

MARGINALLIA

Shenoya looked a dog in the eye **Ketaki asked what that girl is wearing** Cryselle walked the wadis **Krithi and Sapana talked to bar dancers** Jonathan went to the zoo **Rashmi wove a bamboo tale** We planted rice **Nehal inspected the toilets** Loyola and Juhika hung out with some the gangmen **We got Arnabed** Apoorva visited the Ma-Thakurs **Abhra asked what comes after 377** Aakash peered down at the world **And we worked with Khabar Lahariya, a woman-run newspaper in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh.**

SCM 2013- 2014



Shanta Gokhale



Nadira Babbar

SCM

presents a book on

lives of the women

Volume 1 On Stage/Off Stage

Edited by Jemy Pinto
Sophia Institute of Social Communications Media



Jhelum Paranjpe

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Dolly Thakore

Editorial

In a city like Mumbai, numerous cultures and groups of people struggle to co-exist, and creating boundaries seems to be the only way to make sense of the world around us. So we create them without them being mindful of what we are doing, allowing them to exist in the collective consciousness of the city. We only understand the level of absurdity to which we can descend, when we realise that we confront abstract ideas, such as poverty, with concrete definitions such as the poverty line.

This past year was one of redefining boundaries. Some were broken, other re-inforced. Sophia Institute of Social Communications Media forayed into the publishing world with the first book of a series, Lives of the Women: On Stage/Off Stage. A change of guard took place as an era ended with the departure of Jeroo Mulla and the arrival of Dr Sunitha Chitrapu (SCM batch of 1992-93) as Head of Department. The XY chromosome entered the sacred SCM gene pool with the arrival of six male students, the first of their kind.

In Marginalia, you will read about what happened to boundaries in other parts of the city. Dance bars were given legal status, while the LGBTIQ community was stripped of their rights. 32, a previously inconsequential number, suddenly gained significance, becoming the defining line between the poor and the still-so-poor.

There are stories of people who live on the fringes of society, who are rarely mentioned in public discourse -- the tribals of Mokhada, a small village in Thane, where no amenities reach; the 'railway gangmen' who service the lifeline of Mumbai at the risk of their own lives; families that live in chawls but are surrounded by high-rises; and the ill-treated third gender, who are denied the dignity to which they are rightfully entitled.

We have large shoes to fill. Marginalia 2012-13 won the In-house Communication Excellence Award for the most creative name, the most imperative content and the silver award for the best overall magazine. So we pushed ourselves to step outside our comfort zones. Some of us visited dance bars. Others confronted past weaknesses of prescription medication addiction, insecurities related

to living in a wadi, and fears of marriage and separation.

The year was especially enriching, because we had the opportunity to work alongside Khabar Lahariya reporters in the hinterland of Uttar Pradesh. Khabar Lahariya, a rural newspaper run solely by women from marginalised communities, covers topics that are ignored by the mainstream media, and taught us to respect the strength and gumption of women who refuse to be silenced.

We hope you will enjoy reading the magazine as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

-Nehal Jain and Ketaki Savnal
(in alphabetical order)

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We Know What You Did Last Year

SCM students continue to do us proud.

Rohini Ramanathan (2004-05) relocated to the island state of Singapore and was named 'Best Newcomer across all language radios' in Singapore at the Mediacorp Radio Awards 2013. The 2013 South Asia Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature has put Malavika Shetty's (1989-1990) children's book, *The Sweetest Mango*, on its highly commended list.

Shoa Hussain (2006-07) participated in the Nat Geo Cover Shoot reality television show. She was in Sri Lanka, shooting and having her pictures analysed by photographers Amy Vitali, Ashima Narain and filmmaker Nagesh Kukunoor.

SCM students are also doing great work in the field of academic research. Sameera Khan (1989-90) presented a paper at a seminar in 2001 on Mumbai communities. The proceedings of this seminar have been published. It is called, 'Mumbai—Socio-Cultural Perspectives: Contributions of Ethnic Groups and Communities'. Khan's essay is titled: 'Early Muslim Settlers of Mumbai and their Influence on the City: The Konkanis, Bohras, Khojas and Memons'. Sunitha Chitrapu's (1992-93) chapter titled *Language and Indian Film Audiences* was published in the volume on *Audience and Interpretation* (Vol. 4) of the *International Encyclopedia of Media Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell). Her paper *Twenty-First Century Labour: Globalization and Production Crews in Mumbai's Media Industries* was presented as part of a panel titled 'Bollywood in the Digital Era: Shifting Global Practices and Perspectives' at 'Challenging Communication Research', the 63rd Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, 17-21 June 2013, London, UK. Sonia Srinivasan (2007-2008) was the principal author and presented a working research paper, *Bridging the Gap—Democratizing Media Access* (a media access study) at the 43rd International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives conference in Delhi on October 8, 2012.

And it isn't only academic writing. SCM's alumnae are also hard at work, producing other forms of literary art. Sonora Jha's (1998-89) novel *Foreign* (Random House India) was short-listed for the Hindu Lit for Life Prize. Payal Kapadia (1996-1997) won the Crossword award for children's writing for her debut novel, *Wisha Wozzawriter* (Puffin Books).

Manjiri Prabhu (1985-86) started a new Young Adult series with Times Group Books. The hero of this series is Riva Parkar, an Indian teen detective. She describes Riva as "an Indian Nancy Drew". The first novel in the series is called *The Gypsies at Noelle's Retreat* and was released July 2013. Jaico books republished her novel *The Cosmic Clues* (Bantam/Dell, 2004). "It is soon to be a major motion picture," she writes. Prabhu also fulfilled a long-cherished dream of organizing the city's first literary festival, the Pune International Literary Festival which she founded and co-hosted. The first edition was held in September 2013. "This will now be an annual event," she promises.

Some of them are preparing to study further and some of them have completed further studies.

Monica James (2008-09) got the Fulbright Scholarship to do a Masters in Women's Studies next year. Yashaswini SR (2006-07) received the In-Laks Scholarship to do her Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communications at the Royal College of Art in London. She writes: "In any case I hope to stop by at SCM before I leave...a place where it all begins."

Aneesha Henry (2008-09) completed her MBA in Media & Event Management from the Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture Technology & Sciences, Allahabad, UP. She secured the first position in the University exams and was awarded a silver medal by the Union Minister of Agriculture, Prof K V Thomas, the Chancellor, and the Vice Chancellor on 3 December 2013. Ishitaa Sher (2010-11) successfully completed her Masters in Media and Communications Research from London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE) in August 2013 with a special mention of appreciation for her dissertation. Her research topic was "Nirbhaya Facebook - The Fearless; Understanding the role of new media around the 2012 Delhi gang-rape incident."

Ashishwang Godha (2001-02) was selected from among a privileged lot of entrepreneurs for a course by Goldman Sachs-ISBM and Symbiosis University on women in entrepreneurial positions. Her business (a small start-up chain of cafes by the name *Burgers & More*) won the award for the Best Business Plan of the year. She writes: "What does it have to do with SCM? When the award was announced, the director of ISBM credited my background at SCM for instilling in me the ability and vision for a business with a soul. I don't know whether the award itself or the SCM credit made me prouder."

Rasika Duggal (2002-03) acted in a film *Qissa* directed by Anup Singh. She play one of the four lead roles alongside Irrfan Khan, Tisca Chopra and Tillotama Shome. *Qissa* premiered at the Toronto International film festival in September 2013 and won the NETPAC Jury award for the Best Asian film. Subsequently, it won the Silver Gateway award at the Mumbai International Film Festival and screened at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival and at the South Asian International Film Festival in New York. *Qissa* will be the opening film of the Rotterdam film Festival on 22nd January.

Smruti Koppikar (1987-88), currently at Hindustan Times as Editor, Special Projects, was led the team that revived the women's safety campaign—*Make Mumbai Safer*—in the aftermath of the Delhi gang-rape in Dec 2012 and ran it through the year 2013. They initiated the concept of Safety Audits of various public places in Mumbai and partnered women's NGO Akshara to jointly conduct these audits in suburban railway trains and platforms, open spaces such as parks and playgrounds, promenades, streets and so on. The audits spurred official agencies into taking small and big remedial steps. As the year closed, state home minister announced in the Maharashtra legislature that Safety Audits of areas under their jurisdiction would be made mandatory for the police.

Rice and Shine SCM

SCM students try their hand at organic rice transplanting. *Aakash Karkare* reports back.



Students get down and dirty with rice.

Barely a week into the course, the staff of SCM sprung a surprise on the class—we were going to spend a Saturday transplanting rice at an organic farm in Kamshet. They asked, “Why do you think we are taking you there?”

Numerous hands were raised and numerous answers were proffered. Yavar Ahmad, one of the first male students to be enrolled at SCM, said, “To learn first-hand the labours of the poor”. Mandira Bahl, said, “To learn the true value of rice”. Ketaki Savnal dismissed all of this and said emphatically, “It’s a bonding session”.

I was reminded of a quote by Werner Herzog, my favourite film director, “At my Utopian film academy, I would have students do athletic things with real physical contact, like boxing, something that would teach them to be unafraid. Whether or not you would be a filmmaker by the end I do not know, but at least you would come out as an athlete.”

And so there was some level of excitement. I’d always had a hard time in education systems in India. I could never abide the system of listening to people talk about things they didn’t care about or know enough about but at SCM, something different seemed to be happening. Here, education was being treated as a holistic process, where something more than the words printed in textbooks was being taught.

Thus, the morning of 8 July, the class set off on a school bus to transplant rice in the little hamlet of Kamshet. It was a fun journey, the class played antakshari, chatted away and made friends, reminding one of the umpteen number of trips we had undertaken as school.

The two-hour ride through the open roads of the expressway and the early morning sun made everyone feel a sense of calm. The bus stopped some distance away from the fields because the bulky vehicle could go no further. We were forced to trudge through wet slushy mud towards lush green fields. Students, most of whom had recently bought their shiny DSLR cameras, were merrily capturing snap shots of the village: farmers ploughing fields, women lugging around huge piles of recently-cut crop and kids with bulging backpacks on their way to a nearby school. Finally, we reached our destination and met Dinesh Balsaver, the head of the local organic farmers’ union.

Balsaver, an old and lanky man, spoke about organic farming. There was a slight drizzle and the air was heavy with the smell of wet earth. We had been told by our professors that previously a day in the rice fields had given them joint and muscle pains for days afterwards, so quite a few of the students were apprehensive of entering the flooded rice fields. Yavar had brought along a brand new salt shaker because, “rice fields have leeches and salt kills leeches.”

We kept our bags in a crumbling school classroom. classroom and after another trudge along a kachcha road, the class, gathered around the rice field.

People started pulling up their track pants, leggings, what-have-yous and slowly waded into the sludgy rice field. The mud was softer than the softest blanket and walking in it was immensely pleasurable. But occasionally, hard, crusty stones would come in our path and set our bodies alight with little stings of pain.

One of the women who seemed to have been working in the fields since dawn, came forward and began instructing the class. The process was quite simple. At one end of the field, there were bunches of tied rice saplings. Each person had to untie one, and gently push a handful of roots into the mud. The saplings had to be planted in rows and kept at a reasonable distance from each other.

Of transplanting, Sharvari Prabhu says, “It was a very different experience. I thought I would not be able to bear the physical work.”

Six months into the course, the trip became a metaphor for what the students experienced during the Social Communications Media course at Sophia Polytechnic. “It set a pace, that you are stuck in a load of muck but you still have to get work done, in ten minutes,” says Ketaki Savnal.

Sunitha Chitrapu, Head of Department, said, “SCM balances experiential learning alongside a-big-picture perspective on social inequalities. Getting students ankle-deep in the slush of a rice field would help them when they discussed larger issues such as farmers’ suicides in India.”

Innocent Internet?

Parul Rawat and Shantala Phatarphod discover the grimy underworld of the Internet with Neville Roy Singham

On 23 September 2013, SCM in collaboration with the Press Club of India, the Free Software Movement of India (The Maharashtra Chapter) and P. Sainath, Rural Affairs Editor of The Hindu organized an interactive session with Neville Roy Singham, on the topic 'Digital Inequality, Cyber Colonialism : The Rise of the Super Surveillance State.'

Singham began the session by showing us a rather disturbing video of the execution of a young Iraqi Reuters' journalist and his photography assistant by a

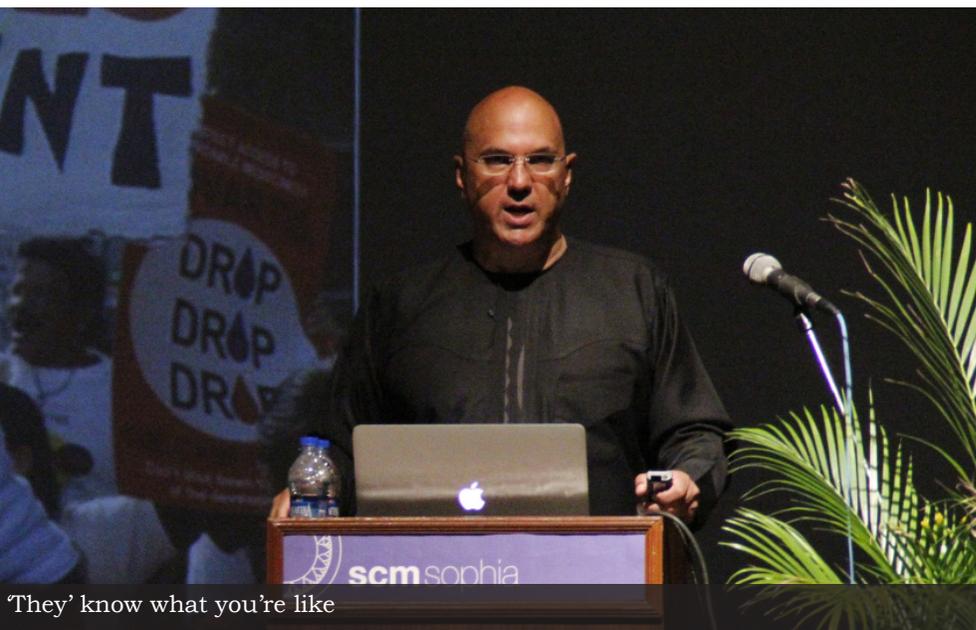
how the maximum flow of internet traffic was via the USA; and he added that the recent revelations by Snowden have confirmed that this flow was in fact by intentional design rather than accident. "The internet is in fact a physical thing... at the end of World War Two, five countries got together to outsource spying on their citizens. So United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England entered into a collaboration, that they would spy on each other's citizens and pass this information secretly through backdoors, this way, every government was not responsible, for spying on its citizens," said Singham. He told us as to how the USA even had a submarine, which dug holes in the fibre-optic cables underwater to retrieve information and every single one the cables has been redirected so that information goes to United States.

Reiterating the idea of cyber colonialism, he talked about how India was one of the hot spots from where USA was receiving information. "Why should the economic information of my Indian clients should be passed on to the USA? So that the Indian business becomes less effective than the American business? ...This is a shame that the Indian government has not spoken about for so long," said Singham, adding how Salman Khurshid, India's External Affairs Minister, is misleading the population by claiming that metadata is unimportant. Other shocking details revealed in the session are the way 'drone

missiles' are sanctioned by the President of the USA to execute terrorist suspects; and had been used to execute a sixteen-year-old boy Abdulrahman.

After the lecture, Singham moved on to a Q&A session, where a student said that she was surprised at the extent to which the advertisements that are visible while surfing the internet are targeted to her based on her conversations on social networking sites. Singham replied, "I don't think it is spying in the classical sense, it is the algorithms that are used for this; but we should not be deluding ourselves that this is not inadvertently changing our behaviour." When the media constantly tells you to buy something, it is indirectly controlling your mind and Singham says this is a negative characteristic.

Ending on a profound note, Singham urged people to support independent media, "It should scare everyone of you that there are 1.4 million people in United States who have top security clearance, who are unaccountable, and who can read everyone of your emails, and decide who lives and dies. They are not elected by the people of India, they are not elected by the people of Brazil...they are a power, uncontrolled and unmodulated," leaving the audience unnerved yet enlightened.



'They' know what you're like

US soldier. The existence of the video had been denied by the US, but it was leaked by Chelsea Manning. Throughout the session he introduced us to a number of such unrecognized heroes, like Edward Snowden, Barret Brown, Aaron Swartz and Laura Poitras. "What I have seen in the past three months since the revelations of Snowden is that young people all over the world are raising the question. The heroes that our society has put forth over the last five years, the Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Larry Alison... are these in fact heroes or villains, and that's today's question."

Singham talked about the way in which Chelsea Manning has been imprisoned by the US government for 'revealing what the world has a right to know about'. Similarly, later on in the session, he talked about how Aaron Swartz, the co-founder of Reddit, was driven to commit suicide because he downloaded academic journals from JSTOR (Journal Storage) and made them available to thousands of student researchers free of cost. He also spoke about the contributions of journalist Barret Brown, and film maker Laura Poitras who had been instrumental in revealing details about information control.

Next, using a map of the world, Singham showed us

Objectively Speaking

Mimansha Punamia re-examines her stance on the Godhra riots of 2002, through a conversation with Rakesh Sharma

“You know I often say that documentary is not a style of filmmaking, it is an attitude and approach to life.”

– Rakesh Sharma

SCM students were shown a documentary, ‘The Final Solution’ (2004), on the communal riots of Godhra and the politics which operated behind them. We could hear the voice behind the camera asking questions to people who were victimised in the name of religion. I was curious to know the person behind the voice.

As luck would have it, Rakesh Sharma was invited by SCM to talk about his film. Sharma was eloquent about his film and was ready to tackle all the questions, queries, insecurities, fears, and last but not the least, our take on the film.

We asked Sharma questions regarding class and creed, and he explained the “the fear of the other”. He said, “You have the fear of the immigrant, the fear of the Muslim, the fear of the terrorist, the fear of the Naxalite, the tribal who will become the Naxalite! So all these fear of the other are constantly being invoked by political formulations that are largely singing the same tune.”

While one of our classmates wanted to know about Gujarat in particular; as to why the whole state, and as a consequence, ‘Gujaratis’, are looked at with either pity or suspicion; another, who was silently sitting in the first row, shared an incident of when her family was attacked by ‘Hindus’ during the Mumbai riots of 1993. Sharma asked her what she had thought of the documentary. She replied saying that she had now understood the other half of the story and that all Hindus were not bad people. It was a political game that was controlled by a select group of people.

On being asked whether he had received any political reactions to his film, he replied, “When you start making a film like this, you need to factor in all sorts of reactions.”

He also mentioned how this film was different from his other film, *Aftershocks* (2003), which he narrated in the first person. *The Final Solution* was narrated in the third person “because I was very clear that the film had to be greater than an account of grief, that it actually needed to communicate why this happened and who it benefitted, and that dictated my choice in terms of when to shoot the film. So we situated most of the film and most of the shooting during the electoral process and just before, when Modi held his Gaurav Yatra which was the dress rehearsal for the election.”

When a question was raised about the selection of the riot as a subject to document, he said “I knew that the choice to remain silent wasn’t mine”.

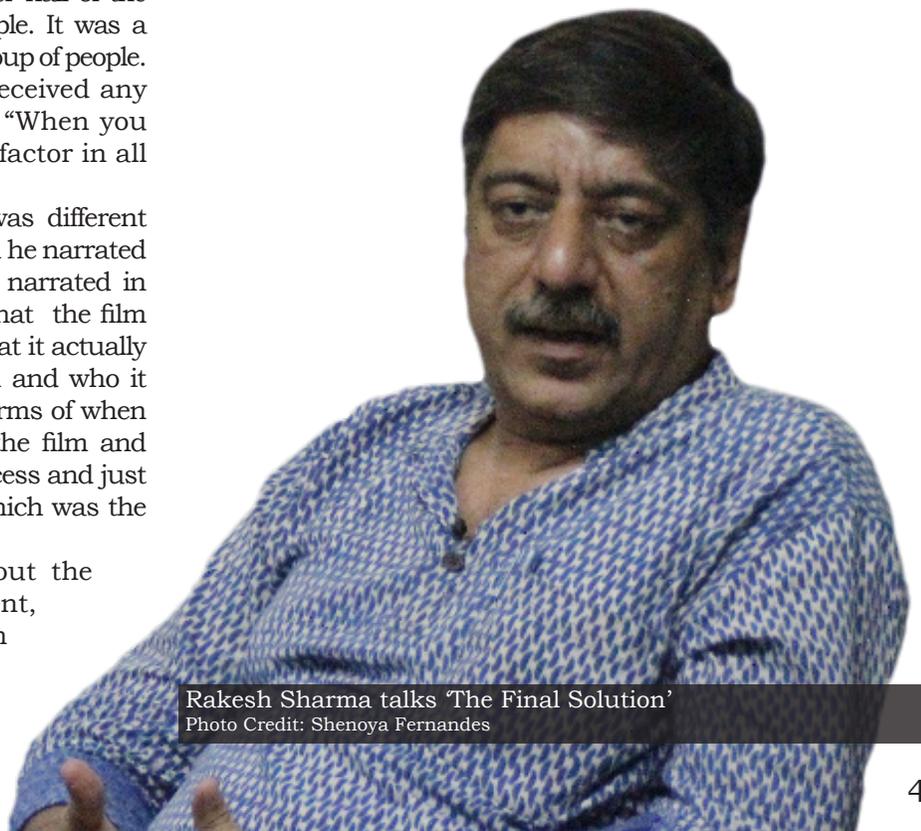
Later in his session, Sharma shared what he had experienced during the shooting.

He described how the Gujarat police was suspicious of him, his activities, and had tracked his activities and how he managed to tackle that situation. Back then, Sharma had a long beard, and so he looked like a ‘Muslim’. Therefore, whenever he attended Hindu rallies, he was asked to prove his identity of being a ‘Hindu’. In some instances, he was also asked to bow down at temples. He shared his experience of filming in the guerrilla style, and how that practice got him in trouble.

When asked about whether his subjectivity might have come in the way of shooting, and coloured the film, Sharma said, “I truly believe that I am yet to meet that person called the objective animal, you know, I haven’t come across it. We are all subjective. All you can do is tamper the degrees of your subjectivity, in the way you situate yourself, in the way you look at a context, a person, a situation. You are making choices already. What you can do at best is understand the consequences of those choices.”

Talking further about his interaction with his protagonists, Sharma said, “After switching off the camera, I may indulge in a conversation or may not, but my primary role as a filmmaker at that point is to document and document alone.”

The whole session with Rakesh Sharma was a mix of reactions, experiences, expressions and opinions. He shared a lot more than just the process of documentary filmmaking. He shared with us the wisdom that forms the basis of it.



Rakesh Sharma talks ‘The Final Solution’
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

Will the Real Arnab Goswami Please Stand Up

Ketaki Savnal looks beyond the facade of Arnab Goswami, an orator as worthy as (perhaps) Marcus Anthony

On 7 August 2013, SCM got “Arnabed”. Arnab Goswami, Editor-in-Chief of Times Now, visited SCM to speak to the students because he did not want to see another “bunch of wishy-washy journalists”. The normally drowsy class paid attention for once and hung on to his every word, as Goswami conceded that he “goes ballistic about some things”. But contrary to his public persona, the Goswami who spoke at SCM was soft-spoken and courteous. The difference between the Arnab at SCM and the Arnab on television was so vast, that after the talk, Jonathan Immanuel, an SCM student said what most of us were thinking: “I liked him and all, but he was so different that I wondered whether he was putting on a show.”

Goswami started out safe, talking about how he entered the field as an Oxford graduate and wrote for the Opinion pages of The Telegraph. “Do you know what the media was in your country ten years ago?” he thundered.

That was just the warm-up. He talked indignantly about how Times Now was hauled up for the wrong photo

of Justice Sawant, and the channel was slapped with a Rs 100 crore lawsuit. He then traced the growth of his professional life, to how he has been “driving the change” for the last seven years at Times Now, by understanding his target audience and encouraging flexibility.

Goswami harked

back to 2006, when he claimed that Times Now changed the nature of television news by being the first channel to live broadcast the story of

Prince, a young boy who fell into a 53 feet deep pit and was rescued after 50 hours.

Goswami spoke about how he has been “solving the country’s problems for the last 19 years” and how broadcast news is “one-tenth the length of a print story,” but a television journalist is “paid two to three times more”. A hint of perhaps invitation to apply for the benefit of the soon-to-be-graduates, perhaps?.

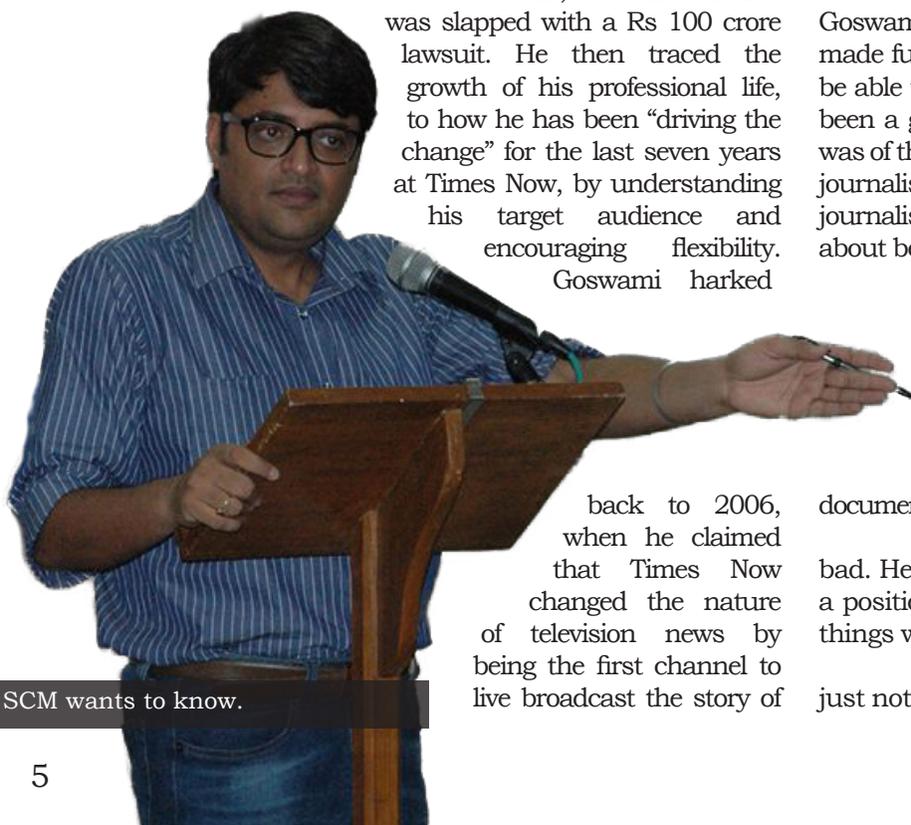
But Goswami looked around and seemed to know what he was up against, and disarmed us with his sense of humour by relating an amusing anecdote about how he was kidnapped by a Pappu Yadav of Bihar, while working on a story for the BBC. “The reality of Bihar is not Lalu Prasad Yadav, it isn’t happy,” Goswami said. Then, to make sure his audience would eat from his palm, he admitted to “feeling lonely in a crowd” and how the journalistic class sits with the political class and decides a story. He went on to say that very few reporters and editors want to get involved, and they prefer to “preach from the pulpit,” and “co-habit with politicians”.

Aakash Karkare, a student at SCM, responded to Goswami’s comment on how ‘Peepli Live’ ought not to have made fun of journalists. Karkare says, “Shouldn’t a culture be able to laugh at itself? While ‘Peepli Live’ might not have been a great film, it has the right to use satire.” Goswami was of the opinion that if the film industry wanted to criticise journalism, it should simultaneously appreciate the work journalists do. So he basically negated everything he said about being ‘wishy-washy’.

