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Shenoy*

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INTIMATE WEDDINGS

Couples who tied the knot during the 2020 pandemic share notes

THE PAD SQUAD

A lockdown initiative to distribute sanitary napkins to the needy

DIGITAL EDUCATION

Three women-led startups riding India's EdTech revolution



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GODDESS PRINCIPLE

The human race has always adapted to challenges, developed coping skills and healed wounds when faced with disasters and tragedies. Women are especially gifted with this phoenix-like ability to rise from the ashes, women who are unafraid of hard work and whose commitment to their families instills in them superhuman strength.

Despite the massive economic losses during the lockdown, it has been women who are picking up the pieces in India's villages (p.53), keeping the home fires burning while their menfolk sit unemployed waiting for work.

In cities too, millennial women armed with technological knowhow and ambition are stepping up to ride the wave of digitalisation of India's education sector (p.17), aiming to make learning accessible across social-economic strata.

Others are using their privilege to reach out to their fellow women in need, like the Pad Squad. Launched by two film personalities in Mumbai, the initiative has distributed over 5 lakh sanitary napkins in five months to underprivileged women, orphans and sex workers across India (p.42).

There are also stories of the triumph of love despite the gloom (p.06) and of new launches – cover personality Preeti Shenoy launched her 13th novel during the lockdown (p.26), and former journalist Smriti Lamech launched 'feminist ragdolls' (p.50). This festive season, let's be inspired by the goddesses among us. ■



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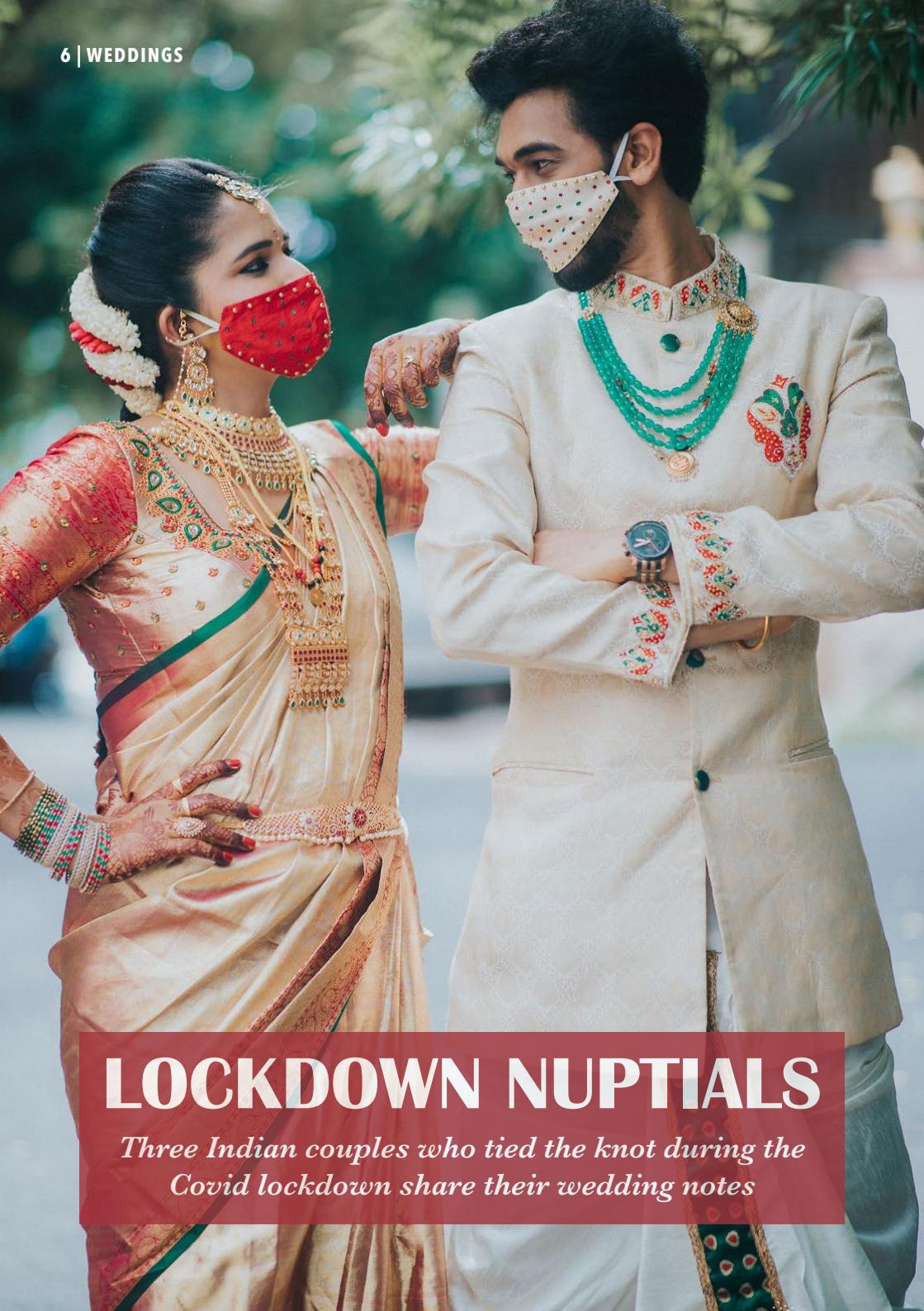
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LOCKDOWN NUPTIALS

Three Indian couples who tied the knot during the Covid lockdown share their wedding notes

NAVYA RAO AND VARUN SAI, BENGALURU

Popular television actor and social-media influencer Navya Rao got hitched to her IT professional partner Varun Sai in June this year

Bengaluru-based 28-year-olds Navya Rao G and Varun Sai C met about a year and a half ago at an event. Both belong to different communities and their professional journeys are also a study in contrast. The daughter of famed Kannada actor Ganesh Rao, Navya has been a television actor herself for the past eight years, while Varun is an IT professional. The couple got engaged in March and the wedding had been planned for October 26, 2020, but they decided to tie the knot earlier than planned as there were no clear signs of when India's lockdown would end.

The wedding took place on June 15, and all their original plans for a grand reception had to be cancelled in favour of a simpler event. The only concern the couple faced was during the pre-wedding shoot as "we didn't get enough time to arrange our outfits".

Even so, they ended up with 100 guests from both sides. The wedding took place at Saligrama party hall near Sita Circle, Bengaluru. Everything went smoothly, and the families took all necessary precautions keeping Covid in mind.

"Since the crowd was minimal, we saved more than 80 percent of

our budget," says Navya. There are no plans for celebrating their wedding post-Covid with a 'real party', because all rituals were followed.

Lockdown or not, any wedding has its memorable moments. "We



both were nervous at the time of tying the *mangalsutra*," Navya laughs, adding that it ended up being one of most special moments of the wedding. "Instead of inviting thousands of people to the wedding, it's better to have a smaller circle who bless you from their heart," she says.



SANJANA NAHAR AND KANISHK DUGAL, DELHI

It took a lockdown for accessories designer Sanjana Nahar and businessman Kanishk Dugal to realise they wanted a wedding right away

On June 29, 2020, wedding bells rang for accessories designer Sanjana Nahar and businessman Kanishk Dugal, as both their families came together in a homely ceremony during the lockdown. Though based in Delhi, the duo first met at a wedding in Thailand, and there had been no looking back ever since.

They didn't want to wait for the

lockdown to end, so the wedding took place as planned. "It was only in the lockdown, in fact, that we realised we wanted to take things forward, that we needed to do this now, and that nothing was better than having an intimate affair at home with our closest people," says Sanjana, who is the founder of the label Jalouze that specialises in embellished clutch bags.

Having studied textile design from NIFT Delhi, Sanjana did her Master's in international fashion business from Nottingham Trent University, UK. Fortunately, both the bride and groom have ample fashion in their lives, and everything was arranged in-house for their wedding. Sanjana's mother designed and created a beautiful lehenga for her daughter. The bespoke jewellery was taken care of by Kanishk's mother, Jahnavi Dugal, who is a jewellery designer herself.

The wedding itself took place at home, and they invited only 15-20 of their closest family members. They also arranged for an online

streaming of the wedding for relatives and friends. In the absence of wedding-service operators, they managed everything else themselves – the flower décor in the home and on the car, gift-wrapping each present, and cooking up a delicious meal. Soon after the wedding, the newlyweds travelled for a short honeymoon to Bikaner and Suryagarh.

“Having a lockdown wedding made us realise that this was probably the way ceremonies were done in the olden days, when every family member contributed to make their daughter's wedding the most memorable one,” says Sanjana.





MARTINA ROY AND ZAIN ANWAR, DELHI

The lockdown cleared the path for college sweethearts Martina Roy and Zain Anwar to finally seal their relationship after several years

Social-media influencers Martina Roy and Zain Anwar, both 29, met while doing their Master's in Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi, and have been a couple ever since. At present, Martina teaches English at a reputed school while Zain works with a major internet company. They had planned to get hitched in September 2020, and the lockdown didn't change their mind.

But it did come with its own challenges regarding the wedding arrangements. The festivities began with the traditional *haldi* ceremonies at both their homes, though the absence of household help was a big hurdle and the parents of the bride had to take care of the entire décor by themselves. They simplified the meal arrangement by ordering from Martina's favourite Kerala-cuisine restaurant, Mahabelly.

"There are many stressful aspects of organising a wedding during the lockdown. One major concern was the guest list. Considering social distancing norms and the cap on the guest list, the good old big fat Indian wedding was off the table and reducing guests was the hurdle. Our original plan was to have about 300 guests, but we could only invite 80 guests in total. Moreover, travelling and organising things was yet another challenge," says Zain, who shed 20 kg over six months before the wedding. "On the whole,

we've seen and experienced a very different wedding by ensuring guests follow all safety protocols."

The interfaith couple had their official wedding solemnised in their local sub-divisional magistrate's office and then a reception at the India International Centre in Delhi, where they went on a live Zoom



Martina and Zain after their court wedding

session for friends and family who couldn't make it. Martina wore a beautiful red Banarasi sari from designer handloom label Ekaya, while Zain wore a sherwani in his late mother's favourite hue, soft pink. "The pink looked rather nice with the red," he notes. ■



A WOMAN YOU CAN BANK ON

Luvleen Sidhu, co-founder of BankMobile, shares insights into her business model and the personal factors that led to her professional growth

Luvleen Sidhu was only 28 when she co-founded BankMobile, a digital banking platform and mobile app, in the US. In six years, the New York-based entrepreneur has expanded the company to serve 2 million customers, and partnered with telecom major T-Mobile and

Google. Her business model was considered disruptive at the time, but for Luvleen, it was a natural progression from the enterprise her father Jay Sidhu had already built. The executive chairman of Customers Bank, which with \$12 billion in assets is among the top 3

percent of American banks, he was her biggest role model in launching a mobile-only banking app.

