

eShe

July-August 2021
Vol 5 Issue 6

— the female gaze —

4TH
ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE

Soraya Chemaly

The American
author and
activist on
why women's
rage can be a
powerful tool
for an equal
world



POP PSYCHOLOGY

Malayalam film actor
Santhy Balachandran's
creative experiment

CROSS-BORDER RAGA

Mahesvari Autar is taking
Indian mantra music to
Dutch concert halls

A MOM'S LIFE

A photographer's
visual ode to her
former cop mother

FEMMEQ

Feminine Intelligence for a Regenerative Future

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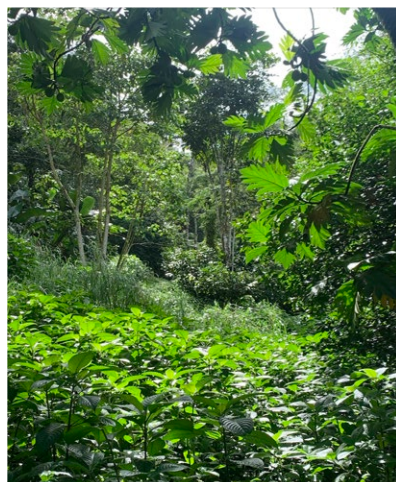
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eShe
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FEMMEQ | PIONEERING THE POSSIBLE

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FOUR YEARS ON

This month, we mark four years of *eShe* as an independent magazine and a space for women's leadership and stories of our shared humanity. In these years, despite the challenges and limitations, we have managed to make a space for ourselves as a credible platform for women's voices from around the world, and can unabashedly call ourselves India's first and only international women's magazine.



Aekta Kapoor
Editor and Publisher
aekta@eshe.in

Not only is *eShe* ranked among the top 25 women's magazines in the world, we have also now expanded the scope of our work to peacebuilding with our new initiative South Asia Union. Feminine energy has long been suppressed and termed the weaker of the sexes, when the truth is that women are powerful beyond measure. The strength of female emotion in the face of injustice – even our rage, as cover personality Soraya Chemaly has argued (p.26) – can shake the world. It was the anger of Rosa Parks that ignited America's civil rights movement; it was the wrath of Durga that led to the destruction of the wicked.

So, it is all the more vital that we put our intelligence and emotion to good use. *eShe* is my humble attempt to channelise women's energy for the cause of unity, peace and progress across borders. As we rise, we must rise together. Four years is a drop in the ocean of time, but I submit to the process with faith and commitment. Please join in. ■

Editor and Publisher: Aekta Kapoor
Business Director: Kaveri Jain
Community Manager and Art Writer: Manasvi Jerath
Contributors: Debalina Bhatta, Kay Newton, Manvi Pant, Maya Lalchandani

Mentor: Kul Bhushan
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सबेरा

**SOCIAL
AND
BUSINESS
ENTERPRISE
RESPONSIBLE
AWARDS**

This year marks the fourth edition of the SABERA Awards, which acknowledge responsible businesses, social enterprises, purpose-driven leaders and efforts creating a sustainable social impact.

Last year's winners included Unilever, Tata Power, Cipla and Maruti. Renu Sud Karnad, managing director, HDFC Ltd., will lead the jury this year. The awards finale will be held on December 9, 2021, with the jury meeting on November 9, 2021.

If you or your organisation have been working towards any of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, sign up and be seen.

**REGISTER YOUR ORGANISATION FOR
THE SABERA AWARDS:**
sabera.co/registration/

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eShe
— the female gaze —

STARTING THE DAY
WITH VERMILION



A MOM'S LIFE

Photographer Debalina Bhatta's photo feature following her mother's daily routine is an ode to mothers everywhere

Kolkata photographer Debalina Bhatta's greatest role model has always been her mother, retired cop Minati Bhatta. "It is impossible to put my feelings for my mother into words. She is one of the strongest women I know," says Debalina. As an homage to her icon, Debalina decided to let her pictures speak a thousand



MORNING PUJA

words, and composed a photo feature with her mom as the protagonist.

“My mom joined the first-ever lady police batch in 1966 as an assistant sub-inspector of police in the Intelligence Branch (IB) of the West Bengal Police. She was posted in Kolkata and worked there all through her 35-year career. She retired as an inspector of police of the IB department,” says Debalina, who has captured dozens of pictures of Minati going about her daily activities in the home. The photographs are taken at different times of the day – showing how the 72-year-old tends to the needs of her family with complete gusto and dedication, even if she has to sometimes sacrifice her own health, happiness and comfort for it.

“The photos depict her everyday routine, and how she selflessly looks after my father, my brother, my sister-in-law and me with the same passion and compassion year after year,” she says, adding that her father too was in the West Bengal Police service and retired as a deputy superintendent of police of Howrah District.



MAKING THE
MORNING MEAL



QUICK
BREAKFAST



Minati's daily routine has been unaltered ever since her retirement. "She wakes up early in the morning before everyone else, and goes to sleep after she completes her daily chores. Every day, she follows the same chain of activities like cooking, cleaning, prayers, washing and so on," says Debalina, who completed her Master's in mass communication and journalism from Calcutta University.

"What intrigued me the most while shooting this feature over the weeks and months was how my mother went about all this gruelling labour without any complaints. I wanted to showcase her strength, dignity and her consistent drive to keep the wheels of our family rolling," she says.

Debalina chanced upon photography in her school days, clicking with a Sony point-and-shoot camera. She also took up painting, which enhanced her inclination towards the creative arts. After completing her Master's, she found herself at a low point in her life. "I was searching for a gateway for my emotions and existence," she shares, explaining why she enrolled for a two-year





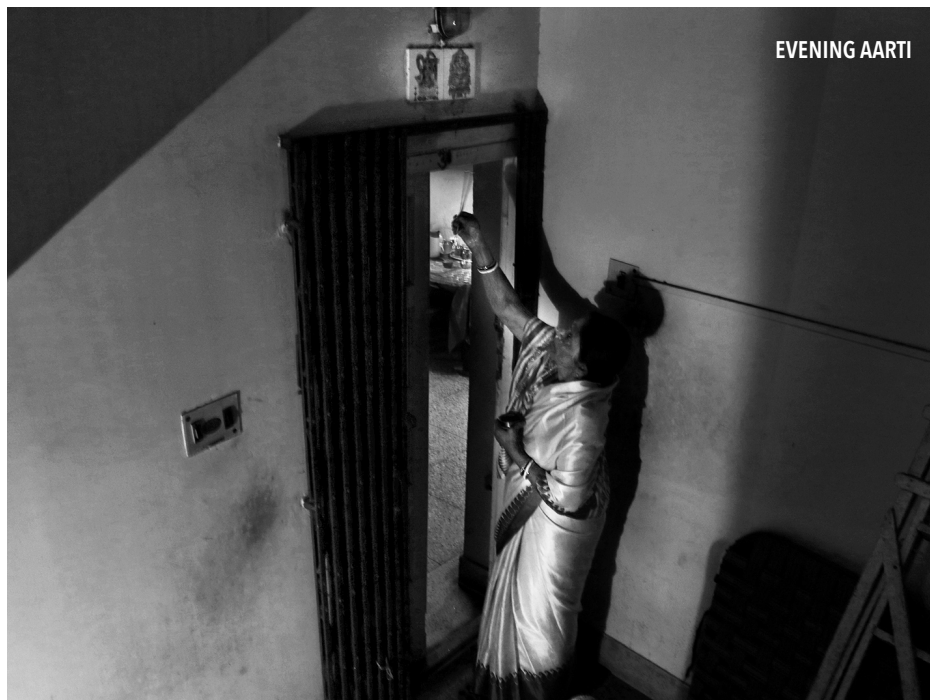
AFTERNOON LEISURE



EVENING AT
THE TERRACE



EVENING TEA



EVENING AARTI



diploma in photography. “After years of mental struggle, I found my true self through photography; it acts as a catalyst for my mental peace,” says Debalina, who – after years of borrowing her brother’s camera – has now got her own equipment and has turned her passion into a profession. Her work has appeared on various platforms. But, of course, the series on her mother lies more in the realm of the personal than professional.

