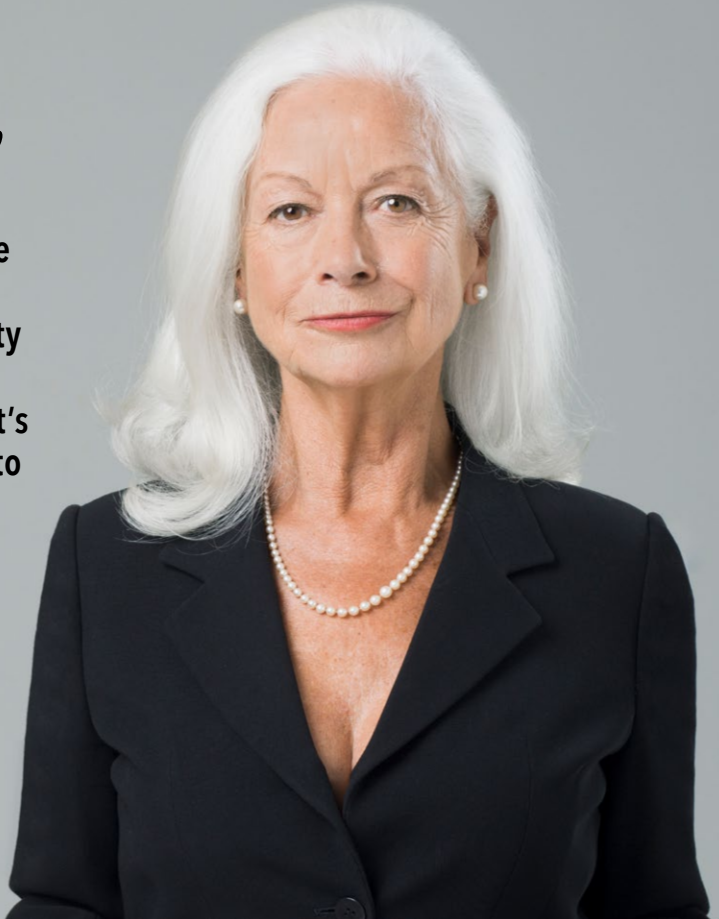


— the female gaze —

Dr Scilla Elworthy

The three-time
Nobel Peace Prize
nominee on why
we need a 'mighty
heart' to build
peace, and why it's
time for women to
take the lead



THE PEACE SUMMIT

eShe's Indo-Pak Peace
Summit Led by Women:
speakers and agenda

MAN AND NATURE

Analyst Aditi Patil on how
social inequalities are
harming the environment

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Tried-and-tested ways to recover from grief

THE PEACE ISSUE

In Christina Lamb's book *Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women* (2020), she describes her conversations with women victims and sex slaves in terrorism-ravaged areas of the world. "[Rape in war] is the cheapest weapon known to man... And it is almost always ignored in the history books," she writes.

Describing case studies of women sold from one man to another, of mothers protecting their young ones and struggling to survive in treacherous circumstances, she chronicles the wars of the past century through their female victims and survivors. The stories expose damning truths: that there is no 'honour' in war; that men see women as property of men; and that whoever wins or loses a war, the women always lose.

Women in positions of relative power around the world – those of us with agency and a voice earned for us by waves of feminism before us – are uniquely positioned at this moment in time to speak up for a cause greater than ourselves: that of an end to conflict and to the establishment of peace. We must step up so that women coming later may never have to be the 'spoils' of any war.

Let us begin with our neighbourhood, the Indo-Pak conflict, and tackle it as only women can: with collaboration, dialogue, constructive action and relationship-building. Next, the world. ■



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INDO-PAK PEACE SUMMIT LED BY WOMEN



January 16-17, 2021

1500–1900 hrs IN | 1430–1830 hrs PK | 0930–1330 hrs UK (both days)

**Join 40 brilliant women from around the world in
celebrating our shared heritage and brainstorming
solutions for peace in South Asia**

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eShe
— the female gaze —



INDO-PAK PEACE SUMMIT LED BY WOMEN

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both days. Media
accreditation available.

Hosts

Aekta Kapoor, *eShe*

Eva Vander Giessen,
The DO School

Day One

Agenda: January 16, 2021

1500–1900 hrs IN | 1430–1830 hrs PK | 0930–1330 hrs UK



1515 hrs IST

**Dr Scilla Elworthy, three-time Nobel Peace Prize
nominee, on 'Yin Intelligence in Action'**

1725 hrs IST

**Dr Scilla Elworthy and Padma Shri awardee
Meenakshi Gopinath in conversation**

1545 hrs IST

**Power of the Written
Word: How Literature Can
Build and Rebuild Ties**

Alice Albinia
Bina Shah
Moni Mohsin
Natasha Badhwar
Preeti Gill
Sheela Reddy
Mehvash Amin

1635 hrs IST

**Trust Economy: Empowering
Communities Through
Business and Culture**

Avni Sethi
Natasha Noorani
Anshu Khanna
Sanya Dhir
Reema Abbasi
Vaishnavi Kumari
Sonya Rehman

1800 hrs IST

**Documenting Heritage:
Keeping Bonds Alive
Through Art and Design**

Amna Shariff
Masooma Syed
Mehr F Husain
Reena Saini Kallat
Ritu Khandelwal
Suparna Handa
Suparna Chadda

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Hosts

Manvi Pant, *eShe*

Manasvi Jerath, *eShe*

Day Two

Agenda: January 17, 2021

1500–1900 hrs IN | 1430–1830 hrs PK | 0930–1330 hrs UK



1515 hrs IST

Gurmehar Kaur,
student leader,
peace activist and
author



1710 hrs IST

Radhya Almutawakel,
world-renowned
Yemeni human-rights
activist

1545 hrs IST

**What Works: How
Global Youth
Organisations are
Leading the Way**

Dr Devika Mittal
Isha Jerath
Kirthi Jayakumar
Saadia Gardezi
Tooba Tahir
Ananya Jain

1600 hrs IST

**Workshop: How to
Understand Your Biases
and Stop Being Played
by Technology**

Shweta Bhandral,
*The Future Skills
Company*

1735 hrs IST

**Firing Imaginations Not
Bullets: How Cinema
Paves the Way to Peace**

Alankrita Shrivastava
Haya Fatima Iqbal
Mehreen Jabbar
Sapna Bhavnani
Shailja Kejriwal
Tazeen Bari
Pravishi Das

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Interview: January 17

Lens of Humanity: The Essence of India and Pakistan in Cinema

1835 hrs IN | 1805 hrs PK | 1305 hrs UK



Sabiha Sumar

Multiple award-
winning filmmaker
and a Sundance
alumnus

in conversation with



Aekta Kapoor

Founder and editor,
eShe magazine

Summit Hosts



Eva Vander Giessen,
Community & Program
Manager, The DO School



Manasvi Jerath,
Community Manager,
eShe



Manvi Pant,
Researcher and Writer,
eShe



INDO-PAK PEACE SUMMIT LED BY WOMEN



MODERATOR

Mehvash Amin,
publisher and
editor of *The
Aleph Review*
(Pakistan)

Panel 1: January 16

Power of the Written Word: How Literature Can Build and Rebuild Ties

1545 hrs IN | 1515 hrs PK | 1015 hrs UK



Preeti Gill,
publisher,
founder of
collaborative
hub Majha
House (India),
and curator of
Sanjha Punjab:
Conversations
Across Borders



**Natasha
Badhwar,**
Filmmaker,
columnist,
author, leads the
media team at
people's
movement
Karwan e
Mohabbat (India)



Alice Albinia,
author, scholar and
RLF Fellow at King's
College London
(UK). Her book
Empires of the Indus
describes a journey
along the river
Indus and back in
time



Sheela Reddy,
book critic, former
books editor of
Outlook India, and
author of *Mr and
Mrs Jinnah* (India)



Bina Shah,
columnist and
author (Pakistan).
Her feminist
dystopian novel
Before She Sleeps
blurs geographical
boundaries in
South Asia



Moni Mohsin,
novelist and
creator of 'The
Diary of a Social
Butterfly' column
(Pakistan-UK)

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INDO-PAK PEACE SUMMIT LED BY WOMEN

Panel 2: January 16

Trust Economy: Empowering Communities Through Business and Culture

1640 hrs IN | 1610 hrs PK | 1110 hrs UK



MODERATOR

Sonya Rehman,
art and culture
journalist
(Pakistan)



**Vaishnavi
Kumari of
Kishangarh,**
art curator, patron
of heritage crafts
and founder of
Studio Kishangarh
(India)



Reema Abbasi,
senior
sociopolitical
journalist,
author, peace
and human-
rights activist
(Pakistan)



Natasha Noorani,
musician,
ethnomusicologist
and co-founder and
director of music
festival and
symposium Lahore
Music Meet
(Pakistan)



Sanya Dhir,
creative director,
Diva'ni (India) with
bridal couture flagship
stores in Delhi, Lahore
and Dubai



Avni Sethi,
Kathak exponent,
interdisciplinary
artist and founder
of Conflictorium
Museum (India)



Anshu Khanna,
entrepreneur and
award-winning
founder of The
Royal Fables
exposition (India)

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MODERATOR

Suparna Chadda,
founder of the
SABERA Awards
(India)

Panel 3: January 16

Documenting Heritage: Keeping Bonds Alive Through Art and Design

1800 hrs IN | 1730 hrs PK | 1230 hrs UK



Mehr F Husain,
journalist, social
entrepreneur
reviving
traditional crafts,
and author of
*Pakistan: A
Fashionable
History* (Pakistan)



Ritu Khandelwal,
architect who
specialises in
palace restoration
and co-founder of
Jaipur's leading
design festival
(India)



**Reena Saini
Kallat,**
multimedia artist,
sculptor and
photographer
whose work
examines political
and social
borders (India)



Masooma Syed,
artist and academic
who has practised
and taught art
across South Asia
(Pakistan-India)



Amna Shariff,
jewellery
designer and
visiting faculty at
Pakistan Institute
of Fashion Design
(Pakistan)



Suparna Handa,
managing director,
Sarita Handa luxury
home design (India)
and passionate
craft evangelist

