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Patriotism Redefined



India & Humour

Can we take a joke?

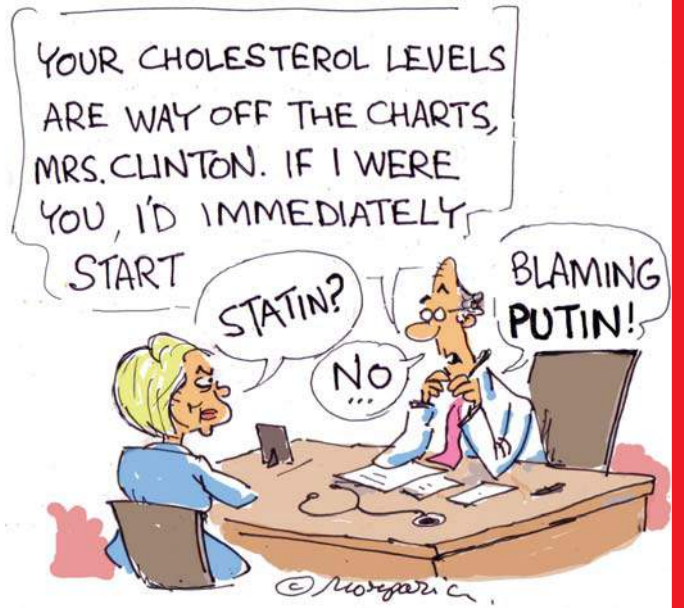
FACE TO FACE
Bhaavna Arora

"I am offended"

The end of cartooning?

KNOW INDIA BETTER
Kolhapur:
Where art struggles to live on

MORPARIA'S PAGE



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Humour



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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

“Nice magazine to read”

Glad to see a magazine which puts the country first and wants to make our country Great, Strong and United. The get up of the magazine is very good with good photos and excellent paper quality. There are a couple of not so good b/w photos occasionally, which could be avoided. Since a good picture is worth a thousand words it would be nice have a good picture even with a snippet. Nice magazine to read.

– Wg. Cdr. V.S. Hattangady, Veteran.

“Don’t insult the flag”

The national flag is a symbol of the nation’s respect and pride. There is liberal use of the flag on Independence Day and Republic Day. There is a new trend of selling flags made of paper and plastic, which is incorrect. With a sense of national pride, people enthusiastically buy such flags, but the very next day, we find these flags being trampled upon on roads, in dustbins and elsewhere.

By allowing this to happen, people forget that they are insulting the flag. Often, these flags are burnt along with the garbage. It is the duty of every individual to maintain proper respect towards our national flag.

We also commonly see people waving the national flag proudly during national, cultural and sporting events. However, once the programme or the event gets over, we see the flags strewn all over the place. This disrespect towards our flag must be stopped.

– Jubel D’Cruz, Mumbai

“A sporting tradition is not a part of culture”

The event of bull fighting is being touted as a central content of Tamil culture. A sporting tradition is not a part of culture. Nor is entertainment as music and dance fans describe so. I recollect that you had brought out the essentials of culture in one of the issues. You may consider explaining this aspect again.

– Brig. S.C. Sharma, Mumbai

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WHO AM I?



The last laugh!

We Indians seem to find humour in everything – crude jokes, slapstick, innuendoes, film humour. But is it really funny? asks Nivedita Louis.

AS a true, “hot-blooded” Indian, I keep wondering if at all we Indians have humour. Did your lips twitch at the word ‘hot-blooded’? Welcome to the world of Indian comedy – a complex quagmire. Comedy that surrounds most of us these days is exaggerated and hell, yes, x-rated. When we mean ‘sense’ of humour, it obviously means the sixth one that goes amiss every time we buy that popcorn at the multiplexes.

Comedy is what we always infer from our Bollywood and Kollywood movies. It was either Johnny Lever and Jaspal Bhatti of yesteryears, or Arshad Warsi and his short ‘circuit’ comedy that tried to pull out the laughs. These days the heroes have evolved as great comedians – if the hero can save the heroine, why not do it with the cape of the joker? Watching a movie? We swim in a sea of sexually explicit dialogues that are being delivered, trying to get a grip on what is being thrust into our faces as comedy. Laughing already? See! Effects of ‘masala’ night comedy shows, this!

Crude jokes aren’t all sleazy, but rudimentary and repeated. It gets dull and boring like being stuck in a loveless marriage but with an alimony-full husband. The comedy track in movies these days is like the last *dosa* made with left-over batter. Never makes the mark, and never takes-off.

The humour mills have been running overtime, turning out jokes that have watered down to plain, regressive, women-bashing. The female lead’s anatomy is always the butt of jokes and so is her lack of brains (did I say Bhatt here?). I would like to tell you gentlemen, try cracking one such joke naming the wife, and you shall see the end of days coming like the tsunami! The Bolly/Kollywood dictionaries stand corrected thus – a joke is a crude hit always below the belt, and a comedian is one boxer who lands punches everywhere, but the opponent. Dialogue-writers may please get their heads out of the sand and seriously think out of the box and the proverbial bottle!

Are televised comedy shows any better? TRP rating matters the most to the channels than their already waning reputation. Too many shows spoil the fans. The comedy satellite channels are always on ‘repeat’ mode as you twist

and turn in the sofas to the innuendos flooding your living rooms, orgasmic, I say! Will someone tell those knuckleheads that their jokes and *bakra* shows make us run for the remotes?

Stand-up comedy, anyone? Yes, why not? We have been seeing the sudden spurt of such short-term wonders. The audience roars with laughter...now wait! The incredulously pinched faces would be reading between the lines to laugh as the speakers around blare recorded laughter, and the herd follows the lead dutifully like domesticated husbands. How I wish I could cut the connection to those speakers.

Slapstick comedy? Dark humour? I’ve become immune to all those because, these days the best comedians are our politicians and the best comic genre, of course, is - Netagiri! Be it Didi’s tantrums, NaMo Ji’s chest-thumping or Pappu’s night out, we remain fully entertained by the brigade. Still, move aside *netas*, the RBI takes the Oscar for the maximum number of flips and twists in fifty days.

We have received wholesome entertainment the last few months, with trolls taking up with the *netas* on social media and meme-creators locking horns, taking sides on ‘ayes’ and ‘nahs’. Being a meme-creator brings you more proposals than what Tom Cruise would have received all his life! How I wish one day I would hear someone say, “*Pappu ban gaya meme-creator!*” and he gets married and lives happily forever. Social media has given wings to those bees that love to s(t)ing.

The other day a friend of mine was arguing that Indian women lack ‘humour’. Dear friend, Indian women have come of age long back and your crude and cruel jokes just don’t interest her anymore. Her biggest joke is – what you



are looking at in the mirror, and she loves having the last laugh, always. Any doubts? Go figure! ■

Nivedita Louis is a writer, blogger and social activist by choice. Bitten by the travel bug, and smitten by nature, she loves travelling and cooking. She blogs at www.cloudninetalks.blogspot.com.

Can we take a joke?

Are we a country with serious ‘humour deficit’? Do we easily take umbrage at jokes or worse, do we think twice before cracking a politically incorrect joke? Unfortunately, we do, sighs E. Jayakrishnan, and suggests that perhaps we need a constitutional amendment to protect humour!

“If I had no sense of humour, I would have long ago committed suicide”, Mahatma Gandhi.

CAN Indians take a joke? No, says Heather Simmons, in the *New York Times*, and lays the blame for this “serious humour deficit” on the ultra-touchy and near-senile Indian *netas* who are woefully on the wrong side of India’s demographic divide.

She may have a case. A case in which she finds Prime Minister Narendra Modi a kindred spirit.

“I think we need more satire and humour. Humour brings happiness in our lives. Humour is the best healer. The power of a smile or the power of laughter is more than the power of abuse or any other weapon,” the Prime Minister said recently at the 47th anniversary of Tamil magazine *Thuglaq*, founded by the late Cho Ramaswamy (the *guru* of political satire in India).

Our parliamentary cupboard of humour is shockingly and seriously bare. A Lalu Prasad Yadav may raise a laugh, but that is more because of his rustic delivery style than any genuine wit. It’s more style than substance.

The state of humour outside the walls of Parliament is no different. The one rare but genuinely funny and harmless aside from an MP (Congress MP Shashi Tharoor’s Tweet “in cattle class out of solidarity with all our holy cows!”) created an uproar, and shoved him summarily into hot waters. When actually what he deserved was a pat on the back for a touch of humour, and maybe 15-minutes of fame on the Kapil Sharma show!

Or, take the other brouhaha over AIB’s roast in Mumbai. While it had invective, innuendo, even obscenity, but most parts of it was uproariously funny. The criticism to the roast was not that it was it did not raise a laugh, but that it insulted some religious sentiment (this time Christian) or

the other. No concession to the fact that like a roast in the world of gastronomy, a comedic roast will contain ingredients which is not palatable to everyone. So, if you don’t like what is on the plate, please don’t eat.

Comic shows and comedians, especially of the stand-up variety, are growing, and look like the fastest growing segment in the entertainment industry. Shows like the aforementioned and AIB offerings have seen eyeballs like never before, but when it comes to our societal and public space, even humour just does not seem to be in play.

India has had a rich comic past. The wit and wisdom of Tenali Ram and Birbal were devoured and revered. The state of Kerala had a golden run of movies in about a decade or so back with superb, well-written humour as their calling card, most of which became commercial money-spinners.

Why this ‘humour deficit’?

Then why have we come to be known as country, society with a serious ‘humour deficit’, which even a foreigner notices and the prime minister decries? Precise answers, unfortunately, are hard to find. However, an explanation or two can be tentatively offered.

First and foremost, humour is not just the quality of raising a laugh, it is more importantly, the facility of laughing at oneself. Of taking it when the joke is on you, not just on the other. Self-deprecating, if you are with me.

Now, that quality of taking a joke on you on the chin, preferably with a grin, is not a quality born out of thin air. It is usually born in a context. A context of being personally secure in one’s own identity, one’s own culture, of a certain rootedness.

This is also predicated in the context of living with fellow citizens, with similar confidence in its own identity and place,

Now, that quality of taking a joke on you on the chin, preferably with a grin, is not a quality born out of thin air. It is usually born in a context. A context of being personally secure in one own identity, one’s own culture, of a certain rootedness.

and where the right of free speech borders on the absolute. The right which extends right where another citizen's dignity, and the law, begins.

However, in India of the last three decades or so, we have become, led by our *netas*, prickly, so politically correct, that anything said seems to go right in amongst so many. Groups, individuals, some already entitled, some searching for entitlement, are increasingly inured to take up cudgels against the slightest jab, real and perceived.

And then the various political and social groups pandering to various interest groups rush in, and then a narrative is built, a media circus invented, award *wapasis* and trips to Pakistan suggested, and facts and reason become the first casualty.

The media, in its search for instant gratification, and the TRPs generally runs with the dominant narrative, and rarely looks for fact checks and a post-truth ecosystem is born. The truth, in most cases, is with the hype.

In such an atmosphere of instant offense taking, the collateral casualty is also humour, or even an attempt at it. Think of the Shankar cartoon imbroglio a few months back as a case in point. What was an innocuous cartoon created by the doyen of Indian cartoonists decades ago, without anyone as much as raising an eyebrow until now, came to be seen as an insult and an innuendo?

Or, think of Winston Churchill's classic retort when informed of his political rival Clement Attlee had suddenly taken ill and been rushed to hospital. "Nothing trivial I hope," said Churchill. Good luck to anyone trying this brand of humour in India on his political rival, as a hapless Tharoor found out.

If we need to address this situation, we have to create an ecosystem when instant offense-taking is not on. As long as no law is broken, offense should not be a misdemeanor. For, who is to decide what is offensive? One man's joke is

usually another man's offense. Take the above cited Churchill quip for instance.

Would have the Sarojini Naidu zinger about "you don't know what it costs the Congress party to keep that old man (Mahatma Gandhi) in poverty" been taken in the spirit that it was made in today's world of ultra-political correctness? Not a chance. There would have been motives attributed and disciplinary action incited for insulting the leader.

The move towards a more humorous society should be an organic evolution. As we grow and modernise as a nation,

and identities are freed from narrow confines of caste, creed and religion, we are likely to grow more comfortable within our own skin. And, that will lend itself to a more secure society which will see humour for what it really is, an ability to take it on the chin when the jokes are indeed on you.

In other words, as a society, as a country, we need to loosen up. Like freedom, humour is indivisible.

Because the latter is an intangible but critical ingredient of the first. Maybe, like America, we need our own 'first amendment' (it would be to be 102nd amendment actually) to 'preserve, protect and promote humour', and to 'ensure that taking offense is not a legitimate ground for violence or harassment, as long as it doesn't violate the law'. And, I am only half-joking! ■



Farzana



E. Jayakrishnan, has reported and commented on national politics for the better part of two decades. Until recently he was the Managing Editor of MSN.com and oversaw the editorial content on Windows Apps. With an M.Phil from JNU on international studies, he currently devotes his time teaching journalism and upgrading himself in the world of strategic affairs and social marketing in Bangalore.

“I am offended”

What is the role that comedians play in our society? Do they make us aware of our shortcomings? Should we get offended if the jokes hit our vulnerable spots? How tolerant are Indians of being made fun of? These are some of the questions that the documentary “I am offended” deals with, says Nikhil Katara as he reviews the documentary.

WHAT is funny?’ This is a question that plagues everyone. In everyday conversations, text messages and WhatsApp chats, we are always on a mission to bring laughter to people around us. But what happens when the joke ceases to be funny, and the convex smiles on faces transform into a concave frown? Comedies can turn tragic in a moment, and the brunt is borne solely by the comedian. The documentary “*I am offended*”, directed by Jaideep Verma (who also made the seminal *Leaving Home – the Life & Music of Indian Ocean* and *Baavra Mann – a Film on Sudhir Mishra & Other Indian Realities*) brings forth the plight of the ones who spend their lives walking the tight rope of making people laugh, knowing very well that they might be toppled by the same laughing crowd.

Different perspectives

At a length of an hour and forty two minutes, “*I am offended*” offers the perspectives of cartoonists, stand-up comedians, satirists and film actors, representing the genre of comedy in India. The film begins with Sanjay Rajoura’s categorical declaration that India, as a country, doesn’t have a sense of humour. Stand-up comic Gursimran Khamba adds to the narrative a few scenes later by stating that “The state will never directly assault you, the state will find people through which it will assault you.” The reason that these comedians fear assault is due to the nature of their brand of comedy, where harsh truths are spoken with ease. Comedy for many of them is a release of their anger, it is therapy for some. In their profession,

puns and word play aren’t funny, but the truth is.

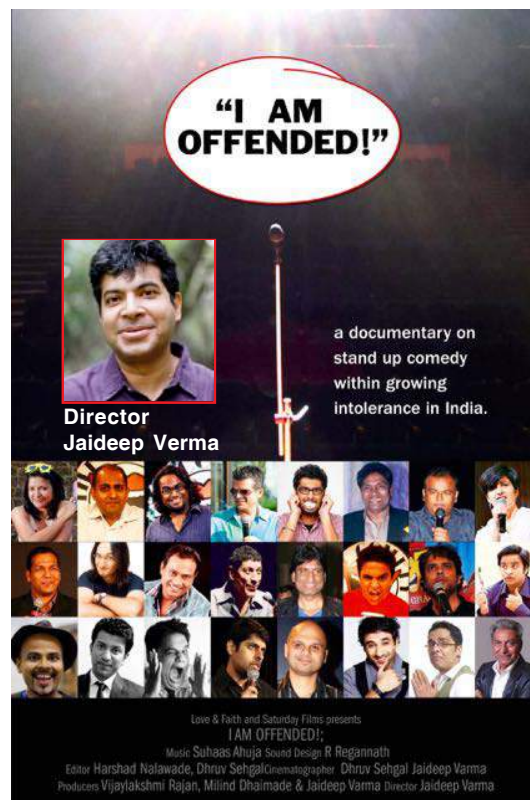
“*I am offended*” goes into arguments about the presentation of comedy. For some, comedy is only a medium, the real appreciation of their art comes in their stories. Many of these stories are highly personal, they arise from incidents that the comedian has experienced first-hand. Vir Das explains that when he produced the show *Walking on broken Das*, it

wasn’t the structure of the narrative that was broken, but it was he who was broken, and he themed the show around the worst period of his own life. The stage was a place to release his anger and frustration.

The film also presents the divide between Hindi speaking and English speaking comics, and the said divide isn’t just about the language. Aditi Mittal deems English speaking comedy as ‘Polemic’, whereas Rajneesh Kapoor doesn’t consider Hindi comedy as stand-up comedy at all. This is because Hindi comedians delve only in jokes, but don’t commit to sharing their ideas. Vikram Sathaye counters this argument by stating that India as a country has a lot of satirical regional artists, but since the elite speak English as their first language, people tend to believe that good work happens in English. He states the example of Pu. La. Deshpande, a Marathi humourist and writer,

whose work he describes as ‘literature in humour.’

