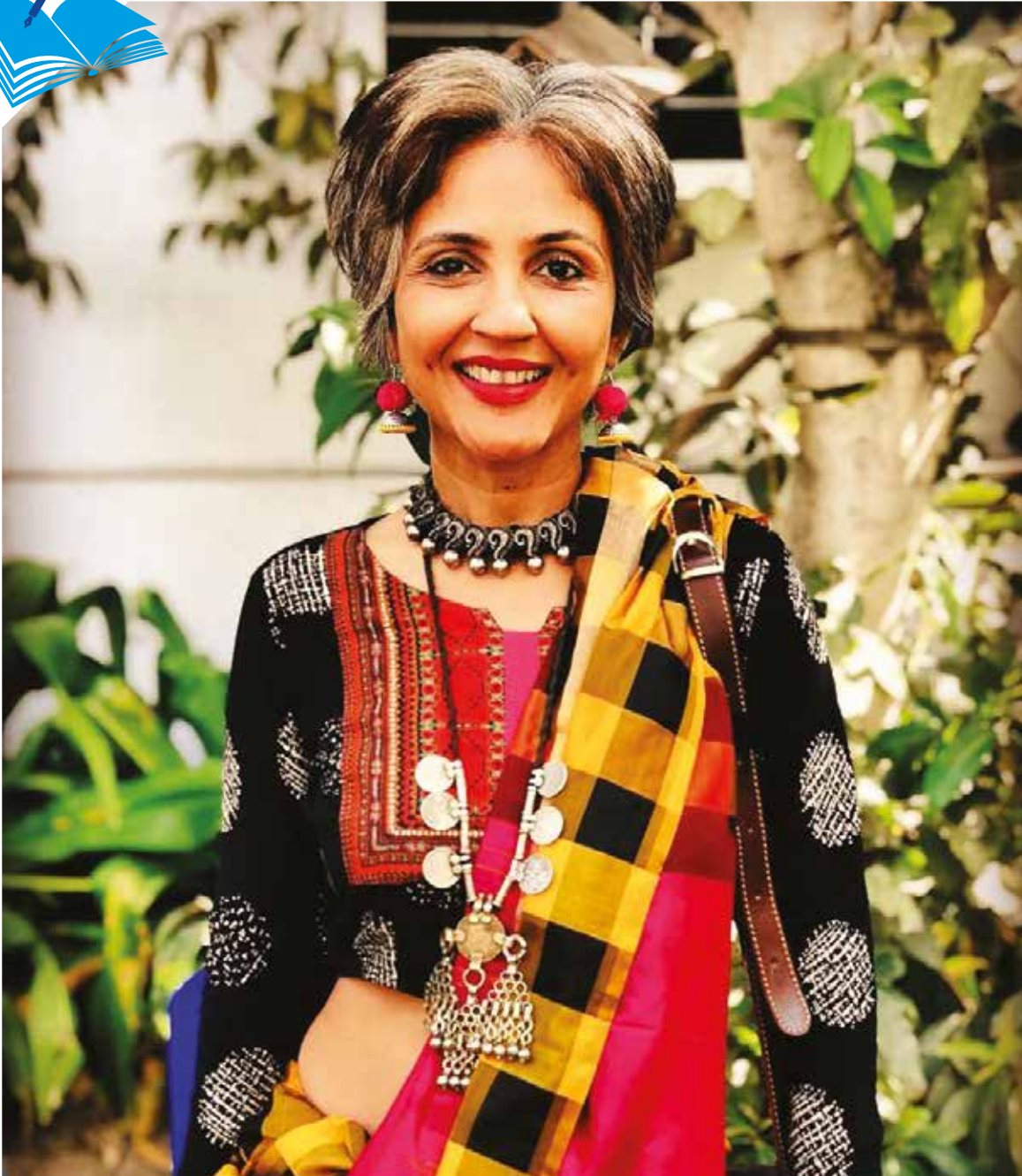
my perspective as a writer. I am drawn to the lives of women as they are. Ethnographical in my approach, I want to narrate how they negotiate the reality around them rather than conjure fantasies of female Avengers. My stories reflect the lives of ordinary Muslim women trying to do extraordinary things such as making peace with the world they are born in by trying to make the best of it. Breaking out is not for everyone. Sometimes staying in takes more strength. And so I write and tell the stories of my fellow heroines.

My own story is getting married young, of continuing my education through pregnancies and part-time jobs, however menial, and making my way up the career ladder, and finally to economic and emotional independence. And through it

all my writing sustained me, made my ordinary existence special. And even though today I know that writing will always take backstage to the economic and emotional demands of life, I hope that it will prove motivational for those who struggle like me to stand on their own feet yet pursue their creativity. A room of one's own may not be possible for women like me who wish to write, but there will always be room for us to share our stories.

Sabyn Javeri Jillani is an award-winning short story writer and the author of *Nobody Killed Her* (HarperCollins, 2017) and *Hijabistan* (HarperCollins, 2019). Sabyn's writing focuses on issues of identity and gender. Her columns have been published in *The Friday Times*, *Women's Web* and *Mumbai Mirror* and her fiction has appeared in journals like *The London Magazine*, *The South Asian Review*, *Bengal Lights*, *Wasafiri* and *Trespass*, and in anthologies by Women Unlimited, HarperCollins, Oxford University Press and The Feminist Press. She has won The Oxonian Review Short Story Award and was shortlisted for the Leaf Prize and the Tibor Jones South Asia Prize. She launched and edited two volumes of the *Arzu Anthology of Student Voices* (Vol1-2018, Vol2-2019, HUP) — a pioneering creative writing initiative for higher education in Pakistan. Sabyn is a graduate of the University of Oxford and has a PhD from Leicester University. She teaches writing at New York University, Abu Dhabi.

There are so many working mothers like me trying to balance work and family with creativity. Does that make our writing any less powerful or credible? We may not have time to refine our prose or ponder endlessly over sentence construction, battle with the inner critic or indulge a writer's block, but isn't that what makes a writer authentic in the first place?



Insight, Empathy and Middle-aged Snark

Anuja Chauhan

I wasn't a very well-informed young woman. A Venn diagram of my mind would've probably revealed that I spent about 40% of my time thinking about my crushes, 30% of my time rueing how fat I was, 29% of my time day-dreaming how I was going to become thin one day and slay all my crushes, and 1% of my time on my studies.

Politics, women's rights, social issues just did not exist for me. I accepted and truly believed that army life was the best life, and that the Rajput community was the best community. Everybody who wasn't part of this premium, magical circle was to be pitied and avoided.

Then I got older, I read more, my world expanded, things happened to me. Once the raging teenage "harmonoans" settled down, I started to view things more clearly and dispassionately. Being a mother helped. Success at work helped.

Then slowly, things that I had resented vaguely for years, but had struggled to articulate, started getting named and shamed by the feminist movement. Mansplaining, guilt-tripping, victim-blaming, gaslighting, the household chores gender gap, and most of all the Santoor trap — that a woman is a Goddess who can do it all — that too while looking like a dewy-faced 21-year-old.

And it was like a whole new world opened up for me.

I remember my mother going through exactly this epiphany when she was around my age (I'm 49). I think it happens to all women. We reach a certain point when we just refuse to be talked down to or infantilised anymore. We stop caring about being liked by people, and start caring about being liked by ourselves. It's a fantastic awakening and tremendously liberating.

As a writer, I feel I have lost some of my wide-eyed romantic optimism, BUT I have gained insight, empathy and middle-aged snark. As a woman, I am surer of what looks good on me, what kind of physical activity

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works best for me, what kind of diet and so on.

