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— the female gaze —



Dr Methil Devika

The award-winning Mohiniyattam performer and scholar on the sensuality and spirituality of classical dance

BEAUTY BOUNTY

5 women-led Indian beauty brands offering safe, natural goodness

DANCE OF INDIA

Classical dancers and educators taking Indian heritage to the world

A SAFER RIDE

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BODY OF ART

I feel very fortunate to be born in a country with such a rich cultural heritage. Our ancient art forms and our wellness traditions are unparalleled in the world for their holistic approach. There is always a meaning even in the smallest gestures and an element of sagacity in each step one takes. The body and mind are but the means through which we access the divine consciousness within us, and the goal is always evolution of the soul.

That is why putting together this year-end issue has given me so much personal satisfaction. On the cover is dance scholar and award-winning performer Dr Methil Devika, who has done extensive research on Mohiniyattam, the feminine solo dance form of Kerala (p.18). We also have New York-based performer and educator Preeti Vasudevan who has contemporised Indian dance traditions for audiences in the West (p.24), and Bengaluru-based neuroscientist and artist Savitha Sastry who has evangelised Bharatanatyam for anyone to access online (p.28).

We also have a special feature on five women-led beauty brands with a common vision to offer Indian buyers safe, chemical-free skincare products steeped in natural nourishment (p.10).

But let's not forget, 2020's new normal includes a digital reality and as 2021 beckons, let's make space for new traditions (p.64). Happy reading! ■



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HAPPINESS



SENSUOUSNESS

THE WOMAN IN THE ALMIRAH



THOUGHTFUL



TRAPPED

Fashion artist Sharmila Nair's new project links women's emotions during the pandemic to the tradition of parents gifting almirahs to daughters

By Shweta Bhandral

Entrepreneur and fashion artist Sharmila Nair's latest project *The Almirah* is a fashion art installation that showcases the emotions that Indian women went through during the Covid pandemic. "There's a tradition in Kerala where the parents gift an almirah to their daughter at the time of her marriage. This almirah becomes her private property, one of her biggest assets that she inherits from her parents, and it stays in her life as a companion with whom she shares her happiness, sadness, fears, insecurities, and secrets," says Sharmila, who is based in Ernakulam, Kerala. "It is in the same almirah that patriarchal society interferes. The almirah stands as a metaphor for the limited public space women experience in a patriarchal society."

Sharmila's love for saris was ingrained in childhood. She started wearing saris while in class 12 and, fascinated by her mother's collection, began to look closely at weaves, styles and textiles. At the same time, even as a high-school student, her father encouraged her to take on summer jobs, which gave her good exposure in running a business, attracting consumers and delivering services. After completing her education, she put both her passion and

skill to good use and began travelling across the country, researching and collecting saris. It marked the beginning of her online sari brand Red Lotus. The first collection was put on sale on Facebook; it sold out in two hours.



Sharmila Nair

But online sales were not enough; a desire to talk about issues troubling society was also brewing inside Sharmila, who decided to use her sari brand to raise social issues in artistic ways. "I think artists through their art should also reflect contemporary reality rather than doing art for art's sake. To resist, struggle, and pass on your vision to society so that

FRUSTRATED



society at large may benefit from your art – *that* is the highest reward and satisfaction you get from doing an art project. I have a personal inclination of transforming art into a public activity,” she says.

Sharmila began expressing her concerns with projects like the *Mazhavil Collection*, for which transgender models wore her sari collection. The next project *18 Shades of Black* talked about gender and colour discrimination; it received international attention as well.

The Almirah is a step ahead of

earlier two projects as it combines the elements of fashion, structural design, solo-performance, still photography, videography, and poetry. The project aesthetically depicts the problem of mental health during the Covid lockdown. Sharmila herself felt trapped during this period as her business came to a standstill. Her collection for the season had been sourced but was stuck due to logistics, and uncertainty about the future troubled her. She explains, “I looked at my saris stacked away in my almirah and I began to think

SADNESS



POWERFUL

about all the emotions women are facing right now. I decided to depict these emotions through my saris. That's how the idea of a woman inside the almirah occurred to me."

Sharmila's colour palette for the project was inspired by the saris in her own almirah. Each colour depicts an emotion, and every emotion finds an expression in our classical dance forms. Sharmila chose Indian classical dancer Ramya Suvi to model her project. Ramya flawlessly showcased eight emotions: happy, sensuous, thoughtful,

trapped, angry, frustrated, sad and powerful. Photographer Ratheesh Ravindran captured Ramya's expressive performance and Sharmila's ideas beautifully in his camera.

The Almirah project began on Instagram and gained traction. Sharmila is now thinking of installing it in an art gallery so that people can take selfies inside the almirah. She also plans to extend the campaign to public spaces under the title 'Open the Almirah' where people can donate items inside the almirah to those who need it the most. ■



NATURE'S GOODNESS

With more people investing in health, these five women-led brands are creating a niche in the growing market of natural beauty products

By Shweta Bhandral

THE MOMS CO.

Malika Sadani's journey started in 2012 when she moved to India from London. Her daughter was a year old. Malika narrates, "When my daughter had her first skin reaction, I realised it was so hard to find great quality natural products that were safe and effec-

tive. I would often ask friends and family members to bring natural products when they were coming to India from abroad." Malika soon realised that she was not the only one facing such issues.

Discussions with more than 200 moms revealed the shortage



Clockwise from top left: The Moms Co. baby-care range; Malika Sadani; the new Ageless Expressions range

of natural mother and baby care products in the Indian market. “That was when the idea to create a brand that can truly be a partner to a mom’s journey into motherhood came alive in the form of The Moms Co.,” says Malika.

Launched in 2017 to address this gap of toxin-free products in the Indian market for pre-natal and post-natal consumption, and baby care, The Moms Co. works with experts across India, Australia and Switzerland. In three years, this homegrown startup has increased its range across categories. They have face care, hair care, baby care

and several other products. They also recently raised US \$8 million in Series B funding from Indian and international venture capitalists.

Last month, they launched Ageless Expressions, a natural age-control range with actor Kalki Koechlin as brand ambassador. The product uses bakuchiol, a vegan alternative to retinol, for its anti-ageing properties. Malika says, “People have become conscious of what they use and what is in their products, especially after Covid-19. Organic products in India, especially in the space of personal care products, have seen a resurgence.”



MITTI SE

Most brands, even those that claim to be 100 percent natural, mix chemicals in their products if they are producing the product on a mass scale, says Tuba Siddiqui. This market situation inspired the Lucknow-based entrepreneur to carve her career in the field of natural products. After doing her Master's in alternative medicine, Tuba wanted to develop products that were completely natural and vegan. Her family initially resisted the idea to start a business. "My father was in government services; nobody ever did business

in our family. Initially, there were questions, and they were sceptical about it. My sisters were my support system because they knew the scope of natural products," says the 35-year-old.

In 2012, Tuba set up a production unit at home. She grew several medicinal plants and made her first product, a floor cleaner. She tells us, "I took the product to exhibitions. People showed interest in it. Family and friends gave good reviews and encouraged me. I aimed to create products from the earth that can go back to the earth. That's how the



L-R: Hyderabad-based Faakhra Siddiqui, 45, and Lucknow-based Tuba Siddiqui, 35

name Mitti Se came about.”

Faakhra Siddiqui, Tuba’s elder sister who now handles strategy and social media for the brand from Hyderabad, adds, “We used a lot of natural things at home – reetha, shikakai and natural oils were not new to us. I appreciated Tuba’s idea because I supported the philosophy. I too used to think a lot about the increased use of chemical products. That’s why I decided to join Tuba in marketing Mitti Se.”

By this time, marriage was on the cards for Tuba. But that did not deter her from her dream. Her husband supported the project, and the Mitti Se range grew to include oils, soaps and home care products. The sisters wanted to be environmentally friendly as much as possible, even if that meant facilitating change in consumer behaviours. Mitti Se products are minimally processed hence generate zero waste. All cleansers are low foam producing,

so they use less water and the grey water is reusable and safe for plants. The packaging of products is biodegradable and can be recycled.

The founders have taken a social enterprise approach. “We hire mostly women from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. They help us in making our products, filling, bottling, labelling and shipping,” Faakhra, 45, tells us.

Until Covid-19 struck, Mitti Se was selling its products via its site, organic stores and a few online portals. They continued to be part of trade exhibitions that helped them take the products to newer markets. The pandemic, however, disrupted their production for a month, but now the brand is back on track and has started selling on their website once again.

The brand is now aiming to launch a baby-care range. “We plan to keep our range lean while making the products multi-functional.”



ETHIKO

Having worked for 15 years in Spain, Dubai and India and after travelling to over 50 countries, Mumbai-based investment banker Sonia Sahni decided to start her own company of natural skincare products.

The idea of Ethiko was born in 2017 when Sonia had some skin issues while she was in Spain. The doctor prescribed steroids. Tired of short-term relief, Sonia took charge of her wellness. She tells us, "I

formulated serums and started using them. The difference in my skin was so evident that friends and family started asking about the products. They then started ordering for their family and friends, and that is how the business started growing."

Sonia came back to India in 2018. She immediately began working on her brand Ethiko. By January 2019 she had the manufacturing and operations in place. "It was tough finding suppliers of high-quality

organic ingredients who would want to support a startup and supply small quantities. I got lucky as I found a supplier who turned out to be an IIT Kharagpur alumna, which is my alma mater too. It helped us trust each other," she narrates.

Soon, she zoomed in on a plant in Ahmedabad to manufacture the products. Once operations and logistics were all set, Ethiko started selling its products online on their website from August 15, 2019.

The products are unisex and inspired by ancient civilisations. For instance, the skin-brightening range uses rosehip oil inspired by the Mayans of South America who used it to counter the harmful effects of the sun on their skin. The oil-control range uses peppermint as used by the ancient Greeks for

cleansing, while the age-defying range contains geranium, which was part of Cleopatra's beauty regimen.

"I source my ingredients from all over the world – argan oil from Morocco, tea tree oil from Australia, and so on," says Sonia. "Also, we launch products when our existing customers ask for something new. For example, our next product is pure almond oil, which was a customer demand."

Ethiko is a bootstrapped company with a team of only three people, including Sonia. She is optimistic about the future despite pandemic-related challenges.

In fact, these past few months of Covid-19 lockdowns have helped her digital-only organic skincare startup with improved sales and a level playing field.