According to the ‘[Time Use Survey in India 2019](#)’ by the National Statistical Office, 81 percent of India’s female population above the age of six is engaged in ‘unpaid domestic services for household members’, compared with 26 percent of Indian men and boys. The survey also found that women spent almost 20 percent of their daily hours on unpaid housework and caregiving for family members, compared with less than 3 percent for men.

“I dedicate this photo feature to all mothers around the world who are the silent performers and always remain the unsung heroes, seldom acknowledged in their everyday lives,” Debalina says. ■



WORKPLACE WELLNESS

Management consultant Seema Rekha on why employee mental health is vital for company growth and why women make better leaders

If an organisation wants to flourish, there is no other way forward than compassionate leadership, says Seema Rekha, a management consultant who believes in the wellbeing of each individual in an organisation, and aligns employee wellness with business outcomes.

The Gurugram-based founder of Antarmanh Consulting, Seema Rekha (who does not use her surname) works towards organisational transformation through people enhancement. She also believes that the core ingredient of leadership is nurturing. “It’s easier for women to lead,” says the 41-year-old mother

PHOTO: MOHAMED HASSAN / PIXABAY

of two. “All school principals are women – and we leave our children in their hands. It is these women in schools and classrooms who are leading the world, not the men and women in executive boardrooms.”

Having launched her consultancy

workforce when it comes to soft skills. “The potential is already there but they need a platform to perform. Women employees and leaders need mentoring and help in growing their skills. Women leaders should collaborate with one another and build more women leaders,” she avers.

Her venture provides ‘people-wellness-centric’ services to ensure holistic and sustainable growth of organisations. They cater to the mental, emotional, legal, financial and occupational needs of diverse employees from both the public and private sectors. “If we want a sustainable workplace, it must revolve around the mental wellbeing of each individual. We are all interlinked: if one part is not doing well, the whole structure can’t do well,” says Seema Rekha, who was trained at IIM Lucknow, Institute of Counselling in Glasgow UK, and TISS Mumbai, and is a member of the American Psychological Association.

She adds, “The most important ingredient is a sense of belongingness within the organisation. Without that, you cannot achieve employee wellbeing. The relational needs of the employees also have to be addressed, and one of the needs is



Seema Rekha

in 2013 when her younger child was just three months old, and now heading a team of over 150 psychologists and counsellors – almost all women – in 13 countries, Seema Rekha is convinced that women are better at handling the

compassionate leadership.”

Born and raised in Jhansi, a small historical town in Uttar Pradesh, Seema Rekha was the youngest of three siblings born to a businessman father and a mother who had worked as a schoolteacher as well as a journalist with a major Hindi daily. “Most women are empowered in Jhansi, including my mother. My father, too, was a compassionate leader in his own way. As a result of my upbringing, I never saw the vulnerability of women as a personal problem but rather as a social problem,” she shares.

According to Seema Rekha, gender inequality hurts both women and men. “Normally, Indians don’t create a psychologically safe atmosphere at home,” she says, adding that this leads to all kinds of issues for children when they grow up.

Her advice to organisations is to build a space where people who are competent have room to grow. “Inclusivity means including everyone – even those with disadvantages – but it doesn’t mean leaving good people behind,” she reasons, suggesting that managers give employees space to come up and talk about their problems; give them flexibility to work in their

own space; build a support system to help those who may be struggling; and, above all, “trust your people.”

“I have seen excellent examples of compassionate leadership even in the government sector, where the managers are concerned about not just employees but their family’s wellbeing as well. It’s more visible in smaller setups, and it is clear that the productivity is higher in such cases,” she notes.

**“IF WE WANT A
SUSTAINABLE
WORKPLACE, IT
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EACH INDIVIDUAL”**

When Seema Rekha had set out to launch her bootstrapped venture focusing on employee mental health and wellbeing, it was still considered a risk and an unconventional approach to organisational growth, but she was determined that this was the need of the hour. “I am not afraid of hard work and fail-

ure” she states. After the pandemic struck last year, she used her own experience in risk-taking and resilience to align Antarmanh to the new world order. “We changed our infrastructure, and all began working from home. We launched free helplines, and offered free services to government and international organisations and their families,” says Seema Rekha, who studies Vedic sciences in her free time.

The organisation, in fact, saw a



significant rise in demand for its services during this period. They ended up delivering over 3000 planned counselling and therapy sessions for adults, children and senior citizens, and an equal number of emergency counselling sessions. “We de-escalated over 150 critical cases, which would have otherwise led to self-harm or even suicide,” says Seema Rekha, expressing her relief and gratitude that her team of experts were able to handle the situations sensitively.

Additionally, the team also hosted over 1600 group workshops for their clients aimed at promoting emotional, physical, intellectual, social, spiritual, environmental and occupational wellness. These included

Covid-specific awareness sessions for frontline health professionals and alternative healing therapies and psychological support for critical employees in the ICU and their families, all offered pro bono. They also established a 24-hour mental-health helpline in collaboration with the Haryana Government for the underserved population.

It was a stressful time for the group, but they feel gratified that they were able to be of service to humanity in its darkest hour. For Seema Rekha, there has been an additional change of roles: “I have become the go-to person for everything – professional as well as family problems,” she smiles. It is a role she no doubt thrives in. ■



Indulgence (2021)
by Shivangi Kalra

UNLOCKING CREATIVITY

If the Covid pandemic affected each part of our lives, can art be far behind? Two young Indian painters Aditi Purwar and Shivangi Kalra take us through the ups and downs of their artistic journeys through the pandemic and how it has shaped their personal and creative vision

By Manasvi Jerath



SHIVANGI KALRA

Delhi girl Shivangi Kalra held her first paintbrush at the age of six and was encouraged by her family and teachers to pursue art ever since. As her personal style developed, she began to tilt towards surreal elements and dream-like compositions. She has been part of many virtual exhibitions such as Nippon Gallery, Kolkata Centre for Creativity, and Art 9 Hong Kong. She was also awarded The Best Painting in an online exhibition by Eastern Foundation of Art and Culture in April 2020 during the lockdown.

Shivangi creates self-portraits

through allegorical features and visual metaphors in her artworks. “I like recreating things as I remember them, I don’t like to imitate their reality. If I have half-forgotten the form, I create the forgotten part afresh from imagination. Sometimes, I draw inspiration from images, if I revisit pictures that stir up nostalgic feelings,” says the 22-year-old, who completed her BFA from Delhi College of Art this year.

She is intrigued by the way the patterns of life interact with lifeless ones in a very silent manner. “My practice revolves around the intricacies of life, impermanent

shadows, subtle gestures of the living and slight movements of the nonliving, flowing patterns and fluid forms. I believe that every moment leaves a mark on us and deserves to be expressed in its own share of time and space, including every element that makes that moment exotic,” says Shivangi, who works with oils, watercolours and mixed media. She has recently begun incorporating digital elements into her practice.