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INDO-PAK PEACE SUMMIT LED BY WOMEN

Panel 4: January 17

What Works: How Global Youth Organisations Are Leading the Way

1545 hrs IN | 1515 hrs PK | 1015 hrs UK



MODERATOR

Ananya Jain,
racial equality
representative,
University of St
Andrews (Scotland)



Tooba Tahir,
art educator,
peace agent,
founder of Self-
Healing Project
and Salamti
Fellow from
Shaoor
Foundation
(Pakistan)



Saadia Gardezi,
political cartoonist
and co-founder of
Project Dastaan
that reconnects
partition survivors
to their ancestral
homes using
technology
(Pakistan)



Devika Mittal,
scholar, peace
activist,
academic, and
convener at
Indo-Pak peace
initiative
Aaghaz-e-Dosti
(India)



Kirthi Jayakumar,
feminist researcher,
GBV liaison, and
founder of The
Gender Security
Project (India)



Isha Jerath,
National VP
(head of sales)
at global youth
organisation
AIESEC, and
youth activist
(Switzerland)



1630 hrs IST

**Workshop: How to
Understand Your
Biases and Stop Being
Played by Technology**

Shweta Bhandral,
Google News Initiative
India Network Trainer

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INDO-PAK PEACE SUMMIT LED BY WOMEN

Panel 5: January 17

Firing Imaginations Not Bullets: How Cinema Paves the Way to Peace

1735 hrs IN | 1705 hrs PK | 1205 hrs UK



MODERATOR

Pravishi Das,
actor and
conflict-
resolution
specialist (India)



**Alankrita
Shrivastava,**
filmmaker and
screenwriter;
director of films
such as *Lipstick
Under My Burkha*
and *Dolly Kitty Aur
Woh Chamakte
Sitare* (India)



Shailja Kejriwal,
chief creative
officer - special
projects, Zee
Entertainment,
who brought
iconic Pakistani
TV serials to
India



Haya Fatima Iqbal,
Academy and two-
time Emmy Award-
winning
documentary
filmmaker, co-
founder of
Documentary
Association of
Pakistan



Sapna Bhavnani,
director and
producer of
Sindhustan
documentary
(India)



Mehreen Jabbar,
award-winning
film and television
director and
producer (USA)



Tazeen Bari,
documentary
filmmaker, co-founder
of Documentary
Association of
Pakistan

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A SONG OF DEVOTION



Shivali Bhammer gave up a lucrative career in equity trading to follow her teenage passion of singing devotional hymns from the Indian tradition

By Neha Kirpal

Motivational speaker, actor, writer, equity derivatives broker, and singer of devotional hymns – 33-year-old Shivali Bhammer wears many hats. Based in London and New York, she is the youngest and only artist to ever be signed by Sony Music BMG for *bhajans* (hymns). Her devotional albums, *The Bhajan Project* (2010) and *Urban Temple* (2012), reached the top position on the iTunes world chart. Interestingly, Shivali gave up a career in equity trading to become a devotional singer.

Born and raised in London, Shivali comes from a family that is philosophical and secular at the same time.

Her foray into spiritual music happened because of her great grandmother and great aunts, and she started making music at the age of 15. Shivali wanted to give *bhajans* an urban modern twist, so that people could identify with them. At the age of 22, she pitched the idea to Sony Music, and it worked. Shivali ended up being nominated for two Global Indian Music Awards at the age of 23 and was listed among the

Top 25 under 25 South Asian Artists in England. “When I look back on that it was a magical moment, where the universe did most of the work, I had just done the preparation and arrived on time,” she says.

As a student, Shivali was deeply fascinated by both economics and philosophy. While she found economics intuitive, as it looks at the logic and process of markets and people, she felt that philosophy questions everything – a search for deeper meaning, it combines science, religion and logic.

Her creative work is all built around personal experience. When she shifted to New York for five years, she

wrote an award-winning play about a British girl living in New York. She also created talks on detachment and the inner journey based on her move out of the country. Further, she used her experiences in personal relationships and the quest for love to express the intricacy and beauty of love in the creative arts – whether through muses such as Radha-Krishna, Kathak and the use of the Shringar, or her talks

**“IF YOU TAKE
OWNERSHIP
OF YOUR OWN
THOUGHTS AND
FEELINGS, IT
MEANS YOU CAN
MOVE THROUGH
CHALLENGES”**

**"WE HAVE TO FIND
THE NATURAL
RHYTHM OF OUR
OWN JOURNEY.
INSTEAD OF
FIGHTING AGAINST
IT, WE NEED TO
WORK WITH IT"**



on what is love. “Creative work is based on who someone is and what they have learnt. They then merge it with their imagination to create a fictitious world with elements of profound truth,” she explains.

Bhakti (devotion) to her is thinking less about oneself and more about the other. “It makes one ‘God-like’, breaking one’s ego slowly and helping one identify with one’s own infinitude.” Shivali feels it also purifies one’s love, moving one away from constant expectation (and therefore disappointment) to *seva* (service) of the other. “You are devoted, and your actions come from a place of fullness and love, not out of scarcity and need,” she says.

About balancing the spiritual with the material, and her soulful music with her glamorous image, Shivali says, “Having a Ferrari doesn’t mean you’re not spiritual. It means you enjoy a great sports car. Where the line blurs is if you think that by having that Ferrari you are better than someone else or if you didn’t have it, you would be less.”

In her personal journey, Shivali has learnt that one can work very hard on something and it still may not happen – whether it is a relationship, friendship or something professional. “But that work doesn’t go to waste. You are redirected to another door at the right time that will eventually open,” she says. “In life, we have to find the natural

rhythm of our own journey. Instead of fighting against it, we need to work with it,” she adds.

Currently, Shivali is producing her third album *The Bhajan Project 2* several years after her first and second. Though music contracts are now completely different since everything is streamed, she says there have been many factors that have



helped her. “If you take more ownership of your own thoughts and feelings, it means you can move through challenges,” she says.

She believes that life is short, and it is about unearthing new experiences and exploring oneself. “I just want to play in the world and appreciate that if I fall, the universe will pick me up, because it always has,” she says. ■



THE PEACE WARRIOR

Three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee Dr Scilla Elworthy advocates peace through fearless action and activating feminine intelligence

By Aekta Kapoor

On Dr Scilla Elworthy's work desk at her home in Oxford, UK, there stands a framed photo of Guan Yin, the goddess of compassion, or the Chinese adaptation of the Sanskrit Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who embodies the compassion of all the Buddhas. As a goddess, Guan Yin is the pinnacle of mercy, kindness and love, and as a Bodhisattva, she represents one who has earned *moksha* (release from the cycles of birth and death) and is destined to become a Buddha, but has forgone the bliss of nirvana and instead takes birth time and again with a vow to lead all the rest of humanity to the Truth.

"Guan Yin is my guide. I am attracted to Eastern philosophies, especially Buddhism. I strongly believe we are all interconnected, and that our thoughts are very powerful," says Scilla, the youthful 77-year-old peace builder and author of *The Business Plan for Peace: Building a World Without War* (2017), which, in the words of Nobel Peace Laureate and civil-rights activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "demonstrates – steadily and sensibly – how anyone can develop this inner power to build their own personal contribution to the future, and to a world that works for all."

It was a similar motivation that led Scilla to set up The Oxford Research Group (ORG) almost 40 years ago to facilitate effective dialogue between nuclear decision-makers and nuclear disarmament activists. The result was path-breaking work for which Scilla and ORG were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988, 1989



Dr Elworthy received the Dadi Janki Award in 2016

and 1991. Scilla was also the force behind Peace Direct, a nonprofit launched in 2002 to fund, promote and learn from local peace-builders in conflict areas. In 2003, she received the Niwano Peace Prize in Tokyo for promoting nonviolent methods of resolving conflict.

Born in 1943 in the town of Galashiels in Scotland as the youngest of five siblings, Scilla was



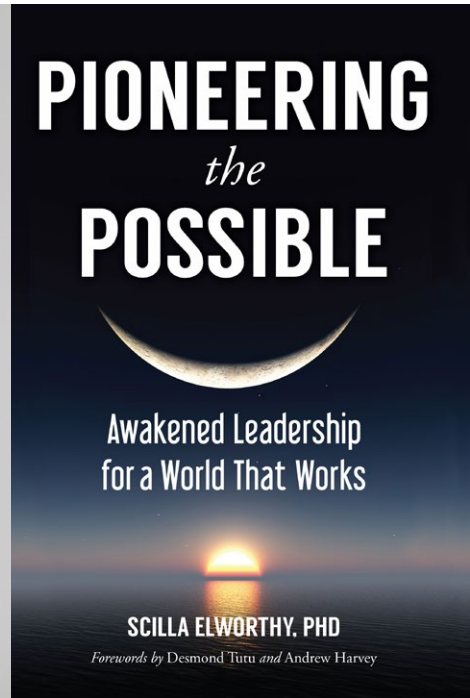
Dr Elworthy was the co-recipient of the Rudolf Steiner Dove of Peace Prize in 2015 along with Dr Rama Mani

energetic and outspoken as a little girl. Two incidents stand out for her from childhood. The first was when, at 11, she decided to shoot at the nest of a bird in the woods near her home. “My four elder brothers had taught me to use the shotgun, and I remember how the shells of the egg, the embryo, and the sky-blue feathers of the mother bird fell on me... I was so shocked by the violence I was capable of even as a child that I kept the gun away. That’s when I knew that violence was unacceptable,” she says.

Scilla narrated the second episode, which happened when she was 13, in her TED talk that has

garnered over 1.4 million views: “It was 1956. I was watching a grainy old black-and-white television, and I saw these visuals of Soviet tanks crushing young people in Budapest. I ran up to my room and began packing my bags. When my mother asked me what I was doing, I said, ‘I am going to Budapest, there’s something horrible happening there and I have go to!’ though I had no idea where Budapest was.” Scilla’s mother managed to handle the situation and encouraged Scilla’s education in the direction of social sciences.