L-R: Ethiko products use natural ingredients and ancient skincare secrets; Ethiko founder Sonia Sahni



RÊVÉES CLIVE



Caroleen Gomez had been happily pursuing her dream to be an investment banker. But while studying abroad, she noticed that the sudden weather change did not suit her hair. This troubled her and made her look for solutions in nature and Ayurveda. Once she returned to India, her interest in natural products gained momentum but she kept it to herself. “Parents generally get worried when you tell them that you are interested in starting a business instead of taking up a job. So, I took up the job I was trained for and started working in the finance sector,” shares the 30-year-old.

Along with her job, Caroleen started training with labs researching on organic and natural products.

She studied the manufacturing process and understood the market.

She launched own beauty brand Rêvées Clive in 2018 with a range of haircare products, body oils, facial oils, handmade soaps, moisturisers, face mists and ubtans. The brand uses ingredients like micro algae, seaweed, marine water, mud and marine plants, and turns them into clean, sustainable beauty products with biotechnology and encapsulation technology. Their products, which are eco-certified and provide long-term protection, are priced ₹800 onwards. “Anything natural, vegan or organic takes more effort to produce. Consumers today understand this and are ready to pay the price for a quality product,” avers the Delhi-based entrepreneur.

AARISH



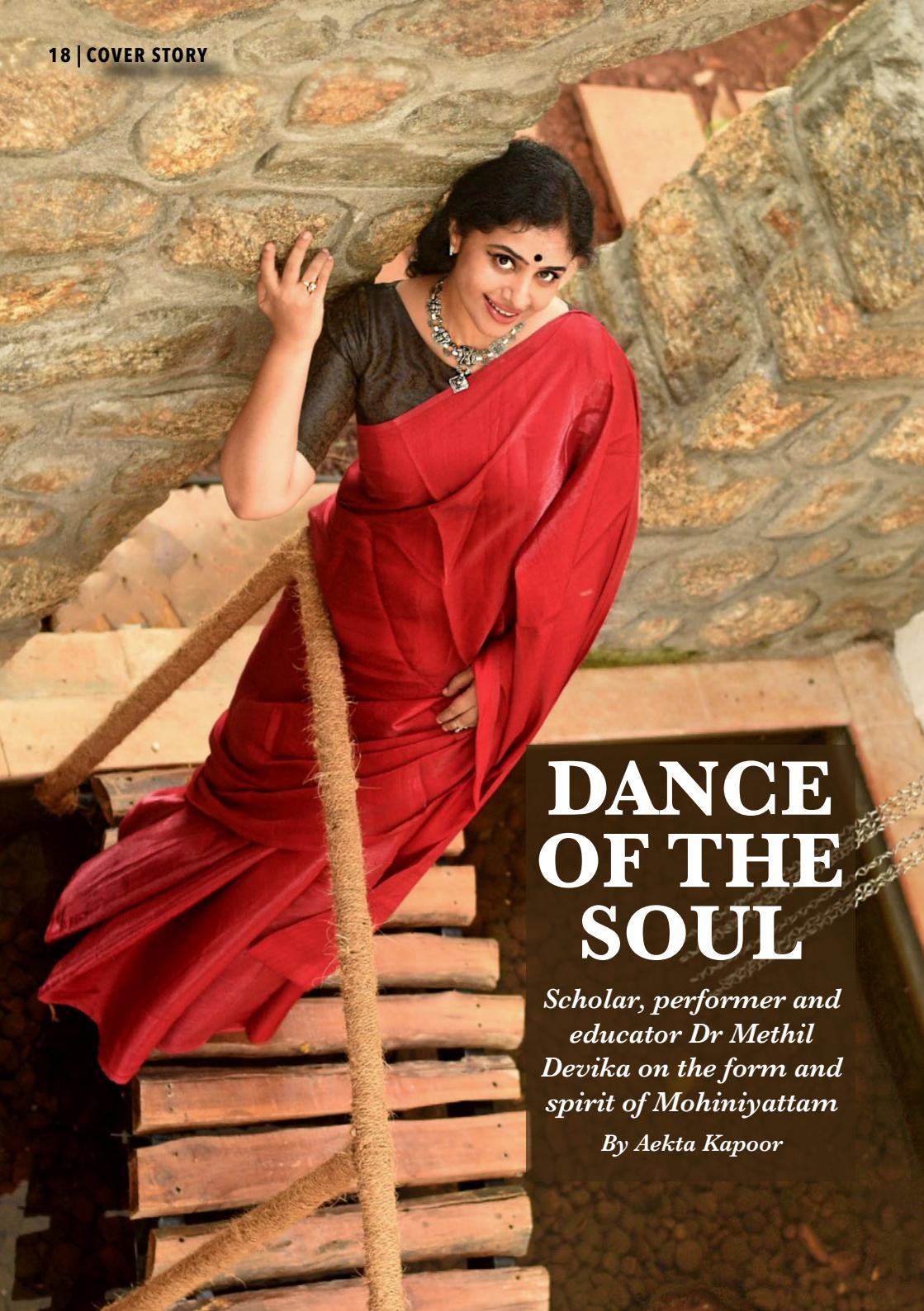
Originally from a small town called Surendranagar 125 km away from Ahmedabad, Manisha Gadani is a graduate in food and nutrition. The homemaker turned into a businesswoman only after moving to Ahmadabad for the education of her daughters. Finding herself with a lot of free time, the mother of two took up a course in cosmetics and skincare, researched various oils and learnt techniques to create natural products.

In 2016, Manisha participated in her first exhibition with a range of soaps, lip balms, scrubs, lotions, and moisturisers. The response encouraged her to create a Facebook page for her brand Aarish, a name derived from the names of her two daughters. “I found there was a lot

of scope on Facebook, so I posted on groups and started getting orders from all over India. Locally, I continued with exhibitions too,” narrates the 44-year-old.

Manisha runs her business from home and makes all products herself. Her husband helps with brand promotions. The soaps are reasonably priced, starting from ₹80. During the festive season, her gift packs are much sought-after. She shares, “Consumers, friends and family always pre-order, so my work is based on bookings and is customised.”

Her sales plummeted by over 25 percent during the Covid lockdown but Manisha is confident of gaining her market back. The Aarish website is in progress, and she hopes to sell her products on Amazon soon. ■



DANCE OF THE SOUL

*Scholar, performer and
educator Dr Methil
Devika on the form and
spirit of Mohiniyattam*

By Aekta Kapoor

In the climactic scene in Methil Devika's dance documentary *Sarpatattwam* (2018), she enacts the opening of the *chakras* and the rising *kundalini* through the classical Indian dance form Mohiniyattam. With her body, facial expressions and hands creating poetry in motion, the award-winning artist portrays within a few seconds of film the culmination of spiritual knowledge and practice: the destruction of the individualistic ego and the dissolution of self into the cosmos.

The 30-minute film brings together all of Devika's passions – philosophy, music, dance and study of the scriptures. Critically acclaimed and even a contender for the Oscars, the film may touch a chord within you, and that won't be accidental. "People say my art gives them goosebumps or leaves them elevated. It would not be possible if I had not experienced that state myself; the experience comes first and then the art," says the Thiruvananthapuram-based dancer, actor and educator, alluding to a divine energy that inhabits the world of artists and creators.

Her performances stand apart not just for Devika's depth of knowledge about the classical dances but also the experiential insight she brings to them. "I have gone through the dark night of the soul. After an experience, I sink into this abyss – which I call the liminal space

between the art being latent and the art materialising. It's that dark phase when you wait. Creativity is a painful process. Like all artists, I'm very sensitive. But that's why I create like this. The body has an intelligence even before the mind," says the 44-year-old dance scholar, who is adjunct professor of dance



at York University, Toronto, Canada, and Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala.

Devika is a well-known face in Kerala's media not just for her own scholarly accomplishments and brilliant performances, but also for her famous husband: 64-year-old Malayalam film star and politician Mukesh. The power couple have been married since 2013; both have



Methil Devika with her actor-politician husband, Mukesh

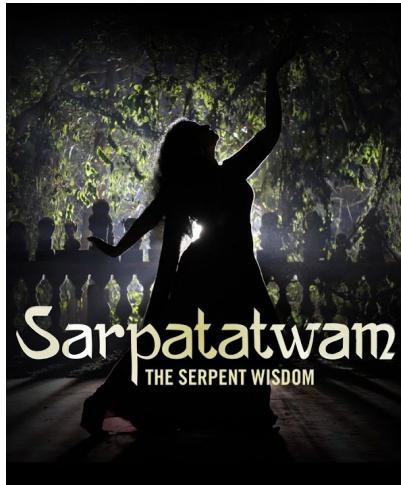
children through previous marriages, a 14-year-old son in Devika's case, and two from Mukesh's first marriage to leading south Indian film actor Saritha. Since 2016, Mukesh has been a member of Kerala Legislative Assembly representing Kollam constituency. If Devika's life wasn't full enough before, it is certainly packed to the brim now.

Born and raised in Dubai, Devika was wearing *ghungroos* even as an infant, and began learning Bharatanatyam at the age of four. By the age of 13, she knew she wanted to pursue the classical arts when she grew up. But, like any other self-respecting Malayali girl who was also good at studies, she made conservative academic choices in college: a Bachelor's in commerce

from Palakkad, and an MBA from University of Madras. But her choice of location was strategic: "I wanted to study Kuchipudi dance in Chennai!"

After graduation, Devika got a job through campus placement at a television channel's head office in Thiruvananthapuram but, three months down, she knew being a producer was not where her destiny lay. Instead, the city being a hub of arts offered her ample opportunity to be a dancer and performer. That's when she set her heart on doing a doctorate in dance. It was unheard of in Kerala so Devika, who is the youngest of three sisters, took her father along to Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata to find out about the admission process.





L-R: Devika takes up only 15 students at a time through her two dance schools, considered the most picturesque in India; *Sarpatatwam* (2018) documentary poster

“They insisted my MBA was of no use and I’d have to do an MA in dance first,” she narrates. “And so I did. I had gone there with just two pairs of clothes and I ended up staying there for two years.” She followed it up with a PhD in Mohiniyattam from Bharathidasan University, Tamil Nadu. In 2010, she launched her own dance academy Sripada Natya Kalari in Palakkad, and last year a second one in Thiruvananthapuram. She is the recipient of various awards at the national and state levels, and is empanelled in SPIC MACAY to promote Indian classical music and culture amongst the youth. She has also been on the board of various educational institutions.

Devika’s practice of Mohiniyattam – a sensual and feminine dance form that originated in Kerala – is *avant garde* in the sense that she constantly pushes its boundaries. “Mohiniyattam has rigid rules – men are not allowed to perform it, for instance, though male teachers existed in the distant past,” she informs. But through her performances, she brings in a more modern sensibility and universal appeal. It helps that she is also at ease with other forms of dance: Kuchipudi and freestyle. “Mohinyattam is my soul, it is home to me. But one doesn’t want to stay home all the time!” she jokes.