While stand-up comedy has found its ground in India due to television shows like the *Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, there is a definitive dearth of cartoonists in India. But the Internet on the other hand has been revolutionised by shows like *Jai Hind*. The internet presented itself as an unregulated



“I am offended” forces one to think about the role of humour in our society



The AIB roast which featured Ranveer Singh, Karan Johar and Arjun Kapoor (above), raised a storm of controversies

space where no writer is silenced, and no thought is repressed. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't face attacks from the offended. On one episode of *Jai Hind*, a joke on the Sikh community caused problems. The artists of the show received death threats every minute for 72 hours just because they had quoted 1984. The sensitivity of the community was so offended that the producers and the artists had to provide an apology for their 'joke'.

The film's intentions are clear from the word go; it tries to establish the helplessness of the comic artists and the lack of acceptance to dissent in the country. It establishes the premise quite well and also educates the audience about the way comedians perform, the processes they undergo to keep tickling the funny bone. It does establish the fact that the layman doesn't accept jibes on their religion and places the conflict clearly. But is India the only country in the world where such tensions occur? Is India the only country where people are sensitive to jibes at their religion? Or is something else at play?

The French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo* was the target of terrorist attacks for its controversial Muhammad cartoons. Twelve people were killed which included Publishing Director Charb in the attacks. The controversy arose when *Charlie Hebdo* caricatured Prophet Muhammad. The terrorist attacks on the magazine were condemned and rightly so for their level of brutality, those attacks can never be justified and are shameful. But the question that arises from the

controversy is, 'What is the limit of freedom in the public domain?' Is 'Charlie Hebdo's act of trivialising a religious figure, using cuss words and expletives not meant primarily to offend? The comedians do target the most vulnerable aspects first, don't they? What is funny is the religious belief, the race, the caste and the social status of the individual. Comments are passed on the gender of the individual. Can one expect nobody to get offended while the joke targets the vulnerable beliefs of people? Isn't the joke meant to offend in the first place? If it doesn't offend has it achieved anything? Many audiences laugh because they can't believe the comedian said something so offensive, explicitly in a public forum. But what the comedians fear is the reactions their offence creates. The multiple death threats that the organisers of *Jai Hind* had to endure and in more recent memory, the arrest of comedian Kiku Sharda for mimicking Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, are examples of harsh reactions to jokes. The question that the comic artists raise is simple, when does the pressure cooker of the Indian sensibility blow? It seems, many a time, it blows quite quickly.

Humour as a bedrock of democracy

The other principal argument "*I am offended*" makes is that comedy is the test of a real democracy. Jug Suraiya quotes, "Anger is building up in people. Humour is that valve that lets out all this built up pressure. Humour is an essential element in democracy. You rule out humour, you don't have a democracy."

(Continued on page 12)

The banana peel humour

Humour in Indian movies, especially Hindi movies, is still more slapstick than wit. And if that's what appeals to a pan-Indian audience, we can't complain, says Suresh Nair. But bucking this trend have been movies in regional languages like Marathi and Malayalam, where the focus has been on subtle humour and satirical themes. He comments.

I N the last few years, the highest grossing comedy films in Hindi at the box office were the *Golmaal* and *Houseful* series of movies. A combination of slapstick and verbal gags – the kind that now are freely circulating on social media – were the mainstay of these movies. To some, this was “timepass” entertainment, the sort where you're advised to leave your brain at home before coming to the movie hall. To others, it was just another indication of the low standard of humour in our movies. But the fact remains that the audience who loved such stuff far outnumbered those who looked down upon such comedies.



A still from Hindi movie *Golmaal*, which was one of the highest grossing comedy films

Comedy is serious business!

Like someone said, comedy is serious business. It's hard to make a comedy and even harder to anticipate if the audience will find the gags funny. But it seems that someone is always bound to laugh at a guy slipping on a banana peel – as opposed to an intelligent wisecrack that might go over the heads of many like a Brett Lee bouncer. The audience for a Hindi film is so vast that it's a challenge to have the same gag evoke laughter in a movie hall in Kerala, Gujarat, Bihar, Dubai and London. This probably explains why slapstick always works better than wit. It's only rarely that the marriage of slapstick and wit results in a box office sensation – like in the case of *3 Idiots* or *Lage Raho Munnabhai*.

Hindi films may not seem to have come a long way if one were to look at the most popular comedy films down the decades. Whether it's *Chalti Ka Naam Gaadi*, *Padosan*, the old *Golmaal*, *Andaz Apna Apna*, *Hera Pheri*, *No Entry* or *Munnabhai MBBS* – the one common element in all of them is visual humour in the form of slapstick, expressions, reactions and jokes that are more a play on words, people's appearances or gender stereotypes. It's the kind of comedy that is relatable

to everyone across the cities and villages of the country. Visual humour more than literate gags work in a darkened movie hall, where laughter is contagious. The laugh track of sitcoms on television is replaced by the collective cheer of a 150-odd people around you. “We just want to laugh and have fun,” says a driver in Delhi, who would rather watch a *Golmaal* or a *Housefull* than a subtle *Cheeni Kum*. Never mind if the gags are repetitive or unoriginal – as long as they make him laugh, it's *paisa vasool*. He's not interested in subtlety or humour that needs him to apply his mind.

But there has been a subtle growth – thanks to the likes of Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Raju Hirani. Mukherjee's films relied less on slapstick and more on the reactions of a common urban guy in awkward or absurd circumstances. Hirani, on the other hand, did the unthinkable – he made a comedy where Mahatma Gandhi was the star attraction. The fact that he could pull off a film whose subject was the Father of the Nation, without a single murmur of protest in a country where even the most harmless joke can be accused of being offensive or hurting sentiments, is no mean feat. Hirani once

again treaded the fine line with *PK*, though *Oh My God* was arguably a better film on the same subject – man’s faith in God. While Mukherjee’s films were small in scale, budget and actors (many of them had Amol Palekar) – mostly aimed at the urban audience – Hirani makes them with big stars, bigger budgets and a style that is “massy”.

One might wonder where then are those literate comedies with humour relying more on wit than banana peel. Interestingly, these you find in regional cinema. Like a *Ventilator* in Marathi or *Maheshinte Prathikaram* in Malayalam last year. The reason why the standard of humour is higher in regional cinema is because of two reasons – firstly, the fact that your humour is meant for an audience of a particular state, language or community helps to make sharper and focused humour without having to make it palatable or relatable for the rest of the country. If you are a Malayali, you’ll get all the jokes and funny observations about everything from eating habits to political views to body language in a Malayalam film. There’s a classic scene in a Malayalam film called *Sandesham*, where two brothers representing rival political parties start arguing at the dinner table and end up fighting about the political situation in Poland. While the humour of the scene might be lost on anyone outside of Kerala, it cracks up every Malayali.

In Hindi cinema, the humour has to be played out broadly, so that everyone understands it. However, the times are changing. People have been able to appreciate the humour in *Queen*, which relies heavily on Kangana Ranaut’s portrayal of a Delhi girl. Similarly, Kangana’s Haryanvi accent didn’t come in the way of the huge success of *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*. But most often, filmmakers are guilty of not walking that extra mile to understand and portray a community or culture beyond stereotypes. So *Chennai Express* ends up with caricatures of South Indians, just the way Shah Rukh Khan’s “Madrasi” character in *RaOne* seems to relish noodles with curd. Just shows that from Mehmood to Shah Rukh Khan, the effort to milk a community for humour has sadly not shown any growth. Unfortunately, after the era of Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee, there’s been nobody following in their footsteps – we don’t have a Woody Allen. On the other hand, sometimes overkill destroys a genre at the box office – as it happened with sex comedies. From *Kya Kool*



This hit comedy movie, *Munnabhai MBBS*, had a message and also featured Gandhiji in a pivotal role!

Hain Hum to Kya Kool Hain Hum 3, the death of sex comedies from overdose is a subject for a hilarious movie in itself.

The role television plays

Television plays a huge role in raising the bar of humour across the world. The humour of *The Big Bang Theory* or *Seinfeld* is of a standard that is yet to be seen on our channels. Once again, the excuse hurled at you by creative heads of channels is that their audience is largely comprised of housewives and senior citizens. So the most popular sitcom is still *Tarak Mehta Ka Oolta Chashma*. There have been very few attempts for a political satire like *Yes Minister* or an innovative family affair like *Modern Family*. Television is the benchmark that raises the bar for most genres in the West. Unfortunately, that’s not the case in India, where we’re still stuck in a time warp of bad *saas*, helpless *bahu* and a vamp who unleashes havoc in a joint family. Once again, the sensitivity to humour is an issue in India. For example, one of the longest running Malayalam sitcoms called *Cinemala* would regularly lampoon politicians and even religion on occasions – one episode had Kerala’s rival politicians setting out on a pilgrimage to Sabarimala. In any other part of India, this would lead to protests and call for a ban. In Kerala, irreverence and satire are acceptable, and hence the standard of humour is far higher than any other state in India – just the

In Hindi cinema, the humour has to be played out broadly, so that everyone understands it. However, the times are changing. People have been able to appreciate the humour in *Queen*, which relies heavily on Kangana Ranaut’s portrayal of a Delhi girl.

simple fact that nothing or nobody is a sacred cow for the Malayali audience.

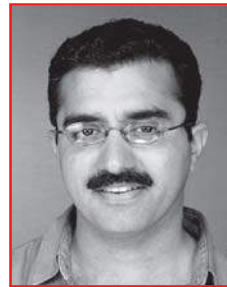
However, when it comes to comedy, Hollywood follows the same tried and tested route as Hindi films. There's no comedy on the big screen that's the equivalent of *The Big Bang Theory* or *The Office*. The emphasis is still largely on slapstick and gags on stereotypes. Not surprisingly, some of the biggest hits are comedies like *The Hangover*, *There's Something About Mary* or the Austin Powers movies. Some of Woody Allen's best comic gems were in the late 70s. Today he's as prolific but less successful than Adam Sandler, who seems to unleash one mindless comedy after another every six months. Even British cinema's most popular export has been *Mr Bean*, who is arguably a modern-day avatar of Chaplin's *The Tramp*. But then Chaplin is still a far bigger star on TV even today.

Interestingly, the standard of humour seems to be undergoing experimentation on the digital platform. *All India*

Bakchod and *Viral Fever*, among many others, have been trying to push the envelope by staying within the confines of accessible comedy – whether it's mocking weddings, reality shows or current affairs like demonetisation.

So, the bottomline is that slapstick, visual gags, stereotypes and innuendoes will always find more takers than intelligent humour. But with various platforms emerging for entertainment, apart from movie audiences being bifurcated as those at single screens and multiplexes, comedy in movies

will continue to tickle – even those who complain about the falling standards of humour. ■



Suresh Nair is the writer of movies like *Namaste London*, *Singh Is Kinng*, *Kahaani*, *Airlift*, *TE3N* and *Kahaani 2*. He is also the former deputy features editor of *Bombay Times* and currently scripts a weekly comic strip in *DNA* called 'Sanskari Sarla'.

“I am offended”

(Continued from page 9)

This discussion is not only applicable for humour, but it is applicable for any kind of free speech. If we analyse our recent past, we will find many examples of book-banning, curtailing of speeches, and even Facebook posts being treated harshly. The murder of rationalist, Narendra Dabholkar was a shock to the entire nation, and though he was no comedian, his cause had offended enough people. The only reason why Dabholkar was murdered was because he used his reason to publicly create awareness against superstition and black magic, trying to bring a ban on such activities. The public sphere where rationalists, comedians and cartoonists bring forth their 'reason' is the place where a nation matures. According to philosopher Immanuel Kant "*the public use of one's reason must always be free.*" It is in the public sphere that a nation gets enlightened. The comedians and the rationalists get targeted because they utilise the public sphere to reason with the people. When comedian Varun Grover's act gets disrupted for a joke, when Kiku Sharda lands up in jail for mimicry, and when rationalist Narendra Dabholkar gets murdered for spreading awareness, one commonality is the attempt to subdue their voice in the public sphere. Just because one disagrees with a certain view or an idea, should one destroy it? Or should one reason with it?

Conclusion

Though India gets offended easily, where is it in the global context? Is India's sense of humour maturing overtime, or is it

not? And how free can freedom of expression be? There are examples of gross abuse of free speech in the public sphere, where hate speeches are made targeting caste, race and the social status of individuals. Should the state allow this kind of offence too? These are questions that "*I am offended*" fails to address.

This is an interesting documentary which asks the right questions about India's sense of humour. That India has a flourishing comedy industry cannot be denied. But can the country allow this industry to graduate from making simple jokes, to making poignant points that not only challenge our prejudices but also make an ever so slight shift in the way our thoughts move forward? India is in a very dynamic phase in the genre of comedy. Every year some of the comedians push the bar a little further. Sometimes they fail and sometimes they succeed, and sometimes their offence brings forth important questions which the community discusses in general. The answers are not simple because when people get offended, all rationality gets thrown out of the window, and the comedians have to take a step back; and the society awakens to ask itself – What is freedom? ■

Nikhil Katara initiated his journey as a writer with his own production titled *The Unveiling*, a science fiction drama in the year 2011. To strengthen critical learning he initiated an MA programme in 'Philosophy' at the Mumbai university with optionals in Kant, Greek Hellenistic Philosophy, Feminism, Logic and Existentialism. His play *Yatagarasu* opened at Prithvi Theatre in 2016. He is a consultant facilitator at J's paradigm (a novel performance arts institute) and writes book reviews for the Free Press Journal.



The end of cartooning?

Is cartooning on the decline in India? Yes, says renowned cartoonist Dr. Hemant Morparia, as he laments the fact that fewer people are choosing cartooning as a career. He also discusses what makes for a good cartoonist and why they are so hard to find.

It has long been an observation among certain sections of the population, particularly the upper class, English educated lot, that Indians lack a sense of humour. It never occurs to them that by that charge, they themselves too would be thus classified. It is always the 'other' that seems to lack it. I have never believed this. We Indians have a robust sense of humour, except when issues turn into those that could be made political capital of. Witness the rise of stand-up comedy in the country and its popularity. On the other hand, there is a decline in the art of cartooning.

The decline of political cartooning?

Though it might be a bit early to write its obituary, there are clear indications that the overall health of the political cartoon in India is on a steady decline. This is a matter of concern. The decline, readers above 35 or so may have noticed, started in the '90s. This coincided with India's entry on the world stage, as it were, with the opening up of trade and other barriers under the broad rubric of 'globalisation'. While this has had beneficial effects for many industries, including the business of publishing, there has been a concomitant decline in the art of the political cartoon. A mere coincidence? Maybe not.

India has had a rich tradition of visual satire and wit in newspapers. A political cartoon is sometimes confused with a pictorial representation of the existing milieu in caricature form. It is not that. A good political cartoon expresses an opinion that crystallises the truth, yet unseen by most, of subliminal events. It captures the zeitgeist, preceding its popular acceptance. In short, it foresees the outcome of the forces at play and gets to the nub of the issue. In a manner that is concise, precise and incisive with wit and panache. It's an original view of a commentator, that is ahead of its time (only to become self-evident later). A tall order, for sure.

This was managed by several now-deceased Indian

cartoonists, notably, Abu Abraham and O.V. Vijayan. They were, however, working in different times. We now live in a country of 1.2 billion people. In the field of art and culture, we boast of thousands of good musicians, hundreds of good artists, film-makers and writers. Take a pause and try to name some good cartoonists. Go on. Take your time. Ok, how did you do? Three? Five? Eight? Not more than ten, I'd bet. If there was an international index of cartoonists-to-population ratio, we would be 'sub' sub-saharan Africa. We are a young nation. Cartoons are about fun, humour, laughs, rebellion, angst, insurgency – all things that appeal to the youth. How then is our track record in producing good cartoonists, in the face of being a young nation, so poor?

Mulling over this decline

The long incubation period: It takes time for a budding cartoonist to get his groove. Just as it takes time for the readers to 'get' him and his humour. Till he becomes a daily habit, that one cannot do without. This is possible when the editor reposit faith, invests space and time in his 'discovery' and has the power and ability to see him through this period. But this is stymied by...

Lack of editorial authority: The editor has seen his authority erode over the decades in India. He no longer has the second most

important job in the country. Decisions are made by committees with MBAs and are often on purely commercial basis. Independent voices as those of a political or other cartoonist may clash with these interests. Long-standing cartoonists with a regular reader following are known to turn into prima donnas, who may not toe the paper's line. Then why create such Frankenstein's monsters in the first place? This brings us to the...

Prima donnas in the field: Some have suffered from the Lata Mangeshkar syndrome, actively stifling potential talent, due to their insecurity, perhaps. They have continued to block posts much after their best-before dates.



Cartooning is a rare talent: Though this is not so rare as to explain the pitiable number of cartoonists in the country, it is still relatively rare. This is because the job of producing a cartoon calls for an unusual mix of various abilities – humour, thinking, creativity, originality, perception, general knowledge, range of interests, language skills, an ear for dialogue, IQ, brevity, the ability to think in a visual-spatial manner, and the odd drawing ability. Suffice to say, with no guarantee of making a career in cartooning, the person endowed with above skills would be more secure selling washing machines. This is mainly because of...

Poor initial payments: They are really low and not consistent enough for one to consider cartooning a real career choice. Often one sees people pursuing another career alongside, to help keep things in balance and secure, unsure as they are of the future of one uncertain career (and I mean cartooning here).