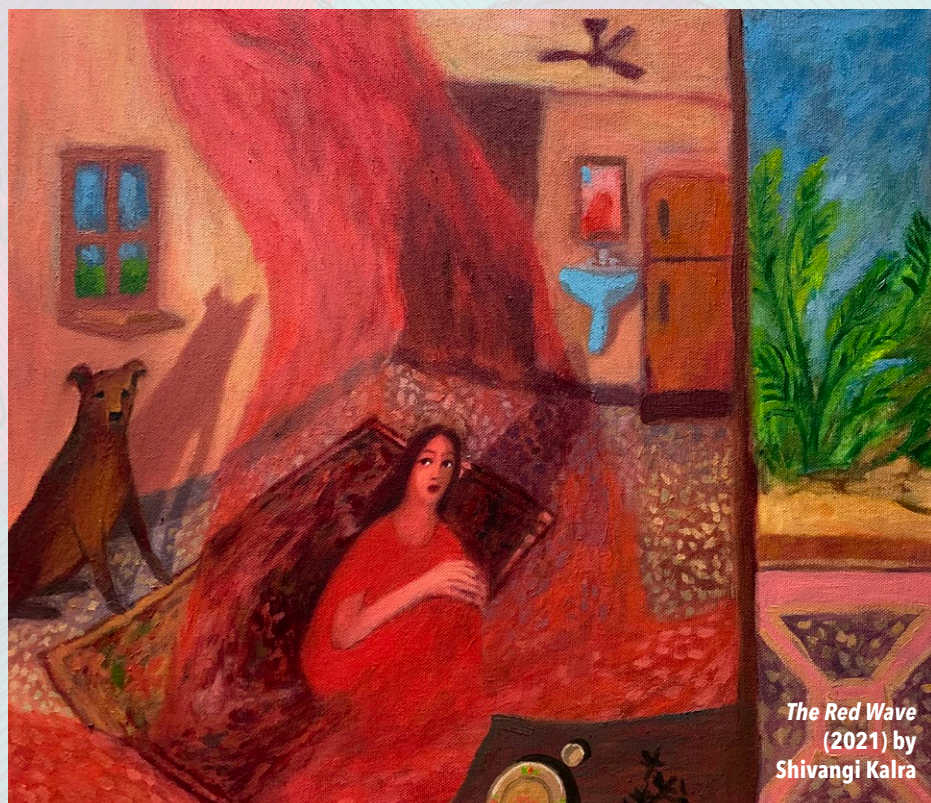
Affected by the pandemic, her art too began to reflect life around her. She explains, “Confinement to a space for a long time was uncomfortable in the beginning,

but later on, it streamlined my visual language. It helped me introspect deeper and work on subjects closer to anything and everything I call ‘home’. Reduced exposure to the outside world helped me realise the beauty of freedom in limitation. At the same time, the strange times that we are living in have left bruising impacts on the way I think and feel.”

Shivangi gives an example of a painting in which she has depicted herself seated in a wave of red, with a haunted look on her face. “The second wave of Covid in India was much more painful than the first. Every day was longer than the



L-R: *Third Person* (2021) and *Full Moon* (2021) by Shivangi Kalra



The Red Wave
(2021) by
Shivangi Kalra

previous. This self-portrait captures how it affected me,” she says.

At the same time, she feels there are still many who are oblivious of the devastation around them and at their doorstep. Her painting *The Storm* depicts two women talking to one another, while the rest of the world appears unstable. A tiger walking toward them represents danger. “Nothing is in order and yet they seem to be unaffected by everything happening around them. This is how the pandemic has been for some people in India,” says

Shivangi, who works on sizes that range from small six-inch surfaces to a substantial three feet for her oil paintings.

Is there something Shivangi wished she knew earlier? “I wish I knew the difference between failure and struggle. They are not the same thing. These are difficult times but let’s not forget to keep creating. I am trying to build my life around something that I love, and I think we all need more love in the world – for our work and for each other,” concludes Shivangi.

ADITI PURWAR



Aditi Purwar's journey is as much about personal revolution as a professional metamorphosis. Raised in the historic city of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, the 28-year-old qualified engineer creates surreal expressionist paintings that capture the essence of Indian households. During the pandemic, she further introspected and dwelt on her true emotions and perspective of her surroundings through her art.

"Painting is the physical manifestation of my intangible expressions,

what I am beneath the physical body and what I perceive when I look towards the world. Through my artworks, I represent my problems and sometimes provide solutions or otherwise keep it open-ended, allowing it to stir emotions in the viewer," says the 28-year-old.

Born to a lower middle-class family, Aditi shares that her mother married early and had to give up her study of music. Perhaps that was one reason why Aditi was drawn to the creative fields. She says, "The property disputes within my fami-



L-R: *Second Wave of Corona in India* (2021) and *Brooming Around the Bird's Cage* (2020) by Aditi Purwar

ly kept me detached from materialistic extremities. As a child, I was quiet, observant and self-contained. I began expressing myself through drawings and poetry very early.”

Always open to experimentation, Aditi says she “adores the medium”, irrespective of what it is. “The type of material we use channelises the expressions we hold within ourselves,” she believes.

Her paintings represent the world as she sees it. In her work *One Third of the Haveli* (2020), she depicts the

very common problem of property division in Indian joint families. She explains: “My grandfather bought a big *haveli* (large bungalow). His next generation comprises four families of his four sons. One-third of the *haveli* is now further divided into four parts. This small city, Allahabad, is made up of similar buildings – all divided to accommodate siblings and their families. In their lifetime, they fight for inches, they even keep waste items in order to seize space. These spaces aren’t only made up of



A painting by Aditi Purwar made during the pandemic: *One Third of the Haveli* (acrylic on canvas, 2020)

bricks; they have a history of anger, love, joy, struggle and many other emotions embedded within. It is a collective representation of their complex minds.”

Being at home for 10 months in pandemic, Aditi could not help but paint the situation she found herself in. “I was separated from them though we still mingled.”

When asked what the journey has been for her as a woman artist, she says, "I consider myself human first. I often forget that I am female; however, society keeps on reminding me of this fact."

After observing the state of women of the previous generation, including her mother, Aditi felt rebellious enough to speak up

female, choosing a life partner on your own, too, is still a major issue in India. I too had to fight for it. Society creates many such hurdles backed by rituals, beliefs and superstitions. People do not look at the world in a wider perspective."

She opines that many women forget their self-worth in the name of sacrifice and living up to the



A painting by Aditi Purwar. *Before Marriage* (oil on canvas, 2020)

against the restrictions that Indian society imposes on women. "It made me cautious and courageous at the same time so that I was able to take important life decisions on my own. Choosing a career in art after completing engineering successfully was not an easy option. My father was devastated when I told him. Whether you are male or

expectations of other people. "If a woman is an artist, I am certain she will find a way," avers Aditi. "I always thought that the definition of honesty is being morally upright, or not lying, or not cheating others. I rarely gave importance to being honest with myself until recently. It has been a revelation and has cured all the problems in my mind." ■



SORAYA CHEMALY

RIGHTS AND RAGE

Washington DC-based author and feminist activist Soraya Chemaly believes women's anger can be a powerful force for social justice

By Aekta Kapoor

In April 2020, Soraya Chemaly wrote a prescient article in *NBC Think* about how Coronavirus could hurt women the most, and how to prevent a “patriarchal pandemic”. “Societies that value women and their time, work and health tend to be the world’s healthiest, for women, children and men,” the Washington DC-based feminist activist wrote. “The United States is not among them.”

A year down the line, it was clear that her prediction was spot on, not just for the US but the whole world. Women’s income decreased up to 60 percent during the first lockdown months, and 50 million more women are estimated to have slipped under the poverty line. Women’s share of unpaid care work at home went up, domestic violence increased, and job losses hit them worse.

And it’s clear that societies still aren’t valuing women. A new survey last month of over 200 women’s rights organisations across 38 countries found that grassroots organisations fighting for gender justice

have consistently had their funding slashed during the pandemic.

For Soraya, the award-winning author of the phenomenal bestseller *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger* (Atria Books, 2018), it is clear that crisis situations – like pandemics – only exacerbate fault lines

that already exist in any society, and if women are to make any progress, they’ll need to harness their anger to fight for equality. “If ever there was a time not to silence yourself, to channel your anger into healthy places and choices, this is it,” she writes.

The director and co-founder of the Women’s Media Center Speech Project, Soraya has long worked to expand women’s civic and political participation, and has challenged gender norms. Her inclination was clear even in childhood growing up in the Bahamas to a Lebanese father and Bahamian mother. At age eight, her father asked her to clear the table, and she refused as he hadn’t expected the same of her younger brother. “That’s the first time I realised one has to fight for equality,

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and yes, the fight continues even today,” says the youthful 55-year-old.