“Receiving the support and encouragement I did from an early age definitely helped instill confidence,” says Luvleen, who has earned various accolades including being selected as one of Crain’s New York Business 40 Under 40 Class of 2020 and as the Fintech Woman of the Year by LendIt Fintech in 2019.

We spoke to her about her personal and professional journey.

Till a few years ago, customers were hesitant to try app-only banking, preferring the security of brick-and-mortar institutions. Have things changed now?

Many people do not realise that digital banking is just as safe, if not safer, than using a bank branch. BankMobile is FDIC-insured and as a digitally savvy corporation, we are consistently focused on not only maintaining safety and security, but finding new ways to protect customers, while giving them flexibility and convenience.

I do feel that consumers are very open to digital banking models and are beginning to understand that their money is equally protected. I believe the pandemic is accelerating this point of view as digital-only banks have seen a significant growth in their customer and deposit bases.

BankMobile is targeted at low-income Americans, especially students. How are you able to maintain competitive pricing

and low costs?

We employ a model called Banking-as-a-Service (BaaS) that allows high-volume customer acquisition at a low cost. By partnering directly with colleges, universities and other distribution partners, we can access millions of customers who can potentially open accounts. This



Luvleen Sidhu and her father Jay S Sidhu

business-to-business-to-consumer (B2B2C) model’s cost is lower than traditional acquisition, which allows us more competitive pricing in markets. We have already established relationships with nearly 750 campuses across the country to specifically target students.

How has your business fared during the

2020 pandemic?

Despite some challenges, our business has remained strong. Because we are inherently a branchless bank, our digital model was more equipped to transition to a fully remote working environment when the pandemic began. Additionally, since banking is an essential service, we needed to find ways to contin-



Luvleen with her mom at home

ue operations and support our customers throughout the pandemic. We are significantly growing our customer base and deposit base as people are focused on saving and also receiving stimulus payments, care-related grants from colleges and other benefits. Recently, we've seen a greater increase in withdrawals and more interest in spending,

which are good signs that the economy is bouncing back.

In countries like India – where people are often ignorant of basic security technicalities and phishing and financial fraud are quite common – is there scope for this kind of digital-only banking?

Absolutely. The unbanked population is very large in India, yet mobile phone penetration is high. This provides a huge opportunity for tech-savvy companies to offer Indians digital financial services. Paytm and Google Pay have had great success in India because their digital tools allow them to access the large unbanked ecosystem, while providing value-additive services.

What do you think is the future of banking worldwide? How is BankMobile preparing for it?

I think there is a movement towards a “super app” concept where individuals can use one app to manage their finances, book travel, order food, make payments, et cetera. Technology players will grow their presence in the banking ecosystem, as we've seen with Alipay and WeChat in China, Paytm in India, and Google in the US, as companies roll out digital bank account options to their customers. There will be an increasingly large focus on money movement capabilities with faster and cheaper payment options, more savings options, unique rewards and investing capabilities. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and technology



Luvleen with her team; BankMobile has 264 full-time employees, 48 percent of whom are female

will begin to play an even larger role to optimise the customer experience and to fight fraud. We are preparing for this future by investing in our own technology, AI innovations and partnering with technology companies like Google.

What steps have you taken so far in your workplace to ensure gender and racial equality?

Female empowerment is something that is very important to me and I have taken several steps to ensure all our employees are treated with respect and given the opportunities they deserve. About 48 percent of our 264 full-time employees are female. Actively focusing on promoting women in leadership roles, creating mentorship opportunities,

providing equal pay and ensuring female voices are represented on our board and senior leadership team are a few ways that I am focusing on bringing equality in the workplace. Our recruiting process focuses on attracting talent that is diverse in gender, age, race and professional experiences.

What were the key influences from your childhood that set you on a path to leadership in later years?

I am the byproduct of having two parents who invested heavily in my personal and academic development from an early age and am very lucky. Growing up in a Sikh family in Pennsylvania, I studied a lot, played piano and have always loved traveling. In my spare



Both Sikhism and Buddhism have played very strong roles in Luvleen's spiritual development

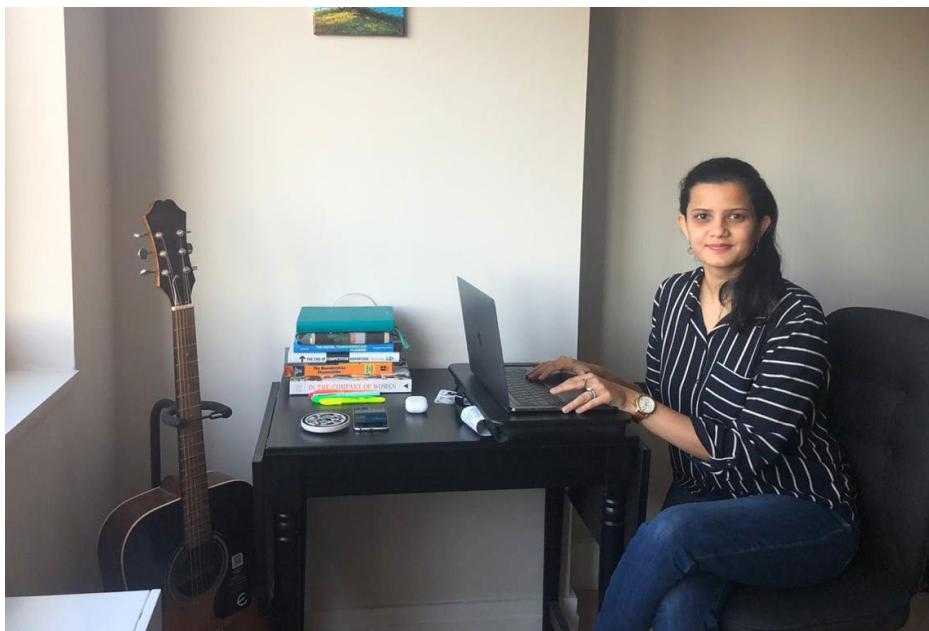
time, I enjoyed horseback riding, track and basketball. My father was my role model. He had studied at Harvard Business School and Wilkes University, where he helped establish the Jay S Sidhu School of Business and Leadership. My mom was born in Punjab, India, and came to the US after she married my father at the age of 20. She earned a Master's in health and business administration and worked in that field until my brother and I were born. Although I was inherently motivated and ambitious, my dad constantly pushed me to be the best version of myself, while my mother has taught me compassion, sincerity, spirituality and love for family.

What have you learnt about success and happiness?

Success can be a part of the happiness equation, but happiness is driven by attitude and how you perceive the world around you. I believe that 90 percent of happiness is based on outlook and only 10 percent is based on actual circumstances. The older I get, the more convinced I become that happiness stems from attitude and gratitude.

I've also found that what brings you joy evolves over time. At one point, it may be family, work, friends or nature. It can be all of these things at once or can change from time to time. ■

Read more on eShe.in



MOVING THE CLASSROOM ONLINE

With the 2020 pandemic changing the landscape of education, digital has been the buzzword for entrepreneurs. These three women-led EdTech startups are riding India's online education revolution

ANAGHA RAJADHYAKSHA - PLAYYDATE

Anagha Rajadhyaksha is the founder of Playydate, a platform for kids' activity and skills-based classes. Launched last year, Playydate already boasts of a pan-India network of more than 1,000 accomplished educators offering classes and workshops. At any

given point of time, there are more than 500 classes and workshops available across more than 30 categories.

With a 15-year long stint in the digital space, Anagha is also the co-founder of the India Food Network and the PING Network. The

Columbia University graduate says that the inspiration for Playydate began at home. Her mother has been a teacher for the past two decades, and Anagha observed her profession closely – how parents find her class, get in touch, register and communicate. Further, her brother and Playydate's co-founder, Aditya, became a father a few years ago. Anagha saw him painstakingly looking for interesting learning experiences for his daughter even as a toddler.

In early 2019, she began to dig deeper and realised this scenario held true across the board. She found a very large but unorganised and fragmented market of educators – extremely talented and accomplished individuals who lacked a platform to get recognised and reach out to parents.

Anagha believes that the parent community is very focused and discerning, and recognises the importance that creativity, skills and hobbies play in the holistic development of their child's personality. But she felt there was no common meeting ground that brought them together, no medium through which a parent could find the best educators for their child.

With Playydate, she brings a new dimension to the extra co-curricular activities (ECA) and programmes that can augment what schools already offer. Its differentiated

offerings range from design thinking for young kids, science through storytelling, workshops on mindfulness, creative-writing classes that teach one how to write a blog to even public-speaking workshops that help a middle-schooler run a mock podcast.

They work with some of the



most accomplished educators in these fields, and have already started offering customised workshops to schools as a part of their ECA programme.

Based in Mumbai, Anagha herself grew up in a close nuclear setup where extra-curricular activities were given as much importance as mainstream academics. "We were

never pushed or forced into it, but always had a free hand to choose what we wanted to pursue," she recalls. As a result, she plays multiple sports and various musical instruments. She says the combination of music and sport hugely shapes the person she is today.

The entrepreneur feels that interests, hobbies and passions build character and shape how a young child transforms into an adult. She believes that for kids to thrive in the coming decades, they will need to be armed with skillsets that go above and beyond the marksheets, and that the situations and challenges they face won't be out of a textbook.

"Learning how to find solutions for a problem, thinking on one's feet and creative out-of-the-box ideas will be some of the must-haves for future generations. Holistic development doesn't mean you have all the answers; it means you have developed a mindset and skillset to address the questions and find the right answers," she says.

According to Anagha, while digital education has been a great enabler in these difficult times with scores of children having access to great learning experiences, it comes with its own set of challenges.

She says that using digital technology to conduct classes is a completely new concept for most educators and has taken some time getting used to. Also, a lot of

young learners are below the age of five, and certain courses require "handholding" quite literally.

Anagha feels the way forward is for courses that contribute towards holistic development to become mainstream in our education system. "They need to be integrated into the curriculum and not looked



Anagha is a Columbia University graduate

upon as 'extra classes' that parents need to sign their children up for. As adults, we realise that it is our life skills, creativity or ability to think out of the box that help us thrive both professionally and personally. So why not integrate this into the school curriculum?" she reasons.