The career-isation of life (and the decline of idealism):

Have you spoken to some young people today and asked them about the career they want to pursue? Chances are, the answers you got had a lot to do with the eventual monetary prospects of the careers they have given priority. The media is partly to blame here. In its intimate embrace with the corporate world, it chooses to overlook the many ills that plague corporate life, highlighting instead its glory and wonders, and the fat pay-packets of first time MBA employees.

This creates a deep impression on the young minds, unfortunately skewing their decision-making ability. My first published cartoon may not get a laugh today, but the amount I was paid for it, certainly would. For many of the young, idealism today is a refuge for the un-ambitious. There are branded goods in every corner- mall waiting to be bought. As well as the mouth-watering new car model. And the flat in a distant suburb. All on convenient EMIs. Sure, it means getting on the endless treadmill of earning and consuming. And discarding idealism or introspection. So what? The link to the poor state of political cartooning of this argument is simply this: Political cartoons have to do with idealism, integrity and passion. One laughs on seeing a political cartoon because one, in a Kant-ian sense, sees the essential truth of the comment offered. Say the word 'idealism' today, and you will be scoffed at. Pretense and posturing don't work in a cartoon.

A cartoon can never be a part of a PR exercise in image-building. Cartooning is a critical art form. Some film, book and art critics can be (and are) bought. A political cartoonist cannot be. The reader would immediately know.

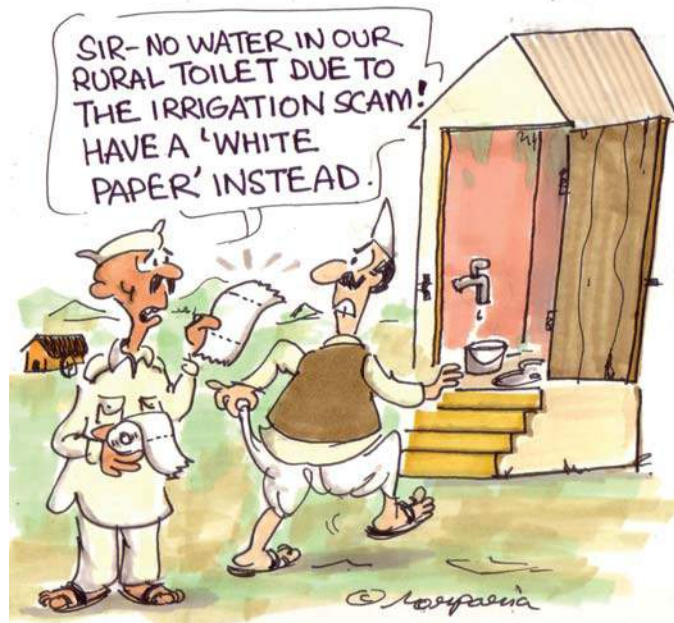
The continuous lowering of thresholds of tolerance: Over time, our skins have got thinner and thinner. The population of holy cows in our country rises every year. I wonder if the cartoon about one such (un) holy cow I could publish ten years ago, would even risk entering my brain today. We live in a climate charged with the politics of indignation and taking offence. Everyone and his uncle is just waiting to have his idol or belief slighted. And attack the creator of the imagined 'insult'. The law never takes its course here. No punishment ever follows, and the perpetrators bask in the orgy of media

coverage that is bound to accompany the attack in these TRP-defined times. Guaranteed media coverage is the main reason to organise the attack, which is a tool for every political party to further its own divisive agenda. The pen has yet to prove its strength against the *lathi*. This has just made humourists take the easy way out and focus on 'safe' subjects.

A political cartoon is as vital to a newspaper as a truly free press is vital to democracy. At its minimum, it serves as a safety valve to

release pent up anger at the outrageous acts of our ruling classes. It may even be a stabiliser in society, if humour and laughter were considered as acts that sublimated our anger. If I do not laugh, I may pick up a stone to throw. Err...well, maybe not. Not now, at least... after this down payment for the mouth-watering new car model, and the next EMI on the flat, perhaps. Hey look, there is a super sale on at the corner mall! I'm heading there right now!

The news of the political cartoon's imminent demise, for its own sake, I hope, is greatly exaggerated. ■



Dr. Hemant Morparia is a radiologist and a well-known cartoonist, who has been cartooning for Indian as well as foreign publications. He has published over 15,000 cartoons and his topics range from politics and urban issues to science, medicine, sports and even spiritual cartoons. He has also authored a few books of cartoons. He is deeply interested in music, sports, photography, and of late into sculpting, both realistic and caricatures.

A commodity called humour

*We have seen how free resources like air and water are being bottled and sold. In fact, we are selling everything which was supposed to be free for the benefit of mankind. The latest one is humour, which has become very serious business indeed, opines **A. Radhakrishnan**.*

“Lucky is the man who can laugh on himself for he shall never cease to be amused.”

– Lehlahla Rachel

HUMOUR is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as humours (Latin: *humor*, “body fluid”), controlled human health and emotion. People of all ages and cultures are amused, smile or laugh at something funny, and hence considered to have a *sense of humour*.

India and humour

India has hitherto had a rich tradition of humour, the dissemination of which happened through folklore, newspapers, *shaayaris*, etc. In ancient Sanskrit drama, Bharata Muni’s *Natya Shastra* defined humour (*hâsyam*) as one of the nine *navarasas*, or principle *rasas* (emotional responses), which can be inspired in the audience by *bhavas*, the imitations of emotions that the actors perform. Each *rasa* was associated with a specific *bhava* portrayed on stage.

Empirical findings prove that humour has been effective in increasing resilience in dealing with distress, in undoing negative effects, and in improving and helping in the ageing process. A smile can imply a sense of humour and a state of amusement.

Most people have their sense of humour toned to appreciate certain varieties of humour, based on factors like cultural references, language, personal anecdotes, tolerance level, exposure to different situations, people, etc., and it can be verbal, visual, or physical. Non-verbal forms of communication – for example, music or visual art – can also be humorous.

Self-deprecation, the best type of humour, is the ability to laugh at oneself as much as at others. Why take oneself too seriously? Classical humour found in certain parts of India is a legacy of British colonialism and resemble British humour to a large extent, including use of puns, wordplay and witty

exchanges. Similar aspects of humour exist in the vernacular in parts of India with literary traditions.

The popularity of comedy shows and content on Indian television and cinema are in most cases ‘forced’ upon the viewers. Most of them are vulgar, double-meaning erotica due to commercial reasons and more of the slapstick variety. Bollywood’s idea of humour still revolves around banana skins. Laughing at somebody’s physical appearance is considered okay and fun.

Yet, there is still a lot of so-called intellectually stimulating humour originating from India (in Indian languages), like the *Hasya Kavi Sammelans*. Urban India enjoys British/ American humour, but the rest of India seems to enjoy crude comedy and clichéd jokes. American humour however lacks in ‘teasing’, in which Indians are very comfortable, and respond with comebacks. This is because of the individualistic nature of Americans, compared to the society driven nature of Indians. Americans however are comparatively more open about joking on a person’s ethnicity or family background. In real life, Indians tease each other for their shortcomings.

Rowan Atkinson explains in the documentary *Funny Business*, that ‘an object or a person can become funny in three ways; by behaving in an unusual way, by being in an unusual place, and by being the wrong size.’ Being funny means being able to express humour of one kind or another – maybe a pratfall, or a witty pun, or a good joke, well-timed. You do need to have a sense of humour to be funny. Having a sense of humour means being able to laugh at – or at least see the humour in life’s absurdities.

Author Prather finds true humour ‘is that which is fun – it does not put down, kid, or mock. It makes people feel wonderful, not separate, different, and cut off. It has beneath it the understanding that we are all in this together.’ Humour is a coveted trait; we’re almost naturally wired to look for it. It is *saying* the right thing at the right time. Wisdom is *doing* the right thing at the right time. “Recession is when your neighbour loses his job. Depression is when you lose yours,” said Ronald Reagan.

Some use humour as a salve to deal with the world and



Comedy Nights with Kapil; an immensely popular show on TV

all its tragedy or insanity. It can make one delight at an absurd situation, since words can't express the level of disbelief. In relationships, it is a great way to reduce tension and feel that at the end there will be something to laugh about, even through not so pleasant situations; a positive connotation and effect. It means laughing with someone, not at someone. Yet, we all have that one person in our lives who, no matter the circumstances, can put a smile on our otherwise scrunched face.

Peter McGraw, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of Colorado Boulder avers, 'It would be wrong to equate laughter with humour, as many instances of laughter (tickling, nervousness, etc.) have little to do with humour and do not result in laughter (due to the mood of the appreciator, the social context, etc.). Hence humour is a quality of perception that enables us to experience joy even when faced with adversity.

The roast and India's growing humour output

A roast is an event in which a guest of honour is subjected to good-natured jokes at their expense, intended to amuse the event's wider audience. The 'roastee' is to take the jokes in good humour and not as serious criticism or insult, and it is seen by some as a great honour to be roasted. Money collected from the paying audience is often given away to charity. The host is called the 'roastmaster'. Anyone who is honoured in such a way is said to have been 'roasted'.

The tradition of roasting grew out of the comedy clubs in America which drew inspiration from a street game *The Dozens*, played in black majority areas in the U.S., which is traced to a Nigerian game called '*Ikocha Nkocha*' meaning 'making disparaging remarks'. As Jane Austen wrote in *Pride and Prejudice*, 'For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?'

A new generation in India is now emerging, making fun of themselves and pulling one another's leg. This is like a blast of fresh air. *Comedy collectives* are the new phenomenon.

All India Bakchod or AIB - is an Indian comedy group, founded by Gursimran Khamba and Tanmay Bhat. Its YouTube channel showcases their comedy sketches and parodies on topics such as politics, society, and the Hindi film industry. With over 100 million views on their videos and over 1.5 million subscribers on YouTube, it also performs regular stand-up acts across the globe and has, apart from an advertisement wing called Vigyapanti, also a news comedy series on Star Network called *On Air with AIB*.

The Royal Turds, presented by AIB, in collaboration, is a comedic awards ceremony that recognises the worst of the Hindi film industry. The statuette is a golden mug, depicting the article that is generally used by people of the region to clean up after defecation.

Its *AIB Knockout* in January 2015, featuring Arjun Kapoor and Ranveer Singh with Karan Johar as the roast master, raised ₹ 40 lakhs for charity. A private event, attended by

many Bollywood celebrities, it was deemed distasteful, sexist, offending and humiliating with smutty content, and proved controversial enough for the video to be removed from YouTube after it received eight million views, amid protests.

Some TV anchors foamed at the mouth over how the 'modesty of Indian culture' had been desecrated, but to some, the videos were brilliant spoofs. It was countered with the argument that Indian politicians often use insulting language about their rivals, but no one protests. It showed a new capacity for self-deprecation that is badly needed in a society that is puffed up with boasting and self-glorification.

Comedian Tanmay Bhat's mock conversation video titled *Sachin v/s Lata Civil War* on Snapchat, with veteran singer Lata Mangeshkar and cricketing legend Sachin Tendulkar, sparked massive outrage on social media. Comedian Anuvab Pal opined, 'In other countries, humour is reciprocated by humour. Here, we respond to humour with prison. How can a comedian have moral responsibility? Their stock-in-trade is to be ridiculous.'

East India Comedy – is a group of Indian stand-up comedians that performs comedy shows, organises comedy workshops, corporate events and scripts movie and television shows and maintains a YouTube channel that shows their comedy stunts and satires on various topics. The group hosts India's version of the Golden Raspberry Awards (Razzies), the *Ghanta Awards*. Founded by Sorabh Pant in 2012, it has seven full-time performers and hires other comedians, cinematographers and editors as freelancers on project basis.

The Viral Fever, or TVF – is an online digital entertainment channel. Arunabh Kumar, the founder, says the network attempts to reach out to the younger generation who seldom watch television/entertainment. Their web series *Permanent Roommates* was the second most-viewed long-form web series in the world at one time. Their second original series was *VF Pitchers* – a show focused on how engineers working in different companies quit their jobs and start a start-up. It has a team of 70, with 11 as consultants in Mumbai and Delhi.

The TV show *Comedy Nights Bachao* by Optimystix production, also based on this format, avoids going too racy to keep the show, family friendly, though some time back they had a problem with some artistes too.

Stand-up comedians

There are good stand-up comedians who have emerged in television/films like Johny Lever, Kapil Sharma, Raju Shrivastav, Krishna Abhishek, Shana Shakeel, Bharati Singh, Sunil Grover, Sunil Pal and on You Tube – Vipul Goyal, Vir Das, Daniel Fernandes, Tanmay Bhatt, Kenny Sebastian, Sorabh Pant, Abish Mathew, Biswa Kalyan Rath, Russell Peters, Papa CJ, Zakir Khan, Gursimran Khamba, Ashish Shakya, Sanjay Rajoura, NitiPalta, Aditi Mittal, Kanan Gill, and Rohan Joshi.

Kiku Sharda – a stand-up comedian known for being a part of 'Comedy Nights With Kapil' – was arrested in Mumbai for mimicking self-styled Dera Dacha Sauda leader Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, and outraging religious feelings. His arrest under 295A of IPC evoked strong reactions. Most of Russell Peter's stand-up comedy, though racist, still has Indian fans.

So, today, there is a proliferation of comedy clubs, stand-up comedy shows, roasts, etc. We have humour being distributed via WhatsApp, social media, GIFs (Graphic Interface Format), cartoons, illustrations etc. There are dedicated sites and dedicated businesses working seriously on just churning out humour, which is being sent out via social media and other means.

Going by the sheer number of jokes circulating on WhatsApp and other social media, the truth is that we Indians love to make jokes about others, but are very sensitive about jokes on us or our community. To laugh or not to laugh depends on the target of the joke. Culturally a diverse nation, we have ample material for jokes, be it quirks of a community, food habits, clothes, mannerism, accent, hairstyle or just the place itself. But most communities turn deeply sensitive if such jokes come from an 'outsider'.

Humour has come to stay, but it could do with a bit of tolerance. ■



A. Radhakrishnan, a Pune based freelance journalist, with close to four decades of experience in mainstream print journalism, is aiming for the digital platform. Making friends interests him and for company, he loves music and books. He also writes short stories and indulges in poetry.

Some interesting quotes by Oscar Wilde which have more than a tinge of laughter!

"I can resist everything except temptation".

"Always borrow money from a pessimist. He won't expect it back".

"Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much".

"Young men want to be faithful, but are not: Old men want to be faithless and cannot".

"I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train".

"I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a word of what I am saying".

"When I was young, I thought that money was the most important thing in life. Now that I am old, I know that it is".

The dawn of Indian feminist humour

*While India's stand-up comedy scene has taken off in a big way in the last few years, it has been dominated by men. But things are evolving, and today, there are many comediennes making their mark, says **Vandita Morarka**. She applauds this trend and hopes more women will join this particular space.*

WOMEN are not funny, you say? Ushering in a new era of humour today are India's comediennes despite a certain preconceived notion of women not being allowed to be funny in a conventional sense. They have a take on most everything and provide a fresh feminist perspective in a traditionally male dominated sphere.

Some popular names are Radhika Vaz, Aditi Mittal, Neeti Palta, Punya Arora and Vasu Primlani. These women and several others are rewriting what women in comedy have stood for – they are redefining and making the Indian stand-up comedy scene very much their own. This new breed is taking on previously held taboo issues head on. They engage virtually, hold discussions offline, and are in their own way creating safe spaces for women to speak their minds, assert themselves and take ownership of their beliefs. They are aware of their appeal and influence over young minds and are using that to encourage and build up other women. The humour is mostly observational and its tagging as 'female humour' is mostly owing to the lack of such an observational perspective in the Indian comedy scene, the perspective of a woman. Personal lived experiences also play a strong role in the humour shaping up – most comediennes say that real personal experiences add a dimension of detail and truth that helps audiences connect with them.

The work comediennes do

Neeti Palta easily admits that while her gender got her noticed on the fledgling Indian comedy scene, it has also posed disadvantages. She speaks openly of being offered lesser pay than other male comedians simply for being a woman and of her family being worried about her safety. Another leading

comedienne, Aditi Mittal, in her act 'Things They Wouldn't Let Me Say', does a brilliant take on the problems faced by any modern day Indian woman. She hilariously takes on the immense intrigue surrounding sanitary napkins in one such act, showing us in a few short minutes how ridiculous the secrecy around female menstrual hygiene is. Vasu Primlani, an openly lesbian comedienne uses, and in fact, plays up her sexuality onstage, and is greatly helping to bring conversations regarding queer sexuality into the mainstream. She has also

been open about the sexual abuse she faced as a child, and discussed it openly, in one such instance bringing attention to how shoddily sexual violence is investigated in India.

Radhika Vaz is known for her acts 'Unladylike' and 'Older, Angrier and Hairier'. Her comedy stand-up acts draw attention to issues resulting from patriarchal oppression and societal taboos. She is unabashedly brash and loud, breaking moulds of how women should be to how she wants to be – in that itself, she serves as an inspiring role model for several young women. Punya Arora vocally expresses the need for equal opportunity for everyone regardless of gender. Her acts talk about boobs and bras, making a strong statement of ownership of one's own body. Aparna Nancherla speaks of issues of depression and anxiety with a light touch, also using her

platform to make powerful feminist statements.