Instead of forcing herself into puritan values of performance,

Devika allows intuition and her own experience to guide her. She choreographed *Sarpatattwam* in just 30 minutes, even though the music took her days to compose. Her Instagram page often offers her thousands of followers candid glimpses of her breaking out into impromptu dances, skipping joyfully, with the wide smile of a woman in her element.

“Art is very liberating,” says Devika, who holds her independence and feminism close to her heart. “I go by my own rules, my own formula about life. I believe there is no right or wrong way to live, and as long as you are operating from love and compassion, it’s all good,” she says.

She predicts that, due to developments in technology, the world will see drastic changes in the way people, especially couples, relate to one another in the future. Despite differences, Devika and Mukesh share a unique bond, and though he is “more of a purist” and may not always agree with her views, he is still very understanding. “He has seen a lot of life,” says Devika.

Her advice to women seeking a happy relationship is: “Low investment and high energy. Don’t bother to give your all to someone who does not reciprocate. Invest as much as you get. But when you are together, be in the present and bring in high energy.”

Devika is now working on

another documentary film about the divine feminine, and plans to learn sign language to make her art more accessible. The next phase of her journey is summed up in the question-and-answer segment of *Sarpatattwam*. Quoting the Upanishads to say “Ignorance is dark and knowledge is darker,” she explains in the film that the journey of spiritual evolution is



like a snake shedding its skin. “The journey needs re-evaluation of one’s weaknesses, regeneration of the self, leaving the past behind; it’s like a rebirth happening every day. What exists finally is bliss and then you are able to radiate selflessness and compassion for other beings. The body is but a mass that exists in a void. It is transient and impermanent. Art is just a medium of experiencing it.” ■



INDIA @ HEART

Award-winning choreographer and performer Preeti Vasudevan is taking the best of Indian classical dance heritage to the youth in the West

What Preeti Vasudevan misses most about India is the multi-generational sense of home. The award-winning New York-based choreographer and performer sorely longs for “that sense of an ongoing story and perspective” for herself and her 10-year-old daughter that only living with parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts can give you.

And so Preeti took a little bit of home to New York.

An exponent of Bharatanatyam,

Preeti has made a niche for herself by creating new provocative contemporary works from the Indian tradition adapted for a global audience. Her love affair with dance and choreography began in her teens. Raised in Delhi, Chennai and Bengaluru, she lived briefly in Indiana in the American Midwest before she moved to London to do her Master’s in dance studies from Laban Centre. Later, she qualified as a certified movement analyst from the Laban Institute of Movement



Preeti Vasudevan with children of Madison Elementary, Des Moines, Iowa, USA (a Turnaround Arts school)

Studies in New York, and began a new life in the dynamic city.

In 2005, she set up Thresh, a performing-arts collaborative. With its vision being to educate and entertain, the team has earned international acclaim for their fresh juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary voices. “It’s an experimental platform to bring in global artists. The aim is to provoke topics of identity,” says Preeti, who has done much thinking on this subject. “When you’re moving around in a globalised world, the question of ‘who we are’ becomes a big deal. In a country like the US, for instance, people want to define you in a certain way, and you may be coming

from a country where you never encountered those definitions. Like, I may grow up listening to rock music in India but if I tell someone in the US that I grew up listening to rock music in India and have no knowledge of Indian classical dance, they would be shocked. People assume certain things about you.”

Part of her work with Thresh is related to representing India to the Western world. “It’s important to see the country as a growing culture, and not to be stuck in a culture bubble or time freeze,” she says, narrating how immigrants often hold on to older Indian value systems after leaving, not realising that Indians and their values have changed.



L-R: Preeti with the Thresh team; she has been recognised by prestigious institutions in the US for her work

“I want to break this. I have been lucky to be able to travel between India and wherever in the world I have lived, so I have never felt disconnected from the changes taking place in India. I am able to bring in a global perspective to my performances and work.” In fact, Preeti makes it a point to work frequently in India so that she can stay “intimately connected” with her roots. Her parents still live in Chennai.

With a string of awards under her belt, she has performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Dance Institute, The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Centre, besides at several locations in India.

But what Preeti loves most is to be able to share the depth and wisdom of Indian classical dance with young people from around the world. Be-

sides theatrical performances, she is also an educator who works with institutes and groups to bring the joy of dance to as many lives as she can. She created a ground-breaking educational website, *Dancing for the Gods*, in collaboration with the Department of Education, NYC, to build a cultural bridge through creative Indian dance for New York’s public schools.

The pandemic and its associated lockdowns in New York put a halt to the work Thresh had been doing. To continue, they had to go digital. “Storytelling is the very essence of my work,” says Preeti, who decided to launch a digital storytelling initiative to keep children entertained at home while also educating them about universal tenets.

Called the Red Curtain Project,



Preeti at a musical theatre programme at Jacobs Pillow, a performance centre in Massachusetts (2017)

Preeti's videos inspire children to see connection and unity between cultures, while also encouraging them to live by positive principles. The subjects she takes up are contemporary and very relevant for a globalised world. For instance, a video made for Diwali called *Lights for Gita*, based on a children's book by author Rachna Gilmore, shares a meaningful message of what it means to dispel darkness and find true light within each of us, and how we can make new homes in unknown countries.

While Preeti performs the narrative herself – in front of a red curtain, naturally! – the project is a completely collaborative effort. In *Lights for Gita*, the illustrations have been done by Harsha Biswajit who currently lives in Barcelona, while

the music has been composed by New York-based pianist Charu Suri, the first Indian-American jazz composer to premiere an evening of work at Carnegie Hall last year.

In each video of the Red Curtain Project (14 so far made during the lockdowns), there are detailed explanations of the *mudras* or gestures used by Preeti in the narration, along with their Sanskrit names in Indian classical dance tradition. For Indian children abroad, the videos offer a doorway to access their country's rich cultural legacy, while for children of other cultures, the videos are an introduction to the colour, depth and wisdom of Indian classical dance heritage. All this while leaving them with a meaningful lesson in personal growth. ■

View the videos at redcurtainproject.org



ART AND ACCESSIBILITY

Neuroscientist and Bharatanatyam exponent Savitha Sastry is mainstreaming the classical dance form through film, social media and digital education

By Manvi Pant

Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer Savitha Sastry's experiments with traditional dancing techniques and her innovations in the field have been widely recognised by critics and peers alike. Known for pushing boundaries, Savitha is a pioneer in taking the dance out of its mythological and

religious moulds, and using it to narrate novel stories. "This makes it more accessible to everyone – even those that have no initiation with the dance form," says the Bengaluru-based neuroscientist and artist.

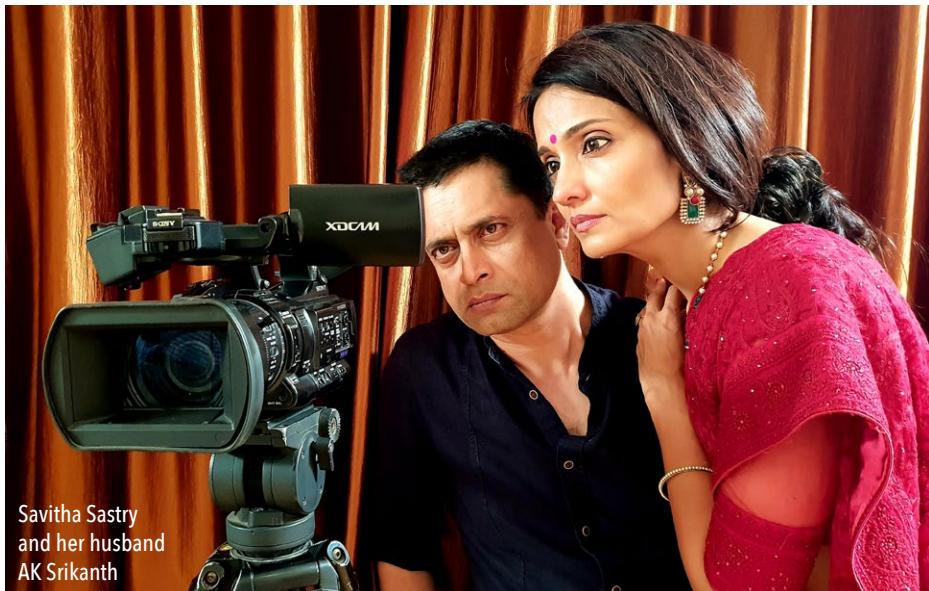
Born in Hyderabad to a Tamil family, Savitha picked up dancing at the age of five and a foray into



Bharatanatyam came as a natural choice given her Tamil upbringing. “I was so enamoured by dance that I remember paying our domestic help a princely sum of 25 paise to play Dharmendra to my Hema Malini, and I would dance in our make-believe world with her!” the 50-year-old laughs. As a dance student, she took her first lessons at the Raja Rajeswari Kala Mandal Dance Academy in Mumbai. When she was 12, her family relocated to Chennai, where she continued her dance education.

A neuroscientist by education, she lived considerable years in the US where as a weekend occupation

she used to teach dancing to students of the Indian diaspora. It was only in the latter half of 2000s that she embraced dancing full-time and emerged as a professional in the field. “I did a lot of traditional repertoires (*margams*). The years added more gradients to my work as an artist. I started performing dance theatre productions, which were based on my husband and writer AK Srikanth’s stories, and were notable for being novel storylines not based out of mythology or religion. Since 2018, I am making dance films for digital media based on Srikanth’s concepts, and we still do not go anywhere near religion

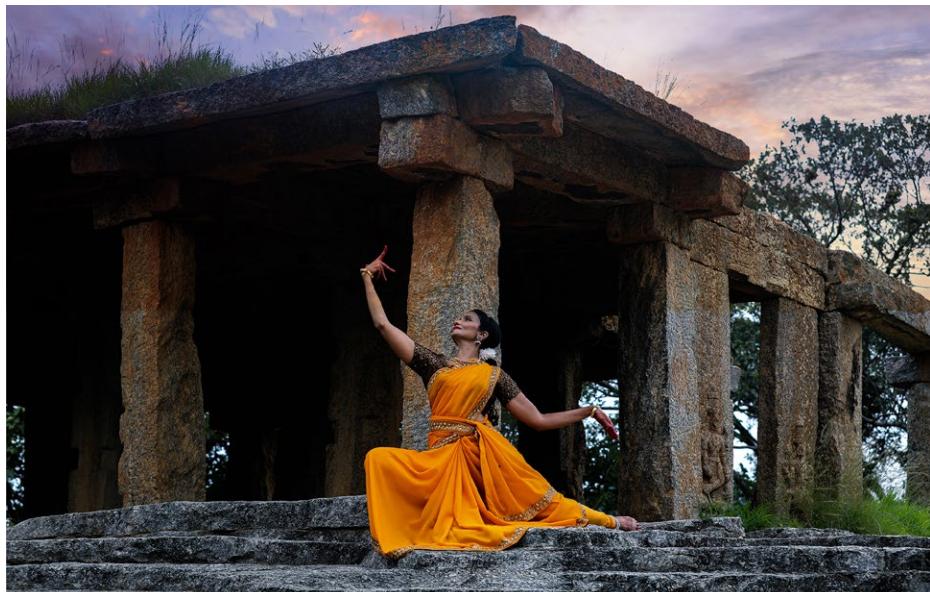


Savitha Sastry
and her husband
AK Srikanth

or mythology,” she says. Their first short film *The Descent* won the Best Short Film Award at the Calcutta International Film Festival 2019.