By Neha Kirpal

AASHI SHARMA - EDUBULL



Delhi-based Aashi Sharma is the co-founder of Edubull, an e-learning platform and app. Incepted two years ago, Edubull aims to provide “content for every learner and teaching technology for every tutor and educational institution”. The EdTech startup is part of VISIONet, which provides learning solutions to over 10 state governments and 400 government institutions, and K-12 content to Rajasthan and Maharashtra state schools. VISIONet is also aligned with over 1,400 private colleges and institutions.

The new venture Edubull offers over 3,000 courses, 10,000 exams, and 50 certifications. Its content is curated by academicians from IITs and IIMs, and teachers from presti-

gious schools and colleges. Available on all devices, Edubull saw a 300 percent growth during the Covid lockdown and expects the number of users to touch 3 lakh by the end of the year.

Aashi, 22, had been part of Edubull's development since day one, though she took over the reins full-time after completing her Bachelor's in multimedia and mass communication from Delhi University. Daughter of GD Sharma, managing director of VISIONet, she was always keen to launch her own EdTech enterprise that would democratise the learning landscape and offer something for everyone, from schoolkids aiming for competitive exams to homemakers looking to upgrade their skills.

A passionate swimmer, Aashi has keen interest in political debating as well as trend forecasting. Having worked with the Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, she was acutely aware of the need of quality education being accessible to all. Many tutorials on Edubull are available for free, while the curated courses and branded content are available at ₹999 per year.

Recently Edubull also announced the launch of its platform e-professor designed to help institutions and individual teachers take their operations online.

AKANKSHA CHATURVEDI - EDUAURAA

Akanksha Chaturvedi is the Mumbai-based founder CEO of Eduaura, an EdTech venture in association with ZEE5 that aspires to provide quality education at an affordable cost. “Education is the central pillar of any country and the access to quality education should not be limited to a child’s socio-economic background,” says the graduate from University College London and postgraduate from Columbia University.

Eduaura offers educational content for CBSE, ICSE and seven state boards in Hindi and English. Students from class six to 10 can access their complete course syllabus in four subjects (maths, physics, chemistry and biology) for packages ranging from ₹999 to ₹2,499 per year – a fraction of the cost of private schooling. Besides video lectures, the subscription includes value-added services like e-books and test papers. Premium subscribers get 1.25 lakh hours of entertainment across genres and languages. “This association will redefine education and entertainment with a reach of 75 million households countrywide,” said the brand’s press release while announcing Eduaura’s launch by Bollywood star and brand ambassador Ranveer Singh on October 30.

During college, where she studied



urban planning and business, Akanksha realised that access to quality education can change the face of the economy and aid the development of a country. She started working towards her goal of providing affordable, accessible and quality education of the highest standard, reinstating education as a right and not a privilege, and now heads a team of 210 professionals.

Akanksha – who is a trained contemporary jazz dancer and is on the board of the prestigious YPO Next Generation – wanted to tap into the enormous potential of the OTT platform and to do for education what streaming channels have done for movies. “If digitisation can democratise entertainment then why not education?” she asks. ■

LAW OF LIFE



Celebrity lawyer and former model-screenwriter Priyanka Khimani credits her underprivileged upbringing for contributing to her success in the legal battlefield

By Neha Kirpal

Young lawyer and screenwriter Priyanka Khimani moves in and out of celebrity circles in Bollywood – as the co-founder and lead partner of Anand & Anand & Khimani, she has handled a number of high-profile cases, such as representing filmmaker Anurag Kashyap in the #MeToo allegations against him, acting for rapper Badshah with respect to the recent

interrogations by the Mumbai Crime Branch on fake social media followers and as a legal advisor to the late actor Sushant Singh Rajput. She has also been a model and theatre artist herself.

But not many know the remarkable journey of a girl who started out with few resources and no privileges, and achieved what she did by grit, intelligence and hard work.

Raised by Muslim and Gujarati parents in a typical Mumbai *chawl*, Priyanka says that it's still home for her, and a humbling experience each time she goes back there. "I owe almost all of my personality and strengths to the place and circumstances in which I was raised. Even before my parents were able to afford a room in the *chawl*, they raised me for the first few months right after I was born in the back of a photocopying ("xerox" as they called it) shop outside Mahim station that they ran. The back of our shop would double up as home when it closed for business for the day," says the dynamic 32-year-old.

Thanks to these surroundings, she says, she picked up different local languages that she now speaks fluently, and learnt to mingle and have a conversation with people from diverse backgrounds and strata. By 15, she had written her first TV show, *Tamanna House*, a 60-episode thriller. "Most of all, I learnt to improvise and quickly adapt to almost every unpleasant, uncomfortable, far-from-ideal situation. And I wouldn't have it any other way," she says.

Given her difficult financial circumstances, Priyanka would make almost every decision on the basis of what could provide a source of income. She took up biotechnology at Mumbai's Jai Hind College while writing for TV shows on the side. Later, while

studying law at Government Law College, saying yes to a law firm's offer during placement week was also quite simply a result of desperately needing a paycheck along with a career. But equally so, it almost felt like it was meant to be. "I was fortunate that all of my previous work experience before that serendipitously put me right



where I needed to be," she recalls.

But her career in law has not been all smooth. For Priyanka, her youth and fashionable appearance, besides her gender, became hurdles that she continues to face in this arena. "For most people, there is a certain stereotype of what a lawyer is supposed to be – grey hair, aggressive, argumentative, foxy, even



Priyanka Khimani with students at her alma mater, Government Law College in Mumbai

unpleasant,” she informs. That fact she doesn’t fit this mould surprises a lot of people. “People somehow only expect to see men in control or in charge of certain situations. They’re not expecting to see a woman in command, let alone someone young,” she explains. However, Priyanka believes that none of these challenges or preconceived notions can act as a substitute for talent, sound advice and a successful end result – which tends to speak for itself above everything else.

Surrounded by big names from the entertainment industry – from Sonu Nigam to Lata Mangesh-

kar – and solving their legal crises has taught Priyanka that each crisis comes with its unique set of peculiarities and has its own life cycle, even if it causes damage. What is key is how efficiently one can arrest the damage being caused. “In most cases, there’s a tendency for the person facing the brunt to have a knee-jerk reaction, especially given the nature of news being instantly and easily accessible,”

she says. She explains that advisors often help mount defence on two fronts – legal and public – so multiple factors affect strategy and at times things quite literally change by the hour. “While the broad

“PEOPLE DON’T EXPECT TO SEE A WOMAN IN COMMAND, LET ALONE SOMEONE YOUNG”

strokes of the procedure may remain common, each of these matters has one looking at different laws and statutes at play. All this means that one has to have the ability to think calmly and on one's feet," she says.

Priyanka's journey as a lawyer has been a fulfilling one, and she has grown just from the sheer learnings gathered over the years, she says. Advising a client through crisis or a high-stake contentious matter sharpened her instincts and ability to strategise, and advising on transactions tested her skills to negotiate and arrive at consensus. She also learnt to be patient yet firm, tactful yet commercially adept. "Whether you're in a court room or board room, two big learnings would be that a successful output can never be found on the basis of 'my way or the highway', and that there's rarely ever a slam-dunk. I never underestimate that someone's reputation and life are in my hands, and I must do everything I can to protect it," she explains.

Priyanka says she is most inspired by seeing someone driven and wanting to push the envelope. Further, she tends to find immense inspiration from everyday experiences and people – judges, investigating officers, fellow lawyers including those on the opposite side of a matter or deal, her artist clients, their agents and managers, all the attorneys in her firm and even the

interns. "I notice things they do differently during the course of their work and draw great influence from it. I think the key is to never really stop learning," she says.

Her future goals include writing a book and making legal education



more palatable to anyone and everyone who needs to apply it in their professional lives. Her #trueorfalses series, which she started earlier this year on her social media, is an attempt in that direction. ■



QUEEN OF BESTSELLERS

Phenomenally successful author, artist and motivational speaker, Preeti Shenoy is a woman of many talents

By Aekta Kapoor

She has authored 13 novels in 12 years, and her name always figures at the top of Amazon's bestsellers list. She is one of the few women rated among the highest selling authors in India, has been on Forbes' most influential celebrities list for years, and her blog is rated among the top 50 from India. She has represented India at international literature festivals, and her books are translated into many Indian languages, also into Turkish.

But being a bestselling author and columnist is not enough for Preeti Shenoy. She is also a motivational speaker, an artist, photographer and a fitness enthusiast. And all her exciting experiences make it in some way or the other into the plots of her engaging books. "I think the

best teacher is life itself," muses the Bengaluru-based 48-year-old.

Indeed, it was observing transitions in society that informs the theme of her new young-adult fiction title *When Love Came Calling*, launched during the Covid lockdown this year. "The issues the youth of today face are nothing that their parents have ever faced. Today, because of social media, the young have an immense pressure of looking good and putting up a fake

front. They have a lot of 'followers' but no genuine friends. Anything they do is immediately publicised on Instagram or other social media," says Preeti.

She adds that the yardsticks parents set for their children are based on experiences from their own youth decades ago, which simply don't work in the current context. "The parents themselves have never faced the problems the youth of today do. The lure of social media is such that we all crave instant gratification through 'likes'. The art of real conversation is lost," says Preeti, whose son is 22 and daughter 19.

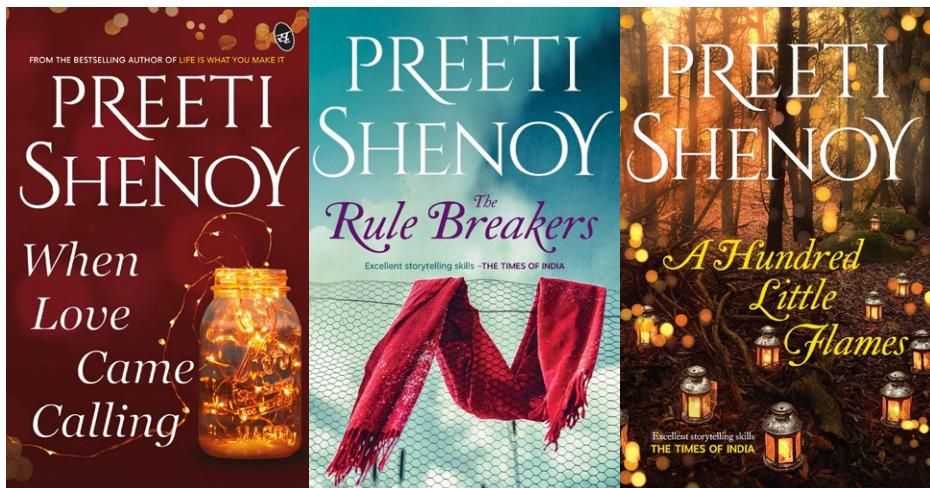
While Preeti is not too convinced by the huge media blitzkrieg of late that paints a sordid picture of increasing youth suicides in In-

dia, she does believe mental health is an important but neglected subject. "People think that we have to talk to a therapist only if you 'have issues'. That's not true. If you find a good therapist, simply talking to a neutral person rather than your friends and relatives – who are emotionally invested in you – could give you insights into yourself you never considered before," she avers.

