

eShe

May 2020
Vol 4 Issue 5
₹150

— the female gaze —

Meera Gandhi

The TV personality and founder of the Giving Back Foundation on staying positive, hopeful and joyful in the time of COVID-19



THE VIRAL IMPACT

Women entrepreneurs on loss and opportunity in the time of lockdown

MENTAL HEALTH

Global celebrities who faced and overcame their darkest hours

CORONA DIARY

Kay Newton reports from the epicentre of coronavirus-hit Spain

LAIQA

Covid-free

LAIQA

PRODUCTS :

Ultrathin Day Pads (Pink Box) - Light to Moderate Flow

Cosyfluff Night Pads (Blue Box) - Heavy Flow (extra-long pads)

Ultrathin Panty Liners (Yellow Box) - Daily discharge, spotting, non-period days.

SERVICES:

ONE-TIME PAYMENTS

DOORSTEP DELIVERY

CHANGE/PAUSE SUBSCRIPTION ANYTIME

HOTLINE SERVICE +91 8882204686

REACH US AT: mylaiqa.com

BODO

Buy One Donate One

For every Pack you Purchase we provide a Pad free to a *Girl In Need*.

Get **5% OFF**
USE CODE: **ESHE5**



contents

ON THE COVER: Meera Gandhi
PHOTOGRAPHY: Ram Shergill



28 **From Darkness to Light**
Six celebrities who challenged
mental illness to find balance

08 **Four Shots and a Script**
Feminist screenwriter Devika Bhagat

12 **Riding Out the Pandemic**
How 5 entrepreneurs are facing the lockdown

18 **Shuttered in Spain**
Kay Newton shares her quarantine diary

22 **On Hope and Positivity**
Cover personality Meera Gandhi

40 **The Truth Warriors**
A new breed of fact-checkers at work

44 **When Dr Taru Went to Bihar**
A remarkable story of persistence and grit

54 **A Tale to be Told**
Christine Leunens, the author of *Caging Skies*

57 **A Queen's Domain**
Historian Ira Mukhoty on legendary heroines

60 **Food for Immunity**
4 recipes to make you stronger from within

MENTAL WELLBEING

As people around the world, from USA to Spain to India, deal with a pandemic and lockdown that has gone on for several weeks in many countries, it is not just the economy that is taking a beating. Humans are being forced to rewire conditioned ways of thinking and behaviour, and to relook at their life and lifestyle. This, along with the restrictions on freedom, movement and human bonding, is taking its toll on our mental health too.

While some may say this is no time for cheery words like 'positivity' or 'joy', and that we can only face the situation with acceptance and stoicism, I do believe that the defining quality of humanity – the one that keeps us going, and the one that has brought us this far – is hope. Without hope, why would one even wake up every morning?

While the universe is definitely giving us an opportunity to learn lessons in coexistence with each other and the planet, it hasn't – yet – given us a reason to abandon hope. On the contrary, there is more evidence than ever that the birds will chirp, the sun will shine and the sky will sparkle blue every single day, no matter what our mental status.

This May, marked worldwide as Mental Health Month, cover personality Meera Gandhi, founder of The Giving Back Foundation, urges us to be truly present in every moment of our lives, and to choose hope (p.22). Take her word for it. ■



Aekta Kapoor
Editor and Publisher
aekta@coralcontent.com

Editor and Publisher: Aekta Kapoor
Business Director: Kaveri Jain
Sales Partner: Karishma Makhija
Contributors: Chaitali Shirgaonkar,
Kay Newton, Oorvazi Irani, Manvi Pant,
Maya Lalchandani, Neha Kirpal, Shweta
Bhandral

Mentor: Kul Bhushan

All rights reserved throughout the world. Reproduction in any manner is prohibited. Published by Aekta Kapoor from Coral Content, C3/1 GF, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi 110057, India. Phone: +91 9818166621. Printed at Colourbar Communications, 44, Commercial Complex, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase - 1, New Delhi 110028. For queries, write to mail@coralcontent.com, or visit eShe.in



**COFFEE BEANS | GROUND COFFEE | COLD BREW
EVERYTHING COFFEE**

MEAN BEAN CAFE - GOLF COURSE ROAD

WWW.MEANBEAN.IN



**STRONG WOMEN
STRONG COFFEE**



RETAILING COFFEE @ BINGE BAKERY

Have you checked out our new Facebook group Shine Your Light™ where you can inspire others and be inspired? Here is a sneak peek

SHINE YOUR LIGHT™



WE ASKED: WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE MANTRA?

**“One day
or
Day one...
You decide.”**

Shivali Prakash

**“Winter
always turns
to spring.”**

Jyotsna Nair

“Just one? Nah!

- 1. Change the way you look at things and the things you look at change. 'Cause mindset is everything!**
- 2. It's all in the self: be your own sunshine, self-love and acceptance.**
- 3. Love and let love 😊**

**This was tough for me –
too many mantras!**

Kaveri Jain

WE ASKED: HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY POSITIVE OUTCOME IN YOUR LIFE DUE TO THE CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN? ANY SILVER LINING?

“It’s made me more patient. I hope I’m not heading for a professional switch from nutritionist to baker!”

Deepa Khanna Rupani

“I’ve started to value the sound of silence and I enjoy my me-time even more”

Namrata Durgan

“I had sent my son to my mother’s place a few days before lockdown. We were supposed to drive there on the weekend and bring him back. As it happened, lockdown started and he’s still there. This long break from parenting has relaxed my frayed nerves and given me and my husband the time to reconnect and relive the early days of our marriage. I find myself significantly less angry and irritable and more relaxed, and have a lot more time to read, write and converse with my partner. I really needed this unexpected breather.”

Zehra Naqvi

“I am learning how to adapt and slow down a bit. There are occasional relapses, but I am overall doing good.”

Manvi Pant



[FACEBOOK.COM / GROUPS / ESHEWORLD](https://www.facebook.com/groups/ESHEWORLD)



L-R: Sayani Gupta, Bani J, Maanvi Gagroo and Kirti Kulhari in *Four More Shots Please!* (Amazon Prime)



FOUR SHOTS AND A SCRIPT

As Season 2 of Four More Shots Please! creates both controversy and new fans in urban India, screenwriter Devika Bhagat shares her take

By Neha Kirpal

Stuck in the coronavirus lockdown, Indian netizens have been gorging on streaming television, and no other series has captured public imagination – and raised heckles – as much as Season 2 of *Prish Nandy and Rangita Nandy's Four More Shots Please!* on Amazon Prime. Screenwriter of both seasons, Devika Bhagat talks about

what feminism means to her, working with an all-women crew, breaking gender stereotypes, and broaching controversial subjects.

How did you come up with the storyline?

When I came on board for Season 1, Rangita Nandy had already created the characters. She wanted the show to be about “unapologetic, flawed women” as the tagline says.

How each character's story flows is through stories of our own lives, our personal experiences, and those of our family and friends. A single mother who hasn't had sex since she got pregnant. A small-town girl who comes out of the closet in the big city. A journalist and a lawyer facing professional issues. A privileged south Mumbai girl trying to find her feet in the world.

By Season 2, we ourselves had grown as women looking at the conversations around us – feminism, #MeToo – and saw how our characters could grow as strong individuals, while still remaining flawed. If we are going to tell a story about real women, we can't make them straight-laced and puritanical because that's not how women are.

What was it like working with an all-women cast and crew?

It was really refreshing to walk into a room filled with women. My baby daughter was 10 months old at the time, and I was trying to figure my life in a new context, so that when she looked at my work, she would feel proud of me and that my work had been of value.

So this was a kind of conscious choice for me. The most important part of working with Rangita and Ishita Nandy, directors Anu Menon and Nupur Asthana, and dialogue writer Ishita Moitra was that we spoke the same language. If I narrated an incident from my past, there was no judgement; it was completely understood around the room. There was nobody trying to



L-R: Devika Bhagat; actor Sayani Gupta's character is embroiled in complex relationships in the show



Actors Lisa Ray and Bani J
in Season 2, in which
they play a couple

mansplain feminism and women to me. There was no ego in the room.

You take up feminism in the Indian context, and the chasm between even women when it comes to its interpretations. Why bring this up?

Feminism is a much abused word. The interpretation changes depending on which social or economic class one is looking at in India. A village girl who is not allowed to study, or is married off at the age of 12 or 13, or sent to work in a construction site, has a different need for feminism. A small-town girl, who is not allowed to live her life or have a career, has a different need for feminism, as does a cosmopolitan woman. Feminism means equal rights – for

pay, status, respect and opportunity. Every woman in the world is facing inequality in varying degrees. Nobody has the right to say that a privileged woman has no issues or has a shallow definition of feminism.

“EVERY WOMAN IN THE WORLD IS FACING INEQUALITY IN VARYING DEGREES”

Women with privilege and education should be able to use feminism to their advantage so that it filters down. We are the ones that can make the change. We must fight with our privilege – that is feminism to me.

It was also important to break stereotypes, because we had to present women in their true form – which is that they don’t fit any stereotype – to present women with all their beauty and ugliness, and to not judge them. The important thing while



Each episode usually ends with the ladies asking for "four more shots, please!"

breaking stereotypes was not to care what men think. We did not make this series for male consumption.

You broached controversial topics such as open marriage and infidelity. What was the feedback – bouquets or brickbats?

Most brickbats are from men who feel that we are corrupting the mind of Indian women. We are showing women empowerment by showing characters striving for the truth and having the strength to overcome anything – they also happen to enjoy sex and have an occasional drink. But we present it in shades of grey. Nobody is the enemy, nobody is the loser, nobody is the winner. Everybody is living life the best they can.

You've also touched on political issues this time: right-wing fanaticism, political oppression and social-media trolls. What triggered you to take up these issues?