After completing higher studies at Trinity College, Dublin, Scilla had an eventful youth: she got a pilot’s



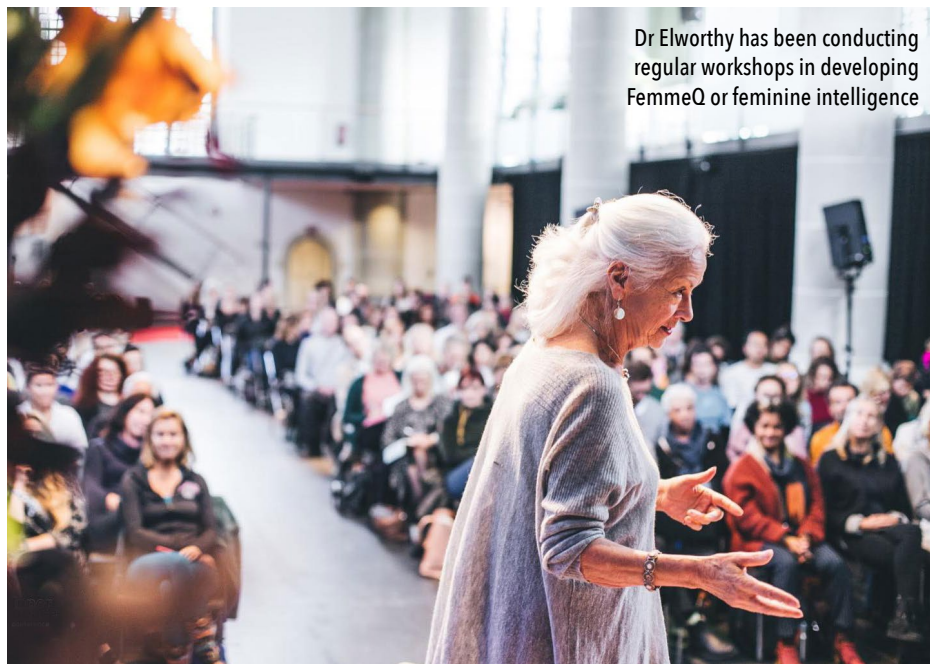
L-R: The cover of Dr Scilla Elworthy's *The Mighty Heart* (2020); the cover of *Pioneering the Possible* (2014)

licence, married, moved to South Africa, had a daughter, and became an advocate for racial equality. Her approach was always action-oriented – from founding the first multi-racial theatre in South Africa, to setting up a minority-rights group in France to writing a report on female genital mutilation that led the World Health Organization to launch a campaign to eradicate the practice.

Everywhere Scilla went, she noticed that women are underrepresented but very powerful at the grassroots. This observation led her to launch Rising Women

Rising World in 2013. “The intention was to identify women who had sufficiently strong biographies so that they could be in positions of decision-making, and to get them into round-tables where peace agreements were being drawn up,” says Scilla. Research has found that when women are part of the peace negotiation between warring parties, the agreement lasts decades longer, and yet only a tiny percentage of peace treaties are drawn up with women negotiators or signatories in the room.

Scilla believes women make better peace negotiators than men



Dr Elworthy has been conducting regular workshops in developing FemmeQ or feminine intelligence

because — unlike men in positions of authority who bargain for maximum assets or profit from the ‘deal’ — women represent those who are suffering the trauma of war and negotiate for their care and compensation. “Feminine intelligence is all that is needed to break the cycle of violence,” she says.

Scilla launched her initiative FemmeQ to awaken this feminine intelligence in both men and women because she believed that was the only way to achieve the UN’s sustainable development goals. She has been conducting workshops and train-the-trainer sessions for the past few years. On January 2, 2020, she awoke with a strong feeling that

“something big and threatening was coming towards us.” Getting into action, she decided to put down all her learnings of the past 50 years of peace-work into a small book, *The Mighty Heart* (2020).

She also developed workshops based on the concepts in the book. “There is a time in our lives when we are faced with a crisis. That’s when we have to develop a mighty heart to be able to take a stand and have a courageous conversation, and to do it in a way that doesn’t provoke more antagonism,” she says, adding, “Growing a mighty heart means you are *giving* of your skills instead of trying to take what you can in terms of profit.” She urges

people to spend at least 20 minutes a day on inner work to develop peace and calm within themselves. “Those who have faced their own fear and inner critic are the ones who can develop presence in a crisis,” she says.

In 2016, Scilla met the Dalai Lama at a conference in Brussels. After listening to her speak about the outlines of her new book – why war continues, how peace can be built, what it will cost, and who can do it – he stood up and announced to the packed hall: “We need individuals like Dr Elworthy to start to the work of preventing war. This has been my personal dream for many years.” That book, *The Business Plan for Peace* (2017), is now a full-time project and Scilla is putting her vision into action once again, working with governments and organisations around the world.

Having visited India in 1997 to unsuccessfully negotiate disarmament with the country’s leaders, Scilla doesn’t hold out too much hope on the governments of India and Pakistan being able to arrive at any sort of peace agreement in the near future. Instead, she hopes enough youth on both sides will stand up for an end to conflict. “If the aim is the prevention of armed violence, then it doesn’t matter what weaponry or how many soldiers you have. What matters is how many capable young people are

available and motivated to make this happen – youth and women with a sense of fearlessness and independence,” she says.

She goes on with a word of caution: “Of course, sometimes, when you take a stance for nonviolence and peace, you can be vulnerable. But be unafraid. The heart is much stronger than the mind if you give it half a chance.”



Dr Scilla Elworthy with the Dalai Lama in 2016

She points towards Gandhi’s moral courage in standing up to an empire, and says there are still lessons from his life that can be relevant today, the most important of which is to work for a greater cause. “The highest attribute of a human being is to be in service,” she avers.

That sounds like something a Bodhisattva would say. ■

HELLO FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Peace activist Dr Devika Mittal of Aaghaz-e-Dosti is working to normalise relationships between the youth of India and Pakistan



As a schoolchild raised in Delhi, Devika Mittal always wondered why neighbours India and Pakistan continued to be enemies. Her grade-12 history textbook and its chapter on Partition made her aware of the human cost of the conflict, and how much people from both sides suffered immensely. While doing her higher studies at Lady Shri Ram College and then South Asian University, she took up the cause of Indo-Pak peace and joined youth-led peace organisation Aaghaz-e-Dosti as its India convener.

Ahead of eShe's Indo-Pak Peace Summit Led by Women where she is a panelist, we spoke to the

30-year-old assistant professor at University of Delhi about the initiative and what drives her to stand up for peace.

As a student, what memory stands out for you about Pakistan and the people of that country, and why did you decide to take up peace-building?

While in college, I attended the retreat ceremony at Wagah Border. I looked at the flag waving on the other side and my school textbook chapter on Partition came back to me. I wondered if the people sitting across the gate would wave back if I waved at them?

Later, I chose to pursue my post-graduation in sociology from South Asian University. The idea

of studying with students of other South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, had really fascinated me and the experience was great. I got valuable insight into South Asian politics. Moreover, the discipline of sociology – which I had continued to pursue through an M.Phil degree and then PhD from Delhi School of Economics – helped me engage with issues, including the India-Pakistan conflict, with an objective and critical lens. What motivated me to enter this field of conflict resolution and peace-building was a sense of curiosity about the ‘other’ that combined with the critical training that I was able to receive.

Did your approach towards our nuclear-armed neighbour change later? What were the triggers?

In contrast to what the jingoists like

to accuse peace activists of, I was never “fascinated” with Pakistan and never glorified it. From the beginning, we, as a group of peace-builders, have always tried to undo the effect of the politicised and biased media on both sides. We have tried to shatter popular misconceptions about the other side and highlighted how we need to look at the people across the border as a complex and heterogeneous group, just like we are. In both countries, the ‘other’ is used as a reference point when it comes to justifying or glossing over rising religious extremism and hyper-nationalism. In India, we are constantly told about how Pakistani Hindus are subjected to atrocities and the same happens in Pakistan for the case of Indian Muslims. Both countries refuse to



Students at Langs Land School and College in Chitral, Pakistan, after receiving greeting cards from India (2015)

acknowledge the discrimination and systematic violence that their own fellow patriots are subjected to. *How deep do you think are our cultural and social values and affinities, and can these be used for peace-building?*

The two countries have linguistic and cultural similarities; spoken Hindi and spoken Urdu are similar. In Lahore and Islamabad, I was as-

one of the peace education activities by Aaghaz-e-Dosti, in which Indian and Pakistani students interact with each other virtually, the session is usually conducted in Hindi or Urdu and we often have students expressing their absolute amazement on discovering this connect and cherishing this. In one video-conferencing session, the



Aaghaz-e-Dosti conducts peace-building workshops, and greeting-card and letter-exchange programmes

sumed to be a Karachi-ite because I apparently spoke “Urdu”. Punjabi is also a great connect. The popularity of Punjabi songs and movies knows no borders. Sindhi language and culture and, to a lesser degree, Gujarati are also important connectors.

Linguistic and cultural connections work as an ice-breaker and they also shatter the stereotype of a different and opposing ‘other’. In

Indian and Pakistani coordinators both spoke in Gujarati.

We also have similarities in our popular culture. Both Indians and Pakistanis share a love for Bollywood movies and both would also confess watching never-ending Indian television dramas. I have many Pakistani friends who have a sound command over Sanskritised Hindi. This emanates from the popularity



A peace-building workshop in progress; Aaghaz-e-Dosti has worked outside of India and Pakistan as well

of Indian television serials and cartoons across the border.

As for what draws the Indian side, music definitely tops the chart. It is said that the one place where Indians and Pakistanis do not fight is in the comments section of YouTube videos of Coke Studio Pakistan.

What led you to join Aaghaz-e-Dosti? What are the initiatives you have undertaken and what was the outcome?

Aaghaz-e-Dosti, which literally means beginning of friendship, was set up in 2012. We started it to dispel stereotypes and initiate dialogue among the people of both countries. We work through peace education activities in schools and colleges. We have been organising art-based programs in the form of an annual Indo-Pak peace calendar, which is made of paintings of Indian and

Pakistani school students, virtual interactive sessions, film screenings and discussions in educational institutions and public spaces in different cities across India and Pakistan.