Somebody I was on a panel discussion with at a litfest summed it up brilliantly. She said that everybody likes girls — they are decorative, diffident and eager to please — but nobody likes women. Especially women in their fifties.

Because they are clear-eyed, witty, wise, they have perspective, they know their worth, they are not afraid to occupy their rightful amount of space in either a boardroom or a bedroom, they laugh loudly, they speak up fearlessly, they have built-in bullshit detectors, they can smell hypocrisy a mile off, they refuse to indulge in girl-on-girl hate, and they are not afraid to call a spade a spade.

I'm almost at fifty and loving this new me.

Anuja Chauhan is the author of five bestselling novels — *The Zoya Factor*, *Battle for Bittora*, *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, *The House that BJ Built* and *Baaz*. She also works in advertising, where she is best known for her work on PepsiCo brands, including *Yeh Dil Maange More*, *Nothing Official About it*, *Mera Number Kab Aayega*, *Oye Bubbly*, Kurkure's *Tedha Hai Par Mera Hai* and Mountain Dew's *Darr Ke Aagey Jeet Hai* campaigns. Her most recent advertising work is the Congress party's *Ab Hoga Nyay* campaign for the 2019 National Elections. All her books have been or are being adapted into movies or web series — *The Zoya Factor* by Fox Star Studios, *Battle for Bittora* by the Anil Kapoor Film Company, *Those Pricey Thakur Girls* by HotStar and *Baaz* by Yash Raj Films. She writes a fortnightly column for *The Week* magazine titled *Schizo-Nation*. Currently, she is working on a sixth novel. She lives outside Bangalore with her husband Niret Alva, their three children, a cranky housekeeper, and two dogs.

मीना कुमारी: तन्हा चाँद का सफ़रनामा

यतीन्द्र मिश्र

महिला दिवस के अवसर पर कुछ ऐसे किरदारों का जीवन खँगालकर देखा जा सकता है, जिनका होना स्त्री-गरिमा को हर लिहाज से सार्थक करता रहा है। ऐसे में यह देखना भी दिलचस्प है कि सिनेमा के सिंहावलोकन के मौके पर वे कौन से अदाकार हैं, जो एक पूरी शताब्दी का कुहासा चीरकर अपनी सशक्त अदायगी के साथ हमसे मुखातिब हुए हैं।

सिनेमा की रंग बिरंगी दुनिया में यदि हम कला सिनेमा या मनोरंजक सिनेमा वाली घिसी पिटी श्रेणी से अलग, मात्र सार्थक और सफल सिनेमा के उदाहरणों से सशक्त अभिनेत्रियों की परिपाटी चुनें, तो एक बड़ी भीड़ में से उँगलियों पर गिनने लायक कुछ ऐसी शख्सियतें नज़र आती हैं, जिनका योगदान कला और लोकप्रिय सिनेमा के मिलने वाले किसी आत्मीय बिन्दु पर अत्यंत गम्भीर और चिन्तनपरक रहा है। बिल्कुल शुरुआती दौर की देविका रानी, शान्ता आप्टे, दुर्गा खोटे, कामिनी कौशल से लेकर बाद में उस धारा में शामिल मधुबाला, नरगिस एवं गीता बाली की अप्रतिम छवियों में एकबारगी बड़ा बदलाव तब नज़र आता है, जब हमें मीनाकुमारी जैसी समर्थ अभिनेत्री हासिल होती है। एक अत्यन्त भावप्रवण और संवेदनशील स्त्री का चेहरा लिये हुए मीना कुमारी एक ऐसे किरदार में तब्दील होकर हमारे सामने आती हैं, जिनका पूरा फ़िल्मी सफ़रनामा ही सिनेमा के अध्ययन के लिहाज से अनुकरणीय बन गया है। उनका आगमन वैसे तो पौराणिक फ़िल्म *वीर घटोत्कच* (1949) के माध्यम से हो चुका था, मगर उनकी अभिनय यात्रा का आरम्भ तो 1952 में आयी प्रभात पिकचर्स की बैजू बावरा से ही माना जाता है। इस फ़िल्म से शुरू हुई उनकी अदायगी की अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण यात्रा में एक ओर सार्थक सिनेमा की ढेरों फ़िल्में मौजूद हैं, तो दूसरी ओर ठीक उसी समय मनोरंजन से भरी व्यावसायिक फ़िल्मों की बहुतेरी दिलचस्प बानगियाँ भी उनके नाम पर दर्ज हैं। आप आसानी से इनमें *दायरा*, *परिणीता*, *एक ही रास्ता*, *शारदा*, *चार दिल चार राहें*, *साहब बीबी और गुलाम*, *आरती*, *दिल अपना और प्रीत पराई*, *दिल एक मन्दिर*, *बहु बेगम*, *पाकीज़ा* और मेरे अपने के बरक्स *आज़ाद*, *यहूदी*, *कोहिनूर*, *अदल-ए-जहाँगीर*, *सट्टा बाज़ार*, *बेनज़ीर*, *ग़ज़ल*, *चित्रलेखा*, *मिस मेरी*, *फूल और पत्थर*, *मँझली दीदी*, *चन्दन का पलना* और *काजल* को याद कर सकते हैं।

पारसी थियेटर के अभिनेता, गायक और संगीत शिक्षक अली बख्श और नर्तकी इकबाल बेगम की दूसरी सन्तान के रूप में जिस लड़की महज़बीन ने 1933 में मुम्बई में जन्म लिया था, वह 1972 तक मात्र उनतालीस वर्ष की एक कम वयस्क उम्र में मीना कुमारी बनकर हिन्दी सिनेमा के रूपहले पर्दे पर पूरे माधुर्य और गरिमा के साथ मौजूद रहीं। मीना कुमारी का मतलब ही था – अनोखी अदाकारा, बहुत अच्छी शायरा और एक बेहतरीन इन्सान, हमदर्दी और अपनेपन की ऐसी दानिशमंद मिसाल, जिसकी शायरी की रूह और रोशनाई, जज़्बात की कलम पकड़कर दर्द के गहरे समुन्दर से अपना वजूद हासिल करती थी। इस बात का पता लगा पाना थोड़ा मुश्किल है कि हम उनकी अमर फ़िल्मों की फेहरिस्त से किसी किरदार का दर्द बयाँ चुनकर यह कह पायें कि वह मात्र फ़िल्म में मौजूद मीनाकुमारी का एक रोल ही है या कि वह स्वयं कहीं न कहीं उनकी शख्सियत के कोनेअँतरे में झाँकने भर की एक तकलीफ़ भरी जोज़हद है, जहाँ से उनके किरदार को शक्क और आवाज़ मिलती है। कई बार उनकी शायरी में मौजूद वह तड़प, बेगानापन और सब कुछ एकबारगी हाथ से छूट जाने की कश्मकश, कहीं न कहीं उनके व्यक्तिगत जीवन के तमाम उतार-चढ़ावों का भी एक फलसफा व्यक्त करता है।

यह अकारण नहीं है कि मीना कुमारी की शख्सियत में मौजूद ढेरों रंगतों ने जिस नाउम्मीदी, बेसब्री और तलाश से जिन्दगी का कैनवास गढ़ा था, उसी में से निकलकर हिन्दी सिनेमा के पचास और साठ के दशक को एक समर्थ अभिनेत्री का चेहरा मिल सका। जिस व्यक्तिगत टीस और चुभन को उन्होंने अपने अभिनय का सबसे बड़ा हथियार बनाया, वह चीज़ उनकी शायर तबीयत में भी औज़ार बनकर कल्पना को खानगी और धार देता रहा। यह मीना कुमारी ही लिख सकती थीं—

