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eShe

the female gaze

KK Shailaja

From humble roots to global fame, the extraordinary journey of Kerala's health minister and acclaimed Covid warrior

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What to teach kids, from social justice to computational thinking

FAMILY GOALS
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Pop culture spotlight on feminism and gender violence in Pakistan

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Navneeth Anna

WALL OF VIOLENCE

The research is clear: when there are more women in positions of power, the organisation or community performs better on all long-term parameters. Take the current battle against Covid being fought worldwide, and the comparative success of women-led responses – cover personality KK Shailaja in India's Kerala (p.13), Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, and Angela Merkel in Germany.

And yet getting women to the top is an arduous climb, and breaking down patriarchal codes is more the treacherous wall of a cliff than a winding slope. The more social media gives women a voice, the more toxic masculinity seeks to crush it.

It's a cross-border problem, and this month we look at gender issues in Pakistan (p.20), only to recognise that the situation mirrors our own in India. We have seen enough brutal violence against women – sexual, caste-based, domestic – in the past few days alone (p.66) to know beyond doubt that Brahminical patriarchy is alive and kicking.

Aekta Kapoor
Editor and Publisher
aekta@eshe.in

Gender- and caste-based crimes are separate NCRB categories for a reason: unlike 'normal' crimes that aren't personal – the thief or drunk driver doesn't know you and doesn't care who you are – these crimes are committed precisely because the criminal knows and *does* care who you are. These are not crimes of impulse or desperation: these are cold-blooded assertions of power and privilege.

The more they strike, the more we must speak up. #SmashThePatriarchy. ■

Editor and Publisher: Aekta Kapoor
Business Director: Kaveri Jain
Social Media: Manasvi Jerath
Contributors: Kay Newton, Neha Kirpal, Shweta Bhandral
Mentor: Kul Bhushan

Published by Aekta Kapoor from Coral Content, C3/1 GF, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi 110057, India. Phone: +91 9971116621. For queries, write to *mail@eshe.in*, *or* visit eShe.in

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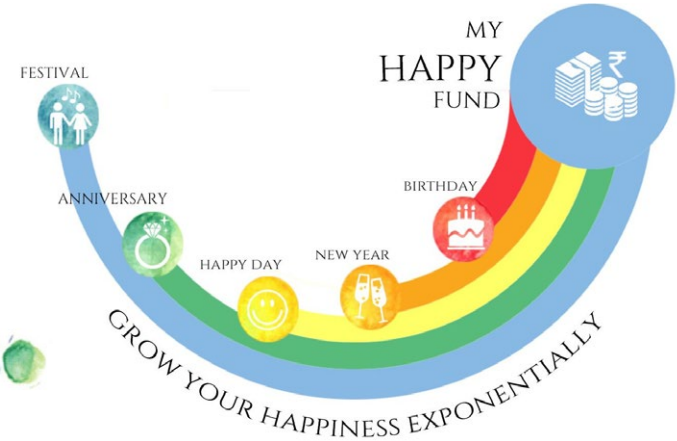

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THE 'WRITE' REASONS

Two Indian novelists, Karuna Ezara Parikh and Anuradha Roy, are grabbing the world's attention

PHOTOGRAPHY: NAYANTARA PARIKH

KARUNA EZARA PARIKH, KOLKATA

Television personality and social-media influencer Karuna Ezara Parikh's debut novel revolves around an Indian-Pakistani romance

A former model and television presenter, Karuna Ezara Parikh's debut novel *The Heart Asks Pleasure First* has already been endorsed by bestselling American novelist Ann Patchett as a "luminous, hypnotic" work, and by actor-author Lisa Ray as an "intoxicating and immersive exploration of the forces that shape our world and relationships."

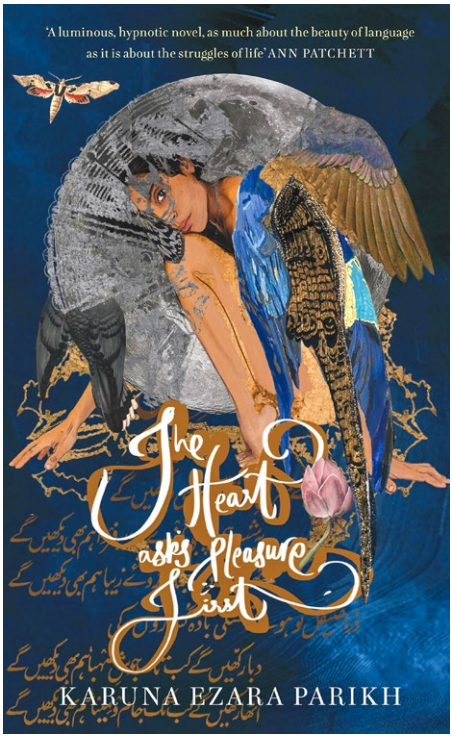
With a degree in journalism, film and broadcasting from Cardiff University, UK, Karuna has written for various magazines and news portals. Born and raised in Delhi, the 35-year-old currently lives in Kolkata with her husband Amitesh and their dog Clover. As a social-media influencer with over 76,000 followers on Instagram alone, her posts range from fashion to feminism and social activism.

She shares her influences and inspirations in this interview.

Your life straddles seemingly opposite worlds – books, poetry and prose on one hand, fashion and glamour on the other. Do they appear contradictory to you, or do you traverse them seamlessly?

One has been my bread and butter, the other my heart and soul. In my

book, the world of fashion does have a small part to play. Nothing I've done over the last decade feels like a waste. All my experiences have come in use somewhere. As a model I learnt patience, I learnt to observe people, I understood insecurity and the ego, and it taught me empathy.



Fashion, at its best, is design. And design at its best is true art. They're both creative spaces, they just feed different parts of me.

What sparked off the idea to write The Heart Asks Pleasure First *and how long did it take you to write the book?*

While I was in college in Wales, I encountered Pakistanis for the first time. It struck me as incredible that I could only meet people from this neighbouring country in a land far, far away. In the West, the people I was closest to, who most felt like home, were often from Pakistan. I wondered about that, and about how it serves governments to continue to keep the people of the two countries apart. I started writing the book straight out of college, but only managed to bring it to full fruition 10 years later, when I met the man who would become my husband, and I realised the best way to tell this important political story is to also tell it as a passionate love story. Altogether the story has been with me for 13 years. This version took about three or four years to write.

Your protagonist Daya is a stranger to Hindu-Muslim enmity and Islamophobia. Is it possible for the current generation of youngsters to ever experience that India again?

It is my hope that that India, the one you speak of, still exists. I see it when I hear stories of Hindu men guarding Muslim areas during riots. Of Sikh women sitting at Shaheen Bagh in solidarity. A land where faiths coexist, and all our stories have value. Where we allow for the other to thrive, and know that we are richer for it. I believe in my heart that most people are good – the agendas of the powerful are

bad. I think there is time to save us from a future where we each live in our own convenient bubble, but that time is now. We must act with love, with energy. It's why it's so important to me that the book is coming out when it is.

Do you believe inspiration is something we are gifted with, or is it something we have to actively seek and work on?

What a beautiful question! Definitely the latter, with threads of the former! I think there are moments we are gifted – like the sudden sight of a sunset through a car window when you had only stepped out to run an errand – but if we want to be consistently inspired, I do believe it takes some work. It's a choice you make. What are you watching? A documentary about blue whales or the news on Republic TV? Are you reading Instagram captions or Rebecca Solnit? Are you meeting the same group you always do or making the effort to call that one friend who lives on the far side of town, but you know if you meet, it will fill your heart with beauty? An inspired life often relies on making a stricter choice with oneself. It is always possible to do this more than we are. To notice things of beauty – the light on the leaves in the afternoon, the teacup we bought because we loved it but never appreciated since…

What was the most challenging part of the writing process for you?

The dance bits were hard for me because I am not a dancer. I think the fear is that one will be caught out. That a ballerina might read it and say, "Oh that's nonsense." I have tried my best though, and I found myself deeply immersed in the subject, so I hope it comes across as authentic. I also found that while I

PHOTO: UPAHAR BISWAS; KARUNA'S OUTFIT: EKA BY RINA SINGH

am no stranger to stringing words together, I hadn't a clue as to how one creates plot. How do you work suspense in, plot each character's arc? Those things took time and practice. I guess readers will decide if I succeeded! ■

Read more on eShe.in

ANURADHA ROY, RANIKHET

Anuradha Roy's latest novel is shortlisted for the Dublin Literary Award

By Neha Kirpal

Ranikhet-based novelist, journalist and editor Anuradha Roy's work of historical fiction *All the Lives We Never Lived* (Hachette, 2018) about a rebellious Indian housewife who breaks social convention in order to seek personal happiness has been shortlisted for the prestigious Dublin Literary Award this year. It's yet another accolade for the author, whose earlier three novels have been translated to several languages and won awards in India and worldwide.

We asked Anuradha about the inspiration behind the book and how the pandemic will change the publishing industry.

Your latest book centres on themes of personal freedom, love and loyalty. What sparked off this idea, or what was the inspiration behind its story?

It was the boy at the centre of the book who started it off – an intensely lonely boy who found an imagined world through paintings. Everything else, even the era in which the book is set, came from this starting point. When I thought about which paintings the boy would be immersed in, I came upon Walter Spies, a German artist who lived in Bali in the 1920s and '30s and who had met Tagore. From all of this the novel grew into an exploration of the themes you mention, as well as the parallels between past and present.

Coming to the book's central character Gayatri, do you think the traditional roles of wife and mother can sometimes be stifling for women? Do women today still have to defy social rules to find personal fulfillment?

Gayatri came to me complete: a sparkling, gifted, sometimes abrasive, sometimes contradictory woman. Motherhood and nationhood are intertwined in our country, and Gayatri's husband wants her to be both – the woman who will fight for her country on the street, and also stay home and look after her child. Her own needs and desires are dismissed by him as trivial. I wanted to explore the pain and exultation in the life of a woman for whom family and motherhood is not the end and start of everything. Gayatri has an inner core that is hers alone, it is a flame that lights her up and has nothing to do with her family, not even her child. I think these battles are fought today as well, though they may take other forms.

The men in her life define Gayatri – her father triggers her dreams and ambitions, her husband imprisons her in a conservative role, and her son narrates

her story from his own perspective. Do you think most women, even today, end up being unwittingly defined by the men in our lives?