The objective of these activities has been to disturb the idea that the knowledge we have is complete and unbiased. Indian students have used the interactive sessions to critically engage with their views about Pakistanis and also about religious minorities within the country. The initiatives have given them a space to connect with their peers across the border without reducing them to their political and social identity. In one virtual session, students bonded over concerns like, “Does your teacher give you a lot of homework too?” and “Do you like Maths?” ■
Read more on eShe.in

OPEN MIC



It's hard enough being a working mother in India, what with most corporate systems being designed for people without little children to look after; imagine how hard it must be for single moms who often don't even have proper support structures at home. We asked three single mothers to take the centre-stage this month and share how they've been doing on the professional front. Hima Bindu from Bengaluru shares how motherhood was the turning point in her career. Rijuta Gupta of Faridabad adopted an infant last year and also wrote her first book. And Mumbai's Arundhati Kumar launched a new enterprise in the midst of a divorce.

THE MATERNITY DILEMMA

By Hima Bindu, Bengaluru

Most millennial women professionals worry that having a child will put an end to their career. Marriage is still okay, but motherhood is something they would like to delay. Besides the additional expense, they are concerned about the health implications of pregnancy, and whether or not they have the support system needed to keep the child healthy and secure after they go back to work. And the fear of losing one's job or taking a long break is very real and can truly be a setback in one's career.

All these worries are valid, but even though having a baby in the early or mid stages of one's career can be a struggle, I still believe it is worth it at the end.

Let me share my journey. I joined the HR department at IBM in 2005 as a young graduate (and I have been with IBM since). Marriage followed and a year into marriage, I conceived. The company's maternity policy allowed only three months of leave, and I had to plan the last working day clearly and hand over to my colleague in advance. I decided to work till the very last day till my water broke and I was admitted to the hospital for delivery. It was a stressful time but, in retrospect, I believe it kept me independent and happy.

Once I got back to work after my maternity leave, I





consciously moved into a challenging role without compromise. The role also involved travel to the UK and managing a team of over 40 engineers.

This shift from HR to IT delivery was an extremely difficult one. I had to leave my four-month-old baby and spend long hours at the office to adapt myself to my new domain with limited guidance. I had to balance work shifts and a demanding job with all my physical, mental and emotional changes as a new mother. Being on-call for technical support late at night while feeding my baby at the same time was definitely not easy.

And let's not underplay the

fact that, as a woman, your male counterparts and peers do test your competence and challenge you in numerous ways, be it during boardroom discussions or in performance.

But now, several years later, I see maternity as the turning point of my life. It was only post-maternity that I took up the most challenging roles that carved my career growth in areas many women would not think to take up. I travelled for the first time on a work trip to the UK when my son was just nine months old and I was a single mother by then. Though there was pressure to earn a living and to balance my work with my parenting, it was not impossible.

Changes are inevitable, and life took me on a new adventure of being a single mother. I became my own competition. What worked for me was clear planning of finances and career path; having discussions with my managers and mentors; having a growth mindset, and being



willing to learn new domains; taking a calculated risk in changing roles; creating a sustainable support ecosystem for my child and myself; and working in a women-friendly organisation.

I did take on some contributing or backend roles for few years when the need arose, but I constantly upskilled myself with relevant learnings and technologies to make up for that gap.

Looking back, I like to call my journey unconventional rather than a 'struggle'. I believe we need not delay the natural process of life, and certain blessings need not be questioned. Being mothers, we must be an example to a new generation of young achievers and leaders.

My word of advice to millennial women facing similar dilemmas is to never resist having a child for the sake of a career, and to never give up on your ambition for the sake of motherhood either. It may be difficult but this journey will transform you. ■



SHATTERING STEREOTYPES

By Rijuta Gupta, Faridabad

I understand the relevance of marriage as a social institution. However, none of the four major considerations – financial, social, physical and emotional – are strong enough to persuade me to get married. I am financially independent and my personal decisions are not dictated by social obligations. Although I do experience my fair share of physical attractions, these aren't strong enough to weaken my resolve. Emotionally, I am comfortable being alone. In such a scenario, it becomes difficult for a man to enter into my life.

I am 44 years old and haven't married yet. Earlier on, family and friends had concerns that I might regret my decision later in my life. As the years roll by, however, I have noticed a shift in their attitude. They have accepted that it is my life and I can live the way I wish.

This doesn't mean that I don't like companionship. I do, but my companion does not have to be my lover. He or she can be my friend. If the companion turns out to be a lover as

well, it would be a bonus. The only condition is happiness. I want to live happily, be it with marriage or without it.

Recently, I adopted a daughter and the kind of acceptance I have received even from some supposedly conservative quarters is heart-warming. There certainly are cynics and sometimes I get irritated by their reactions. But cynicism loses its steam as soon as I remind myself of the affection that I receive from others. Some may label it my naivety, but I consider myself farsighted in this regard. I have tried





distrusting people and it makes me a bitter person. Conversely, receiving others' offering with gratitude keeps my belief in love alive. And love is nothing but a belief!

I have observed that an individual's desires and aspirations are often shaped by societal norms. But I could never identify myself with stereotypes associated with women and their choices. Consequently, my personal choices have not followed a set pattern. Sometimes, I get hurt and at other times I may have hurt others. Gradually, I have understood that neither anyone else nor I did so deliberately. This understanding has further fortified my belief in owning my decisions and their consequences. This in turn gives



me the courage to make difficult choices.

No one else but I am responsible for my life: this is my motto and I am lucky to have parents who have not tried to change my mind. Because of my parents and the relationship they had, I believe in the synergy between men and women. After losing my father many years ago and the adoption of my daughter last year, we are a family of three females.

I am a civil engineer and did my Master's in environmental engineering, and I also love writing poetry. My recently released novel, *Love Alive*, is a reflection of my experience, observation and beliefs. Through this book, I have made an aesthetic attempt to de-scandalise conflicts and confusions associated with love. It presents love through various themes and types, be it with people or our surroundings. There's no better inspiration for fiction than real life. ■



PLANTING A NEW SEED

By Arundhati Kumar, Mumbai



During my corporate career, every year end, I would sit with the team and review our performance for the year while we set goals for the next. As a performance consultant I have facilitated multiple such sessions. It's easy to do this for others, but awfully hard when you are doing it for yourself. It requires extreme honesty and the ability to be passionate yet pragmatic at the same time.

In October 2019, I gave up on my 17-year career as an HR professional to start my own fashion brand of sustainable accessories. With no prior experience in either business or fashion, many called it a foolish move, while I called it being 'foolishly brave'. Foolish because my entire life was in a bit of an upheaval then – I was going through a messy divorce, my daughter was just nine and upsetting a stable career that I had painstakingly built didn't seem very wise. Brave because, despite it all, I had to try, and to me it seemed as good a time as any other.

I launched Beej in January 2020, and invested my entire savings in opening my own design studio in Mumbai. In retrospect, what a year it has been to start a business! However, I truly believe that no other year would have pushed me as hard, which actually makes it the perfect year. Old habits die hard, so here I am, reviewing my learnings and sharing my takeaways.

Celebrate small wins: I haven't done enough of that this year but I want to start. As a founder, I am responsible for the team's morale and that starts with my own. Little wins – that first big corporate order, that new design that got us international mention, that one media article we always wanted and a glowing customer review – are all wins that we should have patted ourselves on the back for. It's always good to keep your eye on the bigger goal, but if you stop enjoying the journey and the moments that come with it, it's no fun.

Resist the urge to compare: Much easier said than done. In a world where social media drives perception, resist the urge to continuously compare your likes, followers and engagement to that of others. I've done a lot of it this year and it really serves no purpose other than to psyche you into thinking everybody else is doing so much better. That's not really true... They may just be projecting better.

Stop believing it's all in your control: Hasn't this been the single largest learning for everyone this year? There will be delays and hold ups and sometimes we can do little about it. Business requires us to work and collaborate with many people and there are times things don't go according to plans or set timelines. It will happen... learn to work around



it rather than fret about it.

Don't hesitate to ask for help: I have learnt you can never do it all alone, and asking for help is not a sign of weakness. Be it reaching out to a neighbour to drop my daughter for football because her classes clashed with an important meeting or asking a friend to help with the number crunching while I worked on my business plan, a lot of the support I got this

year was because I wasn't shy to ask.

Keep learning: Sustainability is a very new space and I had to research extensively and educate myself before I got started but I quickly learnt that's not enough. Learning is a continuous process and the good thing is, information is easily accessible today. I follow some great Instagram handles, blogs, online magazine resources and open courses that help me understand the space and teach me something new every day. While it's very hard to make time between being a full-time mom and running a business, I



consider this as an investment.

Allow yourself to fail and make mistakes: Nothing prepares you for entrepreneurship and if you are a single founder, it's often harder. The decisions are yours, along with the successes and failures that come with it. Make no mistake, you will make mistakes. Don't be too harsh on yourself if you do. Learn from them, don't repeat them and continue to make new ones. There will be days you will want to curl



up on the couch and not go into the office (I've had a few of them this year), and it's okay – take that time, as long as you show up the next day.

When you hear no consider it a 'delayed yes': When you send that email and there is no response or someone you reach out to refuses you because you are still too small to be interesting, it's okay. In business when you hear a no, consider it as a 'delayed yes'. I've had multiple instances this year when we were rejected and written off initially; however, the same people came back to us a few months later.

Trust in your kids: If you are a single parent like me, there will be moments of acute guilt, times when we are just unable to balance our roles and their demands. It's okay to prioritise different things at different times – it doesn't make you any less of a mother or a leader. Speak to your child and you will be surprised. We often underestimate our children and their ability to step up when we need them.

Every entrepreneur's journey is different with its own set of challenges. Every step takes enormous courage and self-belief. When you have that, the rest just falls into place. ■





A MIRACULOUS RECOVERY, AND A DREAM COME TRUE

Sunita Kulkarni overcame a chronic disorder through nutrition, and is now a role model and guide for others seeking holistic health

By Manvi Pant

Sunita Kulkarni was in class nine when she was detected with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), a chronic autoimmune disorder that impaired her walking ability and left her with shattering pain for the next 14 years. But after studying and following the right nutrition and lifestyle, she not only healed herself, she also became a successful wellness consultant and this year fulfilled her childhood dream of winning a beauty pageant.