‘टुकड़े-टुकड़े दिन बीता/धज़ी-धज़ी रात मिली/जिसका जितना आँचल था/उतनी ही सौगात मिली’। इस ग़ज़ल में वे उस बरसात की बात भी करती हैं, जिसमें आँखें हँसती हैं और दिल अक्सर रोता रहता है। ऐसे ढेरों ग़ज़लों की सफल नुमाइन्दगी के लिये हमें मीना कुमारी की ऐसी फ़िल्मों की ओर भी ताकना चाहिए, जिसमें उनकी आँखें ही संवादों



Yatin Mishra (file picture from An Author's Afternoon session)

और परिस्थितियों का सारा कोलाज रच देती हैं। फिर आपको साहब बीबी और गुलाम की छोटी बहू की त्रासदी याद आती है, जो सामन्ती ज़माने के अन्तर्विरोध में फँसी हुई स्त्री का किरदार भी है। दायरा की युवा शीतल का अनकहा दर्द आपको भीतर तक भिगो डालता है, जो उसके बीमार और बूढ़े पति के रूप में घुन की तरह कहीं आत्मा में घुस गया है। इसी तरह चार दिल चार राहों की अछूत कन्या का संत्रास हो, दिल एक मन्दिर की समर्पिता पत्नी का सेवा भाव और उसी क्षण उसमें मौजूद प्रेयसी का असमंजस या फिर बेनजीर की तवायफ़ का समाज द्वारा हमेशा दूसरी औरत के लिबास में देखा जाना दर्शकों को न सिर्फ़ परेशान करता है, बल्कि वह मीनाकुमारी की उपस्थिति में दर्द को कुछ और अधिक गाढ़े दर्द में बदल डालता है। यह सफ़र यहीं तक नहीं रुकता, वह अपना शिखर पाता है, जब जीवन का अन्तिम संगीत रचते हुए वे पाकीज़ा के अन्त में कांच के टुकड़ों पर चलते हुए न केवल अपनी घुँघरुओं की दबी-छुपी सिसकी में खून से सराबोर होती हैं, बल्कि फ़िल्म के अन्त के साथ-साथ खुद का जीवन भी समाप्त कर डालती हैं।

दरअसल मीना कुमारी का पूरा जीवन ही त्रासदी में डूबे हुए एक दुखान्त परिकथा की तरह है, जिसे उसके सपनों का सच्चा राजकुमार कभी नहीं मिलता। जो कुछ मिलता भी है, वह हर बार उन्हें पहले से अधिक छलता है, पहले से अधिक अकेला छोड़ देता है। भारतीय मानसिकता अपने प्रिय और चर्चित नायकों, छवियों को किसी परिभाषा या मुहावरे में कैद करके देखना पसन्द करती है। शायद इसीलिए उसने मीना कुमारी जैसी कई परतों में डूबी और अत्यन्त संश्लिष्ट स्त्री को 'ट्रेजडी-क्वीन' के रूप में देखा। शायद इसी कारण उनकी अधिकांश फ़िल्मों का कथानक भी इसी तरह रखा जाता था कि आम जनता को एक ऐसी स्त्री के दर्शन हों, जो दुःख और बेगानेपन, संत्रास और असह्य पीड़ा में पूरी तरह समायी हुई है। यह गौर करने लायक तथ्य है कि पचास और साठ के दशक के लता मंगेशकर के द्वारा गाये हुए अधिकांश दर्द-भरे गीत मीना कुमारी के किरदारों पर ही फ़िल्माये गये हैं। ऐसे में लता की आवाज़ का जादू और मीना कुमारी की विवश और लरजती उपस्थिति से ढेरों फ़िल्में कामयाबी के कीर्तिमान रचती गयीं और गाने सदाबहार ढंग से अमर होते चले गये। 'मोहे भूल गए साँवरिया' (बैजू बावरा), 'कभी तो मिलेगी कहीं तो मिलेगी बहारों की मंजिल राही' (आरती), 'दुनिया करे सवाल तो हम क्या जवाब दें' (बहू बेगम), 'नगमा और शेर की सौगात किसे पेश करूँ' (ग़ज़ल), 'अजीब दास्ताँ है ये कहाँ

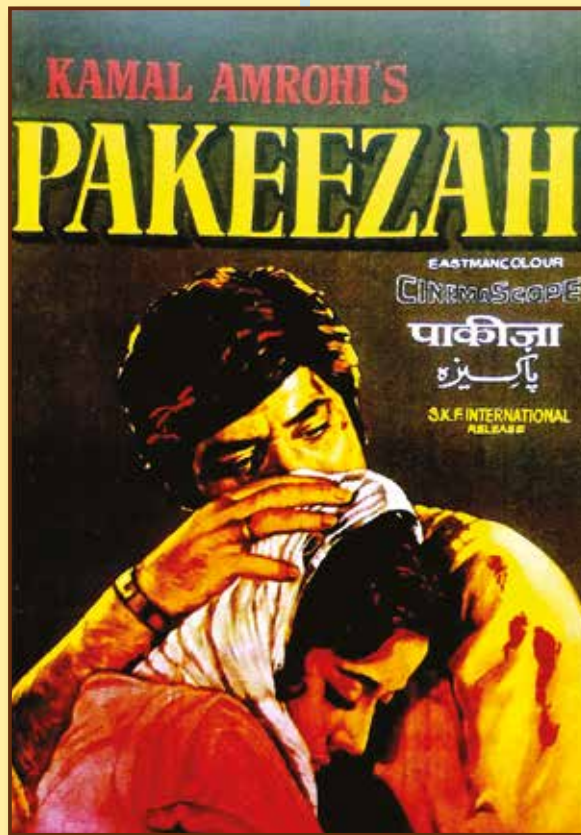
शुरू कहाँ खतम' (दिल अपना और प्रीत पराई), 'वो जो मिलते थे कभी हमसे दीवानों की तरह' (अकेली मत जड़ो), 'हम तेरे प्यार में सारा आलम खो बैठे हैं' (दिल एक मन्दिर), 'रोज़ अकेली आये चाँद कटोरा लिये भिखारन रात' (मेरे अपने)... यह सूची अन्तहीन है, जिसमें आप भी ढेरों ऐसे गीत जोड़ सकते हैं, जो इस वक्त आपको बरबस याद आ रहे होंगे।

मीना कुमारी की दास्तानगोई में सिर्फ़ दर्द या शराब ही शामिल रही हो, ऐसा न था। कमाल अमरोही और धर्मेन्द्र जैसे शख्स भी आये और साहिल की तरह अलग हो लिये। नाम, इज्जत, शोहरत, पुरस्कार, रुपया-पैसा सब कुछ उसी तरह आया, जिस तरह समुद्र में ज्वार आता है। वे हिन्दी सिनेमा की पहली अभिनेत्री हैं, जिन्हें अभिनय का पहला फ़िल्मफेयर पुरस्कार बैजू बावरा (1953) के लिये दिया गया। उसके बाद उन्हें यह पुरस्कार तीन बार परिणीता (1954), साहब बीबी और गुलाम (1962) तथा काजल (1965) के लिये मिला।