Though she was raised a Catholic and was suitably inclined to religion as a child, that bubble soon burst too. “At age 11, I said I wanted to be a priest, and I was laughed at. They said women can’t be priests,” she says of her disenchantment with Christianity and bent towards atheism. “I asked the priest, ‘Why do only men get to be priests just because they have penises?’ He couldn’t give me an answer. Between the corruption of the institu-

to feminist writing in 2010 using this experience as a framework. By then she had a busy husband and three young girls, and the social pressure to be “the perfect mother” took its toll on her. “There was an expectation that mothers have to behave in a self-sacrificial way, and it made me sad and angry. The culture at schools perpetuated the image of ‘dad working, mom baking pies’. It was as if all the progress made by women’s movements over the years had stalled, and instead of things getting better,



L-R: Soraya Chemaly at her TED talk, 2018; her book *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*, 2018

tion and its lack of reason, I realised by the age of 15 that religion was not for me,” narrates Soraya, who later graduated from Georgetown University in Washington DC and made the city her home.

Having worked for over 15 years as a market development executive in the media and data technology industries, Soraya decided to go back

they were actually getting worse,” says Soraya, who currently serves on the board of various American organisations such as Coalition for Women in Journalism and Center for Democracy and Technology.

After giving up her career as a marketing consultant, Soraya threw herself into writing, and soon discovered that internet culture was



Soraya (centre) at the Feminist Press 2019 awards where she was awarded the Feminist Power Award

no better. “It only reflects social mores. Social media is not one-way; we are both creating and consuming at the same time. The internet both exacerbates inequality and allows us a chance to fight back,” says Soraya, who has worked with organisations like Google and Facebook and says they need to make structural changes and not just pay lip service to inclusivity and social justice.

“Five years ago, women writers from India wrote to me about the incessant abuse they faced online – from rape threats to sextortion to blackmail – and they asked for my help to engage with Facebook. And

yet, I don’t think there has been much positive change since then,” she regrets.

That’s why Soraya believes anger is the ‘Trojan horse’ to look at women’s issues. “We have detached anger from femininity, and taught girls to suppress their anger, even if it is legitimate,” she says. Soraya and her husband joke that though her book on women’s anger took her 12 weeks to write, it had developed over 10 years in her head.

She gives the example of Donald Trump’s election win in 2016 as a crystallisation of such concerns. “Here was a man accused of sexual

assault and even rape by so many women, and yet it didn't matter to anyone; he became president anyway. His election was the acme of what is wrong in our society, and how women's issues are completely side-lined," avers Soraya, who is a contributor to several anthologies, including *Free Speech in the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Believe Me: How Trusting Women Can Change the World* (Hachette

Soraya has given numerous talks, including a TED Talk that has since garnered over 2.4 million views, and also co-produced a television campaign highlighting the effects of online harassment on women in politics in America.

She believes the #MeToo movement is "so fraught" because it renders the male role of being providers and protectors redundant. "Here are women saying, 'You aren't pro-



L-R: Soraya (seated right) at a book signing event; Soraya with Marya Teresa Stark, founder, Emerge America

Audio, 2020).

"*Rage Becomes Her* is a book for men. Women already know what's in it," she smiles over a Zoom call from Washington DC. The book was recognised as the best book of 2018 by *The Washington Post*, *Fast Company*, *Psychology Today*, and *NPR* and has been translated into multiple languages. Since then,

viding for me, I am financially independent, and you aren't protecting me either'. It's a direct challenge to men, and that's why so many of them are denying it could have ever happened," she says, referring to the various counter-claims and trolling on social media that targeted women who made allegations of sexual harassment against powerful men.



Soraya (far right)
with her husband
and daughters

“Men need to listen, behave and be comfortable with women leading,” she says of men’s role in creating a gender-equal society. “They have to have difficult conversations with other men, and be role models for the younger generation of boys.”

While Soraya’s book is about women and anger, she says, “I could write the same book about men and sadness. They are not allowed the full range of human emotion, and it’s unhealthy for them to have to suppress it all inside.”

**“I COULD WRITE
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Soraya — whose name means ‘midnight sun’ — believes progress has been slow, especially when it comes to clamping down on sexual violence against women in most parts of the world, and increasing the number of women in politics by making the playing field safer and more equitable. “To do that, we have to shape both the public and the private spaces,” she says. “We have to practise equality at home, in our intimate spheres. Only then will it reflect in the public one.” ■



THE RAGA OF LIFE

Mahesvari Autar's events platform showcases Indian classical music and mantras to audiences in Holland

It is art and culture that is keeping people sane during the pandemic, states Mahesvari Autar, who is disappointed that governments worldwide are clamping down on cultural events in the name of lock-

downs. "They are behaving as if art and culture is not important," says the Netherlands-based founder of DesiYUP, a platform for artists, musicians and performers from India.

Launched a decade ago, the



Mahesvari Autar at DesiYUP's first concert in 2012, which featured German-Indian musician Prem Joshua

events company organises concerts, master-classes and corporate events that showcase the beauty, depth and colour of Indian classical art forms to the European world. “I had a dream of starting my own platform for Indian music, culture and literature, and to inspire people through art,” says Mahesvari, who has so far conducted over 50 events in Holland with audience sizes ranging from 200 to 1000 persons.

In January 2020, just before the Covid pandemic, they even held a concert for infants, where parents and their babies could listen to soothing Vedic mantras being played live. “There were babies everywhere! It was the cutest

concert I have ever done, it was just beautiful,” smiles Mahesvari. Later, during the pandemic, they organised another one titled Little Yogis for kids older than five years.

Born and raised in Rotterdam, the 34-year-old’s Indian parentage and European roots have both played a role in her venture. After completing her Bachelor’s degree, Mahesvari started her career as a television journalist. Her first show was called ‘OHM’, which gave Dutch audiences information about spirituality and Hindu lifestyles. “There was a programme for every religion,” explains Mahesvari.

A documentary that Mahesvari made on environmental activist

Vandana Shiva woke her up to how the ‘web of life’ works and the importance of biodiversity. “It shaped me as a person and contributed to my love for Indian literature and mythology. You name it, I’ve read it!” she laughs. Mahesvari developed a deep and lasting respect for India’s ancient culture and art traditions. “I would rather call it the world’s oldest way of life instead of a religion,” she says. “You can cherry-pick anything you

“Meaningful music has the power to connect people, uplift their minds, and bring them peace and happiness. I especially want to give the younger generation a platform,” she says. Along with her venture, she did her Master’s in media and journalism from Erasmus University

At a time when Bollywood has become India’s greatest export and soft power, Mahesvari is careful to stay away from commercial genres. “India is so much more than



L-R: The team of DesiYUP after a concert by singer Nirali Karthik; Mahesvari with singer Vasuda Sharma

want from it and make it your own.”

Though starting a new venture came with risk, Mahesvari thought, “If I fail, I fail, but at least I tried.” Through DesiYUP, she brought in independent artistes from India and the diaspora – from renowned flautist Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia to German-Indian musician Prem Joshua – to perform in Dutch theatres and concert halls.

Bollywood. The more I research, the more I realise that I know only a fraction of all there is to know,” she says, talking about the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition) that has taken forward the arts for centuries in India.

Introducing raga music to Dutch audiences has been an interesting experience for Mahesvari. “Music has no borders,” she says, describing



The audience watches Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia perform at a concert organised by DesiYUP in Holland

a night concert when the audience was asked to lie down and go through a session of yoga *nidra* with melodious classical Indian music being played. In another concert titled ‘Many Faces of Love’ held in February 2020 after nine months of curation and organisation, love stories from Hindu mythology were narrated through raga music and Western violin. “My audience never knows what to expect from me,” smiles Mahesvari over a Zoom call from her flat in Rotterdam.