Based in Pune, the 39-year-old looks back at the first time she was diagnosed with RA: “It was Christmas day in 1996. I felt as if all my dreams and ambitions died that day.” Anxiety, depression seeped into Sunita’s heart, and she feared for the future. “Then eventually, I stopped making any long-term plans, and instead I started planning short-term six-to-10 month goals, like focusing on clearing my exams,” she shares. She also trained her mind to “stop thinking anything” if she couldn’t think positive thoughts.

All that while, Sunita’s family stood by her like a motivating force and kept her hopeful. Both her parents were from a small town of Chhapra in Bihar, and later moved to Ranchi where Sunita was born and raised. Her father worked in a public-

sector company and Sunita and her two siblings spent their childhood with minimal resources but received the best of education. With brilliant academic credentials, Sunita took up chartered accountancy (CA) and got an all-India rank of seven at the foundation level. Soon, however, she fell severely ill and her condition



Sunita Kulkarni with husband Atul and son Arjun

rendered her incapacitated for three years. Her “so-called well-wishers” suggested she leave her CA exams as she wasn’t likely to pass them and even if she did, who would marry her or give her a job, anyway?

To pass her time while bedridden and sorrowful, she took to watching movies. “I happened to see *Phir Milenge* (2004) starring Shilpa Shetty.

Though it was about an HIV-positive woman fighting discrimination, it somehow left me with the message that this is my life and I have to be strong enough to face whatever comes. It gave me the inspiration to move on,” she narrates.

Beating all odds, Sunita gave her CA intermediate and final exams and cleared both in the first attempt. Research suggests that early experiences of life influence



Sunita with her parents, husband and in-laws

the development of one's character. By now, Sunita had developed resilience in the face of adversity. “You always have a choice – whether you consider yourself helpless and do nothing or take your problem as a challenge to change whatever situation you are in,” she says.

She also believes that God has plans for everyone and what looks ‘bad’ today can turn out to be for

one's good tomorrow. She cites her own case in point: “My father would never have let me leave Ranchi to work in Bengaluru if he hadn't seen me study so hard to become a CA despite my health issues.”

It was while working in Infosys, Bengaluru, that Sunita met her husband and fellow chartered accountant, Atul Kulkarni, and they became the best of friends. “Atul knew that I was an RA patient, and that I couldn't walk properly. Just after three months of friendship, he proposed to me,” she beams, calling it her ‘Yash Chopra’ moment of “true love and soulmate and all”.

Like in many inter-community and inter-caste Indian love stories, their families opposed their alliance initially, but eventually gave in. The newlyweds relocated to Pune and were blessed with their son, Arjun. Reeling with post-natal baby blues, Sunita tried everything from allopathy to naturopathy, but to no avail.

Her husband had been diligently searching for new treatment options when, one day, one of his colleagues referred a nutritionist who prescribed cellular nutrition for Sunita. “Working with certified advisors, I started my journey to adopt a healthy lifestyle and began providing my body the right combination of nutrients,” she shares.

Sunita also enrolled for a course to become a nutrition advisor. “The idea was to cure myself first and

keep my family healthy,” says Sunita, who did not think about making it a career option until much later. The study of holistic health through food opened her eyes. “I hooked on to it. I pursued it relentlessly,” she says, adding, “I learnt that the body has an amazing mechanism to recover from any kind of damage but it needs the right raw material – nutrients, exercise and attitude. The focus has to be on eliminating the cause rather than just the symptom.”

Within two years of her new healthier lifestyle, Sunita recovered completely from RA. “And now, for the past 12 years, I have been helping thousands of families across the globe to live a healthy life,” she says of her work as a wellness consultant.

After recovery, Sunita got a new lease of life. “I started singing with a band, made a few music videos, participated in charitable activities for various NGOs and old-age homes.” But the real recognition came after Sunita was crowned second runner-up with the Mrs Shining Star subtitle at the Mrs West India 2020 pageant held in Goa. “That was a life-changing moment for me,” she says. Sunita had been apprehensive about participating in beauty pageants because of the requirement of walking the ramp wearing four-inch heels, which was impossible for someone with her health history. Also, Sunita wears

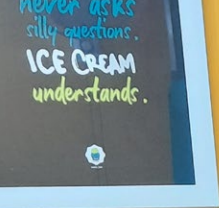
glasses and, due to RA, her eyes are too dry to tolerate contact lenses.

She gives credit to the company that hosted the event, Diva Pageants, for being inclusive. “This pageant has given me a different outlook towards myself and the work I do in the field of health and beauty. People who were earlier not aware of my work now know me thanks



to this platform,” she says.

Sunita now aims to become a ‘messenger of health’ for people across the globe. She shares the biding motto of her life: “If you dream big, there is a chance that you may or may not achieve those dreams, but if you don’t dare to dream, there is 100 percent surety that you will not achieve that.” ■



Notes on Patriarchy

Aditi Patil's new book looks at how India's gender and caste inequalities have led to an environmental crisis

By Manvi Pant



When political economy analyst Aditi Patil and her friend and fellow ecological researcher Manya Singh set out to do conservation research across North India, they discovered the real reasons behind India's environment crisis: bureaucratic corruption, gender divides,

social exclusion of aboriginal communities and persistent policy-intervention gaps. An honest dig at how our country operates at the grassroot level, Aditi's new book *Patriarchy and the Pangolin: A Field Guide to Indian Men and Other Species* (Hachette India, ₹399) aims to hold up a mirror to contemporary

India. In between overarching facts and figures, the author presents bittersweet anecdotes carefully knitted with wit and satire.

Aditi, who has worked on diverse conservation projects with WWF India, Columbia University, and the Gujarat Forest Department, tells us about her invigorating journey as a researcher and her foray into mainstream writing.

What made you choose wildlife conservation as a career?

This wasn't my first job. I finished school when India was going through an IT boom so I studied to become a computer engineer and joined Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) in Hyderabad. While I enjoyed both the city and the work, I would keep visiting animal rescue centres on weekends. Thankfully, I found flatmates who shared my idiosyncrasies and there were more animals than people for around two years in our shared Jubilee Hills apartment. I gradually realised that this couldn't go on forever so I quit TCS and enrolled into a post-graduate diploma in management in development studies. It was an interdisciplinary course that allowed me to think in several directions, most

importantly, how we define "development" and who gets to define it. Interesting internships during this journey led me to choose wildlife conservation as a career.

From WWF India to writing a book, what have been the key challenges in your journey?

It's been a learning experience – a little about the world and more about myself. At WWF I worked

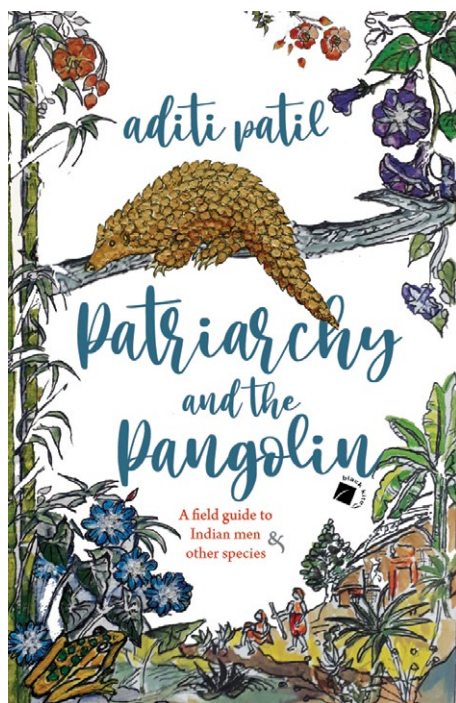
on tiger conservation and with some of the poorest communities in the forests of Madhya Pradesh that live next to forests. I experienced several overlapping socio-economic and environmental problems that people face on a daily basis. I could have continued living my whole life in cities

**"I COULD HAVE
CONTINUED LIVING
MY LIFE IN CITIES
NOT KNOWING THE
MULTIPLE REALITIES
OF INDIA – AND
THAT THOUGHT
SCARED ME"**

not knowing these multiple realities of India – and that thought scared me, because a huge part of our population does that and votes based on that. It's a different kind of mental challenge to see and digest something as flimsy as identity politics of upper castes ruining the lives of marginalised Dalits. It's also a challenge because I can't solve it and that gets in the way of preparing for the larger environmental problems like climate change.

While writing this book, what are some of the things you expected to be harder than they actually were?

When I began writing this book, I transliterated my field experiences into stories (that are now chapters in the book) and emailed them only to Manya and a couple of other



friends. But the idea of turning it into a book came much later when I had around eight or nine of these stories. Those days, I was working full-time in New Delhi and I could only find the time to work on the book during the nights. Most part of the writing was easy as all of it is based on live experiences. The

element of fun and humour was introduced into it by Manya (just by being herself).

But concluding the book was harder than I had actually imagined. Firstly, I could never make up my mind about which experience to include or leave out. And then, I kept thinking it still had scope for improvement and wasn't perfect yet. My brilliant editor at Permanent Black, Rukun Advani, made these things easier by a huge margin.

You say that all of Indian society is oppressed by patriarchy, not just women. Do you think things are changing for the better for everyone in these times as more women are speaking up?

Yes, things are changing. With platforms like yours and several others, women are finding the space to be heard. It's the people who may not have this digital or physical space – the people who remain marginalised because of multiple caste, class, ethnic, gender divides, who are somehow tied to a sense of masculine or patriarchal power – that worry me. The internet has made calling out oppressors easier but this needs to be backed by a strong judicial system on the ground that ensures it doesn't repeat. Our courts are not very accessible to people especially at district levels and the hassle is an extreme test of patience and resources.

It is heart-warming to see the youth unite for causes on social

media like protecting the Mollem forest in Goa or more recently for the ongoing farmer protests. But at the same time, you have to be careful about what is peddled as “news”. I strongly believe in women’s leadership and in the likes of Savitribai Phule, who is greatly responsible for my grandmother’s generation getting educated. But I also fear the kind of leadership that a woman like Pragya Thakur can generate and translate into violence. So while things are changing, it is important to know that we are living through times that demand us to develop independent and critical thinking now more than ever.