मीना कुमारी के बारे में एक बात अलग से कहने लायक है कि वह पूरी तरह से केवल सिनेमा की समर्पित अदाकारा नहीं थीं। ठीक उसी तरह वे पूरे तौर पर शायरा भी नहीं थीं। बल्कि दोनों के मिलने वाले किसी सामान्य छोर पर एक ऐसी आधी-अधूरी औरत अवश्य थी, जो ज़िन्दगी को पूरे तौर पर मुकम्मल जीना चाहती थीं। उनकी शायरी में भले ही ज़िन्दगी का रूमानी एहसास व्यक्त न हुआ हो या कामयाब फ़िल्मों की तमाम बड़ी सूची में से एक-दो फ़िल्में ही जीवन के उल्लास से भरपूर मिलती हों, मगर इतना अवश्य है कि

वे जीवन को सम्पूर्णता की तह तक पाने और जीने में विश्वास करने वाली अभिनेत्री थीं। एक ऐसी संवेदनशील स्त्री, जिसका अन्दर-बाहर सभी कुछ प्रेम की इबारत को समझना-पढ़ना चाहता था। यह बहुत वाजिब है कि उनके प्रशंसक और मित्र, गीतकार-फ़िल्म निर्देशक गुलज़ार ने जब उनकी मृत्यु के बाद उनके नज़्मों का संग्रह संपादित और प्रकाशित किया, तो उसे नाम दिया — मीना कुमारी की शायरी... जिसका डिस्क तन्हा चाँद कहकर जारी हुआ। वे वाकई एक ऐसी तन्हा चाँद ही थीं, जिसके दाग, धैर्य और असमंजस को हम उनके निभाये किरदारों, व्यक्तित्व और नज़्मों की सलवटों में आसानी से पढ़ सकते हैं।

Written on the occasion of
International Women's Day





Gurpratap Khaira

Geetanjali Shree

Crossing Borders with Courage

It is quite spontaneous for me... as I pen my thoughts, I write what resonates with my mind and my heart," said writer Geetanjali Shree, in conversation with Gurpratap Khaira at the **Kalam** Amritsar event held at Taj Swarna. Shree, the author of several short stories and five novels in Hindi, spoke about her literary journey and her recent novel, *Ret Samadhi*.



Praneet Bubber, Preeti Gill, Sonakshi Kundra, Sheetal Khanna

Shree said *Ret Samadhi* was nine years in the making. Though not immediately evident, all the stories are like a family, reflecting how we all have our own families and everything starts with family.

The novel is about one such family in which the 80-year-old protagonist, Daadi, takes to the bed upon being widowed. She will not move from her bed, she declares, despite the family's many attempts to draw her back into their lives. But even as she lies in bed immobile and

resolute, an internal metamorphosis is underway. Her refrain, "Now I will not get up", eventually changes to, "Now I will become new and get up." When she rises from this self-imposed "*samadhi*", it is a new woman, with a new youthfulness and a new mindset, free from all social restrictions and fetters that typically hold women back.

During the conversation, the author described how women have several "borders" in their lives that they must cross in order to move forward. "These borders can be metaphorical, physical, or real, but once they do, there is no stopping them. And Daadi in my story is just like that," said Shree. She talked about how there are many kinds of borders — between men and women, young and old, mind and body, love and hate, sleeping and waking.

Coming to her chosen language of expression, Shree said, "I exist in the modern times. My language reflects my time." She spent her childhood in English-medium schools. However, as an author she chose to write in Hindi. She believes that this is a language in which she was educated through her own experiences. Her aim is to give the language more visibility.



Jasmit Nayyar



Anubha Taneja

Kalam Amritsar is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Dainik Jagran, Taj Swarna and Ehsaas Women of Amritsar

Write Like

A Girl



Aparna Jain



Aanchal Garcha



Kalpana Chaudhary



Lalit Nihal

Rapunzel waits for a dashing prince to save her from the locked tower, Snow White lies in eternal sleep awaiting the "kiss of life" from a heroic saviour, Cinderella pines away at the fireside waiting for Prince Charming to come find her.

Aparna Jain would have none of these "damsels in distress" in her books. The author of *Like a Girl: Real Stories for Tough Kids* and *Boys will be Boys: Inspiring Stories for Smart Kids* was hosted by **The Write Circle** on March 7, in conversation with **Ehsaas** Woman of Raipur, Aanchal Garcha, at Hotel Hyatt, Raipur.

The hour-long session, introduced by Srishti Trivedi, was attended by a number of eminent guests who were delighted to be a part of a discussion that touched upon several topics relevant to our times. Social conditioning, gender stereotypes, patriarchy — they all came up for a review. "Gender sensitisation and equality start at home. If you have a big celebration for your boy child and nothing for your girl child, it's discrimination," Jain pointed out.

The author, who is also an internationally certified corporate leadership coach — and "a wannabe flower farmer" according to her Twitter bio — also discussed

the "thorny" issue of feminism in a patriarchal society. She stressed on the need for youth icons, the importance of inclusive policies and why we need to acknowledge diversity in every aspect of our society.

Coming to her literary journey, Jain said that the motivation to write the two titles for young people (*Like A Girl* and *Boys will be Boys*) was the simple fact that there were hardly any children's books on youth icons that could inspire young adults.

Jain thoroughly engaged her audience during the interactive session, answering all their questions about gender and equality, her books, her creative process and her upcoming projects.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks by **Ehsaas** Woman of Raipur, Kalpana Chaudhary. Jain was presented with a memento from Dr Lalit Nihal, while the attending guests received signed copies of the author's books.

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

Painting the Truth about Panipat



Gayatri Devi Patwardhan



Vishwas Patil

The Third Battle of Panipat was India's Waterloo. It was the bloodiest battle in the medieval period," said author Vishwas Patil at a **Kalam** event in Pune, where he was in conversation with speaker and entrepreneur Gayatri Devi Patwardhan.

"Panipatkar" as Patil is fondly known, held the audience spellbound with his knowledge about history and his warmth and candour.

Speaking about his novel *Panipat* and why the Marathas went all the way north to wage this war, Patil said, "It was always Punjab which was the entry point for all invaders. It was necessary to defeat the Afghan invader, Ahmad Shah Abdali, before he could proceed further. And they almost succeeded in it too."

Drawing parallels between battle and life, Patil said that to win any battle of life, time and destiny have to be with you. Both of these went against the Marathas, which is why they lost in Panipat.

Patil also spoke about the inspiration behind his novel on Subhash Chandra Bose, *Mahanayak*, and "*Zadazadati*", the novel that won him a Sahitya Akademi Award.

Answering a question during the audience interaction, Patil said it was indeed sad that history had been distorted, and even someone like Chhatrapati Shivaji has been misrepresented. But the writer was optimistic that things were now changing.

When asked about the leeway taken by Bollywood movies while portraying historical characters, especially Peshwa Bajirao (in the film 2015 *Bajirao Mastani*), he answered with his inimical sense of humour: "Bajirao

naachne wala nahin tha, nachaane wala tha" (Bajirao did not dance, he made others dance).

Ehsaas Woman of Pune, Neelam Seolekar, delivered the welcome address, while **Ehsaas** Woman of Pune, Amita Munot, ended the proceedings with a thank you note. Sujata Sabnis, also an **Ehsaas** Woman of Pune, felicitated the author.

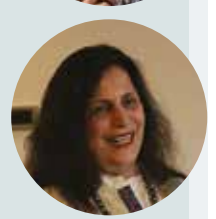
Sujata Sabnis: I am a total history buff and have always found Maratha history to be fascinating. So, to listen to Panipatkar Vishwas Patil talking about his historical novels was an absolute treat. Loved his down-to-earth warmth and delightful sense of humour.