Today, everyone's lives are being affected by the political scenario in the country. You can't escape it. People are being forced to pick sides and even if we don't, we are categorised. So, it was really important to bring that into the script. We cannot escape that a female journalist is heckled, trolled and abused because of her articles and opinions – it's happening.

We live in a secular democracy and we need to create an atmosphere where there is constructive dialogue, debate, and discussion. I don't think that's going to happen for a long time and that scares me because nobody should be allowed to tell someone else that their opinions are not valid, and nobody is allowed to threaten, troll or abuse you because their views don't match yours. ■

Read the complete interview on eShe.in

RIDING OUT THE PANDEMIC

As COVID-19 puts a halt to the wheels of economies worldwide, five entrepreneurs and self-employed women in India share their experiences

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is unimaginable. It has put global governments in a quandary, businesses in a fix, and revealed the cracks in social and economic systems that prioritise corporate profit and defence expenditure over health, education and social welfare.

Besides the lives lost, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 will leave an indelible mark in history for the global lockdowns it has triggered. For sure, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) will be the worst hit by the lockdown in India. This is disquieting as 6.3 crore non-agricultural MSMEs in India employ 11 crore people, who will now shoulder the major brunt of the lockdown and, many predict, will not be able to reach pre-lockdown rev-

enues for months or even years.

In a scenario where men dominate the labour force, where women earn only 80 percent of male wages for the same work, and where women spend 577 percent more time on unpaid domestic work than men, the few women who run their own enterprises are outliers and path-breakers. Women own 20 percent of micro enterprises, 5 percent small enterprises, and 3 percent medium enterprises in India. But economic slowdowns and pandemic-induced shutdowns will hit them the hardest too.

We speak to five women across sectors to understand the lockdown's impact on their business. For sure there is loss, but could there be a course-correction and opportunity too in this crisis?





VANDANA BHAGAT

Salon owner, Delhi

Vandana Bhagat launched her beauty studio, Vannity Salon, in Delhi's Vasant Vihar neighbourhood 11 years ago. It was the first salon in its market complex, but since then, several more have sprung up. "And yet, our customers have stuck with us," says the 52-year-old mother of two. But while Vandana was able to hold her own amidst competition from even international salon chains, she could never have foreseen the coronavirus lockdown that has completely shuttered her business.

Vannity Salon closed its doors on March 19, a few days before Prime Minister Modi announced a three-week nationwide lockdown starting

March 24, later extended to May 3. "We don't know when we will open again," sighs Vandana stoically. "This is a business based on human touch and physical proximity. It will definitely be on the radar of the authorities. Even if I invest more on personal protection gear and disposable tools for my staff, it is not a guarantee of protection from coronavirus. Besides, customers may stop visiting salons now."

With zero revenue, Vandana is struggling to pay staff salaries. It pains her as some of them have been with her for over a decade. "There is only more bad news every day. We can only pray," she says. Once the lockdown ends, she may reduce operations to half and take up another business in the future.



L-R: Madhvi Khaitan
Pittie and Radhika
Khaitan Mittal

RADHIKA & MADHVI

Recycled collectibles, Mumbai

Jaipur-born sisters Radhika Khaitan Mittal, 34, and Madhvi Khaitan Pittie, 32, launched WorkshopQ in 2010 as a home décor and gift products retailer that uses entirely recycled and upcycled raw materials in the production process. Except for marriage or maternity breaks, their social enterprise has done well for itself. Until a month ago, the Mumbai-based sisters had three major projects to work on, including an art installation at Mumbai International Airport that was to be created out of recycled waste, and an order from Ford to make gifts out of scrap material from their automobile plants.

All projects are on hold now. “Our contact at Mumbai Airport estimates the situation may last till December,” shares Radhika. The entrepreneur duo plan to pay staffers till May and then, if lockdown continues, they may have to stop. “The Prime Minister says we must keep paying salaries. But how? We are not getting relief from anywhere.”

The lockdown can go two ways for WorkshopQ, she predicts: “Either people will realise how important sustainability is, and we’ll get more interest from those looking to recycle waste products. Or it will cause so much loss that no one will be able to afford a CSR budget anymore. We will have to adapt themselves to the new world.”



SHWETA GHAI

Travel agency, Delhi

Shweta Ghai, 37, joined her husband's travel agency Trip India Travel in 2010, and since then has been instrumental in the company's growth and move into the digital space. The firm offers companies a fully online booking system and a credit model for bulk bookings. Ever since the lockdown, business is almost nil, and they are struggling to pay salaries and office rent. "We're lucky that we have 60 percent corporate clients and that most of our system is online," says Shweta. Though Indian families won't be going on vacations for a while, their business clients will resume domestic travel as soon

as lockdown is lifted. Even so, she believes she will have to re-strategise their revenue model. "We'll have to get more business clients on board," she says.

Shweta is pessimistic about personal travel picking up any time soon. "We plan to tie up with hotels that are a short drive away from big cities for the few clients who may still want to travel for leisure," she says, adding that the holiday sector has been wiped out for at least six to eight months. "Bigger hotels will survive by turning their properties into quarantine centres. Smaller players – whose peak-time revenues from the summer holiday months are now wiped out – may not make it to the other side of the lockdown. It's a bad scenario for the industry."

PHOTO: SAURABH CHHABRA



POOJA CARIAPPA

Yoga studio, Mumbai

Pooja Cariappa, 42, was fit enough to run half-marathons until she moved from Noida to Mumbai 10 years ago. “My health went for a toss at that time,” she narrates. When all else failed to heal her, she took to yoga, and got hooked.

Over the next five years, she gave up her corporate career and studied the ancient health science, from a diploma in yoga therapy and naturopathy, to a Master’s in Yogashatra, to a teacher’s training course. Finally, she began teaching yoga in her Navi Mumbai apartment. “We removed all furniture from the drawing room and use it as a yoga studio for about 11 or 12 people at a time,”

says Pooja, who has two daughters.

She was doing two to four hours of yoga classes every day when coronavirus struck.

“I shut the classes on March 13, and, frankly, I was lost. We live in a rented flat. My husband and I are self-employed. Both our incomes became a trickle,” she says. Pooja decided to take her classes online on Zoom with her husband’s help. She offered a week of free sessions, sometimes to over 100 people, and then from April 1, began charging a monthly fee. About 50 students signed up from all across the world purely through word of mouth.

“I believe in the magic of yoga,” she says of the new opportunity in the crisis. “I now plan to continue this model even after the lockdown.”



SHALINI SINGH

Online startup, Bengaluru

The founder of matchmaking platform *Andwemet.com*, Shalini Singh believes in meaningful romances, and that marriage is only one of its final destinations. “People are fatigued with matrimonial platforms. We cater to global Indians looking for long-term committed relationships,” she explains of her portal, which was launched last year after four years of development.

So far, the bootstrapped platform had been offered to seeking singles for free. After a year of testing and implementing feedback from users, the website was ready to launch a subscription model this year, says Shalini, who also runs a public-

relations agency for technology firms alongside. “We have had no revenue so far, only operating costs, as this was part of the first-year business plan,” she explains.

The pandemic and lockdown have not affected her strategy. “Our team works remotely, in any case, and salaries continue to be my main expense. On the contrary, there is more interest in matchmaking now with singles having more time on their hands at home. Our visitors are going up 400 percent week on week,” laughs the 40-something Bengaluru-based entrepreneur, whose life partner lives in the US.

The platform will carry on with its planned paid model from May, she says. “Whatever happened has been favourable for us.” ■



SHUTTERED IN SPAIN

Locked in their home in Mallorca due to COVID-19, a midlife couple make the most of the moment, and learn to appreciate the real gifts of life

By Kay Newton

There was BC (the time before COVID-19) and eventually, there will be AC (after COVID-19). Life will never be the same. Here in Mallorca, Spain, my husband and I have been housebound for over a month and although the island seems to be coming out of the worst, we still have a

few weeks before we settle into our new AC life, however that may be.

My daily habit of finding three things to be grateful for has become even more significant. Grateful for my intuition and being more prepared than most – I had actually written the word ‘prepping’ in my diary in January. The larder was

PHOTO: MYLENE2401 / PIXABAY

stocked and enough house paint was bought for a six-month project. Grateful that the car broke down two days before lockdown and left us housebound early. Grateful for living on an island.

Then our new lifestyle began.

As I work from home, there was very little that actually changed apart from the strict rules about going outside. Citizens can only go to the local supermarket, chemist or walk the dog 100m from home. Permissions are needed for those who have to travel. If you are caught outside without these permission slips, you are fined on the spot.

At first, life seems surreal. You start lockdown by spending time listening to the news and feeling the panic rise. Stories of empty

food shelves, and the toilet paper saga. You realise that there is a second virus running parallel with COVID-19 and possibly more significant than the virus itself – fear. Fear is contagious, you begin to see it in everything. It can become all-consuming, leaving you without sleep or energy. At this point you have a choice to turn off the news and begin to breathe again or head further down the fear rabbit-hole.

Your shopping expeditions now called ‘forages’ feel strange and unnerving. You feel grateful for the inhabitants of the village who remain calm and supportive. Each evening at 8 pm, everyone gathers on balconies and claps for those who cannot stay home: the health workers, local dustbin collector, the



A Mallorca café
in lockdown

PHOTO: TANIA VAN DEN BERGHEN / PIXABAY



delivery driver. You realise who the true heroes are, and you wish their salaries were increased tenfold.

You yearn to have a conversation with the family across the way who play the drums and Mallorcan bagpipes each evening or the man who hugs his dog or the German children who wave each night out the window. They are your new 'family' members now.