Savitha and Srikanth incorporated their production house, The Savitha Sastry Production Company, two years ago with an aim to evangelise Bharatanatyam all over the world, and also train the next generation of dancers who can carry forward their legacy. Savitha shares, “We do not use our company as a commercial model. Our short films are available for free across all digital platforms, and training sessions for dancers are made available through an entry-restricted site called ‘Inner Circle’, which is also free.” Her YouTube channel has garnered over five million views.

Recently, the company produced a trilogy *Three Colors: Green* which is based on the life of Srikanth’s mother, Meenakshi, an aspiring dancer who was unable to pursue her passion. It was challenging for the couple to shoot the first piece during lockdown. “We had to do the shooting with as few crew members as possible, and had to take on a majority of the grunt work of lugging equipment, cleaning the locations, and all other associated production work ourselves. Taking extreme care and precautions to ensure health and safety of all team members became imperative. It definitely brought the team much closer!” says Savitha, who was excited to see the end result. “Portraying my husband’s



mother was challenging, but I am happy I was able to bring life to the character. Judging by the number of women who have written in to us claiming it is their life's story, it makes us think the issue is hardly something that can be conveniently pushed under the carpet."

In between all the hustle, decades of hard work and persistence, Savitha agrees that, "Art can be really consuming. It is intense, almost overwhelming and a lot more than that." But all these years, she has tried to balance out these very strong emotions that art brings about, and tried to live a life outside of arts as well. A big fan of the work of Iranian director Asghar Farhadi, she is also inspired by actors and directors of the Hindi film industry

such as Shabana Azmi, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Manoj Bajpai, Pankaj Kapoor, Tabu and Kamal Hassan. "Their craft isn't that different from what I do – we both tell stories. And, all of these inspire me greatly for the way they bring diverse characters to life, and the way they have reinvented themselves time and again over the years," she says.

The devout classical dancer wants young girls to follow their passion but not take short cuts, and not expect instant fame and recognition. "It takes a decade and more of learning and extreme amounts of hard work to make a mark. So, unless you are seriously driven and passionate about it, and have the time available for it, please think twice." ■



Fighting Disparity

WeEmpower Asia programme head at UN Women, Suhela Khan talks about the path ahead for women's economic empowerment in India

For the past decade, social scientist Suhela Khan has worked at UN Women, leading large-scale transformational programmes on women's economic empowerment. Before that, she worked with the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the government of Gujarat to help them formulate and manage their projects and schemes related to the socioeconomic empowerment

of women. Suhela is a Ford Fellow and holds a Master's degree in public policy from the University of Michigan, and a Master's in social work from Aligarh Muslim University.

This month, Suhela is one of the speakers at Grant Thornton SABERA Awards 2020, to be held virtually on December 10. eShe is media partner for the event.

We spoke to Suhela, who is

currently country manager for the WeEmpower Asia (WEA) programme at UN Women, about the path to women's economic empowerment in India and the obstacles ahead.

What are the greatest barriers women in India face when it comes to economic participation and independence? In the years that you have worked toward this cause, how far do you think the situation has improved?

India's female labour force participation stands at around 20 percent, which is one of the lowest in the world. It has been declining over time, despite rising female education levels and falling fertility. This does not hint towards a promising situation around women's access to economic opportunities. Importantly, over 90 percent of women work in the informal or unorganised sector and in certain kinds of jobs and sectors that are unskilled and pay less with little or no implementation of labour laws. Women in India do 9.8 times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men as compared to the global average of 2.6 times. This limits their prospects for economic advancement. They not only experience gender pay gap but also face

**"WOMEN IN
INDIA DO 9.8
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THIS LIMITS THEIR
PROSPECTS"**

a threat of violence including sexual harassment at public, private and workplaces and now increasingly in digital spaces.

Over the years, the Government of India has taken initiatives to increase women's participation in the workforce at different levels of organisations. Starting from notifications removing restrictions on women's right to work at night in factories, in underground mines, appointments as board members to comprehensive maternity benefits and protection from sexual harassment at the workplace, progressive laws and policies have been put in place to change the very fabric of business operations including making worksites safe for women

and girls. Women's economic empowerment is gaining traction with larger private foundations and global corporations showing an interest in promoting gender equality through their policies and practices.

For women, the professional is deeply impacted by the personal. How has WEA helped encourage women entrepreneurs in India with the major roadblocks and challenges they face in their personal and social environments? One of the objectives of the WEA



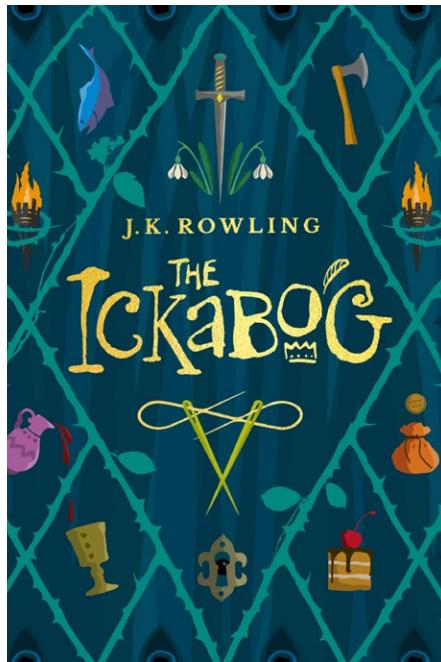
Programme is to create an enabling environment for women's increased access to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. The Programme acknowledges that it is not a mere lack of skills, talent, education, or networks that prevent women from excelling in their ventures, but they are constrained by gender barriers to a large extent. Issues such as gender bias and stereotypes, glass ceilings and sticky floors, violence and disproportionate burden of care work compromise their economic pursuits.

To address these, we work with women entrepreneurs in reflecting on these challenges and identifying strategies to address them leveraging their learnings and experiences. The programme also works with

investors, corporate supply chains and government, enabling them to adopt a gendered approach to address the needs of and support women owned enterprises.

For example, in partnership with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, we convened businesses, trade unions, civil-society organisations, academia and gender experts, and submitted gender recommendations for the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights. Together with NITI Aayog's Women's Entrepreneurship Platform and UN's Investor Consortium, we brought together women-led enterprises and leading investors to address the gender disparities in startup funding. ■

Read more on eShe.in



INDIA'S LITTLE ILLUSTRATORS

These Indian children were among the 34 child illustrators who won the chance to be featured in JK Rowling's new book, The Ickabog

PHOTO: DEBRA HURFORD BROWN © J.K. ROWLING 2018

The creator of the *Harry Potter* series, JK Rowling had the idea for *The Ickabog* over a decade ago. She would make up chapters to read out to her two younger children as bedtime stories. But the book ended up in her attic as she began work on a book for adults.

Then, Covid struck. Realising how hard the lockdown was for children in particular, Rowling brought out the *Ickabog* stories from her attic and serialised it for

free online to entertain children.

Soon, the *Ickabog* illustration competition contest was launched for children age seven to 12. Over 18,000 entries poured in from India, UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. Thirty-four winners, including eight from India, now have their illustrations in the new exquisite hardback edition of *The Ickabog* (Hachette India, ₹1299). Five little illustrators from India tell us about their *Ickabog* experience.

ARIA, AGE 7



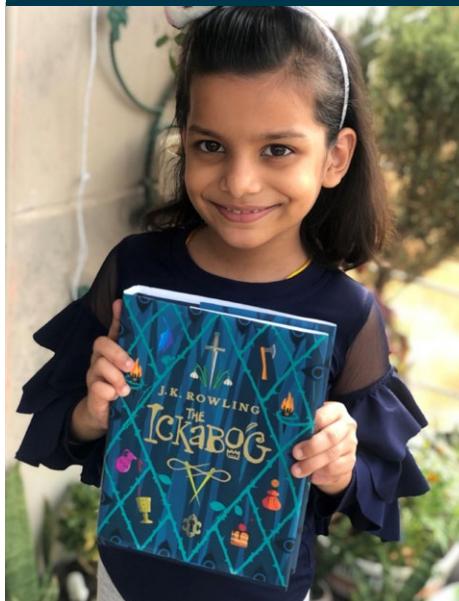
I first started using water colours during *The Ickabog* competition. Splashing paint creates wonderful effects and I love it! The red paint splashed all across the page is what makes this illustration special. It is based on this paragraph: *"When Mr and Mrs Tenderloin's neighbours woke up the next day and found chickens all over the road, they hurried to tell Tubby his birds had escaped. Imagine the neighbours' horror when they found the enormous footprints, the blood and the feathers, the broken-down back door, and no sign of either husband or wife."*

I love to dance and I have been training in classical ballet for almost four years now. I also love music. I love to sing and I play the piano.

When JK Rowling retweeted my illustration entries six times, I already felt like a winner. Then we got a mail saying that four of my artworks were shortlisted. My mom said I am already a winner and the result does not matter as I had done my best. But when the results were announced with me as one of the winners, I was shocked and could not speak for a few seconds! And when I opened my mouth, I just screamed with joy!

Before this competition, I was not very confident of my drawing. Now I feel I can express myself better and enjoy it even more. Also after reading *The Ickabog*, I am reading more and reading fast!

DIVYANSHI, AGE 8



I love drawing and painting. Reading *The Ickabog* chapters online and then making illustrations was very interesting. I would read the description of each scene and the characters again and again before working on my illustrations. I made 22 paintings for this competition and I am glad that eight of them got shortlisted.

This selected painting was special as I had to show one of my favourite characters, Bert Beamish, sitting in front of a closed inn. He was sad and lonely. I love pink and blue so I used these colours for the background to depict a night scene and detailing on the tavern.

Besides drawing, I love dancing.

I am inclined towards hip-hop and try to bring fusion into my choreography. I won a prize at state level in *Gurgaon's Got Talent – Season 5*. I was also able to reach the studio round of *Dance India Dance* hosted by Zee TV.