For better mental health, we need to go back to older ways of

**"ANY INCIDENT THAT
HAPPENS TO YOU
CAN BE PROCESSED
THROUGH WRITING
AND ALSO INFLUENCES
YOUR WRITING"**

connecting and communicating with one another, she says. “Increase genuine connections, spend time on hobbies that give you joy, and keep a lot of things for yourself. Everything doesn’t have to go up on social media!” advises Preeti, whose book *Life Is What You Make It* took up the issue of mental illness way back in 2011 when it wasn’t even a trending hashtag.



Preeti's books sit consistently on top of Amazon's bestseller charts; she's mostly the only woman in the top 10 list

Preeti, who began writing at the age of five or six, is also an illustrator. “The margins of my textbooks were always filled with drawings,” she speaks of her school life, which was spent in different parts of India as her father had a transferable job. She inherited her love for reading from him: “My father had a massive collection of books. Any town we relocated to, one thing was certain:

a library membership!”

Today, her home library has over 3,000 books, many kept in two antique book cases that are over a hundred years old.

Preeti's grandfather in Kerala too had a large collection of books. Every summer when she visited her grandparents' home in a small hamlet in central Kerala, she was the only one allowed access to his

treasured collection as “he knew how carefully I would handle them.” Discussing books with her father and grandfather also fed into Preeti's passion for the written word. “I guess I was influenced by almost everything I read!” she smiles.

Her fascination for letter-writing began around this time as she would write regularly to her grandfather and wait eagerly for

his replies. The habit continued after she completed her class 10 from Chennai and moved to Kochi to do her graduation at St Teresa's College. Years later, letter-writing and her Kerala holidays found their way into her novel *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017).

A corporate career followed as did marriage. But after the birth of her son Atul, Preeti quit her job. "I couldn't bear the thought of handing over my baby to a daycare or to a nanny," she says. After the birth of their daughter, Purvi, the family moved to Norwich, UK, for a few years. Her writing continued. "Life is a continuous stream of events and your interpretation of it. Any incident that happens to you can be processed through writing and also influences your writing," she notes. Her husband, Satish Shenoy, once shared in a blog post about how Preeti took up blogging after the death of her father to vent her strong emotions. Neither of them expected her blog to become so successful, so quickly.

It wasn't so easy for Preeti to get her first full-length novel published, but when it did, it set a precedent. *Life Is What You Make It* was rejected by 40 publishers before it hit the stands and became a bestseller – and it continues to sit on the bestseller charts nine years on.

"You have to keep trying if you believe in your work," says

Preeti, who speaks six languages. A prolific writer, she has written over 300 newspaper columns, over 100 poems and more than 50 short stories – some were published as e-singles – besides 13 novels so far. She has also written tirelessly on her blog since 2008.

She deals with criticism with her characteristic pragmatism. "People are perfectly entitled to their



opinions. Criticism will affect you only if you think that you have to please everyone. And you can't!" she opines.

Preeti's novels often take up complex relationships and her romances also have elements of social issues woven in. "When I was writing the character of the mean mother-in-law in *The Rule Breakers* (2018), I asked people to share their experiences. Some of them were



L-R: Preeti with husband Satish Shenoy; with daughter Purvi; with son Atul, who shares her love for fitness

shocking and I incorporated them into my writing,” she says, hastening to add, “Not all mothers-in-law are mean. I don’t endorse stereotyping.”

Similarly, when she wrote *The Secret Wishlist* (2012), she spoke to several women as part of her research. “Later, I received mails from not only women but also many husbands and sons who said they had never even thought of what their wives or mothers truly wanted. They just presumed that the women in their lives were content. They said the book was an eye-opener,” she emphasises.

Having a book launch during a pandemic hasn’t changed things too much for Preeti, who offers a prayer of gratitude every morning before getting out of bed and is mostly woken by her dog who wants to be

taken for a walk. The last thing she does at night is to draw a page in her illustrated journal, write in her diary, and read till she falls asleep.

She has reviewed over a hundred books on her Instagram account. “For me, the genre and author does not matter,” says Preeti, whose favourite authors include Michael Morpurgo, Roald Dahl, Audrey Niffenegger, Sonia Choquette, Ruskin Bond, Neil Gaiman and Kristin Hannah.

Preeti is motivated by the many emails and messages that she gets every day from her fans. “People tell me how my writing saved their life or gave them hope in their darkest times. I am grateful that so many people find meaning in my writing,” she says. Now, that’s a happy ending for any writer. ■

UNLOCKED WORDS

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

Birds

© Prachi Jha

In the early days
 I woke with a frantic trill in my ears
 A little warbling thrush
 Feeling the rush
 Of adrenalin, raring to go
 Filling up my days
 With the happy confusion of things
 half-done
 Preparing for the final crescendo

It never came
 Gradually, my limbs learned to
 unfold
 With the song of a morning dove
 Setting a strange rhythmic
 precedent
 To ordinary living
 And dying

Then came the grunt
 Of a pelican in my gut
 A mordant protest at wings
 drenched
 In a viscous silence
 An oil spill invading
 Calm waters

Now, just
 A discordant clacking
 Geese flapping their angry wings
 Against my chest
 Souring every conversation
 And intent

Prachi runs a science education and outreach NGO called Life Lab Foundation. She is the co-founder of *Daak*, a digital publication and weekly newsletter that curates South Asian art and literature. She is currently pursuing her Master's in development studies at the Graduate Institute, Geneva.



Dystopian Sleep

© Rianka Bose Saha

As I sat there
 Measuring my time again
 Against the empty old road
 I remembered the cacophony
 Of mismatched voices
 All in a hurry
 To reach somewhere,
 Where are they now
 I wonder sometimes?
 The mad rush of ebullient voices
 And the clamour of rushing feet
 All jostling for a piece of sun
 The grey road, bones aching
 Weary with footfalls
 And
 Unending fatigue
 Of the city that never sleeps
 Now lies in a puddle of froth
 Bubbling from the corners of
 A dystopian sleep
 The bearings of untruth and
 truth
 All lie curled up, expectantly
 Yet pensive is the mood
 Sometimes I vociferate
 Angrily, to the quiet world
 outside

But my voice ricochets back,
 empty
 The walls outside feel cluttered
 Claustrophobic inside my skin
 My home looks back, accusing
 But I have nowhere to go
 The fatigued air conditioner
 Stares hard at me
 The air all stale,
 Rehashing what I breathed
 Days ago, and the clutter grows
 Like a fungus inside me
 My next door neighbour
 Her screams wake me up at
 night
 Every day
 It's like clockwork
 Every day at eight
 She bleeds silently
 I see her sometimes
 Her pure skin in patches
 Of frozen blood
 Yet the blackened eyes
 Kohl smudged
 I gasp for breath
 I pray for a reprieve
 For a bit of snowstorm

In the July heat
I talk to my walls
Sometimes they talk back
 Mostly anxious
About taking too much space
 In my mind
I assuage them, I am fine
So I take out a book, covers
 frayed
Dog eared and ancient
 I read it again
 And again
 Till sleep beckons
But sometimes I am not tired
 Or melancholy enough
 To lie down and sleep
 So as the days collide
Merging with the hems of each
 other
With an unpractised embrace
I sit and watch the starry nights
Trying the patterns on my skin
As you would sometimes do
But we are unaccustomed of
 each other now

And the abyss only grows
 Devoid of the scents or
 embraces
You are on the far side of the
 moon
 And I cannot fathom
 Your eyes anymore
My wheelchair becomes my
 prison
 The garden
 Where the birds chirp
I do not see the children
 anymore
I would love to write you a letter
 about this, sometimes
But I just shoot a two-line
 message instead,
The giant machine broke, I write
You send a laugh emoticon my
 way.

Rianka Bose Saha, 35, is an HR professional and published writer who loves to experiment with various writing styles. She is a full-time mom and a daydreamer, mostly lost in the suspense thriller novels strewn around her. She dreams of owning a little library some day.





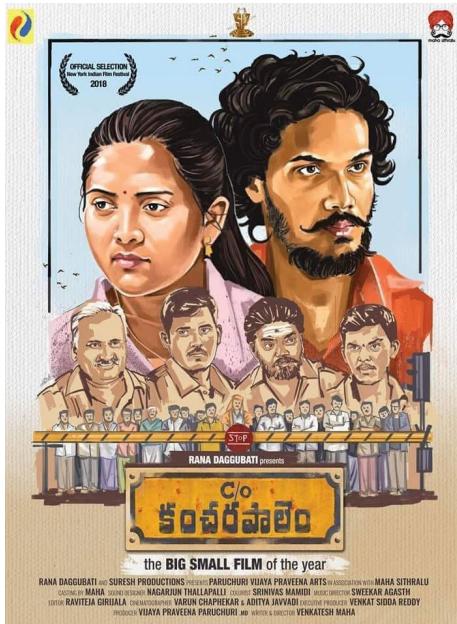
STEP BY STEP

Vishakhapatnam girl Praneeta Patnaik got a break in the Telugu film industry by chance, but now she's diligently working her way upward

By Krishna Prasad

Making a career out of acting was unthinkable for Praneeta Patnaik while she was a management student doing her MBA in her hometown Vishakhapatnam. But she was no-

ticed by Telugu film director Venkatesh Maha, who was scouting the coastal city's dance academies for an "authentic Telugu-speaking girl with good dancing skills" for his upcoming film *C/o Kancharapalem*.



L-R: The poster of the hit film *C/o Kancharapalem*; Praneeta with the film's director Venkatesh Maha

Praneeta, who had been learning Kuchipudi since the age of four, was in class the day he dropped in. The next day, she auditioned and was finalised for the role of Bhargavi.

The film, shot over 62 days in Kancharapalem and Bheemili suburbs of Visakhapatnam, went on to become a superhit and changed Praneeta's life. It premiered at the New York Indian Film Festival in May 2018, and its storyline of four small-town couples cutting across age, religion, caste and class barriers touched the hearts of critics and audiences. *The Times of India* gave it a high rating for its “sincere, uncinematic storytelling (that) gives power to those unheard

regional voices and does its part in undoing the stereotypical portrayal of community-specific stories in Telugu cinema.”