I don't think so. I think women have a certain autonomy no amount of defining by others can take away. There is a minor character in the book, a frail, steely old woman

who calls herself Mukti Devi. Like Gayatri, she has chosen her own path. In her case, it is to fight for the country's freedom. It is just that each version of freedom is different. When Gayatri runs away with a gay man, Spies, it is not for love. Both she and Spies are driven by the need for freedom to live as they please, and to be true to their gifts.

How does it feel for the book to be nominated for the prestigious International Dublin Literary Awards 2020 after two years of publication?

Looking at the 156 books on the longlist, many by authors I love and revere, it feels unreal to be in a shortlist culled out of that, of just 10. It feels doubly unreal from where I live, in a tiny town in the Kumaon hills, with no bookshop or library. Actually, when I look at one of my books, I often wonder how I managed to write it at all – each time the next one feels so impossible.

"WRITING MAY SEEM LIKE WORK FOR WHICH ISOLATION IS IDEAL BUT THAT ISN'T SO. YOU FEED OFF THE WORLD"

Which are some of the other activities and interests that you have been pursuing during the lockdown? How has the lockdown changed things in your life?

I am fortunate to live in the mountains, so our daily life has not been badly affected but all else is changed quite profoundly, as for everyone in the world. In some ways, even as the pandemic has made inequality worse, it has also been a leveller. Everyone is experiencing all-pervasive anxiety and the cruelty of being separated from those they love.

How do you think the pandemic will change the publishing industry and the lives of writers?

Our publishing work at the press my partner and I run, Permanent Black, has taken a hit because sales and printing were stopped for so long. The economy being in a shambles, and most libraries becoming even more moribund than they were, is not a help.

As for writing, it may seem like work for which isolation is ideal but that isn't so. You feed off the world. You need travel, you need the energy and inspiration you get from new experiences and people. On a mundane level, a research trip I need to do is impossible now. Right now, the sense of uncertainty about the future – and even about the present – is almost unbearable, but I am trying to hold on to a routine and write my way through it. I am lucky to be able to – many people's lives have been changed irrevocably. ■

Read more on eShe.in

DAUGHTER OF THE SOIL

Kerala's health minister KK Shailaja has made global headlines for her handling of the Covid crisis, but she continues to stay alert, rooted in grassroots reality

By Aekta Kapoor. Photography by Navneeth Anna

KK Shailaja with Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan

KK Shailaja, the much-feted Minister of Health and Social Welfare of Kerala who shot to global fame for her handling of Covid in the southern Indian state, is so down-to-earth and approachable that everyone calls her Shailaja Teacher or even Teacher Amma (teacher-mother). It's a respectful and affectionate term Malayalis use for schoolteachers and professors, and though Shailaja gave up teaching decades ago, she continues to wear the honorific comfortably.

Born and raised in the scenic seaside district of Kannur in northern Kerala, the friendly politician is accustomed to being in the news of late. In June, after three months of India's nationwide lockdown, she was invited to a United Nations panel discussion for her efforts to fight Covid in Kerala. International newspapers variously headlined her as the "rockstar health minister" or "coronavirus slayer", and her smiling face was broadcast on television channels worldwide.

The 66-year-old was also voted the world's 'top thinker' for Covid by a UK magazine, beating even New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. On September 24, World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced that Kerala had received the UN Interagency Task Force award for its "outstanding contribution" towards preventing and controlling the spread of non-communicable diseases, the first in the state's history.

For Shailaja, however, the onslaught of plaudits this year comes after decades of working on the ground with the common folk of Kerala and promoting scientific thinking. Even when she was approached by film producer Rima Kallingal for the Malayalam film *Virus* (2019) about her successful handling of the Nipah outbreak in Kerala in 2018, in which popular actor Revathi would play Shailaja's role, she had only one request to make of the film's director Aashiq Abu: "The film should be scientific. In future, students should be able to gain knowledge from it."

In her own characteristic aunty-next-door way, Shailaja chuckles on the phone: "I am not silent and sad like Revathi was in the film, though. I am vocal and vigorous." She laughs it all off good-naturedly.

Shailaja's earthiness is typical of women of her generation, especially in the northern districts of Kerala where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM has been a dominant political force and organisational entity since the mid-20th century. Unlike in other parts of India where electoral politics are perceived as either a lucrative career option or a dirty business (or both), here one's political affiliation is often something one is born into, much like Hinduism. You don't convert to other political ideologies unless it's a matter of life and death.

In Shailaja's case, her maternal grandmother Kalyani and her grand-uncles laid the foundations of her own political affiliation early on. "My grandmother's father worked as a supervisor on a British tea estate; they called him Raman Maistri ('*maistri*' means supervisor). The family was considered one of the wealthiest in the district; they lived in a two-storey house that was called a bungalow because everyone else lived in huts," she reminisces, immediately breaking off to joke, "Now it's one of the smallest houses in the neighbourhood!"

KK Shailaja launching the automatic sanitiser machine as part of Kerala's Break the Chain campaign

The good life, however, did not continue into Kalyani's generation. After the premature death of her husband, Kalyani was attracted to India's freedom struggle and communism, which was still in its nascent stage in the 1930s and '40s

KK Shailaja with Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan launching the Break the Chain campaign to fight Covid

in the region (the state of Kerala was later formed in 1956). Her five brothers too espoused the cause, and with their education and relative privilege, they fought for the rights of the bonded labourers against the exploitative landowners of the time.

"Can you imagine how pathetic the condition of the lower castes was at the time? Their women were not even allowed to wear top garments. Their children were not allowed to go to school. Untouchability was at its peak," says Shailaja, crediting social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru for bringing about lasting change in all levels of society.

The only woman activist in those days in her community, Kalyani managed to win the respect and support of both the landowners and the labourers, and became an informal village leader, helping solve disputes, fighting for the rights of the lower castes, distributing food and clothes to the needy, educating them about India's freedom movement, and even scolding drunken troublemakers from time to time! "At that time, women were not allowed to even sit in large gatherings, but my grandmother was given a chair amongst all the men," Shailaja narrates.

Once the communists were elected to power in 1957, they set about changing discriminatory social structures. Through various reforms in land ownership, healthcare and education, they ensured that each individual had access to free schools, hospitals, housing and food.

KK Shailaja flagging off mobile medical units as part of Kerala's National Health Mission

"All this led to a great transformation in Kerala society," explains Shailaja. "Literacy increased, Kerala's Human Development Index rose, prosperity followed."

The only child of a farmer and a homemaker, Shailaja idolised her grandmother and took to social work at a young age. She joined the Students' Federation of India (SFI), a student organisation affiliated to CPM, in 1979 when she was studying chemistry and physics at Pazhassi Raja N.S.S. College in Mattannur, which was 20 km away from her home.

Life for Shailaja in those years was all about the study of science, activism, and travelling to and from college. "The only cinema hall in Kannur was five km away from home; we went there twice a year," she smiles. The year 1981 brought two massive changes in her life: she not only completed her second Bachelor's degree and got a job as a teacher, but she also married fellow CPM worker and teacher K. Bhaskaran. They went on to have two sons together – Sobhith, now 34, is an electrical engineer and heads operations at a Covid healthcare facility in Abu Dhabi, while Lasith, 32, did his MTech and works at Kannur International Airport.

Shailaja joined CPM full time in the 1990s. She volunteered in Kerala's Total Literacy campaign for a year, teaching septuagenarians how to read and write. "They told me, 'Now no one can cheat us of our land'." One of the few women in

the party at the time, and a good speaker at that, Shailaja quickly rose in the ranks of the women's cadre. In 1996, she was elected Member of Legislative Assembly to the Kerala state from the Koothuparamba constituency, and her position in the CPM was sealed. She is one of only two women ministers in the present state government headed by Pinarayi Vijayan, and under her watch as healthcare minister, the state now

boasts of top facilities and technologies at government hospitals.

She rues the eroding of civic values in the newly consumerist Kerala, flush after decades of economic prosperity. "Instead of following scientific thinking, they are now drawn towards superstitions and false beliefs. They want to live on individual terms and in closed communities, and the sense of social and civic unity is disintegrating. This makes it easier for Hindu and Islamic fundamentalists to make inroads into society. We have to fight these tendencies once again," she says gravely.

Having successfully overcome the Nipah virus outbreak, Shailaja and her team were doubly concerned when the first Covid case was reported in Wuhan, and took immediate action as early as January 2020. "I knew that more than 6 lakh people would return from abroad and other states to Kerala due to the lockdown, and it was my duty to contain the spread," says Shailaja. Stringent measures were put in place at airports and teams were assigned to follow up on each passenger to ensure quarantine.

As a result of these measures and strict lockdown enforcement, Kerala's Covid death rate is 0.35 percent, as compared with 1.6 percent average India rate and 3 percent globally (Kerala reported 180,000 cases out of India's 6 million as on September 28). But there's no giving up for Shailaja's team: "We control the spread in one cluster, and then another one comes up."

There were other bitter challenges too along the way: the tragic Air India plane crash at Kozhikode airport in early August left nearby districts reeling with added demands on the healthcare system and devas-

KK Shailaja inaugurating World Breastfeeding Week along with Special Secretary of Social Justice Biju Prabhakar

tated infrastructure. Then, in early September, a young Covid patient was raped by an ambulance driver who was transporting her to a Covid facility in southern Kerala. "I had sleepless nights," Shailaja admits. "Whenever such incidents occur, I tell myself, 'Never repeat this'."

While the incident forced the health ministry to enforce even more stringent rules, it also gave ample ammunition to the state opposition to launch attacks on Shailaja. "Elections are coming," she says wryly, brushing off a Congress leader's sexist remark calling her 'Covid Rani (queen)' as yet another effort to tarnish the ruling CPM's image. "It is a reflection of deep-rooted misogyny in society. It does not bother me anymore," she says.

Shailaja shares the slogan of a campaign she launched after taking over Kerala's Women and Child Development Department, *Sadhairyam Munnottu*, which translates to "be brave and go ahead". "Women should study, get a job and be earning members of their families; that is most important factor for women's rights and society as a whole," she emphasises. She regrets that even as the state has become richer and women are better educated, they stay home after marriage and don't work even if they have BTech or MBA degrees. "Whatever their field, they should work for society, otherwise their education is a waste and women will always be looked down upon as the second sex."