Neelam Seolekar: I became wiser to a few facts that Vishwas Patil shed a light on. He has a deep knowledge of his subject as well as a great sense of humour.

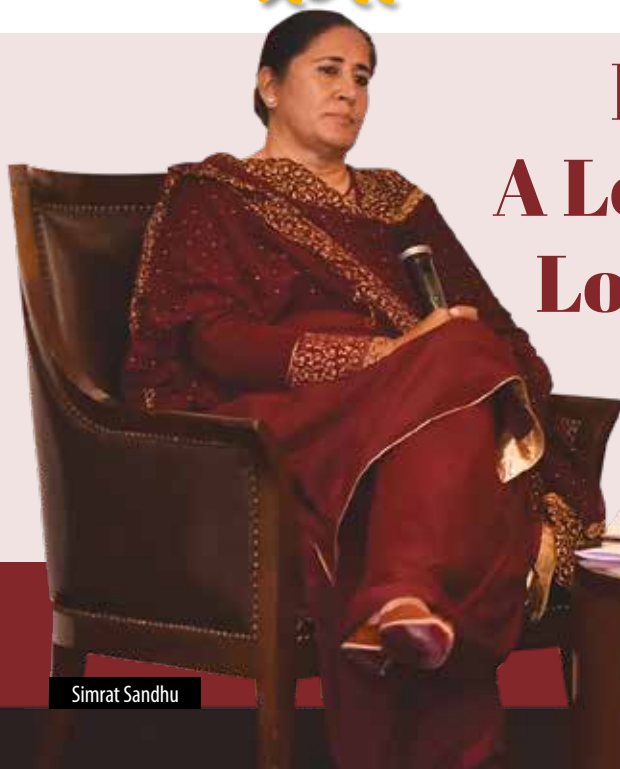


Amita Munot: Vishwas Patil was a most entertaining and informative historian. His rise from meager means to a highly acclaimed author, that too in a regional language, is astonishing. Gayatri Patwardhan's deep study of Vishwasji's books made the interaction very interesting. She herself is so well-read in history.



Kalam Pune is presented in association with Lokmat, The O Hotel and Ehsaas Women of Pune

Punjab: A Lookback to Look Ahead



Simrat Sandhu



Amandeep Sandhu

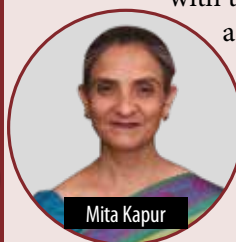
There is no objective truth in the world and I strongly believe there is nothing called non-fiction," said Amandeep Sandhu in conversation with Simrat Sandhu at **The Write Circle** session in Jaipur. The conversation revolved around the history of Punjab as seen in the pages of Amandeep's latest work, *Punjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines*.

The session began with Amandeep talking about his first two books, *Roll of Honour* and *Sepia Leaves*, which were works of fiction, and the transition he had to make in order to write his first "non-fiction" book. He highlighted how there are subtle differences between writing fiction and non-fiction and why the story of revisiting Punjab could not be told through a fictional lens.

After explaining the differences between a fictional narrative and non-fiction, Amandeep and Simrat delved into a discussion on how Punjab has always been a minefield of narratives and how after reading its history, one understands where many of these narratives have gone wrong.



Rishi Mattu



Mita Kapur



Ajay Atal

Amandeep discussed Punjab's water crisis in detail and highlighted how a conflict with the central government has been a recurring theme in the history of the state, starting even before the Independence of India.

He also spoke about the Partition of the country, asking, "Who will know the pain of Partition better than those who have suffered it?" He described how those crossing the border had to deal with several problems, including issues of existence, identity and language.

The writer pointed out how the image of Punjab as portrayed in films and other media is not true to the current reality of the region, which is dealing with a scarcity of water and the land gradually transforming into a desert. The session ended with Amandeep sharing with the audience his experience of travelling through Punjab for three years and being able to connect with the spirit of the land.



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

मैथिली, एक नई जागरण की भाषा

Pradip Bihari

Pranav

लेखन पर प्रभाव के प्रश्न पर श्री प्रदीप बिहारी ने कहा कि किसी का प्रभाव बुरी बात नहीं, पर निरंतर लिखने के अभ्यास से प्रभाव कम हो जाता है।

ये बातें पटना के आखर कार्यक्रम में मैथिली के प्रख्यात कथाकार प्रदीप बिहारी ने कही।

बीआईए हॉल, पटना, में मैथिली के चर्चित कथाकार-आलोचक प्रणव से बातचीत के दौरान कथाकार और उपन्यासकार प्रदीप ने बताया कि उन्होंने अपना लेखन गीत और कविता से आरंभ किया।

लेखन का आरंभ खजौली उच्च विद्यालय में वर्ष 1975 में शुरू हुआ था। जीवकांत जी के सानिध्य में विद्यालय में साहित्य का माहौल था। पहली बार 1976 में मिथिला मिहिर की नेना भूटका अंक में एकांकी प्रकाशित हुआ था।

कथा लेखन के प्रश्न पर प्रदीप ने कहा कि दादी माँ को किस्सा सुनाने के क्रम में लिखने की निरंतरता बढ़ने लगी।

प्रदीप की पहली पुस्तक उपन्यास के रूप में आई, उन्होंने कहा कि मैथिली में प्रकाशन की व्यवस्था के कारण ही उपन्यास विसूवियस पहले आयी।

प्रदीप ने कहा वे लेखक मणिपद्म जी से प्रभावित हुए थे और उनकी उपन्यास अर्धनारीश्वर से उनको विशेष प्रेरणा मिली थी।

उनका कहना था की मैथिली भाषा को अच्छे से समझने के लिए जीवकांत और राज मोहन झा को पढ़ना चाहिए।

कार्यक्रम में उन्होंने यह भी कहा की "समकालीन" और "समकालीनता" में अंतर है, समकालीन मतलब एक समय का और समकालीनता मतलब एक दृष्टि।

अपने कथाओं के पात्रों पर प्रदीप ने कहा, "हमारे परिवेश के ही 90% लोग हमारे कथा और उपन्यास के पात्र होते हैं।"

मैथिली साहित्य पर आंदोलन का प्रभाव पर लेखक ने कहा कि प्रयोगधर्मिता और आंदोलन का प्रभाव हमारे कथाओं में दिखता है, "लेकिन हमने उससे कभी अपने मूल विषय पर हावी नहीं होने दिया।"



Ratneswar Singh, Aradhana Pradhan, Usha Kiran Khan



Kathakar Ashok

बातचीत के क्रम में श्री प्रदीप ने कहा कि भाव दिमाग में अचानक ही आता है, लेखक उससे विषय चुनकर विधा तय कर के लिखना आरंभ करते हैं।

पलायन और परिस्थिति से ही नव प्रयोग का जन्म मैथिली साहित्य में हुआ था। बिहार में सामाजिक समीकरण के प्रभाव के कारण कुछ नव चेतना का जागरण हुआ है।

"खुद को दोहरा नहीं पाऊँ इसके लिए मैं हमेशा नए विषयों को खोज करता हूँ," श्री प्रदीप ने कहा।

लेखन में विचारधारा के प्रश्न पर प्रदीप ने कहा वैचारिक का रंग एक ही हो, यह जरूरी नहीं है। लेखक के सांस्कृतिक स्तर के कारण वैचारिकता की रुकावट हट जाती है।

मैथिली रंगमंच के चुनौती के प्रश्न पर उन्होंने कहा की बारहवी तक खुद वे स्त्री पात्र का अभिनय किया करते थे। अब रंगमंच में महिलाएं भी आ रही हैं।

इस कार्यक्रम के अंत में प्रेम भरद्वाज जी के लिए एक मिनट का मौन रखा गया।

इस कार्यक्रम का संचालन और धन्यवाद-ज्ञापन मसि इंक की संस्थापक और निर्देशक आराधना प्रधान ने किया। कार्यक्रम में उषाकिरण खान, कथाकार अशोक, श्याम धारिहरे, धीरेन्द्र कुमार झा, अनीश अंकुर, वीरेन्द्र झा, रत्नेश्वर आदि उपस्थित थे।



Jai Prakash

Meenakshi Natarajan



Ratna Purkayasth

Anand Madhab



Kurukshetra was not just an 18-day battle, it is a war going on every second," said Meenakshi Natarajan while talking about her book, *Apne Apne Kurukshetra*, at a **Kalam** Patna event, in conversation with Jai Prakash.