I am very happy that my illustration has been selected for JK Rowling's book. The caption for this illustration reads: "The doors and windows had all been boarded up. The tavern had gone out of business and Harold and his family seemed to have left." My whole family was jumping with joy the day we got the results. My family, friends, teachers, and classmates congratulated me. I am so happy. I feel proud and honoured.

DIVYMAAN, AGE 10

Anything around me can inspire me. What I see, what I read, what I hear – I like to draw it all. Besides drawing, I like to find out about extinct life forms, marine life and famous personalities. I also play the violin.

I felt very happy and very special to be amongst the selected few who won *The Ickabog* competition. My picture depicts Mr Dovetail who is in jail and misses his daughter.

Nothing much has changed for me after winning. But, because I like to draw a lot, I feel encouraged to draw even more. There is no such thing as too much drawing.



RADHYA, AGE 9

Books, books and more books! I just loooove reading! Books are my inspiration. Whenever I am free, I either read or draw. So this competition was made for me!

Apart from drawing and reading, I enjoy travelling, skating and swimming. When I found out I had won *The Ickabog* competition, I felt as if I was on top of the world. It took my breath away for a second! I screamed at the top of my voice. I couldn't believe it!

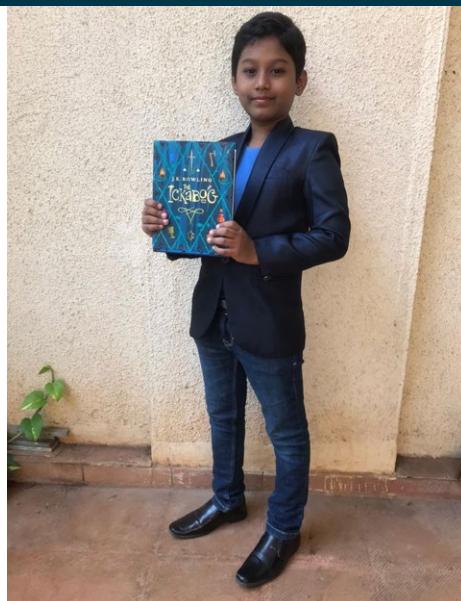
This competition has acknowledged my work and my passion and I feel more confident and inspired towards reading and drawing.



ARON, AGE 7



TM & © J.K. Rowling 2020



I started scribbling on the walls of my house when I was two years old. As my interest in drawing grew, I started participating in competitions and watching drawing shows on TV and YouTube. I learnt how to shade and draw characters.

I have won over 100 awards from national and international art competitions, and am recognised as creative star artist 2020 from Picasso.

I participated in this competition with 100 percent dedication. When this competition was announced, it was mentioned that results would be out on August 10, 2020. I was thrilled and was determined to win this, because August 10 is my birthday. Every year, I used to get

many birthday gifts from my grandmother. Last year, she passed away, so I prayed to her to help me win the Ickabog competition for this birthday. And it happened. This was her gift to me this year.

I was really thrilled when the results were announced. I called my friends and relatives to share the happy moment. In late October, I received my copy of the book signed by JK Rowling. I felt really blessed to receive this book from the best writer in the world. I won the competition for my artwork of the title character, the Ickabog. Now I feel more confident about doing better illustrations. ■

TM & © J.K. Rowling 2020



COMIC SHEROES

Two new comics with female superheroes and contemporary themes like Covid-19 and social media will keep young adults hooked this month

By Neha Kirpal

Love comics? There's an exciting winter of comics ahead with solid, healthy 'sheroes' or girl heroes to read, watch and look up to. India's first female animated superhero Priya has returned in a new comic book focused on Covid-19. The fourth edition of this pioneering series is called *Priya's Mask* and also presents a debut alliance between India's Priya and Pakistan's female superhero Burka Avenger in their fight against the

deadly virus. "The virus does not understand or respect borders," adds the series writer Shubhra Prakash, "so this was a natural synergy between both cultural heroes."

Priya was introduced to audiences in 2014, two years after the Delhi gang-rape. The first volume *Priya's Shakti* shattered social stigmas surrounding rape survivors. Its success led to the release of the second volume *Priya's Mirror*, which premiered at the New York Film

Festival in 2016. Inspired by the story of Laxmi Agarwal, it centred on acid-attack survivors and was funded by the World Bank. The third volume *Priya and the Lost Girls* (2019) shed light on the issue of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia.

Named a “gender equality champion” by UN Women, the comic book is being released this

confidence,” says Vidya, adding. “Apart from being a nod to caregivers globally, which in itself is wonderful and timely and necessary, the animation carries a strong message of solidarity.”

Set in Jodhpur, the narrative weaves around the escapades of eight-year-old Meena – voiced by filmmaker Kabir Khan’s 12-year-

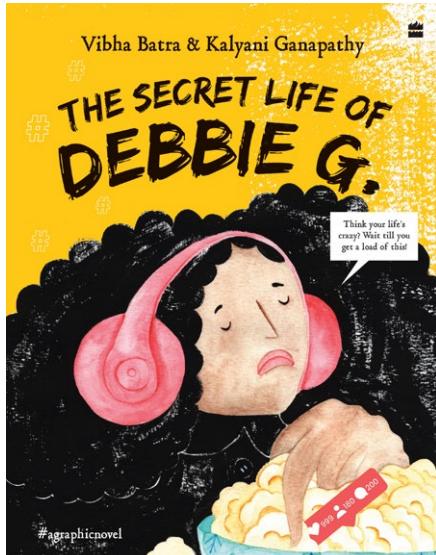


L-R: Series writer Shubhra Prakash; India's first female superhero Priya with Pakistan's Burka Avenger

month paired with an animated short film. Voiced by actor Mrunal Thakur, the heroine Priya is remodelled for the very first time shedding away her former *salwar-kameez* clad avatar and embracing a feisty teenage demeanour. She is escorted by the flying tiger, Sahas, voiced by actor Vidya Balan. “What Priya stands for resonated with me at so many levels and it’s the essence of Sahas that connected with me – her strength, her empathy, her

old daughter Sairah Kabir – and her working mother who nurses Covid-19 patients.

Mrunal says, “I have always aspired to be that superwoman who spreads awareness around social issues and it couldn’t be more exciting than to be a part of an animation character who is the voice of reason.” Sairah Kabir adds that a lot of kids her age will be able to relate to this story since their parents are working round the clock and juggling



L-R: Book cover, *The Secret Life of Debbie G.*; author and advertising consultant Vibha Batra

between so many responsibilities. The comic book series is available as a free download.

Another recent graphic novel, *The Secret Life of Debbie G*, written by Vibha Batra and illustrated by Kalyani Ganapathy, highlights social-media perils and mental-health problems among the youth. The story of a 16-year-old who becomes an online sensation overnight, it is set in contemporary times, when the number of likes and followers determines one's self-worth.

The protagonist Arya is brought up as an independent girl who questions authority and makes her own decisions. She creates an anonymous account on Instagram to teach some classmates a lesson. Through her online avatar, she finds

fame but realises along the way that her alter ego is dangerous.

Vibha believes that in today's times, it is hard to ignore the siren call of social media, and that #FOMO (fear of missing out) is real. "I wanted to explore how social media influences a teen's behaviour and affects their emotional health and relationships. I wanted to explore the pitfalls of fame, the perils of social media. How far would a person go to achieve it? Would they lose sight of themselves? Would they be willing to pay a price?"

Humorously and subtly, the novel brings out several other issues, such as the generation gap between children and grandparents, body shaming, single parenthood and remarriage. ■



FACT IN FICTION

Like her previous books that raised complex social issues, Canadian author-activist Farzana Doctor's latest novel raises the topic of female genital cutting

By Aekta Kapoor

In Farzana Doctor's latest novel *Seven*, the Indian-American protagonist – a mother of a little girl in New York – accompanies her husband to India on a research trip. There, she confronts the reality of

the tradition of *khatna*, or female genital cutting, in the Dawoodi Bohra community, and realises the issue is closer home than she could have ever imagined.

The topic of female genital



L-R: Launching *All Inclusive* in the US (2017); with the other founding members of End FGM/C Canada Network

mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) is a personal one for the Toronto-based author Farzana, who is the ‘maasi’ behind Dear Maasi, an online sex and relationships advice column for FGM/C survivors, where she gives advice such as, “When we surface and work through our internalised shame about being racialised, or women, or Muslim, or fat or poor or disabled or queer or older or depressed or chronically ill, we liberate ourselves.”

One of the founding members of *WeSpeakOut.org*, Farzana’s activism often spills over into her writing, and all her novels take up nuanced social and relationship issues: same-sex love and religious conservatism in *Stealing Nasreen* (2007); a father dealing with the memory of having killed his baby accidentally in

Six Metres of Pavement (2011); and swinging couples in *All Inclusive* (2015).

What unites the four books is that all protagonists are drawn from Farzana’s own community. For the award-winning author, the vision is fair representation of South Asian characters in contemporary English literature. “I think South Asian characters are ‘missing’ – more so the Dawoodi Bohras,” says Farzana, who turns 50 this month. She believes there is space for feminism and evolution even in her conservative religion. “You can be Dawoodi Bohra and still be a feminist. You can love and critique your community at the same time. Else, it can never be welcoming and safe for everyone,” she avers.

Born in Zambia, Farzana



L-R: The cover of Farzana Doctor's latest novel, *Seven*; Farzana with her partner Reyan Naim in Toronto

immigrated to Canada as a baby. Her doctor father had renounced religion, and so Farzana grew up being “naturally critical of aspects of organised religion” though she identifies with being Dawoodi Bohra and a spiritual Muslim with interests in astrology, tarot reading and psychics.

An imaginative, creative child, she was an activist by the time she was 16, when she joined an anti-nukes organisation. Tragedy struck her family when she was 11 and her sister was 14: their mother passed away due to cancer. “We were forced to grow up quickly and become independent kids,” she recalls, adding that it took her about a decade to come to terms with the grief, more so because their father didn’t know how to talk about feelings.

Social justice was the most important theme of young Farzana’s life. Having inherited her rebellious instincts from her parents, who stood up against racism, she joined human-rights clubs while studying arts and sciences at McMasters University. Her first job, at 18, was at a women’s shelter. She followed it up with a Master’s in social work.