Indeed, Shailaja's campaign slogan could well be the motto of her own life and her lasting legacy. ■

PAKISTAN THROUGH THE GENDER LENS

The cast of Pakistani web series *Churails:* Sarwat Gilani, Mehar Bano, Nimra Bucha and Yasra Rizvi

A look at women's issues in Pakistan through the perspective of a web series, a feminist dystopian novel, and the biography of a murdered model

By Neha Kirpal

Recent books and films out of Pakistan depict a stark picture of women's rights in the age of social- media trolls and viral stardom. While the situation is perhaps not too different in India – honour killings, female infanticide, and even targeting of feminists online, for instance, afflict both nations and the control of women's bodies is the over-arching attempt of traditional communities in both countries – yet India's neighbour does have its own unique challenges due to its turbulent political history and large pockets of religious conservatism.

Keeping the lens on women's issues facing urban, modern Pakistan, we look at a web series based in the vibrant, globally connected metropolis Karachi, and speak to two renowned Karachi-based authors about feminism and violence against women.

SHAILJA KEJRIWAL, FILM PRODUCER

Four feisty female protagonists from urban Karachi get together to form a secret agency that nabs husbands who are cheating on their wives. That's the fascinating premise of a revolutionary new Pakistani web series called *Churails*, streaming on ZEE5. Shailja Kejriwal, chief creative officer, special projects, Zee Entertainment, is the first Indian producer to have produced films by Pakistani filmmakers through Zeal for Unity – Zee's apolitical platform to bring together Indian and Pakistani filmmakers.

Shailja has produced over 25 films and TV mini-series, and was the writer for the critically acclaimed Irrfan Khan-starrer *Madaari* (2016).

How much of the women and their lives depicted in Churails *truly reflect Pakistani society?*

Churails is a powerful representation

Shailja Kejriwal

of the issues that are prevalent in the world at large. These issues can't be singled out to a certain country, and while the magnitude and intensity of these problems may differ in each country, the struggle is still global. Sexism, gender inequality, domestic abuse, LGBTQIA+ rights and many more are areas of concern the world over, not just Pakistan or India.

What was the inspiration for the show?

I think it was time to make a show like *Churails*, time to take these issues head on. There has been a simmering undercurrent globally that is becoming louder but still has a long way ahead. We wanted to lend our voice and our platform to the resistance via *Churails*. We wanted to be allies.

Do you feel that the issues discussed in the show (patriarchy, sexism, marital rape, misogyny, domestic abuse, class divides and transphobia) are universal for several countries and cultures?

Yes, these issues are faced by women and the LGBTQIA+ community across the world. The response and resonance that the show has received globally makes us believe that we truly struck a chord.

Given its progressive, outspoken women breaking traditional stereotypes, was the show controversial in Pakistan?

We received a lot of support from the women in Pakistan, which we expected. What really surprised us was that a lot of men came forward and appreciated the show. Overall, the response has been phenomenal.


A still from *Churails*

What has been the response to your decision to bring Zindagi *back on ZEE5, given the strained relations between India and Pakistan?*

Gratifying and satisfying! *Zindagi* was launched with the promise to curate content from across borders and showcase it on a single platform with a belief that art is universal. We are glad that people have reinforced this sentiment and welcomed *Zindagi* back into their lives with such openness. The response has been amazing and we're hoping to reciprocate by giving the best content.

With recent films and shows having a central theme of womanhood and sisterhood, do you think women-centric content has commercial viability and will attract finances and investment?

I believe good content finds its audience. We need to view content for its storyline, narrative and essence and not for the gender that's helming it. It's a great evolving time for content and we are increasingly seeing good content getting the desired eyeballs and backing.

Which are some of the other Pakistani titles one can look forward to, which have similar stories of women voices?

Pakistani stories have usually depicted strong women characters within the family structure, the older shows more so than the current ones. My favourites have been *Tanhaiyaan, Ankahi, Zindagi Gulzar Hai, Daam* and *Ishq Junoon Deewangi*.

What inspires you?

Notions of freedom. ■

BINA SHAH, NOVELIST

Karachi-based journalist, columnist and blogger Bina Shah has authored two short story collections and four novels. The award-winning novelist's work has been translated into Urdu, Spanish and Italian. In her latest novel *Before She Sleeps* (Macmillan), the 48-year-old paints a dystopian picture of a South Asian city where gender selection, war and disease have skewed the sex ratio to alarmingly low levels, and where the government uses terror and technology to control its people, especially women, whose only job is to produce children for multiple husbands.

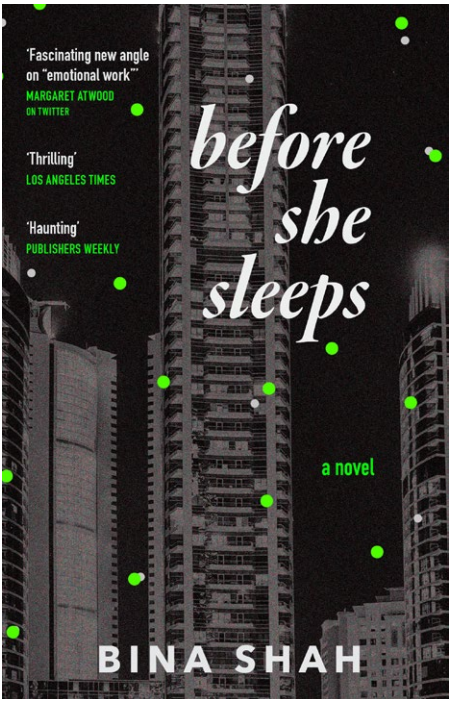
Why did you categorise Before She Sleeps *as feminist dystopia?*

Actually "feminist dystopia" was a category created by book critics who were writing about a wave of books that emerged in late 2018, all running along similar lines. Each outlined a dystopian world in which women's bodies, fertility,

choices and lives are dictated to them by a patriarchal society, in various iterations. Maggie Shen King's *An Excess Male* writes about a China in which women marry multiple men; Leni Zumas wrote about abortion being illegal again in *Red Clocks*; and in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God,* genes go awry and women are monitored in pregnancy. The publication of these books coincided with the popularity of the Hulu series based on Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and so the genre "feminist dystopia" was born. Margaret Atwood said in 2018, "The control of women and babies has been a feature of every repressive regime on the planet." At the very foundation of feminist dystopia is a nod to that truth.

Was The Handmaid's Tale *an inspiration for your book?*

I read *The Handmaid's Tale* when I was in college in the US, but more influential than that to me was George Orwell's *1984*, which I read as a young teenager growing up in Zia's Pakistan, an Orwellian era in our history from which we've never quite recovered. After I wrote early drafts of *Before She Sleeps*, I reread *The Handmaid's Tale*, and was reminded of those days when women's bodies were subjected to immense repression and distorted religious diktats. Women were thrown in jail for going to the police and saying they'd been raped; this was somehow turned into a charge of adultery. I thought to myself, 'Whatever's going on in Gilead, worse goes on in the real world.' So if a comparison must be made, my book is a counterpoint, a hyper-projection of what might happen in the East as opposed to the West.



There is a tendency to conflate South Asian women as one category. Do you think this is unwarranted since there is such diversity in gender across South Asia, such as caste, class, religion and language? How does a fiction writer navigate through the length and breadth of women's diversity in South Asia?

Each South Asian woman comes

from a specific and unique background that is usually reflected in her writing. My Sindhi and Muslim identity is most strongly represented in my previous novel *A Season for Martyrs*. The Indian writer Meena Kandasamy, a Tamil Dalit, writes beautifully about the Kilvenmani massacre of Dalits in Tamil Nadu and also focuses on Dalits in her political activism. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* honed in on Syrian Christians in Kerala, which is her own background. The more South Asian women writing, the more the diversity of our world will come to light with our diverse voices.

How far have government and nongovernmental bodies helped women in Pakistan awaken to their rights and roles as citizens? Or do you think that modern laws and the constitution have not facilitated women's emancipation?

Our Constitution enshrines us as equal citizens; our laws have been undergoing a gradual process of reform to bring the legal system in line with this Constitutional right. Enacting change in a patriarchal, conservative country is slow and painful, but there are changemakers, reformers and leaders in both governmental and nongovernmental bodies, women and men with a progressive vision of gender. We have encountered a lot of opposition from society and will continue to do so for decades. I don't anticipate this fight being over any time soon.

The younger generations of South Asians have massive exposure to world affairs through social media. Has this led to greater empowerment of women or to society getting more conservative and patriarchal?

Social media has led to an awareness of women's rights, which has led to a backlash where the conservative and patriarchal elements of society try to reassert the misogynistic status quo. It has also enabled feminists and women's rights activists to connect with each other in Pakistan and around the world, which is something that is quite powerful and unstoppable. I don't think society is "getting more conservative"; we're just becoming more enlightened about the insidious ways in which it presents itself in our lives.

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS LED TO AN AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS, WHICH HAS LED TO A BACKLASH

Your book is described as a "truly terrifying way to imagine a world of post-religious authoritarianism". Were they any real-life events that went into the building of the thriller?

Not particularly. Unlike *A Season*

for Martyrs, which was very much inspired by real-life events and historical figures, *Before She Sleeps* is built on images that I had: a woman collapsing on the street, a dazzling city skyline at night, neon lights and high towers, a girl wearing a nose pin for the first time, an ambulance crashing through a fence.

On the other hand, the conditions for women in Green City are inspired by the seclusion that the purdah system of Muslims in South Asia practised, and how women were kept segregated from men in places like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.

While the book is about female seclusion and suppression in a highly patriarchal society, it's also about rebellion and trying to take back control. What is your hope and vision for Muslim women everywhere?

My hope for all women everywhere is the freedom to make choices, the opportunities to have good choices and the respect and dignity that women deserve by virtue of being women, not sisters, daughters or mothers.

What is the most challenging part of the writing process for you?

Every part of the process is challenging, but I think getting the first draft out is the hardest part. Creating an entire story out of nothing is mentally taxing work. And it can go on for years. People don't realise the long-term commitment you have to make to writing a book. It's years out of your life, and sometimes it doesn't even get published.

Who are some of your favourite contemporary South Asian writers?