Praneeta's only previous experience of the world of glamour – before the film catapulted her to instant fame – was modelling at the age of 16 and reaching the finals of the Miss Vizag beauty pageant. The daughter of a doctor and a home-maker, she had been introduced to Indian classical dance by her paternal uncle, aunt and cousin P. Uday Shenkar, who continues to mentor her today.

Being from a non-film background, Praneeta continued studying and did not initially let the

film's success and the sudden spate of film offers from Tollywood (as the Telugu film industry is called) derail her MBA studies. "But after this big opening window into films, I realised that my true passion lay in acting and not in regular nine-to-five jobs anymore," admits the

it also has its quirks. One of them is that Telugu actresses rarely get opportunities to star in any Telugu film's lead, with lucrative roles going to actresses from other states such as Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. Reasons for this are not clear.

In this context, Praneeta is aware that she has been fortunate. "I've come across some brilliant directors who do give a chance to newbies and especially to Telugu-speaking women," she says. Hailing from a small city hundreds of miles away from Tollywood's hub Hyderabad, she was also lucky to manage a hit debut film while still living in town. No wonder she suddenly found herself the 'local celebrity' of Vizag.

Her family supported her wholeheartedly. "My parents always encouraged me to follow my heart and my passion. My mother had tears in her eyes when she saw me for the first time on the big screen. My dad is like most Indian dads — he keeps his emotions to himself and puts on a straight face. But his heart swelled with pride to see me on the screen," she narrates.

After completing her studies in 2019, Praneeta plunged into films full-time and signed on a few projects. "Each role I play is distinct from the other," she says, adding that they all served as invaluable learning experiences as a newcomer.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, many of her shoots



Praneeta is on *Stumagz's* 25-under-25 list of actors

23-year-old.

While the Telugu film industry has given rise to cinematic greats such as actors Chiranjeevi, Nagarjuna and Prabhas, and legendary singer SP Balasubrahmanyam (who passed away recently from Covid),



L-R: Praneeta shooting for a Ram Gopal Varma web series; with actor Vijay Sethupathi on the sets of *Uppena*

got cancelled or postponed. But Praneeta has been working on a couple of web series and sees hope for young actors with this new era in the entertainment world. “Streaming television will definitely create more opportunities for aspiring actors who want their talent to be noticed,” she observes.

In her brief Tollywood career, Praneeta has already gained some insight into the industry. “In the past four years, things have changed drastically and filmmakers are becoming more open to trying new things and signing on new talent,” she avers. “Every set I worked on has been a different learning experience and I’m still

learning many things. Being vocal and humble takes you a long way. It’s okay to wait until you get the right roles instead of signing up every role that comes along.” She considers three major factors before signing on any film: her role and its importance in the entire film, the director, and the team. “If given a chance, I’d love to act in Malayalam and Tamil films too,” she enthuses.

But the young actress also emphasises the importance of “saying no”. “Only we are responsible for the choices we make. Once we make a decision, there shouldn’t be any regret with the outcome if it doesn’t turn out as expected,” she advises pragmatically. ■



CREATURES GREAT & SMALL

Herpetologist Emma A Browning is using social media to create awareness about reptiles and amphibians, and the human impact on their lives

By Manvi Pant

When Emma A Browning was a five-year-old growing up on a cattle ranch in Texas, her elder sister – who was in high school at the time and later became a biologist – taught her a startling fact. “She told me that frogs and toads use their eyeballs to help swallow food. I thought that was the grossest coolest thing I had ever heard,” says Emma, explaining what triggered her curiosity in biological sciences.

Today, Emma, 27, is a herpetologist who has set out to raise awareness about how rapidly changing climatic conditions are posing a serious threat to ectotherms (amphibians and reptiles), which are some of the longest living species on this planet. A researcher at the University of Georgia, she is studying the suitability of releasing confiscated turtles from illegal pet trade back into the wild.

Nature had an influence on Emma from an early age. She grew up exploring large tracts of lands where her father kept their cattle in the sunny little Texan town of Channing, with a population of just 363. Observing her growing interest in little creatures, her teachers often allowed her to bring tadpoles in class to see them turn into frogs.

A detailed exploration gave her a good understanding of how competitive the field of herpetology was, and so to stay

in the game, she enrolled herself in several conservation and management projects right after school. “I was particularly interested in amphibians and reptiles, so I assisted with the re-introduction of gopher tortoises and the reticulated flatwoods salamander. This involved restoring their habitat by using chainsaws and prescribed burns



Emma holding a plain-bellied water snake

to help the ecosystem return to its natural state. I also helped with rearing larval flatwoods salamanders to release them back into the wild,” she narrates.

From her experience, she suggests all those aiming to have a career in biological sciences and related

sub-fields such as herpetology or zoology should start early. “If you are in high school and planning to go to university, try to volunteer at your local zoo or local wildlife management area. Getting experience now will help.”

Ectotherms derive heat from the environment to maintain



their body temperature. Despite adapting to numerous temperature constraints, these species have been experiencing habitat loss and are on the verge of decline for the past 20 years. “Tortoises and freshwater turtles play an important role in the ecosystem. They are scavengers, so they keep water sources and their habitat clean by eating dead animals.

They also create shelter for other wildlife. For example, the gopher tortoise digs a burrow that houses over 350 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects and arachnids. They are also considered to be bio-engineers as they maintain the ecosystem by eating plants and dispersing the seeds through defecation,” informs Emma.

Unfortunately, these creatures are doing very poorly due to human activities, suffering from habitat loss, and being collected for wildlife and food trade. Climate change is affecting them too. As part of her project, Emma translocates them into a protected site to see how they move. “We have put transmitters on them which allows us to gauge their movement patterns and understand how they are behaving. Are they adapting well? At the moment, I have around 40 turtles with transmitters on, and so, I have to go into the woods and track them to collect the data on their movement,” says Emma, who chronicles her animal encounters on her Instagram handle [@herpetologistemma](https://www.instagram.com/herpetologistemma) where she has almost 16,000 followers.

She is actively involved in reptile conservation, and often posts pictures with rattlesnakes, water snakes or eastern glass lizards to educate her followers on different varieties of reptiles. In the past, she has given presentations and educational outreaches for kids at

outdoor festivals and at her local Audubon society to educate them about the species of snakes they can possibly find on their property, and what they can do to mitigate that.

No doubt, snakes have a bad reputation but how is Emma so comfortable with them? The truth is, snakes used to scare her at one point. “Yes, but I would never scream and run away. If someone handed me one, I would just squeal.

educate themselves about them, the more passionate and respectful they would be, instead of fearful. Snakes benefit us in so many ways. Some of them – like rat snakes – eat rodents and rodents carry diseases that can infect humans. This keeps a check on tick-borne illnesses. Then, there are venomous snakes, like the copperhead, whose venom is used to treat heart diseases and certain type of cancers.”



L-R: Emma with a rat snake; with a scarlet snake (both individuals were released after photos were taken)

To help myself get out of this fear, I started working with venomous rattlesnakes. Now, I have a healthy respect and admiration for them.”

A fair amount of misunderstanding and ignorance surrounds reptiles, which sometimes also leads to their indiscriminate killing. Emma allays fears and shares their value: “Snakes are not mindless, aggressive animals as most of us see them. They deserve to live with dignity. The more people

Emma’s passion for understanding amphibians and reptiles is visible in her lifestyle. As part of her research project, she spends four to five days every week out in the woods, walking miles and scaling some really steep slopes just to track turtles, save them from extinction, and enable them to live with dignity. If you wish to support her project, visit the University of Georgia’s [crowdfunding page](#). ■

THE PAD SQUAD



Actor-poet Taranjit Kaur and film producer Chhitra Subramaniam have launched a lockdown initiative to donate sanitary pads to women in need

By Manvi Pant

Lockdown 2020 has dealt a blow to almost all industries, more so arts and entertainment. Amidst all this, two women from the Indian film industry – actor and poet Taranjit Kaur and producer Chhitra Subramaniam – joined hands and took upon themselves the social responsibility to source and distribute sanitary pads to economically disadvantaged women. They called themselves the Pad Squad.

Ever since their campaign was launched in June this year, Pad Squad has distributed close to 5 lakh pads. The movement is supported

by 58 Pad Squadders all over India operating in 25 cities, including Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Kalimpong and more. With the support of grassroot NGOs, it has reached diverse communities – from slums in Mumbai, sex workers and orphanages in Kolkata, specially abled girls in Bengaluru, to affected indigenous artists in Rajasthan, and tribals in Palghar.

In the wake of the pandemic, when the government imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 25, it did not initially include sanitary napkins in the list of essential items



Taranjit Kaur giving women pads in Mumbai; the Pad Squad has reached diverse communities across India

exempted from production and distribution restrictions. Though menstrual products were later added to the essential-items list, the production of sanitary napkins had gone into a significant halt by then, with partially operational factories and high absenteeism. In a situation where even higher income households struggled to find a way to meet the shortage, the severity felt in semi-urban and rural areas was appalling.

“Women and their menstrual hygiene needs were totally ignored with rations taking priority for economically marginalised homes,” says Taranjit, who has worked in Oscar-winning film *Raju, Rajat*

Kapoor’s critically acclaimed *Ankhon Dekhi*, and BAFTA-nominated *Mouth of Hell*. She is also a spoken-word poet who writes on women’s issues; her poem *I’m Not a Virgin* garnered millions of views on social media.

“Since most of us are involved in relief work, we sensed the gravity of this situation and started Pad Squad, a pan-India movement committed to preserving the dignity and health of menstruating women and girls,” shares Taranjit.

“It was a need of the hour. Unfortunately, we live in a country where a headache gets far more attention than menstrual hygiene and health,” adds Chhitra, who has

produced films such as Madhur Bhandarkar's *Corporate* and Anurag Kashyap's *Return of Hanuman*.

The duo's brainchild turned into a revolution with other founding members Mayuri Joshi Dhavale, Gillian Pinto, Niiya, Monica Raheja, Surya Balakrishnan, Devashish Makhija and Shilpi A. Singh joining in. "Pad Squad started to fulfill the immediate needs of women who had lost their livelihood and had no means of buying sanitary pads during the lockdown. We sensed the requirement and put up a social-media post requesting people to send us sanitary pads and within three days our house was full of them! We made a visit to nearby *bastis* (slum clusters) and distributed

pads there. The aim was clear – women bleed every month so their menstrual needs must be fulfilled."

However, given the real threat of coronavirus, the Pad Squadders had to ensure their own personal safety too. "The challenges were more internal than external for me, personally," avers Chhitra. "But then the calling was so strong that I let go off the fear, and once that happened it became normal and easy. However, the Pad Squadders' safety has been paramount for us since the inception. It's incredible to see their passion to ensure that women get their pads on time. But we never force them to go into the communities and crowded places. They can also deliver pads to



Chhitra Subramaniam distributing pads; Pad Squad has distributed close to 5 lakh pads since their June launch





Taranjit Kaur distributing pads; her work is supported by 58 Pad Squadders all over India operating in 25 cities

ground volunteers," she says.