There runs a similar vein of humour through cities across India, these comediennes are telling the story of just being an Indian woman and are getting people to listen. They tackle varied issues of sexual violence, infanticide, body shaming, everyday life, sex, virginity, patriarchy, aging, weddings etc. They are re-examining issues from a fresh perspective that is giving new avenues for dialogue and discussion on these issues.

Radhika Vaz is known for her acts 'Unladylike' and 'Older, Angrier and Hairier'. Her comedy stand-up acts draw attention to issues resulting from patriarchal oppression and societal taboos.



(Left to Right): Comediennes Neeti Palta, Aditi Mittal and Radhika Vaz

Some discomfort is good

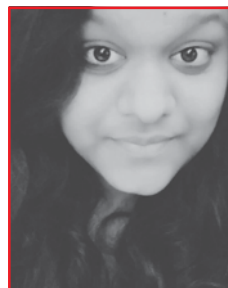
There does seem to exist, a certain discomfort with specific material if it's a comedienne stand-up act. The cultural fabric and dimensions of Indian society don't allow for several topics to be acceptable for conversation publicly. While that may not have changed, stand-up acts are being used by these women to sometimes subtly, and sometimes forcefully, drive across home truths about the need to relook at where we stand today as a people and as a society.

While many laud these women for their impeccable ability to make us laugh, several ambush them with 'do's and don'ts' of what women in comedy should be speaking of. While noticeably there is a heavy focus on women centric issues as part of their stand-up acts – it stands testament to a severe lack of comedy aimed at catering for the female gender or one that tackled their everyday issues. While stand-up comediennees are branching into discussing more varied issues through their well-timed humour, the focus on women centred issues remains, and is in a way a large part of their appeal. This brand of humour is putting everyday issues that women face out for the world to notice, laugh at and then reflect on – it's bringing these issues out of hidden whispered huddles to something one discusses openly amongst friends and family. One of the key impacts of the emergence of stand-up

comediennes and their brand of humour has been a wider visibility for these issues.

Women are also equally vital for the growth of the Indian comedy scene. Recent trends have encouraged more women to look at comedy as a viable career option, and has had many more joining in to explore this field. It's also created a larger demand, and has seen business shoot up for stand-up comedy acts in places across cities. While comedy may not bring social change, it can definitely bring about a new social consciousness amongst several people. Comediennes entering the fray with a heavy focus on feminist issues has helped pave the way for more dialogue on gender related issues.

The impact though of these performances is mostly on an urban population of a certain economic class. More diversity in language of the comedy and wider acceptance of stand-up comedy as a career option could help create a cohort of young individuals who can tackle social problems through humour in more diverse set ups. ■



Vandita Morarka is a Law and Public Policy student with special interest in gender and human rights issues.

Did you know?

Some of India's wittiest were Tenali Raman, who was in the court of Vijayanagar Emperor Krishnadevaraya, and Birbal who was one of the navratnas (nine jewels) who adorned Emperor Akbar's court. Birbal, was made a Raja or king by Akbar, and was finally the only Hindu to adopt the religion of Din-i-ilahi founded by Akbar. Both these wits were known for their ready repartees and humour. They always had solutions for problems of the court and kingdom, and were renowned for their perfect and witty sallies and retorts. With time, their legend has grown immensely, and today, there is an entire spectrum of books, comics and television programmes centered around these legends.

Laughter is the best *dawa!*

Laughter is indeed the best panacea for a lot of ills. We Indians love to joke about everything – from the state of the road to the man on the scooter, from Sardarjis to Gujaratis, from food to fodder! It is also a form of escapism for us. We love to laugh, even if how tolerant we are about our ‘holy cow’ topics, is debatable. But laugh and the world laughs with you... we hope you will too at these rib-ticklers.

Einstein and an Indian are sitting next to each other on a long flight.

Einstein says: “Let’s play a game. I will ask you a question, if you don’t know the answer, you pay me only \$5. And if I don’t know the answer, I will pay you \$500.

Einstein asks the first question: ‘What’s the distance from the Earth to the Moon?’

Indian doesn’t say a word, reaches into his pocket, pulls out a \$5 note.

Now, it’s the Indian’s turn.

He asks Einstein: ‘What goes up a hill with three legs and comes down on four legs..?’

Einstein searches the net and asks all his smart friends. After an hour he gives Indian \$500.

Einstein is now going nuts and asks: ‘Well, so what goes up a hill with three legs and comes down with four?’

Indian reaches into his pocket and gives Einstein \$5.

Einstein is stumped.

I saw two guys communicating in sign language.

Before I could start empathising with them, they spat out the *gutka* and started talking.

We Indians look *both ways*, while crossing the road.

Indian roads must carry a tagline – ‘Best before three months!’

Only two people in this world care about you truly:

Your mom, and the people who shout to tell you about your bike’s side stand.

Anything is possible in Bollywood... like playing basketball wearing football shoes in tennis clothes on a golf course.

Santa went to battery shop and asked to change battery.

The shopkeeper asked: *Exide laga du?*

Santa: *Dusri side tera baap lagayega kya?*

Do you drink?” the girl’s father inquired of his prospective son-in-law.

“First tell me whether it is a question or an invitation”, asked the son-in-law.

Bablu: “Good evening, *yaar*. Thought I’d drop in and see you about the umbrella you borrowed from me last week.”

Chandu: “I’m sorry, but I lent it to a friend of mine.

Were you wanting it?”

Bablu: “Well, not for myself, but the fellow I borrowed it from, says the owner wants it.”

In India, every city has at least one Asia’s largest mall.

Pappu, while filling up a form:

“Dad, what should I write against mother tongue?”

Santa: “Very long!”

Santa and Banta met on a village road. Santa was carrying a large gunny bag over his shoulder.

‘Oye, Santa,’ hailed Banta, ‘What is in the bag?’

‘*Murgiyen* – Chickens,’ came the reply.

‘If I guess how many, can I have one?’ asked Banta

‘You can have both of them.’

‘OK,’ said Banta, ‘five.’

I am sorry. I can’t hear you properly. Can you please repeat, what is the problem?

The same said in Hindi is short and sweet: ‘*Haaaiiin?*’

– Compiled by A. Radhkarishnan and Team OIOP

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Going green over homes

There are many versions of a green home. Whatever may be yours, it's worth following some basic rules to ensure that your home is truly environment friendly.

Usha Hariprasad gives some important pointers.

AS I enter Julie's home I see plenty of money plants all around her house. Some are in lovely glass bottles, tiny jars and some even in mugs. But they hang everywhere. "I like money plants. They bring luck and change your financial fortunes for the better. Besides, I like a bit of green inside my home," explained Julie, seeing my expression. This is her idea of a green home.

Green homes may mean different things to each one of us. While some usher in green in their homes through indoor plants and terrace gardens, some go a lot further. Take the case of Five Seasons House in Bangalore. The house is designed on the principles of a green home with a lot of love and care. There is abundant sunshine in the house, lovely pools, fountains in the garden, water gets recycled, car-pooling is encouraged and scrap is recycled. A lot of their furniture is repurposed and the whole house is a beautiful work of art.

So whatever may be your thoughts on going green, green homes are definitely eco-friendly, healthy and friendly on your wallet in the long run. How? Let us find out.

Defining a green home

A home that conserves energy, resources and is sustainable in the long run is a green home. Green homes are champions of environment as they use energy efficient materials, resources, and thereby incur low carbon footprint. But the nicest thing about living in green homes is not just about being nice to the environment. It also means a healthier you.



Indoor plants enhance the beauty of a home

Rupa's home is an example of this. Her home is made of mud bricks and the inside of her home is not painted. "For a decade I suffered from throat irritations living in a rented apartment. When two years back we decided to build a home, we wanted it to be as close to nature as possible. So we opted for mud blocks and opted out of paints. I am now free of respiratory ailments," Rupa clarifies. The health of Rupa is no mystery. Paints with VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) content in them can lead to respiratory problems. So health conscious owners shift to organic paints or paints with low VOC in them. Organic paints are a tad costly, but in the long run they are worth it especially if you are allergic to paints and varnishes.

Thus, the benefits of living in such a home are plenty. Here are some more.

Low carbon foot print: Sustainable materials are used to lower carbon footprint. This might mean relying on locally available materials for construction, say, locally stabilised mud bricks, rather than transporting materials from afar. So glass may be out, while mud blocks may be in.

Economically sound: Energy efficient homes bring down water and electricity bills. Plenty of sunlight, energy efficient light appliances, better insulation and temperature control bring down electricity bills. Similarly, fixing of leaks, better management of water on site like rain and storm water, water conserving faucets and shower heads, reduce water bills too.

(Continued on page 39)

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These are India's gems. Small cities, which have so much culture, history and hidden stories that not many are aware of. Kolhapur incites one to delve deeper and wonder at all the avatars of itself that it reveals. It can only leave you richer and happier with the knowledge.

KOLHAPUR

Where art struggles to live on



Text & photos: Anvi Mehta



The famous Mahalaxmi Temple; the best time to visit is during Kiranotsav

Goddess Mahalaxmi's idol at the temple

O King of Mountains! I am saying this out of affection for my Bhakts. There is a great place of pilgrimage named Kollapura in the southern country. Here the devi Ambabai always dwells."

This text is a rough translation from the Devi Gita, and the place of worship mentioned is the modern day city of Kolhapur. The temple which is a Shakti *peetha* (a place associated with the goddess of power, Shakti) is located in the centre of the city, and is a major tourist attraction. It is said to have been constructed by the demons when Goddess Mahalaxmi left Vaikuntha and arrived in Kolhapur, after a fight with her husband Lord Vishnu. It is said to have been made in a single night and carved out from a single rock mass.

The temple is the first thing to visit in the itinerary of every tourist. Most of the pilgrims visit the Mahalaxmi Temple after taking their blessings from Tirupati in the south, it is said that the pilgrimage is complete only after taking blessings from the Goddess. The best time to visit the temple is either during the Kiranotsav, in which the sun's position is such that the rays touch the feet of the idol during sunrise. This happens twice a year, generally during the months of January and November. Also, Navratri is a good time to visit as the temple is decorated with glittering lights and *diyas*, the idol is brought out during the evenings on each of the ten days and taken around the temple premises in a *palkhi*.

The idol is decorated differently with coloured saris and flowers during the procession. Other than the religious importance, the Mahalaxmi temple is a sight to see for anyone interested in architecture or archaeology.

The royal abode

Apart from the temple, the New Palace is another must-visit. The palace was built in the late 1800's and has paintings of Shivaji Maharaj's life stories. The palace has a garden area, a museum, a wrestling ground and a small lake within its premises. As the city was one of the important administrative centres for the Chattrapatis, the museum has a lot of memorabilia including college certificates of kings and princes, pictures of the royal family, letters from eminent personalities, old maps and family trees of royal families in the state. It also has a few personal belongings of the kings and queens of the Maratha clan like their clothes, weapons, games, furniture and jewellery. There is also a room which displays stuffed, all the animals and birds the king and his family members have hunted from all over the world. There are stuffed tiger heads, wild bulls, deer species, Himalayan Black Bear and panthers, to name a few. The main attraction is the *darbar* hall which has the throne at one end of the room, its glory intact despite passing time.

Apart from the temple, the New Palace is another must-visit. The palace was built in the late 1800's and has paintings of Shivaji Maharaj's life stories. The palace has a garden area, a museum, a wrestling ground and a small lake within its premises.



The New Palace, which was built in the late 1800s

The royal family continues to live in one part of the palace, the descendants of Shreemant Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj have their private chambers in the palace. The palace takes us back to the era when the royals ruled our country.

The river banks

The banks of the Panchganga river are another place of worship for many pilgrims. The river is formed at Prayag Chikli with the confluence of four streams Kasari, Kumbhi, Tulsi and Bhogawati. It is said that the River Saraswati flows underground and joins the confluence.

The river bank has a temple of Lord Ganesha, Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti. It also has an old spiritual centre built for

the sages during the time of Shivaji. The best time to visit is during *Deepotsav* when thousands of *diyas* float in the river. This happens during Diwali and was started a few years back to gather the community, and attract tourists.

Ahead of the banks is the road towards the famous hill stations Panhala and Jyotiba. The former is known for the fort used by Shivaji himself, the latter is a place of worship. This is a sneak peak to the historical and religious importance of the city. It is because of this rich heritage that the city has a good reputation for its art and culture. But if you visit the city now, the growing urbanisation and modern lifestyle is slowly taking over the ancient arts and practices in the city. Before the heritage is lost in time, one must move past the temples and



The Panchganga River; it is said that River Saraswati flows underground



The iconic Kolhapuri Chappal, on sale in Kolhapur

palaces and experience the local culture by visiting a few hubs.

The colourful chappal lane

The Kolhapuri Paythan, better known as Kolhapuri Chappal, is a leather footwear which is quite a rage in the fashion industry even today, both national and international. One can often see designers pairing traditional outfits with these *chappals*. They are made from animal skin, mainly buffalo, and are handcrafted. The USP (Unique Selling Point) of this *chappal* is that the leather is tanned using vegetable dyes and not chemical dyes. This is a practice continued since they were manufactured for the first time.

The city's chappal lane is near the temple. It is a 500 meter road stretch with shops on both sides. One can smell the leather, its polish from meters before the road begins. A typical Kolhapuri Chappal is heavy leather footwear which has a lot of straps in the front, usually decorated with threads from the animal skin. Over a period of time, the chappal has been modified and made into lighter footwear with only thin straps.

“The Kolhapuri Chappals are said to have

been made first during the 13th century. It was a specific community known as the *chambhars* (cobblers) who specialised in making these *chappals*. The *chappals* made for the royals and the military were heavy, and made a chirpy sound while walking”, said Jaysinghrao Powar who owns one of the oldest stores in the chappal lane. Depending on the quality and make, *chappals* vary from ₹200 to a lakh. One needs to have great bargaining skills here as store owners often end up quoting more than the actual price.

Buying a pair of *chappals* is a good experience, but seeing a pair being made, is a better one. One must definitely try to visit one of the small-scale manufacturing units in the city. Any store owner in the lane will help with a visit to one of these units. These small units are generally owned by the higher strata of the *chambhar* communities. The artists are usually of the economically lower strata that are skilled in making the footwear since their childhood. One can see three different groups of artists – one is responsible for tying the threads removed from the hide to create intricate designs for

The Kolhapuri Paythan, better known as Kolhapuri Chappal, is a leather footwear which is quite a rage in the fashion industry even today, both national and international. One can often see designers pairing traditional outfits with these chappals.



A workshop where Kolhapuri Chappals are being made; is it a dying art?

the top of the *chappal*, the second group works on the polishing and cutting of the leather to make the base, and the third one usually takes care of the finishing. Artists are paid anything between ₹ 50 to ₹ 350 for a pair. It is an unusual tourist experience to actually see the artists at work.

Increasing demand, but a dying art

While everything looks fine for the *chappals*, the art of making this leather footwear is dying. The owner of a small establishment, Namdev Kadam explained that there are very few artists who make the chappals. The older generations of the cobbler community are losing efficiency with age and the newer generations do not want to learn this skill. As it is a daily wage profession, people are losing interest in it. Families are opting to educate their children over teaching them this ancestral art.

“Making a *chappal* is a work of art. The thread work is intricate and need a lot of focus to get the perfection. Compared to the work done, the artists get paid very less. This is one reason why people are drifting away from this job. They are getting educated and trying for jobs that pay better than this sedentary job. The community should set up a training centre and decide on a monthly salary instead of the daily wages. This will bring back the younger generations to this art, which

their families are involved in for hundreds of years,” said Kadam.

As per shop owners, beef banning in the state has caused a major setback in the Kolhapur *chappal* industry. The sellers have to import the leather from Kerala. This has brought down the quality of the leather. Manufacturers are also no longer able to order leather as per their requirements. It is because of these two major reasons that the art which has demand, is at the brink of extinction. Though the footwear is available in stores and on online markets, the make and quality is dropping



The Dhangar Kolhapuri Chappals



An artist at Ganpatrao Udhale's workshop



Stone carving in progress; another of the dying arts

with each passing day. Fewer artists who make these chappals the traditional way remain, elders predicting the footwear art will last not more than 10 years from now. The story of the Kolhapuri Paythan needs to be propagated to ensure that some

steps are taken to revive this old art, and train younger generations.

The last stone-carving centre

It is said that the Mahalaxmi Temple was hand-carved



These stones were cut using hand tools



A religious symbol cut into stone



A stone idol at a workshop in Kerala

from a single mass of stone, right from the numerous pillars supporting the structure, to the delicate designs on them.

Probably this is one reason why one can find a lot of temples made from stones with hand-carved designs. The stones used to build these temples are also chiselled using hand tools only. This is an art common to the state of Maharashtra, Kolhapur being one of the biggest hubs.

On the Kolhapur-Panhala highway, a lot of stone carving artists can be seen on the side of the road. They belong to the village of Keral, and they generally make small hand-carved stone idols. These stone carving workshops have now become hybrid – that is, they use both machinery and hand tools to carve designs on the stones. Most of their work is used for temples being constructed in nearby areas.

But, to know more about the art, one must visit one of the last stone carving workshops in the city. At Dussera Chowk is the workshop of Ganpatrao Udhole. It is the largest space where stone is cut, polished and carved using hand tools. There are a few artists of the Vadar community who specialise in stone carving.