A part of this book speaks of how disappointed you are as a citizen of India.

What changes do you hope to see? And, what is likely your role in it?

It may sound in the book as if I am disappointed as a citizen but that is only because I know how great the country is and how enterprising its people are. A huge population of our people deserve better such as indigenous tribes, Dalits, marginalised women, minority communities – the list is longer. It is easy to look away from all of these issues for a socially and financially

privileged person. I am choosing not to look away and I’d like to think of that as my pro-activeness about getting some of the above changes done in my lifetime.

In my observation, two things work in our country’s favour – its democratic spirit, and the little remaining spine of India’s civil society. As a researcher, my role is to investigate and gather facts about a topic, analyse them and contribute

to an actionable set of recommendations for policy-makers working on it.

If you had to give our readers three reasons to read your book, what would you say?

One, anybody who’s interested in the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental problems, from micro to

macro level in the country should read the book. Two, readers may agree or disagree with my opinions but I promise there’s not one dull moment, and a bonus for those who find birds and animals to be fascinating fellow passengers on Earth. Three, read it to know my amazing friend Manya. She is someone who, upon sighting honeybees, recites Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s epic poem *Madhushala* to them! ■

Read more on eShe.in

“TWO THINGS WORK IN OUR COUNTRY’S FAVOUR - ITS DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT, AND THE LITTLE REMAINING SPINE OF INDIA’S CIVIL SOCIETY”



INKED IN PUNJAB

New York author Manreet Sodhi Someshwar on the Punjab factor in her writing, the recent farmer protests, and #MeToo element in her new book

By Neha Kirpal

New York-based bestselling writer of five books Manreet Sodhi Someshwar was hailed as ‘a star on the literary horizon’ by the great writer Khushwant Singh. She has also won accolades from

none other than lyricist Gulzar for two of her books. Manreet’s work has been featured at literary festivals in Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, India and New York. Her book *The Radiance of a Thousand*

Suns (HarperCollins, 2019) recently won the PFC-VOW Book Award as well as the Laadli Media Award for Gender Sensitivity (Fiction).

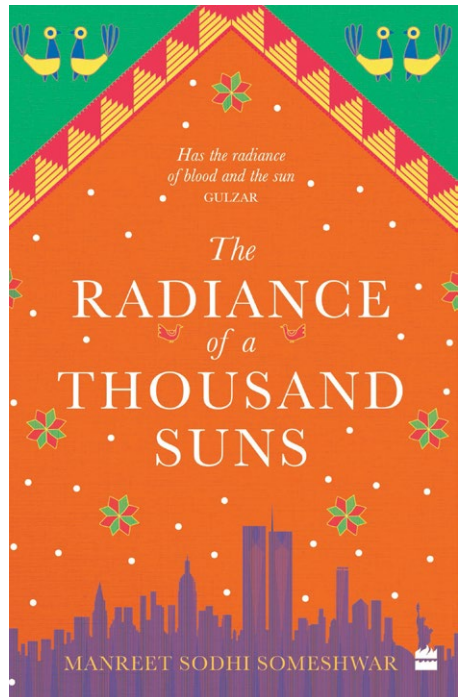
She talks to *eShe* about her unique trajectory as a writer, her thoughts on the farmer protests in Punjab and igniting #MeToo conversations in her new book *Girls and the City* (HarperCollins India, 2020).

The Radiance of a Thousand Suns includes various incidents in history such as Partition, 9/11, Emergency and the 1984 Sikh riots. What inspired you to pick these subjects to write about?

The Radiance of a Thousand Suns is about Niki's determination to complete her dead father's unfinished book, his life's work, which takes her from India to New York City. The narrative spans the cataclysms of Partition and 9/11, via the brutality of Emergency and the pogrom of 1984, and stretches from India to New York. Admittedly, it is a broad canvas, one that I have wrestled with for many, many years. To echo that famous dialogue from the film *Damini*: "Draft pe draft, draft pe draft, draft pe draft likhti gayi, par manuscript nahin mila." Until it finally did. Phew!

In India, the past is forever intruding upon the present. And yet, it is a syncopated vision of the past where the male narrative of nation building is what is celebrated come every anniversary of India's independence. Meanwhile, the

female narratives of pain, humiliation and shame have been submerged as if they never occurred. My novel explores how a society riven by a seemingly-unending spiral of violence needs to open up to the stories of its survivors and fold them into its national and social history.



Which sets up an important task for the novelist: to transform general loss into a specific loss, to give us characters and their stories we can care about. And if, like me, you grow up in a border town, history is in your veins. Ferozepur, a Muslim-majority area that should have gone to Pakistan but stayed in India



courtesy Radcliffe's squiggle. The stories circulating in its air and in its soil stirred up by the marauders of yore, the *kafilas* of '47, the militants of the eighties, are the stories that course through me.

Punjab is in the world news at the moment due to the farmer protests in India. What are your thoughts on the current situation?

My thoughts are with the farmers protesting for their rights in a most bitter winter. With their peaceful protests, working in solidarity, amidst a can-do positive spirit of service, the farmers are setting an example for all of us. Their protests are valid and the government needs to sit down and begin communicating

honestly with the people who are our *annadata*, in the truest sense. Mandating laws without involving farmers as equal partners is a ridiculous, undemocratic exercise.

Do you feel a need to represent Punjab and Punjabis to the world through your writing? In your experience, how has the Punjabi diaspora changed and evolved over the years?

I started writing because there were stories I wanted to tell that weren't being written. Indeed I owe becoming a writer to my hometown which stands Janus-faced on the Indo-Pak border. The turbulent, tumultuous landscape of Punjab is a steadfast inspiration. However, my stories are not limited to Punjab

or Punjabis – rather they deal with themes which are meaningful to me because I developed an appreciation for them as I grew up in Punjab.

Punjabis have been travelling the world and seeking new homes in distant lands for a long time, be it as soldiers fighting world wars, adventurers settling in sun-drenched California that reminded them of home, or cab drivers in NYC who fled persecution in the eighties. But however far a Punjabi travels, Punjab remains the lodestone. This is abundantly evident in the ongoing farmers' protests where Punjabis across the world, Southall, London, California, Toronto, have showed up in support.

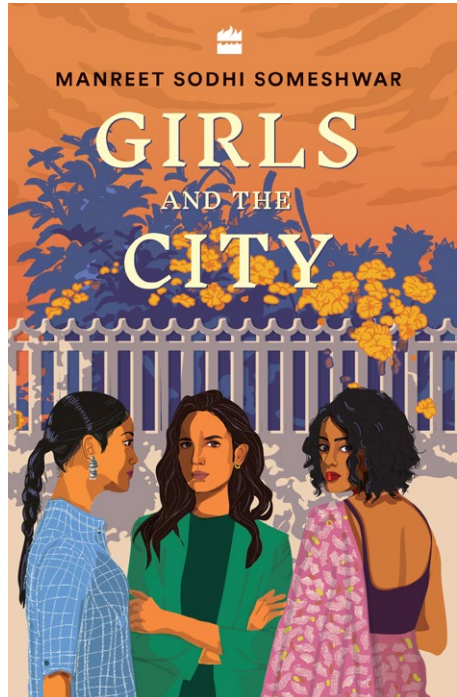
Your recent book, a whodunit about female friendships, aims to bring out conversations on #MeToo. Tell us how you thought of the story and what you hope people would take back from it.

Set in Bengaluru, *Girls and the City* is a story of female friendships centered on a murder mystery. A whodunit, that's more of a who-was-it-done-to?

I started writing this novel amidst the #MeToo movement as I wanted to explore the dynamics between sex and power. As a society, we are reluctant to discuss sexual assault and harassment. I saw *Girls and the City* as a way to reignite that conversation. It explores how women navigate everyday misogyny using wit, grit and tenacity, and is a

definitive #MeToo novel.

I want people to read the book and enjoy it thoroughly, the travails of three young women caught up in a murder! I also hope the novel helps readers see how patriarchy works in countless ways in our daily lives. I hope we can reignite the



conversations around #MeToo and get women and men talking about the casual misogyny and violence against women that is entrenched in our system. I would like boys and men to read it as well to better understand the experiences of the women in their lives. ■

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CHOCOLATE FANTASIES

The pandemic did nothing to deter India's chocolate market and new brands have popped up to cater to a variety of palates and occasions

By Shweta Bhandral

In school, I remember getting chocolate as a prize for winning a competition or for scoring full marks. Thanks to effective marketing, big brands such as Cadbury, Nestle and Amul were able to replace our traditional Indian sweets with their products. In fact, chocolate is the most popular confec-

tionery item in India; more than 61 percent of Indians are frequent consumers and at least 55 percent of these are women, says a study by market intelligence agency Mintel.

The chocolate market is expected to grow in double digits in the coming few years, driven by entrepreneurs who are



Facing page and above: Sheetal Saxena's Colocal offers both the taste and experience of quality chocolate

focusing on the Indian bean and experimenting with flavours. The pandemic, somehow, did not deter this segment. New brands and products continued to tempt Indian consumers.

One of the most recent is Colocal, a new brand of craft chocolate made with cacao from Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Craft chocolate or bean-to-bar chocolate is expensive because it is manufactured in small lots, the beans are high grade, and processing machines are also costly. So, the brand decided to not only make chocolates but also give their consumers an experience of making chocolate. Sheetal Saxena,

co-founder of Colocal, says, "We wanted people to visit and experience the whole chocolate-making process in a beautiful ambience along with some great food and service. That's why we opened a chocolate factory with a café and dining out place in Delhi."

Organic, dark chocolate, vegan, sugar-free, homemade and craft chocolate are the operative words in this new-age chocolate world. Sheetal tells us, "As a brand, we want to achieve 100 percent dark chocolates that are palatable, without any added flavours or sugar. We are close to our target and are already making 85 percent dark chocolates."

Retailing from Hyderabad, Kolkata and Delhi, Colocal is available in caramel, nuts and sea salt flavours.