Natarajan said the characters of the *Mahabharata* were still alive, inside every person. She likened salvation to "the attainment of truth", but pointed out that the "truth" was different for every person. We do not find the truth because of the hidden fear inside us. Victory over fear is the victory of truth. Our greatest enemy, according to Natarajan, is sitting inside us as fear, with which we keep fighting every day. This is the Kurukshetra within us.

People seek external ways to be free from fear, but the solution is within the human being, said the writer. On the concept of patriarchy and fear Natarajan said that patriarchy affected everyone, female *and* male. The rules of the society bind both men and women. Sometimes there is a desire to be free from this bondage, but somehow we are not able to free ourselves from fear. This process needs to start from within. If we remove the fear inside ourselves, we can also challenge the patriarchy and the state, she said.

Natarajan described how our ways of speaking and listening change with a change in time and perspective. Any work, according to her, is a creation of its time, and fear, hunger, desire, lust are all as prevalent among humans today as they were during the time of the *Mahabharata*.

Kalam Patna is presented by Shree Cement Ltd, in association with Dainik Jagran, Hotel Chanakya and Navras School of Performing Arts

Protectors of the Wild

Machhli, the tigress. Photo: Manjari Maheshwari

"There is no universal language in the jungles; each species has its own language, and though the vocabulary of some is limited, as in the case of porcupines and vultures, the language of each species is understood by all the jungle-folk."

— Jim Corbett

There are some very special humans, too, who understand this language of the jungle-folk!

To recognise the efforts of all those conservationists working to safeguard the forests of Rajasthan and their incredible faunal treasures, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) India and **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** have instituted the 'Machhli Award'. The award has a cash and component and a citation.

The first edition of the 'Machhli Award' was presented at an awards ceremony on March 13, 2020, at ITC Rajputana in Jaipur.

The chief guest at the award ceremony was former Rajasthan Forest and Environment Minister, Bina Kak. The award was given jointly to Shankar Singh Shekhawat, who leads the Wildlife Rescue Team of Sariska Tiger Reserve, and Assistant Forester of Sawai Madhopur, Yogesh Kumar Sharma.

Named after the legendary tigress of Ranthambhore National Park, 'Machhli', the award aims to recognise the exemplary contributions of a field staffer of the Rajasthan Forest Department, a member of the local community, an individual or a group in conserving wildlife and their habitats across the length and breadth of the state.

Kak said the Machhli Award has recognised and honoured the incredible talent and intellect of the recipients. Remembering the



Shankar Singh Shekhawat

Yogesh Kumar Sharma

Bina Kak



Rajpal Singh, Apra Kuchhal, Divyabhanu Singh Chavda, Yogesh Kumar Sharma, Bina Kak, Shankar Singh Shekhawat, R.J. Soni



Pramod Sharma



Manful Singh, Tejveer Singh, Sheduram Yadav and Vikram Singh



Ravi Singh

patron feline of this new award, Kak said, "Machhli was like a goddess for us, who demanded respect but had so much compassion and love in her eyes." She said Machhli was an icon, and many people connected with her. Her progeny has increased the tiger population at Ranthambhore National Park.

Secretary-general and CEO, WWF India, Ravi Singh, said the award was a beginning. "It is a start towards commemorating the achievements of the staff of the Forest Department. In the coming years, the scope of the award will widen to involve the village-level community as well," he said, adding that the award was being given to enhance and encourage the contributions of the field staff who often work under very trying and difficult

conditions.

Award recipient Shekhawat briefly touched upon the various areas of work being carried out by his team. This includes rescue operations, especially when an animal escapes into the city, night patrolling and much more. His fellow recipient, Assistant Forester Yogesh Kumar Sharma, described how he had managed to apprehend the culprits of chital poaching in Sawai Madhopur recently.

Retired IFS officer R.J. Soni, former president WWF India and member of advisory council WWF India, Divyabhanu Singh Chavda, and National Tiger Conservation Authority member Rajpal Singh were also present on the occasion.



Manual for a Happy, Stable Life

Literature can never be put under lockdown. To ensure that patrons did not miss out on their regular dose of literary interactions, **Prabha Khaitan Foundation's** boutique literary event, **An Author's Afternoon**, went Live on Facebook in March with a closed group of attendees tuning in from their homes.

Mythologist and *sutradhar* (storyteller) Seema Anand took the audience on a fascinating journey through one of the oldest Indian literary traditions — the *Kamashastra*. The *Kama Sutra* is possibly the most well-known text in this literary tradition that deals with matters of desire, like the *Arthashastra* deals with politics and government.

Anand, the author of *The Arts of Seduction*, is an expert on the *Kama Sutra*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and is also associated with the UNESCO project on Endangered Oral Traditions.

Anand began by saying, "In ancient times, the idea of *Kama* was the basis of success in literally every part of our lives. If the *Kama* wasn't right, nothing was right." *Kama Sutra* is not just one book but one of several thousand, because as each king ascended the throne in a kingdom, a new version of the *Kama Sutra* was commissioned. It was believed that if society was stable, the kingdom would flourish. And one of the keys to a stable adult human mind was a happy, satisfied body; hence the *Kama Sutra* was more a manual to a happy, stable life. Anand also shared some interesting facts about how in the Buddhist *Kamashastras* some intimate positions, like the 'Clinging Vine', were adapted by the military in physical combat and war formations.

Anand lamented the fact that we've come to believe that the *Kama Sutra* is a book about sex and that it's confined to that one subject, when it is actually an

incredibly important book in our history.

Anand works with women's narratives and describes herself as a "die-hard feminist". "The stories that we tell define our identity, they define who we are," she said, emphasising that if we wanted to create real change, then we needed to change these narratives. While working on these, she discovered that there were very few stories about a woman's right to her own sexuality. Instead, her body is always portrayed as somebody else's property.

That is when she began to research the *Kamashastras*, to see what stories we had silenced over time. She spoke about how the Indian *Kamashastras* were some of the most refined, elegant and subtle literature she had come across. She expressed her belief that the *Kamashastras* of ancient India were written by a woman, specifically Rati, the wife of the Hindu god of love, Kamadeva.