Rashmi Mehta, another student, says, “I asked him about why there is no reporting of ‘good news’ in the country. He said that he would tell me what he told Manmohan Singh when he asked the same question, which is that he will report good news when it happens.” Goswami mentioned that the audience did not respond favourably when Times Now aired documentaries, and so the practice had been discontinued.

Goswami’s final advice for the students wasn’t half bad. He said, “If you don’t go all out, play things up, take a position, express opinions, or push things to a corner, things will not happen. You have to stick your neck out.”

We’ll express our opinions, Mr. Goswami, we’re just not sure we want to play things up this much.



Feminism Deconstructed

Nehal Jain unravels the f-word with Urvashi Butalia

“Feminism is a process of development, it continues to evolve,” said Urvashi Butalia, a feminist activist, and founder of publishing houses Kali for Women and Zubaan, to give us a starting definition (of her own) of feminism. On 8 August 2013, Butalia gave SCM students what we needed much more than a lecture: an answer. Feminism is a subject that invariably gains popularity when more than eighty-five percent of the class is female. Added to that, the gender issues that the professionals teaching at SCM stress upon (because it really happens), left us with more than enough questions.

Butalia wanted to give no lecture. Instead, she collected all our questions on a sheet of paper and then proceeded to answer them one-by-one. It was a give-and-take session, and Butalia did not restrict herself to the boundaries that a “question” could define its answer. She meandered into her private life, citing examples from personal decisions, describing situations where she managed to overcome the power relations that give society its “fairer” sex.

There were a variety of questions that were put in front of Butalia, some of them being about the relationship between feminism and tradition, especially Indian tradition, some about the treatment of women in society, with students citing personal examples within the questions and some just asking for clarification on what feminism is and how it is understood in an Indian context. Questions like “Is feminism just a middle class phenomenon?” and “Will the upliftment of women be better if we have more male feminists?” were also put forward.

One point that Butalia was very clear about was that feminism, as a normative movement, is restricted to the upper and middle class women, that “...there is a lack of awareness in the majority of the minority...” Muslim, Christian, minorities and Dalit women are classified under the minority by Indian law, but in reality, they are a significant part of the feminist movement, for they are burdened by both poverty and patriarchy.

Butalia also said that “the marginalisation of women today is not an illusion, it is very real”. She also said, “Feminism is an inclusive movement, not exclusive. It allows address to other marginalities: the LGBT community, environmental issues, Dalits. A feminist in India addresses the problem of poverty, of health.”

“Every woman has a right to a life of dignity. However, society is so hierarchised that “equality” becomes difficult to define.” Butalia makes many such strong hard-hitting statements, and stresses on ‘Feminism’ being a developing movement, an “amorphous” being, takes into account ideological blindness, including those of religion, that further push women down.

Butalia dispelled some of the myths that exist around feminism, especially the “Bra-burning Movement”, which is said to be the heralding call of feminism. Butalia said, “Nobody ever burnt a damn bra! They are so expensive, women have an idea of what they cost. Maybe they burnt one bra, and maybe it was tattered and torn.” With that, she had the entire class breaking into fits of laughter.

What we liked most was that Butalia did not answer in merely conceptual terms; she gave us operational definitions from her own life to support her statements. She brought up the topic of her marriage, and how she decided to not have children. She encouraged us to read more on feminism, by suggesting books such as *Women Writing in India—600 B.C. to 1970* and *A Comparison between Men and Women* by Tarabai Shinde, that would offer invaluable insights into how women have been treated.

Butalia ended with the words, “Things change, they are not static. A conscious feminist has to face many dilemmas and she defines what feminism means to herself. There are no readymade answers to define feminism.”



Urvashi Butalia redefines feminism

Stayin' Alive

Aakash Karkare examines the effectiveness of a three-hour Krav Maga session

Bruce Lee famously said, "There's only one basic principle of self-defense: you must apply the most effective weapon, as soon as possible, to the most vulnerable target."

We live in dark times. Dark times that force us to protect ourselves from unknown attackers. These attacks could come when you are at your most vulnerable. On a quiet night, on an empty street, inside an empty local train compartment. There is never a time when you will be truly safe. Mumbai used to be called a safe city, but that maxim is true no longer. In light of Mumbai's recent past, the citizens will have to learn to fight. To be able to defend themselves against all kinds of assailants.

And so, on 26 August, Elroy Vaz and his team of four from Krav Maga Global, came to SCM to teach the girls and boys some self-defence techniques. Vaz opened with, "Our self-defence techniques are mostly for women, sorry boys." The boys gave each other knowing looks. This being a landmark year where boys were finally allowed to become a part of SCM, there had been quite a few other such incidents. We had become used to it.

from predators. His first advice was to run. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, the answer is not to fight back, but to try your best to escape from that situation.

Vaz then spoke about the various levels from which an assailant could attack. The attack could come from the top, it could come from the side, it could come from down below. "If you want to be able to defend, then you have to be aware of all these points."

The class formed a circle around Vaz and attentively listened to his instructions. Along with his team, Vaz began demonstrating the various techniques involved in Krav Maga. He showed us the complex grappling holds and maneuvers. Unfortunately, those weren't going to be taught to the class of newbies. We were taught the simpler stuff.

First, there was a basic drill to warm up the sleepy class. Everyone was made to run around in circles and then do jumping jacks and a few basic exercises.

The class was divided into twos: the girls with the girls and the boys with the boys. Different levels of attack were shown to us. The blows could come from any angle. The trick was to absorb them on the inside of your forearm, as that part of your body can withstand the greatest force. The drills were repeated and both partners got a chance to give it a shot.

The moves progressively increased in their complexity. Vaz's assistant, a lanky but strong twenty-something, an ex-student from Sophia College, showed us what self defence really meant. As her small body collided against Vaz's hefty built-up body, one couldn't help but wonder whether she would be able to protect herself the same way, in a real world situation. "The instructors at the Krav Maga workshop had to exercise restraint while attacking her, but real attackers wouldn't," felt Srushti Iyer.

The three-hour session ended with a group photo and a bunch of tired students. Some of them went home happy. Rashmi Mehta said, "It felt empowering. The fact that it is pure technique and practise involved in self defence and that

anybody can do it was the best part". Lisha D'souza agreed, "The workshop gave me the confidence to feel safe in public spaces". Ketaki Savnal, was a little doubtful of that, "I might know more theoretically. But a day's practice isn't enough to fight an attacker off."

Like the popular Bruce Lee quote, 'Fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.'



Kicking it up a notch.

Krav Maga is less a form of martial art and more a system of self defence. The techniques used in its practise are sourced from different fighting techniques used in Muay Thai, kick boxing, wrestling, jiu-jitsu. Unlike other martial arts, Krav Maga focuses on real world situation and is known for the brutality of its counter attacks.

Vaz introduced the basic techniques of Krav Maga to the class and spoke about defending oneself

The Visual Writer-slash-Storyteller

Abhra Das collects the pebbles of wisdom as shared by
Vikramaditya Motwane

Udaan (2010) was a game changer in more ways than one. The sleeper film (a hit), with its story of an adolescent boy's fight against his father's loveless domination and his struggle to become a writer, touched a chord with many young people. This was Vikramaditya Motwane's directorial debut. He had been an assistant in two of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films, Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (1999) and Devdas (2002), and had been the co-scriptwriter of Anurag Kashyap's DevD (2009). His recent film Lootera (2013) was a critical success too.

He told the students of Sophia Institute of Social Communications Media (SCM): "Every producer looks for safe films. Very few people look for unsafe films. Udaan and DevD are unsafe films from the film producers' perspective," Motwane said. He added that one needs to have a story to tell if one really wants to be a director.

"I was more a director than a writer in that sense. Writing was something that came out of necessity. I wanted to tell my film in a certain way and couldn't get my writers to understand what I was thinking, so..." Motwane said that he decided he would just do it himself.

This makes him something of an anomaly in the film industry. Motwane said: "Every director who wants to make a film will tell you that he is scared of writing. Every director feels that he can't write. Actually they can, but 'feel' that they can't. And they go through that process where they'll get writers on board; they'll do all those kind of things, because they feel they can't. They are actually scared to put together a pen and a paper and write a few lines.

"So in the beginning I was writing from a director's point of view. I'd be writing scenes, I'd be thinking of shots as I am writing them. Over the years, the experience teaches you not to do that.

"It is like Jekyll and Hyde... it's you versus you. It's difficult to get into that zone but once you are there, you kind of get used to it. Writing is about stories and conflicts and emotions and not about shots and moments. You have to find a balance."

To illustrate his point, Motwane told us how a certain complex sequence in Udaan (where the father asks the son to light a cigarette and smoke) was drawn from an experience from his own life. His father had once given permission to his bunch of friends to smoke in front of him. The friends smoked happily while he was caught in an

awkward position because of the presence of his father.

Motwane has worked with actors from different media. Barun Chanda, a Satyajit Ray actor who was in Seemabaddha (1971) played the zamindar in Lootera. Ram Kapoor and Ronit Roy who acted in Udaan came from the television industry. Motwane said each one had a different approach: "While some may give their best shot



Motwane motivates the students
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

in the first take itself, some may get it right in the fifth take and some need to be put together on the edit table."

He advised the students to start hanging out with the people who are working in the industry and to start off work as soon as possible. He believes, he said, in learning-by-doing. "The only way to achieve that is to practice, which can be joining a department to intern or as simple as shooting with your own camera," he said. With the advancement in technology and the internet, one need not shy away from shooting films. One can always use one's phone camera to shoot and use YouTube as a platform to display it.

When asked for the five most important points a newcomer must keep in mind in order to become a director/screen-writer, he emphasized that the first three points should include the want to tell a story. That should be followed by reading, be it books, magazines, scripts etc. And lastly one must see all kinds of cinema irrespective of language or box office numbers.

I told Vikramaditya Motwane that the film seemed to be based on my own experience. He laughed, knowingly. He's probably heard that one before.

MAMI and Me

Yavar Ahmed bags exclusive boasting rights after being crowned MAMI Best Young Critic 2013.

Once upon a time, MAMI (Mumbai Academy of Moving Images) and HT (Hindustan Times) café combined powers to create the 'Young Critics' Jury' for the Mumbai Film Festivals, which would give a fine assembly of young monocle-bearers, such as me, a chance to write reviews for an audience far greater than my previous audience of two (dog + self). After the jury was formed via a fine blend of review writing and natural selection, the twenty-two of us were groomed by Daniel Kothenschulte, a German critic who knew a great deal about everything to do with movies and enjoyed pointing out the cheese in all things; and by cheese I mean the 'cheese' in the movies, not the thing that just helped my doctor buy himself a Mercedes.

I wouldn't have exactly called them 'grooming sessions' since I seemed to look the same after them, but I did learn a great deal more about cinema and saw many movies and documentaries that I would never have watched otherwise, such as a documentary about oil wells. I suppose in a way that summarises what the experience meant to me, something unlike anything I've experienced before and under different circumstances (such as the fact that SCM has mortgaged my soul and body) something I would have never experienced.

The actual festival itself seemed to be a peculiar blend of your standard movie-watching experience, a fish market and ballroom dancing. It was fairly amusing

to see the otherwise quiet and somewhat elite Metro Cinema packed to the brim and beyond, with people lining up to get their seats and ticketless viewers glaring like jilted Romeos at the lucky baskets with tickets.

The Festival itself had quite a few categories and numerous movies in each category, giving me a flashback to my childhood nightmares in which I'm tormented by arithmetic. Thankfully, we focused solely on the 'International Competition' category, and as the name suggests, it was composed of movies from all over the world featuring relatively unknown names, all vying for the big hit as indeed this category was essentially the 'main' category of sorts of the entire Festival and winning it would no doubt be nice for them.

We watched quite a few movies (often three in one day), wrote brief reviews for each (which would end up gracing the HT Café's second page) and had to finally select one movie to present with the Young Critics' Jury Award. After a short debate with a curious lack of blood, we selected *Voice of the Voiceless*, a devilishly charming, bizarre and engaging (mostly) silent movie about a young deaf and mute girl's plight as she is forced to beg for her urban captors, which utilised a surprisingly whimsical tone and minimal sound to create an invigorating experience.

La Jaula de Oro (The Golden Cage) was my personal favourite, and it told the bleak story of a group of young Guatemalans trying to sneak into the US of A, attracted by the allure of the American Dream. The movie was relentlessly cruel and struck a fine balance between drama and raw emotion, which is rarer than you'd expect. This movie was also given the big award by the other jury (you know, the one with the professionals with decades of experience).

Other movies that made my top list were *Ilo Ilo*, a touching movie about the relationship between a young brat and his housemaid, *The Rocket*, a story about the journey of a young Vietnamese boy and his struggle with his 'curse', and *Mamay Umeng* a movie that grants you a skin-deep disturbing look at the life of an old man who has nothing to do but wait. Even the Marathi movie *Fandry* (Pig) made a strong showing, winning an award and even making it into my top list till it was dethroned by its competition.

The Festival was book-ended by an opening and closing ceremony, with the awards being given out in the closing ceremony, including the Best Young Critic award which was given to a perplexed boy in a crumpled shirt and sandals. I still don't know why I was given the award, or on what basis it was given (evidence points to the written reviews being the core factor) but I know that it was given to me and that I am still shocked.

I really liked the mousse served at the after-party dinner, but don't tell my dietician that.



Yavar Ahmed is crowned poster boy

We Go Wiki

Parth Vyas wonders about the world's most famous online encyclopedia

What can anyone say about Wikipedia? Wait, let me rephrase that. Can you imagine a world without Wikipedia? If you have always wondered who wrote, reviewed, edited, curated and moderated 30 million articles in 286 languages, there's a simple answer: we did it. People like you and me, enthusiasts, anoraks, writers, self-publicists, propagandists, journalists and everybody else.

On Saturday, 13th July 2013, a workshop on Wikipedia was organized by the volunteers of Wikimedia Foundation, in association with SCM, Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai. The workshop was conducted by Bishakha Datta and Rohini Lakshane. After a brief history of Wikipedia, Lakshane and Datta divided the class into small groups and explained the process of writing and/or editing an article on Wikipedia.

During Wikipedia, the world's largest and the most referenced work on Internet, has been ranked at seventh position globally on Alexa as of June 2013 (Alexa Internet, Inc. is a California-based subsidiary company of Amazon.com which provides commercial web traffic data). It has an estimated 365 million readers worldwide. Though the numbers are enough to boggle one's mind, what truly electrifies the spinal cord is the way Wikipedia functions. Anyone from any corner of the world (Now, you can ask if earth is round or square? Go to Wikipedia, you will get interlinked references from Heliocentrism to Geocentrism, from Copernicus to Galileo, from Copernican Revolution to Renaissance, and thus traverse the complete circle of knowledge!) can write an article. Then some other volunteers keep the wheel rolling by editing and validating the existing article and by adding required citation, views and counter-views. This invisible chain-reaction keeps flourishing Wikipedia just like an unnoticed food chain of natural ecosystem.

Lakshane and Datta guided us in following the process of looking for authentic references regarding a topic, creating a new article on Wikipedia, adding citations & images and publishing the same. We successfully created two articles on Dina Vakil, the first woman resident editor of The Times of India's Bombay edition and Ritu Menon, the co-founder, writer and publisher of India's first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women. The workshop truly helped us realize that how the power of technology, information and collaborative effort can drive people towards the informed and knowledge-intensive society.

After the seminar I was curious to know more about Wikipedia and how it affects the world we live in. I came to know that Wikipedia is not used by research scholars as the information on Wikipedia has been referenced from somewhere else. In such case it is better to cite the actual reference than Wikipedia. Moreover, Wikipedia is not the authenticated and error free source of information. There are chances that the changes made in reference don't reflect on Wikipedia immediately or ever. Because of these reasons it is not used in the researchers' community as an authentic source of information.



Besides that, while surfing on the Internet, I came to know about "Wikiality", a term coined by Stephen Colbert. He said on his famous show The Colbert Report that "Wikipedia becomes our most trusted reference source," he continued, "reality is just what majority agrees upon." Wikiality is the version of reality created by the information available on Wikipedia. He also illustrated ridiculous edits on Wikipedia and threw a rhetoric remark, "What happens when you bring democracy to information?"

However, I believe Wikipedia is a great ecosystem to democratize the information and knowledge. But as applied to all democracies, its true strength is people, specially active participation of people. So the valid and legitimate threat envisaged by Stephen Colbert can be quarantined.

After attending the workshop I couldn't stop myself and posted the following note dedicated to my all friends on Facebook:

- Do you think 30 million articles in 286 languages is too loud a figure? If you are sceptical, then that's great. Go and investigate further. Provide the correct figure (if the given figure is erroneous) and yeah provide the reference/citation as well.

Bingo! That's how the whole Wikipedia has been erected, by sharing and contributing knowledge. Contribute about your locality, personalities, culture, tradition, etc.

- Believe in good faith. Knowledge is a path not the signboard. Be in good faith, put information, views and counter-views with reference, and don't be judgmental. Neutrality is the nature of Wikipedia.

- Acknowledge the effort. Not only when you write a research paper or contribute to Wikipedia, but also when you receive help, love and care of someone, do acknowledge. Democracy cannot exist without thankfulness and compassion. Wikipedia is a democratic way of knowledge transfer - for the people, of the people, by the people.

Waves of Change

This year, on our SCM study tour, we worked alongside Khabar Lahariya, a rural woman-run newspaper, in the Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh. *Rashmi Mehta* and *Apoorva Rao* share their experience

A woman aged 30, dressed in a simple cotton salwar-kameez watches drunk men fight. The men are fighting over a legal matter. The voices get louder and no resolution is at hand. Suddenly, the woman speaks. The command in her voice is unmistakable. It is enough to quieten the fighting men. They respect her and believe in her. All this, because, she is a Khabar Lahariya reporter.

Poorvi Bhargava, Editorial Coordinator at Khabar Lahariya, says, “Being a woman, in a place where you are expected to have a ghoongat up to your chin, there women have become a journalist. They are going to thanas, going to the Block Development Officer’s office, talking to men about their problems. They are openly talking about rape and sexual assaults, it is very difficult for the society around them to digest. But overtime I think the same society has been forced to give them recognition.”

Welcome to Khabar Lahariya (News Waves in Bundeli), a local newspaper organization run by forty

aspired to have a newspaper that not only encouraged reading and writing, but one that would also be a source of empowerment for women, giving them political and social news. Thus, with the end of Mahila Dakiya (1999) began Khabar Lahariya (2002), under the watchful guidance of Nirantar.

The voices they give prominence to have been unheard till date and come from the some of the most marginalised, most suppressed spaces of Indian society. The voices belong to women, Dalits, Muslims and other minority communities. Shanti, a senior reporter tells us, “We were being pushed around by authorities at first, but now we have found our way to get things done.”

Large-scale revolutions are clearly not the only way to bring about change – sometimes it can come in the form of forty enterprising, courageous and dynamic women who decided enough was literally enough. Not only do these women journalists have beats in areas that are famous for dacoits, but they also regularly brave journeys to areas in which patriarchy is so entrenched, that independent, thinking women are seen as anomalies who threaten the existing social order.

So what is it exactly that these women do that is so special, so important that it demands our admiration and mainstream attention?

Visualise a sad, desolate rural village where all the expected caste and gender based segregation and discrimination exists in full force. Then imagine a woman, with a ghoonghat upto her chin, extremely unwilling to talk to anybody; giggling as you ask her something. Suddenly as she spots a Khabar Lahariya reporter with us, she agrees to talk about her inexperience with a laptop, and not just to us, but to the camera as well.

Meera, the editor of Khabar Lahariya introduces Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh (where most of their readership exists) with unflinching honesty: “It still remains the one of the most backward areas in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Living amidst poverty, illiteracy and poor infrastructure, large swathes of population in the region still follow the illegal and outdated traditions of sati-pratha, purdah-pratha and caste purity.”

However, the men of the area are immediately subdued by the women of Khabar Lahariya. Like most of the houses we have seen earlier, the women sit on the floor and the men on the charpoy. Then enters Sunita, a reporter from Khabar Lahariya; the men immediately offer her their seat, and they themselves sit on the floor. Water and some food is immediately brought for the guest, and they start discussing issues with her;



Students with Khabar Lahariya editor, Meera (extreme right)
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

women. A newspaper that begun in 2002 to encourage literacy among women, Khabar Lahariya is now an eight-page weekly reaching 80,000 readers from 600 villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with Bundeli, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Hindustani and Baijika editions.

Nirantar—Centre for Education and Gender, Delhi collaborated with Mahila Samakhya in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh to come out with Mahila Dakiya, a newsletter produced by rural women. Mahila Dakiya was a one-page handwritten broadsheet for women that mostly covered the internal Mahila Samakhya activities and events. The Nirantar team

One year at SCM

those that she has written about and those that she wants to write about. This respect is what the Khabar Lahariya reporters have earned for themselves; this is empowerment.

Meera adds, "Welfare schemes simply do not work here because of the deep rooted corruption in the system. People here carry guns and the area is known for dacoits." Yet, she is not daunted. As we sit and observe their two hour long production meeting and the publishing of the dummy newspaper, her leadership is visible as she accepts some stories and rejects the others, asking the reporters to follow up on them, or introduce another point-of-view.

All the Khabar Lahariya reporters, from recent recruits to seasoned editors like Kavita and Meera, participate in the editorial discussion. Each one of them reads out their stories, as Meera and Kavita listen sharply - examining the language, context and relevance of the stories. They are quick to correct language errors and chide poorly-researched stories. They caution the reporters to not follow the template of a previous successful news article and ask them to follow their own leads and intuition.

Once they have taken editorial decisions, the stories go to their office for designing and lay out and are finally sent off for printing. In the Chitrakoot office, Roopali is in charge of design and formatting of the newspaper. Roopali, who has not had a formal training in computers, today handles Photoshop, Coreldraw and Pagemaker with extreme ease. Roopali says, "I had no idea of what all of this is; but today it is very simple. I can design pages at the click of a button."

We assisted the Khabar Lahariya reporters on their work for three whole days. By being with Meera, Kavita and Sunita we saw government apathy, discriminations practiced and restrictions imposed in the society. These women have come a long way from being a part of a literacy program to becoming change-makers themselves. Many of the senior reporters and editors have pursued further education. They have not only battled the societal pressures but have also had to win over their families in order to continue doing what they love.

"Kavita completed her B.A. and her M.A. while she was with Khabar Lahariya. Sushila, in the Benaras team, enrolled herself for college studies after she joined us. Usha from the Mahoba team, a new literate, is driven by the passion to educate all four children in her family and she

wants to send them somewhere big and enable them to do big things in life," Poorvi tells us.

Our respect for the Khabar Lahariya team grew as we saw them carry on about their work. It was the first time that we heard of an event called a



SCM students witnessing a production meet
Photo Credit: Sapana Jaiswal

'Sati Mela' -- to which even the Khabar Lahariya reporters had no access. It was the first time that most of us were in a village that has absolutely no electricity and saw people walk five kilometers, simple so that they could charge their mobile phone.

We saw a Dalit woman go from house to house repairing hand pumps. But the same people who drink the water from a hand pump repaired by her, will never accept a glass of water from her hand. The irony that rural India is facing today was visible at every step; with laptops in villages that have no electricity, unemployed men and overworked women who work overnight, cutting firewood to sell at meagre prices in order to serve her family one cooked meal a day.

Realities that shocked us are those that the Khabar Lahariya reporters have been dealing with every day. But these people don't need saviours from outside - they now have their own people fighting their battles for them, and winning some of them, it would seem. The reporters record and relay the voices of those left behind and harmed in the name of development. But now they themselves have become the voice of the voiceless, who are wilfully forgotten by the government during any planning.

All work from reporting to editing to illustrating and distributing is entirely done by women. As Poorvi says, "It's not just to challenge the fact that women don't find a way in to the public sphere, but to consciously pave the way for more women to come into the public sphere." Many men have asked to join the organisation, but Meera says, "We decided that it will be only a women's space."

“They only See that We are Dancers”

They have returned to the stage after seven years. Has everything changed? Or is it all the same? Krithi Sundar and Sapna Jaiswal find out...



Main kissi se kam nahi
Photo Credit: Sapana Jaiswal

It was a Saturday evening when we decided to head to a dance bar at Juhu, whose name itself promised an exciting evening ahead. The moment we stepped into the bar, the cacophony hit us right in the face. The place was dark and there were lights of all possible colours in the spectrum continuously flashing on and off, giving the place a very shady feel. The song 'Laila mein Laila', the timeless Zeenat Aman hit, played at particularly high decibel levels, encapsulating the atmosphere. There were around four to five customers seated across different tables and more than half a dozen bar dancers hanging around those tables. Dressed to impress in tantalizing outfits, caked in loads of makeup, standing tall in four-inch high heels and flaunting their backs, each of them tried to exude an erotic charm through their eyes.

Two dancers noticed us standing around and one asked, “Have you come to find work?” We just

giggled and said 'No' in response. Through the course of the evening, we realized that our initial shock at being regarded as bar dancers stemmed from long-held perceptions that virtuous girls are not supposed to visit shady places. Bar girls are equated with vice since they dance in shady night clubs and pour drinks for their male clients. Our purpose was simple, we had just gone there to have some fun. Little did we know then that getting to know more about them and their job would change us and our outlook forever.

It was not easy to get them to open up to us. To them, we were strangers. Whether we were simply curious or had sinister intentions was not known to them. We tried talking to them, but they wouldn't reveal much. It took finding a common thread between them and us that really started the conversation.

One look at Muskaan and she comes across as a

very confident, pretty girl who grabs eyeballs wherever she goes. With lovely eyes like those she could easily be mistaken for a model or a potential actress. Well... she came to Mumbai nurturing those dreams too. Little did she realize that even though Mumbai is the city that manufactures India's biggest dreams, not all dreams come true.

She came to this city when she was fifteen. She's twenty-four today, and nine years later her struggle for survival still continues. We asked her what her reason for working here was. All she had to say was, "Everyone has different stories, but a single reason- to run a home, to live life. What to do? This is our means of earning."

That's also the case with Julie, who has been in this profession for the last twelve years. She came all the way from Goa to Mumbai in search for a job, hoping to support her family and settle down in life. At the age of eight, she was doing stage shows in Goa. However, when the money she earned from that job became insufficient, she was advised to go to Mumbai and work as a bar girl.

When she was only nineteen, Julie got pregnant out of wedlock. The father, one of her customers, promised to take care of her. But when he realized that she was getting serious about their relationship, he ditched her. She decided to keep the baby, but her son is known as her married sister's son. Even as she narrated her story to us, Julie was in tears and excused herself for a while.

A dance bar is not only about the girls who dance there, but it is also about each and every person working there that makes it a complete family, right from the stewards, waiters, artist, singers, musicians, bouncers and kitchen staff. In the orchestra team, we spoke to a keyboard artist who was sixty-eight years old, with a wrinkled face and bespectacled eyes. He was silently seated in a corner and playing the keyboard. When we enquired what forced him to work at this age and condition he said, "My son is sick and I have to work for him as he doesn't. I knew how to play the keyboard so I got work here. I earn enough to support my family and pay for my son's treatment. What else do I need?"

In 2005, a ban by the Maharashtra State Government on all dance bars in Mumbai on the grounds that it was corrupting the youth and degrading women put 1.5 lakh people, including 75,000 bar girls, out of a job. This ban led to turbulent times for many people in this profession. For many like Chahat, it meant losing members of their family. Her mother was suffering from cancer and without Chahat's income, her father became the sole breadwinner. Due to stress,

he had a severe paralytic attack and passed away for lack of proper treatment. Since her father's demise, the responsibility of her family has landed on Chahat's shoulders.

Fortunately for her, the recent lifting of the ban on dance bars has come just at the right time, and financial support from the government has offered her some relief. She says, "My younger brothers and sisters are receiving a free education through the government and this is good, but the ban resulted in a lot of loss- for the dressmaker, the cabdriver, the make-up artist,



Standing, not dancing
Photo Credit: Sapana Jaiswal

all cry on loss of business. The government thinks our dancing is bad, but it happens in pubs as well."