What Mahesvari has noticed is that the classical arts of all traditions are bound together by a certain mindset and aesthetic. “For instance, those who listen to Bollywood songs may not be likely to sign up for a sitar instrumental, but if one

is inclined to enjoy Western classical music, one is more easily persuaded to listen to Indian classical instrumental,” she shares.

One day, Mahesvari got a call from a man whose mother had attended a DesiYUP concert. The elderly lady had recently lost her husband and had been unable to sleep. The concert was her first outing since the funeral – and it was the first time she had slept well all night, her son told Mahesvari on the phone.

“Mantra music has nothing to do with religion or your political mindset,” says the young entrepreneur whose name stands for Goddess Durga. “This music is here to help you heal, relax and forget your mundane life. It can be a gift for you.” ■



WOMEN FIRST

Michigan-based artist and entrepreneur Svitlana Martynjuk is determined to facilitate fair representation of women in the global art scene

By Manasvi Jerath

When Ukraine-born Svitlana Martynjuk set out to establish herself as an artist in the US, she was shocked to discover the serious under-representation of women in the American and global art scene. This triggered her to create a platform and community called All SHE Makes, which now

provides hundreds of women artists the resources and opportunities to develop and grow commercially.

Born and raised in Rivne, a city in western Ukraine, Svitlana was 16 when she went to the US on a student-exchange programme. “No one prepared me for the culture shock,” she says. “The climate, the

PHOTO: STEVEN GLYNN PHOTOGRAPHY

way people lived their lives, dependence on vehicles, lack of city-like living, the inability to have the same opportunities as other people due to visa restrictions, and constantly being singled out and having my intelligence questioned simply due to being an immigrant from Eastern Europe – this put me in survival mode for years.”

Because of these difficulties, Svitlana took longer than usual to complete college. A bad relationship

that she connected with a local art community and participated in art events for the first time in her life.

After spending more time studying art history, Svitlana realised that local women artists only had limited avenues to show their work. “Throughout history and in today’s world, women artists remain underrepresented. Only 13.7 percent of living artists in major US museums and galleries are women. This doesn’t make any sense,” she says.



L-R: An artwork by Zeinab Diomande on All SHE Makes; Svitlana Martynjuk in her artist studio

that ended with her in therapy also led her to take up clinical psychology in her undergrad. Soon after, she began working on her art career.

A move from Texas to Michigan along with her partner gave Svitlana everything she needed at the time. “The Michigan climate is identical to Ukraine, and the area we live in resembles city living, which I missed so much,” she narrates, sharing

Svitlana started looking into the gender disparities and was dismayed to realise there wasn’t enough activism about it. “Being an artist, I wanted to see if there was a way that I could contribute to making a difference. My idea for All SHE Makes was born from a desire to create an international directory and a global access to quality art by women artists, because the most

common question I got was ‘where do you find artists?’,” she says.

Launched on January 1, 2020, All SHE Makes grew during the Covid pandemic. Svitlana believes it is important to emphasise the lack of women’s representation in the art circuit. “We cannot change anything if we don’t highlight the main issue or the people it affects. We thought art history included *all* artists, but it turns out this couldn’t be further from the truth. We trust museums to give us the correct history, but that’s not the reality when the artists shown are 80 percent white male,” she says.

Svitlana’s study of psychology informed her further about art and art practices. “Having a huge fascination for the human mind keeps me perpetually excited about art,” says the artist and entrepreneur, who believes there are no limits to the way people use art, and each story is equally inspiring. “There are as many perspectives as there are people,” she says.

Now as lockdown restrictions have eased and in-person events are on the horizon, her goal with All SHE Makes remains the same – increasing visibility for women artists. “We may use different tools and avenues for doing that, but the main idea is always bringing attention to the incredible achievements of women artists who are constantly overlooked,” she explains.

All SHE Makes helps artists build their CV by offering monetary support in form of scholarships, community support via networking and art critique events, visibility via art exhibits, and publishing opportunities through the *All SHE Makes* art magazine.

“We try to avoid concentrating so



Svitlana Martynjuk

much on the importance of being a full-time artist, because for some that may not even be the goal,” she says. “Our annual scholarship is available to all directory artists, and artists can use it for anything from babysitting costs to project starters.”

Indian artists too have made it to All SHE Makes, including Charuka

PHOTO: STEVEN GLYNN PHOTOGRAPHY



L-R: An artwork by Elaine T. Nguyen; an artwork by Laura Cuellas Tanco, both on All SHE Makes

Arora, Pallavi Singh, Farheen Fatima and Niha Nathersa. “Charuka is an incredible human exploring her own artistic journey. She is passionate about taking creativity and arts to the masses and in creating meaningful communities. Pallavi’s work is exploring the grooming culture amongst Indian men, which is showing a change from the traditional alpha male,” explains Svitlana.

She goes on: “Farheen is a self-taught photographer and that’s why her process is experimental. Niha is artist and art therapist. She says she processes the goings-on in her life through her painting; it is meditative and therapeutic for her.”

Svitlana believes women artists deserve and “are owed” a premier

place in museums, galleries, and commercial settings. “Women artists graduate with MFA degrees at higher rates than men, but we do not see that play out in the art market. When you go shopping for art or visiting galleries and museums, take a note how many of the artists are women,” she says.

She also asserts that there are various income streams available to women artists, such as fine-art licensing, limited-edition prints, taking part in public-art projects such as murals, and taking art workshops online. “Artists are more accepting of the notion that an art career is whatever you make of it,” she says. “There is no right or wrong anymore. We all create our own journey with what we have.” ■

A MYSTERY IN HISTORY

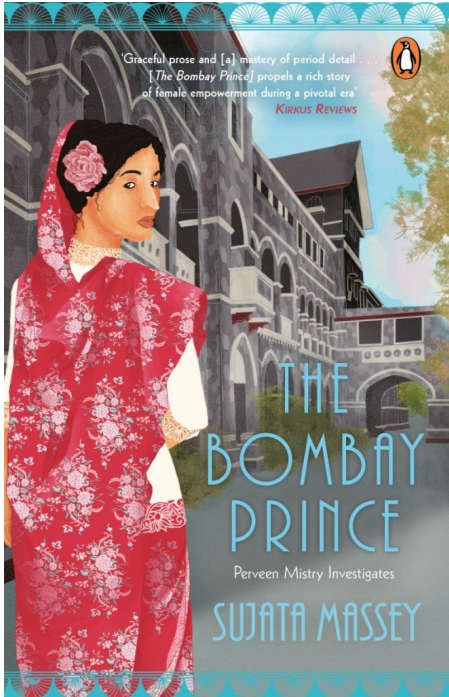
We review two novels set in the 20th century with fabulous, flawed female protagonists out to investigate strange goings-on



It's satisfying if a suspense novel has a woman in the lead role, seeking answers to mysterious riddles and triumphing in the end. It's fascinating if the novel is also set in the past and allows you a glimpse of history. And it's absolutely riveting if the protagonists turn out to be intensely *human* – with all the flaws and failings that entails.

Two sparkling mystery novels by two stellar writers have recently made it to the news. While Sujata

Massey's *The Bombay Prince* is the third in her award-winning Perveen Mistry series and is set in pre-Independence Bombay, Clare Chambers has set *Small Pleasures* in the suburbs of 1950s London. Besides their historical setting, both books feature protagonists who are eminently relatable: women who make mistakes, lust after the wrong men, have career ambitions, and seek the truth despite odds. Read on for detailed reviews.



Sujata Massey

THE BOMBAY PRINCE

This is the third in the Perveen Mistry series that has already earned Sujata Massey the Agatha Award for best historical mystery novel (2018) and the Mary Higgins Clark Award for mystery writing (2019). Based in Baltimore, Maryland, US, Sujata is the much-acclaimed author of 14 mystery and suspense fiction novels set in India and Japan, and her latest June 2021 release continues to keep the bar high.