I love the work of Tabish Khair, who has a unique sensibility and

Bina Shah wrote the foreword to *The Ordinary Chaos of Being Human: Tales from Many Muslim Worlds*

writes with a lot of compassion for women, as in his book *Jihadi Jane.* Usman T. Malik's science fiction is masterful and addictive; so is Tishani Doshi's poetry. I've quoted from *Girls are Coming Out of the Woods* at the beginning of the book I'm working on, a sequel to *Before She Sleeps*, to inspire me as I try to nail down that elusive first draft. ■

SANAM MAHER, JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR

For more than a decade, Karachi-based journalist Sanam Maher has covered stories on Pakistan's art and culture, business, politics, religious minorities and women. Her book *The Sensational Life and Death of Qandeel Baloch* (Aleph Book Company, 2018) – which was later published under the title *A Woman Like Her: The Short Life of Qandeel Baloch* (Bloomsbury, 2019) – pieces together the life of Pakistan's first social-media star, Qandeel Baloch, also known as Pakistan's Kim Kardashian, who was murdered by her brother in the name of 'honour' in July 2016 in central Pakistan.

What inspired you to write a book about the life of the Muslim world's rebellious social-media icon, Qandeel Baloch?

I was working as an editor in a newsroom at a daily English paper in Karachi when I first heard about Qandeel. A couple of colleagues were talking about her viral *"How I'm looking?"* video. I thought I could do a piece on how young women are using platforms like Facebook and Instagram to push the envelope

on how they can dress, speak or present themselves in Pakistan. I've long maintained a fascination with what we as Pakistanis do on social media, and I thought Qandeel would be a great person to focus on for a piece exploring this.

In July 2016, I remember staring at the television the day news of Qandeel's murder broke, and feeling stunned. The idea of this woman who had managed to fool all of us – her audience and the media – and who had created this persona that we had bought into wholesale took root. I admired her gumption and the courage it must have taken to create the persona that she did.

Then, in the hours and days after, it was terrible to see the reactions online from many Pakistanis who were very happy that she had been "punished" for behaving the way that she did. It was a moment when I was seeing friends and family members draw a line and very firmly position themselves on either side – a moment that calls for definition or clarity on the question of how we see ourselves as Pakistanis and what we hope for or believe we deserve.

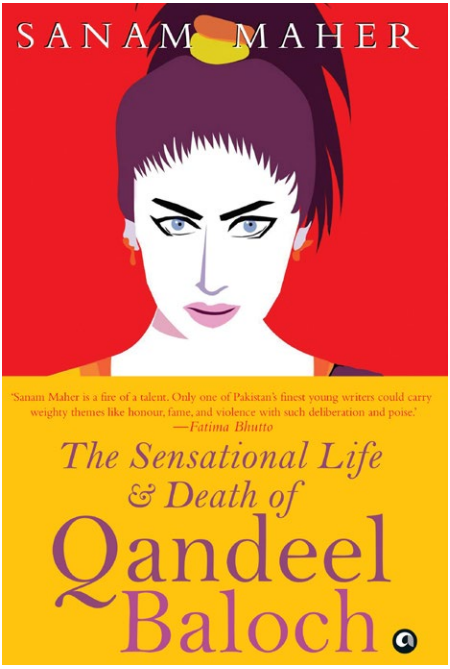
I wanted to tell a story about that moment. It wasn't just about Qandeel, but about the place that enabled her to become who she did, and the place that ultimately found that it could not tolerate her.

Tell us about the scale of research that went into putting together the book.

The book doesn't just focus on Qandeel. It tells her story, but also uses each part of her life to open up into a story about Pakistan at this particular moment. For instance, when looking at Qandeel's fame as a viral star, I began to think about how my generation of Pakistanis has been

Qandeel Baloch was murdered by her brother because he believed she had besmirched the 'family honour'

connected to the world like never before – what are we doing online? What does it mean to go viral in Pakistan? How are we building communities online to speak in ways that we may not be able to "offline"? What happens when we behave in a way online that seems to break the rules of how we are supposed to behave, particularly as



L-R: Qandeel Baloch; the cover of Sanam Maher's book, which also explores related issues in Pakistani society

women, "in the real world"?

In exploring these ideas, I met Arshad Khan aka the Chaiwallah, as well as men and women who are trying to patrol our activities online and monitor and censor us, and others who are determined to keep us safer and more vocal online – particularly in the case of women and marginalised or minority communities. That meant meeting everyone from trolls and hacktivists to Nighat Dad, the creator of Pakistan's first cyber harassment hotline.

I divided the book into sections. I started out with Qandeel, and the bulk of my time was spent in Punjab, where she came from. I met people in her village, spent time with her friends and family, those who loved and missed her as well as those who were glad to be rid of her.

Honour killings to punish socially unacceptable behaviour, particularly for women, are common in South Asia. Pakistani activists say there are some 1,000 honour killings in the country every year. Did Qandeel's case become a symbol for women's rights in that sense?

It would be a challenge for the average Pakistani to recognise the faces of any of the hundreds of men and women killed for honour every year. Sometimes we don't even read the stories about honour crimes buried in the third or fourth page

of the newspaper. But Qandeel was different. There was a sense of having known her as many of us engaged with her frequently online, whether that was to bait her, shame her, secretly watch her videos at night, or share her videos with friends, imitate her and make a meme of her. So it was incredible to see women engage with the subject of honour killing very vocally online at the time of her murder, to see that they felt they could not stay silent, to talk about how a Pakistani woman can and should behave and what happens when she is believed to misbehave.

What kind of challenges did you face while writing the book?

With all the news reports, gossip, TV shows and documentaries, I think many of us feel we already know Qandeel's story. But ultimately, I realised just how little I myself actually knew, even after poring over every piece of information I could find out about her before I travelled to Punjab and started my own research and interviews. What we know so far has been coloured by the media frenzy around her murder.

Do you see a simmering conflict between a conservative society and liberalism in Pakistan, whether in its streets, institutions or cyberspace?

I don't think that conflict is "simmering" anymore, and the dissonance is something I was very interested to explore in this book. I wanted to see how we might be connected to a global space of ideas and possibilities online, but we're still very much grounded in the society and culture we live in here in Pakistan. Through Qandeel's story and some of the others in the book, you see the terrible ramifications that a clash between the two can have.

IT WAS TERRIBLE TO SEE THE REACTIONS FROM MANY PAKISTANIS WHO WERE VERY HAPPY THAT QANDEEL HAD BEEN "PUNISHED"

Has trolling become a weapon in the hands of people who want to maintain patriarchal status quo?

As in many other countries, social media is helping us build communities online in order to speak in ways that we may not be able to "offline". This has been vital for younger feminists – at least the minority who have easy access to such platforms – to come together, organise, support, mobilise. At the same time, our "offline" tendencies, such as our kneejerk reactions to women who don't behave or look or talk like we might want or expect them to, are creeping online and manifesting on social media. ■

Read more on eShe.in

FROM HEART TO HAND

Pottery isn't just about making functional or decorative products but also an avenue to heal and create beauty, as these two potters aver

By Shweta Bhandral

Digging your hands in clay, spinning the potter's wheel, and finally dipping your pieces in colourful glaze to form creative designs – all this is not just a source of livelihood but also an activity that many people use to heal and grow. Psychologists believe that pottery or working with clay is a useful tool to overcome depression and anxiety, and is meditative too. Potter and educator Neha Ramaiya would attest to this with her own life. Pottery not only helped her come out of depression, it also opened doors of opportunity for this Mumbai-based 42-year-old. A graduate in ceramics, she healed herself with pottery before she started teaching ceramics. Her own therapist referred clients to her. Enthused, Neha went on to pursue higher studies in clay therapy abroad. She came back to India to

start teaching ceramic-work at a few colleges in Mumbai. Alongside, she came up YellowSpiders Pottery, which, by 2012, made a name for itself as a school for pottery-making.

Neha shares that it had been a fascinating time for ceramic craft until the pandemic struck. Lots of pottery studios had come up, and with the government promoting local art and 'Make in India', the profession had been finally flourishing. She points out that sourcing material had also become easier, and so artists could concentrate on design and be innovative unlike ever before.

Neha says, "Ceramic work helped me to take a step back and look at things objectively. If something breaks, I look at it with detachment. I see loss in this way: if I have made it once, I can make it again and probably better. The same rule applies to life."

Pune-based artist and potter Priyanka Joshi also talks passionately about the human relationship with ceramic. The 33-year-old says, "It's fascinating to look at how pottery subconsciously affects us in our daily lives. It absorbs our memories with every touch, and creates objects from stories to be told, desires to be fulfilled or memories to be relived. In the end, it becomes part of us."

Neha overcame depression through pottery and went on to study clay therapy; she now helps others heal

Priyanka was introduced to pottery in school, but it was only during her last year of graduation that she decided to turn her hobby into her profession and become a potter. Her parents were not very happy, though, and were wary of her idea, but she did not give up. While learning from several artists herself, she started teaching ceramics to

Priyanka Joshi's mother initially opposed her career as a potter but now backs her to the hilt

autistic children, tailor-making sessions for them. While the work with special kids was focused on hand-building the pieces, Priyanka set up her studio in 2016 to teach ceramics to teenagers and adults as well. Around this time, she began to design ceramic collections too, while teaching remained a good source of income. The lockdown in 2020 disrupted it all.

Earlier, when one spoke of pottery or ceramics in India, only four spots would get a mention: Jaipur blue pottery, Khurja pottery, Chinhat pottery and Auroville Pondicherry pottery. But new generations of artists are pursuing it as a profession and setting up their studios all over the country. From healing through pottery to creating designs that are their own, they draw inspiration from all around.

"I love trees, nature and the elements. The craft is so involved with the earth, fire and the other elements – water, air – that it grounds you completely," says Neha. With her studio finally set to produce collections, Neha is using social media to help her reach out to potential customers. In fact, she began using Facebook to promote her work as far back as 2010, and she credits the platform for helping her make YellowSpiders Pottery famous.

Being an educator and artist who has been in the profession for 20 years, Neha opines that with the growth of studio pottery, artists should help local potters. "For the sake of growth, we should not only

With the lockdown putting an end to classes with children and adults, Priyanka is building her collection for sale

employ local craftspersons but also make sure that they get their due and that the craft doesn't die."