As time goes on, you may feel like you have been hit by a train. The grief train. Grief for the old life you had. Grief for the things you wish you'd done, the travelling you dreamed of, meeting with friends more often. You will feel a deep sadness for family members, those working in hospitals. You miss your adult children in another country and although you know

they are safe, you realise you may not hug them for many months to come. You will think further afield to other countries and feel their suffering. The pain you feel will be excruciating. It will all be too much and you will weep uncontrollably.

Gradually, the new way of life will seem the new norm. You will find ways to make your cocoon homely. You will paint and varnish every surface possible until it looks new, grateful for the opportunity to re-bond with your husband of 28 years. This is the longest you have been in each other's company in a constant stretch. You are grateful you still love each other and are beyond childbearing age – there will be no divorce or unexpected babies.

You try new recipes and create mouthwatering dishes from weird

PHOTO: FRANK NÜRNBERGER / PIXABAY



L-R: A deserted street in Mallorca; Kay Newton



leftovers or pantry staples you found at the back of a cupboard. You vow that when this is all over you will not eat in restaurants because of the money you have saved and how healthy you feel.

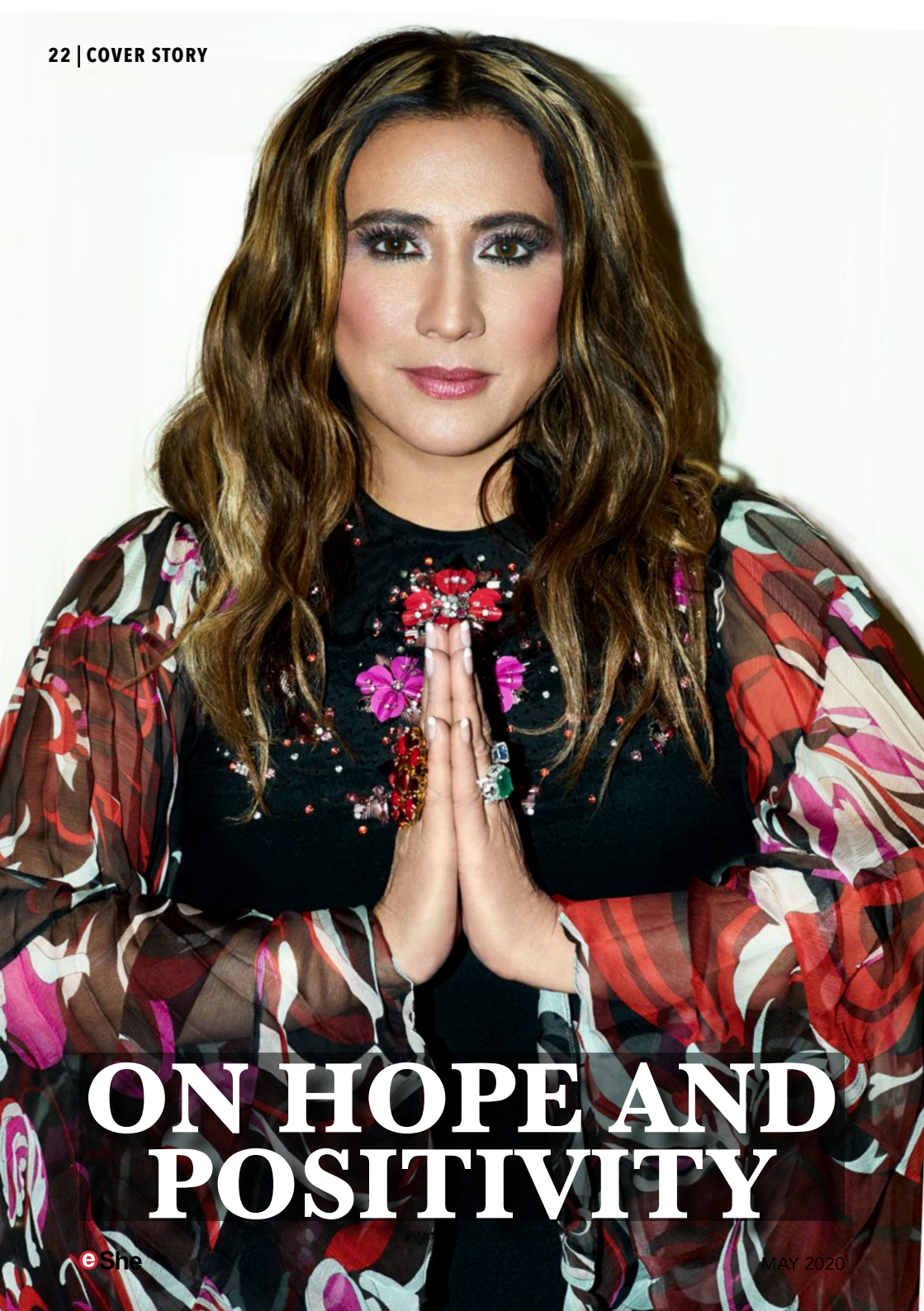
You will notice the dawn chorus; it is loud and magical and you have time to stop and listen to it. Each sunset and sunrise will catch your breath. You will ponder how time flies by so fast. Less is certainly more. You will suddenly feel guilty for all those wasted purchases that depleted the earth of all its resources.

Your husband may surprise you one morning and suggest that you go for a romantic weekend away. Packing your overnight bags, you move into the spare bedroom and then on Monday, decide it is not worth the effort to move back.

In an attempt to stay COVID-free, you clean like a madwoman yet refuse to use bleach as you know it will damage your lungs, lungs that you need to have in tip-top condition in case you get coronavirus. The paranoia will set in. Next, you will ban everything from entering until it has been washed in hot soapy water (husband included), and accept that this is the way it will be from now on.

As you lock out the outside world even more, it will be the little things that mean the most. Gratitude for the sunshine, waking up, the ability to laugh or sing, a hug. As you focus on the *now*, you begin, at last, to understand that today is all we have and we can choose to be grateful for it or not.

What are you grateful for? ■



ON HOPE AND POSITIVITY

New York-based humanitarian and television personality Meera Gandhi on mental health and wellbeing in the midst of a global pandemic and social crisis

Text by Aekta Kapoor. Photography by Ram Shergill

At a time when the world order is being redefined by COVID-19, New York-based humanitarian, author and TV personality Meera Gandhi is out to spread a message of resilience and optimism. The founder of the Giving Back Foundation and mother of three recently launched her limited-series show on Times Now TV, *Three Tips by Meera Gandhi*. We speak to her about mental health in the time of COVID-19 and how we can collectively stay sane.

COVID-19 has been a source of mental stress and chaos the world over. How do you suggest people manage their anxiety at this time?

We have not been faced with a situation like this where the entire world is affected almost simultaneously. In these times, we have to hold on to hope and harness our collective energies to affect positive change. Author and motivational speaker Deepak Chopra talks about manifesting what we want to see. I think we have to manifest an early recovery and in time everything will catch up. The important thing is not to stress out, as the economies will recover but stress is a killer. Listening to spiritual guides and taking advantage of the

various free meditations offered go a long way in relieving anxiety. We are limited as humans so we need to let the infinite carry us and not feel like we need to control everything.

I personally pray and meditate and just breathe. I try to stay in the moment and ask myself, how can I live this moment at its best?



Meera with women's rights activist and former US Congresswoman Marjorie Margolies

Comforting others and sending out positivity makes us feel better too. Exercise or yoga and eating healthy alive food also calms the mind. This quote of Sadhguru empowers me: "Life throws things at you that you cannot control, but you can control how you handle it."



L-R: Meera shares her birthday with Donna Poydis, Soli Mehta and Micheal O'Brien; Meera's cake, designed by Cheri Phillips and Creative Cakes NY, had details such as Meera in a yoga pose, her book and TV show

New York is the epicenter of COVID-19 cases in the US. How are you dealing with this at your personal level?

The first thing I told myself was that I was not going to let fear take over my brain and my thoughts. At home I do yoga and meditate and am on a 21-day juice fast to add calmness to my being. We have this time to reset and we cannot waste a moment of it. It's a gift in another way.

I have FaceTime sessions with family and friends. I read and listen to inspirational guides who understand the energy of the planet. I complete things I can do from my

computer. I have spent a lot of time calming people down with the idea that things will recover. I have been sharing views of CEOs like Davia

B Temlin who says, "We know this health, financial and social crisis will get far worse before it gets better. But we also know it will eventually improve. Like refiner's fire, if we can walk through it honourably, my hope is we can emerge more tempered,

finer, stronger and even better – if forever changed."

Everyone is talking about a future changed world order. What changes do you think we might see going forward?

**"COMFORTING
OTHERS AND
SENDING OUT
POSITIVITY
MAKES US FEEL
BETTER TOO"**



Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev with Meera (right) at her New York townhouse on Diwali. Meera quotes him: "If you don't dance with the uncertainties of life, you'll never experience exuberance.' I simply love this idea."

I think the world will not rush the way it has been rushing. I think "global" will be understood as "inclusive" and geographical boundaries will be understood for what they are.

We are one planet and one people and this sentiment will flourish – that is my hope and belief. I do think that people will work smarter and will pay more attention to health. I think the collective consciousness will awaken in people, businesses and governments. The new norm might be less for all but it will be a happier balance. I think money will have less significance as

will success. I think millennials will rewrite the value system, which is already on its way to a more balanced existence. Most importantly,

we will learn not to fear the unknown as much. I think more people will be meditating than not!

What does joyful living mean to you?