Seven years after they were banned, the Supreme Court overturned the Maharashtra State Government's decision and allowed dance bars to open once again. But there's a catch. Ironically, according to this judgement, although the ban on dance bars has been lifted, the ban on dancing itself has not. This has led to far lesser crowds coming to the dance bar. Muskaan says, "Nowadays, people have lost interest in dance bars. They get bored here. Pubs and all are better...so people prefer to go there. If there was dance, then people would be interested." Another girl quipped, "If there was dance then the bar wouldn't be so empty. When there was dance, there was crowd. Now when we stand on the side, it feels as if we're begging."

The ban has legally been lifted, but that's just about it. It has changed a lot for the bar dancers in terms of financial woes, but their reputation or the lack of it still remains. It is interesting how a profession tells you much about human beings and our society. We learnt that day that we live in a society of hypocrites and judgemental people. A society that constantly classifies people as good or bad based on their profession. A society that forces good people to feel cheap about themselves, just because they are in a profession that is considered taboo by people who are fortunate enough to afford any profession of their choice.

Over a period of a month, we went to that dance bar on three different occasions; with different agendas – as patrons and as journalists. Each time the experience was starkly different from the previous one, and overwhelmingly so.

As customers, we received more stares than the bar dancers received. It was apparent that each of the other patrons watching us were questioning our character and upbringing. It wasn't very nice; at some level we even felt cheap. But it wasn't all that awkward because each time we made eye contact with any one of them, they either looked away or smiled. Since we were sitting on the customer side of the table, we hadn't yet dropped to the last rung of respectability; a certain class barrier that shielded us.

In our capacity of journalists, we were treated like royalty. We were allowed entry into places inaccessible for most others, including the bar girls' changing room. There too, we were treated very cordially by the bar dancers, although most of them were either sceptical or indifferent. They felt that no matter what or how much we wrote, it wouldn't make any difference whatsoever to their lives or society's attitude towards them.

That awkwardness was reserved for the third time we went to the bar. The staff of the bar were able to recognize us by then, so they looked at us like we were doing our job as journalists. But that's not something the patrons knew. For them we were just two more bar dancers among a bevy of them. They looked at us the way they looked at any other bar girl. But for us to be at the other end of that gaze and objectified in that way felt outrageous. We cringed at the way those lustful eyes scanned our bodies in expectation. We were nothing more than vital statistics for them: the sexier and the bustier, the better.

We noticed how each of the girls was trying to go out of her way to seem respectable. In some odd way, they were trying to differentiate themselves from the rest of the girls by presenting themselves as more decent and moral than the others. They were extremely conscious of people's perception. And this was not because they personally thought their job was bad. It was because the society around them believed so and labelled them as indecent people. Every dancer that we spoke with shared a common opinion: "People's thoughts are wrong about such places. Because these places have a bad reputation, we also get a bad reputation. But it is nothing like that. No one can even touch us."

After a while we seated ourselves at a table to make some notes about our experience that night. We were now back to being decent, intellectual people who commanded respect in the society. But for some reason the bar girls continued to feel threatened by our presence. We realized that the reason they felt that way was because they thought they might lose their patrons to us and we may dent their earnings

for the day. All of them waited in anticipation for that currency note in a patron's hand. All that mattered was being more attractive than the other; winning for the day; being ahead of the other no matter what it costs.

An incident on this was narrated to us by Pramodini Yashwant Kadam (the actress who was 'Meena' a bar dancer in the movie Chandni Bar). She was travelling by a local train in Mumbai and was recognised by a couple of girls. They spoke to her about her character in the film where she helps Tabu's character, the new entrant in the dance bar industry. One of the girls said, "Your role was not written properly. In this line, no one is friends with the other. The help you have given Tabu in the movie, it doesn't really happen."

When we were sitting on the sofa behind the bar girls, every once in a while a dancer would glance in our direction and smile if we caught them looking at us. That glance and that smile, although just cordial, conveyed what a million words could not. They said to us, "You're lucky to be sitting on the other side of the table. And I pray that you never land on this side."

All of them smiled and charmed their way through; they looked happy and in complete control. But there was something unspoken and uncomfortable about the place... a silent sympathy that all the girls had for each other, and a look of lust that all the customers had in their eyes. However, each time they looked away from the customer, there was a look of intense grief in their eyes. A look of self pity. They didn't want to be there... but they had no other choice. For them it was just the desperation to earn a living, but for the world it was disgrace.

The feeling of being there was a very unsettling one for us that day. At that point I didn't realize what that feeling was. But on my way back when I introspected, I understood the feeling. It was respectability. I realized the difference one notebook could make in the hands of a girl. It demonstrates goodness. But who really decides what is good and what is bad? And how? Maybe as Shilpa Phadke, professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) says, "There isn't a clear definition of what constitutes obscenity. But the thing is once we allow ourselves to be dictated by a morality often determined by a more conservative faction of society, then we lose our right to self determination; we lose our right to choice."

With a heavy heart and an even heavier realization, we left the place. And all the way what Chandni, one of the dancers, said that evening rang in my ears, "Ek baar label lag gaya na badnami ka, toh bas lag gaya. Hum kaise hain... ache ya bure woh koi nahi dekhta. Sabko sirf yahi dikhta hai ki hum naachne waliyan hain." (Once you are labelled, you can never rid yourself of it. No one looks at whether we are good or bad. They only see that we are dances.)

(Names of the bar dancers in the article have been changed.)

Gender v3.0

Hijra. Aravani. Chakka. Sixer. Nikita Raijada and Abhra Das try to explore gender fluidity in the lives of a few transgenders of the city

Pallav Pattankar, Director, HIV Programmes, of the Humsafar Trust (HST), Mumbai, an NGO that works with sexual minorities, puts it clearly: “Most theorists believe that gender is fluid. No one is 100 per cent male or female. Gender is a spectrum.”

Transgenders, commonly known as hijras in Mumbai, evoke fear and awe in equal measure. They themselves talk of a glorious past: of being palace guards to the Mughal zenanas, of being even warriors. Some people believe that they have magical powers. Others that they are just sexual oddities. They are seen as the source of powerful blessings and so are propitiated at births. They are seen as the fountainhead of equally powerful curses so it is never clear whether a blessing is being sought or a curse is being averted.

Rarely do people seek the truth: that the hijra you see at the signal or on the train might well have been born that way but that is only a tiny fraction of the population. Most of the others are not born but made. They choose to become hijras, to step out of the mainstream. They are born male, but feel female inside. They feel trapped in the wrong body until they decide to change, a change that defines them, a change that becomes their identity. Vidya speaks of this change in her book, *I am Vidya, A Transgender's Journey* (Rupa Books, Rs 195): “Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I was now a woman: mine was a woman's body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted, had yearned for”.

Urmi Jadhav, a transgender working at The Humsafar Trust, Mumbai, says, “We live just like other people. I do not understand why people think we have some different lifestyle. Our behaviour might seem different but there is nothing crazy or weird about the way we live”.

This may well be true but the community has its own hierarchies. They say they follow the guru-shishya parampara. A senior hijra becomes a guru. She has chelas who form her family. These chelas seem to be free to leave after paying a fine. The guru sends them out to ‘work’. This might be for badhai-basti, to dance for weddings; sex work or begging. They give a part of their earnings to their guru. “But otherwise,” says Urmi Jadhav, “in what other way are we different? We eat and sleep and laugh and love just as other people do.”

What about the cursing? “Some people say that there is a belief that when he was leaving Ayodhya, Lord Rama turned around and said, ‘Men and women of Ayodhya, go home. I will return.’” When he returned, he found a group of people had sat there, waiting for him. He asked them why they were there. The leader said, ‘Lord, you spoke to the men and women of Ayodhya. You said nothing to us, the hijras of Ayodhya.’ Lord Rama was touched at their fidelity and gave them the power to foretell the future.”

Gauri Sawant, Chairperson of Sakhi Char Chowghi, a Community-Based Organisation, says, “I don't know whether



Urmi Jadhav- Hoping for a rainbow
Photo Credit: Abhra Das

there is anything to a hijra's curse that is not there to an ordinary person's curses. If we could foretell the future, if our curses all came true, we would be gods in temples.”

Sawant and her chelas distribute free condoms. Gauri does not think hijra should do sex work but she believes they have few options. She says, “Who will give us jobs? People tend to forget that we too are human beings. Is my Crocin different from yours? We take Crocin too and shouldn't that be proof that we are not aliens?”

Vidya who wrote about her life vowed never to do sex work for a living. The path to ‘Nirvana’, as the transgenders call the process of becoming a transgender, wasn't an easy one for her. Unlike most transgenders, Vidya is an educated woman.

Perhaps that's what is needed? Education.

There are other issues too. Many schemes seem to have been formulated but as Sawant says: “Yojnaaein banti to hai, lekin neeche tak nahin aati.” (Schemes are created but they never trickle down.)

Health is a constant concern. Many are at high risk because they have multiple sexual partners and while condom use is being encouraged, it still hasn't spread as far as it should have. “All HIV positive people are discriminated against,” says Urmi Jadhav. “But transgenders suffer from double discrimination.”

Vidya's book talks movingly of how she was ignored after her operation, left to fend for herself against the pain, drinking tea to try and keep the urine flowing to heal her wounds.

Another is that of human rights. But there is hope. Aadhaar cards have been issued to transgenders. Passports now recognise the possibility of a third gender. Somya, a transgender Training Officer at Humsafar Trust says, “It should not be ‘Other’. It should be ‘Transgender’. This ambiguity is not palatable.”

Mumbai to Mokhada

Out of sight, out of mind. This is sadly true for tribals of Thane district whose problems are rarely taken into account by the government and by the society. *Apoorva Rao* tries to throw light at one such group of people living not very far from Mumbai

Six hours and over 150 kms of road trip from Mumbai and already we are in the hinterland. Here what we call basic infrastructure (such as good roads and a municipal hospital) are privileges. Welcome to Hattipada, a hamlet in Mokhada sub-division of Thane district. Vikramgad, another subdivision of Thane, is known for its resorts and

blue. Some have brightly-coloured flowers, leaves and other designs. Children curiously turn their heads as I pass by.

One can fall prey to romanticizing the rural charm and forget the real issues that grip them. Hattipada is clearly cut-off from all basic civic amenities and bodies—the Zilla Parishad, health clinics, secondary and higher

education and even water supply. Yet, the first thing I did was to point my camera to a near by mud house, only to be yelled at by a local to photograph a Karvy hut. Karvy, the shrub, is known for some of its species whose flowers bloom once in eight years and turn the whole Western Ghats purple. It also has a distinct near rectangular stem than a circular one that helps in building huts. For locals, Karvy stands for poverty and hardship. That is because Karvy huts fall apart after every



Shantaram Manya Burbudhe(left) with his father(right)
Photo Credit: Apoorva Rao

waterfall; Jawhar, for Warli artists. Mokhada is just another subdivision without an identity. You drive a few kilometers further east into Mokhada and get sucked into oblivion.

A hamlet of close to 150-200 houses, Hattipada stands on a hillock that is surrounded by valleys and hills painted by pastels in the winter. Little girls in bright and shiny garments provide sudden splashes of colour. Little houses line both sides of the sole kachcha (non-cemented) road of the hamlet. The houses are either pretty mud houses with Indic motifs or huts made from the stems of the Karvy shrub. Both these forms are used, ironically, in the resorts of neighbouring Vikramgad, where they are meant to produce a rural idyll with air-conditioning and indoor plumbing.

Ten am on a winter morning and most people are going about their work. Some women are plastering floors and outer walls of their homes with cow dung. Men and women are working together to build mud houses that they renew regularly. Some have their houses ready with the mud walls plastered in paler shades of yellow, brown and

two-three years and men and women have to travel long distances into the wilderness to get Karvy and rebuild their houses.

There is a buzz near the place where the hamlet ends, where the hillock juts out into emptiness and unevenness of the valley. People scuttle in and out of the community gathering room, locally called as the 'Samaj Mandir'. A little room with concrete walls painted in sea green is filled with 50-60 odd people. Don Bosco Development Society (DBDS), the non-profit organisation that helped me reach here is conducting a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) workshop. The NGO works at various hamlets in Thane district to facilitate social development without resorting to proselytisation. The PSP workshop helps people become socially and politically empowered so that they address their civic issues. DBDS volunteers struggle to keep the number of participants large and steady.

Throughout the day children, men and women come and go. But the workshop has a small number of interested participants. The Maji Sarpanch (ex-Sarpanch) of the hamlet and

a few 'Bachat Gat' (a Self Help group) members are one of them..

People were welcoming and they eagerly spoke about themselves. Laxman and his friends, a bunch of twenty somethings were curious to find out my intentions.

“What are you here for?”

I told them about my purpose for visiting their hamlet. And Laxman was ready with answers for my line of questioning. Speaking in the local dialect of Marathi, he said, “We all are Ma-Thakurs. People down the valley are the Katkaris. They are Hindus. We are tribals.” He explained the reason behind the segregation, “Our customs are different. They eat animals. They also eat undir. We don't.”

“Undir means chuha (mouse/ rat),” adds Jagganath, Laxman's friend.

Hattipada is home to the tribal community of Ma-Thakurs. “Ma' because they begin most of their sentences with 'Ma'. Similarly there is another tribal group called Ka-Thakurs who tend to use Ka in the beginning of their sentences,” DBDSs' program co-ordinator, Melvin Pangya informed me. There are a few Katkaris and fewer Warlis. And they all live in joint families with their parents.

By then, the Maji Sarpanch, Pandurang Shirsayak and a general store owner Annasaheb Lambge too joined in. The conversation had grown serious now. Laxman began to show flashes of discontent, rage and disappointment. He spoke about the water issues, “After the monsoons, there isn't a drop of water. Nothing has changed here.”

Though Thane district receives good rainfall (average annual rainfall-2293.4 mm) it does not count for much. The rainfall from June to September constitutes 94 per cent of the annual rainfall. Even after four months of rain, people work around the dryness and barrenness of resources. The closest water source is the river stream two kms down the valley that recently became available due to the building of the Sayda dam for a nearby village. “We grow millet, rice and mustard. After the rains we do some odd jobs around the nearby towns,” says Shantaram Manya Burbudhe, a Ma-Thakur local.

Men mostly farm when it rains, build houses, take the cattle (cows, buffaloes) out for grazing and do odd jobs in nearby towns. Women cook, clean, look after the children and the house, work in the farm, build houses, take the cattle (goats) out for grazing and bring about waves of positive changes.

Rupali Annasaheb Lambge, president of one of Hattipada's only existing Bachat Gat said, “We brought back electricity to the village. For three years, our husbands spent large sums of money and made trips to Jawhar to no avail. Then we told the MSEB (Maharashtra State Electricity Board) people, 'If you don't supply electricity, we will not budge from here.' The officer there finally relented.” The women also managed to close liquor shops after facing a lot of hardship and opposition from the rest of the hamlet.

Rupali's family is one of the very few families which can afford electricity. Shantaram states, “We cannot manage to pay our bills. We only used a light bulb and that cost us Rs.300. How can using a bulb



A newly constructed Hattipada mudhouse
Photo Credit: Apoorva Rao

cost so much?” Similarly, education is not within every family's means. “They have to forgo one of their children's higher education,” says the Maji Sarpanch. Children with access to higher education either live in hostels or travel three-four hours daily. Laxman discontinued his education after class seven whereas Jagganath is doing his Bachelor of Arts.

The Maji Sarpanch then tried to bring to my attention to the infrastructure. “You see that village (pointing out to another hamlet on a distant hillock)? It is 15 km from Hattipada when you use the road which goes from Kinnisti (yet another hamlet). If we had a good road from where we standing, it would be just three kms away. Please write about it,” he asked me, his eyes beaming with hope and enthusiasm.

Annasaheb nodded earnestly. I guiltily clarified, “I am student not a patrakar (journalist). My write-up in all likelihood will not bring about change here or reach concerned authorities regarding your issues.” But that did not dampen Annasaheb's or the Maji Sarpanch's spirit.

Places like Hattipada figure among countless godforsaken places of India. Their situation remains unchanged or even gets worse. Their own resources are always snatched from them to serve the bigger or rather the biggest spenders' needs. The Middle Vaitarna dam that is way closer to Mokhada and Jawhar serves the 'burgeoning needs' of Mumbai and does not serve Hattipada. M. B. Gangurde, an engineer with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (B.M.C.) and a local from Jawhar admits to not knowing about much Hattipada's water issues. The roads too are poor in condition, barring the one that leads to the Middle Vaitarna Dam. Health and education are a distant reality. The tribals have to travel at least three-four kms to access these basic amenities.

Despite these gloomy scenarios, changes are happening, especially with women leading the movement. “Women are the centre of development. If they decide to do something, nothing can stop them. See, men always think about infrastructure, employment; women think about development, education etc,” declares Melvin. In his experience every single time, it is women who are the harbingers of change and development. Perhaps, there will be more Rupalis in Hattipadas and much more support reaching them from urbanites like us.

Wadi Live!

Cryselle D'Souza walks the wadis and crawls the chawls



A wadi still holds strong amidst the high rises
Photo Credit: Cryselle D'Souza

I live in the 'Twin Tower Lane' at Prabhadevi. Being both a residential area as well as a commercial area, the lane is quite well maintained. The lane starts with the Industrial Estate, followed by the Sahas Company, and ends with the Twin Towers. I live in the area between the Industrial Estate and Sahas. In the map of the locality that the Advanced Locality Management (ALM) has put up at the beginning of the lane, we do not figure. Our wadi, otherwise called Glosswell Chawl, has been erased. Perhaps it would lower the tone of the area. Perhaps they didn't even notice we were there.

I wonder sometimes, is this what happens when you live in a wadi? My home is also called 'Baiti Chawl'. I wondered what a baiti chawl meant until my daddy explained it to me that it meant we lived in a 'slum'. I was very offended when I heard the word 'slum'. I thought to myself, "I lived in a slum all these years? And I never realized it?"

I could not accept the idea. I couldn't be living in a slum. My home is not some jerrybuilt shack; it's a proper

house, and the area around is hygienic—or at least as hygienic as Mumbai gets. The floor tiles are the envy of friends who live on slippery marble. They talk of another time, a time when even the tiles were pretty. As a child I would lie on the floor with my wax crayons and fill in all the white bits. My mother would get hopping mad, but the tiles cleaned off easily and were there to be coloured in again.

But still there was something that was disquieting me. Maybe my daddy's words, spoken seriously, forced me to get out and find out what the real truth was. I was totally disturbed with what daddy told me I thought to myself that I should go out and find out for myself what "living in a chawl or wadi," exactly meant. So I decided to communicate with those who are still living in a chawl or wadi or had been living in this space before.

The chawls of Mumbai came into existence around the time the textile mills shaped the city. The mills needed workers and these workers came from the hinterland and did not have homes. And so the mill owners—and some independent entrepreneurs—began to build accommodation for the people who came to work in the city. It was assumed in the beginning that this would be bachelor accommodation but the men began to bring their wives and the wives began to have children and the children began to play in the common verandahs, games like langdi, land and water, hide and seek, kho-kho, football... just as we did when I was younger and television and the internet hadn't sucked every young person off the streets.

I set out to meet other people who had lived in chawls. Anagha Tendulkar is a sociology lecturer at Sophia College as well as a past resident of a chawl in Girgaon. She now lives in a two floor bungalow.

Tendulkar did not feel that she had ever been looked down upon because of where she lived. "I do not understand this stereotyping about chawls, nobody looked at me differently. With suburbanisation, some of the very old chawls in Bombay are now reduced to localities of the less privileged. So those who do not have the financial backing continue to stay in chawls. So their culture or rather their lifestyle is no longer as it used to be earlier. Earlier 'chawl' was a culture, now it has reduced to being merely a geographical location. It is because there has been a turnover from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous culture within the chawl system that the hygiene has suffered. When I lived in a chawl, it was a Brahmin chawl, only Brahmins lived there."

Since most of the chawls are in Central Mumbai, in the island city where real estate prices have soared, they are now sought-after and prices can get absurd. What has happened to the all-Brahmin or all-Kayastha chawl, is that some of the old residents have sold out and they often sell to the highest bidder, regardless of caste or ethnicity.

"However, the chawl I lived in was, and still is, like family to me," she says. Tendulkar visits her old home often, and had just visited the chawl on the day that I interviewed her. "I call my immediate neighbours kaka and kaki. Every

other day there would be various dishes that would come to your house from various neighbours, who would love to share their batata poha with you. If there was a kulfiwala passing by, people wouldn't just buy kulfis for their children but for the children of the entire chawl. During festivals and weddings, the doors connecting the rooms of each house were opened, thus enabling the sharing of responsibilities and joy. We celebrated as one big family."

Tendulkar feels that living in a chawl is like "getting a management degree". "You learn to handle all sorts of situations. You learn how to maintain a certain distance between yourself and others and you let them into your life as well. I feel a little sorry sometimes that my son does not get all this."

I guess there are some downsides to those eight rooms too. Would I like to live in one, I wonder. My first instinct is to say: No. Then I think: what if the fates are listening? I amend my answer: Maybe.

Steve Rodrigues told me what it was like to move into an apartment. The 26 years old, who works in an IT firm, lived in D'Silva Wadi, Prabhadevi, but had to shift to a one-room apartment after it was demolished. "Living in a wadi was so much fun, we would play football in the front yard of our houses in the rains. During Christmas, after midnight mass we would have late night parties in our homes and even if we blasted music no one would mind because everyone would be at the party, so who was there to mind? But then it wasn't only about parties. You could always get help if you needed it. Now, life is very different; people in my new neighbourhood are self-contained. I can't imagine my building people reaching out for any help if we needed it."

The Wadi where I stay is in the midst of highrise concrete structures, and often when I go for a walk in my lane, I see these well-lit apartments with clear, full length glass windows and I begin having fancies of living in such apartments, but then I think, will life still be the same? I got

a reply to this when I spoke to my neighbour Alisha D'Souza, 16 years old, fresher at Wilson College who told me that her friends often told her how boring their lives were, living in an apartment. While on the other hand, living in a wadi was, and still is, so much fun. "We only have to call out, 'anga yo' (come here), and at the next instant, we will have 10 other people standing ready to help us," she said.

All of us remember this porosity. Tendulkar says, "You know we didn't have to think twice when we entered our neighbour's house, it wasn't taken as invasion of privacy. You were welcomed at anytime of the day, you could sit, chat and no one would mind. Now it's different, I can't do that any longer. I have to call my neighbour and ask if I may visit them."

I felt so connected to her at that point. I thought to myself: indeed this is the reason that although a wide amount of conversation happens in the world today, rich nourishing personal communication is lost, and so are we.

Everything has its pros as well as cons and so does living in a chawl or wadi. Tendulkar recently took her mother to an orthopaedic expert, as her mother was having a back ache. On getting the x-ray done, the doctor asked her if they belonged to a farmer's family, as her mother had developed a typical farmer's spine. "This was because she had been carrying heavy buckets of water from the ground floor to the second floor, which had had a direct impact on her spinal cord," says Tendulkar.

After my father's slum comment, I began to listen more carefully to how people talked about my home. 'Woh Industrial Estate ke piche jo jhopde hai wahi na?' (Those shanties behind the Industrial Estate?) 'Sorry, ma'am, we do not deliver pizzas in chawls.'

You don't? Perhaps you even live in one. But that isn't what counts. Wherever you live, life isn't going to make sure you have the best comforts, it comes in with its own difficulties and challenges. What counts is how to decide to live it.



Goa in the midst of Dadar
Photo Credit: Cryselle D'Souza

Zoo Story

When you can catch all the wild life you want on YouTube, is there a place for zoos in our world? *Jonathan Immanuel* peeks over the cage's edge to test if it is of any use...

The leopard had left her cubs to go on a hunt. The tall grass provided cover from all but one predator, the African Rock python. The python slowly slid through the rocks, sticking its forked tongue out to sense its prey. As it got closer, the cubs began to squeak, but their mother was too far to hear their cries. In a flash, the python grabbed hold of one of the cubs, squeezed it with its muscular grip and devoured it in one go.

Over the years, I have watched many videos of snakes devouring rats and lizards. I have been mesmerized by one in which an African Rock Python swallowed a whole antelope ten times its size. But none of these can beat the live experience of watching two cobras in an eating frenzy at Vandalur Zoo in Chennai. These lethal creatures seemed incapable of stopping themselves from sinking their venomous fangs into the flesh of the rats scurrying about in the cage and gulping them down one by one. It was as though the cobras had not had a meal in months.

Having grown up on a diet of documentaries, I know

a lot about venom. I knew about the exact damage that can be caused by the neurotoxins, cytotoxins, cardiotoxins or haemotoxins when released into the rodents' bodies—but watching this live was completely different. Seeing the rat stop in its tracks and fall dead – just lying there, not moving a muscle, not even twitching, made it all so much more real. Witnessing the drama of life and death play out in a confined glass cage was by far a greater learning experience than all those videos. However, zoos are contentious spaces today.

To begin with, man began sharing space with animals to domesticate them. But soon enough we began to confine exotic animals for other reasons. If the first captive animals were housed for the purpose of food and companionship, others were kept as a symbol of wealth and power. Kings exchanged rare animals as a token of friendship. Big cats like tigers and leopards were considered so prestigious that only royals owned them. Others were used right up to the nineteenth century to hunt. During the Age of Discovery, explorers would collect animals from their places of travel and would house them in their own state. This led to early zoos being established in cities.

Zoos needed a marketing strategy to draw visitors every year. Almost every zoo has got some animal that is peculiar, that is different, that is loved by the crowd. The zoo would then focus on bringing this animal to the limelight, making that animal its star attraction. Jumbo, the African elephant, was one of the most famous zoo animals of all time. He was born sometime around Christmas in 1860. Loved by all, he was the star attraction at the London Zoo, giving rides to visitors, especially children. Many zoos around the world boast of the various rare animals they exhibit.

Factors such as oddity, age and appearance make these animals a crowd puller. Guru is a hairless chimpanzee who sits and shows off his biceps and triceps at the Mysore Zoo. Clearwater Marine Aquarium in Florida houses Winter, the dolphin that gained fame because of her ability to survive with a prosthetic tail, after losing her own in a crab trap accident as a baby, while Mia, Bronx Zoo's Egyptian cobra has about 180,000 followers on her fictional twitter account.

Despite the overwhelming popularity of these certain animals, zoos today, are often perceived as a place where these very creatures are confined to small areas, forced to lead miserable lives. People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) believes that animals belong in their natural habitats and not in zoos. Zookeepers tend not to agree.

“We are going through a huge revolution in the way Indian zoos are managed, from cages to something called as enclosures, where the space is much more...and from keeping a lot of species and animals to keeping just a few



Whatcha looking at? -Taken at Nehru Zoological Park, Hyderabad.
Photo Credit: Jonathan Immanuel

species, because feeding them, maintaining them, enriching them is quite a tedious task,” says Shekhar Kolipaka, a wildlife researcher who is currently researching on the Indian Caracal in Panna, Madhya Pradesh.

The Veermata Jijabai Bhonsale Udyan and Zoo, in Mumbai, commonly known as Byculla Zoo, has had the reputation for being one of the worst zoos in the world. Their rate of animal mortality is extremely high. Many independent organisations have condemned the zoo for its lack of space and poor hygiene guidelines. PETA, over the years, has requested zoo officials to ensure that steps are taken to improve the living conditions of the animals exhibited. Renovation plans for the Mumbai Zoo are underway. According to these blueprints, by 2015, all animals would be provided with new enclosures.

Apart from developing the infrastructure, new animals, a few being the Hyena, Jackal, Asiatic lion, jaguar and even a Humboldt Penguin would be introduced. ‘Living together’ is the theme that has been approved for the new zoo layout with an aim at creating natural habitats within the enclosure to fulfil their ecological needs.