Pad Squad has collaborated with NGOs like Sukhibhava, which offer free menstrual health consultations to women. "We have been sharing NGO helpline numbers where women and young girls can call for any kind of consultation on gynaecological problems," she says.

The voluntary initiative comes in the wake of growing awareness about the environmental fallout of regular commercial pads, which create mountains of plastic waste not to mention endangering waste collectors who handle them. They are also too expensive for most Indian women. We asked team Pad Squad if they have considered any sustainable options to donate. "It's true that the environment is being polluted by millions of tons of menstrual waste," nods Tarajit. "To ensure we don't add to it, we

used biodegradable pads initially, and now we have collaborated with NGOs like Stone Soup to give reusable pads. They have already been distributed to major cities like Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru, and we intend to cover other cities as well. A cloth pad can not only last for up to five years, but also saves a woman from the health hazards of disposable pads," says Tarajit.

Chhitra adds, "We also distributed menstrual cups but there are many cultural contexts and sensitivities regarding the use of menstrual cups in India. Some education in this matter is still required."

Pad Squad hopes to reach more cities and towns, spread awareness around menstrual health, and to remove the taboos associated with periods now that the Pad Squadders have created an unwavering trust within communities. ■



OF ICONS AND IDENTITY

Madhubani artist Malvika Raj is using a traditional artform from her state, Bihar, to highlight the message of her icons, Dr Ambedkar and the Buddha

By Neha Kirpal

Madhubani artist from Patna, Malvika Raj is known for her innovative twist to the traditional artform, centered around Hindu and Buddhist narratives. With the recent rise in atrocities against the Dalit community, especially women, Malvika's art is her own kind of activism, highlighting the

philosophies of Dr Ambedkar and the Buddha through brushstrokes.

A graduate in fashion designing from NIFT Mohali, Malvika's art has been displayed at several prominent exhibitions in reputed galleries such as the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai as well as ICCR and Lalit Kala Akademi in



Dr Ambedkar (left) and the Buddha (above) have been depicted in several of Malvika's Madhubani paintings

New Delhi. One of her paintings, a Madhubani rendition of her icon Babasaheb Ambedkar, is displayed at the University of Edinburgh.

While Frida Kahlo and Vincent Van Gogh are her primary artistic influences, Impressionism and the Black Arts Movement have always inspired and guided Malvika. "Learning social literature and Dr Ambedkar's philosophy from my father and travelling to Buddhist shrines and other places with my family truly inspired me back in those days," she adds.

Dr Ambedkar has been depicted in many of Malvika's works. Ever since childhood, Malvika's father

had narrated to her stories about the history and life struggles of Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar EV Ramasamy, Sant Kabir Das, Sant Ravidas and the Buddha, making her acutely aware of social and political realities from a young age. "Dr Ambedkar has helped remove discrimination based on caste, untouchability and poverty that have existed in India for centuries, and restored human dignity by giving equal rights and justice to all. He wrote the Constitution of independent India, which granted equal rights to the most backward classes in the country, such as

SCs, STs, OBCs and women,” says Malvika. It was for all these reasons that she decided to depict his life through the medium of her paintings – her humble attempt to spread his message among the people of the country.

After completing her course at NIFT, she worked at various export houses in Delhi for three years before returning to her hometown, Patna. Here, she worked on some paintings that were embedded deep in her heart and mind ever since childhood. During this time, she also got a chance to understand Bihar's Madhubani painting style. She stayed for many days at the

original site – the Madhubani district – where the art originates from, and studied paintings made by the women there. The paintings recreate small stories based on nature and culture, and depict various Hindu gods and goddesses.

The experience wasn't completely positive for Malvika as she learnt firsthand how deeply rooted caste discrimination was among the local populace, so much so that she was discouraged from learning the Madhubani style due to superstition about her Dalit roots. “I made my own interpretation of the paintings, in a way that I could believe in them and connect with them personally,”





she explains. Thereafter, she created her first series called *The Journey* in which she depicted the life story of Buddha, from childhood till the time he attained nirvana.

According to Hindu mythology, the Buddha is considered one of Lord Vishnu's avatars. Malvika, however, considers Buddha to be a human form, who first attained enlightenment himself and then showed others the way. "Buddhism is not religion, but 'dhamma', which leads people from darkness to light. I try to replicate its teachings in my own life. In my paintings, Buddha's story is not based on the Jataka Tales; instead it is based on the reality of human life. I believe that Buddha is truth, and his story is also based on

truth," she says.

Malvika also has her own clothing line Musk Migi, a startup working with local artisans for a wide range of eco-friendly handcrafted and hand-painted garments, accessories and utility products. Its range is based on traditional Madhubani art and Godna (tattoo) – a marginalised, dying artform from Bihar. All the pieces are hand-painted on handcrafted silk fabrics by rural women and artisans trained by Malvika. Her brand's vision is to generate rural employment, create a niche market in traditional and Indo-western fashion, and preserve the aesthetic values of hand-made art and craft in this growing era of art digitalisation. ■



DOLLS OF CHANGE

Former journalist Smriti Lamech's new venture is giving traditional ragdolls a feminist, political twist while generating employment for local women artisans

By Shweta Bhandral

Even before Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged Indians to get 'vocal for local toys', several social startups – from Tamil Nadu to Himachal Pradesh – had begun efforts to help traditional toy-making stay alive. Kodaikanal-based Smriti Lamech is one such social entrepreneur. A captivating storyteller, the 41-year-old mother of two is popular on social media for her aesthetic sensibilities, love of textiles and her personal stories. Keen to work for the revival of traditional weaves

and crafts, the former journalist launched Smritsonian during the lockdown, making bommai (dolls) with a feminist twist and torans (doorway decorations) with a message of peace.

Smriti and her husband moved over a year ago from Gurugram to Kodaikanal after their two children joined boarding school in the hilly Tamil Nadu town. Though the couple had planned to move out again earlier this year, the lockdown disrupted their relocation plans.

It also put an end to Smriti's anti-CAA activism that had given her a sense of purpose since December last year. Smriti went into a funk. "I thought, here is something that I am doing for my children and for my nation. When the lockdown happened, all our planned protests also got cancelled," she says.

for a revolution. Soon, she realised that the womenfolk could also make small toys, but "there was nothing exceptional about them for someone to buy them."

Seeking a novel idea, Smriti thought back to the ragdolls of her childhood, which were in sharp contrast to the superheroes and



L-R: Smritsonian's Maya ragdoll; Smriti Lamech is popular on social media for her love of saris and textiles

Around that time, Smriti came across a women's self-help group Prowess. Many of its members were the sole breadwinners for the families. To encourage them, Smriti designed and gave them orders of masks with slogans and torans with spiritual messages.

India's growing divisiveness based on religion troubled Smriti so the products she made centred on religious harmony and need

plastic Barbie dolls that are mostly sold in the market today. "It took just about 30 seconds for the idea to flash in my head. I decided to make handcrafted feminist ragdolls," says Smriti. Though her investment banker husband did not buy into the idea, he supported her nevertheless.

Smriti's first set of feminist dolls were superheroes who broke conventional boundaries and stereotypes. To begin with, she designed

Savitribai Phule, Kalpana Chawla, Maya Angelou and Frida Kahlo. Once enough pieces were ready, she promoted them on social media. The response was tremendous. She got orders not only from cities across India but also US and Europe.

A solo-preneur, Smriti manages the entire show herself, though her family does chip in whenever possible. She admits there are limitations. “Starting a business with my savings

compromise or bend. It was how I wanted it,” says Smriti, who is unabashed about the political message in her creations. “I am a political person; I believe everybody is political. Everything you do – from what you eat to the clothing you wear – is what your government allows you. Every time you comply, you make a political choice and these are things that matter to me. And that is why everything that I



L-R: Masks made by Smritsonian; Smriti (front right) with the women from the self-help group she works with

during Covid times was not such a good idea. The local women are also not used to this kind of work, so they take time to make the dolls,” she says of her challenges, hastening to add that these are small issues, and that she has invested herself in this project in a way she has never done before for anything else.

“Smritsonian embodies every belief of mine. I did not have to

have created conveys a political point of view,” she asserts.

Each bommai goes out with a story in first person introducing the doll. She is also keen to limit her carbon footprint and generate employment and revenue for local craftspersons, so she uses upcycled fabric and sources everything locally. “If I am living in this hamlet, I need to serve this hamlet.” ■



THE BURDEN OF LOCKDOWN

Rural women in India have never had it easy, and the Covid lockdown has further increased their workload while leaving them financially vulnerable

By Shweta Bhandral

The past few months have been exceptionally brutal for India's economy. With GDP contracting by 23.9 percent from April to June, as many as 21 million salaried jobs are estimated to have been lost in the wake of the pandemic. The informal sector too has taken a beating, and some

economists have noted that the number of unemployed does not even take into account millions of people who may have gone back to farming as jobs dried up in other industries. That has also meant a reverse migration from cities to villages in the wake of the sudden lockdown.



Kamlesh, a domestic helper, and her tailor daughter were the breadwinners in the family during lockdown

What does that bode for rural economies, families, and especially the faceless women in India's villages, who are far less literate (58 percent compared with 78 percent men); earn only 60 percent of male wages; constitute 42 percent of India's agricultural workforce and are yet not counted as 'agricultural workers'; denied access to government schemes and property rights; and are instead themselves considered the 'property' of their fathers, husbands or even sons?

To understand the effect of lockdown on the ordinary village woman, I travelled by road to a village called Turehti in Pathankot district of Punjab. Represented by Bollywood actor Sunny Deol of the BJP in the Lok Sabha, it's a small village by Punjab's standards but better off

compared with many of the other 6.4 lakh villages in India. Like most other north Indian villages, it has its fair share of patriarchy, caste discrimination and other repressive social structures. Marrying outside one's caste or religion could very well lead to an 'honour killing' here, not unlike the autocratic rule of Khap Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Very few women from the 300 families residing here are involved in agriculture and are mostly employed in domestic labour, while men work as farmhands, daily-wage workers or as drivers for school buses in nearby towns.

Once the lockdown began, these men sat at home doing nothing. I met Kamlesh, whose husband and son are both drivers but since the past seven months, it is Kamlesh and

her daughter who are the family's only breadwinners. Kamlesh works as a cook and caretaker at the home of an old couple. Her daughter works as a tailor while doing her Bachelor's degree at a local college. Kamlesh worked all through the lockdown and was paid her regular salary. There are several retired Army couples in the area who need help for household and farm work. Their presence is a boon for the village-women, who work in these households as cooks and cleaners.