On the Kolhapur-Panhala highway, a lot of stone carving artists can be seen on the side of the road. They belong to the village of Keral, and they generally make small hand-carved stone idols.

They are usually seen carving mythical creatures, holy symbols and flower designs on large pieces of stones. While a few years back everything was done by hand chisels and hammer, these days the workshop has installed a cutter for the initial stage. The designing is still done using hand tools.

A few decades earlier, the whole area of Dussera Chowk was occupied by large workshops, there was a high demand for these stones in the construction of temples, buildings and idols. As cement concrete began replacing the stones, the workshops started closing down one by one. For the last two years, this is the only workshop operating continuously. Where stone carving is concerned, the main reason for its decline is the lack of demand. With not much demand in market and less income, the younger generations of the Vadar community are leaning toward other better paying jobs.

“The art of stone carving is very difficult. It needs a lot of skill and patience. The younger generations want quick money and they want to learn other skills than this. Also, there is not much market for this. If only



Wrestlers at Khasbaag Maidan, where most get trained and honed

the newer constructions start using the carved stones to give their buildings a heritage touch to it, it may solve a lot of problems”, said Udhale. Stone carving is also found in the northern and western parts of the state, but most of the workshops have converted to machine-based ones.

‘Dangal’ in the city

Recently, there were two movies based on wrestling, both starring superstars. The movies have shed some light on wrestling and its situation in our country. Very few people know that the city of Kolhapur is also known for its wrestlers and wrestling groups. Talim *mandals* as they are called, are groups of men practising wrestling everyday morning. ‘Kushti’ is a sport locally famous, youngsters from faraway villages come to the city to get trained.



Kushti is very popular here

To see the oil clad men wrestle with each other in red mud, one must visit the Khasbaag Maidan. It is the hub where most of the practice as well as the matches take place. The best time to visit is either early morning or evenings, when you can see the wrestlers exercise, relish their diet of milk and eggs, and practice *kushti* in the mud wearing *langotis* – a sight that will definitely remind you of the movies. If not the Khasbaag, you can visit any *talims* (groups) that train wrestlers. Most of these *talims* are in and around the temple area.

While the movies are propagating wrestling, in the city it is on a decline. Youngsters are finding gyms a cooler and modern way of working out than wrestling. Also, the sport is not earning them enough money to survive in this competitive world. Probably a lot more ‘dangal’ is needed to save this sport from dying.

Conclusion

The arts mentioned above are the ‘essence of the culture of Kolhapur. While visiting the tourist places is important, feeling the culture of the city is a new experience altogether. This is heritage that we need to see, get inspired and preserve. ■



After completing her engineering, Anvi Mehta interned for a newspaper and has been freelancing since then. Currently working in Uttarakhand as a Fellow, she travels to document different cultures and arts.



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Walking around MADURAI

Text & photos: Anvi Mehta

The city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu state is a city with culture and heritage visible in its every corner and crevice. Here, life is slow-paced, temple festivals sacred, the air redolent with the smell of jasmine, the fragrance of filter coffee, and the sounds of temple bells. Walking around this city is truly a step back in time, when modernity was an incredible, and perhaps, a blessed mirage.

FONDLY known as the Athens of the South, Madurai is a city with a glorious past. The modern city was established by the Pandya rulers and expanded during the Nayak rule. The city is rich in culture and heritage, and the best way to experience it is by attending a Heritage Walk in the morning.

The streets of Madurai

As Madurai is still a developing city, one can experience a typical south Indian morning here: Men wearing *dhotis*, *pujaris* offering prayers, cycle rickshaws carrying bananas, and small cafés brewing filter coffee, are some of the common sights in the old city. The walk typically covers the four Mast streets within which the ancient city thrived. The city area between the inner Mast streets and outer Veli streets is encircled by a fort, and seventy-two fortifications enclosed within four gateways. There are many traces of the ancient city in the modern Madurai which take you back in time.

As mentioned earlier, Madurai is a city with a rich past. The city was the capital of the Pandya rulers since 3rd century B.C. It has a unique place in the literary mentions of the *puranas*, historical records and accounts of foreigners who visited the city at its glory. Madurai was an important trade centre since its establishment, and it had trade contacts with ancient Greece and Rome. Foreign traders from different sects and religion were associated with Madurai, hence the city's culture evolved with time. It has been ruled by the Pandyas, Cholas, Sultans, Vijaynagar emperors, Madurai Nayaks, Nawabs of Arcot, and the British.



The Nayak Palace darbar hall

The Thirumalai Nayak Palace

The first stop in the Heritage Walk is the Nayak Palace built by the King Thirumalai Nayak in 1636 A.D. It is a huge palace supported by heavy columns. The palace has beautifully painted domes, striking arches, stucco figures and works which depict the architectural splendour of those times. The palace is an example of Hindu and Muslim architecture combined. The best part of the palace is the Swargavilas, where the King lived. While three-fourths of the palace has been destroyed, the Swargavilas, courtyard, darbar hall, pooja room and bed chamber still exist. A light and sound show is organised in the darbar hall by the tourism department in the evenings. Outside the palace is a small museum where the development of Tamil language is shown via inscriptions and slabs. Although many may not understand the language, the evolution of the script is intriguing.

The Sethupati Hospital

A few hundred meters from the palace is the Sethupati Hospital. It is now an old building in ruins, converted into a departmental store. The structure was erected in 1897 A.D. by the Sethupati ruler of Pannad in honour of Prince Albert Victor. One can see a stone slab fixed on the wall of this hospital mentioning its construction date and purpose.

The Ten Pillar Lane

A narrow lane to the north of the Nayak Palace has ten stone pillars with a height of 12 meters and a breadth of 1.20 meter. The pillars are the remnants of the Rangavilasa, the second part of the Nayak Palace where the king's younger brother resided. The lane is known as the Ten Pillar Lane, and is a commercial centre in the modern city. The pillars were



The Sethupati Hospital, now converted into a departmental store



An inscription describing how the ten pillars in this lane formed a part of the Thirumalai Nayak Palace



The stunning gopuram of the Meenakshi Temple

assumed to be part of the elephant stables, but historians say that they were part of the Rangavilasa's *darbar* hall. Though the tourism department is trying, the pillars need a lot of maintenance.

The Vilakkuththun (The lamp post)

The fourth stop in the walk is the lamp post, also known as Vilakkuththun locally. It is situated at the meeting place of South Masi street and the East Masi street, north of the Ten Pillar Lane. The lamp post was installed to honour the then General John Blacburn. Blacburn had ordered the destruction of Madurai Fort and expansion of the city towards the outer streets in 1840 A.D. The lamp post has a British architectural touch to it, and is still lit in the evenings.

The undisturbed gate or Vitthavasa

Vitthavasa, also known as the gate that should be left undisturbed, is the next monument in the heritage walk. Similar to the Pandya Fort, the gate is mentioned in an inscription of the British government found on the gateway. The inscription warns that if anyone tries to harm the gate, they will be severely punished. Currently though, it is kept untouched, the surroundings are crowded, and it is very difficult to actually locate the inscription.

Raya Gopuram

The Nayak kings wanted to build a *gopuram* which is the largest in the state. They started one in 1654 A.D., and the *gopuram* was supposed to measure 58 meters in length and 38 meters in breadth and it was located near the Meenakshi Temple, but for some reason, the structure could not be completed and now the incomplete *stumbha* has a small temple at its base, where prayers are held regularly.

The tank at the Elukadal Street

A lot of history is lost in the development of the modern city. One needs to search for the places which exist, but are camouflaged in the large stores and busy streets. One such monument is a large tank in the Elukadal Street which was broken and converted into a multi-storied commercial complex. A portion of the tank is in the centre of the complex with a temple of Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Meenakshi. Legend says that Kanchanmala, mother of the Goddess, wanted to take a trip to the seven seas. When Lord Shiva learnt of his mother-in-law's wish, he miraculously brought the water of the seven seas into this one large tank. An inscription stone near the tank says that an officer of the Vijayanagara ruler renovated and reconstructed the tank in 1516 A.D. He also named it the Saptasakaram.



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The temple pond

The Pudumandapam

A hall to celebrate festivals constructed by the Nayak king is currently a market place. While the centre of the hall is locked and opened only during festivities, the fringes have small stores. On the pillars of the *mandapam*, one can see life-size images of Nayak rulers, the royal family, the Gods and Goddesses. One can see the architecture of that time in the *mandapam* pillars which also have inscriptions talking about life stories of the Gods and Goddesses. This *mandapam* defines the structural art of the Nayak period.

The Meenakshi–Sundaresvara Temple

This ancient temple is one of the major tourist attractions in Madurai. Thousands of pilgrims visit the city every year to offer prayers to Lord Shiva and Goddess Meenakshi. It is said to be a thousand and five hundred years old. The location of the temple is such that it is the center of the city, and the streets of the old city were laid around it. The temple was mentioned in the songs of the holy texts since the Sangam age. It was established and expanded during the rule of early Pandyas. Most of the old structure was removed and reconstructed during the Nayak rule like the *gopurams* outside the eastern and western gates. The present structure is there since the Nayak rule. The interiors of the temple have scriptural



The popular *jigarthanda* drink

paintings, and there are more than 60 inscriptions which talk about the Nayak and Pandya period. The architecture of the temple show a blend of cultures, as there are elephants, lotuses and dragons all used as motifs on pillars and walls.

Madurai being a city of festivals, the most important one is the Chitra festival. One can see a crowd of lakhs on the street celebrating the Lord and Goddess' wedding. The hundreds-of-years-old temple cars made from wood and decorated with jewels, are taken around the old streets of the city. If a visit during this time is not possible, one can see the temple cars kept in glass cases on the East Masi street. The temple cars are truly beautiful pieces of art.

A typical heritage walk ends with the Meenakshi Temple, but one can definitely explore the modern city thereafter. The city is very rich in its culture and traditions, one must not leave it without trying its food, especially a cold beverage called *jigarthanda*. ■



After completing her engineering, Anvi Mehta interned for a newspaper and has been freelancing since then. Currently working in Uttarakhand as a Fellow, she travels to document different cultures and arts.

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“I wanted to give the other side of women. Not all women are meant to do artis in the temple or cook alu matar in the kitchen”.

Please do not mistake this **Bhaavna Arora** for the young lady who threw ink on Kejriwal earlier this year at a public meeting. This is the young, bubbly, highly educated young writer, who is making waves with every novel of hers that hits the market. Her latest, *Love Bi the Way*, the “Bi” being a deliberately suggestive word that one would get to know while



reading the novel, is already a big commercial hit, and is getting rave reviews in the press. Bhaavna goes into details about her latest creative venture in her writing career she opted for voluntarily when she could have easily got a cushy position with her two management degrees and a Ph.D. in leadership. Excerpts from her conversation with **Shoma A. Chatterji**.

You are qualified enough to become a full-time academic or a high ranking corporate executive. What made you choose fiction writing as a career?

Sometimes life chooses you and at other times you choose life. For the person I am and the personality I carry, I would fall in the latter category of people. I always wanted to write, and when I thought that the time was ripe, I just made a switch from a full time director of a B School to a writer, and I couldn't have been happier.

How did the idea of this particular novel –*Love Bi the Way*– occur to you to begin with?

This novel is a tribute to a special person's honesty towards me, and the challenges he is facing for being “gay”. I was introduced to him via a marriage proposal. Though I wasn't too keen on marriage, I liked the person instantly. His honest confession and refusal to marry me is what triggered me to write about this subject.

I always wanted to write, and when I thought that the time was ripe, I just made a switch from a full time director of a B School to a writer, and I couldn't have been happier.

I would define this book to be in a chick-lit genre. Do you agree?

Honestly, my books cannot be categorised in any genre and I do not prefer any categorising into genre/genres as this tends to restrict readership. The content of the book has greater and deeper meaning than what a chick-lit is assumed to have.

How do you define the term chick-lit with reference to contemporary fiction in English?

I do not think I am the right person to answer this question. I would rather reserve my comments, lest my co-authors take offence.

You have written three published novels till now. How have you evolved as a writer from the first novel to this recent one?

Reality is more bizarre than fiction. I do my research well on any topic that I write on or about. I often put myself in the shoes of the protagonist who is mostly a strong, classy, intelligent and an independent girl. In this

novel, Rihana is strong. I questioned myself what I would have done had I been in that situation. My novels always conclude with something I strongly believe in. We all evolve as human beings everyday and if we do not, we are not in the right place. My first book, *The Deliberate Sinner* talks about infidelity and how it is perceived differently by society for a man and a woman. *Mistress of Honour* spins the yarns of a tale of love that includes two generations of the same family. My third book talks about honesty being more important than fidelity. I think I've evolved as a human being and as an author.

In your novel, Rihana seems to be a confirmed misandrist – hater of men and why she is so is revealed only at the end of the novel. Is this a fictional character or is she inspired by someone you may have encountered in real life?

It was inspired by someone I have met in real life from what we generally term “high society.”

There are two female protagonists in this novel and the two supporting characters are also female – Nandini and her daughter. Kanhaiya, as the girls say in the book, is the only male. Was this a conscious decision to make it woman-centric? Or did you just go with the flow as you wrote or was it a blend of these two?

There are many more supporting characters like Saif, Zubair and Shaurya. The idea wasn't deliberate at all. It's just that the characters you've mentioned fitted well in the script. Kanhaiya is bound by monetary gains. Even Zubair comes out clean in the book. There is no hatred towards men in the book, it is the experiences with different men that gets the girls closer. However it appears to be like that because of the demand of the script.

Zara is also alienated from her parents. This seems to be a sort of bonding they share – Rihana and Zara – their keeping away from parental ties which is very foreign to the Indian mindset. How do you explain this as a writer and as a woman yourself?

The idea may sound foreign as we still make movies and write books keeping the moralistic character of parents in mind. A mother is an epitome of love and sacrifice, while a father is someone you can worship. But humans have flaws. Even if they are parents, they sin. The idealistic image of parents that we've been carrying though the Bollywood characterisation, doesn't allow us to accept them. Today's individuals even as

parents have some of their priorities sorted. So it's just not a “foreign” concept anymore. I think desensitisation is important as many marriages are falling apart, and many kids are being raised by single parents.

The idea may sound foreign as we still make movies and write books keeping the moralistic character of parents in mind. A mother is an epitome of love and sacrifice, while a father is someone you can worship. But humans have flaws.

Rihana seems to wear her sexual desires on her sleeve and is both brazen and somewhat brutally frank about it. Did you do this by design or is it an insight into her character, in reality hiding behind that false exterior?

It was by design. I wanted to give the other side of women. Not all women are meant to do *artis* in the temple or cook *alu matar* in the kitchen. We always long for forbidden things without having the courage to get them. In that sense, Rihana is brazen, yet brave.

Did you enjoy writing the novel and how do you look back on it now that it is a great commercial success?

I thoroughly enjoyed writing *Love Bi the Way*.

Its freshness and uniqueness is something I love. It was a big risk I took in the commercial space, but its success only brought more happiness.

Which contemporary Indian and international fiction writers do you admire and why?

I love reading Paulo Coelho as his books have logic that I can relate to, and intensity.

If you are an avid reader, then what are your favourites?

I read anything that is interesting and keeps me glued to the story.

What are you working on right now?

I'm working on a biography now.

Is there an emotional draining after the novel is finished?

The feeling is not “emotional drain” but “emotional exhilaration”. I really can't explain in words as I'll fall short of them. ■



Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for ‘commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues’ among many awards. She is currently Senior Research Fellow, ICSSR, Delhi, researching the politics of presentation of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema 1950 to 2003.

Going green over homes

(Continued from page 22)

So if you have plans to construct a home in the near future, then why not go for a greener approach? With rising levels of pollution and warning signs of global warming, this can be your contribution to a greener world. Here are a few salient points to consider during design of such homes.

Local materials: Use locally available materials whenever possible. Natural materials like mud blocks, stone and recycled wood or bamboo can be effectively used to ensure that the carbon emissions are low. Try to cut down on steel, cement and concrete usage.

Sunlight: Opt for natural sunlight. Plan the orientation of homes in such a way that there is abundant sunlight entering your home. Place windows to get maximum sunlight. Go for skylights, and if you have the space, opt for an open courtyard too. Such courtyards help in cross ventilation, bring in adequate sunlight and also keep the home cooler.

Save water and plan for rain water and usage of grey water: Be water wise and save rain water. Collect the rain water, filter it as it passes through pipes and store it in storage tanks. Plan to use the grey kitchen water to water gardens. Some of the green homes in Bangalore have also connected the output of their washing machine to the flush tanks in toilets.

Paint free: Organic paints are costly but are great for your health as they are lead free. There are some homes owners who have opted to go paint and plaster free as well.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: Recycle or upcycle whenever you can. Doors, window frames, recycled wood, lighting fixtures, cabinets can be repurposed for your home. Homes like the Five Seasons House in Bangalore have found new uses for pipes, tyres, furniture, trunks, stone slabs etc.

Compost waste: Composting can be



A plant cheers us up instantly!

So if you have plans to construct a home in the near future, then why not go for a greener approach? With rising levels of pollution and warning signs of global warming, this can be your contribution to a greener world. Here are a few salient points to consider during design of such homes.

fun. My neighbour uses a *khamba* pot from 'Daily Dump' organisation to compost wet waste. At the end of six weeks the black compost is used for her vegetable garden, and sometime she gifts them to her friends. The Daily Dump comes with decorative pots that make composting a lot of fun. You can get all the details of the product and its

usage manual on their website.