“Various educational activities are being conducted at V.J.B.Udyan and Zoo for creating interest and awareness for the wildlife, nature and environment,” says Anil Anjankar,

Educating people about wildlife and conservation in the animal’s very own natural habitat is a better solution. A three-hour safari at a National Park would teach you a lot more than what a zoo would. One could learn about the flora in Indian forests, see animal behaviour in its natural surroundings and even identify the calls of the wild. But all this comes at a price, albeit a small one when compared to the larger scheme of life: one safari would cost about Rs 700, exclusive of travel, accommodation and food; while a trip to your local zoo would cost you not more than Rs 50.

Even though the price of visiting a zoo is lesser than that of a National Park, zoos are one of the primary starting points which enable people to develop their love and passion for animals. It is a place where they can realize that if something could look so splendid in a caged enclosure, its magnificence would hold more worth when witnessing the animal in the wild. Added to this is the thrill of being just a hop, skip and jump away from the untamed and unseen part of nature, with only the thin veneer of a cage in between, though nowadays cages have been replaced by spacious enclosures.

Where else can a human of the 21st century see an animal like the Galapagos Tortoise, the largest living species of tortoise, without having to travel to the Equator?

And let us not forget the Jaguar, South America’s elusive cat or the ever ballsy Honey Badger, native to Africa and select parts of Asia. Zoos afford people the chance of falling in love with the wild, or simply retaining the awe for God’s natural creations, coming in touch with a reality very different from Man’s concrete jungle. I am not trying to prove that these animals should live in confined spaces. They shouldn’t. It is, perhaps, a small price for nature to pay for the sins of man, so people can be made more aware of the beauty of animals, in the hope that animals in the wild could be left alone and better off, at the cost of the caged few.



First step to wildlife education at Banerghatta Biological Park, Bangalore.
Photo Credit: Jonathan Immanuel

Director of the Byculla Zoo. “Zoo awareness programmes are being encouraged among municipal schools in Mumbai. These children are given the opportunity to participate in photographic exhibitions, rare tree trails and zoo guided tours.”

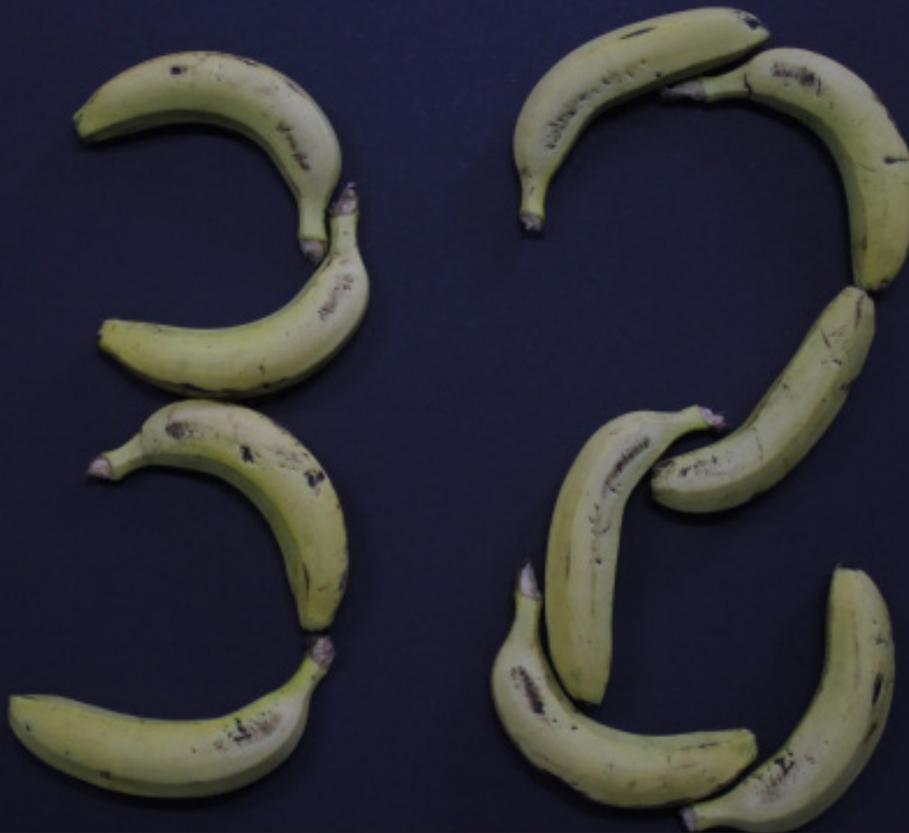
However, zoos, as an institution itself, have been condemned by many. “Trying to educate people about wildlife conservation by taking them to zoos, is like trying to teach people about crime by taking them to gawk at prisoners through bars,” says Bittu Sahgal, founder editor of Sanctuary Asia, India’s leading wildlife and nature conservation magazine. What Sahgal says rings true for anyone who has visited a zoo in India.



Hope my brothers are doing better in the wild! Taken at Banerghatta Biological Park, Bangalore.
Photo Credit: Jonathan Immanuel

An Encounter with line no. 32

Parth Vyas takes on the challenge of toeing the poverty line for a week



Dear Govt, here's my full meal.
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

Once upon a time, I loved a good banana milkshake. Not anymore. I have eaten 30 bananas in three consecutive days. That, and a loaf of bread. Nothing else. No other food.

Three bananas cost Rs 10. A loaf of bread, cut into 18 slices, costs Rs 22. Yesterday, I had four for breakfast, five at lunch and six at dinner. Cutting chai, vegetable sandwich, vada pao and paani puri, seem like a distant dream, a lavish feast fit for a king.

I fear the evening, especially sunset. As the sun moves from east to west, my mind moves from the world outside, to my stomach. I tell my tummy, "You have just been fed. You cannot be hungry again". If hunger strikes harder, I tell my tummy, "Wait a while; you're going to have a great dinner tonight!"

I don't use an eraser, a pencil or a pen, unless it is absolutely necessary. I can't afford to. I don't waste paper either. I walk slowly on the crowded streets and train stations. I have to be careful. A cobbler would charge a minimum of ten rupees to repair the smallest tear in my shoe.

I envy the people who travel alone in air-conditioned cars. One litre of their bloody petrol costs more than my daily food expense.

As night approaches, I lose my ability to think, talk and express myself. I become restless, illogical and short-tempered. Even sleep betrays me. I pace in my room for an hour. When I finally feel tired, I collapse on my bed, the ache of my body overshadowing the rumbling in my empty stomach. I face a terrible fear of tomorrow. I ask myself repeatedly, "Will I survive?" Slowly I lose consciousness.

I remember thinking: is this a joke? The newspapers that morning announced "Spend Rs 32 a day? Govt says you can't be poor" (Times of India, Sep 21, 2011). The Planning Commission of India had defined a new poverty line, which

was subsequently ridiculed by the media. The response from Planning Commission Deputy Chairman, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, was “The fact is that Rs 4,824 per month for a family [of five] to define poverty is not comfortable, but it is not all that ridiculous in Indian conditions.” (The Hindu, October 12, 2011) Was that not ridiculous?

I decided to examine the Line No. 32. The question was, how?

I decided that the only way to truly understand the absurdity of the situation, was to live within a budget of Rs 32 a day.

Even though the experience shared at the beginning is honest and truthful, I was unable to recreate the authentic experience of living on Rs 32 a day. I spent all the money only on food. Clothes, rent, gas, utensils, grooming products, transportation etc were taken care of by a separate budget and money that had been spent earlier.

Having said this, I feel that living on only Rs 32 a day, is completely incomprehensible by logic, unimaginable by the mind and unrealisable by the senses.

“Poverty Line’ helps in understanding the incidence of poverty in any economy. It also helps in identifying those people who need urgent attention of the policy makers (the government). This [Rs.32 per day] poverty line underestimates the extent of poverty we have in the country. In reality the level of poverty is much more than what’s reflected in official statistics,” says Sunita Jadhav, assistant professor, Department of Economics, Sophia College, Mumbai.

“It is a projection of India’s insertion into the global world. To show the world that our growth programs have succeeded and that India’s move towards being a superpower is in the right direction, you need to have very small number of people under poverty line. What you are doing is not reducing poverty; you are reducing the number of poor.” said Dr. Angelo Menezes, associate professor, department of economics, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai. He continued, “You reduce countability of poor. You change the headcount index by changing the numerator. If the numerator is the number of poor and denominator is the total population, you can’t fiddle with the total population, the denominator, so you start fiddling with the numerator. This is called numerator sleight of hand. By redefining the numerator, you just create extremely favourable ratios. I believe this was not a blunder. This is something he [Mr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia] meant. It was not inadvertent.”

“Rakesh ne mari mari ne samjavie toye e koi vaat ma samjtoj nathi. Akho divas rakhadya kare ane ghar ma bese j nahi, (Even though I hit Rakesh severely and try to make him understand the reality he doesn’t realize. Whole day he wanders and he never sits at home.)” Laxmi told me as she mopped the floor. Laxmi is our household help in Gandhidham, Kutch. She has worked for us for more than twenty years. She cleans the floor and washes the utensils and our clothes. Earlier, she washed the clothes by hand. Now she loads unloads the washing machine and hangs the clothes to dry. She works in three other houses and earns around Rs 5000 per month. For the last fifteen years, Laxmi has been the sole earning member in her family. Now her son Rakesh is around seventeen or eighteen.

I replied in a “reformist” tone, “Ene school kern nathi

mokalta? (Why don’t you send him to school?)”

She stopped mopping, smiled, looked into my eyes, and said, “Khavana paisa maand bhega thaay che toh bharva kya mogle? (We hardly manage to buy food, how can we think of school?)”

“Mereko teen din se bahut sar dard ho raha hai aur bukhaar jaise bhi lag raha hai, (I have been suffering from a severe headache and have been feeling feverish for last three days),” Babita Mausi, our cook in Mumbai, was whining while preparing dinner. Apart from cooking at couple of other houses, she also washes clothes, utensils and floors. She manages to earn more than 7000 rupees a month. Her son also earns and contributes to family income. Including her, there are five members in the family.

“Zyada kuch hone se pehle doctor ko dikha do, (Better see the doctor, before the situation becomes worse),” I advised gently.

“Paisa kaun dega? (Who will pay the bills?)” she asked.

“Kitna mil jata hai ek din me? (How much do you collect in a day?)” I asked him.

“Assi nabbe rupye mil jaate hai, allah maherbaan ho toh sau ke upar bhi mil jata hai (I used to get 80-90 rupees a day. If God graceful, sometimes I collect more than 100 rupees a day)” Rasheed replied. Rasheed is a beggar who usually operates from Chinchpokli, Byculla and other stations along the Central Railway Line.

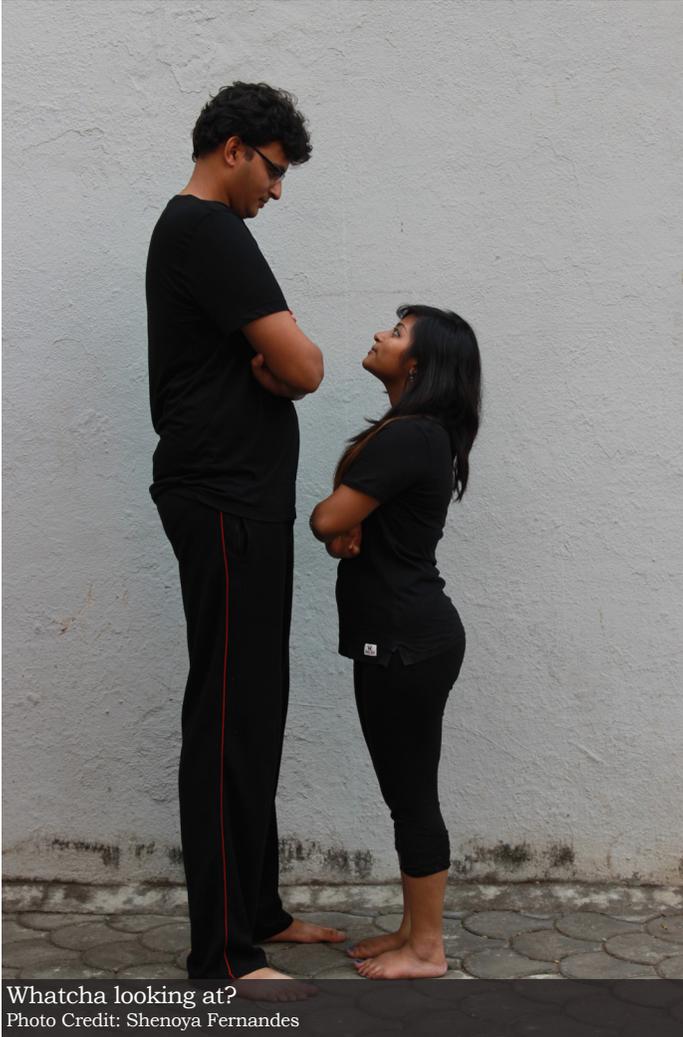
“Kitne log hai ghar me? Sab log yahi kaam karte hain kya? (How many members are there in your family? Does everyone work in the same business?)” I was anxious to know. “Main aur ammi hi hai. Usse bhi itna hi mil jata hai (My mother and I are the family. She also manages to collect this much),” he answered with a smile.

Gandhi offered the nation a talisman, “Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen, and ask yourself if this step you contemplate is going to be any use to him”. Whose face was Mr Ahluwalia thinking about?

This is the country where even beggars do not count as the poor.

Tall Tales

Aakash Karkare points out the highs and lows of being six-and-a-half-foot tall



It was the first day of junior college. I was apprehensive; I didn't want to be seen or looked at. Perhaps, I would make eye contact with a few people and slowly, make a few friends. Or maybe not. That'd be my decision. I made the walk through the long corridors of R.A. Podar College, confronted by a sea of unknown faces. As I walked into the classroom, all eyes turned to me. All 120 pairs of them. It's difficult not to be noticed when you are six feet six inches tall.

I have always been called a tall person. "The doctors said that you were the biggest baby in the hospital," my mother often says. In school, I was always the tallest person in the class. For photo shoots, I would stand in the back row. During lectures, I would sit at the back of the class. I didn't mind that. The backbenchers were cool and didn't need to bother with the teachers. Most of them were quite tall too, the only difference was that they stopped growing, I never did.

Except this one guy from school. Mihir Patel, was his name. He was called 'Stacy' by everyone in Don Bosco after Stacy Kiebler, the long-legged diva from World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). He got the wrong end of the stick of being tall. I was only called 'lambu' or 'khamba'. Years later I would meet 'Stacy' in Phoenix Mills and find that he was taller than me. "Arrey, tu toh mere se bhi lamba ho gaya." I remember exclaiming.

As a tall person, I am afraid of growing old. My huge frame may burden my knees. My spinal chord may not be able to support my weight. The knees that never fit anywhere, may give way. Tall people, throughout the ages, have died early.

Close to a century ago, in 1918, Robert Wadlow, the tallest man ever recorded in history was born. Barely 22, the eight feet eleven inch American, died from an infectious blister from a faulty brace which he used for his weak knees. To avoid a similar fate, I take to walking. Walking is good for your knees, I've read somewhere.

So, in my ill-fitting jeans sourced from the US by my enterprising mother, I walk through the streets of Mumbai, sticking out like a sore thumb, looking down on my fellow Indians from my vantage point, a foot taller than the average Indian male who stands at five feet and five inches.

In the background, I hear little children shout, "Khali, Khali." (The seven feet one inch WWE wrestler from Punjab) I ignore them and continue walking. A few random college students come up to me and ask, "Are you a Complan boy?" I mumble a feeble "no" in response. Passers by ask, "Height achchi hain. kitne lambe ho?"

"Six foot six," I say almost instantly. On the few occasions that I have actually checked my height, it has oscillated from six foot five to six foot seven. Six feet six is a nice round figure at the centre of those two extremes.

When I was a young boy of 14 or 15, I was already over six feet tall. One of my relatives, Viju Mama, would often say, "Boy, if I'd had your height, the things I'd do." What would he do I'd wonder. Touch ceiling fans? Bang into low branches and other low hanging objects in the street? Not fit in cars, buses, trains and any other form of public or private transport? The mind would boggle.

Sometimes, I think I've seen someone taller than me. My pace quickens to catch up to him and as I pass by, I glance over my shoulder, but more often than not, the chosen candidate will be shorter by a few inches. Some of these people with overactive pituitary glands will strike up conversation. "I'm 6'4", they'll say. And then ask, "How tall are you?"

Their eyes go a little wide and we discuss the usual tall people problems. "How do you fit in airplanes?" The seat near the emergency exit. I'm tired of listening to the stewardess tell me what to do in case of emergency.

Old people are often quite intrigued. They stop and stare. They grin and eventually ask, "You have a great height, young man. Be proud of it. Make use of it," some say.

Once, as I waited at the bus stop, an old man said, "It would be difficult to get you married. Your parents will have to find a tall-enough bride." The observation was bang-on-the-money. The first girl I professed my love to, asked her friends for advice. They said, "Think properly about it. We think he is too tall for you." When the bus arrived, I took my usual seat in the middle of the last seat.

There are only two places I fit comfortably on a bus. I used to think that it was a metaphor for my life. Two loves in my lifetime. Two places where I'll find meaning.

The Blue Pill Parable

In which *Smita Dutta* fights an addiction to Proxyvon, an antispasmodic drug

I would feel like I was floating in space, suspended in a single moment that seemed to last forever. It was as if I was meditating upon each grain of time as it passed through my hands. It was a darkness which was not bound by time and in which only I existed. Somehow when I was under the influence of the drug, the “truth of life” seemed much clearer and acceptable to me.

The answer to “how did it all start” is not only clichéd but also disposable. As in almost all cases, it was a friend of a friend. My friend had described her as “a dopehead from Delhi”. I had never met a junkie before. When I met her, I asked, “What are you doing these days?” She replied, “Spasmo proxys. They are huge in Delhi. Cheap, easy and extremely potent. You want to try some?” I looked at her, rather intrigued. She went on, “It is a pain killer. Basically a prescription drug but it is easy to acquire. It gives you a great trip, you know hallucinations and all.” I nodded, though I had no idea about what these “hallucinations” were. A part of me wanted to take the blue pills; another part resisted the desire. A few days later, I met her again. I told her that I needed an escape. She started laughing and I laughed along with her. I felt that I had found a relief for a deep abyss of pain within me. I was determined to try it out now. I had found my painkiller.

The drug? A prescription pill named “Spasmo Proxyvon”, banned in May 2012 as it contained dextropropoxyphene, which has dangerous side-effects. Before the ban, it was probably one of the most commonly prescribed antispasmodic drugs. Though selling more than four pills without prescription was illegal, larger quantities were easily available.

It was a sweltry May afternoon when I popped four for the first time. Initially I felt nothing but within an hour, I felt energized and extremely happy. Two hours later, I started having hallucinations. My speech was slurred and I could see neon figures dancing in the darkness. They danced to the beat of the pulsating music that I blasted into my ears. Time slowed down and I felt like I was floating in space. I felt I was suspended in the darkness like a weightless feather. The feeling of being alone as well as lonely started settling in. I realised that I was to be forever lonely “within my skin” and so was everybody else. This realisation brought tears to my eyes. Suddenly I was feeling unexplainably depressed and started crying. But the low ended soon. I felt I had hit upon a great revelation. I was so overjoyed, that I started cackling. The numbness which had started from my toes, had spread to my whole body. Soon, I fell into exhausted sleep. This single experience was enough to get me hooked.



Illustration Credit: Smita Dutta

The funny part with any kind of intoxicant is that “the more you take, the more you need”. What had started off as four pills became ten within a matter of days. However, the amount of gratification I felt seemed to decrease every day. What had once been novel had now become “normal” for me. And the normal life I had was lost in the haze of periods of severe ecstasy followed by misery. I carried out my regular activities while existing in a world of slow motion and neon figures. I was never hungry and always exhausted. I started withdrawing from the usual activities I formerly engaged in.

On a rather rainy and overcast day in August, I realised the black hole that I had fallen into. As I stared at the pristine white Victoria Memorial through my bus window, I came to terms with the person I had become. My life was ruled by a lurid blue pill and it was my master. I decided to give up my addiction then and there. But it was not going to be as smooth as I had imagined. As soon as I stopped consuming spasmo proxys I started suffering from severe cramps, insomnia and low blood pressure. Each tissue in my body ached and I constantly felt like I would blackout. I found it difficult to leave home, paranoid that I might faint in the street. It felt as if sleep had abandoned me. I would keep my eyes shut tight praying that I fall asleep. On a good day I managed to get an hour of sleep. I was always exhausted. I was prescribed medicines for low pressure and insomnia, but it was only two months later that I stopped suffering from cramps.

It has been almost three years now since I last saw the “blue pill”. Escaping to the “other plane” once in a while may seem attractive, but it can never be a solution. Soon that plane loses its sheen and one find oneself falling through a deep dark black hole.

The Return of 377

An archaic law is brought back into power. *Abhra Das* joins in the protest against this invasion of Human Rights...

On December 11, 2013, things looked bright for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex Queer (LGBTIQ) community. The Delhi High Court (HC) Judgement seemed to have the magisterium of a well-thought out and progressive court, intent on decriminalising a community that has already suffered much discrimination. However, after the announcement of the Supreme Court (SC) verdict on re-criminalization of homosexuality, there descended a pall of darkness over the members of the community and its supporters. They had gathered at Maheshwari Udyan, King's Circle in Mumbai on the Sunday afternoon of December 15, 2013 to protest.

The general atmosphere of the protest was full of anger towards the archaic law of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which dates back to the 1860s

and penalises anyone who has the audacity to have sex 'against the course of nature.' The whole debate about what is normal and who decides it remains unquestioned.

Nitin Karani, Trustee of Samapathik Trust, Pune raised serious concerns about the law giving

'the corrupt (among the police) licence to harass and blackmail' both LGBTIQ and heterosexual individuals and prosecuting them under this law. He says, "It has raised a big question mark over State funded and/or promoted HIV prevention efforts among highly vulnerable populations such as gay men and hijras, also in the bargain endangering the so-called mainstream population, the common woman and man. Furthermore, the Supreme Court has unwittingly criminalized health professionals such as doctors who might be offering the most basic services to anyone, gay or straight, who might approach them for any issue as a consequence of oral or anal sex.

"I don't think the Supreme Court bench applied its mind while delivering the verdict, not just to the consequences, but to the very validity of the Section under the Indian constitution. It seems as if we are now suddenly in Saudi Arabia or Iran, not in the Republic of

India. Is the SC saying all those who have oral or anal sex should be in jail for life? Imagine if that happens: pre-pubescent children will have to run the country and the rest of us will be behind bars. Maybe that is what the SC is: pre-pubescent children!"

Journalist Vikram Doctor, one of the organizers of Gay Bombay, was shocked. "It is one of the most horrible decisions ever made. I just hope it gets reversed as soon as possible," he said.

Celebrity hairstylist Sapna Bhavnani was profane. Love to her means freedom. She said, "The reason I am here because I think it is f***ing ridiculous that in this day and age we have to deal with some f***ing law that tells you who you have to love."

Actor Bhushan Kulkarni said, "I am here because I am not a criminal. This has offended me the most. My friends say that how does it matter if you have sex in your house? But that is not the question." According to him, if gay sex is called a criminal act, then indirectly the entire LGBTIQ community is being labelled a criminal.

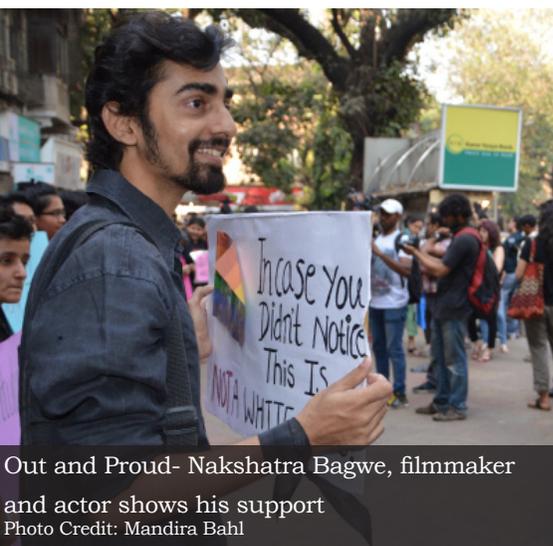
He adds, "We are as responsible citizens as anyone else. Why should I be called a criminal? A crime like rape gets seven years of imprisonment while gay sex between two consensual partners can land you in jail for your entire lifetime."

He was rather happy that the entire movement took a global momentum and people came out to protest across 33 cities all over the world. "I want my voice and everyone else's voice to be heard. The government must notice this."

Rahul, a participant in the protest, was in his inimitable best. With gleaming eyes behind his red aviators and a black ribbon of protest across his neck, he said, "...it seems the society wants to say a lot of things to us which we do not wish to listen. Those who claim that homosexuality is unnatural may not know the meaning of the word 'unnatural'. They must educate themselves first."

Gay rights activist, Harrish Iyer said, "This law gives the state the authority to dictate what you should do in your bedroom with your partner. It is not an 'anti gay' law, so to say, it affects heterosexuals as well... I would wish that the law stays for 'non-consensual' sexual offenses like sexual assaults of genders other than female. It infringes on the basic right to a life with dignity." He posed a question to the society in general, "Aadmi hoon, aadmi se pyaar karta hoon. Tum aadmi ho, aurat se pyar karte ho. (I am a man and love a man. You are a man and you love a woman). I don't have a problem with your sexuality so it is high time that you leave me with my sexuality alone."

The LGBTIQ community has constantly faced stigma over the years. But the historic judgement passed by the Delhi HC which de-criminalized homosexuality



Out and Proud- Nakshatra Bagwe, filmmaker and actor shows his support
Photo Credit: Mandira Bahl

had brought a great wave of change in the social and corporate front. Parmesh Shahani, author and head of Godrej India Colour Lab says, “Companies like Godrej were changing their Human Resource (HR) policies to become more inclusive. You saw many young people coming out with confidence. You saw many parents accepting their LGBT children, because they thought it was okay and not a crime.

“Within the community, a boost of confidence was visible as after the 2009 verdict, they thought that they would finally get recognition as an Indian citizen. The SC has not only reversed the legal process, they also have reversed the huge wave of social change that was happening on the ground.”

However Sherlock Homo from the ‘Gaysi Family’, an online blog about the ‘gay desi’, had a rather optimistic view. She said, “For me, while there is no doubt that the verdict was such a major setback for a country that should be progressing, I feel like such a strong statement against our rights has actually worked towards the advantage of the community. The number of people who have come in support for the LGBTIQ community has been immense, the coverage has been amazing and suddenly people are left wondering if they believe or not in simple human rights. I believe it’s taken the movement into overdrive.”

But it wasn’t only LGBTIQ community members who were present at the protest. Senior journalist with the Times Of India, Bachi Karkaria had a different angle to the entire issue. She said, “I am here because I always been there for the LGBT community long before it had the label of LGBT. It is not one miniscule group, it’s a much larger group than we want to admit to and that they shouldn’t be marginalised.

“Firstly there is the basic question of human rights. Secondly there are all the health and education issues. Today HIV/AIDS is not the kind of problem that it was in the early 90’s. But at that time we realized the absolute danger of driving the problem underground, by not giving access to the AIDS affected community because every group that fell out of the safety net was going to actually increase problems for everybody. It was hence important to draw them into the mainstream of the health network.”

There was a time when Bollywood stereotyped the community in their films. However, in the past few years, the portrayal of homosexuals has changed, even though the number of such movies is small. It was heartening to see Bollywood personalities standing up to show solidarity and support towards the community. Filmmakers Onir, Zoya Akhtar and actors Purab Kohli, Prateik Babbar, Nandita Das and

Celina Jaitely were extremely vocal about their stand on the issue.