Priyanka agrees with Neha on this. As a youthful traveller, she even draws her inspirations from local artisans and their designs. She likes to be fluid and flexible with her creations. "My current body of work reflects my love for the landscape I grew up in, the Middle Eastern sun, sand, mountains, and sea, along with awe-inspiring human-made creations. Woven into my pieces are elements inspired by art and architecture that I have encountered during my travels – from the ancient terracotta vessels depicting stories and love of life to the opulent baroque churches, mystical gold mosaics, graceful stucco work and delightful swirls of colours applied by skilful hands," she tells us.

With no classes due to the pandemic, both potters are focusing on their online presence. Priyanka, who used to make limited sets just for showcasing to students, is now focusing on building her portfolio for e-sales. She is also experimenting with and learning new techniques. With both her parents by her side – her mother as friend and critic and her father looking after the accounts department – Priyanka aspires to exhibit her collection at art galleries. On her part, Neha, being the introvert she is, has decided to focus on promoting her studio on social media and create collections on order. ■

UNLOCKED WORDS

We bring you three poems by Indian poets written during the lockdown

Headwaters

© Mugdha Hareendranath

Destined are we to be reborn in another space-time
As butterflies of forlorn tributaries
The wait will endure longer thanks to the memories
Of effervescent affection
The couplets of dreams I long to recall
They fall these days as rain for the soul
The insomniac pain, forever
The night-time spell of *ghazal* classics
Once, in the solitary lookout for something I don't remember
My finger on the strings of your love
That I cherish with moist but grand vision

The celestial flowers of an ocean of unalloyed music
You are the radiance of the rarest tune
The star of my footprints of endearment

The sights I confront on my somnambulist trails
The ebb and flow of the floodtime of my yearning,
That is you
Is it the beauty of truth that you empower
Or is it the grief of tender devotion
Inside the uncrossed portals of my arteries
You are the portrait of time, pride of place
I drift in the downpour of endless craving of thee
My rhymes flow without you ever knowing
And then I am born anew

Mugdha Hareendranath is a qualified lawer and a homemaker currently based in Hong Kong. This poem was originally published in Malayalam.

Locked Down

© Viveka Goswami

I am locked down in my head.
Traces of breath are buried on the outside.
Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock
Talk,
Talk to me.
Trickle down my throat like the stories you'd trip over
alone, asleep.
When the door is ajar
I tip then toe to your knocker
alone, awake.
But you are closed, shut, bolted
Locked down
in your head.
My room is too big,
the balcony too little
to breathe in the sky and carry it inside.
Maybe I should try to focus on work.
Concentrate, concentrate, calculate
Contemplate?
Can I navigate
this empty house with too much time
ticking away, taking away
all of my spirit.
We touch each other through opposite ends of a wall
chorusing, "If death comes, may it take our separator part."
You cave in, I cave in,
we stay in
this ruin, isolated,
Locked down
in each other's head.
Whose roads lie open
so I can go
and feel the blushing morning snow
against my cheek
upon my brow
for in this moment, the here and now
I am alone
I am a stone
I am an island
knocked down.
The break in me is abrupt,
I crash and then erupt
waiting to be
opened up.
On the terrace, I light a candle
with a flame so faint
Hope burns flickering in high night winds.
The borders have faded,
the corners have blurred,
on our knees, we unite.
Freedom is ill,
all thought is blocked
and I gasp for breath
until unlocked.

A literature student at Delhi University, Viveka Goswami has a passion for poetry. She believes in the power of words, trying to harness it in her writing.

The Virus

© Preetha Vasan

Mornings are no more
The stillness of paintings,
Nine o'clock quiets of Mondays
Are rushes of doorbells
And beeps of
Dispatches, deliveries and Dunzos.

Twin phones
His and hers
Like watches
Couples buy each other
On anniversaries and Valentine's
Ring endlessly breaking
The silence of forgotten
Quiet morns.

But they protect the silence
In this room called mine
With the stillness of antiseptic
And the quiet beep
Of the blue-green cliffs and valleys
That records my life
In pulses, breaths
Death and my comatose
In-between.

My room
Has had other stillness
Than the antiseptic
Of these pandemic times.
His familiar musk,
Heavy and damp,
Sweating with desire
In the white
Of her dimpling smile,
And crawling
Her starched nurse whites
Into creases
No more stiff and clinical.

Her sponge soaks clean
The grime,
Rubs my
Blue bed sore red
Like her lips
Unlike mine
Pale and
Locked down to a
Bed he will never make warm.

Yet the virus
Never stays away too long,
His infection fills the room,
When my lawyer
Rustles files like cheques
Which pay his endless bills,
Incessant like morning deliveries.
The virus comes then
Donning other masks
Than his usual
Surgical sky blue,
But unusual ones
Warm, chirpy and smart
Like the machine
In the hallway,
The one they call "Alexa",
The one
Who always says the right things.

The night is ablaze
With candles,
But
The air in my room
Is a heavy black,
Not even the beep
Of the blue and green
She turned off
With her painted toenail.

In the hallway
The clink of glasses
Toast his freedom
From a locked-down me,
The kind husband
Who cleansed and cared
A comatose me.
Thus the virus blooms endless
Like the bread and milk they
hoarded
Rotten now
Like his pandemic-love.

In distant terraces
Cymbals and conches herald
Death I can taste
Acrid like the champagne
Yellowing in their glasses,
My mind settles into a dark sleep
Tranquil in the nightmare
They will wake up to.

For how will a virus live
After I have washed him
Clean off my will?
How will a virus thrive
After disinheritance like
Disinfection
Silences his life
Into the stillness of
Lockdown morns
Empty of beeps and bells?

Dr Preetha Vasan currently teaches the post-graduate English programme in a premier institution in Bengaluru. Her book of poems *Yagna*, based on the *Mahabharata*, uncovers hidden stories while contemporising the epic.

THE FAMILY THAT DOESN'T GIVE UP

What do you do when you lose an election, or five? You get your kids to run too! Meet the marvellous Ahmed family of Bowie, Maryland

The Ahmed family in Bowie, Maryland, USA, is remarkable in more ways than one. Between Shukoor Ahmed, 58, and his two daughters – Raaheela, 27, and Shabnam, 25 – the family has contested and campaigned for 11 elections in their district from 1998 onwards. Except for three – including when Raaheela was elected by a decisive majority of almost 32,000 votes to Prince George's County Board of Education, District 5, in 2016 – they lost all the others.

And yet, determined to represent religious minorities and people

L-R: Raheela and Shabnam were five and three when Shukoor made his first run for state delegate in 1998

of colour, and to use the electoral platform to raise vital social, economic and political issues, they showed up time and time again.

This month, Raaheela will run for reelection, but since her position is uncontested, she is likely to continue for another four-year term. This is the 12th election the Ahmeds will run, and Shukoor is already prepping the girls for the 13th.

The penchant for standing up for causes runs in the family. Shukoor, a technology entrepreneur, traces his ancestry back to India's freedom struggle and to his great-granduncles Maulana Shaukat Ali and Mohammad Ali Jouhar of the Khilafat movement. Born and raised in Hyderabad, he moved to Saudi Arabia during the 1980s Gulf boom.

In 1985, 18-year-old Pakistani-American Nabeela made her first visit to India to meet her father's relatives. Her father had migrated from Hyderabad to Pakistan just after Partition, and then with his Punjabi wife to USA in the early 1970s, where they set about raising their four daughters. Nabeela is the eldest.

Having travelled more to India than Pakistan, Nabeela considers herself a mix of both nationalities along with American. Though her family had only modest means while she was growing up, "I felt rich all the time," she says. "Contentment comes from peace of mind, not worldly possessions." Their father encouraged community service, charity and strength of character, and all four sisters grew up to be academically accomplished in either engineering or healthcare.

Since *desi* (South Asian) parents around the world have always loved matchmaking, Nabeela's dad and Shukoor's mom – who are distantly related – decided that their children would make a good couple. And so, during Nabeela's

Shukoor (kneeling, far right) with his supporters during his 2010 run

first trip to Hyderabad, they plotted the matrimonial alliance, getting the two to meet in US in 1986 and then married in 1989.

While Nabeela studied to be a pharmacist, Shukoor did his Master's in public policy in the early years as they settled down in Bowie, the fifth largest municipality in Maryland and a short drive away from Washington DC. Once the kids came, Nabeela was happy to raise them in the presence of both sets of grandparents while she worked full-time as a pharmacist.

"It was such a blessing to have Shukoor's parents move in with us. They were instrumental in raising the girls. We never needed babysitters, and Raaheela and Shabnam absorbed the good traits from all sides!" smiles Nabeela, now 53. She shares stories of the games the girls played with their grandfather: "He'd ask them, 'Tell me everything you know about truthfulness,' teaching them how to articulate impromptu from the heart." Shukoor's brother and sister too spent a decade each living with the family, and Nabeela only has words of gratitude for their contribution in her daughters' lives: "It takes a village to raise a child."

In the meantime, while Shukoor decided to make a career in information technology, he was also drawn to public life. "Since we were going to be in this community for the rest of our lives, I thought it was important to be part of community building," says Shukoor, whose

technology startup V-Empower was picked by Deloitte as the fastest growing private company in 2007 in Maryland and was ranked 263 of the top 500 companies nationwide by *Inc.* magazine the same year.

Always opinionated about issues, Shukoor became a youth leader in his faith community early on even though he is a reformist by nature. He is against animal sacrifice, for instance, though it's a part of certain traditions in the Muslim community. "Why sacrifice animals? It's not relevant. Sacrifice your stocks or bonds instead," he says.

Raaheela and Shabnam were five and three years old when their father first stood for local elections as a Democratic candidate in 1998, and campaigned for him again in 2002, 2006 and 2010. "After the first one, I got hooked. I enjoyed the process of meeting people, discussing issues and understanding what was going on at the grassroots," says Shukoor, adding that there are several areas around his municipality that are populated by economically and educationally disadvantaged groups.

He lost each time, but by a smaller and smaller margin, giving his daughters ample practical training in elections and developing a never-say-die spirit all through their youth. "I never faced much Islamophobia," vouches Shukoor, who believes deeply in the idea of America and has immense faith in its democratic systems. "In the workplace, there is no such problem. People respect you for your work. It's only when we go door-to-door campaigning that, sometimes,

L-R: Raaheela with supporters during her 2012 run (which she lost); during her 2016 run (which she won)

we face racist or Islamophobic comments telling us to go home." Despite the few negative incidents, Shukoor optimistically showed up for each election as candidate of Maryland House of Delegates.