Run on Solar: The solar installation initially may cost you. But when all your appliances will run on solar power, think solar lighting and heating, your bills come down too. If you have a roof, balcony area, then solar panels may be right for you. So opt for solar panels after deciding on your budget that covers the initial investment, installation, servicing and maintenance of the units.

A little bit of forethought and planning of your home can prevent cost escalations at the last moment and help you design a cost effective home, a home that you and your family will be proud of in the years to come. So it makes sense to go that extra mile while designing your dream home. ■

Usha Hariprasad is a freelancer who is fond of travelling, discovering new places and



writing about travel related destinations around Bangalore at Citizen Matters. Currently, she works in a trekking organisation.

Narcissism by another name?

We may think taking a selfie is a casual act. But selfies have become a craze of late, taking even the dimensions of a disease, sadly. Is it a form of protest or one of narcissism? A. Radhakrishnan dwells at length on this phenomenon, while advising people to enjoy the act, and not obsess about it!

A selfie is a self-portrait photograph, typically taken with a digital camera or camera phone held in the hand or supported by a selfie stick. Selfies are often shared on social networking services such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. If someone else takes your photo it is not a selfie.

Oxford Dictionaries announced their 2013 year word to be selfie as 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.'

The origin of selfie

Designer/photographer Jim Krause is said to have coined the word selfie in 2005, and Time magazine ranked it one of its top 10 buzzwords for 2012. Although the rampant proliferation of the technique is quite recent, the selfie itself is far from being a strictly modern phenomenon. Indeed, the photographic self-portrait was surprisingly common in the late 1880s when camera shutters with self-timers became available, and it was often more convenient for the experimenting photographer to act as model as well.

The first photographic portrait considered a selfie was taken by an amateur chemist and photography enthusiast from Philadelphia named Robert Cornelius. Setting up his camera at the back of the family store he took the image by removing the lens cap and then running into frame where he sat for a minute before covering up the lens again. On the back he wrote "The



Say 'cheese'! Selfies are a craze today!

first light Picture ever taken. 1839." Too bad he couldn't upload the photo to Instagram with the hashtag #selfie to receive the credit he deserves.

'How to take a selfie' primer

To take a selfie on a smartphone:

- Open your camera application.
- Make sure the front camera is on and facing you. In the top right hand corner there is a switch sign that, when tapped, will flip between the front and back camera.
- Practice your smile and make sure you can see your entire face.
- Take a selfie!

Angles are important. Most people look the best when their face is tilted at a slight angle to the camera. But do not make it a side profile shot. Practice by just taking photos of your face from different positions. After you've found your angle, hold the camera with just

one hand at a 45-degree angle above you and then use your thumb to snap the photo.

Using two hands can cause your neck to tense up and the selfie will look less relaxed. You can go hands free using a selfie stick – a long stick with an adjustable clamp on one end that holds your phone in position. The handle has a button where you simply click it and it takes the photo from your camera. They are also a great tool for group shots.

There are selfie DON'Ts to adhere to. Don't hold the phone under your neck and show a double chin, or even worse, letting people look up your nose! Even mirror selfies taken just of your shoulders up are not a good option! There could be a glare in the mirror from the flash. Remember that selfies should always be the most accurate description of you; so just smile, relax, and have fun!

More than just a photograph

Elise Moreau, a professional blogger writes, "There is so much more meaning behind a selfie and why it's become such a massive trend. The younger crowd seems to be especially involved, mainly because teens and the 18 to 34 demographic are heavier digital users than their older counterparts. Kids who are connected on a social network to someone they admire may be more driven to upload attractive or alluring selfies as a way to seek attention, especially if they're too shy to do it in person. It's a strange new flirting method that's only been around since the rise of the mobile.

The psychological factors that drive specific persons to take a selfie and upload it to a social networking may vary. It might be to genuinely express themselves, as not all are driven by narcissism, but want to build their own self-image. Many people take selfies entirely for themselves, even though they may post them online for everyone else to see.

But the narcissist part kicks in when they like to get noticed on social media and all of those 'likes' and comments from friends are a quick and easy way to fish for compliments and boost one's own ego.

Yes, there are also people who are bored at work, bored at school, bored at home and bored on the toilet, and hence will take selfies because they have nothing else better to do! Social media is about being social. Some people don't need a real reason to upload selfies. It's fun, and it's a cool way to sort of document your own life. Some popular tools have a lot of great filters to make your selfies look instantly aged, artsy or highlighted".

But then every new technological advance creates a band of doomsayers and selfies are the latest victim.

Selfies, defenders aver, are a natural expression of being human. 'As the

Don't be selfie-obsessed

- There was this guy who dragged a shark out of the ocean, pinned it down on the beach and then posed for selfies with it. When released, the shark was so distressed, it flopped around in the shallow waves, which actually washed it even further up onto the beach.
- In another incident, a rare, endangered Franciscan dolphin of which only 30,000 remain in the wild, was taken from the ocean, passed around among a mob of people who took selfies with it, then left it for dead on the sand.
- In Africa's 'lion parks' lion holding facilities take cubs as young as a few weeks old from their mothers so that paying tourists can touch, pick up and take selfies with them.
- 16-year-old Ryan Morgan was shot dead at his home in Jeannette, Pennsylvania, by a classmate, who then posed with his dead body, took a selfie picture and sent it to another friend. He was charged with first-degree murder, homicide and possession of a firearm by a minor.
- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in 2015, tried to turn copyright law on its head with the mug of a macaque monkey named Naruto, whose selfies went viral and was seen around the world. It filed a suit, asking the courts to declare Naruto the rightsholder and hence an owner of property: a copyright. David Slater, the British nature photographer whose camera was swiped by the ape in the Indonesian jungle, was 'very saddened' over PETA's lawsuit (PDF) in the United States. A federal judge in San Francisco however ruled that a macaque monkey who took the now-famous selfie photographs cannot be declared the copyright owner of the photos, and that while Congress and the President can extend the protection of law to animals as well as humans; there is no indication that they did so in the Copyright Act!
- Closer home, Aditya Shukla, a 22-year-old Agra resident, lost both his legs after he fell off a moving train while hanging out of it and trying to take a selfie. What a tragic way to die!

human voice is the organ of the soul (to quote Henry W. Longfellow) the human image – the face – is the expression of the soul'. What can be more beautiful than the joy of the moment of capturing a group, or strangers for that matter, in a huddle of smiling faces – bent over in a selfie?

It is believed that selfie boosts self-confidence and self-esteem. According to *Time* magazine, researchers believe that it allows people to express their selves in a way never seen before. There have been about 90 million photos posted to Instagram with #selfie. It is absolutely a benefit to society that people are coming close and the bond has become stronger. There is more sociability. Everyone from prime ministers, athletes, movie stars are taking pictures of themselves and posting to their social media profiles.

A psychological disorder?

But some consider it as a psychological disorder or self-obsession. Scientists link selfies to narcissism, addiction and mental illness. People who take six or more selfies in a day and upload them on the internet have serious mental disease. Grouches ask, why 257 narcissist selfies in a day? Doesn't this accelerate one of the evils of our increasingly individualistic society?

'Selfitis' – a newly termed mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) is where a person develops an obsessive compulsive disorder of clicking selfies. They get impatient and irritated if told not to and have to be put on cognitive behavioural therapy.

(Continued on page 49)

The brilliance of Om Puri

*Om Puri was a truly versatile, and one of India's most talented actors ever. His passing away has indeed robbed India of a shining star, says **Shoma A. Chatterji**, as she charts his brilliant career.*

OM Puri (1950-2017), is perhaps the first actor to have raised the bar for every Indian actor in terms of acting talent. Before Om, it was assumed that smashing good looks, good height and a relatively fair skin were imperative for a man to make it in films. Om, with his pock-marked face he did not care to 'correct' with cosmetic surgery even when he could afford it, proved again and again that an actor can rise above his looks through his dedication, passion and hard work. He leaves behind a volume of films that would stand testimony to his priceless contribution to Indian cinema for all time.

He was the first actor with a pock-marked face, a skeletal, bony frame, a dusky complexion and average height to set the benchmark for many wonderful actors who have made a mark in Indian cinema not for their looks but for their sterling performances. Examples are many, but the few that come up at

once are – Irrfan Khan, Nana Patekar, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Manoj Bajpai, Neena Gupta, Raghuvir Yadav, Rajpal Yadav, Tannishtha Chatterjee and many others, most of who, interestingly, like Om and his lifelong compatriot and close friend Naseeruddin Shah, were also graduates of the National School of Drama, Delhi. So, they have in common their background in theatre in an era when they did not carry their stage mannerisms, voice modulations or dialogue delivery into their screen roles which underwrote their extreme versatility as actors.

Versatility, thy name Om Puri

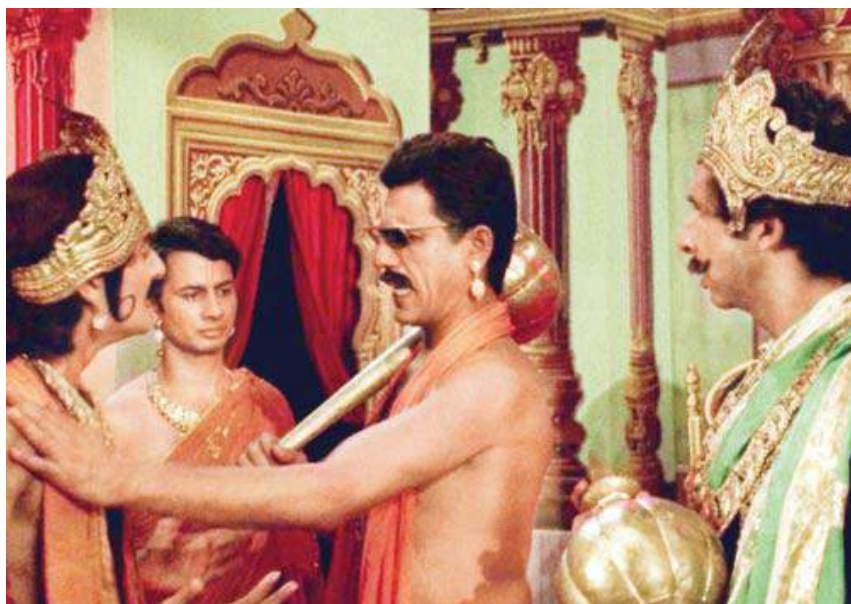
Versatility was the key to Om Puri's tremendous success as an actor who ruled over Bollywood in every film and role one could conceive of, for four long decades and was still counting, till death took him away at the relatively 'young' age of 66 on January 6 this



Om Puri in *Ardh Satya*

year. Naseeruddin is of course, the more 'glamorous' between the two who did many films together for many years and remained friends forever. But that is because Om was a down-to-earth actor who did not give importance to glamour at all. Right through the four decades, he never resorted to make 'improvements' on his face either with make-up or with cosmetic surgery even when he could have afforded to have done so when films began to fall into his already full basket. As age grew on him, his hair turned completely white and he wore a wig or dyed it black only when the director asked him to in order to fulfil the demands of the character he was playing in a given film.

Two classic examples of how he performed the balancing act between and among different genres of films, different characters and mainstream and parallel films are – Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* and the *masala* blockbuster *Narasimha*. In *Mirch Masala*, he plays Abbu Miyan, the septuagenarian security guard of the red chilli factor where all the workers are women. He acted three times his age with a long beard and long white hair, his affection towards the women so paternal and emotionally close that he did not bat an eye when he knew



The iconic *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*, which in many ways redefined comedy in movies

his life was at stake; just so he could protect the dignity of the woman who had taken refuge in the factory from the lascivious Subedaar, and thus risked the safety of all the women there.

N. Chandra's *Narasimha* (1991) was an out-and-out action film filled with fights, killings, sword-fights and the like. Om portrayed Suraj Narayan Singh, a big lord of goons and capitalist of the city who basically controls the law and order of the city and rules over it using muscle power and his immense wealth. He does not blink before ordering to kill whoever dares to cross his path. For this role, Om wore a shoulder-length wig with touches of grey in it, big glares and a vertical red mark on his forehead that enhanced the cruelty of his character. He looked both hateful and funny, and that was his unique contribution to his roles in different kinds of films.

As Om grew in weight, age, status as an actor, and maturity, he made no attempt to cut down on his weight reportedly due to his heavy binges in alcohol. His films in English did not bring about any change in his typically Punjabi-tinged accent as seen noticeably in his character in *East is East* (1999) where he plays Zaheed George Khan, a Pakistani Muslim settled in England who marries a Briton, but bashes her up from time to time. He has another Muslim wife back in Pakistan and wants his British-born and bred kids to imbibe and internalise Islam, arranged marriages, and protests against their licentious lifestyle with boyfriends and dating and so on. The film won him a BAFTA nomination establishing his global credentials as an actor for all time. His role in *My Son, The Fanatic* (1997) fetched him the Crystal Star Award at the Brussels International Film Festival in 1998. The Montreal Film Festival bestowed on him the Grand Prix Special des Amériques for his exceptional contribution to the cinematographic art in 2000.

He smoothly gravitated from the



Om Puri in *East Is East*; this film won him a BAFTA nomination

underdog, the poor and the oppressed man in umpteen parallel films to brazenly commercial films to genres ranging from entertainment to comedy, to negative roles, to serious characters under any and every director across the cinematic landscape in India and also abroad. For directors, he had tremendous repeat value which means they must have been more than happy with his performance.

His first break in Hindi films was in Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) in which he did not utter a single word, and had to emote with his angry and expressive eyes filled with simmering violence. It is said that Nihalani who was making his directorial debut with this film, was advised against taking Om to portray Bhiku Lahanya, the low-caste man accused wrongly of having murdered his wife. But Nihalani stuck to his decision and said that was exactly the kind of actor he was looking for to portray that role. *Aakrosh* is a brilliant cinematic example of voluntary silence used as a strong political statement against wrongful indictment of a low-caste, poor and illiterate man by vested interests in the semi-rural place he lives and works in.

Ardh Satya (1983), saw him in a mesmerising performance as Anant Velankar, a gentle, poetry-spouting police inspector, who is fiercely angry with his father who used to regularly

beat up his mother, angry with himself because he did not protest, angry with the system that he found to be corrupt to the core, and this simmering anger found expression in an explosive act in the climax. He won the Best Actor Award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1984.

A tribute can hardly do justice to his voluminous oeuvre of work ranging from films like Prakash Jha's *Mrityudand*, through the amazing performances such as in Gulzar's *Maachis*, or Kundan Shah's rollicking black satire *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*, or the romantic husband in Basu Bhattacharya's *Aashtha*, or Shyam Benegal's *Mandi*, in which he portrays a dirty photographer who sneaks into a brothel to take dirty pictures and many more. This therefore, is a modest attempt to pay a tribute to one of the greatest actors of Indian cinema. ■

Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many awards. She is currently Senior Research Fellow, ICSSR, Delhi, researching the politics of presentation of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema 1950 to 2003.



No country for women

*The assault on women out to usher in the new year in Bangalore, brought us back to a depressingly familiar place – an India where increasingly women are being subjected to horrific assaults, even in public places. We must not tolerate this, and it's time things changed, says an anguished **Rashmi Oberoi**.*

A new year...A new beginning... New hopes and new dreams. But unfortunately, for women in this country, there was a terrifying and rude start to the year. We woke up to hear how Bangalore started the New Year on a horrifying note with the mass molestation of women on the streets of the city on New Year's Eve. Welcome to the 21st century where we still have men disrespecting women at every corner of the country and not only that...The blame is put on the women for that.

You see: Women must remain indoors and not even think about partying or celebrating or having fun or enjoying themselves. That right only belongs to a 'man' apparently. What is scary is the fact that this happened in Bangalore which is supposedly one of our 'safer' cities for women. What is even worse is that no one stopped them. For the first few days, no one was held responsible, and the blame conveniently shifted to the woman, as usual. This is what our cities have become for women – a nightmare, and nothing short of that.

It appears that the police and local administration need to be reminded time and again about their obligations and duties to provide law and order and safety to all its citizens. But yet again, the government is dithering on investigating these crimes and Bangalore has now become the next city on the long list of cities unsafe for women in India.

Women! You are on your own!

It is still fresh in my mind; during

the tragic Nirbhaya episode, politicians and bureaucrats rushed to deflect the attention from the crime with their cheap tactics and the same is now being done in this case with the crass and insensitive statements being made by politicians. These indefensible statements blaming women for their dress sense and every other conceivable reason to blame the victims for the crimes committed on them is despicable.

The end result is that no one wants to take responsibility for the crime that has occurred. Women must fend for themselves – that is the bottom line. In reality, there should be zero tolerance when it comes to crimes of any nature – be it children, women or the elderly, but the government has time and again failed in its duties.

Be it Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore – it seems that women have no right to have fun or experience the simple joys of bringing in the New Year. Instead, they must be ready to face the horrors of being accosted, teased, groped at, being molested, harassed or have their modesty outraged.