Prateik said, “I am here to support the community because I have a lot of friends in the community. Secondly, I think what is passed (judgement) is absolutely disgusting. It is ridiculous to discriminate people in such a fashion. They are human and have emotions just like us. They should be given equal rights to live in peace and harmony.”

On being asked what the Parliament should do now, Prateik said with confidence, “Parliament needs to open their eyes and ears to look around the country and see how many people are hurt by this verdict. And since we are a democracy, they need to act upon it and give people what they want. It’s not much they are asking for. All they are asking for is peace, happiness and harmony.”

Singer Anushka Manchanda felt helpless at the situation. She poignantly put across the fact that, “If I want to sleep with someone else and they want to sleep with me, whether it’s a boy or a girl or whatever the hell...it’s nobody else’s business as long as to both adults are consenting, it doesn’t matter.”

But everything is not as bleak as it sounds. There’s still hope among the people who do not let barriers come in the way of love. By the end of the day, people were seen singing romantic songs and lighting candles as a symbol of hope.

Kenny, a fellow supporter, looking into the shimmering candle light with glistening eyes said, “It is great to see so many people coming to support us. It feels so warm by the end of the day.”

It was heart-warming to talk to a gay couple,

Pallav Pattankar(Director HIV Programs), Harrish Iyer, Hitesh Singh, Charles Williams and Sonal Giani (Advocacy Officer), Humsafar Trust (Left to right)
Photo Credit: Mandira Bahl



who do not wish to be named. They said how the verdict strengthened the bond between them even more. They got committed a few days before the verdict came out. “Now that we have a cause to fight for and also have each-other’s company in these difficult times, we are not afraid of anything.”

One could see a candle was bent due to the heat of other candles standing erect in its vicinity. However, it continued to glow with equal brilliance, perhaps with a hope to remove darkness bit by bit.

Basket Case

Rashmi Mehta explores the lives of the makers of Mumbai's bamboo baskets

The child stares at the looking glass. The other one runs around, playing with thin strips of cut bamboo. Undisturbed, the parents continue weaving bamboo. It takes impeccable hand-eye co-ordination to make a bamboo basket. For most, it has been their profession for more years than they can remember. Younger newly married women in the profession have other interesting stories.

You know that day when you head to the market really early so that it is time for 'boni'—the first money that comes in the day? It is the time you can score a

whose only source of income is the weaving of the baskets. The second: a people who are proud of their skill and their pride is reflected on their faces.

Wardharam Mauvan, fifty plus years of age, and his younger brother Vishnu Masraji, around thirty-five, belong to the first group. Both Mauvan and his brother, along with the entire family live on the road, at a little distance from Bhoiwada Police Station. During the monsoon, storage of bamboo being the biggest issue, they go back to their village in Rajasthan.

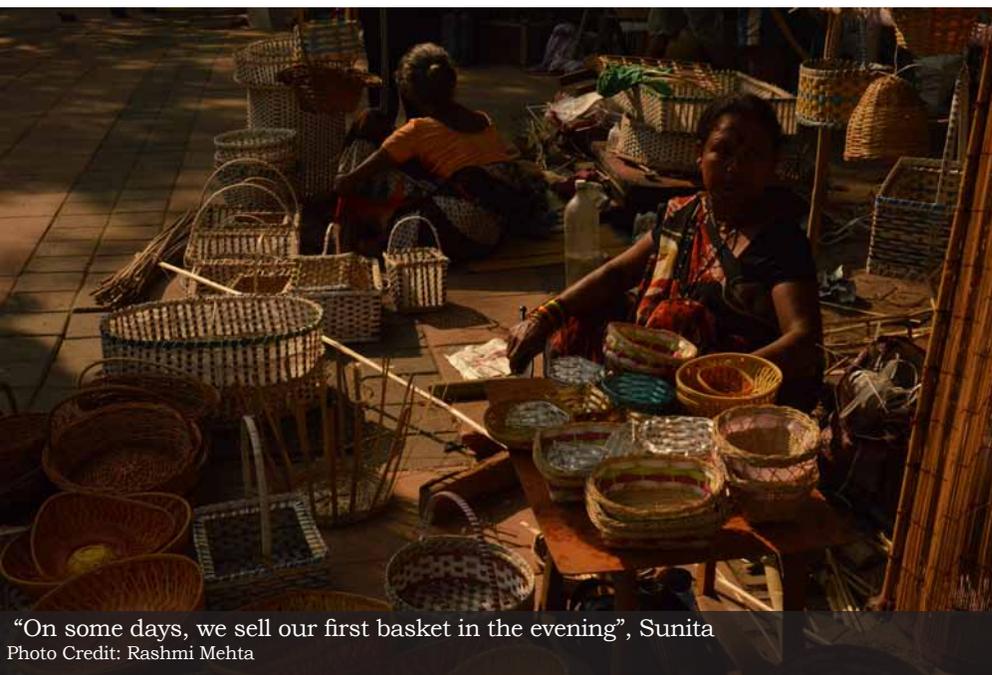
Mauvan sat smiling as he narrated his history and stories from the past: of days when bamboo was cheaper as compared to today, of days when plastic had not infiltrated the market so much. He talked wistfully of days when bamboo was cheaper and when plastic had not infiltrated the market so much. Unable to imagine an alternative profession, Mauvan seemed resigned to his current realities. In a matter of fact way, he says, "Ye kaam toh sab ke bas ki baat nahin hai." (Not everybody can do this job). His face beaming, one can see that sense of self-respect creeping in for a second in the midst of the morose reality of Mumbai street life.

While the adult members of Mauvan's family are occupied in the making of the baskets; some seven little children keep running all around the

place; occupying their attention with broken toys and keeping themselves busy by pulling the strings of the chatai (mat).

Between them, they manage to make seven to eight big baskets a day which they sell for around thirty rupees per basket. The raw material costs around sixty rupees per bunch of bamboo, deducting which they manage to make a profit of about twenty rupees per basket. The bigger baskets, the ones Mauvan makes, are mostly bought by the vegetable sellers.

But they do not want to talk about the math. They want to talk about history. They want to tell you that weaving baskets is something they have been doing since they were little children. They believe that their trade, their legacy, their skill will survive the challenges of the use and throw generation. "Plastic woh nahin kar sakta, jo bamboo kar sakta hai...aap vegetable lo, uska saara paani ye basket se neeche chala jaata hai aur vegetable fresh rehta hai, plastic mein sab sad jayega." (Plastic cannot do what bamboo does. If one buys vegetables and



"On some days, we sell our first basket in the evening", Sunita

Photo Credit: Rashmi Mehta

bargain because the stall-owner or vendor wants to make a sale, wants to please his first customer, wants the first reassuring coins to clink into his dabba. But what if you make a purchase at around seven thirty in the evening and have the seller tell you, with a sad face, "Chutta do na, boni abhich hui hai." (Give me change, I have not earned anything for the day yet). Such an event took place one evening in October 2013, on the streets of Mahim.

The industry of people who have been making these bamboo baskets are the most affected by the increasing entry of plastic. A centuries old indigenous craft, today its practitioners are struggling to earn their livelihood. Although the majority of the bamboo weavers of the city are concentrated in Bhoiwada, some are also spread out in small groups across Mumbai. The art seems to have come into Mumbai from Rajasthan and Karnataka; as most of the basket makers come majorly from either of these two places.

At Bhoiwada, there are two kinds of realities. The first: a group of people from a village in Rajasthan

puts them in a bamboo basket, the excess water will seep into the bamboo and keep the vegetables fresh, while in plastic it will just drain out and the vegetables will rot).

This reality is matched by the one at Mahim. Here, Poornima (reluctant to reveal surname), tells me how difficult it is for them to make one or two baskets and though they prefer to have a bulk order, that rarely happens. Surekha, a lady of almost sixty five who has been selling baskets at Mahim for almost thirty years now complains that everyone buys plastic as they believe it is cheaper, however, one small cane basket costs only thirty rupees without any need of a bargain.

Compared to the sellers in Bhoiwada, there seems less enthusiasm here. The story as far as the finances go, is the same; but the sense of excitement, achievement or pride seems to be hidden, covered with layers of grappling urgent situations and meeting daily necessities.

The little children of the Mauvan family in Bhoiwada play on the road, too young to go to school yet. Back at Mahim, when Surekha's grandson Samir talks to me, he seems to be just like any other child. For him, his school (Victoria High School) is his world. He claims to know how to do the bamboo weaving but his grandmother brushes that off as a joke.

The bamboo weavers who sit at Mahim spend most of their time on the streets. Even the storage of the material is done on the roads. During the rains, they keep it on the footpath in such a way that the roof of the first floor house gives it shelter. The industry thrives on the street and lives off it as well.

Five minutes from where Mauvan's family sits in Bhoiwada, the second reality is encountered. A group of houses with bamboo baskets hung at the door of their house, making it look rather aesthetic come into view. The entire community that lives here comes from Bellary, Karnataka. The square shaped neatly polished tiles shine as Uday Pushpa, almost 27, feeds her children Maggi noodles while watching television. Her younger sister-in-law, Vijay Krishnaveni, almost twenty-two, is busy adjusting the clothes on the rack. They welcomingly invite guests into that small, but beautifully maintained house, complete with a sofa and fan. Compared to the 'living off the road' condition of the Mauvan family, this house looks like a palace. Both of them tell chirpy stories of bamboo weaving.

Drawing each shape with her hand in the air, Krishnaveni excitedly tells me that various types of baskets such as the egg shaped, the chapati shaped, the round, the square, a long oval and chatais (mats) are what they specialize in making. Krishnaveni has spent very little time in this profession. She has a diploma

in spoken English and Computer Studies from her village, but gave up everything to support the profession of her husband's family. Her husband's family has been involved in the profession as a tradition. She says that there have been generations of people involved in the art. She confesses, much later into our conversation that she would love to study again someday but trails off by saying, "Abhi jaisa pati bole, waisa hi..." (I will do as my husband says).

Both Pushpa and Krishnaveni took it up as a challenge to learn the art, which they feel very proud to have mastered in six months. There was no sense of extreme attachment to their work, the sort that is present in people who have been doing this ever since they were young. A sense of achievement, however, was clearly present that they can now make one big basket per hour; and two small ones in the same time.

Krishnaveni adds, "Woh main gaon mein pankha banaati thi na, uske wajah se mujhe seekhne main takleef nahin hua." (I used to make hand fans back in my village, hence I found it easier to pick this up).

Weaving these bamboo baskets is not taught at any institution. Although it requires a high set of pre-requisite skills, it is a form that they have picked up to support their livelihood. However, one wonders if it is a dying industry. The reasons for this may be many; one of the reasons is the preference of other forms of storage over bamboo.

A survey conducted for this article with 50 households shows that plastic is the most preferred, followed by steel. Very few people indulge in buying the bamboo basket and when they do, it is for aesthetic reasons.

On the one hand, buying bamboo seems to be an activity of the rich, making these seems to be an activity of people who have to survive sometimes without selling even one basket. There are many instances where the makers of a product come from the polar opposite economic class compared to the consumers. Yet, if we think again, that usually is the case with a lot of handicraft and artisan work; is it just a reality that we do not notice around us, or have we made ourselves numb to this as well?



"Dont click the baskets and put it in the paper. What if someone copies the shape", Sunita
Photo Credit: Rashmi Mehta

Dressed to Vanish

Ketaki Savnal parses the complex sartorial grammar of a college student in Mumbai

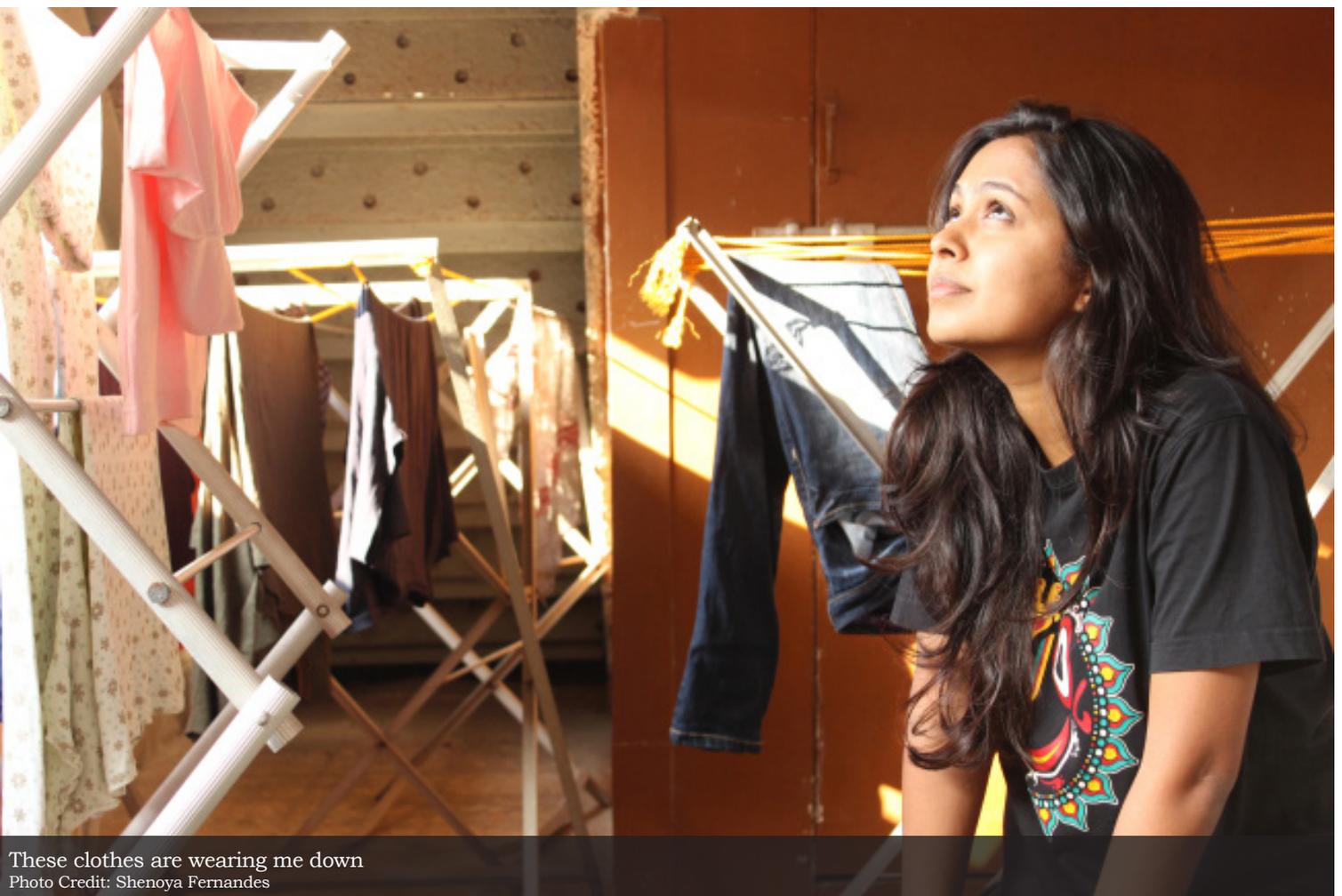
I stand in front of my cupboard at 8 am and blink. I was due in college five minutes ago. In my mind, a complex algorithm predicts the rest of my day and chooses the best possible outfit. I know that I will have to use public transport, take my shoes on and off multiple times outside the studio, endure the Siberian winter in the editing suite and cross the under-the-flyover squatters' home in the dead of the night. A trip to a BMC office or an NGO in Dharavi might be on the cards. Best be prepared. So I throw on my invisibility cloak: a loose kurta, pull on a pair of ubiquitous jeans, wrap a multi-purpose scarf around my neck and slip into a pair of flimsy chappals.

The pressure I face to dress appropriately for social reasons is outweighed by the pressure to avoid unwanted attention in public spheres. I find innovative ways to strike a balance – layers of clothes to hide cleavage, modest scarves to cover bare shoulders. But in an attempt to balance aspiration, tradition and safety, I am forced to ignore my body's persistent weeping at the city's humidity levels. And so my cupboard is divided into two sections – the pristine, ironed pile of

evil, sweat-revealing clothes and the faded, lint-coated pile of sweat-resistant ones.

Shopping, then, becomes an even more elaborate exercise. I navigate the suburbs through which I travel, weaving through an endless stream of sweaty bodies, to find clothes that will be an expression of my identity, yet conform to the laws laid down by this confused metropolitan society. The newspapers say crop tops and short hair are 'in season'. What does that even mean, I wonder. Apples are in season. Even if Mumbai has just two seasons (monsoon and the rest of the year), hair isn't going to grow fast enough for the next season's demands. And a crop top in Mumbai? Really? But everybody else seems to have these resolved these questions for themselves. So I speak to them, to see if it helps me answer some of my own.

Nikita Patil, who is the first woman in her family to attend college, has so far resisted her mother's attempts to buy a pair of jeans for her. Her mother Sangeeta, who works as a domestic helper with a family in Dadar, wanted to transform her daughter into one of the girls who come from



These clothes are wearing me down
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

the families that she works for. The first step was to eliminate the salwar-kameez, which to Sangeeta, pointed at the family's socio-economic roots and was an indication that the sixteen-year-old hasn't moved with the times. Nikita says that she refused to wear jeans because, "Vaya gelili muli jeans ghaaltaat (girls who have bad values wear jeans)".

Chrislyn Lewis lives in Talegaon, a small village on the outskirts of Lonavala. She moved there from a gated community in Andheri to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. Chrislyn wears a salwar-kurta to work every morning, as stipulated by senior doctors. Chrislyn says, "If someone is wearing a sleeveless kurta or one with a low neckline, people immediately think that she is too busy thinking about her clothes to take her career seriously." Chrislyn also says that patients who might not trust their doctor could also possibly not respond to their course of treatment. "I don't want to take that risk. Until I build a reputation, I have to be careful. Basically I can wear jeans only when I'm forty."

The jeans that I reluctantly step into every morning, groaning about how my legs can't breathe, seem to have become a symbol for something greater. If Nikita wears them, she might betray her roots. If Chrislyn does, she might lose her credibility. Conversely, denims might be the ultimate symbol of empowerment for a woman who wants to be seen as "moving with the times".

The kurta is yet another symbol of complex sartorial grammar. Chrislyn reluctantly befriends it, knowing that being in its company will ultimately reflect well on her. Sayalee Karkare, a German teacher, wears only cotton kurtas in a conscious effort to blend in with the average Indian. She explains how the kurta has been dethroned by western clothes, "When we were in college, jeans and a kurta was still okay, because clothing brands were still too expensive. But you don't see kurtas like that anymore. Indian clothes are now only reserved for weddings." At an interview with a lifestyle magazine, Sayalee went dressed as usual. "The person interviewing me told me that I looked very serious, and was worried about whether I would fit in. Maybe it was also because of my spectacles," she muses.

While Sayalee might find that the salwar-kameez offers a sense of anonymity, others feel limited. Preeti Mehta moved from Lokhandwala in Andheri, to Bhilai in Chhattisgarh, to study at an engineering college. She says, "We have a dress code here, to make us engineers accustomed to formal clothing. Also the men are so cheap. It's a rule that your dupatta must cover your chest." Preeti says that she 'hated the clothes at the start' but 'later learnt how to style them'. Having said that, she says, "But somewhere inside, after studying in Mumbai and seeing the way people dress there, and comparing it to what I see here, I hate this."

Perhaps, as Sayalee theorises, the current generation has seen the greatest shift in clothing. Jerry Pinto, author of *Surviving Women*, talks about the change that he has witnessed at Shivaji Park, where one can see three generations of walkers, all dressed differently. "Suddenly the granddaughter is

in Lycra, the daughter is in salwar-kameez and the grandmother is in a sari," he says.

It is then these groups of people, who collide every step of the way in Mumbai, who perhaps create the sense of unease for each other. To avoid people who might show their appreciation or the lack of it, through gestures, language or behaviour that is best avoided, some women have an easy solution: private vehicles. Petrol, for those who can afford it, becomes the price they pay for the freedom to wear what they like.

Sayalee recounts a time when an Italian friend visited her in Mumbai. "She was watching a Bollywood film, when she turned to me and said, 'But I've never seen an Indian woman on the streets dressed like this!' So I took her to Phoenix Mills, where everyone wears what they want, gets into their cars, drives to the place, shops, gets into their cars, and drives out."

Mitali Halbe, a twenty-one-year-old law student living in Thane, drives to her college in Vile Parle. She says, "I usually wear a shirt and loose pants, something that I'm comfortable in." She bristles when teased about owning a car, and says, "If you live in Thane and want to have a functional life, you have to have your own car".

Apart from attracting unwanted attention, the public transport systems pose another problem, although only for a select few. Khushbu Shrivastava, a media student from Borivali, who travels to her college in Grant Road by train and is self-admittedly a cleanliness freak, says, "I don't wear shorts, or a skirt, or even leggings, because I know the trains are dirty. I probably wouldn't give my clothes a second thought if I was traveling by car."

But a lot of other women, for whom private transport is not an option, find safety in numbers. Chrislyn remembers a time when she was studying in Mumbai and would take a train at five in the morning to go to basketball practice. She would wear shorts, the stipulated uniform, only if she was traveling in a group. "Trains are more crowded, so it's still safe," she says. "If I was traveling by bus, it wouldn't be an option." Luckily for Chrislyn, the training ground also had a provision for changing rooms.

But the general fuss around clothes, this need to navigate around tradition, safety, identity and practicality, puts some women off. Is it easier to simply eliminate the need to look good or express oneself through clothing, and label it as a frivolous pastime, for those who have nothing better to do? Will that ease the problem, or is it a form of living in denial?

Khushbu says, "I feel like dressing well is a defense mechanism, to keep people away from you. At some point, it also becomes about a need to look good, because there is nothing else to feel good about. A few years ago, I used to wear clothes that made me invisible, like a plain t-shirt and jeans. I don't do it anymore, but I still avoid clothes that are too flowery or girly."

Some questions might take a little longer to resolve.

What Rs. 100 can do

Men earn and save. Women spend and spend. *Lisha D'souza* meets the women who know the worth of a hundred rupee note

A hundred- rupee note doesn't take you far these days: A one magazine, a cup of coffee or a snack is about all you can get. With rickshaw and cab fares soaring high, it is not a big deal to shell out Rs.100 on commuting in this city. "I spend Rs. 100 everyday only on travel from Bandra to Sophia college (Grant Road)," says Apoorva Rao, student of Social Communications Media, Sophia Polytechnic. Aabida Sheikh, a Bachelor of Mass Media student from Raheja College (Santacruz, West) says, "I don't spend less than Rs. 500 every day only on food and travel."

The issues of domestic violence, harassment by in laws and financial worries are persistent in the lives of a majority of women in our country. A national survey states, almost 31 percent of married women are subject to physical abuse. There could be a number of ways to tackle these issues. You could sit back and leave it to fate, you could hope that things will change someday,

Sumitra who has been a part of the group for the past 15 years. Like Sumitra who earns her living by embroidering, 11 other such women pool in Rs. 100 on the 12th of every month. "The money is of huge help to build houses and to pay school fees, many a times if our bank balance is insufficient we also pool in our own money," says Sumitra. The big boon for these women who make use of the deposited money is the low interest rate, "I took a Rs. 50,000 loan to buy an auto rickshaw for my two sons at 3% interest rate," says Prema Mauriya, member of 'Ramabai' and a fruit vendor.

While such a self-help group has been a blessing for women like Mauriya, disorganization has left the group in a shambles. "Women tend to make a big issue out of every small thing that happens, as a result there is lack of unity in the group," says Prema, who claims to be unaware of the president of the group and the group's bank balance.

'Roshni', another such group in the area faces the same situation. "Hardly anybody attends the meetings nowadays and there are constant internal fights," claims Janaki Kaundal, secretary of the group. While she continued to complain about the other women in the group, one of the accused Mehmuda entered and the decibel levels in the room soon increased making evident the internal disputes of the members. Mehmuda said she forgets about the meetings. When further questioned she added that some of her family members were hospitalized and therefore she couldn't make time.

Janaki, a tailor by profession, went on to add that when the members' absence is questioned, they respond by saying, "I want to leave, give me my money back." Another issue that engulfs these groups is the nonpayment of loans taken from the group's bank account, "There was a lady who took a loan of Rs. 50,000 and left the area after returning Rs. 22,000, we don't know where to look

for her now", says Mauriya. While these self-help groups are faced with their own internal conflicts and worries, some believe that their survival is of utmost importance. "Since we are registered with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, we receive subsidies from the banks on the loans we take," says Shakuntala Vawle, member of 'Pradnya' another such self-help group. The money collected by her group has helped her fund her surgery and the construction of her two room home.

Disorganization and internal conflicts left aside, these women who live on the margins can do wonders with Rs100, and change their life as they have in many cases. More such groups of women could lead to a better future not only of their families but eventually could do a great deal of good for the betterment of the city.



'Sewing her own fate'. Janaki Kaundal, secretary of 'Roshni'
Photo Credit: Lisha D'souza

you could seek help from the police, NGOs, etc. or you could help yourself. This seems to be the motto of the 36 existing women self-help groups in New Babrekar Nagar, Malad West.

So what exactly do these women do that makes them so different? Well to begin with, they have opened their own bank account, exclusively for their use. "We were displaced from Babrekar Nagar in 1997 and thrown here (New Babrekar Nagar, Malad West) where we had no proper water supply and had to walk in knee-deep water every monsoon. Our children had to drop out of school, life was a huge struggle. We then decided to make a committee to empower women," says Sumitra Shyamal, president of the self-help group 'Ramabai'.

"We currently have Rs. 1 Lakh 20 thousand to our name in The State Bank of India," proudly states

Mere Piya Gaye Rangoon

Zulekha Sayyed spends a day dancing with the real stars

“It’s going to be another regular day of documentation,” I thought, as I hauled my camera into the Rangoonwalla Community Centre (RCC) at Subhash Nagar, Jogeshwari. The RCC, that serves as a meeting place and skill-development platform for women from economically vulnerable sections of society, had organised Pratibimb, a festival to encourage these women to sharpen their newly-learned entrepreneurial skills.

As I walked in, my senses reeled with the shrieking laughter of children, the unmistakable tang of mehendi and the lurid shades of an elaborate rangoli. At one stall, a woman sold faux jewelry. Another stall was crowded with people who cheeks bulged with paani puri. A third stall had a woman handing out ice creams to children.

In the middle of all the activity, an odd sight caught my attention. Three aged women, as a part of a dance competition, were putting on a performance that would shame a teenager. All I could think to myself was, “Wow!” After the competition, I went up to the women and struck up a conversation. 73-year-old Sumedha Mahimkar, the lead dancer, was already back to manning her stall, where she was selling snacks that she had cooked herself. Mahimkar’s modaks, chaklis and nariyal wadi were a big success, but her sanjachya polis weren’t selling much, because Mahimkar guessed, “People haven’t seen them before, so they don’t know how to eat them.”

I asked them how at their age, and despite having such difficult lives, they had the energy to dance. Mahimkar said that the adulation she receives after a performance is what keeps her going. “Jab main stage se niche utarti hoon, toh sab log mera haath milate hain, chummi lete hai, acha lagta hai (When I descend from the stage, people shake my hand and kiss my cheeks. It feels good),” she says.

Mahimkar first chanced upon the RCC when she needed to visit a doctor two years ago. The RCC clinic proved to be helpful, and slowly, she began to participate in more activities there, such as the yoga classes. Mahimkar had always wanted to be a dancer, but had never had the opportunity to learn. One day, a teacher at the RCC said, “If you dance, the children will see you and be inspired to join as well!” Mahimkar realised that she had never had to chance to express herself, and that this

would be the ideal way to realise her childhood dream. Since then, Mahimkar has come a long way. When asked if she ever feels shy to dance on stage, she replies with two words, “Shauq hai! (I enjoy it)”.