Set in 1921, *The Bombay Prince* (Penguin Random House India, ₹499) begins with its protagonist Perveen Mistry, India's only female lawyer of her time, receiving a

visit from a fellow Parsi, a college student called Freny Cuttingmaster, in her office, which Perveen shares with her famous lawyer father. Unlike most of her community, the 18-year-old Freny is critical of the Prince of Wales' upcoming visit to Bombay and wants to join other budding freedom fighters in her college in boycotting a college function in the prince's honour.

When Freny mysteriously dies on the day of the event, Perveen finds herself drawn to find out the truth. In the process, she faces various challenges – personal, professional and political. Sexism and religious discrimination face her at every

turn, and her status as a divorcee doesn't help matters. The city is also in a state of unrest after the prince's visit, and Perveen is further preoccupied with an unsuitable suitor, an Englishman whom she cannot afford to be seen with.

Given Perveen's status as a woman born into wealth and high status, the tale takes us through lush homes and plush settings, including the Taj hotel at the Gateway of India.

But it also reminds us of the inequality in cities like Bombay, where the terribly rich rub shoulders with the wretchedly poor at every corner. Though fast-paced, the book allows you to dwell on its sumptuous details. The issue of colonial rule is also handled empathetically – while the author stays on the right side of history, the characters enamoured of the Raj are not turned into villains either.

The novel's feminism is subversive, presented in a deeply intimate way. Eventually, one comes away from the book as if awakening from a vivid dream, full of dazzling colour, drama and action, feeling as if one has driven through a very important moment in history, and having peered into the heart of an exceptional woman.

SMALL PLEASURES

The 2020 release *Small Pleasures* (Hachette India, ₹899) by Clare Chambers has recently made it to the news because it was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2021. The UK author already has nine novels to her credit, one of which was longlisted for the Whitbread best novel prize. Currently a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at the University of Kent,

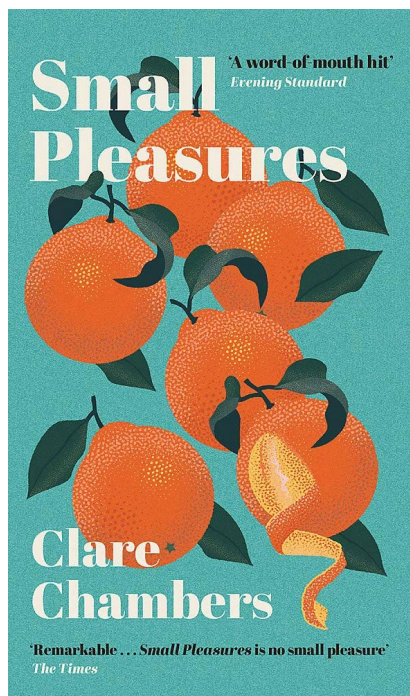
Clare began her career as a secretary at a small "eccentric" publishing house, and some of those experiences made it into her acclaimed 2007 novel *The Editor's Wife*.

A few of those experiences have perhaps also crept into *Small Pleasures*, which is set in Kent and the suburbs of London

of the 1950s. The protagonist Jean Swinney is a journalist at a small local newspaper whose own life is so boring and limited – a single woman living with an irascible mom, an unappreciated staffer assigned to all the unimportant sections of the newspaper – that gossip letters from her sister, who lives with her family in Kenya, appear thrilling in comparison.

It's no wonder that Jean is excited by the opportunity to investigate a





Clare Chambers

message from a reader who claims her daughter was the result of a 'virgin birth', and that there was no man involved in the conception. During the course of the investigation, Jean not only develops affection for both the virgin mother and her 10-year-old daughter, but also – oops – more-than-friendly feelings for the mother's current husband.

A gripping and layered storyline ensues, with the investigation taking Jean across England and meeting new and interesting sorts of people, and her own feelings and past experiences surfacing with every step in the journey. Her bonds with the Tilbury family are

so complex and messy that they are completely realistic. Added to that is Jean's difficult relationship with her mother and her inability to leave her and move out.

The book also touches on issues like sexism at the workplace that still appear familiar more than half a century later. Jean has learnt to play by the rules in order to survive, but she displays enough streaks of unpredictable strong-headedness to keep the narrative interesting. With plenty of psychological analysis thrown in between strange secrets and dysfunctional families, the novel is a winner for suspense fiction lovers. ■

A NEW APPROACH

Malayalam film actor and Oxford graduate Santhy Balachandran used her anthropology background to conceptualise an avant-garde music video



What Santhy Balachandran enjoyed studying most at college was social psychology. Years later – after she completed her Master’s in visual anthropology from the University of Oxford and became a famed Malayalam actor – it was this subject that inspired the theme of her lockdown music video project, *Oblivion*, launched this summer by iconic music director AR Rahman.

“I am fascinated by how culture influences perception,” says Santhy, who made her acting debut in the 2017 Malayalam film *Tharangam*, a fantasy black comedy directed by Dominic Arun. She shot to

mainstream fame when her third film, *Jallikkattu* (2019), directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, became a box-office hit. With three more film projects paused or postponed during the pandemic, an opportunity to work once again with Dominic – this time on an independent music video – drew her interest.

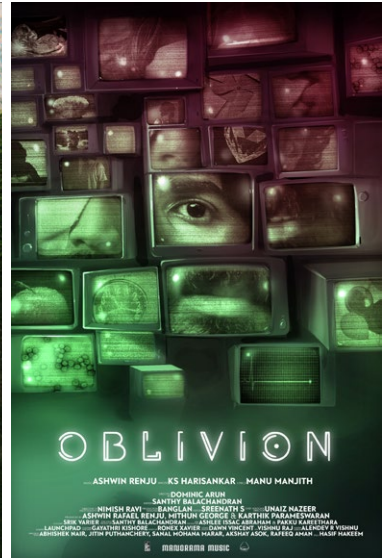
The seven-minute-long video explores the space between life and death, and the role of the senses in creating memories. It is influenced by the Nordic myth of Odin, who sacrifices an eye in return for a sip of water from the well of wisdom. “It is the idea of giving up outward perception in favour of inner

perception,” says Santhy, who also oversaw the launch of Instagram ‘filters’ based on the video, the first such marketing strategy to be used for an Indian music video. The filters allow users to mimic the dreamy-surreal feeling of *Oblivion* in their own photos. Within the first 24 hours, the filters had 1.5 million impressions online, says Santhy.

Born in Kerala, Santhy was raised

says of her decision to move to the film industry from academia. “It has been a learning space for me to be around so many talented people.”

With each successive film giving her a variety of experiences and opportunities to expand her creative instincts, there has been no looking back for Santhy. After *Jallikkattu* won various awards and made the news “for all the right reasons,” the film



L-R: Lead actor Sidharth Varma in a scene from the video of *Oblivion*; the video's promotional poster

in Chennai and Bengaluru before she left India to study in Oxford. Her plans to complete her PhD were cut short when she was in India for a break, and happened to audition for a play. Its success led to a film offer for Santhy. “The collaborative aspect of theatre and cinema really appealed to me,” she

Paapam Cheyyathavar Kalleriyatte (2020), a social satire directed by Shambhu Purushothaman, sealed Santhy’s image as an actor with a bent for the experimental. “But my next two films should swing the pendulum the other way,” she laughs, referring to the upcoming sports drama *Aaha* and family



Santhy Balachandran and Dominic Arun with the team who worked on the music video *Oblivion*

entertainer *Djinn*.

With *Oblivion*, she has further established herself as an artist with a broad oeuvre of work. Composed by Ashwin Renju, written by Manu Manjith and sung by KS Harisankar, the song has somewhat dark lyrics, which triggered Santhy to look beyond the usual themes of Malayalam music videos. “It could have been interpreted as a usual romantic video – the concept of loss works there too as the lyrics and tune have an element of destructiveness in them. But we wanted to go the unconventional route,” she says.