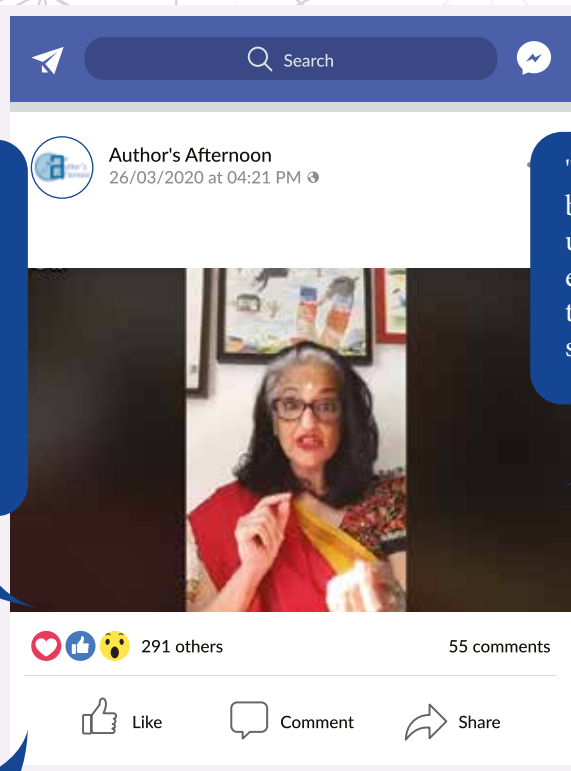
She explained how women were held as equals in

the *Kamashastra*. Their desires, rights and needs were given equal consideration and respect. They had the right to consent and the power to refuse. Men were even given instructions on how to make themselves worthy of and desirable to women. Anand shared her in-depth knowledge on the significance of the *solah shringar*, jewellery, perfumes and even different types of *paan* that could be served, each having a different connotation.

Having decided to work on texts dealing with pleasure, desire and seduction, Anand revealed the hardships she and her family had faced during her research. She had lost friends and faced social stigma because of her "unconventional" field of work. But she ended on an optimistic note, saying that people had gradually started responding positively and understanding the beauty of her research. Anand's insights into ancient wisdom and mythology, both Indian and Western, left the audience mesmerised and looking forward to a session with her in person soon.

"I'm just fascinated by this session! I have some experience of reading ancient texts, mostly explaining Shiv-Parvati, Radha-Krishna, Ram-Sita, etc., and now I am finding out the answers to many questions which had crossed my mind while I came across the beautiful and subtle metaphors." — **Soonrita Das**

"Seema enjoyed every bit of the session, telling us the stories. Her facial expressions and way of talking kept me glued to the screen." — **Simi Gupta**



"Thanks, **Prabha Khaitan Foundation**, for this novel initiative. Loved it. Thanks for choosing an author who gave us a totally different insight into a subject considered taboo!" — **Shelja Singh**

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

A TORNADO OF QUESTIONS

At a time when the world is waging a war against an invisible virus, author Sandeep Unnithan took his audience into the workings of another invisible yet ubiquitous adversary — terrorism. More specifically, the terrorist attack on Mumbai on November 26, 2008.

The author, who is Executive Editor, *India Today*, was hosted by **The Write Circle** Jaipur on a Facebook Live session. Unnithan was introduced to the online audience by Mita Kapur of Siyahi.

Unnithan is the author of two books — *Black Tornado: The Three Sieges of Mumbai 26/11* and *Operation X: The Untold Story of India's Covert Naval War in East Pakistan*.

Unnithan spoke about his literary journey, sharing with the audience how the idea for *Black Tornado*, which has recently been turned into the ZEE5 web series, *State of Siege: 26/11*, came to him while he was writing his first book, *Operation X*, based on the Indian naval intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

The writer, who collaborated with the Late Captain M.N.R. Samant for *Black Tornado*, answered enthusiastic questions from the audience regarding the socio-political implications and the state of national security in relation to the 26/11 attacks. He went on to candidly discuss the limitations faced by security agencies in such dire situations, and the reason behind discrepancies in official accounts and media reports. He also shed some light on the Indian legal system and the court proceedings that followed the Mumbai attack.

Speaking about his writing, he said he followed a journalistic approach in his research for his books, including multiple interviews of the victims and the commando personnel. The session concluded with a vote of thanks from the author to his audience for the invigorating interaction, all because of their many intelligent questions.

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

Sandeep Unnithan

Mita Kapur

Juhi Sharma

Ayesha Sajjan

Neeru Saluja

Twinkle Singh

History, Mystery & Mythology



The wonders of history, mystery and mythology were delivered through the windows of the world wide web, as Ashwin Sanghi interacted with a select audience of **The Write Circle** Nagpur at a virtual session, in conversation with Apra Kuchhal.

Sanghi, who is aptly called an "entrepreneur by day and writer by night", said he would like to call himself a "storyteller". The bestselling writer has written numerous popular novels by expertly blending myth and history to create mystery. During the course of the conversation, he expressed disappointment that schools and colleges have taken out the fun factor from history and made it a boring subject.

Answering a question about how much of mythology was true, Sanghi said that he believed that mythology was more truthful than history as it came without any pretensions. He felt that history should not be whitewashed and all versions should be given due importance.

The writer of titles like *The Rozabal Line* and *The Krishna Key*, and most recently *The Vault of Vishnu*, said he had no qualms about being called "the Dan Brown of Indian literature" as he was a great admirer of the American writer of the Robert Langdon series. He said he was glad that there were a plethora of authors now who were simplifying mythology to hook the young readers of this generation.



Though he dedicates some time to his family business, he is no longer involved in its operations. He is more engaged in the "business of the book", he quipped, as his life as a writer also entails a certain amount of strategising to market his books. Having had his work rejected 47 times by agents, he was very happy to guide aspiring writers on how to go about getting their work published.

The session was a roller coaster of history, mythology and fiction, which took the knowledge of the ancient times and gave it a contemporary interpretation. The thirst to know more remained with the audience and they signed off looking forward to meeting Ashwin Sanghi in person at a session in the near future.

"Really enjoyed the session. It was wonderful, and yes, the most interesting day among the many days of the lockdown. I liked the way Ashwin Sanghi answered questions and elaborated on how he differentiated in the styles of various authors in answer to my question. Thank you organisers, for this session and thank you for including me." — **Madhavi Naidu**

The Write Circle Nagpur is presented in association with Lokmat, Radisson Blu Nagpur and Ehsaas Women of Nagpur

Wow

Women of Words

Prabha Khaitan Foundation organised a contest asking **Ehsaas Women** from across the country to write about their favourite woman author and their favourite book by her. Here are the winning entries.

Preeti Gill



Favourite author:

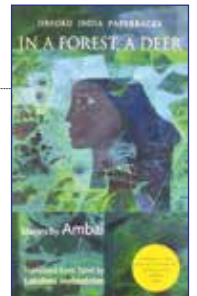
C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai)



Why: Ambai's writing speaks to me because her concerns are with women and their lives, struggles, conflicts. Her writing is strong, evocative and true. Her characters are beautifully etched and detailed, as are the landscapes and lives she describes. I find her work full of empathy, yet fearless. She's a fantastic storyteller and her stories need little embellishment because the core is so strong. She is among the foremost writers in Tamil today, yet her reach is worldwide through translations. To my mind she's an international writer, who uses the local and transforms it into the universal.

Favourite book:

In A Forest, A Deer



Favourite author:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni



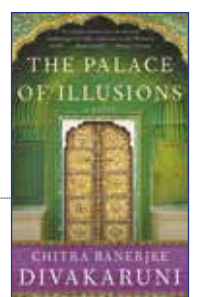
Priyanka Kothari



Why: A decade ago, I picked up this atypical mythology out of sheer boredom as until then mythology meant *Amar Chitra Katha* to me. But behold! There it was, a beautiful rendering of the feisty Panchaali's soul, so unapologetically human and real, in *The Palace of Illusions*. The beautiful prose "illusioned" me into an emotional but exciting labyrinth, like any "fan fiction". Divakaruni, in all her books, subtly cracks open the glass ceiling by giving voice to the voiceless, trivialised, misunderstood, maligned, yet strong women of India, broken by people but mended by love. Her writing is kind, even to the antagonist, gently cleansing prejudice and biases against mythology.