Snacks like chocolates have now become meal replacements rather than just indulgence. Another recent launch, Kocoatrait, not only makes healthy vegan chocolates but is also selling the idea of being responsible towards the planet. The brand claims to be the world's first zero-waste eco-friendly bean-to-bar chocolate. With sustainability as its core vision, the brand uses upcycled cocoa husk

first female chocolate taster. The brand also focuses on health with reduced sugar and high cocoa content. Being a vegan brand, they do not offer any white or milk chocolates. Kocoatrait retails online, but they do have 'experience centres' in most metros.

The chocolate business has seen tremendous growth, driven by India's newfound love for dark chocolate. Then there are popular beliefs such as one that women crave more for chocolate during periods,



L-R: Deesha Sakhi 'periods chocolates'; Kokoatrait vegan chocolates come in 12 flavours including Red Rose

wrappers. Made with organic cocoa from Kerala, the chocolate contains non-refined *khandsari* sugar.

Introducing new and unique flavours is also key to stimulate consumer interest, and most of the chocolate giants in India haven't been able to do much in this area. Kocoatrait offers 12 variants including flavours like rose and lavender. The recipes are developed by Poonam Chordia, who is India's

and that chocolate can help with hormonal disturbances and mood swings. Keeping all this in mind, Pune-based chocolate brand Deesha Chocolates launched its Deesha Sakhi 'periods chocolates' to help women feel good and relieve painful cramps. These chemical-free chocolates have vitamins, minerals, hormone-balancing Ayurvedic herbs, proteins, sea salt and nutrients like omega-3. Available in a pack of



Mr. Moustache's Cakes offers customised chocolates based on the client's taste, occasion and preferences

five for five days in distinctive flavours, the brand promises to make our periods' experience better.

I like my chocolate to be traditional, just about sweet, milky and filled with nuts. Mr. Moustache's Cakes is one such place where you can order homemade stylised chocolates in different flavours. The brand started its business in 2019 and grew in Covid times as demand for safe and home-cooked food grew. Thirty-year-old Khushboo Chaudhary, co-founder of Mr. Moustache's Cakes, says, "I think the homemade chocolate trend is catching up. Our chocolates are not overly sweet, and we customise

them if the client demands sugar-free chocolate. We do chocolates with different fillings, like coconut, sprinkles, caramel, and various nuts. There is no food colouring."

The father-daughter duo behind this brand are also famous for their tea cakes. Khushboo's father does all the baking while Khushboo is responsible for running the business side of Mr. Moustache's Cakes. Khushboo says, "We started with putting up a stall at an exhibition organised by Ramola Bachchan. We were also the gifting partners, so our products went to all the influencers. We sold out. My father and I haven't looked back since." ■



The Roadblocks to Health

Dr Anuradha Rana shares her experience as a gynaecologist in a busy small town, and explains the roadblocks to women's health in India

By Shweta Bhandral

Dr Anuradha Rana, a gynaecologist and obstetrician, is based in Pathankot, a business town in Punjab which shares borders with Jammu and Himachal Pradesh. Since Anuradha gets patients from all the three states, she is able to recognise the vast differences in healthcare facilities and knowledge of women's health in

rural versus urban areas. According to her, it boils down to the three 'i's: innocence, ignorance and illiteracy.

"There is a need for more NGOs to work at the grassroots level for healthcare. Women's health in India will only improve with self-care, and awareness is the only way to do it," she avers.

An army officer's daughter and

an army officer's wife who had travelled and lived across India all her life, Anuradha had no particular reason to choose Pathankot – which is a travel hub and also shares a border with Pakistan – to settle down. “As a typical army wife, I didn't get the opportunity to work for almost 12 years after completing my MD, as we kept moving from one place to another. When we

Pathankot, where she still works.

Now 53, Dr Anuradha Rana is the first name that locals recommend for a women's doctor. She delivers 90 to 100 babies in a month on average, half of which are natural births. With her outpatient fee fixed at just ₹100, she sees over a hundred patients every day. This fee is also exempted for some patients. “What you do in private practice is

in your hands,” shrugs Anuradha. “I wish to serve women and girls coming from far off small villages with little or no resources.”

Talking about most common problems that women suffer from in this area, the doctor shares, “The biggest health issue is nutritional anaemia. Women from villages in Himachal come with haemoglobin levels as low as six.”

were posted in Pathankot, the kids were slightly older and I decided to look for a job. I got a position in a nearby town Sujampur and wanted to prove my worth to myself. So I worked extremely hard just like any new doctor would, day and night. Patients started trusting me, and I made a name for myself.” Two years later, Anuradha got an offer to be a partner in Ram Mission Hospital,

Studies confirm that 53 percent of women in Punjab, 55 percent in Himachal and 40 percent in Jammu have nutritional anaemia. Overall, in India, more than 53 percent of women suffer from anaemia, which indicates a lack of access to nutritious food.

The next most common issues faced by women in smaller towns and villages are genital infections



and polycystic ovarian disease. Sadly, there are hardly any studies on the prevalence of these 'women's diseases'. "A lot of these problems can be dealt with if women are literate and aware," regrets Anuradha. "Most of these women are ignorant and somewhat innocent. They come to me only when the problem becomes unbearable for them and

glect this point.

The healthcare system also suffers from an infiltration of quacks in small towns and villages, either due to a faith factor or because people are intimidated about going to large hospitals and prefer self-medication. Data from National Health Profile tells us that in India, there is one government allopathic doctor for every 10,189 people; one government hospital bed for every 2,046 people; and one state-run hospital for every 90,343 people. At the same time, according to Indian Medical Association, there are more than one million quacks practising in India.

Due to Covid, the aversion to hospitals has risen further. As a solution, Anuradha suggests, "There is a need of good counsellors at the primary healthcare level. The system needs to gear up; panchayats need to

has reached the last stage, medically speaking."

Another significant health issue is post-natal care. New mothers suffer from depression, hormonal changes and body changes all at the same time, besides having a new baby to look after. "Safe motherhood is a woman's right. We have to sensitise men and families about this," says Anuradha, adding that even families and authorities in metro cities ne-

work in this direction. We should have educated ASHA workers who should be equipped with knowledge of basic healthcare."

The state of women's health in semi-urban and rural India is evidence of systemic patriarchy: women are not important enough for their families or the state. Prioritising women's health will need both political will and grassroots upliftment and education. ■



ON THE CARDS



Your success guide for 2021, by tarot reader Karishmma Mmakhija

ARIES

The year may begin with a few disappointments, but be optimistic. Meditate for answers and listen to your intuition. Things improve in the second half of the year; you will take complete charge of your life and will be at peace with yourself. Singles may end up in a sweet romance. Accept yourself unconditionally and open-heartedly. Be a light to others.

TAURUS

The year could begin with a battle of egos due to communication issues, so be cautious of what you say and how you say it. Believe in yourself and get complete information about any professional or per-

sonal offer before taking a decision. Things may not be the way they appear but you will handle obstacles well and improvise. Love yourself the way you are and know that you are loved. Arrogance will have its downfall, so be watchful.

GEMINI

The year may begin with encountering a mentor or a spiritual leader. The time has come to move past the old into something new. Pay attention to the signs you receive, be aware of what is calling for a change, a new direction. Listen to your intuition. It's time to be assertive. Health issues will improve. Go with the flow, even if you see events move at unexpected speed.



CANCER

You will stand up for whatever you believe in. There will be moments of frustration so meditate on what you seek and let go of what doesn't serve you. A senior person may offer advice; be open to it. The second half of the year may be challenging; strive to rise above feelings of helplessness. Face your fear head on. You may come into money and travel to a place you always wanted to go.

LEO

You have everything you need to grow. But things may not be what they seem, leaving you in anticipation after all the work you have put in. There could be sleepless nights. Re-evaluate certain situations and choose to forgive and let go of some. Connect with people and live

in your highest joy. Your God lives within you so ensure you make that a happy place!

VIRGO

The year begins and ends wonderfully and you may find what you have long desired – a new job or source of income, a new look, a new relationship, or a resurrection of old ones. Your key learning this year will be to communicate wisely and not be hurtful. With this change, you will attract many helpful people into your life. The worst is over and exciting things may happen soon.

LIBRA

2021 begins with you in complete power. You may collaborate with people to move your business ahead or may take up leadership roles. Keep an open channel of clear

PHOTO: CANDICE PICARD / UNSPLASH

communication, and rest when required. Progress and success are up to you. Keep moving towards fresh beginnings that await you towards the end of the year. You shall be rewarded.

SCORPIO

Be open to wise counsel from a mentor and don't hesitate to ask for help. New relationships or projects are on the horizon but take sensible decisions. You may be assailed by your own inner demons, addictions or fears. Draw up strength from within you to tame them and come out victorious towards a peaceful resolution within yourself. The change within brings change without, and you'll end the year on a balanced note.

SAGITTARIUS

There are signs of recovery, emotional or physical, and joyful moments with the family. Wishes may come true, mostly in the form of a financial or work opportunity. But avoid any hasty decision else you may be misled. Things will ultimately work out as you believe, so keep the faith. Trust divine timing, and let go of what doesn't serve your higher purpose.

CAPRICORN

You begin the year comfortable in your own skin and financially secure. Continue to approach issues in a no-nonsense manner and you will be successful. Avoid judging people. You may migrate or trav-

el to a foreign land and encounter helpful people. Some may have an increased workload of wearing two hats. Health improves from April onwards. Follow your intuition and be patient.

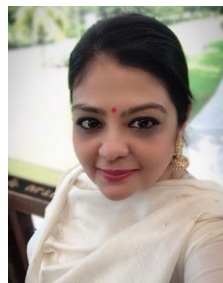
AQUARIUS

The year begins with you moving away from painful situations and drama. Keep the faith: the universe is protecting you in ways you can't see. Your health may have been affected by unwelcome events but you will let go of what doesn't serve you in the second half of the year, and achieve whatever you desire. Life is a mirror: make inward changes to see victory outwards.

PISCES

You are armed with willpower and determination, and will receive exciting offers as your internal changes manifest, so take action and follow your heart but be assertive and communicate your needs clearly before taking the plunge. You are what you seek, so be careful of what you attract. If certain things come to an end towards the last quarter of 2021, forgive and let them go. ■

Karishmma Mmakhija is a tarot and angel-card reader based in Mumbai. The former media marketing professional took a turn towards spiritual modalities two years ago, and now practises them as healing tools.