Ranjana Nag, Mahimkar’s second-in-command, said that she decided to participate in the competition after seeing Mahimkar at the previous year’s performance. She thought, “If she can do this, then so can I!” Nag lives alone and earns her livelihood by selling garlic. After her daughter and four sons got married, they stopped visiting her. Nag says that she doesn’t feel alone anymore because she has found a new family at the RCC.

Sushma Chiplunkar, the third dancer of the group, said she was encouraged by Mahimkar to pursue dance as a hobby. At 66, Chiplunkar says, “We make mischief like children!” Chiplunkar says that the women that she met at the RCC have become her support system.

For these senior citizens, who danced to the Hindi song Satyam Shivam Sundaram, and the Marathi song Navrai Majhi, dancing, even at their age, is the easiest part of the day.

Mahimkar wakes up at 4:30 am every day, to cook for her three sons whom she lives with. After that, she goes to two other households to cook their meals, which is how she earns her money. She insists on finishing her tasks in the morning, so that she has the rest of the day to herself, and to dedicate to her dance.

Mahimkar said that after joining the RCC, she feels empowered and is proud to be a woman. She says, “My life has changed completely. I have become confident, and now I want to make other women just as confident.” After having danced way ahead of the competition, the next thing on Mahimkar’s agenda is to join English classes.



Abhi toh main jawaan hoon
Photo Credit: Sapana Jaiswal

Radio, Women and Power

Abhra Das and Rashmi Mehta chat with some of Mumbai's favourite RJs to understand the power of voice

Mumbai, do you think radio? The greatest link is the human voice. Abhra Das and Rashmi Mehta chat with some of the city's favourite RJs.

"Radio is a woman. It is everything you see and associate with femininity... Radio is a friend. I think there's lots on the radio that seems to reflect the world of women, in some senses at least, the sales, the gossip, the shopping, the useful tips." says RJ Archana Pania, who is currently doing the show *Kasa Kai Mumbai* with RJ Salil Acharya on Radio City 91.1Fm. "And women have responded because radio makes space for them. Women share things on radio, because they hope to be understood; sometimes people at home don't understand them."

Does radio have a gender? Especially, when as Pania says, "...the one name that always comes to mind when we think of radio is Ameen Sayani." If it does, is it the functioning of radio to be gender sensitive? Rohini Ramnathan, who begun her radio career with *Fever 104Fm* in 2006, believes that radio empowers women, "Women on television face the pressure to look good; there is a sexualisation about them...In radio, the pressure to 'look' is suddenly taken away, and all you are left with is what you are saying; and how amazing is that!..."

"The way a majority of Indian culture has been, women have always been seen but not heard; radio flips that on its back and says, 'here is this woman, who is going to be heard but not seen and what she says is going to make some sense.' RJs Malishka and Tarana both, to me exemplify the modern woman, the liberated woman and the intelligent woman. The boldness of Malishka calling up an authority and challenging him cannot take place on any other medium."

RJ Malishka Mendonsa, who does the show

Morning Number One on 93.5 Red FM, was responsible for the 'Pothole Utsav', an initiative by Red FM in 2013 where potholes were worshipped in the presence of the area corporator. It became a huge success. "It was one of the most kickass, relevant, rightly timed stuff that has come out of radio. We researched, went to the Public Works Department (PWD) and fought with the guys and Bajao-ed them. The BMC Commissioner agreed to come to our studio and got barraged. In the end they actually confessed that it's a good thing since it opened eyes," says Malishka.

"Radio is also a platform for one woman, who has the opportunity to speak on the mic, to be able to influence the thoughts of many other women," believes RJ Meera Damji who is currently doing the show *Sunset Samosa* with RJ Suren on Radio Mirchi 98.3Fm. She adds, "Radio is that friend who will never judge you, one you can speak to without any inhibition. I like addressing my women listeners, I want them to stand up for themselves." Meera was working at an Ad agency when she gave her first radio audition, some six years ago.

Just like RJ Meera, RJ Rohini too realized her talent suddenly. She was a part of the organizing team at an event at her college festival when the compere backed out the last minute. "You know the show," the event head told Rohini, "Get out there and do it." She spontaneously hosted an event for a crowd of more than 3000. That is when she realized she could talk to audiences, and rather well.

"The ability to talk to a large faceless crowd and seem as if you are addressing each individual personally may be a skill but it is not the only skill involved," says RJ Rohini, who hosted *Adda* on Red FM and is now in Singapore with Radio Masti 96.3Fm. "People are connected with you for what you are saying and people are only connected with you, if you are making sense," adds Ramnathan, laying extreme importance on the word 'sense'. She credits a lot to the Social Communications Media (SCM) Department of Sophia Polytechnic in Mumbai with giving her that sense, adding that, "Once you are out of there, you know at some level, what the right thing is. So when an issue comes out, you can give a take that is a little more balanced."

But to the faceless crowd, the RJ is also faceless. RJ Rohini narrates an incident when she and a few friends, around five years ago, were casually sitting at a bar (name not specified) in Mumbai. Her friends were a part of a live music performance taking place at the bar. Suddenly, the police entered and announced that the bar did not have the license to hold live performances. Instead of arresting the bar authorities, Rohini's friends were arrested. Rohini went up to the cop and started arguing when he said, "Tum kaun?" (Who are you?) And she replied, "Rohini." His expression changed and he said, "Madame, aap...arre aap ko toh hum radio par bahut sunte hain," (I listen a lot to you on radio) and then he let her friends go eventually.



"Radio, is a woman. It is everything you see and associate with femininity." - RJ Archana Pania
Photo Credit: Roycin D'Souza

RJ Meera had a similar experience when she was trying to reduce verbal and physical sexual harassment of women at train stations. “Men hang out of railway compartments and touch the women who are waiting to enter their compartment. I conducted a survey with four hundred women at Malad station and took it to the National Commission for Women to ensure that the some protection is made. I had attached credibility to me because I am an RJ. People take you more seriously.” This is what RJ Pania means when she says, “You can’t get over a voice.”

But there is also the accusation that an RJ need only talk and talk and the show is done. “People think RJs talk a lot, but then when we break it down to them ... ki hum ek ghante mein sirf dus minute baat karte hai (In an hour we talk only for ten minutes), they say ‘Really?’,” elaborates Pania. It is indeed that regular conversation, that feeling that someone is addressing issues that newspapers or Television news would never do, that makes RJs very special.

RJ Pania adds that radio is not all about excitement. It is about addressing issues in a way that the listeners can understand them and connect with them; and here, she thinks women RJs have cracked the trick. She says, “But women on radio are very important. The listeners identify with women RJs, there is a certain sense of warmth that is present. In the recent Nirbhaya case, I spoke about personal incidents...a man on radio can’t do that. The impact that a woman on radio can have to listeners is a lot. They might get inspired to come and speak out for themselves.”

RJ Meera adds, “I have the power of the mic and I use it to burst myths about filing complaints. I talk to women about filing First Information Reports (FIR) if harassed, about standing up for themselves. Even though most of them have internalized patriarchy, I want them to teach their daughters to be strong women. I use the mic to remind them that they are equally empowered. They need to make a noise if harassed because till we don’t make a noise, nothing will change.”

RJ Rohini’s instinct to always do the right thing also found space for expression in radio. On the morning of 26/11 when all of Mumbai city sat inside their houses because of the terrorist attacks, RJ Rohini decided to go live on radio. Even though she was the only RJ in office, and was joined by her boss later, she ran a live segment from five in the morning to five the evening that day, for twelve whole hours. Her phone encounters with people who had loved ones stuck inside the building under siege, of people who were inside themselves and with the people of the city affected her deeply and made her realize how radio is such an important medium for the city.

Something that is seen as a frivolous medium only of entertainment, has thus crossed various boundaries and proved, more than once, its importance in the city. “The good and the bad part about not being able to give news on radio forces that radio becomes even more localized,” adds Ramnathan. As RJs, these women face the pressure of being relevant to both the CEO of a company and the local vegetable seller. It is their ability to strike the right chords with both, that keeps them in the minds and hearts of every Mumbaikar. But while we talk about women RJs, there are a bunch of extremely good



“In radio, the pressure to ‘look good’ is suddenly taken away, all you are left with is what you are saying.” - RJ Rohini Ramnathan
Photo Credit: Rohini Ramnathan

men RJs in the field today as well.

Pania says, “In a world that is so fake right now, there is so much keemat (value) for honesty, just blatant honesty...and that is what we try to do on radio.” Damji continues from there adding that radio has the power to influence and shape opinions, and that, to her, means a lot. “The fact that we openly talk about sexual harassment stories on-air instead of brushing them under the carpet, means times are changing. If it’s happening in the city and affecting each one of us, we will talk about it,” she says. While most people believe that radio is a part time job, it is a full time commitment. The RJs are connected to their city, to their listeners and to the local news. Yet, they never seem to lose the energy connected to the medium; the excitement of it all stays alive, through varying emotions.

A Dog's Life?

They say every dog has his day. While there are many privileged dogs who have their day in the parlour, there are others who live a dog's life. *Shenoya Fernandes* investigates

It used to be that one only wanted a healthy, happy pet. Now, everyone wants a healthy, happy, well-groomed pet. Poonam Thaval, 31, owner of White Collar, a pet spa at Matunga West, left the corporate world after having worked there for eight years, when she realized she was only following the money and not her passion. She has worked at The Times of India, DNA and Hindustan Times, but she often found herself bored. "I thought of starting a pet spa when I realised I would never get bored of dogs," she says. "I grew up with so many."

With the increasing number of pet spas sprouting in the city, pet hygiene and grooming is easily outsourced. Priyanka Luthra, 31, pet-parent of a Labrador says, "People get their pets to spas as it is convenient, but also because they fall for the luxury factor of it." Pooches are given aromatherapy and even medicated massages depending on their skin type. "Bath and conditioning are important because the Mumbai weather tends to irritate their skin," says Thaval.

But it's not all doggy love. Sometimes 'privileged' dogs are made to wear muzzles and their vocal cords are removed if they bark too much. Shirin Merchant, a dog behaviourist with 18 years of experience says, "Barking is not a problem, it is a symptom of a problem. I work with the behavioural reasons behind the barking, and try to change the environment so the root cause of the behaviour is removed. For example, if a dog is barking at other dogs because he is frightened of them, I work on reducing the fear. Once the fear is gone, the barking goes too."

'Guardians' as In Defence of Animals (IDA) likes to call owners, can also get things wrong. Too much love can cause problems too. In one incident, a cocker

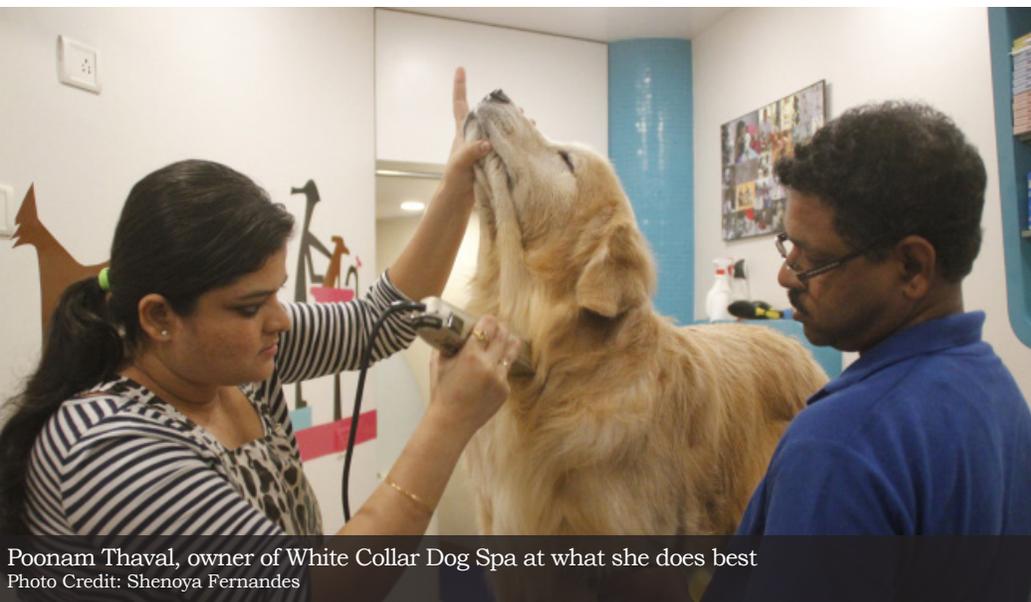
spaniel broke her back, because she slipped in the shoes her guardian insisted on putting on her paws when they went for a walk. The shoes simply did not allow her paws to do their work and she ended up with a dislocated spine. Naina Athale, 55, managing committee member, IDA, says, "Unless there is an absolute need for clothing (extreme cold conditions or on the vet's request) I feel 'dressing up' a dog is a silly fancy of the guardian's and quite unnecessary, even at times dangerous."

With the growing number of animal NGOs, dog lovers and animal activists, stray dogs seem to be in better shape than 'privileged' dogs. Aaron Patrick D'silva, 25, a canine behaviourist, spotted a female dog howling in pain at Borivali station at 1 am in September 2013. He said, "I was shocked at the state in which she had those pups. A month later, the tails of the five pups were chopped off. They were too young to go have to undergo this brutal treatment."

D'silva didn't take the mother and pups home. He doesn't think such 'adoptions' work and believes instead, that stray dogs prefer to be on the road. "They cannot be rehabilitated to a human house if they have lived for long on the road. Like all other animals, dogs too learn their behaviour from their mothers and if a dog has been brought up on the street, it can often find it difficult to adapt to an apartment." But Poonam Thaval, who also volunteers at Welfare of Stray Dogs (WSD) and Youth Organisation in Defence of Animals (YODA) encourages families to adopt strays and has special discounted rates when a stray walks into her spa. She goes all out to help the homeless.

Over the years, people have become more passionate about strays. A couple residing in a slum area around Matunga, who have a tough time fending for themselves, bring their stray dog, Tingya, to a spa during Diwali and on their birthdays. In fact by February 2014, you will see the strays of Shivaji Park all shaven and ready for the summer. Thaval and her business partner Prashant Pallath, have taken this initiative, to prevent skin infection and reduce fleas.

The unconditional love that you receive from a dog, be it a breed or a stray, is something you cannot get from anybody else. Naina Athale adds to this, "Human relationships are based on a 'give and take' equation. Due to this, there are expectations and sometimes disappointments: ups and downs, extreme attachments and distances. With dogs, it is a simple equation.



Poonam Thaval, owner of White Collar Dog Spa at what she does best
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

There is just love and that is peaceful and is an anchor in the turbulent waters of human relationships.”

Abodh Aras, 42, Chief Executive Officer at Welfare of Stray Dogs, comments, “There are so many strays. I share a long-term relationship with them. So when they pass away, most of the time, a part of me dies with them.” For those who are fond of strays, a short documentary on two stray dogs, ‘Malli and Chikki’ by Uma Chordia, is worth a watch. The film shows how affectionate, warm and loyal the Indian dog is. “When we no more talk of caste and creed, should we really care about their breed?” the film asks. By the the end of the film, you will probably want to bring one home.

Indeed, strays are fun-loving animals. If you run on the road, they’ll run after you. Have you ever wondered why strays run after cars and bark at them? Abodh Aras explains, “Dogs have evolved from wolves and so they have a chasing instinct. Hence, they like running after something that runs outside their territory. If the car stops, the dog stops running after it too.” Different people have different perceptions about this. Rahul Kakar, an avid dog lover says, “Dogs run after cars because they develop hatred for cars as they run over dogs which leaves them seriously injured or even causes them to die.”

A minor percentage of people actually dislike dogs and some of them can descend to unimaginably low levels, pelting stones and cutting tails at strays, or hurting them during religious celebrations. Abodh Aras believes that “cruelty stems from ignorance”. He says, “Dogs are just like humans. They are a part and parcel of the urban environment and have the right to share space that we live in. WSD strives to break the myth about dogs, educate people about how to be kind to animals, tell children that dogs don’t bite unless you provoke them. Children and people are open to change.”

But not everybody will accept Aras’ belief. When asked why she dislikes dogs, Mitali Puthli, 21, SCM student says, “I don’t like their wet wet tongue all over me.” Sapna Rao, 28, senior executive at Lodha, says, “They bark a lot. In the middle of the night, they disturb my sleep.” Shraddha Amin says, “They are unpredictable. They suddenly run after you.” Shannon D’souza, 19, student of St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai says, “When I walk on the road, I see poop everywhere.”

All this talk about dogs reminds one of Charlie Chaplin’s film, ‘A Dog’s Life’. Chaplin, in his usual state of abject poverty, brings home a female dog who had been attacked by other strays. Together, they struggle to live in the city; stealing sausages and getting kicked out of bars they cannot afford. Back home, the dog digs up a money-filled wallet which had been buried by some crooks and in the end, all’s well. Charlie, Edna (his love interest) and the dog live happily ever after. You never know, a dog might bring you luck as well. To know for sure, get pooched!

You’d be surprised to know much lighter your pockets would be after a trip to the pooch parlour as compared to a human one!

Men’s expenditure (Standard rates)

Shaving	Rs 20
Haircut	Rs 40
Oil head massage	Rs 30

Women’s expenditure (Standard rates)

Haircut	Rs 150 onwards
Manicure and Pedicure	Rs 300
Massage	Rs 500

Pooches’ expenditure

Bathing, haircut, Cleaning of Nails, ears and private areas at White Collar, Matunga (W)

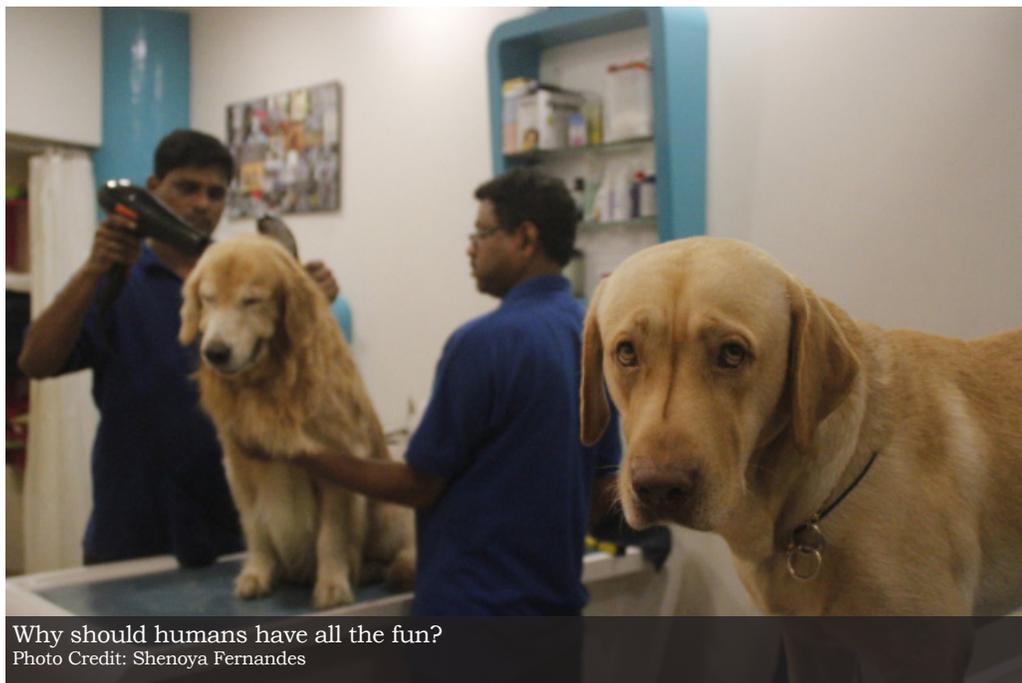
S Dog	Rs 1600
M Dog	Rs 1800
L Dog	Rs 2000
XL Dog	Rs 2200
Strays	Rs 500

Bathing, haircut, Cleaning of Nails, ears and private areas at Shake Hands, Tardeo Rs 1600

Bathing, haircut, Cleaning of Nails, ears and private areas at home by freelancers Rs 1200

for each session.

With inputs by Abhra Das



Why should humans have all the fun?
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

To Pee or Not to pee

Nehal Jain takes a tour of the public toilets in Mumbai

A fluorescent-lit entrance. A narrow corridor. You enter. A man sits on the desk near the entrance. The stench of ammonia hits you and scrunch your nose. You go up to the man and see a sign posted on the wall above his head. It reads: No.1- Rs 2, No. 2- Rs 3, Bath- Rs 10.

It is an emergency. There is no other choice. Luckily, you only have to pee. You move towards the one of the two toilets that is available for 'Ladies'. A voice rings out, "Paisa deke jao." (Give the money and then go.) This is a much-repeated phrase by Saifuddin Sadhu Seth, who has worked as the caretaker of the public toilet outside of Dadar station since its start in 2005.

There is no dearth of public toilets in Mumbai. There is one in every train station. And usually one on either side of the station. It is the infrastructure that is faulty. The absence of water and proper lighting are the elements that create the image of "unclean". An example of this is the public toilet at Santa Cruz station. The caretaker for the past three months, Baloo Mohar, says, "There has been no water for the past fifteen days. The Ladies toilet has a lock on it so that men cannot use it. I cannot keep an eye on both Ladies and Gents entrances as they are opposite each other."

If you're a woman, you will then have to ask for the keys to the Ladies Toilet. Mohar asks you to follow him to the Ladies Toilet. He unlocks the door and lets you enter to do your business.

It is a tiny space that allows for hardly any movement and a door latch that could fall apart with a single shove. All of this happens only on one condition: the man 'guarding' the toilet has to be present there at all times.

Sweta Kadam, a 40-year-old mother of two, says, "I used the toilet for the first time, and it was good. I managed to find one in time. It was clean too, which I was not expecting." All of these toilets have a cleaner who regularly washes the bathrooms and checks them. Seth says, "The toilets here are cleaned every three hours or so, and there are two cleaners hired for this toilet." It is only due to lack of water supply that toilets have been given the status of 'dirty'.

This erratic supply of water from Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) creates a dire condition of toilets which is repeatedly seen spread across Mumbai, especially in those that have been constructed on the railway platforms. And also the ones near railway stations.

Amazingly, this quality seems to be absent from toilets in parks near high-rises, where, let us face it, there is really no need for a toilet. Nihilal Mundla, one such caretaker in Thakur Village, Kandivali, says so. "This toilet is not needed so much, it is a residential area and there are many good restaurants here, people usually use those." The ratio of toilets in this shauchalaya is 7:1, with there being 14 toilets and bathrooms for men, and only two for women.

Prachi Sawant, aged 37, travels from Jogeshwari to Churchgate and back every weekday. She says, "I take

precautions and leave office or home, you know, go to the toilet before leaving. But in dire situations, you have to go, and so I use the shauchalaya at the station. You can't expect clean toilets everywhere." Contingency plans have to be made beforehand itself.

"It is easier to hold it in rather than go to the bathroom which is dirty," says Ila Bhatt, a 60-year-old diabetic retired teacher, who spent 32 years travelling in the Ladies compartment in the Western railways. "I search for a nice hotel or a hospital in really bad cases. Otherwise, I hold it until I reach home," she adds.

This is for a traveller within trains. For the ladies who sell their wares in railway stations, it is worse. Lakshmi Kodam, 50, sells sanitary napkins on the Western railway line and has to go pee in "an open space that I can find, usually near Malad, where there is one next to the station."

There are many women who echo this statement, another being Sita Jadav, a 40 year old woman who sells home-made farsan on the train. "I have gotten used to it actually. I only go to the bathroom twice a day."

Aparna Rethke, 22, who sells hairclips on the train, prefers to use the bathroom at home. "My route is from Mahim to Ville Parle. I do not feel like using the station bathroom as it is dirty." When asked which toilet she visited that she found unclean, she said, "I have heard that it is dirty, I have not used one myself."

The general consensus that the public holds is that the public toilets are dirty and grimy, but that is only due to the lack of water and light in many cases. For this outlook to be changed, infrastructure needs to be improved. Women should be able to use a service that has been provided for them by the city.

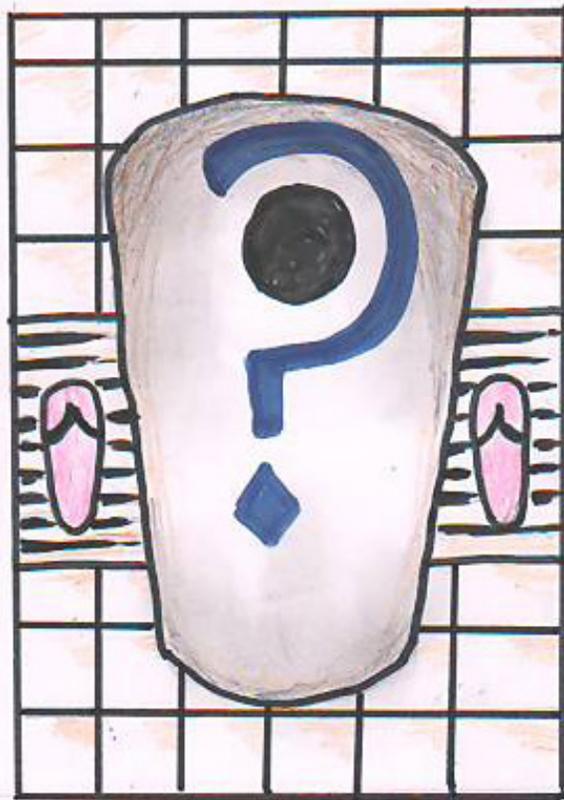


Illustration Credits: Madhurima Chatterjee

Happily Divorced?

Khushbu Shrivastava wonders whither marriage

Actor Kangana Ranaut set the cat among the pigeons when she aired her views on marriage, “People who get married need to go to a psychiatrist. Even if people are married, a legal contract to possess someone’s body and soul is so needed.”

For decades, Indians believed that divorce was not an option.

Forty-seven year old Niraj Voralia, was only four years old when his parents separated. A professional film editor today, he says that his greatest takeaway from the experience of growing up with divorced parents is that he doesn’t believe in forcing a relationship. He himself is divorced and has a thirteen-year-old daughter. While his wife went on to get married again, the two of them still remain good friends. In fact he attended his ex-wife’s second wedding along with his girlfriend.

He says, “When my father and mother separated, I did not see him [my father] for four years. After that we did keep in touch, but things weren’t like before. Of course I wanted them to reconcile, but I also knew that it was not possible. Both of them eventually remarried. While my mother’s second marriage did not last, my father is still wedded to his second wife and has two kids with her.”

Remembering the growing years he says, “But there was never any bitterness or resentment on my part towards either of them. My mother never made me feel like I was missing out on anything, or that I was disadvantaged because I did not live with my father. However, whether it was living with my mother or staying at a boarding school in Rajkot, I remember that I used to miss my father a lot.”

In hindsight, he says that given the contradicting personalities of his parents, separation was perhaps inevitable. He feels that they were better off divorced and happy rather than married and resentful.

Dr. Brenda Fernandes, Head of the Department of Psychology at St. Xavier’s College is also a practicing marriage counsellor. She says that a marriage may only look irreparable; it may well have many things going for it, “I have been counselling warring couples for twelve years and most of them have decided to not go through with the divorce, most of them end up staying together.

“However the reason for their reconciliation is not that they want to work on their marriage, but simply because getting a divorce would be too expensive, especially for the man. So they are stuck in an unhappy marriage. The couples are clearly not in love and probably don’t even like each other. I have seen so many situations in which the husband and wife both are cheating on each other, they are both aware of it and still continue to stay together.”

Twenty-one-year-old student, Sargam Merchant talks about her parents’ fights: “Yes they did scare me, I mean to see the two people who mean everything to you argue, yell and cry every night is very traumatising. I felt angry and frustrated. I thought: Why me? Why our family?”

My dad worked in an multi-national corporation and he got transferred very often. Since my brother and I were small and we were already in sa good school, my mom did not want to move. My dad started being away a lot. The fights and arguments increased as I grew up and came to a stage where things were not resolvable anymore. There was too much bitterness and frustration.