Joyful living to me is being truly present in every moment of our lives. Living in the flow without friction and

conflict is a joyful way to live. I laugh, see the sunrise, focus on the moon and it makes me see how our lives are truly meant to be joyful, not miserable! Our spiritual tradition

**"WE ARE ONE
PLANET AND
ONE PEOPLE
AND THIS
SENTIMENT
WILL FLOURISH"**



L-R: Nikhil Gandhi, Suniel Shetty, Mana Shetty, Ajay Kulkarni, Meera Gandhi, Neetu Singh, Navika Kumar and Rishi Kapoor at Meera's New York home last August. Rishi Kapoor passed away on April 30 this year

tells us that it takes 4 billion years to be born on this beautiful planet as a human, and the lifespan lasts just 80 years. How can we waste it by being unhappy?

What was the inspiration behind your TV show Three Tips by Meera Gandhi?

The idea of my show *Three Tips*, which I developed with Times Now TV network, was to provide on-the-go, easy inspiration to people as they go about their busy day – to hear things like friendship should be non-transactional, and that unconditional love brings tremendous happiness. Using the right

amount of assertiveness enables us to communicate both clearly and firmly! A show like this can lift the psyche and good energy of viewers.

The better the mental wellbeing of a person, the better the mental wellbeing of a country and the better the wellbeing of our planet was what I had in mind.

Please tell us about your other projects.

The Giving Back Foundation hosts a retreat every

year called the Ledgewood Retreat where people come together and do yoga and colour therapy, eat vegan food, walk, meditate and listen to inspirational speakers. It's

**"JOYFUL LIVING
TO ME IS BEING
TRULY PRESENT
IN EVERY
MOMENT OF
OUR LIVES"**



L-R: Meera's three children Kabir, Kiran (also known as Madame Gandhi) and Kanika Gandhi; Meera (right) with Laura Mazurek, the popular radio talk show host of *Take It to the Streets*

a very transformative day and has been very successful in helping people de-stress and reset. Going forward, I want to do more in the area of mental wellness and we will be conducting many more retreats.

Indian women have higher rates of depression than women around the world (36 percent of all female suicides happen in India, and most are married women). What is your advice?

Indian women are very strong and if they understand the great power that comes with motherhood and raising children, they will not be depressed. We are indeed part of a much greater plan,

and are not tied to our small everyday problems. Look beyond. The world is a beautiful place. Choose to look at the good and the beauty.

**"WE ARE
NOT TIED TO
OUR SMALL
EVERYDAY
PROBLEMS.
LOOK BEYOND"**

We don't need to have solutions to everything. Our brains are finite, so there will always be stress as we can never solve all the problems. But the energy of the universe is infinite so if we choose to live in the moment and leave things to the universe, it

will go a long way in lifting mental burnout. But societies have to learn to value mothers and wives and we need to keep talking about this! ■

Read the complete interview on eShe.in



From Darkness to Light

If you have ever felt trapped and isolated inside your mind, you are not alone. With May being Mental Health Month, we bring you six celebrities who addressed and spoke up about their mental-health struggles

By Manvi Pant

JK ROWLING

Renowned British author and creator of the mega-successful *Harry Potter* series, JK Rowling suffered from clinical depression before she found fame. A short-lived catastrophic marriage, financial penury and being the unemployed mother of a newborn led her to the darkest patch of her life. “It

was almost a surprise to me every morning that my daughter was still alive,” she said in an interview. Things changed when she decided to seek help. She learnt to accept who she was and prepared herself for the worst. Despite being rejected by 12 publishing houses in the UK, she did not give up until one signed her up. “Rock bottom is a foundation, not a conclusion,” she says.

ELLEN DEGENERES

TV show host Ellen DeGeneres came out of the closet in 1997 on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. While it was a historic moment for the LGBT community, what happened after turned her life upside down. Her career nosedived, her shows got cancelled and the feeling of alienation hit her hard. Eventually, she started seeing a therapist, took medication for depression, and healed. “I can’t believe I came back from that point,” says Ellen, who is now married to her lady love, and is one of the world’s most successful TV personalities.



ILEANA D'CRUZ

Body-shamed as a child, Ileana D'Cruz spent most of her early life looking for acceptance. Unfortunately, things did not change after she entered Bollywood. “I had gone from happy to being completely depressed and not knowing what it was. There came a time when I wanted everything to end,” says the *Barfi!* actor who suffered from depression, much like fellow actor Deepika Padukone, along with body dysmorphic disorder. It was only after Ileana took therapy that she was able to look forward with clarity and strength.



PHOTO: TRISHA SARANG

GWYNETH PALTROW

In 2006, Oscar-winning actor Gwyneth Paltrow became a mother for the second time. But things quickly turned into a different direction when postpartum depression took over. “I really went into a dark, scary, painful place and the experience was debilitating,” she said in an interview. Instead of going for medications, she adopted organic methods like therapy, a healthy lifestyle, regular exercise, rest, recovery and good sleep. In a much better place now, Gwyneth uses her experience to give strength to new mothers. “That’s how you move through it!” she shares.

**SARAH SILVERMAN**

American standup comic Sarah Silverman struggled with severe depression and anxiety as a teenager. She saw several therapists. “One hanged himself, another overmedicated, and a third took me off medications and helped me feel like myself again,” she says. Then, nine years later, her symptoms returned. Sarah has lived with depression for years now. If anything has changed, it’s her ability to control it and ride it in the best way forward.



PHOTOS: TWITTER

DEMI LOVATO

Disney star Demi Lovato's first brush with mental illness happened at age 18. The child actor was diagnosed with depression, addiction, bulimia and bipolar disorder. While her career was on an upward graph, her personal life was falling apart and she never even realised that she was sick. Despite several public relapses, Demi has been vocal about her problems, and has inspired many. ■

COPING NOT MOPING

*Psychologist and
psychotherapist Dr Varkha
Chulani on how to deal
with lockdown blues*

By Maya Lalechandani



Associate supervisor and fellow of the Albert Ellis Institute, New York, Dr Varkha Chulani practises rational emotive behaviour therapy system. To put it in layman's terms, the clinical psychologist and psychotherapist helps people live the lives they desire, and be happier and healthier. She shares with us the key ways to deal with the current pandemic and lockdown.

ACCEPT: These are extraordinary times and society as a whole is not used to such challenges. Our conditioning does not give us opportunities to develop resilience or the tenacity to deal with such hardships. The privileged, educated, urban classes are even more emotionally fragile and brittle than

their own domestic helpers. But non-acceptance heightens fears further, thus increasing fragility. So accept that this is a new way of life.

Try this emotional capsule: (1) Even though you do not like this new reality, accept it anyway. (2) Tell yourself you will deal with it in the best way you can. (2) Do your best under the restricted circumstances.

KNOW YOUR WHY: Recalibrating life is very much in our control. Neurologist and psychiatrist Dr Viktor Frankl was sent to a concentration camp by the Nazis, and he survived holding on to just one idea that he wanted to write a book after he left. He used bits of paper and pebbles to scribble his ideas, and in doing this he discovered logotherapy. He

PHOTO: PIXABAY

explained, “If you have a *why* to live, then you bear any *how*.”

This is definitely the time to focus on the meaning of our existence as each of us will now discover what is of paramount interest to us and live our lives accordingly from now on.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE: This is the time for cooperation and collaboration. Setting standards begins with the top 10 percent in any society or corporation. Training too begins with the leaders, and this is the time that leadership needs to build trust by walking their talk.

STAY IN THE MOMENT: Keep thoughts in control, dealing with only the present, knowing what one can and cannot do. We cannot be supermen/women all the time. The more we try to suppress or ignore our anxiety, the more agitated we become. Monotony and repetitiveness can sometimes worsen anxiety, so changing things helps. Use your creativity.

BE JOB-READY: In this landscape of layoffs, one needs to develop new skill sets, filling the gaps. A lot is going to change, so read up more and up your game. The first jobs to be slashed are those not adding value to an organisation. Quality will matter more than anything else.

BUILD BRIDGES: Domestic violence and child abuse are rearing their ugly heads during the lockdown. This is the time people should use for building bridges rather than

erecting walls. Reconciliation, communication, and making allies instead of enemies is paramount. In the end, only our great relationships are going to see us through.

SHARE RESPONSIBILITIES: Families should be assigned tasks based on whatever one is good at. There should be understanding, respect,



Dr Varkha Chulani

and personal space. That being said, we have to pay attention to addictions as well like alcohol, sex, tobacco and drugs. This is not the time to start new medications, so it's better to learn to manage one's thoughts and control one's behaviours. The focus should be on coping, not moping. ■



ASHTANAYIKA

An artistic collaborative project by actor, filmmaker and educationalist Oorvazi Irani and photographer Chaitali Shirgaonkar looks at the eight archetypal phases of a romantic heroine

In a kind of performance art for the camera, filmmaker and educationalist Oorvazi Irani got together with photographer Chaitali Shirgaonkar to chronicle the eight archetypal phases of the romantic heroine in the Indian aesthetic tradition called *Ashtanayikas* (literally, 'eight heroines'). Central to this concept of love is the play of two opposites - meeting and separation. Five of the eight heroines reflect the stage of separation, while three

represent the stage of meeting.

The eight phases also correspond to the eight key emotions in the Indian aesthetic tradition, namely *shringar* (love), *hasya* (mirth), *karuna* (compassion/grief), *roudra* (anger), *veera* (heroism), *bhayanaka* (fear), *bibhasa* (disgust), and *adbhuta* (wonder). The protagonist in the series, performed by Oorvazi herself, belongs to the Maharashtrian culture with its own specific art and tradition in dressing, props and setting.

VIRAHOTKANTHITA: The heroine yearning, awaiting her beloved to return home (facing page)

My eyes are longing for that one glimpse of you my beloved / My arms are aching from the emptiness of your void / Wanting to touch you and feel your presence besides me is all I desire / I don't doubt even for once that you must be delayed by duty / But, my heart knows no reason and only understands the language of your embrace...