At 22, Farzana came out as a bisexual. “I didn’t see any reflection of people like me in books at the time,” she says, explaining why she thought it important to bring up stories of Asian, Muslim LGBTQ+ persons in her fiction. “The more you bring up issues such as FGM/C, the more you normalise the conversation,” says Farzana, who is also a psychotherapist. “My novel is my contribution to this.” ■



A SAFER RIDE

Young tech entrepreneur Hira Batool Rizvi's carpooling app offers women commuters in Pakistan a safe and efficient way to get to college or work

This November, when Vodafone Institute's Berlin-based F-Lane accelerator programme for businesses using technology to empower women was in progress, an unlikely participant was part of the online conference: a newborn baby. But little Aaleen had been part

of her mother Hira Batool Rizvi's entrepreneurial venture even before birth as the 30-year-old founder of She'Kab – Pakistan's first monthly carpooling app for women – managed operations remotely from Dubai during the pandemic. "The baby was supposed to be born after

I completed the virtual accelerator programme, but she was three weeks early," smiles Hira.

Like her daughter, Hira too is a woman in a hurry. She was 26 when she launched She'Kab to help fill the gap for safe public transport for urban Pakistani women. "Car ownership rates are dismal for women, and the state of public transport is terrible. Public vans [small buses] in cities have only one seat in the front next to the driver for women; the rest of the van is reserved for men. The assumption is that their place is at home. So women who don't have their own cars end up spending four times as much as men on commuting safely for education or work," says Hira.

According to a 2017 report, 90 percent women face harassment on public transport and 82 percent at bus stops in Pakistan. Most of these women commuters do not report them due to fears that their complaints will not be acted on by the authorities, or that their families may curtail their independence if they knew the truth. "Many women drop out of educational institutions or the workforce due to this systemic lapse," says Hira.

It was a reality that Hira had never really noticed until she reached high school. Daughter of progressive, educated parents, Hira's biggest role model was her paternal grandmother, who was the first woman

to earn a PhD from Osmania University in pre-Independence Hyderabad, where literacy rates were high even a century ago.

Hira's grandmother moved to Islamabad during the Partition, and where other women in their community were forced to drop out of school in class eight or nine, women in Hira's family were expected to be



Hira with the She'Kab team in Islamabad

as educated as the men. "Equality was really important for me even when I was a child; if my brother signed up for a digital design course, I would too," narrates Hira, who is the third of five siblings.

Being one of only three girls in a class of 50 boys while doing her A-levels was the first instance that



Hira at Norway's Katapult Accelerator, which offers tech startups assistance and up to USD 100,000 in funding

Hira noticed gender discrimination in education. "Girls weren't expected to take up subjects like maths and physics," she says. Later, she was one of three girls in a class of 120 boys in engineering college in Taxila, and one of only two women engineers to work at a software firm in a building full of men.

It was after joining Georgia Institute of Technology at Atlanta, US, on a Fulbright Scholarship that Hira had the idea for a safe taxi service for women in Pakistan. Her Master's in science and technology policy focused on new and emerging technologies. "I studied the models of companies like Uber and Lyft but I realised that the model would

not work in my country," says Hira, who returned to Pakistan in 2015.

She reached out to her brother Ali Haider who was doing his Master's in computer science in Berlin at the time. He was only too willing to join her in her new venture. Together, they set up She'Kab in 2015 and Hira joined the entrepreneur ecosystem in Pakistan. "Women entrepreneurs were becoming a 'thing' then and I was one the few," says Hira. "It was easy for me to penetrate the network."

She'Kab is a monthly carpooling app for women commuters in four Pakistani cities. The app uses intelligent clustering and route optimisation while being four times cheaper

than other ride-hailing services, due to carpooling. While commuters are charged a monthly subscription priced between PKR 5000 to 9000 (INR 2300 to 4200), drivers with self-owned cars are paid monthly salaries with She'Kab taking a 10 to 15 percent commission. Over 6000 women riders are registered on the app, mostly in the age group 18 to



45, students or working professionals who need fixed schedules.

Of the registered 4000 drivers, about 20 percent are women. "The idea was to have *all* women drivers, but that was wishful thinking," sighs Hira. Confronted by a huge shortage of women behind the wheel, the startup decided to sign

up male drivers after careful, vigorous screening and training.

With a goal of reaching out to 17 million Pakistani women struggling every day with finding safe transportation, Hira's idea caught the attention of global investors. In 2017, she was one of 12 startups to win a seat on Norway's Katapult Accelerator, which offers startups hands-on assistance and up to USD 100,000 in funding. Beating over a thousand contestants from around the world, She'Kab was the only startup selected from Pakistan.

She also competed in Shell LiveWIRE's Top Ten Innovators Competition, a global competition for businesses that demonstrate excellence in innovation, and won the runner-up award and USD 10,000 in funding for She'Kab.

In the meantime, she got married and moved to Dubai this year. While Covid-19 crippled businesses worldwide, She'Kab made it to a prestigious list of nine women-led startups from around the world to be picked out of 455 applicants for the F-Lane accelerator programme. The one that baby Aaleen ended up gate-crashing.

"All of us are blessed with a unique quality to make a difference," says Hira. "For me, technology and gender are my unique qualities, and I am using them to make an impact to women's lives in my country." ■



GRANNY FLEX

What should grandmothers look like? Sculpted, strong bodybuilders, if you go by Sweden's Eva Birath

By Anita Panda

If there's anyone who embodies the idea that age is only a number, 64-year-old Swedish grandmother of three Eva Birath fits the bill. At 5'11", this stunning bodybuilder is accustomed to standing out in a crowd and has no intention of giving up her passion for fitness anytime soon.

Eva first shot to fame at 47, clinching the first place in a local body-building competition in 2003.

This led to coverage in myriad Swedish publications, the *New York Times* and a Swedish television show. She is also an artist with her works displayed at several exhibitions in Sweden and once in Norway.

Born and raised in Gothenburg (also called Göteborg), a seaport town in Sweden, sports and fitness came naturally to her through her family; her parents often took her for skiing in winter and swimming

in summer. She began playing volleyball at 12. "My father taught me that there is a solution to every problem, and from my mother I learnt to cook simple meals at home and to avoid junk food," says the power-woman.

She met her first husband, a Brit in Saudi Arabia, when working as a nurse in the Middle Eastern coun-

many years later in Sweden and re-educated herself to become an architect. She had another child, a son, but began facing health issues at age 35, with hormone problems due to a pituitary tumour. Her second marriage lasted 13 years, and she entered a dark phase of her life soon after, suddenly laid off from her job around the same time.



L-R: Eva was one of eight people featured in a newspaper campaign against prejudice; modelling in her youth

try. They had a daughter together, but separated after five years of marriage. Eva moved to London and began working as a model with her baby girl in tow. Soon, however, despite prestigious assignments and frequent appearances in fashion magazines, she got tired of "feeling like a brainless object" and quit modelling.

She met her second husband

She sold her house and car, and moved into an apartment. She had no idea what to do next but was told she had a good physique for bodybuilding. So, she signed up for a tournament with scant knowledge of diet, training or poses. It was unusual for someone to begin bodybuilding at her age and yet, despite the late start in her forties, she competed at the national



L-R: Eva with her three grandchildren; at the gym with her training partner who is also her son's best friend

level and finished first! It was enough to persuade her to commit to her training as an amateur bodybuilder in the Swedish national championships in 2006.

But it wasn't easy to combat the popular and uncomfortable perceptions about bodybuilders in Sweden. She was even questioned by one of her co-workers if she was on steroids or a lesbian! Unfazed, she ignored people's views and stayed on her path of doing what she loved most – training and painting. "I chalk out concrete goals and make routines to achieve them," she says. Her children, who are now parents themselves, support her completely.

Her health challenges, however, returned time and again. When she was 50, she got tumours on her parathyroid glands. At 60, she

was operated for an abscess in her brain that had given her dizzy spells for over a decade. At 61, she was diagnosed with colon cancer and underwent surgery to remove the tumour and almost 12 inches of her colon. But she continued training three or four times a week, changed her diet, and says she has now recovered completely.

She advises women to "stay strong, healthy, independent" and cherish their self-respect. "You can't change other people's attitudes, only your own. Take yourself seriously and value yourself," is Eva's firm belief.

The spunky sexagenarian goes on: "There is no such thing as ageing. It is a myth. Just be bolder and braver. The secret of ageing well is to be the best you can be. Defy all laws of what you should be!" ■

THE ONE RUPEE COIN

An unexpected act of assistance from a stranger in a phone booth turned into a life-changing miracle for this IT professional from Mumbai

By Tejinder Kaur Sethi

I belong to a middle-class Sikh family living in Kalyan, a central suburb of Mumbai. Right from childhood, I have seen my parents spiritually connected with utmost faith in Waheguruji (God). I have seen my father reciting daily prayers and have witnessed a complete transformation in his life. It made me believe in miracles.

I too was blessed to have experienced such a miracle.

The incident happened in 1995 when I was working as a senior developer in Mumbai. Most of my colleagues had found their fortunes in the US. While I was not keen to move out of India, the financial situation at home pushed me to



explore the option.

In October that year, I came across a full-page advertisement by Blue Star in *The Times of India* seeking an experienced programmer in two countries. The requirement perfectly matched my experience, so I applied with my first option of location being Singapore and second USA.

I was called for an in-person interview at the Blue Star office in Mumbai. I cleared the technical and functional interviews, and was asked to wait for one final round of discussion. It was noon and I was asked to come back after lunch. I had applied for only half-day leave at my workplace and had to inform



L-R: Tejinder with her cousin's family who welcomed her to Singapore (1996); Tejinder's parents (1996)

my office that I needed full-day leave. I called my office using the phone booth (in those days, the only way to communicate was by using the ₹1 coin phone booth).

I was still on the phone when the beep sound alerted me that the call would soon get disconnected. While I was struggling with my wallet to find another coin to extend my call, a young woman standing behind me tapped my back and offered me her ₹1 coin. I took it gratefully, extended my phone call, completed my conversation, and went back to the Blue Star office for my final interview.

I later realised I had forgotten to repay the girl her ₹1. I will refer to her as 'angel' in this story. That ₹1 coin helped me complete my phone conversation and established

my first connect with my angel.

The final interview was meant to evaluate my emotional quotient and readiness for relocation to a new country. When asked why I had selected Singapore as my first option, I naively said that it was because my cousin lived there and because it's closer home. Every response of mine clearly indicated that I needed strong emotional support in a foreign land and any decision of my life would be influenced by my parents. I later felt that my answers did not meet the interviewer's expectations.

While I waited in the lobby for the results, I was told I was selected but the location of the job offered to me was Bangalore. Many years later, I reflected on my interview and realised he was a good inter-

viewer and was right in his analysis on my emotional readiness for the job abroad. But at the time, I was disappointed to have closely missed getting a job that would have helped address my financial needs. I did my math with the Bangalore offer, factoring the cost of relocating, accommodation and so on, and did not find it good enough.