I was fifteen when my dad moved out. But even before the actual move, I felt like my parents were separated already. I wasn’t very surprised; in fact I was expecting it. By then I was old enough to understand that it was not going to

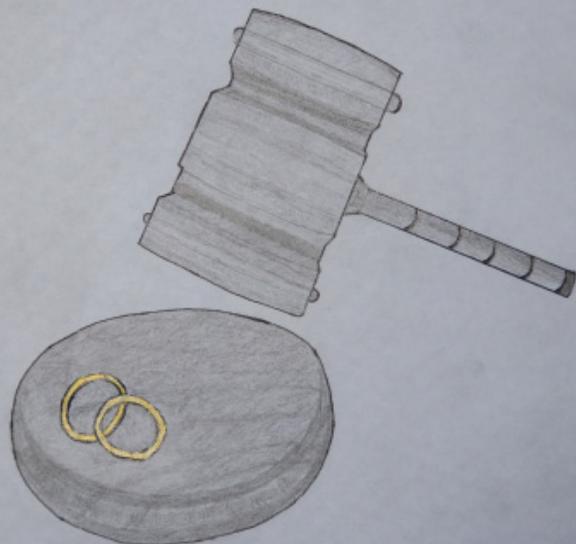


Illustration Credit: Varun Sinha

work out and sooner or later they would have to separate.”

About her own view on marriage and commitment she says, “In my teenage years I had a lot of doubts and fear in my mind, I had this feeling that I would never be able to last in a relationship with someone. I think I still have this fear of being left or abandoned by the one I love. However I do believe that marriage is a beautiful institution, it is a lot of work and involves trying times, but that doesn’t discourage me.”

Divorce or no divorce, the emotional security of children who live through their parents’ unhappy, dysfunctional marriages is hardly ever up for discussion. Where do these children go to for help? Who do they turn to? Whether an unhappy couple stays together “for the sake of their children” and continue to have fights, or whether they choose to divorce and find happiness as individuals – the impact on their child cannot be underestimated.

Gangmen of Railwaypur

They keep the circulatory systems of the city going. *Loyola Rodrigues* and *Juhika Desai* meet the railway trackmen



Tracks ki thad thad mein
Photo Credit: Loyola Rodrigues

When Kamalprasad Ramparosh says that he came to Mumbai and began to work as a gangman because he didn't know what else to do and had no educational qualifications, he doesn't mean he joined a gang and began shooting people. What the fifty-three-year-old was doing was looking after the railway lines, the actual metal tracks on which the trains of the city run. And he wasn't even paid much to do it in those days. "I was paid nine rupees a month in the earlier days," he says. Today, the gangmen are also called trackmen. Whatever the weather, they must walk up and down the tracks, making sure that all is well with the lines that keep the city running.

You've probably seen them if you've looked out of the train at the right time. They're standing at the edge of the rails as your train thunders by. Some of them are wearing the bright orange jackets that are supposed to make them visible from a distance. When two trains pass by in opposing directions, they must physically squat between the lines and hope for the best. In the past four years, 139 trackmen have died on the three lines—two Central lines and the Western line—that service the city.

The engineering department of the railways starts at the basic level of trackmen. "You have to be at least twelfth standard pass," says a senior official of the Central Railway, who did not wish to be named. "However there are even graduates who apply for this post." You can go on to become a senior trackman, and then a Mate (or muqaddam) and then a junior engineer and then a senior

section engineer. The railways have internal examinations and a trackman may apply to sit and improve his position. "But promotions are hard to come by," says another trackman who did not wish to be named. "You can wait for ten years before your turn comes." They do agree that a trackman can become a senior trackman quickly. But even a senior trackman must walk the tracks and keep an eye out for danger.

Tracks are subject to metal fatigue. They bake through the

noon-day heat of May and get chilly in December nights. In the months of June and July, the tracks may spend days under water and chances of rusting increase exponentially. With trains passing over them, overcrowded trains that are overweight, the tracks can crack and this might lead to an accident. That's where your gangmen come in. One of the senior railway officials says, "The job of maintaining tracks is 50 -70 per cent mechanised, but the rest has to be done by someone actually walking the line."

The railways do plan on mechanising the entire process but they're not sure whether there will ever come a time when the job can be manual labour free. "The machines themselves are very heavy and need two or three men to lift them up and put them on the tracks," says Ramesh Yadav, who works as a trolleyman. A trolleyman takes the junior engineers down the tracks in those dinky little carriages with two or three people aboard that sometimes rush past you while you're standing on the station platform.

A new trackman is sent for a training of 10 days within two to three months of joining. Whenever a new person joins the workforce, he is taught how to walk on tracks with the equipment by the junior engineer or by the trackmen who are already working there. One or two people are allotted for taking the safety measures, whistling to signify the approach of a train, showing the flag, assisting the mate and providing water to the ones who are working. Sixty to seventy men operate under one mate. Each unit has a mate/muqaddam and a junior engineer to monitor the trackmen daily. The section engineer and the senior section engineer

monitor their work every two to three days.

According to Dattu Kishan Nimbalkar, a trackman who works in Thane, “Our day starts at eight o’clock in the morning. I work as a trolley man and I am allotted a location to work. I have been working over here for the last thirty years, out of which I was temporary for ten years. Whenever we leave our house, we are not sure if we’ll come back home in the evening. There’s always a fear of losing our lives.”

The railway authorities provide the trackmen with radium jackets to wear at night so that they can be visible while they work, along with shoes, gloves and helmets. In spite of the safety measures many trackmen lose their lives while they work on the tracks.

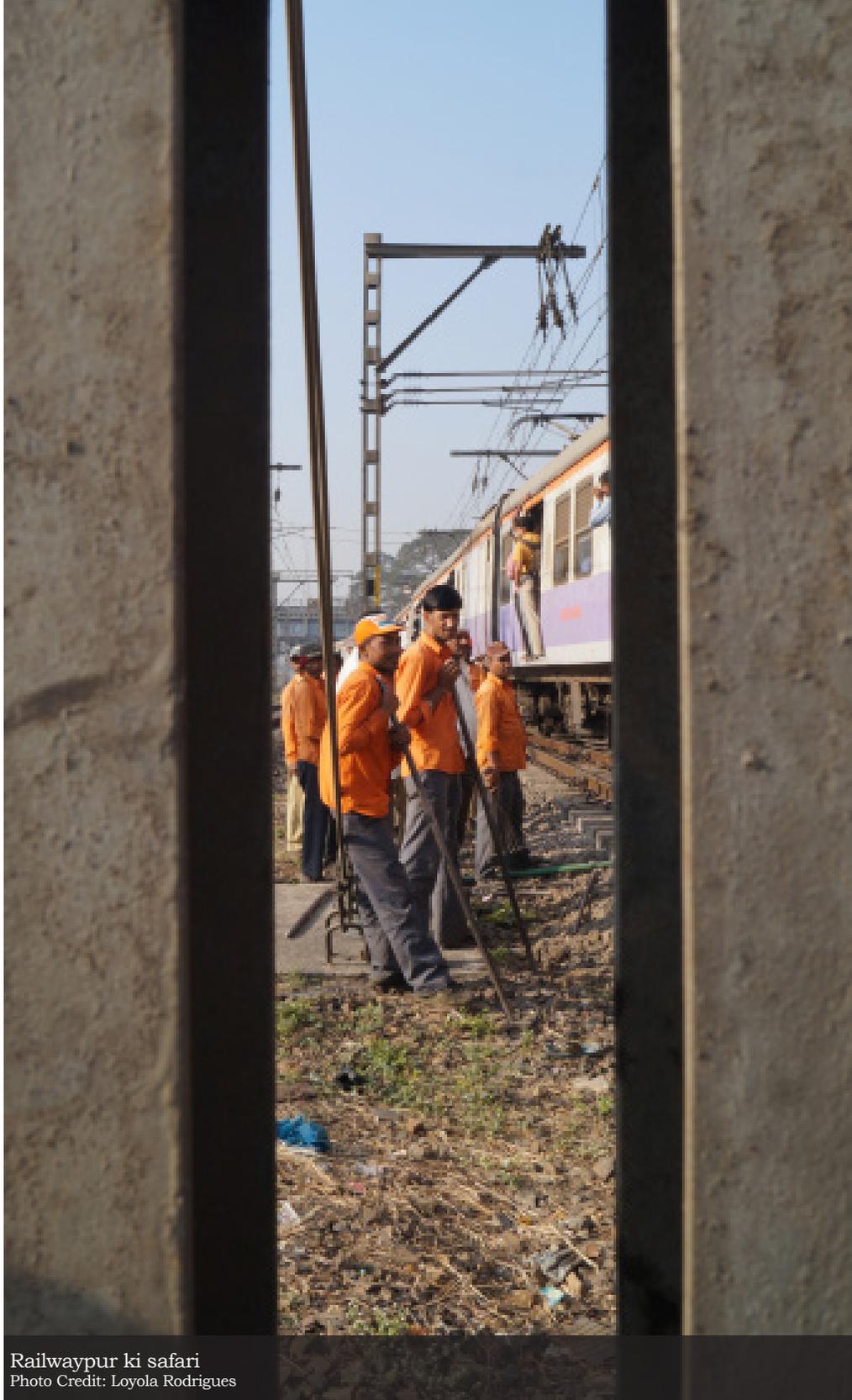
“We feel bad for the motormen so we turn off our torches because the flash can hurt their eyes. And they turn off their headlights because they know that the glare can blind us. But if they forget their horns, they can cut down one or two of us without meaning too,” says another trackman.

The trackmen are paid a salary that starts at Rs. 5200, which increases by Rs. 250 over the time. With experience it can go up to Rs. 20,000. One of the gang men who now works as an announcer says, “Gangmen are not paid any type of overtime. Since their work involves physical labour, they are given a holiday the next day to rest.” If it’s only one or two hours extra they don’t get the holiday.

In spite of doing laborious work and having a low salary, they don’t compromise on their aspirations. According to Shailendar Singh, a trackman, “I have an eight month old daughter and I want her to be a pilot. I have already started planning her future. Standing on the tracks watching all the planes fly over my head while I work, I dream about my daughter flying one of those planes.”

A senior railway official said, “Initially, educated people didn’t come into the tracks, so people living in nearby villages were recruited. They continued to work for a long time. Since local labour is the best labour, we preferred them.” If a trackman has worked for thirty years or more, one of his children can be recruited for the post. He’ll get a job within three to four months of intimation. Educated people can get promotion after working there to four years. They have to appear for a departmental entrance exam which is only for railway employees.

Madhavswami Suryanarayan, who works as a carpenter and repairs the tracks, says, “We are the



Railwaypur ki safari
Photo Credit: Loyola Rodrigues

people who do most of the hard work and still we are the ones who have to listen to people’s dirty talks and comments. People from the train spit on us while we wait between the tracks and the train passes. The water from the toilets of the trains also falls on us sometimes.”

In case of injuries they are issued a memo and are given a day or two to rest. “If you want the memo to be issued, blood should ooze out of your body. When I got injured while working, I injured myself a bit more so that I could get a day to rest,” says Singh.

The next time you complain about the trains, think about the men who keep them working. They pay for their leisure in blood.

Cop Out

Cryelle attempts to fix society, but ends up in a fix herself

India Fights Back, Crime Patrol, CID: my family watches it all. After watching these shows for so long, I felt so greatly inspired by them, that I decided to stand up against the evil that I would find in society and fight it.

It was Gokulashtami, a day of festivity. For SCM students, days of rest come few and far apart, and I decided to spend the afternoon finishing my photography assignment and asked my niece Simone Shetty to accompany me. I knew we had to be careful, because there would be revelers on the streets. So we headed to Worli Seaface and planned to finish before sunset.

We reached the park at Worli, and sat on a small bench facing the sea. Two men sitting near us, kept trying to enter my frame. I asked, “Aap ko koi problem hai? (Is there a problem?)” to which he replied, “Nahin hum kuch nahin kar rahe hai. (No, I wasn’t doing anything.)” All they did was to shift an inch or so. I didn’t ask again.

I was so absorbed in my exercise, Simone said in a frightened voice, “Cryelle, I think that man is clicking photographs of us on his phone.” I went up and asked if they had taken a photograph of us. They said, “Nahin toh, dheko, aap check kar sakte ho. (Not at all, here, you can check.)” He thought I wouldn’t check his phone, but to his surprise I snatched the phone from his hand.

I found that he had clicked several pictures of us, as well as of other ladies in the park, without any of them noticing. When I asked him about it, he said, “Nahi woh toh galti se phone ka button dab gaya, (It was a mistake),” I sternly asked, “Aur galti se itne sare photo bhi kheech gaye? (Was it by mistake that all these photographs were taken?)” He didn’t know what to say so instead he said, “Maaf kar do galti ho gayi (Forgive me, it was a mistake)”.

While saying this he was trying to get closer and closer. I shouted, “Peeche khade hoke baat kijeye. Aap chalo police station (Stand back. Come to the police station.)” and started walking out of the park with his phone. At the words ‘police station’, the man ran away. A small boy came up to me and said that he saw the man, along with five of his friends, jump

over the boundary wall.

Simone wanted to go home as she was scared. I kept trying to convince her that it would be it have been wrong to give up.

I decided that the right thing to do was to go to the nearest police station and lodge a First Information Report (FIR). With great difficulty, we found our way through the small lanes of Worli Koliwada and reached the police station. On reaching the police station, we saw the policemen sitting outside their tiny office, watching the local boys from the traditional Gokulashtami ‘human pyramid’ for the dahi handi celebrations. They told me that they couldn’t lodge my complaint because the Seaface area was under the jurisdiction of Worli Police station and I should go there. I was irritated, but my conviction didn’t waver.

I thought of dropping Simone home and then going to the police station, because it was getting late and I was getting calls from home, asking where I was. But then I realised she was a witness, so I dragged her along. When I finally told my family where I was, they started panicking and ordered me to return home at once. I refused.

At Worli Police Station, the officer told me to take the sub-officer to the location where it happened. I couldn’t understand the importance of returning to the park, I knew we wouldn’t find anyone there. When we reached, he turned to me and said, “Yahaan koi nahi hai, bhag gaye lagta hai (There isn’t anyone here, seems like they ran away).” I began to say to myself, “Wow! Like they would still be sitting here, waiting for you to come and catch them.”

He took us back to the station to get the complaint lodged. Half an hour later, the officer at the table rustled through a fat, dusty book. After searching for 15 minutes, he asked his senior officer, “Hey complaint kutliya section khali lodge karu? (Which section do I lodge the complaint under?)” and the senior said, “Harassmentchya khali takh (Put it under harassment)”.

Finally the complaint was lodged. When I reached home I was scolded badly, very badly because I had acted brave. But I still wondered why. Why did we watch shows like India Fights Back, Crime Patrol and CID if we weren’t suppose to fight the wrong in the society?



Fought It Right
Photo Credit: Shenoya Fernandes

Meet the Music Makers

Sharvari Prabhu meets the makers of the sweet melodious sounds...

TABLA

Dha Dhin Dhin Dha, Dha Tin Tin Dha' is one of the common bols (words) of the tabla, an instrument synonymous with Ustad Zakir Hussain. "Around 200-250 years ago, an Indian instrument called pakhawaj was split into two pieces and the tabla and the dagga were formed," says Suresh Chavhan, the owner of the shop Damodardas Govardhandas, a tabla shop at Lalbaug, Mumbai, the very place Hussain purchases his tablas. Chavhan has been making rhythm instruments like the tabla, dagga, dholki and pakhawaj for more than 35 years. The tabla and the dagga are paired and played together.

The tabla is made either of forest wood (jungli lakud) or sesame wood which is delivered to Mumbai from Delhi. The dagga is pot of brass, copper and steel. Its price and the quality vary. The dagga is played as an accompaniment for resonance.

The upper empty part of both the tabla and the dagga is called 'pudi'. After the buffalo calf leather is placed on the upper opening of the tabla, it is called 'pudhi'. Then the tabla is wrapped in wood and tied with ropes. The thin layer of 'pudhi' is cut into a round shape of a particular size according to the five black notes (sharp and flat) of a harmonium. If the cut is five inches, it is C sharp (kali ek) note; if it is 5.15 inches it is D flat (kali donn); the 6.45, 6 and 5.30 inches are for kali three, four and five respectively.

Once this layer is cut, it is taken to another room where the women in the Chavhan family fill this portion with black iron powder. This is then mixed with semolina (kneaded with water) and a venomous powder called 'mortoku' is added to give it a strong bluish-green colour. The entire mixture is soaked in water overnight. After the water is drained out, the thick substance formed is again mixed with iron powder and rubbed into the round portion on the 'pudhi' cut earlier. The tabla is dried for two hours. Once it dries, it is rubbed with a stone. The dagga is made in the same way as the tabla. It takes around three hours to make a tabla.

Mr. Chavhan says, "My shop has no other competitors. The number of people who work in this field have drastically reduced owing to education and availability of several opportunities." He believes that making the tabla is an art which includes science. This is a tedious job and requires a lot of knowledge, intelligence and patience. He also aspires to start a workshop for the economically backward section of society so that they can earn their living and keep the tabla speaking its bols.

BANSURI

The west has its own myths about the flute. What was the Great God Pan doing, down in the reeds by the river? Spreading ruin, scattering ban, and frightening Syrinx, a nymph, into turning into a reed. That was when Pan—who lends his name to panic—plucked her, cut holes in her and turned her into the world's first flute.

Anand Dhotre, a 40-year-old flute maker from

Mumbai, has no such illusions. He thinks it might have been a much more organic process. "Perhaps it was insects like termites in the forest which carved holes in bamboo. When the wind blew through these holes it produced sweet sounds, the pure sur (notes). These bamboo sticks with holes were the inspiration for the musical instrument. Look at the fundamental instrument: it is a thing of great simplicity. It is a bamboo pipe with six or seven holes drilled on it.

"A lot of concentration, precision, patience and hard work go into making it manually; it can neither be repaired nor can it be tuned unlike other instruments," says Dhotre.

He has inherited the art of making flutes from his father, Ramchandra Dhotre. "My father was a renowned flute maker himself. I started making flutes professionally when I was in the eighth grade. I remember being shouted at and beaten up several times when I used to break flute in the process of punching holes in it. I used to apply unnecessary force and pressure on the flute with a hot iron rod. There was a time when I was interested in computers and took odd jobs. However I soon realized that making flutes was my passion," says Dhotre.

Chinchor, a type of bamboo found wild in Assam, is used to make flutes. Only straight bamboos which are three to four years old with certain dimensions are used. However once the bamboo sticks are sorted and selected they need to be seasoned with anti-pesticides and dried in the sun for three to four years. Then the holes are carved. It takes around three full days to make a flute.



Hold your breath
Photo Credit: Rasika Patil

The Man with the Pom Poms

Prarthana Uppal meets the men who put the I in idli

The idliwala blows his unique horn to signal his arrival in the neighbourhood. On his head, he precariously balances a large aluminium vessel with idlis stuffed inside, smaller stainless steel containers oozing chutney and sambhar, and a heap of paper plates, all fastened together with a thick rubber band.

15 by 15 foot houses go from dark to glowing as the work starts at four in the morning. Inside, men and women worship a gigantic aluminium steamer, and light up their stoves in order to satisfy the hunger Mumbai's extensive workforce.

By 4 am, the men put the idli batter, made from fermented rice and urad dal, into metal moulds lined with plastic sheets, that allow them to be slipped out effortlessly once cooked. Each steamer contains three tray moulds at once, steaming 100 idlis at a time. While the idlis are being prepared, the men work on making the delicious coconut chutney and sambhar to serve along with the hot, steaming idlis.

Most idliwalas are from Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Since the making and selling of idlis is primarily a man's job, the women of Dharavi pick men from Tamil Nadu's villages, rather than city boys, who can help out with the family business. Most of them came in search of jobs and resorted to idli making after failing to get a stable job.

Mani Subramaniam, one of these idliwalas, leaves his house at 7 am every day to fulfil his family's dreams. Mani has been selling idlis near Bhatia Hospital, Tardeo and Wilson College for over twenty years now. His wife and business partner wakes up at three am and starts preparing idlis and vada. Mani came to Mumbai to become an actor. He says, "I was twenty when my uncle brought me to the city from Madurai, I wanted to become an actor like Rajnikant but things didn't turn out in my favour. Due to lack of money I started the idli making business as it was the only thing I knew."

Mani, who started small, has now become a big name in the idli making industry and sells over 600 idlis every day. He and his wife introduced dal vada to college students and have been successful in whetting their appetite. Afreen Ansari, one of his regular customers says, "Anna makes the most delicious idlis. It's cheap and the best I can have in my break time. They are so light and tempting that I don't realise the number of idlis I eat. I often take them home for my family to eat. They are big fans too."

Yatin Rathore, another regular at Mani has been eating his idlis since the last fifteen years. "I must have been five or six years old when I started eating idlis from him. The taste has been consistent since then, and it's the best breakfast I can have. Every time my mother refused to give me breakfast, I resorted to Anna's stall. I used to wait for him to come and serve me the hot steaming idlis. His vadas and



Mani Subramaniam, the forty year old idli maker looks forward to finish his entire stock of idlis near Wilson college, Mumbai
Photo Credit: Cryselle D'souza

Between 500 to 700 families that live in over 50,000 structures in Dharavi, earn their living by making idlis and vadas, every South Indian's staple breakfast. Each home makes up a minimum of 400 steaming, fluffy rice cakes every day, making a profit of almost Rs. 400-500 per day. A household with two or three men could take that number up to Rs. 1,000. This community of migrants from Tamil Nadu have turned idli-vada into one of Mumbai's staple breakfasts.

Nearly three lakh idlis leave the mini Tamil Nadu of Mumbai, settled between Sion and Mahim, on trains along the Central, Western and Harbour lines to satisfy Mumbai's fast running workforce every day.

The lanes that connect this complicated slum having

the spiced chutneys add to the flavours. Anna remembers my choice of chutney also without fail.”

Mani says, “I am happy I could fill so many stomachs every morning of the people of Mumbai. The city has given me a lot and I am satisfied with my work. My daughters Sujitha and Ajita are studying and teaching me how to take my business to a new level. I hope I become a big man some day”.

Periyama from Andhra Pradesh, had bigger dreams than just selling idlis when he came to the city in search of a job. When he met his community fellows, he decided to join them in the business. “I had my family to worry about at home and there was very little money left. I was ready to take whatever job came my way. I started off living in a small room with a few friends and acquaintances from back home, where we did the cooking. It was a small place but good enough for eight to 10 people,” says Periyama.

“I was given idlis, medu vadas and small dosas to sell. When I started off, we charged very little and I had to travel to Andheri early in the morning. I used to wake up at 3 am to help in making the idlis, sometimes cutting the vegetables. Even though there were others to do the work, I was eager to learn everything, so that one day, I need not be dependent on anyone,” he smiles.

Around 7 am, Periyama would leave in a packed train to Andheri, and from there would walk to Lokhandwala complex. Back in the days, Periyama had few customers, to earn a living was difficult. “But as time passed, I became a familiar face. Mothers would eagerly wait for me, as they wanted to serve their children idlis for breakfast. They told me they liked the small coin sized idlis because they never went waste. It was also ideal for them to pack in tiffin boxes.” A few good customers like these, and Periyama’s morning got off to a good start. Over the years Periyama and his family has grown. He got married and had two children, who now go to the Municipal school at the Labour Camp in Matunga. Not having had the privilege of an education, Periyama believes that an education can turn anyone into a rich man. “The only education I had was on how to sell all my idlis and not bring any back to my superior. I am so happy to see my children learning. There is so much to learn from them. They can help me expand my business.”

Periyama started off selling four idlis for Re 1 and the dosa for 50 paise, which made it one of the cheapest snacks available. Even in the posh locality of Lokhandwala, business was good. People now know him and his ‘pom pom’. He has bought a cycle of his own and can carry more idlis, dal vada, medu vada and dosa. He carries a big plastic bag for waste and does not allow anyone to litter.

“I am so happy that a small uneducated man like

me has reached so far serving idlis, not only to the poor but also the rich. People in cars stop by to buy my idlis. I sit near the Lokhandwala Circle and have even served a few TV stars,” says Periyama.

The 70-year-old owner of the Idli House in Matunga, A Rama Nayak, also started his business by selling idlis door-to-door. After 35 years, he now has a permanent restaurant near Matunga station where almost 200 people eat every day. The place serves almost twenty types of idlis and vadas. “I am thrilled by the response I got. I couldn’t believe an uneducated man could get so far, just by his relying on his cooking skills. My idlis are famous among people of all ages. I feel happy when people come from faraway places, asking for my shop,” says Rama Nayak.

Omkar Raut, a 22-year-old who commutes daily from Matunga station says, “I start my day with Nayak’s idlis. It is the healthiest breakfast I can get at such a cheap rate. The taste of his food has been consistent and he has not increased the rates for a long time. I am unmarried and there is no one to cook breakfast for me. Hence, these idlis are the most convenient and cheap way to fill my stomach every morning.”

Rama Nayak says, “It wasn’t an easy journey, but I am happy that I could turn the idli into one of Mumbai’s staple breakfasts. The city has turned me into a big man. I hope that the next generation keeps this tradition alive. Our community is fast-growing and I can see that the hard work put in the work every day is paying off”. Rama Nayak’s restaurant has recently catered for many weddings and birthday parties, and they are planning on expanding it to a full-time business.

Periyamma and Mani Subramaniam are filling their own stomachs, dreaming their dreams, and powering those of the young people around them. One day, they may all be Rama Nayaks.



The elements of the morning platter
Photo Credit: Cryselle D'souza

Djembe Away

Why Tribal Flora doesn't mind being the niche, finds Shloka Patwardhan

Dim blue lights take you to a completely different musical universe. Bobbing heads, swaying hands add to the ambience. To add to it, a bunch of people start dancing right in the centre of the quadrangle at Ruia College.

Mind-maul alert: Tribal Flora is playing. This five-man band (Anand Bhagat, Gideon Crasto, Vaibhav Wavikar, Karan Sajnani and Kenroy Sequeira) plays instruments like the didgeridoo from Australia, the djembe from West Africa, the morsing (Jew's harp) from Rajasthan, the kalimba from Sub-Saharan Africa, and the cajon from Peru.

They started off by jamming at Carter Road, Bandra along the seaside, with a few friends. They also played at a

tree. The balafon, originated in West Africa and is made out of bene wood and is dried in the fire. It is somewhat similar to a santoor. It is precisely this indigenoussness of the instruments that makes the music so earthy and pure. "We are very close to nature" says Bhagat, as they go very often for treks and hikes to various corners of India and play their music. "And we are nature," adds Gideon Crasto, and they all begin to laugh.

Their music is mostly experimental and they improvise a lot while performing live. Gideon says, "There is no great challenge in composing something and sticking to it." Vaibhav Wavikar, who plays the cajon, believes that their music is not the kind of music that can be recorded. They do follow a structure, but every time they play a piece, it evolves and sounds different. Their music is not only aurally appealing, but also visually, as it is extremely fascinating to see them play instruments that one has never seen before. The instruments are hypnotic and what is more fascinating is that they all play more than one instrument while performing live on stage.

Even though improvising and making music live is their way of crafting music, they have recorded original compositions. A few of them include, 'Nine Planets' (the sound of the tabla and the didgeridoo together to give a interplanetary experience), 'Spanish Guitarras' (Spanish flamenco guitars and didgeridoo), 'Earthworms' (a twist of morsing didge tabla drums and flute), 'Chillout Downtempo Jam' (kalimba, table, didgeridoo, guitar, morsing, synthesizers).

Anondita Mukherjee, a student at Ruia College, says, "Their music changes all that you once considered true. One has to hear it, to believe it." Aarushi Rameshchandra, another college student, adds, "With blend of jazz and world music,

Tribal Flora takes you on a trip with amazing instruments you have never heard before".