"Lockdown has been hard for the family, but we managed well with my income, and my employers bought us ration," says Kamlesh. "Now that things are opening up again, my son recently got a job as a driver. My husband is waiting for

the local school to open so that he can go back to driving the bus."

Her neighbour, Sushma, who is a homemaker in a family of seven, was not so lucky. "Since everyone was at home, life was tough. My daughter-in-law and I have not got time to breathe," says the middle-aged woman sorrowfully. Managing fodder for animals, cleaning, cooking and keeping the kids occupied took up all her waking hours. "We used up whatever little savings we had," says Sushma, whose daily-wager husband is unemployed at present. Her son, also a daily-wager, was out of work for several months. He has only recently got work again.

Sulochna from the same village works as a cleaner in a nearby school. A widow, she has two sons



Women workers break for lunch at Shaurya School in MHOW cantonment area, Madhya Pradesh

aged 20 and 21. Both were educated till class 12 and are waiting for a job opportunity. "They would not go and ask for work as labourers in local farms or shops; it is below their education status," says Sulochna, adding worriedly, "There are no notices for government jobs. They are hoping for something in Punjab Police or the Army, but nothing has come up in the past 18 months. Once they cross the age requirement, they can't apply. The government should understand this."

The first two months of the lockdown were challenging for the family as Sulochna had to sit at home without pay. They managed with help from the neighbours and some ration that they received from the panchayat. Sulochna is now back at work earning just half of her earlier salary, but as she says, "Something is better than nothing."

Moving towards the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (MP), the plight of women is no different. In the past few months, not only have the women in most of the households here been running the show in terms of domestic and mental support but also financially. Just last month, news broke of how 250 women of Angrotha village in Chhatarpur district of MP laboured for 18 months to cut through a hill to reach the only source of freshwater in the village. There was no news of the men.

Over 500 km away in Kodariya, a village in district Indore in MP, I met Mangla, a 32-year-old widow who raised two children while working as a caretaker in Shaurya School in MHOW cantonment area, six kilometres from her village. Her son goes to college and the daughter is in higher secondary. Run by the MHOW War College,



Sulochna currently earns half her previous salary

the pre-primary school continued paying her salary so she had no financial crunch. But with schools going digital during the lockdown, her kids faced a huge setback in their studies as they have only one smartphone between them. WiFi connections are either weak or not available in the village, and data is expensive since they consume more than 2GB with online classes,



Mangla, a 32-year-old widow and mother of two, with fellow workers at a pre-primary Army-run school in MHOW

assignments and other activities.

Mangla expresses her concern: “Children in our villages are at a loss in this new system. We don’t have the gadgets, nor do the schools here have the infrastructure and capacity to teach online. How will my kids give exams like this?”

Her colleagues Kiran, Pushpa and Kamla are all in similar situations except they are married and have an extra unemployed mouth to feed at home. They could manage modestly through lockdown because the school kept paying them their monthly wages. In some of these households, the men don’t work at all; in others, they are daily-wagers

who had no work for months.

The biggest setback for them all is the lack of jobs for the educated workforce. Most male relatives who moved back from the cities during the lockdown had nothing to do for months. These men refuse to take up small jobs in the village and instead have taken to drinking, smoking, playing cards or consuming drugs. The load of running the home has fallen on the women who earn from either their craft or jobs while putting up with abuse at the hands of their frustrated husbands or fathers. If the life of India’s village women was hard earlier, the lockdown has only made it worse. ■



MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS

*Author Maya Shanbhag Lang talks about her critically acclaimed new memoir *What We Carry**

By Neha Kirpal

New York-based author Maya Shanbhag Lang's new book *What We Carry: A Memoir* (HarperCollins India, ₹499), delves into her relationship with her

mother, an accomplished physician who immigrated to the United States from India and completed her residency while raising children in a traditional Indian way.

The memoir has been named a *New York Times*' Editor's Pick, an Amazon Best Book of 2020, and a *Parade Magazine* Best Memoir of 2020. In this interview, the author talks among other things about the challenges of narrating a personal story, the changing dynamics in mother-daughter relationships, and writing about degenerative mental-health disorders.

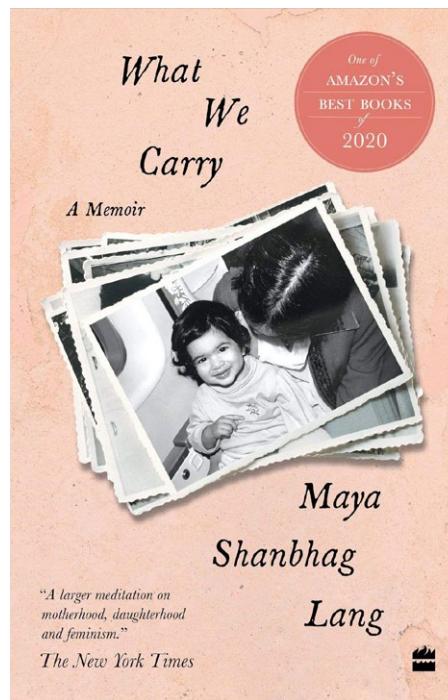
*What led you to write your memoir
What We Carry?*

I was in the middle of working on my second novel when my mother needed emergency care. A geriatric psychiatrist, she was an expert at masking the symptoms of Alzheimer's – until she couldn't. I brought her home with me because I couldn't bear the thought of hospitalising her.

Overnight, my life changed. I was caring for my young daughter at the time. I didn't have help. I was overwhelmed. To cope, I started writing social media posts – my way of letting steam out of the pressure cooker that had become my life. An editor saw my posts and contacted my agent to ask if I would be interested in writing a memoir. I politely declined because the prospect terrified me. That night, I wrote 50 pages. I had no idea how much I needed to write this book until I started doing it. The most necessary stories, I think, are the ones that feel scariest to tell.

Your previous novel The Sixteenth of June (2015) was a fictional story. How different was it writing a memoir this time round?

I think every memoir contains elements of fiction, just as every novel contains elements of memoir. We conceal and reveal ourselves.



We just aren't always aware of when we're doing it. The writing experience, though, is very different. In fiction, you create a parallel universe and then find solidarity in it. Your characters voice feelings and questions you didn't know you were grappling with until you hear them reflected back at you. You find

yourself in others.

Writing memoir is raw. It's like building a house but using yourself for the materials. You're implicated throughout, which can be unsettling, but the insights are more direct and immediate.

What was easy and challenging about writing a story that is personal to you?

Certain parts of this book made me viscerally uncomfortable. My abusive father, the experience of post-partum depression, my mother not being there for me, the gap between who I wanted her to be and who she was: none of that makes for easy subject matter.

It was easier to write about my daughter. She helps me think about who I want to be. Simply by existing, she illuminates so much. Motherhood offers a chance to atone: to do what wasn't done for us, to reach for the next version of ourselves, to break old patterns.

When did you first start writing, and what were your key influences?

I've been writing ever since I can remember. Writing felt like magic – an escape hatch into another world. When I was a girl, I was obsessed with the *Sweet Valley High* books. I wrote silly romances in notebooks and passed them around to my

friends, stories where the girls had names like "Laura" or "Emily" and the guys had names like "Geoff" or "Scott." It's funny now to think about how white and American those characters were, how I never dared to think about characters who were more like me.

Who or what are your literary inspirations?

Some of my favourite writers are Toni Morrison, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Jhumpa Lahiri, Zadie Smith and William Faulkner. I love poetry as well, from T.S. Eliot to Terrance Hayes. My first novel was about *Ulysses*, so I have to mention James Joyce, but I was thinking about society's relationship to that novel – the fact that people revere it despite not being able

to get through it, and what this means about inclusivity and cultural capital.

You are also a competitive-calibre weightlifter. Tell us more about this passion of yours.

After my daughter was born, I realised I wanted to model fitness for her, not as an obligation but as a passion. I also wanted her to have a strong, healthy mom.

I fell in love with weightlifting because it taps into my internal

competitiveness and drive. I don't have to tuck that away. My father always wanted me to be modest and cooperative rather than bossy or opinionated. At the gym, I can let out the willful girl I always was inside, be my warrior self. I can then go out in an elegant evening gown or bake cookies with my daughter. So often as women we get boxed into categories, but we don't have to be. We shouldn't fear our strength.

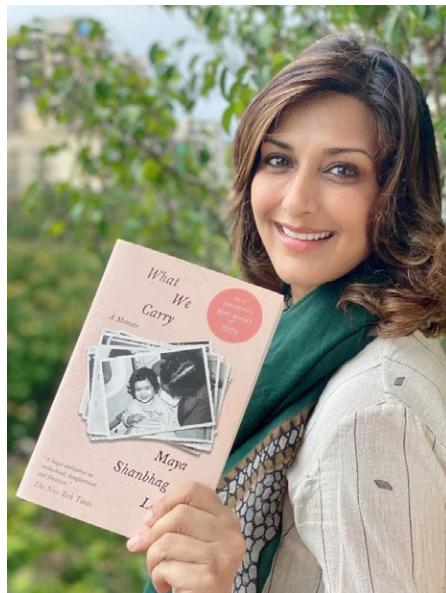
The relationship between mothers and daughters is complex and influenced by factors like birth and caregiving. As daughters grow older, how does this dynamic change?

We don't really process our parents' choices until we become parents. Children are the ultimate rearview mirror. We're driving forward, but they make us look back. There's that moment with rearview mirrors in particular where we sometimes see a double reflection, a ghost of ourselves. When I was caring for my mother, I felt the past and future and present converge on me all at once. Sometimes, I would take my daughter and mom out for errands, and I would need to help them both with their seatbelts. The car felt like this perfect metaphor. My past and my future were there with me, all of us together, hurtling along.

What are you working on next?