ABHISARIKA: The heroine sets out to meet her beloved against all odds

Nothing can stop me now / I am the warrior of love / To behold you in my eyes I will fight all the world / I will vanquish all obstacles to meet you tonight



VASAKASAJJA: The heroine adorns herself with pleasure and readies for her beloved
*Oh beloved! My lips tremble
 My eyes cannot contain their excitement
 My feet are ready to break into a dance
 My heart is pulsating to be one in union*



VIPRALABD: The dejected heroine stood up by her beloved last night
*All night I waited but he did not come
 I waited ... and waited...
 My beloved deceived me.
 Now my eyes empty of all hope
 My temple of love, deserted and I stand all alone*

KHANDITA: The heroine, angry and disappointed, shuns her beloved for being unfaithful

Let the earth part to engulf me in her womb / I cannot bear to see you in the arms of another woman / You have made a mockery of my love / Now no water will quench my thirst / Only the fire of your betrayal will keep burning inside me





KALAHANTARITA: The heroine quarrels with her beloved but might suffer remorse later (above)

*Look me in the eye
And tell me where I failed you.
You were the ocean of my love
Why did you reduce me to an insignificant
mere drop of water?
You don't deserve me
Walk away silently into the night
Never to return*

PROSHITABHARTRUKA: The heroine in deep longing separated from her beloved (right)

*Separated from you I feel so incomplete
A part of myself that I long for
I count each breath and it seems like
eternity
When will you kiss me and bring me back
to life?*





SWADHINABHARTRUKA: The heroine content with her beloved's affection and dedication

*I have been searching for you, oh beloved, all these years / But finally I found you because I found myself...
I recognise you without your masks, I see your true self shining through / As lovers we are now truly
inseparable. ■*

Words and performance: Oorvazi Irani. Photography: Chaitali Shirgaonkar

THE TRUTH WARRIORS



As technology majors and media houses gear up to fight fake news, fact-checkers at the forefront face the social backlash and soul-crushing battle

By Shweta Bhandral

In April 2018, Google News Initiative (GNI) held their first train-the-trainer fact-checking workshop in India with 35 journalists from across the country (*in photo, above*). Attending that four-day seminar at Google's Delhi office certified me as a fact-checker and verification trainer.

There was an urgent need for this education. The years 2017-2018 had seen 29 people die of mob lynching in India. Most of these incidents happened because of disinformation and misinformation – or 'fake news' – spread through social

media and messaging apps.

I started using my skills to debunk images and videos shared widely on WhatsApp groups, and even shown on primetime TV shows. There was an increased sharing of fake stories, photoshopped pictures and unrelated videos during the Pulwama attack and various state elections. The narrative became communal; even if I exposed the truth and showed the proof, people only believed what they wanted to believe. I was instantly labelled a 'liberal anti-national'. The fallout was that I was asked to shut up or leave the group.

It didn't deter me. While fact-checking became second nature to me, I also started training mass-media students. To play a better role in keeping logical, ethical and fact-based journalism alive, I decided to leave broadcast news to become a full-time trainer and educator at 42.

I have trained more than a thousand students so far, and there are 241 of us GNI trainers out there sharing fact-checking skills with

are in English), they stayed back for another day to master the tools and spread awareness in their village.

Efforts made by GNI have encouraged media houses to create fact-checking desks, hire people with these skills, and even produce shows to spread awareness. Parul believes that all this is visible at ground level and a lot of people think twice before pressing the forward button.

The training has impacted her



L-R: Shweta Bhandral at a seminar in Ahmedabad; Parul Jain at Hansraj Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar

even more students and journalists.

Parul Jain, a freelance journalist and former university professor, was part of the second batch of GNI's programme. As a verification trainer, she is very active in north India. Her experience at Hansraj Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar, was one of her most memorable ones. The girls came from remote villages of Punjab and despite the language barrier (most fact-checking tools

professionally too: "The work I do carries credibility and responsibility. People believe in me so much that the authenticity of a message depends upon my yes or no."

There are also those for whom fact-checking is a full-time job. The stream of fake news that started with the state elections, the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, and the Delhi riots in 2020 has given sleepless nights to

fact-checkers like Pooja Chaudhari, 25, a senior editor at Alt News, a renowned fact-checking website and app that even state authorities rely on. “In the past one year, the fake news shared has become more communal with a powerful anti-Muslim narrative,” Pooja notes.

Fact-checkers have no fixed hours of work. During the Jamia Millia Islamia University anti-CAA protests in Delhi, the Alt News team received most of the videos at night. It would be 3 or 4 am by the time they did their research and uploaded the article. “Most of the stories we published during CAA protests and Delhi riots centred on visual verification, especially of location. We watch videos repeatedly

to get clues. Sometimes, we watch the same clip for hours until we find something,” narrates Pooja.

Her workday starts even before she reaches office, as she tracks, collects and makes her list by scouring social media and the internet. “Alt News has a WhatsApp number where people send requests for fact-checks. We also have a mobile application where we get 300–400 requests daily.” But as the number of fact-checking platforms increases, so does the number of fake stories.

Urvashi Kapoor, 30, chief sub-editor at Vishvas News who reports on health, says that it sometimes takes more than two days to debunk a piece of fake health news, especially in the wake of COVID-19. The



Pooja Chaudhari,
senior editor,
Alt News



Urvashi Kapoor,
chief sub-editor,
Vishvas News

topics range from unproven cures to miraculous vaccines. “Dozens of viral articles are hosted on click-bait health misinformation sites,” says Urvashi. To bust fake news, she connects directly with doctors and relies on official sources like WHO or the health ministry.

Like Alt News, Vishvas News is also certified by IFCN (International Fact-Checking Network) and is a unit of Jagran New Media. The coronavirus pandemic has pushed the team to be ever more vigilant. For instance, there were many cases when fake audio clips claiming to be from WHO officials or reputed doctors went viral. In such instances, Urvashi says, “We talk to experts or directly contact the person mentioned in the clip. In fact, not just audio clips, we need to fact-check everything, be it a text message

from a friend, something we read on social media, or something we overhear. As a health fact-checker, I know these viral claims are impacting lives,” says Urvashi.

Though working from home since the lockdown, fact-checkers like Pooja and Urvashi are working round the clock, and it takes a toll on them physically and mentally. “I feel I’m losing my compassion,” admits Pooja. “Of course, I feel a great deal of sympathy for victims, but over time I have become apathetic towards violence. I can watch violence without blinking an eye, and this is worrisome for me.”

To help the fight against fake news, follow these simple rules: Do not believe every message you get. Question it, don’t forward it. Do a simple Google search, and follow fact-checking websites. ■

When Dr Taru Went to Bihar...

Dr Taru Jindal was sent to Bihar to train rural doctors in modern childbirth practices; she ended up transforming the community and herself

By Manvi Pant

As part of a project sponsored by the Bill Gates Foundation, a young gynaecologist gets posted at the Motihari district hospital, Patna, where her job is to train the doctors in improved techniques of caesarean-section

and other essential childbirth skills. Eager to take on the task, she packs her bags and leaves for a journey that changes her life forever.

Dr Taru Jindal's passionate memoir *A Doctor's Experiments in Bihar* (Speaking Tiger, ₹499) talks of the challenges, negligence and discrimination in the maternal healthcare arena in the remotest and least developed parts of the country. Written candidly with engaging personal anecdotes, the book presents a striking contrast between the workings of a government hospital in a backward state like Bihar and the professionalism and medical procedures followed in a multispecialty healthcare centre in a metropolis like Mumbai.

By taking its readers through remarkable descriptions, the book creates vivid scenes in your mind. For instance, on visiting Motihari government hospital for the first time, Taru writes, "I absent-mindedly looked out of the adjacent window. My eyes almost popped out as I saw piles of



biomedical waste dumped just outside; it looked like a rotting gutter.”

She continues, “*A woman was urinating right at the entrance of the labour room. I turned around in a reflex, but she continued, unbothered by my sudden appearance.*” All through the book, the author’s style of writing is fluid, and she conveys personal feelings with utmost ease.

rural areas are poor, unregulated, unorganised and barely monitored.

But how did the young, idealistic gynaecologist turn the tables in such difficult circumstances? As one reads further, one can sense Taru’s grit and optimism. Right from building her own team to working on the infrastructure to cater better to women, the strategies she



Dr Taru Jindal (in yellow) after delivering a baby in a government hospital in Bihar

India is indeed one of the fastest emerging economies, with its healthcare sector recording ambitious growth year on year. Despite this, healthcare disparities, combined with social inequalities, take a significant position in discussions amongst health professionals and policymakers. The quality and accessibility of public healthcare provisions across

outlines to improve the health care system are extremely cogent. And they work wonders. As she notes, nurses learn to sterilise instruments and make it a practice, the labour room gets regularly cleaned, bulbs get repaired, and sweepers stop delivering babies (yes, they did so earlier). These small yet significant changes start taking place and she converts the dark into the light.



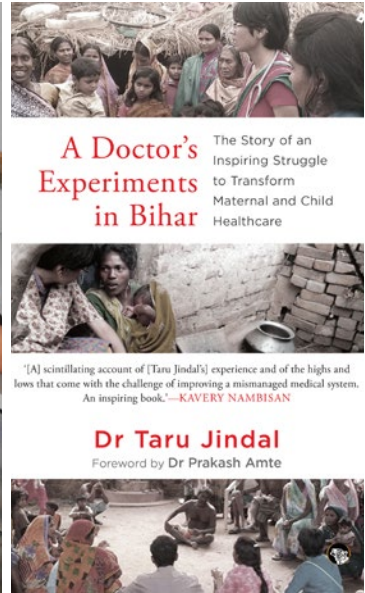
One of Dr Taru's jobs was to train rural doctors in modern childbirth practices being implemented in cities

Born and raised in Mumbai, Taru had spent her humble beginnings within the boundaries of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) colony as her father was a BARC scientist. She had firsthand experience in the limits of human pain and endurance when her grandmother got paralyzed and was bedridden. From changing her urinary catheter to dressing her bedsores to putting a feeding pipe in her nose to feed her, the young Taru learned the art of caregiving from her elder brother, an aspiring doctor at that time. Those moments of witnessing her grandmother's helplessness turned into moments of clarity. She realised she would make a good doctor herself. As

the years passed, Taru, now 36, completed her MBBS and then MS in gynaecology from the prestigious Lokmanya Tilak Medical College and Sion Hospital, Mumbai.