In 2012, he passed the baton to Raaheela. "He always told us, 'You can do it.' He spoke it into existence," says Raaheela, who was 18 when she first ran for the county board of education and lost against a powerful incumbent, University of Maryland, College Park, with a BS in finance and BA in economics. The recipient of a number of awards and recognitions for her academic, leadership, and community service work, she got married just before the Covid lockdown this year after a three-year engagement (Raaheela's parents continued the family tradition of matchmaking her with a young IT professional from Hyderabad living in Dubai!).

L-R: Raaheela is now an elected representative to the Prince George's County Board of Education, District 5

and 23 when she won in 2016. Her victory to public office as a young Muslim woman of colour was considered significant in a year that Donald Trump was elected the US President with his divisive anti-Muslim rhetoric.

"My win created a movement of sorts among young people, it inspired them to action," says Raaheela, who graduated from the

After Raaheela's 2016 success, Shukoor convinced his second-born Shabnam to give electoral politics a shot. In 2018, Shabnam ran against the same opponent her father had lost to four years earlier. She lost by a mere 42 votes. "Considering we did our own fundraising and had no sponsors, we had to prove ourselves going door-to-door," says Shabnam, who is doing her Master's in public

Shabnam and Raaheela with a fellow protester during the Black Lives Matter movement this summer

health from George Washington University and is a xenophile and linguist who knows six languages. Though Raaheela was thrice denied a visa to travel to India, Shabnam managed to visit several Indian cities; she also travelled to Peru as a volunteer, and has served at various non-profits across the US.

"For me, running for elections is not about politics or power. It's about raising issues and educating people," says Shabnam. She believes that despite not winning, she was able to motivate people to be more participative – a record eight persons of colour under 35 years of age ran for office in the area's 2018 elections. "My purpose in life is to bring equity into education and public health, and to make them accessible and affordable," she says, "which is lacking so far."

Raaheela adds, "You don't have to be in a position of power to be a leader. Leadership is about moving people to action and about being a role model.You can do that in many different ways."

His last (lost) election in 2014, Shukoor has now taken to mentoring young people of colour to run for office. "Four of them won," he says proudly. "People have this impression about *desis* being doctors, engineers or professors; they never think of us as political leaders. It's time to change that." ■

FUTURE READY KIDS

Education isn't just about learning from the past, but also equipping kids for the future. Two moms and professionals share the key skills kids need in a digital world driven by algorithms and artificial intelligence

SHAHNEILA SAEED, LONDON

Shahneila Saaed's work at UK Interactive Entertainment Association (or Ukie) over the past six years has focused on adding computational thinking to the basic reading, writing and arithmetic for younger children. It was an idea she had started exploring 15 years ago as a schoolteacher. Now, as director of Ukie's nationwide Digital Schoolhouse programme, she has taken her dream of inspiring and engaging educators and learners to over 100,000 children and almost

10,000 teachers since 2014.

A second-generation immigrant, Shahneila was born in London in a conservative Pakistani household. She did her Bachelor's in psychology from University of Westminster and her teaching degree from Kings College, London. Now married, she has non-identical twin girls, age nine, who are often her first 'guinea pigs' to experiment with her ideas. Her new book *How to Raise a Tech Genius* (Hachette, ₹599) contains astoundingly simple games and activities younger children can play to understand basic computing concepts. She shares her thoughts and ideas with us.

What inspired you to make a career in education?

While I was in university, I volunteered in a secondary school's IT department. One day, the teacher asked me to sit next to a particularly disruptive girl and help her out. I soon realised that she was disruptive because she couldn't understand what was being taught. As I helped her, she began to understand the work and her behaviour radically improved. When the teacher later asked the class a question, she shot her hand up and got the answer right. I'll never forget the smile on her face… it warmed my heart.

That was the exact moment I realised that teaching was my profession. I wanted to help more children and to make a small difference every day.

As someone who grew up in the UK, what were the gaps in the educational system that you experienced firsthand and wanted to fix once you joined Ukie?

My computing lessons when I was 11 – 13 were one hour a week of us being left with the computers in front of us with no further instructions. We spent the hour playing games in MS DOS (yes, that's how old I am!). Instead, I picked up a few things from an uncle who was a researcher and programmer, which I would then try out in school. I remember my computer studies teacher sitting down next to me and asking me how to do things.

Shahneila Saeed

College was better, I learnt a

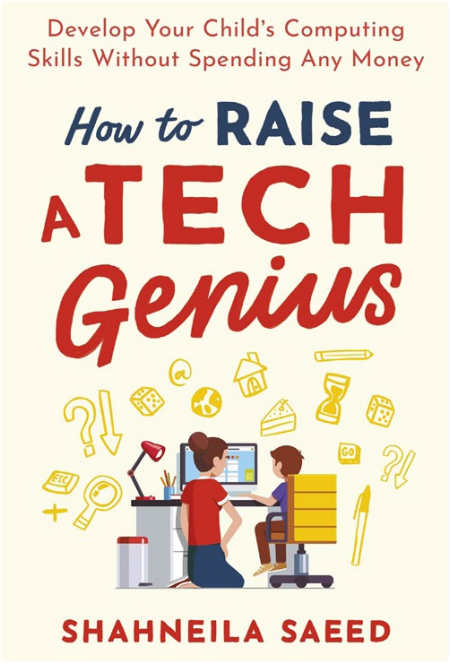
lot, but I was the only girl in the class. I was too shy to ask questions, and left feeling like I wasn't good enough. Thirty years later, there is still unconscious bias in the way we speak to students about subjects but now we have numerous schemes and initiatives to tackle these issues.

Diversity and inclusion have been big areas in tech, but so too is contextualisation. Even today, students don't know or can't see how studying computing can help them in their lives either on a general level, or the sheer volume of career opportunities available.

That is something I've been trying to tackle. It's important that students understand the relevance of what they are studying and we can do that by linking the concepts to real-world issues that they can relate to. That also makes it more engaging and fun, and they are more likely to be motivated to continue with it. Computing is not just for the smart kids; it is a subject that should be accessible to everyone.

How has the response been in your educational community to the system you have developed?

It is a unique approach to teaching computing and not your usual run-of-the-mill lessons, so there is a natural curiosity by most people as to how this will work. But that's the thing about play: young or old, everybody loves to play. I've yet to meet a person who is frightened of playdough or storybooks or playing cards. Of course, there's a puzzled look on their face when they realise I intend to teach them programming and other computer science concepts using these same objects. But it always ends with smiles and laughter.



That's what makes it work so well. Those objects are familiar and accessible. They make potentially intimidating and abstract concepts tangible and concrete, thereby making them easier to grasp. The unexpectedness of it is in itself a very powerful learning mechanic – it instantly dispels stereotypes about computer science and

programming. And it works with all ages too, from young children to grownups.

Our work and approach to teaching computing is also in sync with other educational research, such as Professor Paul Curzon's at Queen Mary University of London.

Your book also talks about basic social-media hygiene that parents and kids should be aware of, and other aspects of digital living that everyone should know.

their child's learning of technology is centred around buying products. Even the Raspberry Pi, marketed as the worlds cheapest computer, costs over £30 for just the device, and then you'll need add-ons like a monitor and keyboard, sensors, motors and LEDs. If your weekly food budget is £50, you're not going to spend that same amount of money on a piece of hardware.

But does that mean that these

L-R: Shahneila Saeed with her husband and twin daughters; with her team members at Ukie, London

Could these activities be adapted for senior citizens or people who don't have regular access to computers such as the underprivileged in developing countries?

All activities within the book are fully adaptable. I myself have used some of these to train grown-ups in industry as well as teachers. In fact, underprivileged families were one of the audiences I had in mind as I wrote this book. A lot of promotion around parents supporting families should miss out? Of course not. That's why the book only uses objects that can be found around the home, taking into consideration everyday activities, such as preparing a meal, or a pen and paper. The book is full of prompts and discussion points that parents can use and adapt as they need to. It taps into the natural human instinct to play and have fun. ■

Read more on eShe.in

KIRAN MANRAL, MUMBAI

Kiran Manral began her writing career in the world of media and advertising. Then, over 15 years ago, she took to blogging about her son and became India's most famous mommy blogger. Having written 10 books over nine years (with two more in the pipeline!), the Mumbai-based 49-year-old is equally prolific on Twitter where she has over 66,000 followers. Her books include both fiction and non-fiction titles and her novella *Saving Maya* was longlisted for the Saboteur Awards UK, supported by the Arts Council England.

Kiran is also the founder of India Helps, a network of volunteers who

assist disaster victims. In her new book *Raising Kids with Hope and Wonder in Times of a Pandemic and Climate Change* (Westland), she talks about the burning topics of our times – climate change and social justice – topics we can no longer avoid talking to our children about.

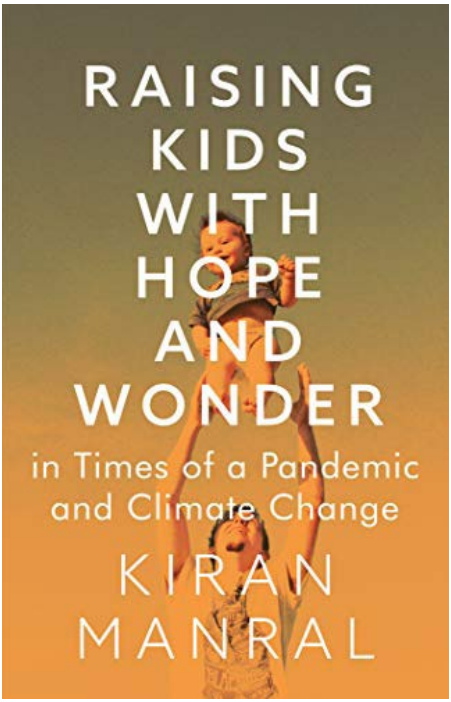
What can parents do to bring up environmentally conscious and responsible children? What are the challenges you have personally faced in this regard?

I have always worried about the world we are leaving behind for our children. While our generation and the previous generations have unapologetically messed up, it's never too late to become environmentally aware and to do whatever little we can in our individual capacity to mitigate the damage we caused.

One household being aware of their water consumption, one household recycling, upcycling, sorting out their waste into wet and dry, one family eschewing the use of plastics, walking close distances, cycling rather than taking the car, being conscious of the e-waste they generate – it all adds up.