Favourite Book:

The Palace of Illusions



Nidhi Garg



Favourite author: Sudha Murty

Why : Her style of writing is very simple yet beautiful and her books have a message for our everyday life. She is a versatile and dynamic author who makes you think about the lifestyle that needs to be altered for the inner rejuvenation of life, both at the mental and physical level. Her choice of words and narration are appropriate for all age groups.



Favourite Book: *Wise & Otherwise*



Sangeeta Datta



Favourite author: Arundhati Roy

Why: Arundhati Roy is a master in her fiction writing, where she brings magic realism to small-town experiences in India, boldly dealing with gender and class issues woven into the narrative. Her non-fiction essays are brave expositions of social issues and class inequality in our country. Hers is a voice which is heard in India and internationally. Today she is a writer-activist and her words "to fight back with love and win the world" are inspiring to cross-generations in India. A writer has to be the master of her craft, build credible worlds and characters in enchanting style and also fight for free speech, and hold out hope for society. Roy is on top of all this. Brave, bold, empathetic, stylish.



Favourite Book: *The God of Small Things*



Vedula Ramalakshmi



Favourite author: मन्नू भंडारी

Why: मध्य प्रदेश के भानपुरा में जन्मी मन्नू भंडारी ने अपने पिता से साहित्य एवं माता से भावनाओं के संस्कारों की थाती को अपना पाथेय बनाया। आधुनिक हिंदी कथा साहित्य में जीवन एवं जगत के वैविध्य को बड़े ही मनोयोग से चित्रित करने वाली मन्नू भंडारी ने अपने पात्रों को भानपुरा के जाने अजाने चेहरों में से चुना है। *अकेली* कहानी की सोमा बुआ का अकेलापन, *मजबूरी* कहानी में अम्मा की मजबूरी, *आपका बंटी* उपन्यास में रिश्तों से उलझती पुलझती शकुन जैसे पात्र हर पल समाज से संघर्ष करते हुए नारी स्वतंत्रता एवं चेतना को बल देते हैं। *एक कहानी यह भी* में लेखिका की समस्त संवेदनाएं अपनी संपूर्ण आभा को लिए हुए अभिव्यक्त होती हैं। अद्वितीय साहित्यिक सफलता के बावजूद असफल वैवाहिक जीवन की टीस आप के अंतस् को झकझोर देती है। नेतृत्व गुणों से संपन्न मन्नू का मन युगीन राजनैतिक परिवेश को देख आक्रोश से भर जाता है, और साथ ही विस्थापन जैसे सामाजिक सरोकार उन्हें विचलित कर देते हैं। बिखरते परिवार को समेटने की कोशिश एवं साहित्य सर्जन के मध्य आप लगातार बँटती रहीं। जीवन के हर रंग को अपने आंचल में समेटता मन्नू भंडारी जी का व्यक्तित्व अपने नारी होने के अभिमान को संजोये रखता है, परिपूर्णता को प्राप्त होता है। आपके व्यक्तित्व की यह बहुआयामी विशेषता ने मुझे हमेशा से प्रेरित किया है। मन्नू भंडारी का साहित्य ही नहीं बल्कि उनका संपूर्ण व्यक्तित्व प्रेरणा का उत्स है।



Favourite Book : *एक कहानी यह भी*



Our Superheroes Celebrating World Health Day



Health is wealth. This old adage is, perhaps, truer now than ever before in human history.

A global pandemic is sweeping across the globe, leaving disease, death, isolation, loss of livelihood and unprecedented hardships in its wake. Yet, the Coronavirus crisis has also given the world a new set of superheroes, second to no Superman or Wonder Woman. They are our health workers — doctors, nurses, paramedics, ward boys and all other medical professionals — who are standing between us and the deadly virus like a shield, guarding us, guiding us and caring for us, very often at the cost of their own health and lives.

It is, therefore, quite fitting that the tagline for World Health Day 2020 is "Support nurses and midwives". World Health Day is celebrated on April 7, the birthday of the World Health Organization (WHO). This global body came into being in 1948, and since 1950, WHO has been celebrating April 7 as World Health Day, with a new theme or focus area every year.

This year's World Health Day highlighted the current status of nursing and around the world. According to WHO, this focus on nursing staff will be vital to "achieve national and global targets related to universal health coverage, maternal and child health, infectious and non-communicable diseases including mental health, emergency preparedness and response, patient safety and the delivery of integrated, people-centered care, amongst others."

The pandemic has shown us that not countries that have the biggest nuclear warheads or the deepest oil wells, but countries that have a robust public healthcare system, universal health coverage, extensive research and development facilities, environmentally sound policies and emergency preparedness to handle a medical outbreak are the ones that will be the next big players in global affairs.

India instituted a National Health Policy in 1983, which was established to ensure primary care for citizens by the year 2000. Our latest health policy came in 2017, called Ayushman Bharat, which aims to provide

ARTWORK BY **SUDIPTA KUNDU**

free health coverage at secondary and tertiary levels of populations. For a country that is less than 75 years old, India has come a very long way in its mission to achieve universal health coverage, yet a tremendous lot still remains to be done. To know more about the different health initiatives of our government, the website <https://www.nhp.gov.in/>, is informative and educative.

But what can we as individuals do to improve the health of the self, the community and the country? A lot actually. When each of us cares about hygiene,

adopts a healthy lifestyle, ensures environment-friendly practices at home and the workplace and is mindful of both physical and mental health, we contribute towards a healthier and happier world.

As Gautam Buddha said, "Health is the greatest gift, contentment the greatest wealth, faithfulness the best relationship."

We at **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** remain committed to the pursuit of a healthy and happy India — and the wider world.

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Deepak Ramola	Kalam Raipur, Bilaspur
Shashi Tharoor	Kalam multi-city session and closed-door session for Ehsaas Women of India
Manoj Muntashir	Kalam New York
Salman Khurshid	The Write Circle Mumbai, Bengaluru
Bijoylaxmi Hota	An Author's Afternoon Kolkata
Anand Neelakantan	The Write Circle Ahmedabad
Nomaan Shauq	Lafz multi-city session
Usha Uthup	Ek Mulakat Jaipur
Arpit Vageria	Kalam London
Ashwin Sanghi	The Write Circle Jodhpur, Hyderabad
Sanjeev Paliwal	Kalam Bhubaneswar
Shabnam Virmani & Vipul Rikhi	The Write Circle Jaipur
Sujoy Ghosh & Arindam Sil	Ek Mulakat Kolkata
Amish Tripathi	Kalam Vishesh — All India & Overseas
Bakhtawar Singh	Aakhar Amritsar
Vandana Rag	Kalam Chandigarh
Devdutt Pattanaik	Kalam — All India & Overseas
Dr Gajadan Charan	Aakhar Jaipur
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Shabana Azmi and Sangeeta Datta	Closed-door session for Ehsaas Women of India
Alan Friedman	The Universe Writes



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Amish Tripathi

Anand Neelakantan



Arindam Sil

Arpit Vageria

Ashwin Sanghi



Bakhtawar Singh

Bijoylaxmi Hota

Deepak Ramola

Devdutt Pattanaik

Dr Gajadan Charan



Manoj Muntashir

Manvendra Singh Gohil

Nandita Das

Nomaan Shauq

Pempa Khan



Salman Khurshid

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