The Bill Gates Foundation project took her further away from home than she had ever lived. Gradually, Bihar becomes Taru's second home. Once the assignment at Motihari District Hospital finished, she then started a health centre in a remote village called Masarhi.

About 25 km away from the city, the villagers there suffered from hunger and malnutrition. Taru decided to transform their health by understanding the lives of its people. Slowly, she penetrated deep into the skin of their problems and tried to



L-R: Taru training rural healthcare workers; the cover of her new memoir, *A Doctor's Experiments in Bihar*

find solutions that promoted health like increasing local food diversity and improving the availability of fruits and vegetables.

Giving a striking example of freedom activist and social reformer Vinoba Bhave's '*bhoodan andolan*', she decided to walk on his path and started community farming. Indeed, her approach to every challenge she encounters is methodical and expansive. Along with her persistence and her compassionate attitude towards the people of Masarhi, in no time, she became an integral part of their life.

As rightly quoted in her book, *magic happens when you don't give up*. The universe conspired in her favour and she was selected

'Youth Leader from India' by World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action for her work on breastfeeding and malnutrition. Thirty-two delegates from across the world, including Taru, shared the most coveted stage at Malaysia. When they asked her, "Where are you from?" she beamed at the thought of her new identity and proudly said, "I am from Bihar."

More than anything, this well-written and insightful book is about the fighting spirit of a woman who has a resolve and is not ready to give up. In November 2019, Taru was awarded the Karmaveer Chakra Award by the International Confederation of NGO (iCONGO) in partnership with the United Nations. ■



VITAMIN OF LIFE

Medical doctor, yoga exponent and vitamin-D evangelist Dr Renu Mahtani shares tips to good health and immunity in the time of COVID

By Maya Lalchandani

Around the time that Dr Renu Mahtani worked in a hospital ICU, she developed psoriasis, an incurable skin disease. Badly affected and bleeding, she realised it was stress-related, as she had long working hours and two small children. She started exploring breathing techniques in yoga and at once her condition improved. That started her experiments with various schools of yoga and she completely healed herself.

Consequently, Renu, who holds an MBBS, an MD in internal medicine and a fellowship in metabolic and nutritional medicine (USA), founded ParamYoga with fellow teachers to demystify yoga. Her Medical Yoga Therapy course assimilates her qualifications in medicine and yoga, and she has trained over 200 yoga and gym teachers.

A practising physician for the past 30 years, Renu is also a vitamin D evangelist. Her conviction came

about due to her own personal experience. After menopause, she developed an auto-immune disease and her face became dark. Despite her yoga, she realised her body needed nutritional corrections. During her fellowship, she came across the work of a doctor in Brazil, Dr Cicero Coimbra, who was managing autoimmune diseases with higher than normal doses of vitamin D.



Dr Renu Mahtani

Inspired, she tried a combination of supplements for herself. “Today, my skin is much better, my vitamin D levels are high, and I haven’t felt the need to use sunscreen for two years,” she affirms. We ask her more about the wonder vitamin.

Why do so many Indians have vitamin D deficiency?

It’s a concern not just in India, but globally. Though we are blessed

with a tropical climate, urban India has ‘sun-phobia’ and we stay indoors for fear of getting dark or to avoid the heat. A large chunk of Indians are vegetarians, and vegetarian food does not have vitamin D either. Our ancestors got 90 percent of their vitamin D from sunlight. But now supplements are needed.

How does vitamin D deficiency affect overall health?

Vitamin D is only just for the skin or bones, but many autoimmune diseases as well – from rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, type-1 diabetes and psoriasis, to hypothyroidism. I’m treating all these with vitamin D and am seeing excellent results, even reversals in the MRIs of multiple-sclerosis patients. Ask your doctor to try this with the right supplements – you will see remarkable results.

What are the right amounts?

Ninety percent Indians are deficient in vitamin D. The doses that were recommended earlier were primarily to prevent rickets. I believe that a minimum level of 60 ng/mL gives you strong immunity.

Any tips for these times of COVID-19?

People at risk of influenza or COVID-19 should take vitamin D supplements for a few weeks to rapidly raise 25 (OH) D concentrations. The goal is to raise the body’s level to 40–60 ng/mL. For those who test COVID-positive or work on the frontlines, higher doses might be useful. ■

THE WRITE PATH

How authors Naomi Datta and Annie Zaidi reinvented themselves after successful careers in mainstream journalism

By Shweta Bhandral

It's never easy to quit your job and start off on the road to self-employment. We speak to two women who moved from journalism to full-time writing careers.

NAOMI DATTA

Radiant smile, quick wit and her one-liners on everything from politics to Bollywood – these are what one remembers after meeting Naomi Datta. Born and raised in the beautiful Khasi hills in Shillong, Meghalaya, Naomi came to Mumbai in 1999 to pursue mass communication from Sophia College. She always wanted to be a TV host: “I come from a small city, and it is a big deal there to have someone anchor on a national news channel,” she says. And so she worked hard to land an opportunity at one of the best TV shows of that time, *The Amul India Show* on TV18. Soon,



she was producing and hosting her own show.

As Naomi lived her dream, broadcast news took a strange turn, with anchors shouting from the studios, and the focus shifting away from reporters on the ground. Disillusioned, she quit television to move towards the entertainment world, and worked as a creative director and writer for shows on MTV, Star World and Netflix.

Humour comes naturally to Naomi, which is why her writing is also full of satire that makes you smile. She didn't plan her first book, as she tells us: "I was in-between jobs and a bit disgruntled with Indian TV. I started writing a short story as a gift for my best friend. The story kept developing, and in four months, I had a novel, a satire called *The 6 PM Slot*. I got signed up by Penguin Random House."

The book was appreciated but Naomi was not ready to be a full-time writer yet. For eight years, she continued to write satirical pieces, columns and even worked on projects with production houses as social-media strategist or creative director. "Over the years, I was active on Twitter, and an

online voice and persona developed – snarky, irreverent, sharp and yet not offensive. I realised that people enjoyed my commentary through Twitter or my columns. We also live in weird times – there is polarisation, intolerance and general toxicity. I thought this was the best time for my brand of satire and humour. It holds up a mirror to you but makes you laugh at the same time. We don't do much satire in India – people often don't get it. I feel I do it well, and there is an audience for it. Therefore, the book."

Naomi's second book *How To Be A Likeable Bigot - A Handy Guide for the Savvy Survivor* came out in December 2019 to very positive reviews. It is a collection of satirical essays on everything from corporate brown-nosing to mummy politics to armchair bigotry. Her publisher wants her to start work on the third one quickly.

So, what is the 42-year-old writing next? "I am currently locked down at home like everyone else! I want to write twisted, funny short stories about a post-Corona world. Human behaviour fascinates me endlessly. My friends are always worried they will end up in my books, and they will and have. And because my default setting is satire, it is mostly not flattering," she says. "I have a few ideas – when I finish washing, cleaning and cooking, I will write."





ANNIE ZAIDI

A peaceful countenance, a crisp cotton saree and a pleasant smile as she greets friends and guests at her book-reading session. It wasn't the first time I was meeting Annie Zaidi but the girl I had known as a passionate poet and creative writer had never aspired to make a career of it. Yet, here she was, experimenting with both fiction and non-fiction writing with seven books and other works to her credit.

Born in Allahabad and raised mostly in Rajasthan, Annie studied journalism at XIC, Mumbai, and joined *Mid-Day* newspaper soon after. "Through my job, I learnt how to write, research and gather information. Journalism helped turn me into a writer, and especially

the particular kind of writer I am," she says.

In 2008, Annie took up a part-time job that would help pay her bills and give her more time in hand. After completing her first manuscript, she quit the job entirely and lived on her savings for a year. By the end, she was financially broke but much more confident

about her writing abilities.

"It is not easy. But it is worth doing if you want to do it," she shares. "And sometimes, it is also useful to do it so you can discover how badly you want to write. The year I quit, I had decided that life was too short not to do the things I wanted to. That my art and craft matter more than job security. And that if I failed, then so be it. If you choose to do this, you must be prepared to be your own person. You surrender certain social circles and shrug off peer opinion. You live on a very tight budget. You don't spend the way your friends or family members do. You may not be able to afford to have kids or send them to decent schools. You have to accept that these are choices, and nobody owes you anything."

Her first book *Known Turf* was a

collection of essays based on her experiences while working for *Frontline* as a reporter. The book was shortlisted for the Vodafone Crossword Book Award in 2010. Since then, besides books, she has written plays in Hindi and English, and experimented with writing and directing short films.

Her second book *Love Stories #1 to 14* and third book *Gulab* were romances of a different kind. “I observe politics or the economy or the personal and often deeply lonely lives around me,” she explains. “The love stories were written separately over two years. Whenever I wanted to take a break from non-fiction, I would write a story. But I did impose a strict discipline upon myself, writing six to eight hours a day.”

Annie’s latest work *Prelude to a Riot*, written two years ago and published in late 2019, was born from observing how bigotry works in a society that does not see itself as bigoted or radicalised but is, in fact, quietly marching towards violence. She says, “Hate is a subtle and evil virus, every bit as dangerous as the Corona. I wrote the novel to capture that malignancy and its inevitable outcome. Unfortunately, by the time it was published, people were saying it is ‘timely’ because more violence unleashed.”