Walking the talk is important, we have to do things that lessen the carbon footprint, and become conscious consumers. Children don't learn from what you tell them, they learn from what they see you doing.

For me, the challenge has been to get my son to see the larger picture, of how our actions compound and affect the wider community, country and planet. This I've tried to address by talking about things as they happen – simple things like 'let's walk to the store' rather than take the car, or why I prefer a bucket bath, eschewing firecrackers, switching lights off, reducing the consumption of electricity, carrying cloth bags when I go shopping.



Making small steps towards sustainability part of his day-to-day life makes it doable and non-radical, something he can adopt without worrying about a complete shift in lifestyle and habits. Start small, then build it up and through it keep

talking about environmental issues, without being preachy – that's been my modus operandi, to be honest.

The pandemic and associated lockdown created a humanitarian disaster in India. How should we educate young children and teenagers about such issues?

They've seen the stories on the news, on social media, in the newspapers. As parents, we need to discuss what has happened with them. Tell them, in an age-appropriate manner, about inequity in income and wealth distribution, about how people migrate to earn a living, about how a nation needs to take its poorest and weakest into consideration when it makes decisions, and how the decisions that impact them need to be considered first.

This is the moment to have conversations that will encourage a social conscience amongst children and also awake empathy in them towards the plight of those compelled to walk long distances just to reach home. With empathy comes social conscience and with social conscience come responsible citizenry.

We need to start teaching our kids to think beyond themselves, and to get them more active in social-welfare work, environmental activism, in whatever little capacity, even if it means a beach cleanup, visiting an orphanage, or volunteering with an elder helpline. It all adds up. It will all make a great impact on their ability to think about others less privileged than them.

Can compassion be taught and developed? Or is it something children imbibe from their parents' own actions?

I think it is a mix of both: one can definitely encourage compassion, and children also see it from how parents behave and deal with those less privileged than them. I think if there is dissonance between the public face and the private face, kids pick that up too – parents who give huge donations elsewhere but

are miserly with domestic staff, for instance. I also think that some people, and that includes children, are natural empaths, and this is something to be encouraged.

What's the one thing you have learnt about raising teenagers that you never read in a book?

That you relive your own adolescence, your own insecurities and fears with them, and you worry for them in a way you never ever worried for yourself. ■

Read more on eShe.in

IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

A new online assessment test HIGH5 offers young and old people alike a way to recognise their strengths and chart out a better direction for their lives

By Kay Newton

Retirement is often a time of questions, for example, 'Is there more to life?' and 'What do I want to do with the next 30 years?' We cannot turn to previous generations for the answers. Today, women may have more vitality and drive, yet deciding a new direction can feel overwhelming. Where do you start?

The HIGH5 assessment may hold the answer.

ARINA VOLKOVA

Latvia-based Arina Volkova loves how the HIGH5 assessment tool started. She says, "It offers something different than other tools and reflects more of what a person 'is' rather than 'how' they are defined."

In 2015, Ukrainian Dmitry Golubnichy was on a mission to make his own life happier. He decided to share a daily image on social media, using the hashtag

#100happydays. People organically joined in and the '100 Happy Days' project naturally progressed into positive psychology. Today, the non-profit foundation has over 8 million participants from 160 countries, with an estimated 19 percent

Arina Volkova and her mother Natalya

improvement in happiness levels.

Dmitry and his team found a scientific approach to happiness and launched numerous projects to bring this science to the masses. One of them is a precise strength assessment tool called HIGH5. It can be used worldwide by individuals and businesses to find out what they are naturally good at. The main results of the strengths test are accessible free of charge.

"There has been a lot of test-taking, refining and honing to make the system user-friendly and helpful for every person," says Arina, who has been working with the team for a year. "The product is well researched, so is the methodology behind the assessment. We wanted individuals to be self-aware, and to have the ability to interpret their results without needing any third-party help."

Arina even asked her mum to take the test. "I was so surprised at the confidence the test gave my mum. Her newfound focus and happiness made me realise that HIGH5 can help the senior generation too."

Her mother Natalya adds, "Like many women who have dedicated their lives to others, it is so easy to forget and appreciate who you are. You need an external resource to see the obvious – whether it is to define a new hobby or to offer your skill set and knowledge to charities or the workplace. This tool is a great place to start."

JAYNE LUNN

Jayne Lunn, 59, from Norfolk, UK, recently retired from a career working for the UK's National Health Service (NHS). Always busy

with work and family, Jayne found her new freedom overwhelming. She started doing research and was astonished by the range of hobbies and careers people had moved onto at retirement.

"I had a sense of being lost. The more I looked for answers, the more options there were. I felt confused and under pressure to quickly identify what my next move would be. I stopped like a rabbit in the headlights. My mindset seemed stuck in doing what I had always done and I could not imagine or see how my skills could lead me towards different avenues," she shares.

It was very clear to Jayne that she did not want to go back into the NHS. "I looked at volunteering but again struggled to see beyond things that I knew well. I was concerned that I would not be able to turn my nurse head off."

Overwhelm led Jayne to a Midlife Strategy session with me and then to HIGH5. She had used personality tests Myers Briggs and The Strength Deployment Inventory in the past.

"For me, the HIGH5 test was more intuitive and not so analytical. It was spookily accurate," she says. "Some traits mentioned in the report I knew from previous tests and I have used them throughout my nursing career. Others attributes, for example, 'Philomath' (someone who likes to teach and learn) are part of me, yet have never been defined. One of my top strengths is 'Self-Believer', so innate within me, I would have never pitched it as a strength. The paid version also showed five lower strengths, not as weaknesses, rather strengths you can delegate to others."

The test made Jayne realise that short term projects suited her. "I loved the way my strengths were described and it would make it easy to pitch them to an employer or to develop projects in the future," she says. "The Covid lockdown stopped me pursuing the routine I had imagined for my retirement. Now I can see a new way forward. I now have a focus that feels exciting." ■

Jayne Lunn

Take the test: http://bit.ly/esheHigh5

PHOTO: DINGZEYU LI / UNSPLASH

THE SELF IN THE SILENCE

Journalist Gayatrai Jayaraman's new memoir Sit Your Self Down *about her vipassana experience accomplishes a rare feat*

By Aekta Kapoor

The thing about reading a book on meditation is that you can't really know what the writer is talking about unless you do it yourself. It's like trying to imagine the taste of hummus or mango pickle, or anything really. Experience is the only teacher.

In that sense, though, journalist Gayatri Jayaraman's new book *Sit Your Self Down* (Hachette, ₹399) accomplishes a sleight of hand. Instead of trying to describe vipassana meditation or the taste of it – an impossible mission – she describes her own experience of it in minute detail. So that by the time you journey with her from day one

to day 10 – from the pain in the legs to the tilt on the right side, from self-flagellation or judging one's roommate to the nerve-wracking release of tears, from memories of abuse to the dawn of forgiveness – it's almost like you've been there yourself.

That is why this book is perfect for those who have never tried vipassana. That is also why it is perfect for those who have, and even for those who have done it once and have been unable to bring themselves to do it again.

This book is a testament that the 10-day silent meditation retreat is not so much a *getaway* from one's own life as a *getting into* it – in microscopic detail, no less. It certainly helps that the author is good-humoured about it; there's nothing worse than an earth-shattering breakdown, than an earth-shattering breakdown without a few wry remarks thrown in. It also helps that she is brutally honest with herself, and subsequently the world at large, about her own truths, though one marvels at the courage it must take to do so. By accepting and revealing herself – warts, dark history and all – she allows the rest of us to do the same.

Progressing into the book from Gayatri's first days at the centre, to adjusting to the various inconveniences and then learning to look within for answers, feels like knotting up and letting go of a deep sigh. Self-work is not for the faint of heart, and it is commendable that the author manages to not only stick to it but allows it to transform her in a way that only divine grace can. The difference between her previous work of non-fiction, *Who Me, Poor?: How India's Youth are Living in Urban Poverty to Make it Big* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and this one is stark. Except for the self-aware sense of humour, it is almost like the two books have been written by two different human beings.

Gayatri Jayaraman

But then, that's what vipassana does to you. Makes you more *human*, makes you more *being*. It takes you

PHOTO: ABHIJIT BHATLEKAR

places you never imagined, makes you experience sensations you never knew you were capable of, and shows you a universe of space and silence – all within your five-foot body. With shock and awe, you realise your craving for adventure, travel and new experiences was naïve. You need not go anywhere for little things like that. You are the whole world in yourself.

Vipassana literally means 'special-seeing' or 'insight'. It's a form of meditation that seeks to unravel the true nature of reality by shining the spotlight on human sensation in whole and in painstaking detail. The 10-day silent retreat format was developed by the Indian vipassana teacher and Padma Bhushan awardee Satya Narayan Goenka (1924–2013). Born in Burma to an Indian business family, he moved to India in 1969 and set up vipassana centres all over the world, funded by voluntary contributions from students. His explanations of Buddhist concepts are largely universal and scientific – for instance, he talks of *annicha* (impermanence), *metta* (unconditional love), and of 'the space between stimulus and response'.

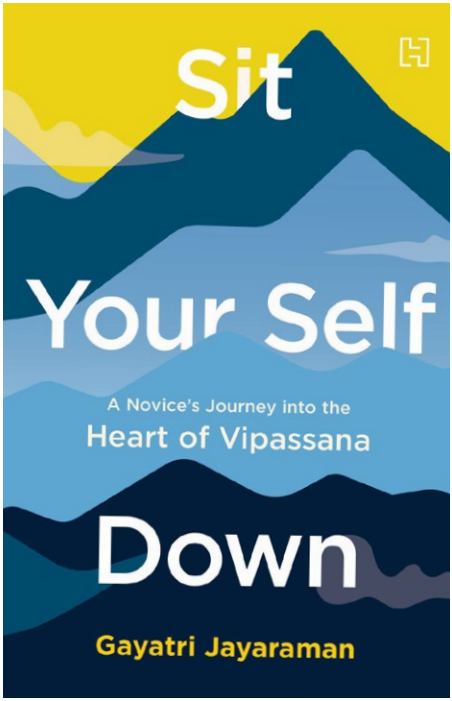
Dotted with cute illustrations, Gayatri's memoir is divided into 10

chapters, one for each day of the meditation. Evidently blessed with a remarkable memory – for writing material is not allowed inside the centres, forget digital devices – she takes the reader through her day-to-day routine at the first vipassana retreat she attends in Sikkim (she later attends more). To protect the other participants' privacy, names have been changed but their stories are imminently relatable.