When asked if they think this type of music would ever make its way into Bollywood, Anand Bhagat says, "No I don't think this music will get commercialised. We might have one track, but that will just be for some off-beat movie and not mainstream Bollywood movies."

Tribal Flora has played all over the country and on different terrains, in deserts, on beaches, and in the mountains. They have played at the Ladakh Confluence, at Celebrate Keralam in Kerala, Ragasthan in Rajasthan, The Onam Festival at Cochin, The Kitshmandi (the flea market) in Pune and Bangalore and The India Surf Fest at Orissa. In spite of playing at a number of places all over the country, their music is known to only a niche crowd.

"We don't mind being the niche" says Crasto, "We are here to make good music" adds Bhagat.



Gideon Crasto playing the didgeridoo at Ruia College, Mumbai
Photo Credit: Srushti Iyer

club in Bandra called Zenzi for Open Mind Nights, which was an open invitation to artists who seek a platform to perform. And by 2008, they formed Tribal Flora. "So that is how it all started," says Anand Bhagat, as he plays with his dreadlocks that go down to his knees. Anand, 27, plays the djembe, balafon, (percussions) and the kalimba (thumb piano). Most of the band members have not taken professional training in these instruments. Even though Karan Sajnani, who plays the didgeridoo and the Jew's harp, has basic training in conventional instruments, Anand Bhagat says, "Every instrument has its own way of playing. Like the djembe or the congas, it will be similar in a way, but they each have their own technique, which we have to learn."

Their music is inspired by nature, since their instruments are naturally made. Gideon Crasto plays the didgeridoo, and he explains how this Australian instrument was originally a hollow log of wood eaten by termites. In India, the didgeridoo is made at Dharamshala with the akani

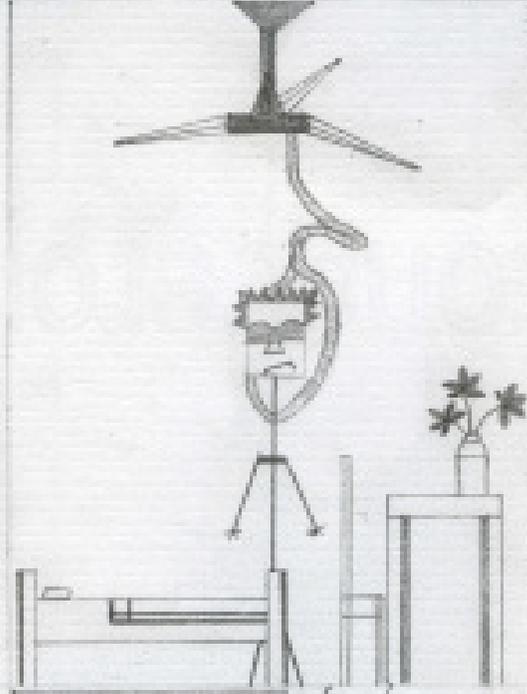
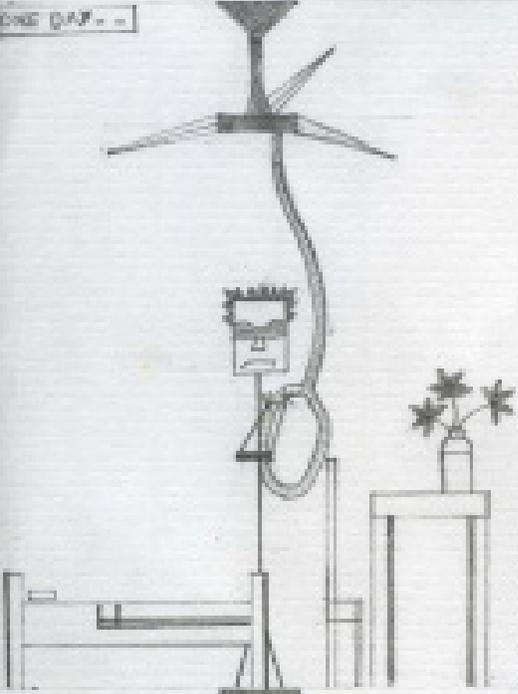
THE TALL AND SHORT OF IT!

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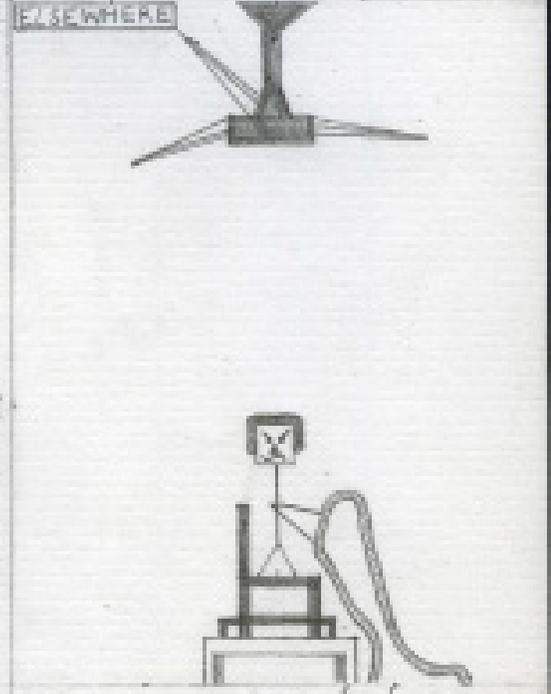
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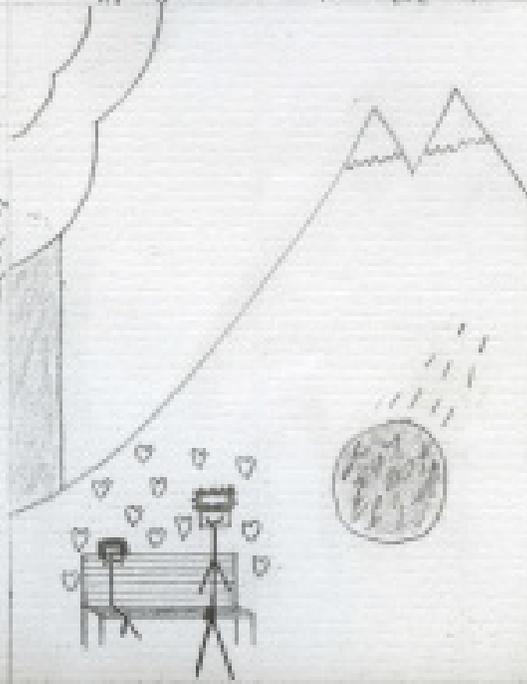
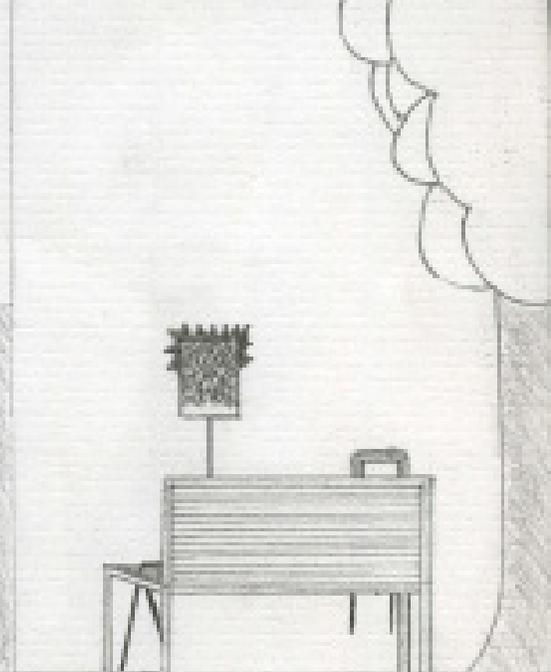
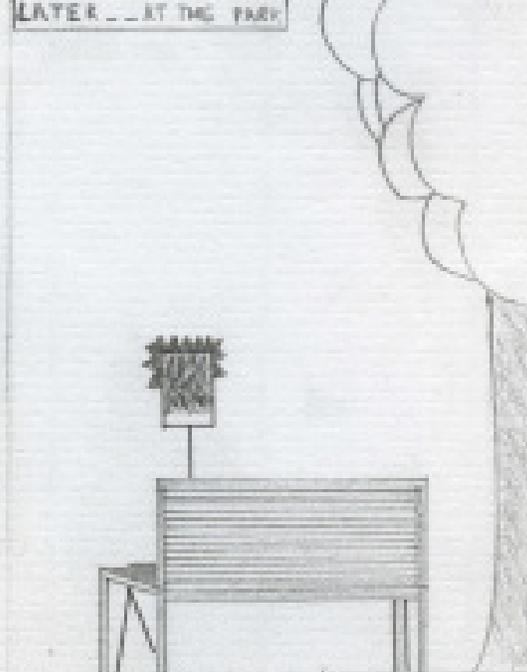
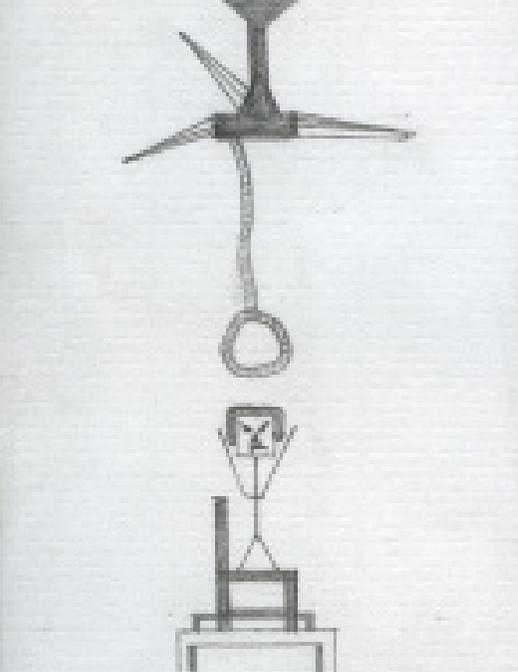
ONE DAY...



ELSEWHERE



LATER... AT THE PARK



END

The Fading Sun

Yavar Ahmad discusses the 'purpose of purpose' while analysing 2011's cult classic video game Dark Souls



The 'Chosen Undead' in the flesh
Illustration Credit: Yavar Ahmad

What is the purpose of this world if everything is going to end? What is the purpose of structures and civilization if everything is going to inevitably turn to dust? What is the purpose of doing what I am doing? What is the purpose of existence? What is the purpose of purpose?

These are some of the questions that are raised in FromSoftware's 2011 dark-fantasy videogame 'Dark Souls', an unforgiving and punishing experience that inverts some trends of modern gaming. There is no hand-holding and ensuring that the player does not fail so that he/she can enjoy the total 'cinematic experience' of the video game. Dark Souls, unlike most modern games like Call of Duty, is not an 'interactive movie'. It prefers if you work to uncover everything it offers. A grisly game wherein a single wrong step, a single moment of hesitation, a single moment of overconfidence can cost you your life... or does it? In the game, you are already dead: just an undead husk trying to fulfill its destiny, except that you don't know what that destiny is.

Your character, the 'Chosen Undead' must end the reign of the old gods, who, save for one, have long since abandoned this land. You must endure everything: defeating all who stand

in your way, hacking away at all the fiends and abominations you encounter and putting an end to things that have long persisted. After you have accomplish all these feats and survived against the odds, you reach the final goal, the Lord of Sunlight. As you enter his den, you realise that something is amiss. The Lord of Sunlight is not the pristine God you expected. He is nothing more than a husk of what he once was. He utters not a single word as he comes charging at you the moment you enter. His flaming sword is the only remnant of his divine power, and he is easily put down... yes, put down as it isn't a clash with the God of Gods but instead a mercy killing of an old man who became insane trying to keep his world intact.

As the last embers of his life run out, you are left with two choices. To leave the flames created by him alone, allow them to die out and bring in the age of Man... but it is also an age of darkness, a mysterious age where the suffering of the world is unknown and inevitable. Or, you can use your body to stoke the flames, prolonging the age of the Gods... and delaying the inevitable darkness. You choose the former and emerge victorious.

But things are never as they seem. Were you truly the weak one overcoming great odds? Or were the monster: an undying executioner, putting an end to beings of greater purpose for your own selfish gains?

The demonic spider witch you killed for coming in your way? She sought the souls of others, such as you, to only delay her sister's death, a kind young soul who had brought herself to the brink of death to save the lives of others.

The giant sword-wielding grey wolf you killed for his master's memento? He was protecting you from the darkness his master had brought upon himself, a darkness which consumed a once venerable knight and made him destroy the things he sought to protect. He did not wish to see another friend consumed by this darkness and chose to fight you, though he knew it would mean his end.

All around you beings of your kind go insane, go 'hollow' and turn against the world, turning into ravenous and murderous creatures. Beings who lack a purpose and are no longer sane. This scourge of purpose forces you to kill allies, friends, teachers and paragons. All this while you work towards your purpose, and what is that purpose exactly? Are you a hero? Or are you nothing: a faceless creature, a pawn?

In this forsaken dying land, a land both grotesque and beautiful, a land stripped of every shard of hope, a land fated to an endless cycle of darkness; just what is your purpose? Does it matter?

Lokada Kaalaji

Ketaki Savnal flails her arms for the new Raghu Dixit album

When I was 12, my family got our first computer. My uncle, who set it up for us, copied his out-dated music playlist into the PC, and Michael Jackson moonwalked into my life. For a long time after that, before retro became cool and my friends walked around with iPods and mp3 players, talking about Slim Shady, all I had was my humble playlist from the 1980s. Although I did forage for different genres at music stores, those and what my friends were listening to, was still too alien to become mine.

The first time I heard The Raghu Dixit Project was quite by chance, when the band was closing for a literary festival at Mehboob Studios in 2011. I had never experienced anything quite like it. There was a group of men, not sporting dreadlocks or suspenders, but colourful lungis instead. They cradled banjos, accordions and Hindustani classical flutes and pranced around in ghungroos. I felt like I had come home after a long, tiring journey.

“Don’t scream, sing!” Dixit had admonished the audience as he made us repeat after him, “Lokada kaalaji madatheenanti / Ningyaar byaadantaara maadappa chinti” (You want to worry about worldly pleasures... Who stopped you? Worry!) “Hello madam in glasses, full worry in life? Sing no, sing for the joy of being here!” Dixit said to someone in the audience. Because that’s what The Raghu Dixit Project does. They make music: not restrained by coolth or the slipping off of the aforementioned suspenders, but exploding with merriment and and the sheer joy of making music.

It’s been six long years since their first album but their second album, 2013’s ‘Jag Changa’ (Punjabi for ‘the world is beautiful’) is as Raghu Dixit-esque as it gets. The album features a delightful mix of influences and cultures which Raghu Dixit seems to have picked up while traveling to the top of the iTunes World Music Charts, stopping on the way to perform for the Queen of England at Windsor and at Mexico, North America and South Korea.

I had already heard a few of the songs live, so I was apprehensive about whether the same energy would be reflected in a recording, without the towering presence of Raghu Dixit, or the raucous energy of a live performance. ‘Lokada Kaalaji’, which I had sung along to, with the crowd bellowing all around me, could easily fall flat in a studio recording. But in the album, which was available for free on their SoundCloud account (Raghu Dixit policy to make good music for the love of it), Dixit’s powerful voice shone through and the only thing I really missed was the silly banter that happens between songs.

When performing in front of an audience, Raghu Dixit shouts out to the crowd, makes jokes and takes requests. In the album, he has managed to keep the conversation alive, by including the different elements that he interacted with during the course of his travels and collaborating with different musicians: Abigail Washburn’s clawhammer banjo in ‘Jag Changa’ was discovered during the band’s time at the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations at Windsor and sarod player Soumik Datta was roped in for ‘Rain Song’ after Dixit

met him at the London Indian Film Festival. The words ‘jag changa’ and the spirit of the song of the same name, were picked up by their band during the Punjab leg of their India tour. The simple philosophy of ‘Lokada Kaalaji’, to be happy, is derived from the Kannada poet-saint Shishunala Sharif. The songs in the album range from the intensely personal – ‘Yaadon ki Kyaari’, a nostalgic song about Dixit’s childhood and ‘Amma’, an ode to his mother, to more universal themes – ‘Kodaga Koli Nungita’, a parable about the insignificance of an individual, that involves a hen swallowing a monkey



and ‘Sajana’, a love song about a woman who waits for her husband to return home. The languages in the album are also just as varied: the lyrics of ‘Amma’ are written by Tamil lyricist Madan Karky, and Ankur Tiwari has written the lyrics of ‘Yaadon ki Kyaari’ in Hindi, beautifully encapsulating Dixit’s memories of his childhood, which was spent in Nasik.

Dixit even includes a satirical line in ‘Jag Changa’. “Gyaani ke andar se nikale yeh ganwaar / Chutki mein suvar ko banaade yeh sunaar / Jogi bhi bach na paaye aisi iski maar pyaare / Saton samundar tak bichaa hai yeh bazaar,” translated by the official website to “Man has become but a mere advertisement / The Tihar Jail is packed and the Parliament is empty!”

I might miss the of the ghungroos and the effervescence of Raghu Dixit and his band, but ‘Jag Changa’ definitely packs a lot more influences and collaborations than a live performance could have managed.

Ishq Vishq and Other Matters

Rashmi Mehta interviews Nighat Gandhi whose new book looks at the lives of Muslim Women across the subcontinent

“It’s only humans who are driven to tears and transcendence, sacrifice and story-telling by the madness and gentleness of love.”

At the beginning of her travelogue-cum-exploration of the love in the lives of Muslim women in the subcontinent, *Alternative Realities: Love in the lives of Muslim women* (Tranquebar, Rs 350) Nighat Gandhi begins with a moment of self-implication. She and her sister are in the USA when their father comes to visit them and they order in a pizza that has pork in it. Furious at this act of gustatory apostasy, their father asks them to throw it away. This ‘Un-Islamic’ pizza makes one realize that the book will question the beliefs of Islamic fundamentalists.

The book starts with Gandhi’s own story about marrying a ‘Hindu’ which reminds one of a script that looks ready to be made into a Bollywood film. The interspersing of the intense emotions of love and separation, of being locked up in a room with only one meal a day as punishment for being in love, of fleeing a country to get married; with the mystic words of the Sufi poets captivate the reader in the first thirty pages of the book itself.

Her narrative, essentially feminist, is interwoven with the central idea of love that enhances as the mystics are invoked and beautiful verses are quoted from Ghalib, Rumi and Amir Khusro. Gandhi travels to various towns and villages in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. The crossing of the border near Attari (close to Amritsar) becomes a celebrated event in the book, the moment being prolonged and the nostalgia heightened as Gandhi realizes that the “Indian sky was the same shade of overcast grey as the sky in Pakistan.” A poignant statement, it reminds one of Amitav Ghosh’s *Shadow Lines*, Sadan Hasan Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh*.

The book goes on to explore the lives of people who live as double minorities: Muslims and women. To this gets added a third when Gandhi interacts with khadras (transgenders) in Mirpur Khas, Sind. Nisho, or the ‘Rakhi Sawant of Sind’ as she likes to call herself talks about boyfriends, love, marriage and Jealousy.

A similar situation of owning a lost identity is faced by the lesbian couple that Gandhi interacts with; Nusrat and Qurutalain. Nusrat remarks, “Everything that affects Pakistani women affects Pakistani lesbians...How can we talk of a lesbian liberation without a heterosexual women’s liberation first?”

It is these ideas of sexuality, freedom, patriarchy, education and most importantly, love, that Gandhi has explored through her book. Gandhi weaves each tale with objectivity and yet, an omnipresent sensitivity.

Excerpts from an email interview

Considering the various issues that your book covers, why did you use the idea of love to interweave the book together?

I didn’t consciously choose to use love as the overarching idea on which to peg this book. I was planning to write a book about culture and sexuality but the book became more

humane and tender. It had its own destiny.

Did meeting the women, who live with the realities of patriarchy and fundamentalism, change your perspective about feminism in any way?

It changed me in the sense that I just grew more comfortable in my spiritual feminist skin. I grew more fearless and found myself surrounded by love and companionship. I thought I was setting out on my journeys alone but I realized I wasn’t alone at all. I met women who were struggling and carving out niches for themselves with so much courage, creativity and compassion and grew in clarity from listening to them.

All the women in the book aren’t entirely free from the shackles of patriarchy or religion, but they are quite liberal. Do you think that sort of constant negotiation will pave the way for change?

Most radical changes don’t happen as rapidly as we would like them to. They are gradual reforms which weaken older systems of thought and make room for the new. Cultural paradigm shifts happen at a rate that may seem slow to us but that’s how life evolves. Just thirty years ago, most people in the west were totally opposed to gay marriage. Today, only one out of five are. I foresee a similar opinion change happening in India and it might take less than thirty years!

You have lived in three countries; how do you think the ideas of feminism differ from one country to another?

Feminism is feminism. Ideas about feminism aren’t different depending on geography or race or religion. The difference lies in regional manifestations, the apparent causes that lead to feminist uprising and activism. The underlying purpose and hope is the same: liberation or humanity from the prison of gender roles.

In your book you say, “pragmatism is the killer of love”; do you believe that in the world today, the love that that Ghalib and Rumi spoke about is possible?

Not only is it possible, I believe love is our reality. The contemporary crisis we seem to be trapped in, what you might call pragmatism or a purely materialistic worldview, is only a passing phenomenon. We are progressing towards a more spiritually evolved state collectively and what we are witnessing at present are the growing pains in that evolution. At the end of my book I end with a positive note that comes from witnessing the reemergence of hindu-muslim love, despite all the risks involved, in a working class mohalla in Gujarat!

Fragments of Time

Nehal Jain discusses 'scattered fragments' with Bilal Tanweer

The Scatter Here Is Too Great (Random House India, Rs. 350) by Bilal Tanweer is a book that you read backward and forward. You keep flipping the pages to go back to the stories told before, to make logical sense of what has been written. Fragments need to be connected in some way or the other to tell a story that is comprehensible. Or is that really necessary? "Fragments were true; but we needed stories greater than fragments. We needed stories in order to imagine the mad world we lived in," says the 32-year-old author who lives in Pakistan, over an email interview.

The Scatter Here Is Too Great is filled with fragments. Memories, incidents and fateful meetings are the lifeline of this novel, and the greater understanding of what stories mean to an individual is a vital lesson that the reader takes away. Tanweer successfully creates a picture of Karachi in the mind of the reader, complete with the sights, the smells, the sounds and the feel of the city.

Tanweer's Karachi is a multi-faceted city, built from the voices of the many different characters within the novel. They remember the story, they are telling the story and they are the story. The story is woven through the characters, who are, in some way or the other, acquaintances, and also through the underlying larger, more threatening situation—a bomb blast at a busy train station located in the heart of the bustling city.

The protagonists' stories blend in with each other, and their lives intersect in the alleys and market-places of Karachi. The 'Writer In the City', who is known only by that title throughout the book defines Karachi as a story that his father used to narrate to him, and he in turn is today, telling us his version of the story. There is Comrade Sukhansaz and the three generational father-son issues that plague his family. Sadeq's life revolves around love and violence, two of the most selling themes in the world, but Tanweer's treatment of these in his book is in an unexpected manner. Violence is legalised and love breeds hatred.

Then there is the bomb blast at Cantt Station one muggy morning, when Comrade's Sukhansaz's grandson is out on a forbidden date, when his son is dreading the fated meeting between father and son, him playing both the roles at different times and Comrade Sukhansaz himself, in a red Coca-Cola hat, has been made fun of by college students. There is a battle of choices that takes place here, with regrets trailing into the picture after the blast. Tanweer glosses over 'Death' and gives the reader the after-effects of death, the haunting memories with heightened sensation.

Tales from Tilism Hoshruha and Dastan-e Amir Hamza, both translated by Musharraf Ali Farooqi, are woven into the web of stories being told by Tanweer, and add more depth to the narrative, for the reader is sucked in further. This already deep and scattered narrative then introduces characters that speak little, but leave an imprint upon the mind. The old man who goes, "Huee! Huee!" or the auto driver who has a sick father in the back of his auto are some such characters.

For a debut novel and five years of hard work, Tanweer has come out with a fascinating novel that gives multiple different perspectives to a bombing, an issue that has become, quite common today.

Excerpts from an interview:

Is the novel 'autobiographical'?

Writing for me is a bit like method acting. You try to imagine the world through your characters but you do that by digging up your own feelings and memories. So I would say that all characters are 'autobiographical' in that sense.

Is there a specific image of Karachi that you wished to portray through your words?

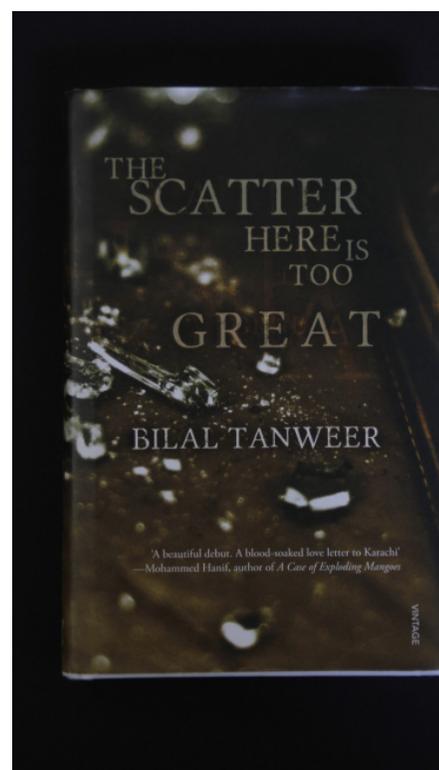
There is no one image that could do justice to the experience of Karachi, which is a city of over 20 million individuals. But certainly there was an attempt to imagine Karachi in a narrative. It amazes me that for a city with such scale and import, how poorly it remains represented in narratives.

Your novel is made up of many voices, which appear disjointed in the beginning. Why this 'scattered' manner of writing?

I think generally speaking, in life, I am discomfited by single perspectives on things. The source of a lot of oppression is imposing one single narrative on a multifarious reality. So I attempted to capture a range of perspectives on a particular incident like a bomb blast which is usually read and reported as a flat incident. I wanted to see how so many people relate to an incident such as this. It lends texture and broadens the possibilities of meaning and helps us empathize more deeply. And obviously, if you are attempting to do such a thing, it is hard to write a conventional realistic narrative. There will be a pressure on form.

Why are there only male voices in the novel? You only gave a glimpse into the depth of the female characters in the novel; I would have loved to know more about them.

I tried writing female voices but I did not feel I succeeded in writing convincingly. But writing in the voices I finally did, I did my best to give the female characters the space to express themselves.



Spot the Spotted One

Mitali Puthli recounts the thrill of shooting a leopard in a split second



Caught in the act!
Photo Credit: Mitali Puthli

One of the exciting things on the itinerary of the SCM study tour in 2013, was the tiger safari at Panna National Park. On the second, optional safari, all of us were tired and disappointed. We had heard so much about the big cat population at Panna, but the sun was setting and despite umpteen promises from our tour guides, we hadn't spotted a single one. Just as we were giving up hope, less than half a kilometer away from the exit gate, Apoorva Rao exclaimed, "Turn back turn back, I think I saw something."

The driver reversed the jeep a little, and then we saw it. There was a leopard, sitting on a wall, just a few meters away from us. I was stunned,

but I knew there was hardly any time to react. I clicked furiously, but in one graceful movement, the leopard was gone.

By the time the rest of the jeeps had arrived, the leopard had disappeared and our colleagues refused to believe us. I checked my camera, looking for a trace of evidence, only to find a clear photograph of the leopard, looking serenely into my camera. I had actually managed to capture a photograph of the leopard. Infact I was the only one to do so!

All I could think of that night was the leopard's gaze. The feeling of capturing the leopard's gaze forever, is something I will never forget.



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