The 41-year-old believes in speaking freely, especially in a democratic republic founded on the premise of universal rights. She says, “Anybody who has the ability, the language and the tools should protect our fundamental rights. It is through silence that oppression works. But the few who are still speaking up for the rights



of the many sadly get labelled.”

In 2018, Annie won The Hindu Playwright Award for her play *Untitled 1*. In 2019 came the Nine Dots Prize for her upcoming memoir *Bread, Cement, Cactus: A Memoir of Belonging and Dislocation*. While writing a personal narrative, Annie has tried to examine the wider causes for the feeling of dislocation or displacement, impoverishment and discrimination, which can lead to migration or a feeling of homelessness. ■

A TALE TO BE TOLD



Christine Leunens on Nazi atrocities, the inspiration behind her book that was made into an Oscar-winning film, and fanaticism in today's world

By Manvi Pant. Photography by Amélie de Maupeou

Twelve-year-old Johannes Betzler has the heart of a fanatic. He is devoted to his country's megalomaniac Nazi dictator, Adolf Hitler. His mind is blinded with a callow ambition to exclude all the 'others' – the Jews – because he has learnt in school that his own Aryan race is the purest. He aspires to shine at the Hitler Youth Camp, but life takes an unexpected turn when he gets grievously injured in a bombing. Disfigured and disheartened, he returns home to recuperate. One day he finds his father mysteriously gone, and his mother acting strange. His world is upended when he learns about Elsa, a Jewish girl hidden in their house. Infuriated at his parents for betraying the Führer, he considers denouncing them. But, would he? Or, would he kill this girl instead?

Caging Skies by Christine Leunens – the book behind the award-winning Hollywood drama *Jojo Rabbit* – presents the fascinating, sadist workings of the mind of a complicated, dark character whose innocence has been stolen. Speaking of the plot, Christine tells *eShe*, “In my twenties, I became friends with an elderly French woman in Paris, whose family had hidden a young Jewish man from Poland behind a

wall in their apartment during the war. She and he spoke through the wall, and fell in love. After the war, they married, but ended up divorcing later as the trauma of having lost his entire family was



too overwhelming. The premise of this true story stayed with me, but I didn't want the story to be romantic.”

The 55-year-old mother of three, who has triple citizenship of the US, New Zealand and Belgium, goes on, “So, I thought of having the Jew in

hiding be a young woman instead. And the one to discover her is a member of the Hitler Youth whose parents are in the Resistance. That's where the plot seemed to take off on its own. I wanted to explore how such horrific events on a massive scale affected the different members of a family, not on the



Christine
Leunens and
Taika Waititi

fields or anywhere big, but mainly in the small domestic realm.”

After so many years, Christine, who is an alumnus of Harvard University and holds a PhD from Victoria University of Wellington, feels that the world going backwards to some extent again. “We are witnessing a resurgence in racism, fanaticism and anti-Semitism. People across the

globe are facing huge uncertainty over economy, digital disruption, strained resources and a collapsing ecosystem. Some online platforms are actively spreading lies and hatred, or passively facilitating the process. I don’t believe such divisiveness as we are witnessing can start to heal again until these platforms are held accountable,” says the author.

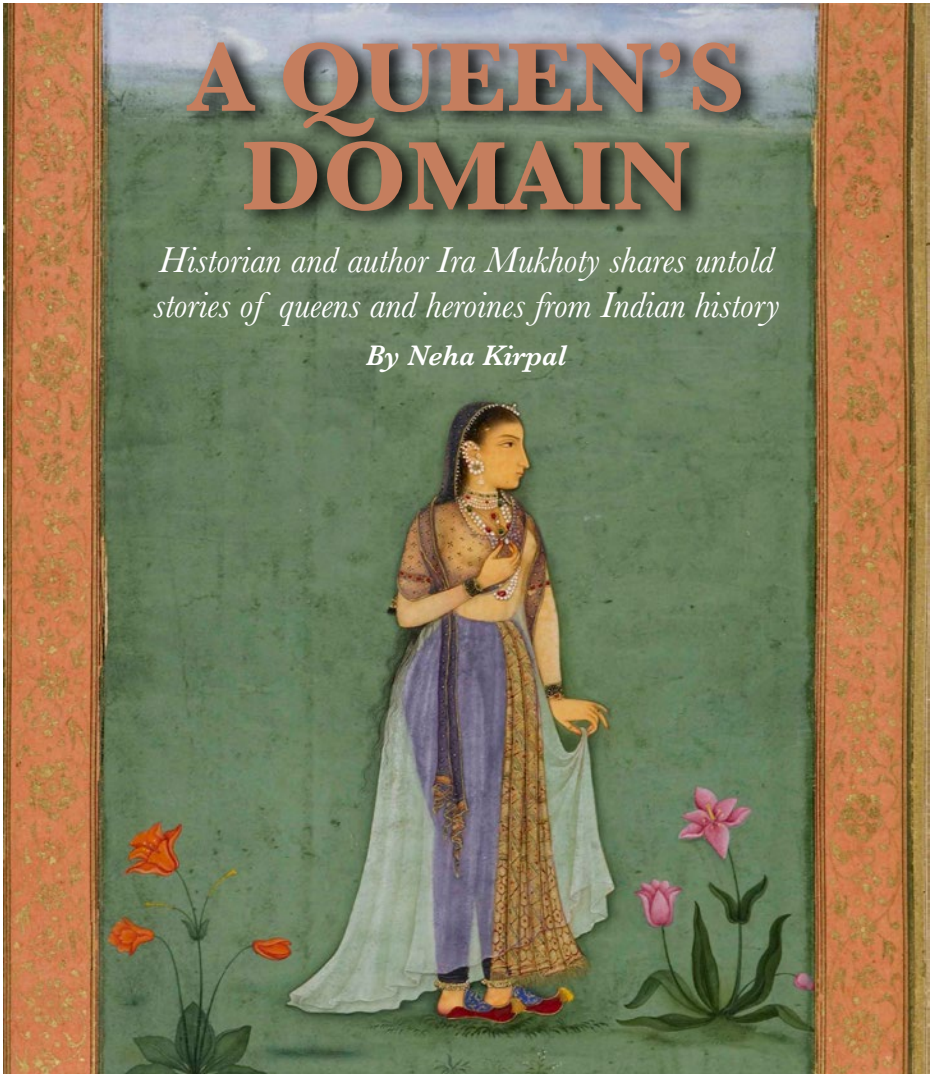
Born in Hartford, Connecticut, to an Italian mother and a Belgian father, Christine is a former model who has represented renowned fashion brands like Givenchy, Paco Rabanna, Nina Ricci to name a few, acted in television commercials, and authored three books. Speaking of her transition from fashion world to literary world, she tells us, “I’m grateful for how modelling allowed me to travel across Europe, Africa and Asia, and to fund my studies and early writing. But to be honest, it was such a relief going from doing something where it was all about how I looked, to eliminating my outer self completely and having people engage with me solely on how I think or feel on the inside.”

In 2019, New Zealand filmmaker and actor Taika Waititi wrote and directed *Jojo Rabbit* based on *Caging Skies*. The film went on to receive six nominations at the 92nd Academy Awards and won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay and Toronto International Film Festival’s People Choice Award. ■

A QUEEN'S DOMAIN

Historian and author Ira Mukhoty shares untold stories of queens and heroines from Indian history

By Neha Kirpal



Historian Ira Mukhoty's first book *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myth and History* (Aleph, 2017) consisted of tales of mythical heroines including Draupadi, Radha and "six real women who played extraordinary

roles but who weren't written into textbooks". Her second, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (Aleph, 2018) was about the disappeared women of the great Mughals. In her newest work, *Akbar: The Great*

Mughal (Aleph, 2020), she moves away from a female-centric theme but does highlight the role of women in the making of the emperor.

The Delhi-based author, who studied in Delhi and Cambridge, talks to us about untold tales of mythical heroines and Mughal queens, and their relevance in contemporary times.

Which were your favourite stories from your first book, Heroines?

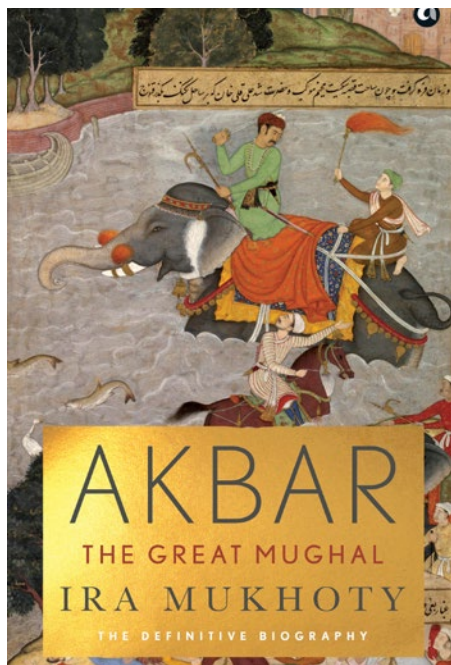
Some of the little known facts about women I discovered while writing *Heroines* were facts that were uncomfortable within the conservative narrative they were usually framed in, and so were gradually erased and forgotten.

Rani Laxmibai is deified for dying a warrior's death but it is forgotten that she would have preferred to live, and rule her kingdom of Jhansi, and that she conducted a long, determined diplomatic correspondence with the British.

As for the 16th century Bhakti saint Meerabai, the claims and counter claims are endless – that she was an elderly widow, tending to her husband till the end of his life before leaving home almost as an act of renunciation – whereas her songs point rather to the fact that she escaped an oppressive, traditional household, leaving behind her husband and in-laws as a young woman, in response to a divine call.