The abstract concept is considered a pathbreaker in the world of

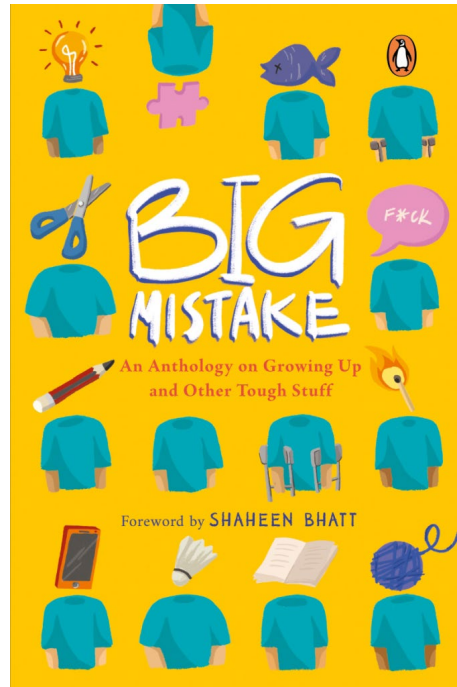
Malayalam music and filmography, bringing in elements of psychology, art history, nostalgia and the perception of time. “I wanted to contribute in my own unique way to the project,” says Santhy.

Their projects on hold after months of lockdown, the team was in a mood to attempt new genres and push themselves creatively, despite the budget constraints. “We didn’t have a lot of money but we had the luxury of time, and could put in our 100 percent,” says Santhy, who was hugely gratified when AR Rahman offered support by launching the video. “It is something that gave us all life in the dark months of the pandemic.” ■

THOSE MISTAKES WE ALL MAKE

A thought-provoking new anthology of essays by writers, influencers and pathbreakers reminds us of all those difficult journeys we navigate at some point while growing up

By Manvi Pant



Did you feel underconfident growing up? Or too consumed with self-doubt? Got sandwiched between what your family tells you to do and what you think you should do? Has the feeling of ‘not doing enough’ plagued you? If yes, then *Big Mistake: An Anthology on Growing Up and Other Tough Stuff* (Penguin India, ₹250) is definitely not a mistake to read. It is an exciting collection of thought-provoking narratives that will compel you to question your conditioned reality and all the ideologies imposed on you while you were still trying to get a sense of this world on your own.

This label-defying anthology starts with a powerful foreword by Shaheen Bhat, where she talks about mental scars – how they often lie lurking behind a smile and make an appearance now and then, yet fail to define us as we move ahead in the path to inclusion and affirmative dissimilarity. The compilation, then, opens itself to stories, anecdotes, and poetry from 12 powerful voices such as that of badminton superstar Saina Nehwal, founder of *Revival Disability* magazine Anusha Misra, founder-CEO of *Feminism in India* Japleen Pasricha, and writer-comedian Kautuk Srivastava to name a few. The authors use their

life and experiences to talk about subjects like love, identity, ambition, disability, body positivity, and many more, making the read strikingly relatable to readers.

Every chapter displays an ambiguity that the writers tackle with stunning clarity. For example, in 'An Accidental Ambition', Japleen says, "As young



Andaleeb Wajid



Japleen Pasricha



Shaheen Bhatt

students, we are pressured into deciding what we want to do at 15 or 16 years of age. I did not find my calling until I was 25 and three degrees down." Her story fearlessly questions societal norms and standards and calls them out for not giving kids enough room to make their own decisions, explore, or try new things.

When it comes to taking charge of one's life, the story by seasoned author Andaleeb Wajid, 'The Hair-

cut', stands tall for all the right reasons. She writes, "A woman's beauty lies in her hair. The longer it is, the more beautiful she is considered. By

whom, I wanted to ask Ammi." Raised in a conservative Muslim family by a single parent, Wajid realises very soon there is more to life than her thick long hair, which her mother and her culture take pride in. She understands it's essential to have self-perspective in life, and one doesn't need to cave into everything that elders say or believe in. And so, when her college initiates a hair-donation drive for cancer patients, despite trembling feet, she takes a brave call and donates her hair. The plot is simple but leaves its readers captivated.

Some pieces in the anthology will amuse and sadden the audience at the same time, like co-founder and CEO of Yuva, Nikhil Taneja's letter. 'To All the Boys We've Failed



Sonaksha Iyengar

Before' takes a funny yet honest dig at how boys are raised in India. He has attempted to call the toxic out of masculinity in a tongue-in-cheek style and explore why our society teaches boys to be men before they can become human. Holding a lot of ground right there, in a thoughtfully written piece, 'The Geometry of Shapes', queer South Asian illustrator, writer and graphic recorder Sonaksha Iyengar presents an excellent argument against how society is obsessed with body shapes, paying utter disregard to the human within. In their own way, both writers celebrate vulnerability as a strength and urge readers to embrace it with open arms.

While no piece in this compendium fails to make a mark, the one that leaves a long trail is Anusha Misra's 'The Crip Gang', in which Anusha talks about how a stroke at the age of nine rendered her



Nikhil Taneja

disabled and re-defined her entire worldview. The story opens boldly with an assuring statement, "Before you read ahead, please note that I have accepted who I am, partly, if not completely." It moves forward and ascends from the feeling of invalidation, invisibility to solidarity, courage and acceptance. The essay clarifies that living with a disability is not as 'inspira-



Anusha Misra

tional' as it is portrayed to be. It can be a de-feminising, isolating experience and that the road to building social connections is still far away.

This engaging book is highly recommended for millennials reeling with conflicts of all sorts, and those from the older generations who keep an open mind. The collection's element of humanity will hit home and remind its readers of all the pivotal moments that defined and confined them at some point. ■



LOOKING OUT FOR THE BIRDS

Bird steward Karen Mason on why she wants to save the birds on Florida's coasts and her viral photo of a bird feeding her chick

By Kay Newton

When Karen Mason first moved to Florida from Pennsylvania, she hated it. The land was flat, overpopulated and humid. Yet, she continued to live there for over 35 years, and as a bird-steward whose job is to ensure the safety of the birds in her environment, she went on to click one of the most iconic photographs in

the hall of conservation fame: that of a mother black-skimmer bird feeding her chick a cigarette stub.

Karen's love of nature and passion for photography led to time spent in the Florida swamps watching birds. She came across an article about skimmers, a seabird that is native to North and South America. So impressed was she with the

quirky bird that she started work as a volunteer at the Suncoast Sea Bird Sanctuary.

The centre rehabilitates injured coastal birds. Karen helped to feed the chicks especially when it became apparent to her that the shorebirds living close to the beach were in danger. Skimmers nest close together in a group, and the beaches



in Florida are overpopulated with hotels and condos. There is very little space for nests, even with cordoned nesting areas.

As a bird steward, Karen's job was to take photos of their trials and tribulations. Birds move quickly, so rapid successive frames became part of her remit. Karen invested in a Nikon D500 and a decent lens. During her first year as a steward, there was a huge storm, which

washed all the eggs out of the nests. Fortunately, it was early enough in the season for them to renest and produce chicks.

"I found it fascinating to connect to their emotions, to see them through the camera lens. Whether it was dogs or humans too close or a neighbouring nester, love for their chicks or partner, these birds show their feelings," says Karen.

Stewarding also involves teaching and educating the local population in the hope of saving the bird population. One day Karen was giving a talk and at the same time taking photos. She saw a mother give her chick something and snapped the image. The following day, Karen looked at the snapshots on a bigger computer screen and realised what she had caught on camera.

She explains, "The mother bird was feeding her chick a cigarette butt! It was incredible! I was so disgusted and angry. How had humans stooped so low as a species? I was sick to the stomach and furious. So much so, I did something I would have never dreamed of - I distributed the images to as many sites and influential people as possible."

The image not only affected Karen's emotions but also picked up viral outrage. Messages began to pour in from around the world. For Karen as a non-tech savvy person, it became a bit overwhelming. "There was not enough time to ask

for donations, a credit for the image or answer all the mail. Despite this, it made me feel good. The image had stopped people in their tracks and change something about their life – whether it was to volunteer or make sure they disposed of their cigarette butts correctly. Every person counts. As we change, we affect change in other people,” she says.