I've been thinking a lot about the concept of joy. I used to imagine joy as something we stumble upon

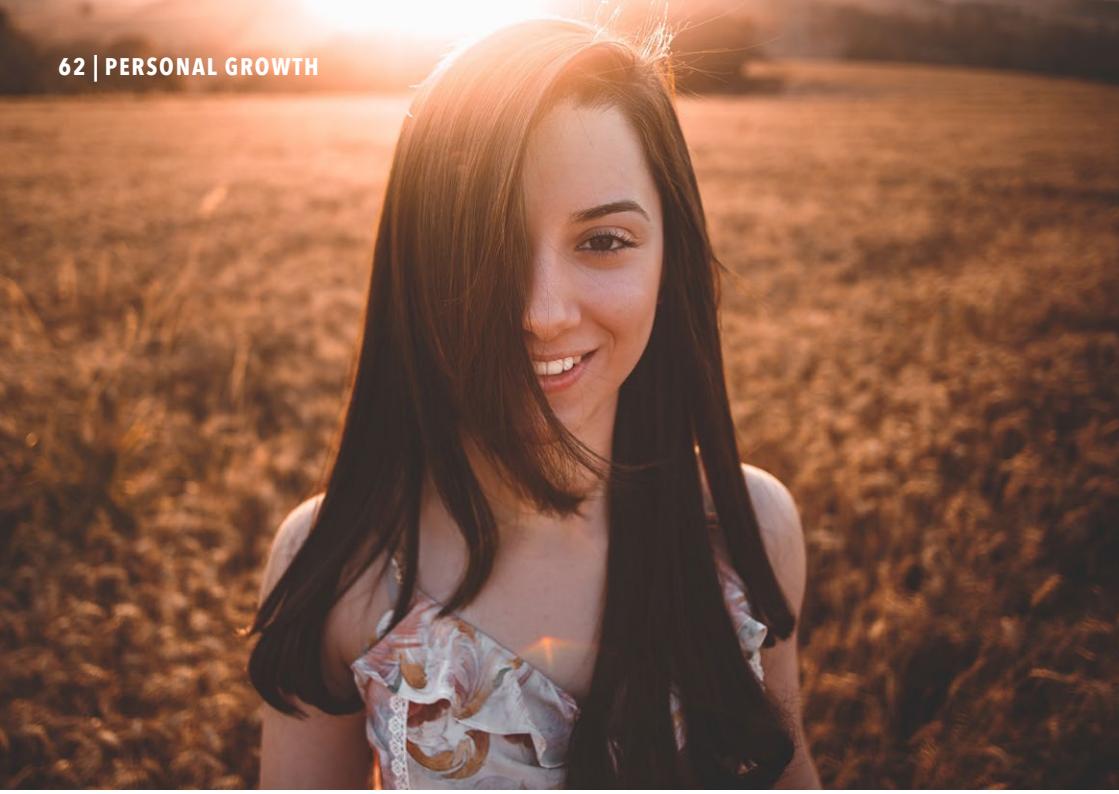
if we're lucky. Now, I realise that joy is a choice – and not necessarily an easy one. We hold the keys to our own happiness, but using those keys can be frightening. It can go against the grain of what we've been taught, especially as women or minorities or a conscientious people. If you are all three of those things – a thoughtful



Actor Sonali Bendre Behl featured Maya Shanbhag Lang's *What We Carry* in her book club

brown woman, for example – then choosing your happiness can be downright terrifying. But, as always, my daughter lights the way forward for me. I want her to know joy, to live voraciously and magnificently – and the only way she'll know how is if she sees me do it. ■

Read more on eShe.in



The Four F's

These four words will lead you to a more constructive year ahead

By Kay Newton

For many people worldwide, 2020 has been *annus horribilis*. Yet, every cloud has a silver lining and the beginning of this decade has been no exception.

For me, four words are constant this year, four words that offer simple solutions to handle what life throws at you for the years ahead.

Yes, the first is a swear word. Do

not cringe! Swearing is something we have in common; it is universal. (You may not do it verbally, yet you cannot stop the mind from thinking!) If you grew up in a home where swearing was an essential component of emotional language, you probably swear naturally. Expressive communication can help you to come to terms with current circumstances and relieve stressful situations. There are many benefits

PHOTO: GUILHERME STECANELLA/UNSPLASH

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to uttering expletives, for example:

- Helps you to connect with others
- Helps you focus on the present moment
- Creates social bonding
- Allows you to express yourself
- Releases emotions, frustrations
- An outburst of blasphemy is said to reduce your pain level

Yet, there is a word of caution: cursing is only powerful when used occasionally, in certain types of social situations and never in front of children.

FORGIVE

When you hold on to hurt, pain, resentment and anger, the harm to you will be far more than the damage to the offender. When hate remains in your heart over long periods, it will make you ill, both mentally and physically.

When you forgive, you move on. Allowing yourself to let go of anger, contempt or the need to seek revenge creates freedom from within, allowing space for growth and happiness. Also, it frees you to live in the present.

The act of forgiveness instils compassion and reduces stress levels. Forgiveness is not saying what happened was okay. Forgiveness states that you are not going to let what happened to you ruin the future.

Forgiveness is not just for other people, forgive yourself too. Probably, the most powerful of all actions.

FREEDOM

What does it mean to be free? Freedom comes from letting go of fear and other emotions that create chaos in our inner world. Internal disarray and being out of harmony with your true nature will be reflected within the chaos of the outer world. If we want to end conflict, corruption and poverty, we first have to let go of the fear within.

Your attitude to life is all that matters. When you handle what life throws at you without falling into the trap of victimisation, complaints and disempowerment, when you feel grateful for the things you have in life rather than what you do not have, you will be free.

Freedom comes in simple steps;

- Love the body you are in, warts and all
- Pursue your dreams and not those of others
- Let go of fears related to money, relationships or death
- Experience life in different ways, new cultures, foods, places
- Conquer addictions to food, social media, drink, sex, et cetera
- Accept that struggles make you stronger
- Be yourself – everyone else ‘is taken’
- Trust that everything in life happens for a reason, you do not need to know what it is
- Help others more vulnerable than yourself



- To give to others, you must also be willing to receive

- Be true to your own core beliefs

Freedom also means to become detached from the moods and emotions of others, and to let go of your expectations, disappointments and projections on those around you.

FUN

Fun is probably the most important of all and certainly has health benefits. Fun diminishes stress. Stress is often seen as a cause of weight gain and the inability to fight infection.

Make a habit of daily time to relax and smile. Each day, engage in activities that you enjoy. Fun equates to consistent lower stress levels, positive feelings, better sleep, better coping abilities, and improved relationships.

She

Fun can be as simple as:

- Deciding to smile before you get out of bed each day
- Stopping after completing a task and doing a happy dance
- Sending a loved one a joke or fun comment
- Smiling at the next person, you meet on the street, for no reason other than you can
- Spending time with people who make you happy.

We only have one chance at this life. No matter what is happening around you, you have a choice to laugh or cry. Life is for living. As many-faceted beings everyone will have their version of the four Fs (F***, Forgiveness, Freedom and Fun). Why not let the conversations begin? ■

Find Kay on KayNewton.com

A Benevolent Universe



Energy is neither created nor destroyed; the universe is always whole

By Aekta Kapoor

I have a new favourite mantra. It's the Shanti Mantra (invocatory verse) of Isha Upanishad. It goes:

*Om Poornamadah Poornamidam
Poornaat Poornamudachyate
Poornasya Poornamaadaaya
Poornamevaavashishyate*

Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih

This mantra became a daily part of my life ever since the lockdown. I began doing yoga through the Sivananda Yogashram YouTube channel in these months, and they end each yoga session with this mantra so I was imbibing it every day. One day, I decided to look up the meaning of it, and read it out to

my kids: "That is the Whole, this is the Whole; from the Whole, the Whole arises; taking away the Whole from the Whole, the Whole remains."

They laughed and laughed. "That's a lot of holes!" they giggled with much merriment, and perhaps I sounded comical as I said it. But something about this mantra drew me in. Of course, it sounds similar to the physics lessons we learnt in school: energy can neither be created nor destroyed. But more than that, there is a sense of comfort I find in it, a sense of being enveloped in a benevolent universe. A sense of, well, wholeness.

In late August, my younger daughter was to leave for foreign

shores and begin her independent adult life and new job. As the date of her leaving approached, my heart became heavier and heavier. I could not display this; the last thing I wanted was to cloud her new journey with my maternal sentimentality. On the morning of her flight, I could barely control my tears.

I did my YouTube yoga and lingered on this mantra much after the video ended. I repeated it over and over, tears streaming down my face. *“Taking away the Whole from the Whole, the Whole remains.”* After I said it many, many times, its essence sunk in and a deep calm descended over me. There is no loss. Nothing is ever lost. *The Whole remains.*

Yesterday, my friend’s cousin passed away at age 45. She had had early stage cancer last year but was presumed to have recovered. Due to the Covid lockdown, she had not gone to the hospital for follow-ups all year. A few days ago, after returning from Diwali shopping, she lay down and had a paralytic stroke. An MRI scan revealed the cancer had spread to her brain. Before doctors could operate, she haemorrhaged and died. Her children are 7 and 17. Her husband’s parents are no more; he has only his kids now.

I sent prayers to the family and

meditated on my mantra. The condolence and sorrow is not for the one who died, for she is merged with the universe, but for the ones left behind. How does one comfort the survivors of such a tragedy, or any great loss? How do you tell them, “There is no loss, the Whole remains”? It appears cruel to say so.

And then as I meditated, the answer came: *The suffering too is part of the Whole. The pain too is*



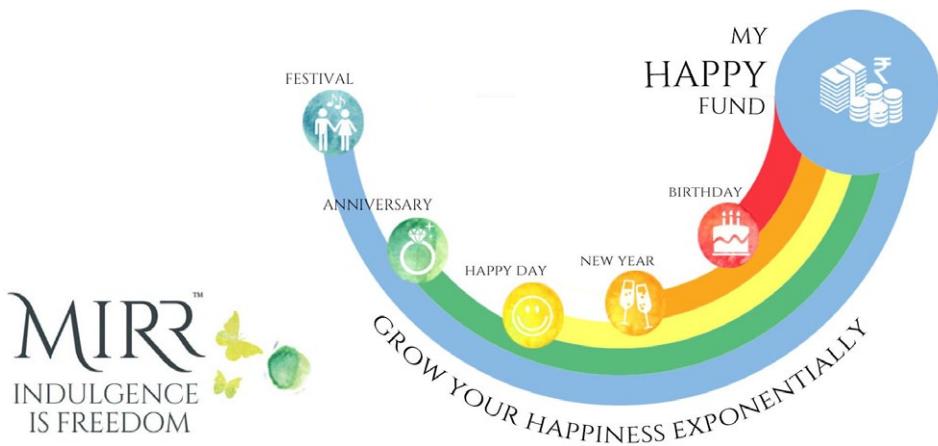
part of the whole. The vacuum too is whole. Accept them all. Surrender to the process.

And another realisation came: Who am I to comfort them, or anyone? My prayers are merely to comfort *me*. My blessings, perhaps, are the only thing I have to offer them.

There is much suffering in the world, there has always been. But there’s also so much joy. They are both parts of the same reality, and any gain or loss we perceive is illusory. *The Whole remains.* ■



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