While I was thinking about all of this, I saw the same angel at the lobby. I approached her and thanked her for her help. It turned out she was an employee at Blue Star. I narrated my situation to her. She advised me to try on my own for a job in Singapore. I asked her if she could give me any contact there; she asked me to wait. She went back to her desk and returned

with a post-it with the address of AIT Software Services.

Coincidentally, in those days, my cousin in Singapore had been repeatedly urging me to come for a holiday to visit her and also explore jobs there. Given the financial state of my family, I did not even have the money to buy an air ticket for Singapore. My cousin and brother-in-law offered me a deal: they would pay for the ticket and if I ended up getting a job, I could repay the ticket money; else they would just bear the loss. I did not like taking favours from anyone, and was not willing to consider the offer. Then, one of my uncles shared a different perspective of the situation: "You never know, God may be creating a path for you, do not think of it as a



Tejinder (in yellow) with Deutsche Bank Singapore team (1996); her interviewer Noor Hayati is behind her

favour.” I took their offer.

While my visa and ticket were in process, I had my resume updated with DTP software at a cost of ₹100 (too expensive for me in those days). I sent my resume and the address and fax number of AIT Software to my cousin via Speed Post. I chose to do this on Guru Nanak Jayanti day in November, offering my prayers to God to guide me on this journey. My brother-in-law received my resume in one week and he faxed my resume to AIT Software along with his contact number.

Getting leave approved on my current job was also not easy even though I had requested for a month’s leave without pay. Somewhere, I had a strange feeling that I would be away from India for longer than 30 days. It was like a subtle intuition that also left me very nervous. With no prior experience of staying away from home, my parents and siblings, I went through a gamut of difficult emotions.

I landed in Singapore on the night of December 26, 1995. On our way home from Changi Airport, my brother-in-law told me that he had received a call from AIT Software two days earlier. They wanted me to come in for a face-to-face discussion. He told them I was travelling from India to Singapore on 26th. All through the drive, he reminded me at least five times to be early the next day and

meet the AIT Software team. I was casual about it, and said, “Let me take two days to enjoy the city.” But being a Singapore resident and an IT professional, he understood well the criticality of the opportunity and insisted I meet them right away. He prepared me mentally and emotionally to be ready take up a new job assignment at short notice.



Tejinder at Keukenhof Garden, Netherlands (2000)

(Mentally, this was something I was not completely prepared for.)

I met the AIT Software team the next day, and the meeting was extremely positive. They mentioned they had an immediate opportunity with Deutsche Bank and enquired about my readiness to join at short notice. I was taken aback but I reminded myself of my financial need and my brother-in-law’s



Tejinder with Harinder Chatrath, Sudha M and the Capgemini leadership team at their Mumbai office (2018)

guidance, and agreed.

The magic of the ₹1 coin and the angel in my life was unfolding.

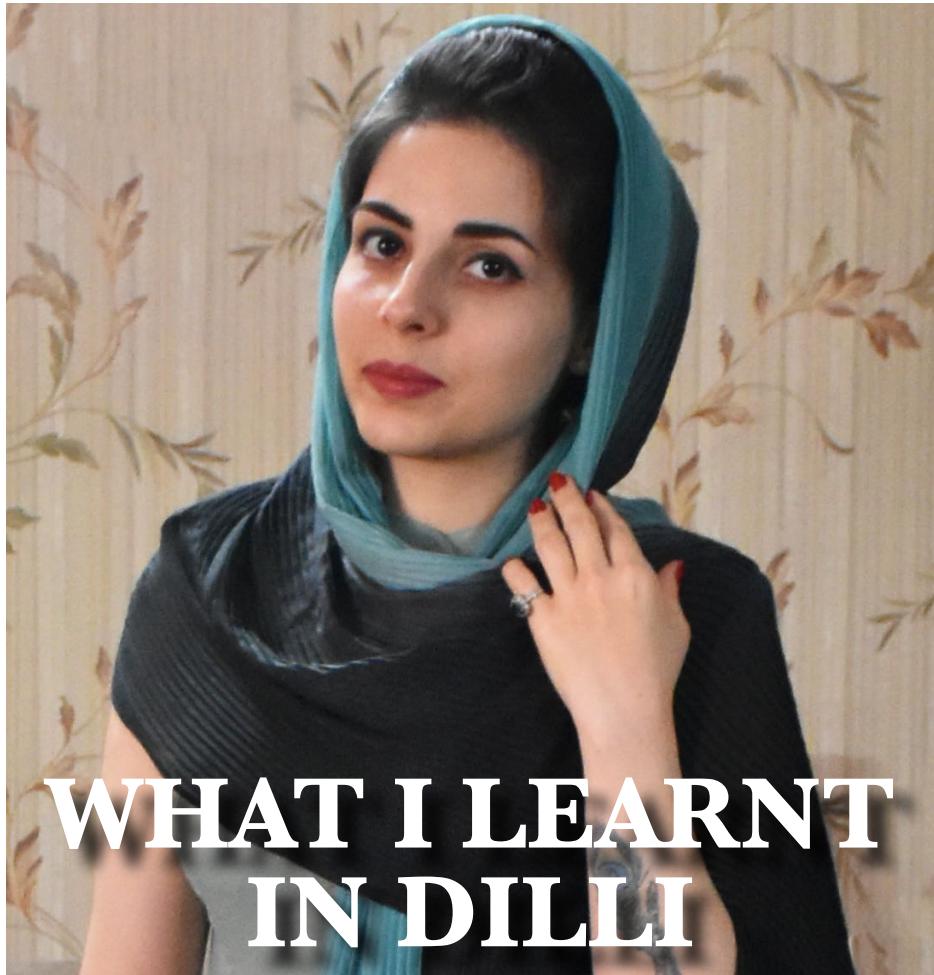
My interview with Deutsche Bank was fixed for January 4, 1996. The technical interview went very well, and hope surrounded me as I travelled back home by metro train from their office in Tanjong Pagar to my cousin's home in Lakeside. Throughout the journey, I felt I was surrounded by positive energy. When I reached home, my cousin welcomed me with joy and congratulations. I had got the job.

Within a week, AIT had arranged for my temporary work permit, and on January 15, I started working

as an analyst programmer with Deutsche Bank Singapore.

The angel who gave me the ₹1 coin was the channel from God to help me rise above my financial difficulties. I did not have her phone number, but she has been in my prayers every day all these years for having touched my life and turned my family's circumstances around. The job experience in Singapore influenced and shaped my career going forward.

God's miracles continue. Today, I am director at Capgemini, a French multinational corporation with 270,000 employees in over 50 countries. ■



WHAT I LEARNT IN DILLI

An Iranian researcher travels to India for tourism; the experience changes her worldview and triggers her new career as author and translator

By Sougand Akbarian

A small event can change someone's life forever. My life also changed, it has got a new and special colour, after my first visit to India and especially New Delhi (which I prefer to call by its old

Hindi-Urdu-Punjabi name Dilli, *dil ka sheher*, city of heart).

Just one trip changed everything for me: my life, my career and my perspective towards life.

I lost my heart to my *dilruba*

(beloved) Dilli in the very first trip, and decided to write a travelogue in English based on my travels. The book, which is called *SouganDilli*, was a bestseller in my country Iran. Thereafter, as an interpreter, researcher, author and scholar in translation studies, my work has taken me often to India as I now translate Indian literature to Farsi.

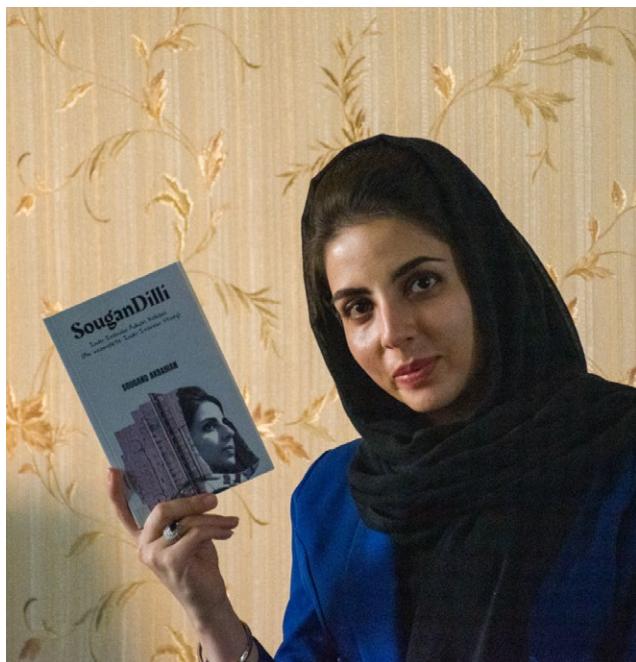
When destiny decides to surprise you, no one can stop it. And my first trip to India was an unforgettable surprise to me, just days before Holi festival in India and Nouruz, Iranian New Year, in Iran. I still hold those memories close to my heart.

To me, the beauty of this city lies in the way it encompasses all of India within itself. It's truly the capital of 'Incredible India'. You can taste south Indian food like *dosa*, *chutney*, *sambar*. You can be at a Guru Nanak birthday celebration with Sikh and Punjabi people and have *langar* food with them. Dilli has the largest market of spices in Asia and you can get a taste of them in the *parathas* of Chandni Chowk – even *parathas* with 15 layers!

This city is home to the tallest minaret in the world, Qutub Minar, with lines of the Holy Quran inscribed on it. This is a place where

people of all religions respect Shirdi Sai Baba. This is a place you can dance at a *sangeet* musical or *mehndi* night to celebrate a Hindu festival or someone's wedding.

Dilli is the home of the Jama Masjid, one of the largest mosques in India. It is also the home of the



Swaminarayan Akshardham Mandir, the world's largest comprehensive Hindu temple. A temple that was inaugurated by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, a Muslim scientist and India's former President, a temple that opens its doors to all people of any religion.

The greatest lesson from my India travel was the concept of humanity.

We are all the same, we are all human, and humanity is important. We may worship the supreme power as Allah or Bhagwan or any other name but the destination is one: peace of heart. Just as Ramadan has Ram and Diwali has Ali, as a human and to keep humanity alive, the door of any place of worship is

language as well. Language is a key with which you can open a door called literature and enter other countries and cultures. I began my journey as a traveller, and ended up becoming a translator – a traveller of different cultures.

Today I use the power of both travel and language to give invisible



Sougand Akbarian on her first visit to Delhi; she travelled several more times as translator and interpreter

always open.