The Gem in You

Gemstones evoke certain qualities that reflect ones already inside us; can we learn to recognise and cherish the gems we are?

By Kay Newton

January is the best month to take a step back and do nothing other than contemplate. You do not need fixing or help from anyone else, just time with yourself. Make space to mull over the past year and envisage the months ahead to create the reality you desire.

Let me share a story for you to ponder over.

A wise woman sat by her workbench, crafting a beautiful object made of gold and precious jewels. Her captivated granddaughter sat quietly beside, watching in awe. “What are all the shiny pieces?” asked the 10-year-old.

“Darling child, each part of my creation is unique and special in itself, yet together they become

PHOTO: BRETT HONDOW / PIXABAY

a valuable powerhouse. Let me tell you the potential of each the elements then you can see how strong they are together.

“The bluestone is called a Sapphire, and although it looks like the sea, it also shines like the sky. This gem may have many powers: wisdom, protection, good fortune, mental clarity and insight. The stone also aspires to restore balance, help concentration and bring lightness and joy. The gem will help you to attract gifts and fulfil dreams.

“Green emeralds are gems that define love, protection, hope and an open heart. Think of the spring season, new beginnings, vitality and the cycle of life. Emeralds connect you to nature and others in a faithful long-lasting relationship.

“The red crystal is ruby; think of summer, fire and passion. It gives the bearer courage and strength, power and leadership, devotion and energy, confidence and motivation. Not only does it give you these capabilities, but the gem also aids with honour, compassion, generosity and prosperity.

“The gold is a precious metal, soft and pliable. It bends like a tree in the autumn wind, yet it is also strong and enduring. Gold has an indestructible nature and is very malleable. With gold’s relative scarcity, it is a unique metal. Humans are often related to gold and its enduring sheen. It is said their soul is eternal too.

“Diamonds are a symbol of purity, innocence, love, faithfulness to oneself and others. Invincible in hardness, it displays all the colours of all other gemstones, although it is transparent when the light hits. The gem of winter, the colour of ice, it is also one of pure and perfect light. When we are true to ourselves, we are like diamonds.”

As the grandmother mounted the final piece into the object, the beauty of the craftsmanship became apparent. Alone each element dazzles, yet together they are stunningly brilliant. The two looked upon the trinket, and the grandmother breathed deeply. She asked the child, “Now that you know this knowledge, what do you see in this beautiful object?” The child simply answered. “I see myself.” The grandmother smiled, her work completed.

The story, when contemplated, has so many layers and questions. As unique human beings, we sometimes feel disconnected from the web of life and forget that we are part of nature. The cycles of the moon and tide, as well as the seasons, affect who we are.

When we relate to nature, we strengthen our reason for living, for being here on the planet, at this moment in time.

We may see our characteristics within the gems mentioned, attributes that are strong and well-

formed within us and others that we aspire to become. We always have a choice, and we can now ask – what do we want to let go? What will serve us better now? How can we move forward?

When we look at familiar objects in new ways, we create different possibilities. The world around us is in a state of constant change; when we learn from our surroundings and listen to our intuition, we often find answers that were not apparent until we focused upon them.

There are many other precious stones in the world with hidden meanings that we can also explore. Such gems may lead you to further answers that you seek. You are all of

the elements mentioned and more. Sometimes, the answers we seek are found in ‘nothing’ space. When we stop and be, rather than do, we can see modern-day life from a completely different angle.

Instead of beginning the New Year focused on dream / vision boards or a list of goals (both personally and professionally), stop and breathe. Focus on the coming 12 months by staying in the present moment. Find out how to sparkle right now and become the exquisite gift to the world that you are. What did you find when you contemplated the story? ■

Kay Newton is an award-winning speaker, writer and midlife strategist



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5 ways to heal



We all go through grief and pain; here are five tried-and-tested ways to heal

By Aekta Kapoor

Grief is a lonely place. Even as the world is shrouded in a dark wave of loss and confusion that has affected almost every human on earth, each of us must traverse the treacherous path of grief alone, within ourselves.

I have been there in the dark night of the soul. For over a decade, I lived in a place where I was forced to die a little bit each day, and on some cataclysmic nights I mourned my own death – the death of the life force inside me. But the very sensitivity and poetry of my heart that made me vulnerable to deep

bruises also saved me, because one day it began to sing. Instinctively, I was drawn to heal myself, pulled out of my black hole of misery and into the light by a force of nature.

Then began the next decade of my life – one of healing, metamorphosis and self-love. I tried everything, and the five paths I am listing here have worked for me and continue to be the bedrock of my life's journey. Take the first step towards healing and try any of them. You cannot eradicate grief but you can transform it into a force for positive change, for yourself and the world.



HEAL THROUGH YOUR BODY

The body is a wondrous tool. While cellular memory can be a storehouse of all the blows you have received, the body is also a pathway to unimaginable realms of ecstasy, regeneration and growth. Look at your body – not with your eyes open in the mirror, but with your eyes closed, looking inward. What are the sensations you can feel? What feels good? Where does it hurt?

Vipassana meditation, which is precisely this process of observing your body's sensations and being with yourself in silence, is a difficult but brilliant tool to become one with your body. Less difficult options are yoga and *pranayama*. Pleasurable sex can also elevate you if you immerse yourself and leave your mind out. I also recommend dancing and Sufi whirling for the

joy and meditative states they evoke, and any exercise that allows you to savour your body without punishing yourself. Each day, your body feels different, some days are harder than others. But if you keep at it regularly, one day you will realise that you have come a long way.

TRAIN THE MIND

Pain manifests in the body but it begins in the mind. If you allow painful thoughts to dominate your mindspace during the day, they will erupt in health issues, both mental and physical. Like the body, the mind needs exercise, movement and muscle-building.

Cognitive and alternative therapies help. Seek a therapist or guide, someone you trust and respect. I studied all kinds of methods – pranic healing, neuro-linguistic

PHOTO: POLINA TANKILEVITCH / PEXELS

programming, counselling, hypnotherapy, even past-life regression. Like steps up a ladder, all helped in filling in the gaps in my awareness. They helped me recognise my 'bad' thoughts and replace them with 'good' ones instantly. With daily practice, it becomes second nature, and you nip the pain in the bud.

HEAL WITH NATURE

Nature has potent healing properties,

finding strength from its roots and constantly reaching for the sky.

Dwell on these messages and signs from nature, soak in its 'beingness', and absorb its vital primal energy. When we wake up to the knowledge that we are all one – all part of the same plane of existence, pulsating with the same life force as the sun in the sky and the sand under our feet – then a gentle shift takes place in our consciousness. Grief becomes yet another tree or wave; it becomes part of the process of life. It exists but without suffering. It is just there.

TAP YOUR CREATIVE ENERGY

There is a river that flows through you, and it needs to meet its sea. Your creative energy may manifest in different ways, and how stunning they all can be. Some of

any kind of nature – from puppies to mountains. Besides your own body, spend time with other bodies – animals, plants, ocean, wilderness. Observe the cycles of the seasons and the work of the elements. Notice how the invisible wind can create visible disturbances, and how the waves become one with the sea after their work is done. See how the tree lives in a state of perpetual 'giving', growing silently,

us make music, some write, some launch startups with global impact, some cook splendid meals.

Every single one of us is creative in ways we may not realise. Keep trying different forms of creativity until you find the river that flows inside you, and then allow it to flow to its natural outcome and release itself. If you are builder, build; if your hands make magic, let them.

Creativity is a miraculous tool

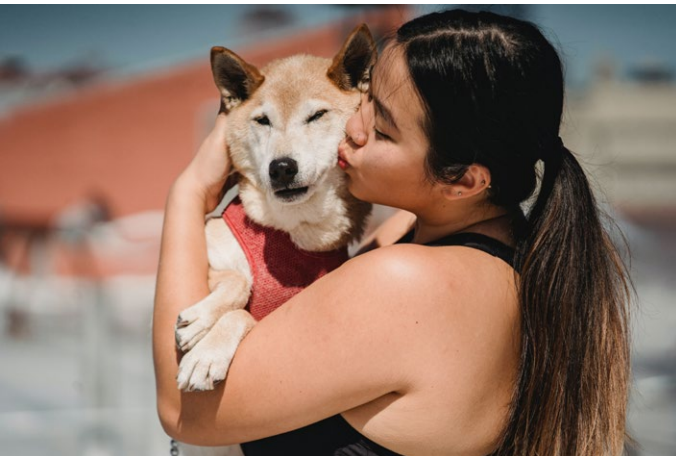


PHOTO: SAM LION / PEXELS

for recovery for two reasons: one, because you allow divine energy to channel through you each time you create something. Two, because there is always something to show for it, and the sense of achievement – however small it may appear – stacks up happiness bars in the treasure chest of your heart and it grows bigger and bigger, until one day you shine as bright as the sun.



ADOPT A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

There is no greater path to recovery than adopting a spiritual practice, and one that also helps you discover your calling, develop fortitude for future griefs, and give your life a sense of direction. I have never been one for the constraints of organised religion. Instead, I find the freedom and expansiveness of the world's

various spiritual traditions to be liberating and uplifting in several ways.

How do you know if a spiritual path is right for you? Regardless of religion, there are four aspects you could consider. One, does it require daily practice? Meditation (*dhyana*), yoga (*kriya*) or chanting (*japa*) practices activate our intuition and discerning wisdom. If done with a sense of devotion and faith (*bhakti*), we become unshakeable in the face of life's vicissitudes.

Two, does it encourage study? Knowledge, *gyan*, is one of the paths to enlightenment. Study strengthens the intellect and our conviction.

Three, does it include *satsang* or positive collaborative company? Human connections built on faith, inspiration and motivation are the most precious relationships of all. They increase our life span and add depth and meaning to our existence beyond family ties.

Four, does it encourage the breaking of mental boundaries and aspiration to greater inward growth (*atmavichara*)? Horizontal or outward or material growth is limited and limiting; vertical or inner growth that takes us deeper and deeper into our beings is the only real path in our control.

Healing can become a part of this inner journey, and when it does, you will look back at your grief with awe. For, from that darkness, came the light. ■



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