I find it fascinating that Hazrat

Mahal was a courtesan of dubious pedigree, possibly with part African heritage, and that Wajad Ali Shah divorced her and repudiated his son with her. Nonetheless, when the events of 1857 broke out, she found the courage, confidence and acumen to rise to the occasion.



What inspired the second book, Daughters of the Sun?

One of the 'heroines' I wrote about in my first book was Jahanara Begum, daughter of Mumtaz Mahal, who became one of the most wealthy and powerful women of her time. She wrote a biography in which she challenged Sufi masters' dictum that, as a woman, she

could not claim the same spiritual status as a man. She not only patronized extensive building works in Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi) but is buried in Nizamuddin Auliya's Dargah, showing her Sufi leanings. And yet I had never come across these astounding facts, pointing to



Ira Mukhoty

a systematic erasure of the voices of these women. Then, I was lucky enough to stumble on the academic work of feminist historian Ruby Lal, who has analysed the harem of the early Mughal emperors, and I was introduced to a whole new way of imagining the Mughal harem.

When did you develop your fascination for royal queens in Indian history?

I forayed into writing to find out more about iconic Indian women who could be captivating and believable role models for young women. My two daughters were young at that time, so this was a personal quest. I was not necessarily looking for only queens but historical recordings, scant as they are for women, are almost non-existent where non-royal or non-elite women are concerned and so in the end, my search did include more queens and begums.

I used the stories of mythological characters as well as historical women, because in India we have a peculiar reality in that mythological women are revered as real persons, while historical characters are easily forgotten and the narrative of their lives manipulated and altered.

What can today's leaders, both in the corporate world and electoral politics, learn from these Indian queens?

Aside from the specific examples in *Heroines*, who demonstrate that women have all the skills required for leadership with compassion, I would propose that the great need of the hour is to encourage women to participate in all aspects of public and social life. That it is only by creating environments that foster the participation of women in large numbers that the endemic injustices of a society skewed against women can be addressed. ■

Read the complete interview on eShe.in

FOOD FOR IMMUNITY

Have you been wondering how to build your immunity in this worldwide pandemic? These natural ingredients will help you

Recipes by Kavari Jain. Photography by Aadi Jain

A healthful, balanced diet plays a vital role in staying well, and building a strong immune system has become essential in the time of coronavirus. Foods like turmeric, ginger, blueberries, pumpkin, garlic, sunflower seeds,

peppers, broccoli, lemon, sweet potato, yogurt and so on must be included in your daily diet to boost immunity. Here are some delicious yet nutritious recipes that strengthen your immune system and make you stronger from within.

ROASTED PUMPKIN AND BEETROOT SALAD

Ingredients (serves two):

300 to 400 gm pumpkin, peeled and diced into cubes; 1 tsp salt; 2 tbsp olive oil; 4 medium beets, cubed; 2/3 cup walnut halves caramelised with maple syrup; 2 tbsp mixed seeds; 3 tbsp pomegranate.

For the dressing:

4 tbsp apple cider vinegar; 4 tbsp olive oil; 2 tsp maple syrup; 1 tsp mustard; ½ tsp salt and pepper; 3 to 4 cups mixed salad leaves of choice

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C. In a bowl, toss the pumpkin, beetroot, olive oil and salt.
2. Scatter on a flat oven tray and roast for 20–25 minutes in the oven until soft. Remove and cool.
3. Whisk the dressing ingredients in a bowl, and then set aside.
4. Scatter the salad leaves in a bowl and add beetroot, pumpkin, walnuts, seeds and pomegranate.
5. Drizzle dressing on top, and serve.





PUMPKIN AND CHICKPEAS YELLOW CURRY WITH RED RICE

Ingredients:

Cooked red rice or any rice of your choice; 1½ tbsp coconut oil; 1 onion finely chopped; 2 tbsp minced fresh ginger; 2 tbsp minced garlic; 1 red chilli chopped; 2 cups boiled chickpeas; 4 tbsp yellow Thai curry paste; 3 cups peeled and cubed pumpkin; 400 gms coconut milk; 2 tbsp maple syrup; 1 tsp salt; 1 tsp ground pepper; 1 tbsp tamari; 1 cup chopped broccoli; 2 tbsp lemon juice; ¼ cup roasted cashews

For serving (optional):

Fresh coriander; lemon juice

Instructions:

1. Heat a large pot over medium heat. Add coconut oil, onion, ginger, garlic and sauté for a few minutes.
2. Add curry paste, stir. Add pumpkin, cook for 5 mins. Add the chickpeas and broccoli, cook for 2 mins more.
3. Pour coconut milk, maple syrup and mix. Add turmeric and salt, and stir. Simmer over medium heat for 5 mins.
4. Add the lemon juice and top with roasted cashews. Garnish with coriander and lemons.
5. Serve hot over rice.

TURMERIC GINGER ROSEMARY LEMONADE

Ingredients (serves 4):

1 litre water
2 inches of fresh ginger, peeled and sliced
2 inches of fresh turmeric, peeled and sliced
Fresh rosemary
A pinch of freshly ground black pepper
2 tbsp honey (or any sweetener)
The juice of 2 lemons
Ice

Instructions:

1. Add the ginger, turmeric and black pepper to a saucepan with one cup of water. Bring to a boil. Simmer for 10 mins. Let it sit for 15 mins to cool.
2. Strain the liquid through a fine mesh strainer into a jug, add in the rosemary.
3. Let it cool, then add the remaining water, lemon juice and honey, and mix. Taste and add more honey if desired.
4. Serve the lemonade over ice. Enjoy!





GINGERY APPLE CABBAGE SAUERKRAUT

Ingredients:

6 cups red or green cabbage, finely chopped; 2 tsp sea salt; 1 cup thinly sliced radish; 1 apple, thinly sliced or chopped; 2 tbsp fresh ginger (grated); 4 cloves garlic, minced

Instructions:

1. Sterilise a one-litre mason jar by pouring boiling water over it (even the lid). Keep it aside to dry and cool.
2. In a large bowl, throw in the finely chopped cabbage and top with salt. Massage the cabbage for 7–8 mins, or till it softens and releases water.
3. Add radish, apple, ginger, and garlic and massage once more for 4–5 mins.

4. Put the mixture in the jar, press down and pack tightly. Make sure there is 1–2 inches space between the sauerkraut and the lid. Seal with the lid and keep to ferment in a closed cabinet (ideal temperature is between 20–30°C). Fermentation will happen between 24 hours to 10 days.

5. Make sure to open the jar once a day to release air. Press the vegetables down ensuring there is liquid on top.

6. Taste after 48 hours to check if it's tangy enough (it takes 3 days in Delhi).

7. Once ready, keep it in the fridge. It will last 3 months. Enjoy with salads sandwiches and just like that! ■

A Handful of Light

The coronavirus lockdown is forcing us to grow, little by little

By Aekta Kapoor

Early on in the lockdown, my fingers began itching uncontrollably, and I'd often get up at night having scratched them raw and bleeding. It wasn't any external rash or infection, it was related to my state of mind, a fact I could recognise as I had been through it before. Twenty years ago – when I was in a marriage I did not want to be in, trapped in a home full of strangers, with no close family or friend in town to vent out to, burdened with unfamiliar duties, and with no understanding of myself or my purpose in life – my fingers had itched this way for the first time.

It was not a coincidence that the second time this happened

to me was also related to being “locked in”, stripped of freedom, burdened with work, and anxious about the future, though I am in a happier space in my life. My body's sympathetic nervous system was reacting to a situation where neither fight nor flight was a possibility. It was making me aware of a problem, which only now I can see was due to gaps in my belief system and thinking.

Mental health is a vast subject, and the mind is a mysterious abyss of past experiences, fears and desires. Though the quest of personal development is self-knowledge and self-actualisation, this is an elusive goal and all of life's endeavours are just part of the process. We can never truly

‘know ourselves’, even though we may spend a lifetime trying.

At the same time, since the universe is in a constant state of expansion, we may perhaps progress from one point to another, and then another, in painstaking degrees, either of our own volition or when nature forces us to change and evolve.

The coronavirus pandemic is one of those instances.

It has brought to the fore our faultlines, our deepest fears and desires, our haunting insecurities and doubts. It has also given us an opportunity to count the many blessings in our lives, to expand our ability to give and receive love, and to bring our attention to the present moment as acutely as the single-minded focus of one trying to thread a needle.

I observe myself with much wonder, and some consternation, these days. While there is gratitude that my husband and two children are with me at my home, and my parents, in-laws, family, friends and helpers are safe in theirs, I am also crabby about my increased workload, irritable about the change in my routine, aggrieved about the daily-wagers and self-employed out of work, and worried about waylaid future plans. The fingers itch at night, when I am alone

with my demons in the dark.

But I am not unprepared for this second round of ‘lockdown anxiety’. I have my tried-and-tested healing tools this time: my chanting, my yoga, my breathwork, expressions of love with the family and pet, and drowning myself in a cause greater than myself—my magazine *eShe*, where I encounter inspirational stories of women every day, stories that



leave me with goosebumps.

The itch is largely in control, surfacing mildly as a warning sign every alternate day, reminding me to breathe, activate the parasympathetic nervous system response, and let go of my stress and fear. Personal growth is a lifelong process and, forced by a pandemic to stop and look within, this moment is significant. If each of us can take that one tiny baby step forward together to heal ourselves, we may just end up healing the world. ■



www.mirrinvestments.com
MOBILE: +919818018222

INVEST ON EVERY
HAPPY OCASSION





Actor Maanvi Gagroo with The Red-Black Accordion

Photography by Ram Shergill for *Four More Shots Please!*