Our law makers and politicians then come out with the most ludicrous statements that reflect the way they think: "These things do happen" is an acceptable explanation of women being molested en masse at a public celebration of New Year's Eve. And another dispensed the argument that if women, unaccompanied by their fathers or husbands, mingle with other men, "It is wrong to expect them to treat her with respect...if there is sugar somewhere, ants will come." Shouldn't these uncouth men be punished for even suggesting that it is the way women dress that is to blame for such attacks.

You see, in this country, it is never a man's fault. It is always the woman who is to blame. And when things go wrong we blame the western culture. Very conveniently, the blame lies on the woman for dressing provocatively, or the situation being provoked by a woman, or how modern women are uncontrollable.

It makes my blood boil to read and hear such statements. We need a radical change in our society. We need our men to think differently. We need families to educate their boys and men on how to treat their girls and women. A

You see: Women must remain indoors and not even think about partying or celebrating or having fun or enjoying themselves. That right only belongs to a 'man' apparently. What is scary is the fact that this happened in Bangalore which is supposedly one of our 'safer' cities for women.



The assault on women, on New Year's Eve in Bangalore, shocked everyone

society which commits atrocities on their weaker members is not only uncivilised, but also underdeveloped. The brutalities done on women by men are not their sign of strength, but it is a sign of their weakness, which they are camouflaging.

History has proven the fact that the societies and civilisations which haven't

respected rights and safety of women, have perished badly. I firmly believe that respect and safety of women are the basic foundations of a society. It is imperative that if a community is not providing equal rights to women, and if women are bereft of basic freedom, there cannot be an ounce of progress in that society.

In hindsight, the answer is not very complicated. All that needs to be done is to teach our men how to respect women in our society. Men and woman must be treated equally in the eyes of the society to make this world a better and safer place to live in. ■

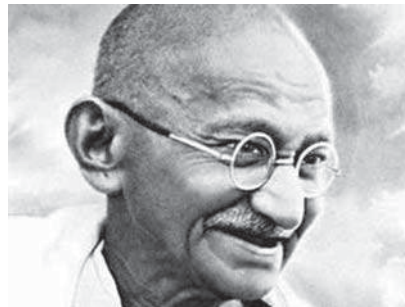
As an army officer's daughter, Rashmi Oberoi was lucky to travel and live all over India, as also a few years in Malaysia and U.S.A. Keenly interested in writing for children, she wrote two story books - *My Friends At Sonnenshine*, which was published in 1999 by Writer's Workshop, Kolkata, India and *Cherie: The Cocker Spaniel*, which was published in 2009 by the same publishers. For a few years she moved into the corporate world of HR but her love



for writing took precedence, and she pursued her passion by writing articles and middles for newspapers, print and online magazines, including a children's magazine abroad.

A leaf from the Mahatma's book

GOOD thoughts are good. Good words are better. Good deeds are the best. Good deeds without good thoughts are not possible, but good deeds without any words at all are the loftiest. Best to be a workaholic; not just a windbag. It is quite easy to say good things if one is not really valuing one's own words, and not thinking hard about what needs to follow in due course of time – the practice of the precept; the walking of the talk. The gift of the gab – anyone who possesses that, can charm with great ease. The great majority of *homo sapiens* are mesmerised and transfixed by good oratory. But this is merely a skill – inborn or cultivated. If one possesses a skill, it does not take much effort, does it? But doing what you say, takes a lot of it. An awful lot. Not just the effort expended in the 'doing', but also the effort in handling the pressure to walk the talk. And that is what makes it the



best. Intuitively, it is quite obvious that unless you do good or motivate others to do good through your speech or writings ('words', in other words), good thoughts are like seeds, and good words are like fertilisers....these without the ploughing and the irrigation, are simply useless.

One can call for 'blood, sweat, tears and toil', like Churchill did during the Second World War, but if such pompous statements are not backed up by what you did earlier, and what you would do, after the utterances, your words will only be mocked at by posterity. You

cannot preach and write about being environment-friendly for instance, and drive around always in a capacious gas guzzler. You cannot lecture a class on hygiene and good health and shrink away from cleaning your own toilet. Mahatma Gandhi cleaned his and those of others too! So, good deeds then leave behind the 'footprints on the sands of time' which Longfellow referred to in his poem, *The Psalm of Life*. 'Let us then be up and doing, with a heart for any fate.' ■

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Is education equity a pipe dream?

*India's Right to Education Act and the National Curriculum Framework are absolutely praiseworthy initiatives, says **Suman Barua**. But the challenges lie in the implementation. He discusses these challenges, and the way forward.*

AS students of International Education Policy last year, we learnt an important skill that one must develop to succeed in the development field – and that is being able to identify a champion in the sector you are working. My passion lies in striving to achieve education equity in India – which essentially means that everyone has access to excellent educational opportunities, no matter what financial and other resources they have access to. This article explores the most powerful stakeholders or champions that are trying to achieve education equity, in India.

Education is a subject of the concurrent list in India, which means that both the states and the federal governments have to work to ensure everyone has access to education. However, in reality, the ownership pretty much lies somewhere away from both of them.

The RTE and the NCF....and the challenges

The Central government launched two monumental policies that were intended to serve the quantity and quality aspects of education, namely, the Right to Education (RTE) and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF). While the former aims to ensure each child of age 6-14 has access to free education, the latter is a set beautiful document that defines very intricately what good quality education looks like.

To realise the Right to Education,

government launched the Compulsory Education Act in 2009, which has to a large extent gotten kids into school. According to the Act's directives - government schools have to provide free education to all admitted students, and private schools have to reserve at least 25% seats for economically disadvantaged sections of the society. There are enough proponents and skeptics of this, but one thing that is

Imagine it to be like someone serves a group of diverse guests, the best biriyani they have ever tasted in their lives, and asks them to go home and make it; with no recipe or explicit steps. The guests remember the features of the dish in terms of textures, smell and appeal, but are supposed to figure out how to get the end product!

for sure is – the RTE fails to account for challenges faced by the families to keep the students in schools which have forcibly become inclusive. Imagine a student who has never stepped outside a slum, going to school with kids who have travelled the world, it opens up a box of challenges that both the parties will face in the same classroom.

Is it possible to deal with these problems, and make use of the economic disparity in the class? Yes, it is possible. A carefully set culture of collaboration and support in the classroom can definitely achieve great learning outcomes in such a context, however, it is very dependent on the skills of the teachers. How much resources and skills the school imparts into its system has multiple variables, which the RTE or the Act does not in any way address. As a result, schools where there is a deliberate attention to inclusivity, are the only places where the Act will achieve its intended purpose.

The NCF is usually loved by many educators, and it was created to be a guiding light for all curricula, both at state and national levels. The framework is so thought out that it explicitly allows teachers to have different tests for different students based on ability or special needs, if the teacher deems necessary. However, any student currently sitting for the benchmark exams in the Indian system like the 10th and 12th will tell you that everybody receives the same yard stick to measure their academic prowess. Which brings us to the conclusion that the framework's non-mandatory nature has allowed it to be diluted down to a level which is not a real representation of the ideology behind the NCF in the first place. Well, then should it be made mandatory so that all the syllabi designed by different bodies are excellent? That is hardly a possibility, because similar to the RTE, this framework does not account for

skill levels and resources that different government agencies, education boards, and schools have access to.

Imagine it to be like someone serves a group of diverse guests, the best *biryani* they have ever tasted in their lives, and asks them to go home and make it; with no recipe or explicit steps. The guests remember the features of the dish in terms of textures, smell and appeal, but are supposed to figure out how to get the end product!

The role of the NGOs

Looking at another group of contenders in the fight for education equity; non-governmental organisations(NGOs). The development sector in recent times has been flooded with non-profits that run education (or related) programmes by collecting corporate money, and often achieve great results.

Though these organisations have very different stories, inevitably they are filling a gap left by the government policies, institutions, or resources. Let's look at this from the perspective of urban and rural areas.

Rural India deals with issues of access to education, wherein students in many parts of India like the Northeast still have to walk hours to find a school they can attend. The government resources are stuck somewhere between the political system and the ground realities; and neither of them have access to it. What NGOs are able to do in these contexts are directly bring highly skilled people or resources from well-resourced communities into the villages, and look for sustainable solutions. Some NGOs bring promising youth from diverse sectors to work with the local school leaders and work on capacity development. And others create occupational opportunities in the rural areas in a bid to develop the local economy and in turn create the demand for better schools. Quality of education



The RTE Act has brought more kids into school

in rural schools is still plagued by casteism, gender norms and other archaic approaches like rote-learning, and we need more NGOs to work on changing mindsets locally.

On the other side, urban India sees a lot more action from the non-profits because of proximity to disparity and visibility that can be leveraged by CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) teams. A lot of organisations have created mini-career-capsules as “fellowships” for the urban youth to explore and give a few years of their life to create impact, or create a movement of leaders who fight for education equity throughout their lives. Another set of NGOs run a plethora of skill development classes in the slum regions for adults, which are supplementary to formal education, but intended to provide necessary tools to the youth that they will need to get to succeed in jobs. The advantage that these organisations have is quick-access to the global pool of resources in terms of people, funds and knowledge – which the government lacks because of layers of bureaucracy.

It is safe to say that we need both the government and the NGO sectors to fight for education equity, and to a large extent, they are doing so. However, the lack of synchrony between the two major groups causes an even more

increasing gap of education inequity. The whole reason we were taught to find a champion in the field is so that either we align ourselves to the goals set by the champion, or directly try to influence what they do to create maximum impact. But the established differences between the two champions in India, i.e., the government and NGOs – compel educators who want to join the movement for equity to make a hard choice between the two, where it actually should be joining the collaborative team with the single purpose of making excellent education a reality for all. ■

Suman has a Master of Education degree from Harvard University(U.S.)and currently works as the Director of Education for Reality Gives, a non-profit that runs programs for children and youth in the slums of Mumbai and Delhi. He received his engineering degree from University of Mumbai and worked as a Software Engineer, before realizing his calling to be in Education. As a Teach for India fellow, Suman taught for 2 years in a low-income school in Mumbai.



He has worked as a teacher-trainer, done projects with UNICEF India and the Swedish government. He hopes to do everything in his power to achieve education equity for all children.

Grotovsky's theatre in the modern world

What do you get when you combine Girish Karnad's sheer brilliance of storytelling with Grotovsky's style of theatre? A play which tells a complex story, in a very nuanced and philosophical way, says **Prof. Avinash Kolhe**. And Jyoti Dogra tells the story well, he applauds.

ALL over the world, serious artists always interpret and reinterpret traditions and epics of their society. In India, this process began during the colonial era, and continued after India gained freedom. Here, one must mention Girish Karnad (born: 1938), who has been doing this for decades. With this purpose he has written plays like *Nagmandal*, *Taledand* and *The Fire and the Rain*, his sixth play. Each of these plays force us to look at our traditions afresh, as these plays are infused with new, modern insights. Karnad received the 'Jnanapith' award and was decorated with 'Padmabhushan' too.

Jyoti Dogra, a Mumbai-based theatre practitioner, found a new expression for *The Fire and the Rain* in her latest production *Toye*, a Sanskrit word for water. In this production, the whole focus is on the human body as a primary medium of expression, which is often neglected in modern theatre productions. But then these are not conventional dance movements. In this production, actors under Jyoti's able direction react to basic impulses like hunger, lust etc. The entire experiment and its effect are quite unique.

In 2002 came *Agnivarsha*, a Hindi film based on Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*. The film did not do well at the box-office. Now Jyoti Dogra has taken the challenge to reintroduce the play with a different theatrical language.

The story

Not only Jyoti's production, even the



A still from the play *Toye*, which is an interpretation of Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

story of the play is quite complicated. Arvasu, a Brahmin by caste, has become a performing actor. He loves Nittalai, a tribal girl who reciprocates his feelings, but insists that he must get the blessings of her father and elders of her clan. Arvasu's elder brother Parvasu has been busy for seven years conducting a major *yagna* to appease the god of rains, Lord Indra. The region is reeling under severe drought for the last ten years. Their father Raibhya hates both of them and would like to see them die before his own end. The story is derived from the myth of Yavakri, which is a part of the great Indian epic, the 'Mahabharata'.

Raibhya suspects Vishakha, his daughter-in-law and Parvasu's wife, of having an extramarital affair with Yarviki who has returned after ten years of penance. Back then they

were in love with each other. Now he finds Vishakha married to Parvasu, his arch-rival. Parvasu and Vishakha were married for three years after which Parvasu left to perform a major *yagna*. Raibhya is terribly angry with Vishakha and summons the Brahma Rakshas to kill Yarviki. The Brahma Rakshas does what he is ordered to do and Arvasu has to cremate Yarviki. This is why Arvasu gets late for his appointment with Nittilai's father and elders from her clan. They marry Nittilai to someone else. When Parvasu hears of the death of Yarviki, he kills his father and ensures that Arvasu gets blamed for this. Arvasu gets beaten for this and left for dead. When Nittilai hears of this, she comes to help Arvasu but is hunted by her husband and his brother. She is killed by them. Parvasu admits his crime and



Toye tells a complicated story, with minimal props

cremates himself. In other words, many characters get killed one by one. This does ensure the appeasement of Indra. The purity of Arvasu and Nittilai's love brings salvation to the land.

To stage a play like this, is always a challenge. Jyoti Dogra got in league with the team of young theatre persons who realised that the space and resources constraints would always haunt them in any urban centre. They decided to

relocate to Indri, a village in Haryana, and home to one of the actors. Here they had ample space and could practice with meagre resources. They got the banner of Shaheed Somnath Smarak Samiti and now shows are being performed under this banner. This is a unique experiment in many ways.

Dogra has touched on the power play between

the Brahminical characters and the love affair between a Brahmin boy and a tribal girl. She has used multiple actors to play one character. This makes the production representative of our society. Right from the beginning, the play grows organically. This is an ensemble production where each actor brings in a complexity that is his own. In this production there are different actors playing the same characters at different times. This is to compel audiences to

not engage with a character as much as with the ideas and possibilities those characters represent. These ideas as well as the actors keep changing. At times, audiences find it hard to follow the story line, but that is a minor issue. What matters is the philosophical narrative that gets evolved in the play.

It is more than clear that Jyoti Dogra is inspired by Jerzy Grotovsky and keen to imbibe his ideas about theatre. Grotovsky emphasises on the use of minimal or no properties. Dogra has used a ladder, a huge swing, an earthen pot and a long broom, etc. Like these properties, costumes and makeup was minimalist too. With such an approach, Dogra has created a magical production

based on Karnad's play. ■



Prof. Avinash Kolhe is Asst. Professor in Political Science at D.G. Ruparel College, Mumbai.

Narcissism by another name?

(Continued from page 41)

Selfies can be group or individual. The latter addiction is a matter of concern, as such people lack self-gratification. "They strike different poses as they are not happy with one picture, and then upload them on social networking sites to get approval in the virtual world," says Dr. D'Souza, psychiatrist and research associate at LTMG Sion Hospital, Mumbai. A study among school students found a majority of selfie-addicts are girls, 55% of whom were insecure or self-obsessed.

Dr. Harish Shetty, psychiatrist from Dr. L.H. Hiranandani Hospital, opines that clicking selfie is a magnified way of seeing oneself in the mirror. "Teenagers are more concerned about how they look and how others perceive them. Generally, individual selfie-clickers are seeking

identity and meaning in the world."

Selfitis can broadly be divided into three types: Borderline (taking at least three pictures of self but not posting them on social media), Acute (taking at least three photos of oneself every day and posting them on social media), and Chronic severe (taking at least six photos or more of self every day and posting them on social media).

But the big drawback of a selfie is that it can make you a target on social media and one can be bullied or trolled or even face more malicious acts. Avoid posting photos that reveal your body because it's better to be safe than sorry. Over the last few years, hundreds have died in the act of taking selfies, generally while doing very dumb things like handling live grenades and dangling from skyscrapers, but it has had no effect on the rest.

Kali Holloway, a senior writer and the associate editor of media and

culture at AlterNet, observes that "Bad ideas and selfies are like 'the peanut butter and jelly of our times'. While trying to snap impressive self-portraits, some of the distracted and vain have accidentally driven off the road and ploughed into a tree, walked backward off a dangerously high cliff, and been bitten by a rattlesnake who was not in the mood to be photographed (See box on page 41)

So in conclusion, excess of everything is bad; so selfie lovers must not go overboard. Make it fun! ■

A.Radhakrishnan, Pune based freelance journalist, with close to four decades of experience in mainstream print journalism,



is aiming for the digital platform. Making friends interests him and for company, he loves music and books. He also writes short stories and indulges in poetry.

The third gender

The International Film Festival of Kerala took a momentous decision to focus on the transgender community at its 21st edition, and what a wonderful reception it got, exults **Shoma A. Chatterji**. For the first time ever, there was an attempt made to look beyond just the superficial, she applauds.

A unique and revolutionary step the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) took in its 21st edition in December 2016 was recognising, accepting and respecting the transgenders in the state by offering them the scope to register and also actively participate in the events and screenings at the festival. The festival reserved an exclusive space for members of the transgender community, who made full use of this space. As S. Sreekanth so succinctly points out, “India that boasts a diverse and heterogeneous nature, excluding an entire community with an alternative sexual and physical orientation contradicts the very idea of “Indianness” as we understand it. Transgenders are discriminated against across the world.”