All these experiences in Dilli touched my heart and soul, they moved me deeply. And it all happened just by exploring India as a tourist. Travel is art, the art of discovery, and my travel to India led me to discover Indian literature. But for that, I needed to learn its



wings of cultural communication to enrich both countries, and to power my words to fly as messengers of peace and humanity beyond man-made borders. ■

Sougand Akbarian is an Iran-based author, translator of Indian literature into Farsi (Persian), and TEDx speaker. Email: sougand_akbarian@yahoo.com



ALL HANDS IN

After losing her hands in a tragic accident in 2014, Monika More had a successful double hand transplant just in time for her birthday last month

By Manvi Pant

Monika More's world collapsed when, on January 11, 2014, she lost her arms in a horrific accident. Then a commerce student at SNDT College in Mumbai, Monika was heading home when she fell into an unfenced six-foot gap near a signal pole at Ghatkopar railway station. Both her arms were crushed under a running train. "It took me a while to get hold of reality. I wailed in pain until a few

people rescued me and took me to the hospital," she narrates. Almost seven years later, the Mumbai girl has now become the recipient of a new set of hands, transplanted in an astounding surgery from the body of a 34-year-old Chennai software professional.

Daughter of a travel-agent father and homemaker mother, Monika had a humble but happy upbringing. She is the elder of two siblings, both



L-R: Monika celebrated her 24th birthday on November 6th with her new arms; Monika at home without aids

of whom had a good education. But Monika's accident shattered her family and crushed her dreams. "Time came to a standstill. I felt as if I'd never get my hands back. But I did not give up hope," she says.

For a few months, she tried using prosthetic limbs but they were heavy and using them for a prolonged period caused her fatigue. "There was a constant risk of getting rashes, sores or skin infection. The other drawback was lack of sensation, and the limbs could not be used in water. Sometimes, it frustrated me if the socket did not fit well," shares the 24-year-old. The struggle to restore mobility and quality of life went on for many years, when suddenly life took a positive turn.

In 2018, Monika learnt about bilateral hand transplantation at Glob-



al Hospital, Mumbai, and got herself registered there. But she missed several opportunities to find a donor due to various reasons – both medical and emotional, as sometimes the families of the deceased did not agree for hand donation. Finally, this year on August 27, the hospital received an alert from their Chennai branch. A family was willing to donate the hands of their 34-year-old brain-dead son but had failed to find a suitable recipient in Chennai. "As per protocol, the donor name goes to the state list first, and then to the regional and national list," explains Dr Nilesh G Satbhai, consultant plastic, aesthetic, hand and reconstructive microsurgeon at the hospital, who operated on Monika.

After medical formalities were met, the hands were flown from



L-R: Dr Amresh Baliarsing, Dr Nilesh G Satbhai, Monika More and Dr Vivek Talaulikar, CEO of Global Hospital

Chennai to Mumbai by a chartered flight. The transplant was carried out on August 28. The 16-hour procedure, which was Western India's first bilateral hand transplant, was challenging and complex. "The patient was put on immunosuppressant medications after the procedure and kept in the transplant ICU in a separate room, with a dedicated nurse under strict care and isolation. On the third day, she was able to sit up and walk with support for her arms. We also gave her physiotherapy twice a day, with breathing and shoulder exercises," says Dr Nilesh.

Monika spent four weeks in hospital and recuperated well with a plaster slab to support her bones. Her hands and fingers are expected to start moving after another couple of months as her nerves, muscles and

tendons heal. The doctor further informs, "For now, she will need help with her day-to-day-activities. Once the hands start functioning, and physiotherapy progresses, she will be more independent."

Monika is excited about resuming her earlier routine. "I can't wait to apply *mehendi* and to paint. I would also be able to do some basic activities such as eating, bathing, combing hair and cooking," she beams looking at her hands.

She is reminded of her father whom she lost last year, and who dreamt of seeing his daughter with both hands once again. "It is time we shed the taboo surrounding organ donation. The gift of life is a noble act. Pledge to donate organs and help those in need to improve their quality of life," she urges. ■



New Traditions

Traditions will take on a digital avatar in coming years, and why not?

By Kay Newton

Traditions are ways of conveying customs or beliefs from generation to generation. Every society has its specific cultural nuances based on the past. In 2020, the world stopped due to Covid-19. Now new Western traditions are appearing that may continue far beyond 2021. As we move into a New Year and technology changes the world at an ever-faster pace, we can expect traditions to diversify too. Here are a few ideas about changes to expect in the coming years.

ONLINE CELEBRATIONS

2020 changed the way we celebrated special occasions – christenings, birthdays, weddings and funerals. Not able to meet in large groups or family gatherings, we postponed, cancelled or turned to the internet.

As we powered up our mobile phones and laptops, it became apparent that meagre quality and unreliable networks needed an upgrade urgently. New live streaming celebration rituals appeared overnight. We dressed for the occasion

from the waist up, kissed the computer screens, and sent pretend hugs.

Wedding companies that have moved their business online are expecting continuous growth even when Covid-19 is no longer a threat. Online means *everyone* can be on the guest list, as there are no worries with travel restrictions or costs involved. For many young couples, it is the only way to go.

Christmas and New Year celebrations are also moving from traditional practices of home decorations and food choices to simple, sensibly selfish ways. Dubbed the orphans' Christmas, as families will be apart, there are still positives to celebrate: the time and money saved, the ability to stay in bed all day, eat your own food choices, and watch what you want on TV.

ROBOTIC RETAIL

The tradition of physically going out to buy goods was no longer an option during lockdown, and consumerism moved online. Whether it was to upgrade the garden, decorate the house or start a new hobby, it was all delivered to the door. For the consumer to achieve their expectations, and have access to everything (even toilet rolls 24/7), retail has had to change. Local micro-fulfilment centres, automated warehouse systems, and the use of robots to improve efficiency in cleaning and taking inventories are

on the increase.

Shopping online will also change the landscape of inner cities and how we use them, combined with working from home.

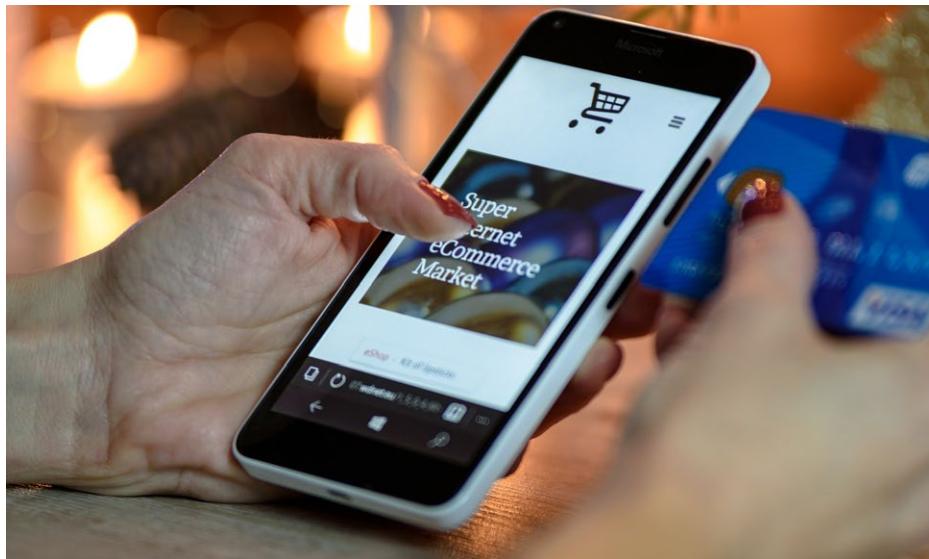
Lockdown also created a contrary movement to consumerism, an antithesis to spending just for the sake of it. Backed by the uncertainty of the future, there is a growing trend to buy what is needed, to opt for eco-friendly goods and from local services where possible. 'Repair, reuse, recycle' is an old tradition with modern implications.

GOING TO WORK

The old images of rush hour, crammed public transport and the commute became distant memories. For the privileged who could work from home, the traditional work-life balance changed overnight.

Increased employee productivity, a reduction in the cost of real estate to the employer and less pollution from commuters are all positives. Major companies are seeing the benefit. Twitter, Facebook and Microsoft have announced that workers can choose to work from home indefinitely. Some companies are also offering mini-grants for home-office improvements, yoga/meditation classes and online social events for their staff.

Yet, there are disadvantages mainly around company values and culture. No one is quite sure how



work will look in the future. As the threat of Covid-19 decreases, going to the office will not be so daunting, although it may look different: fewer people, more open spaces, and the obligatory hand gels.

VISITING THE DOCTOR

2020 saw a shift from traditional doctor visits to online consultations. Online services reduce the workload on staff, who therefore make fewer mistakes. When the patient has access to their medical records, it increases knowledge and patient confidence. Health can move safely and securely from institutions to individuals with the use of secure blockchain technologies.

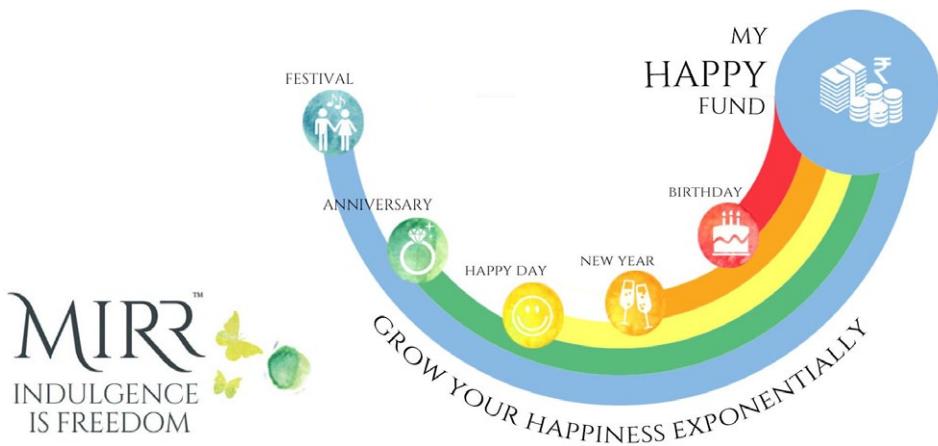
The general public is now aware that a healthy immune system is a paramount defence to Covid-19.

As demand increases for nutrition, the global food industry will also change and, in doing so, change the medical industry. Preventative health begins by incentives for people to take care of themselves. In turn, it reduces unsustainable costs on the healthcare industry. It is becoming general practice to receive health insurance discounts if you wear a fitness tracker. Whether it will be daily care or the way we act towards pandemic scares, converging technologies will alter both economic and social traditions.

As we move into 2021, we will decide what traditions are important. Today's youth will offer fresh perspectives on old ideas. If the tradition still works, it will live on, and if it doesn't, there's probably a reason for its demise. ■



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