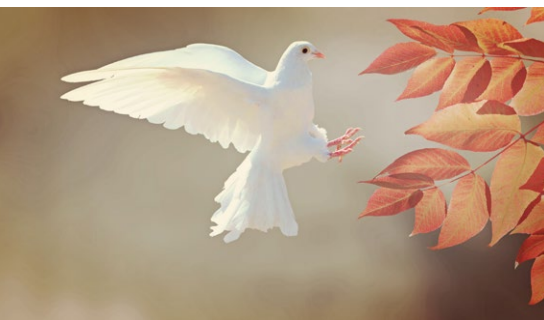
The continual influx of people to Florida means the wetlands are disappearing rapidly. Every day Karen runs across a new road

for. Experts are investigating if iron columns in the basement of Champlain Towers South, a 40-year-old luxury condo constructed on reclaimed wetland, could have rusted due to water seepage in the soil or shifted due to vibrations from a nearby construction.

In either case, over-construction in a sensitive area would be to blame for the tragedy.

Karen still has hope for the birds. “Without volunteers, the birds would have already gone. Education leads to change,” she says, referring to the National Audubon Society, which protects birds and their habitats, and other associations that are making a difference. “There is hope because the people continue to put their hearts on the line.” She wishes that schoolchildren had compulsory trips to landfills and not into nature. “We all need to be put in front of the issue, to think about what we do. We take more than we need, and this is not natural.”

It is not just the skimmers who are affected, she says. Pelicans are wrapped in fishing line and hooks. Burrowing owls use cigarettes for their nests. Plastic is killing their source of food – there are fewer fish in the ocean. “Everyone can do their bit. Take a canvas bag to the store instead of using plastic bags. Become a volunteer,” she advises. “Walk your trash to the bin. Especially cigarette butts!” ■



extension or condo.

“Florida lacks public transport so the roads get bigger and wider. The state is becoming solid human. The charm has gone. No one cares about nature. The government is not protecting the water source and the beaches, the reason why people want to be there,” says Karen.

Her words are particularly relevant at a time when Florida is facing, for the first time in American history, a building collapse in Miami, killing 97 persons with more unaccounted



The pandemic has normalised spiritual discourse and religious references

By Aekta Kapoor

If you asked someone how they were doing around the month of April or May this year, especially in India where the pandemic had ravaged our bodies and souls, you'd observe a pattern.

"I am well, with God's grace."

"Hare Krishna, everything is alright."

"Allah is great, we are all fine."

"With Waheguru's blessings, the family is in good health."

"Thanks be to Mother Mary, we are all okay."

It was as if Covid had brought God on the tip of our tongues.

In any case, I have always felt very

blessed to belong to a land that inspires spirituality everywhere you look.

People are named after gods so you cannot help uttering a few holy names in the course of a usual day. My younger daughter is named after Goddess Durga. My aunt had a housekeeper called Mahesh (another name for Lord Shiva); he drove her to despair but my mother used to joke with her, "At least you call out God's name a hundred times a day because of him."

Temples and mosques jut out into even arterial roads every

now and then; sometimes, someone puts up a makeshift shrine right in the middle of the footpath with some photos and garlands. Passers-by join their palms reverentially as they walk past.

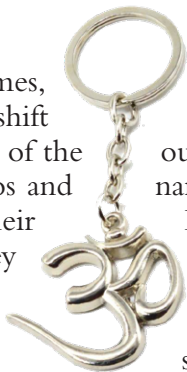
Cars feature wind-shield stickers with the names of gods on them. In the evenings, the strains of beautiful *bhajans* (devotional songs) or Buddhist chants waft into my house from some *satsang* (prayer meeting) in the building. In the mornings, I sometimes play mantras myself.

Rich and poor men alike worship Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth; I read somewhere that a majority of Indian businesses had names of gods in them. Workplaces will usually have a sacred niche where framed pictures of deities gather flower petals and dispense blessings.

Sometimes, walls along streets will have photos of gods and saints on them, from Krishna to Christ, to dissuade pee-on-the-wall-prone pedestrians of all denominations.

Tattoo artists will usually have a page of various religious symbols to offer customers, right up there next to the skulls and roses. Gift shops have all kinds of Om keychains or carvings. Gods even abound in trendy forms in the malls.

The *tikka* is ubiquitous on people's foreheads or a *mauli* (red holy thread) on wrists – even in



offices – fresh from some *puja* (worship) or the other. Even our very gesture of greeting – the namaste – means “I bow to the Light in you,” and is the same whether used for a god or a human, for hello or goodbye.

With all those symbols, signs and rituals around us, I'm surprised we aren't all enlightened beings here. I suppose the fish doesn't know it's in water until it isn't. We take our gods for granted, just like the fish does the sea.

But the pandemic woke us up. Confronted with our own mortality, God quickly came back into our vocabulary. The thanks we gave was heartfelt, if only because we'd been forced to the edge.

My journalist husband, an atheist, one day interviewed a contact of mine about her Covid experience, but he didn't use her quotes in his health article. “There was no story. She only spoke about God,” he explained to me later.

“But that's the story!” I laughed. “Covid brought us closer to God.”

How long will the effect last? Things are already going back to ‘normal’ – when we assumed we'd live forever, when we considered our health and our loved ones to be our permanent property – and God is once again fading from conversation.

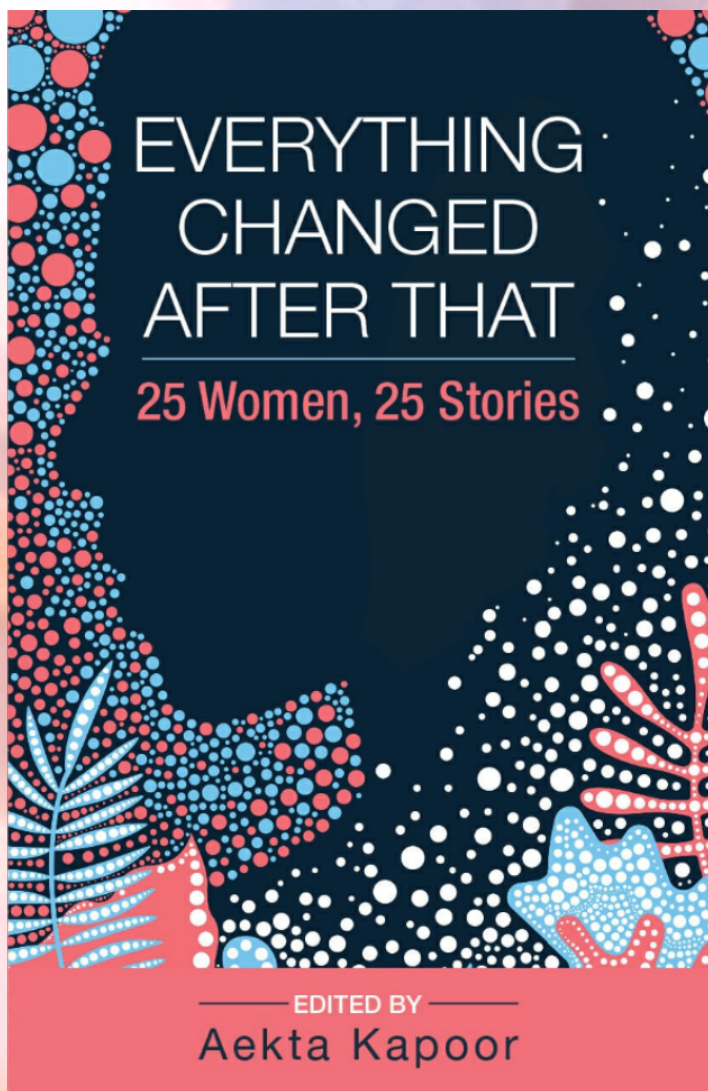
Let us hold these lessons close, lest we are forced to repeat the class. ■



**INVEST ON EVERY HAPPY OCCASION,
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