The author's preoccupations in the first few days of the retreat are classic 'journalist-goes-to-vipassana'. She observes everything from the point of view of her media training, making mental notes and questions everything she observes, even joking to herself about certain rituals. As the days go by, her thoughts turn to her relationships – as a single mother, she naturally dwells at length on her teenage son and their ups and downs together, on her romantic liaisons, and issues she had with colleagues.

It's interesting to see how her thoughts become so much more personal and intimate as her journey progresses. She wakes up to the truth that all the other issues and situations in her life had resulted from her own reactions to previous events, leading to a chain of interconnected actions and reactions. Her karmic patterns become clear to her. By the end of the book, the light of awareness rids the dark corners of her mind of all fear, and she is able to chart an entirely new destiny for herself. What may appear as a drastic transformation from the outside is a matter of course for the soul inside.

Each one's journey will naturally be different, but for those looking to begin, Gayatri's memoir is a handy roadmap. Those already on the path will find themselves smiling and nodding along the way. And for those afraid of going back, it is a gentle reminder that we cannot run far from our truths even if we drown ourselves in the busy-ness of living. Ultimately, we will have to sit ourselves down in the silence. ■



SEVEN DAYS, 2,000 KM

A family of four sets out on a dream road trip from Mumbai to Haryal during the lockdown, soaking in India's villages, cities and scenic beauty

Text by Shweta Bhandral. Photography by Samarjit Bhandral

L-R: Shweta with her husband and daughter; breakfast was buttered bread and boiled eggs on all days

These times of Covid and lockdown have been tough for so many of us in so many ways. My husband's elderly parents were alone in Punjab, my father in Delhi and my mother stuck in Mumbai with us. All of them suffer from diabetes, high blood pressure and other ailments but do not understand the need to stay away from people. My own anxiety levels and restlessness were constantly on the rise.

Nobody wanted to travel via public transport. So, as soon as the Centre removed the interstate travel restrictions, we planned a road trip – our road trip home that we always wanted to do, from Mumbai to our village Haryal on the border of Punjab and Himachal just beside the Chakki river, with a dashing view of Dhauladhaar range.

Since work and school both are online these days, it made sense for us to leave the constrained living of a Mumbai flat and move to open space. It had been six months since my mother and daughter had stepped out of the house.

On September 7, we left Mumbai at 5 am. It started pouring in typical Mumbai style. The rain was so heavy that we thought of postponing the trip. But Google's weather app predicted worse weather in Mumbai in the coming days, so all of us gathered our courage and, after delaying for over an hour, we left.

The weather improved after we crossed Mumbai. Maharashtra is lush green in September right after monsoon. Dr Ambedkar Nagar, commonly known as Mhow, via Nashik highway is a route I have travelled often. This time around, there was much less traffic and most

Shweta's daughter and mother take a break

of the eateries and restaurants were shut, except those for the truckers. We crossed Nashik around 10.30; it was time for breakfast. We parked near a vineyard to have buttered bread and boiled eggs; this was going to be our breakfast throughout this journey. It is the easiest to carry and handle in the car. After stretching a little, we got back into the car and drove straight on NH52.

In Maharashtra, toll collectors wore mask and gloves; we would also wear our masks and sanitise our hands every time we crossed a toll. As we moved closer to the state border, the police stopped us. They checked our papers; we sanitised everything they touched and moved on.

Going to a public washroom is out of the question in these times. Normally too, I use public toilets only at places where I can spot cleaners cleaning them frequently, I don't mind paying a fee. Most of the public toilets or washrooms at *dhabas* (truckers' eateries) are unkempt and unhygienic. Moreover, we knew we would not find any to use because of the lockdown, so we carried a bedsheet. We would look for a spot in the fields and create our tent wherever we had to.

As we entered Madhya Pradesh (MP), we noticed fewer people were wearing masks, and social distancing was a far cry. We saw villagers, men and women, huddled together in tempos. I figured out later that this is contractor-provided transport to take them for work on construction sites or fields.

As we reached our first overnight halt destination at my sister-in-law's

L-R: A *gadariya* (shepherd) with his flock; windmills supplying green energy in villages in Madhya Pradesh

house in Mhow, we saw the shops were open but the restaurants and malls shut. It was close to sundown, and fewer people were on the road.

We spent the night at Mhow and started early morning at 5 am for our next station, Jaipur. We drove past Pithampur industrial area in MP; the site was already back in business. Early-morning buses full of the first shift of workers were coming in packed with young and middle-aged men and women, happy and content to go to work. Morning walkers, bikers and, as the sun rose, the *gadariyas* (shepherds) with their flock all made us feel that normalcy is setting in. Most of them did not look bothered about Covid at all. There aren't probably too many cases in their vicinity. The numbers countrywide tell a different story, though.

Mhow to Jaipur via Chittorgarh is a route full of diversions. Six lanes and a flyover construction are underway on NH52. In Rajasthan, nobody wore masks or took any kind of precautions. All the restaurants and highway *dhabas* were open. The traffic in the markets and the city was busy as usual. The route was greener than expected but much less scenic. We reached our destination by 5 pm with three small stops for breakfast, lunch, and

A road sign in Punjab; Shweta was amused to note her maiden name Khanna on it

a loo break.

The guesthouse caretaker in Jaipur assured us about the sanitisation of rooms, but we sanitised everything from the washroom to the beds once more.

The next day, we started at 8 am from Jaipur. The Jaipur-Delhi stretch was the shortest drive of our trip and the most boring one. Between Jaipur and Delhi, it was a city drive all the way. As we reached Manesar, then Gurugram, and finally Delhi we could only see factories, offices, high-rise buildings and flyovers. I now feel Mumbai is much greener.

We reached Delhi by lunchtime. Delhi is home, it's my city, but it made me sad to see its state. There is a lot of development, but it has taken a toll on its historical charm and greenery. In Delhi, people roamed about with masks on their chins. Restaurants, mithai shops and markets were all open. The traffic was as usual, and the number of Covid cases is also increasing every day. We stayed at home in Delhi for three days because we wanted to avoid weekend travel.

If one is up to it, you can catch NH44 to Punjab from Gurugram and complete the trip in 14 hours. We had only one person driving, so we wanted to avoid night travel and more than 10 hours a day on the

The paddy and sugarcane fields were lush green in Punjab due to post-monsoon bounty

road. So we took a longer route.

On September 14, at 5 am, we began the final leg of our journey. We took the supersonic eastern peripheral highway from east Delhi to join NH44 near Panipat. Barring a few diversions because of six-laning of the highway, this route was smooth and beautiful. As we entered Punjab, the Patiala police stopped us and asked for Cova registration (an e-registration for road travellers made mandatory during the Covid lockdown in Punjab). It took us about 20 minutes to finish the process and we were on the road again.

It was business as usual in the markets and villages we crossed, but most of the people were wearing masks in Punjab. The rice and sugarcane fields on both sides of the highway looked precisely like a scene out of a Yash Chopra movie. All through the route, roadside trees provided shade to travellers. The white gurudwaras stood out majestically amidst greenery all around. The roads in Punjab are best compared to all the states we drove through. We were home at 3.30 pm having covered around 2,000 km, completing our dream trip in such unusual times.

And then it was time for a week's quarantine in our home village. ■

SEPTEMBER 2020, INDIA

HATHRAS, UTTAR PRADESH
19-year-old Dalit girl gang-raped by four upper-caste men in a field, found hours later naked, bleeding and paralysed, her tongue split and her spine broken – she dies in a Delhi hospital two weeks later

DELHI
86-year-old woman raped by a 23-year-old man who offers to take her to buy milk, and instead assaults her in a farm

BHOPAL, MADHYA PRADESH
Senior IPS officer thrashes his wife at home as two other men look on; video goes viral, he says it's a "family matter"

BALRAMPUR, UTTAR PRADESH
22-year-old Dalit woman gang-raped and brutally beaten up, injected with poison – she dies on the way to the hospital

BHOPAL, MADHYA PRADESH
22-year-old girl gang-raped by two middle-aged railway engineers in a VIP guest house after they lured her into a trap offering a job

MEERUT, UTTAR PRADESH
35-year-old woman travelling to her parents' house in Meerut drugged and gang-raped in a moving bus by the driver and conductor

India recorded an average of 87 rape cases daily in 2019 and overall 4 lakh cases of crime against women in the same year, a rise of over 7 per cent from 2018.

Stop controlling women's clothes, movements, choices. Start controlling men.

HarperCollins*Publishers* India

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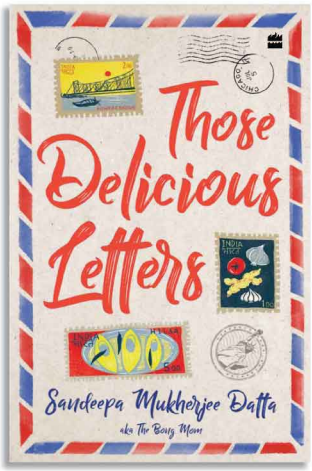
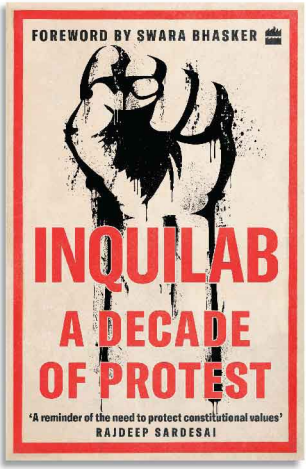
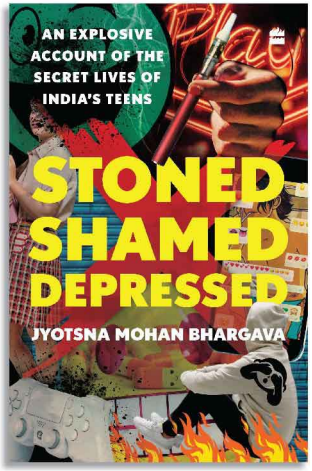


Served with a side of the most delicious recipes, this is a heart-warming story about love, family and food

India's most powerful voices on a decade of protest





The 'bois locker room' controversy was just the tip of the iceberg

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