Veteran filmmaker Kamal, Chairman of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, said, “The ability to empathise and understand the significance and relevance of contemporary happenings is certainly one of the strengths of the IFFK. For example, the package called ‘Gender Bender’ is the one that empathises with the struggle of the transgender community to gain a



Lithuanian movie *Summer of Sangailė* is a lesbian love story

distinctive identity for themselves. This year, they registered as transgender while applying for delegate passes, and the festival also arranged separate rest rooms for them at the three venues where the films were being screened.”

Out of the closet

The festival grounds were spilling over with transgender personalities who became a trigger in bringing many of their peers out of their ‘closet’ status, to come out in the open and become part of the mainstream. Sheetal Shya, a transgender activist who was also the first transgender to register as a delegate at the festival said, “We are treated like celebrities here”, and many transgender delegates stripped themselves of the ‘discomfort’ of having acquired an aura the media had wrongly bestowed them with. “Leerings are making way for the camera, and this is nothing new for us and we perceive it as a positive thing,” said Sree, another transgender activist who registered as a delegate with direct recommendation of the festival chairperson Kamal.

Sheetal said that it was commendable of the festival organisers to pick them out and give them an identity through the registration process which however, stands in contradiction to state policies on the transgender



The Latin American film *Rara* featured a lesbian couple bringing up their kids

identity. Persisting background realities still wait for state intervention and they still do not have access to proper identity cards, bank accounts and other official designations as they still need to fill in forms either as ‘male’ or ‘female’ as the term ‘transgender’ does not exist within the state’s official vocabulary.

In India, where films on and about transgender people and people with alternative sexual choices are rare, this has been a wonderful step taken by the IFFK this year. The “Gender Bender” segment of six films included this year chosen from across different cultures, countries and languages, raise very pertinent questions about sexuality and gender demarcations because these films highlight the anguish and dilemmas these people face. “Such films were screened earlier too, though perhaps not in a separate section. But those who were watching them were mainstream people who were distanced from the issues and problems we face, so their looking at our problems are

more like an outsider looking in. This time, since we are participating in this programme, things will perhaps go beyond just the Supreme Court recognising transgenders as the third gender since 2014,” said Sree.

The festival also offered a platform for mainstream people to interact openly and positively with the transgender community which was an ideal step towards the latter’s integration and recognition. “This helped do away with many prejudices they have about us and helped them shed the stereotypes they had constructed within themselves about us,” said Sree. There is another section under the title “Migration” which, said Sheetal, “was very relevant for us because, as we are socially stigmatised for no fault on our part, many of us are forced to uproot ourselves from our roots and find shelter elsewhere, which is more difficult for us than for the mainstream.”

“Separate toilets and restrooms will help us, but will not solve the problem of being ghettoed. What we really want is to hear more tales and voices of acceptance and recognition for whatever we are, because basically, we are all human beings. We are really looking forward to a time when the state will allot separate seats in public



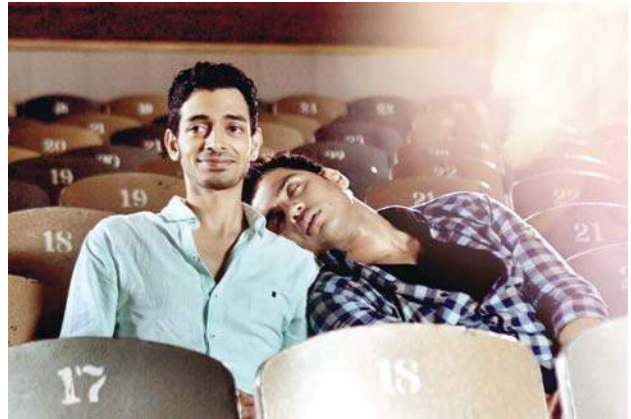
Something Must Break is a pathbreaking movie about love

transport for us so that we do not get laughed at by much of the mainstream,” said Sree. It was wonderful to see them dressed to their teeth, wandering around the venue in brightly coloured saris, lips coloured with lipstick with body language spelling out confidence with a capital C.

The screening programme was curated under the title “Gender-Bender” with six films from USA, The Phillipines, India, Sweden, Chile-Argentina and Lithuania. The phrase “gender-bender” is often misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented in cinema which is a reflection of real life. It is a concept more than a physical reality, and it is this fluidity and ambiguity that leads to a misreading of the term. In dictionary parlance, “gender-bender” stands for “a function at which the gender roles are reversed, or manipulated in various ways. It also refers to a person who explores the boundaries of gender roles, or outright denies their existence.”

This definition excludes people born outside the physical framework of precisely biological gender. This means that they are neither fully male nor fully female but are in a state of flux. Transgenders either dress up in reverse of the sex they are born into or those who, through a series of surgeries change their biological sex. The one thing they have in is that they are oriented towards alternative sexual desires and practices.

A happy feature is that all these films were set against the backdrop of contemporary society. They were distanced from typical “coming out” stories. *Loev* from Sudhansu Saria from India brings in a whiff of fresh air around the gay identity in this film. *Rara* was about family issues specific to parents of a lesbian couple trying to bring their



Loev, a movie by Sudhansu Saria, deals with gay identity

kids up in today’s Latin America. *Quick Change* steps into the fragile world of beauty contests in the Phillipines where transgenders are desperate to look beautiful and gain recognition by winning at beauty contests. *Front Cover* explores the world of the Asian-American gay community in the US trapped between Asian culture within a Western world in a pocket comprised of Asians. *Summer of Sangaille* is a lesbian, coming-to-terms love story set in Lithuania. *Something Must Break* is the most out-of-the-box film among all these films. According to John Badalu who curated this section, “This film breaks all gender terms by making it very fluid and rebellious.” Sexuality in this film knows no boundary. Being gay or lesbian or transgender or heterosexual carries no meaning and the focus is love that transcends everything else, which can only come from Sweden. ■

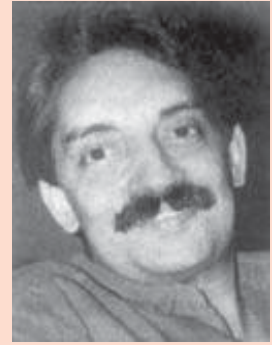
Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for ‘commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues’ among many



awards. She is currently Senior Research Fellow, ICSSR, Delhi, researching the politics of presentation of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema 1950 to 2003.

Migration magic

Migration has to be one of the most fascinating occurrences of the natural world. The younger generation should be encouraged to study and list the migratory patterns, especially of birds visiting their areas seasonally.



Bittu Sahgal
Editor, Sanctuary magazine

It was not until the early 19th century that migration began to attract serious scientific attention. First, it was bird migration that scientists were interested in, and soon migration in other forms of life also began to be studied. They wanted to know which animal species migrate, why and how they do, and what it is that inspires them to move. Even today, there are a lot of questions about migration that remain unanswered. In birds, there are two main kinds of migrations.

Some species are 'locally migratory', which means they move locally, over short distances, say, from one district to a neighbouring one, usually immediately after the breeding season, and then hop, skip and jump around in nearby areas. Such local migrants may not stay in an area for long. Several dozen bird species in the Himalayas also migrate 'altitudinally', which means that with the approach of the cold season, usually by early September, these species move to lower altitudes (for example, from the peak of a mountain to about halfway down), and some even scatter over the north Indian plains in the Himalayan foothills.

The second main form of migration is 'long-distance winter migration', which is the southward movement of species before the onset of winter. These species may travel anywhere between 1,000 to 5,000 km, and usually stay in their wintering grounds for at least four months, often till mid-March. Migration is fascinating. Why not be a part of this exciting study and start your very own migration research project by keeping track of birds in your neighbourhood? Before you begin, remember, most long-distance migrants arrive between mid-August and end-October (and a little earlier in the northern and central parts of the India than in the south). Also, it is very important that you have a good field-guide for bird identification (for example, Sálim Ali's Book of *Indian Birds*), and a pair of binoculars. To start you off, below is a list of some of the more common migrant birds that undergo seasonal migration in India.

BIRD (common name)	REMARKS
1. Rufous-backed Shrike	LM (R)
2. Grey-headed Myna	LM (R)
3. Brahminy Myna	LM (R)
4. Rosy Pastor	WM
5. Grey Drongo	WM (R)
6. Golden Oriole	LM(R)
7. Redshank, greenshank, all other sandpipers, sand-plovers, stints dunlins	WM
8. Little-ringed Plover	LM(R)
9. Most ducks and geese (except Lesser-whistling Teals, spotbills and Comb ducks or nuktas)	WM
10. Brahminy Kite	LM (R)
11. Osprey	WM
12. Harriers	WM
13. Indian Pitta	LM (R)
14. Blackbird	LM (R)
15. Wagtails (except Large Pied)	WM (R)
16. Pied Bush Chat	WM&LM (R)
17. Collared Bush Chat or Stonechat	WM(R)

(Important note: Birds with LM marked after their names are 'Local Migrants' found over many parts of the country. Those with WM marked after their names are long-distance 'Winter Migrants', mostly arriving from the high Himalaya and central Asia. Remember, however, that all LM species may not necessarily be local migrants everywhere. Those with a capital R after LM are resident in parts of the country. Similarly, some of the Winter Migrants are resident in the Himalaya and will have an R marked after WM. Take down careful notes about when you saw the first bird of the species, what it was doing, what it ate, how many you think there were, and anything else that you think may be important.)

If you like, take your research a step further and do some insect watching too. Don't let their tiny size fool you – these little fellows will travel far and wide in search of food or better weather conditions! Even fish, turtles and in fact, thousands of other life-forms migrate seasonally, to feed, breed, lay eggs and ensure the survival of their species. Remember, if you learn to live in nature's wonderland, you'll never, ever be bored. ■

A landmark judgment?

Will the Supreme Court's recent judgment against the use of caste, creed, language and religion for canvassing for votes, find an echo among electoral candidates?



C. V. Aravind

is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.

ELECTIONEERING in India has always revolved around campaigning for votes in the name of caste, creed or religion, and political parties with hardly any exception, have shown no scruples in appealing to the voters to cast their votes in the name of caste and in recent times, polarisation has also set in and political parties have begun to use religion as a handy tool to sway the electorate. The relevant sections of the Representation of People's Act has outlawed this practice, but that has hardly had the desired effect. It is in this context that the recent majority judgment of the Supreme Court which has once again reiterated that the use of caste, creed, religion or language will constitute a corrupt practice and candidates found guilty would be disqualified, has gained prominence.

The relevant portion of the judgment reads, 'Election is a secular exercise and therefore, a process should be followed. The relationship between man and God is an individual choice and state should keep this in mind.' The court was interpreting the provision in the Representation of People's Act, Section 123 (1) which mandates that it would be deemed a corrupt practice if any candidate or his agent or any other person, with his consent, appeals for votes on religious or other such grounds.

The apex court's interventions in streamlining the election process and in cleaning the Augean stables have been welcomed by large sections of the society. Its judgment calling for compulsory filing of affidavits by candidates declaring their criminal antecedents if any, details of cases pending against them, educational qualifications and assets on hand, have gone a long way in ensuring a high level of transparency in elections.

Another positive development was the disqualification of candidates who had been convicted and sentenced for a term of more than two years, and this led to the cleansing of the system as it checked the entry of criminal elements

into the realm of electoral politics. A long felt desire of the electorate regarding rejection of all candidates in the fray in a constituency was also granted by the Supreme Court with the advent of NOTA (None of the above). However, the number of votes cast under NOTA could hardly have an impact on the results as the candidate with the largest number of votes would emerge the winner in any case.

The present judgment however, is likely to have a limited impact, as the country's electoral history would reveal that in spite of the existence of stringent laws regarding the misuse of religion, there have been hardly any convictions on this score. Further, in a multicultural society like ours where caste is preponderate and candidates can hardly turn a blind eye to the various caste formations, religious groups and language considerations while seeking votes, the judgment could at best contain the vituperative outbursts by candidates flaying one religion or the other, and the inevitable polarisation during election campaigns.

However, even before the ink on the judgment could have run dry, an MP (Member of Parliament) of the ruling party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), Sakshi Maharaj has already flouted the law by referring to a religious community, that it was perpetuating the triple *talak* concept and was instrumental in the population explosion in the country with its four wives and forty children syndrome; though he did not name the community, the inference was obvious. The leader has been booked, but this is hardly going to be an isolated case, and with five states going to the polls in the months of February and March, including the country's largest state, Uttar Pradesh where the stakes are particularly high, there is every chance that political parties will be employing every trick in the book to canvass votes. It would therefore be safe to presume that unless political parties decide to eschew the use of religion in *toto* and fall in line with the provisions of the Representation of People's Act, the judgment can only have a very limited effect. ■



SPOTLIGHT

YOUNG

Knockout!

The success of *Dangal*, a biopic essaying the extraordinary journey of wrestlers Geeta and Babita Phogat and their father Mahavir Singh has garnered huge interest in wrestling.

Aamir Khan-starrer *Dangal* celebrates the indomitable spirit of Mahavir Singh Phogat, an amateur wrestler and coach who dared to dream big for his daughters and trained them to be wrestlers. It is no mean feat in a deeply patriarchal society of Haryana.

All the Phogat sisters Geeta, Babita, Ritu, Vinesh, Priyanka and Sangita are amateur wrestlers. Geeta, Babita and Vinesh have won gold medals in different weight categories in the

Commonwealth Games.

Geeta Phogat was the first female Indian wrestler to qualify for the Olympics.

The Phogat family comes from Balali village in Haryana's Bhiwani district. What makes her story extraordinary is that Geeta has excelled in a male-dominated sport in a place where it is customary for women to work only at home.

Mahavir Singh was keen that his daughters learn *kushti*, the traditional Indian style of wrestling. Geeta's first training ground was an enclosure adjoining the cattle shed in her home. She was excused from doing household chores so that

she could concentrate on training.

Geeta's father was a hard taskmaster on the wrestling pit. As there were no female wrestlers in the village, the Phogat girls had mud bouts with boys. They became famous as 'the sisters who beat all the boys'!

The rigorous training paid off as the young Phogats began winning medals at wrestling tournaments. Geeta won gold in the 2009 Commonwealth Wrestling Championship and the 2010 Commonwealth Games in the 55 kg women's freestyle wrestling.

Inspired by Geeta's success, other girls in the village have taken up wrestling and are taking lessons from Mahavir Singh.



AMAZING LIVING WORLD

Swift Shark

Imagine if you could swim at a speed of more than 30 km/hr! Then you could compete with Mako sharks, which are among the fastest swimmers in the ocean. Not only are they super-fast they are also acrobatic – able to leap out of the water to a height of 6 m. They are large, measuring upto 3.2-4.5 metres in length.

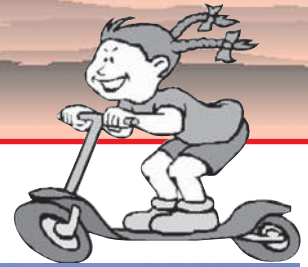
Mako shark females give birth to live pups. The eggs hatch within the mother's womb and feed on a yolk sac inside. The stronger pups also eat their less developed brothers or sisters or the unfertilised eggs.

Because they are so agile and swift, avid fishermen enjoy catching Mako sharks for sport. The shark in Ernest Hemingway's book *The Old Man and the Sea* was a shortfin mako.

They are aggressive and known to attack people and fishing boats.



Ice Festival



Harbin in China is called an ice city because of its long and extremely cold winter. For centuries, Harbin was just a dot on the map. During the long, freezing winters, when temperatures dipped to -25°C , the local fishermen would carve ice blocks from the frozen rivers into rough lampshades and hollow bulbs. These were placed over candles to prevent the icy winds from blowing them out.

In 1963, the residents organised the first ice lantern show. The show was a success and since then Harbin has been hosting an annual ice and snow festival between December and February every year.

Thousands of neon lights fixed inside the sculptures come on



at night, transforming the entire site into a breathtaking and surreal thing of beauty.

STORY TRAP

The Missing Cat

As he was returning from school, Ramesh stopped by at his neighbour's house. Mrs. Dinshaw had a variety of pets, including an African grey parrot.

"So how's your parrot?" Ramesh asked Mrs. Dinshaw as she opened the door. "Mom told me you'd asked me to come over. Has he learned some new words?"

She said, "Scamper, my Siamese cat, is missing! He was in the lawn when I went inside to answer the telephone. When I came back, he was gone."

"I didn't know your cat ever went outside," Ramesh said.

"He wouldn't wander off by himself! Meher, the girl across the street, says she saw Rohan Gupta leaving my lawn holding a Siamese cat. It must have been Scamper! But we don't know for sure." There were tears in Mrs. Dinshaw's eyes.

"I'll talk to him, Aunty," said Ramesh soothingly. "Don't worry. We'll find him. He probably wandered off."

Ramesh cycled across to Rohan's house. He found him bouncing a basketball in the garden. "Hey," he called, "do you know anything about Mrs. Dinshaw's missing pet?"

"Oh, no, I never saw it," Rohan shrugged. "Anyway, I wouldn't take him. I'm allergic to cat fur."

"Oh, yeah?" said Ramesh. "Why don't you just quit telling lies and hand over Scamper to me?"

Why was Ramesh so sure that Rohan had the cat?



Answer: How did Rohan know it was the cat that was missing, unless he had taken it?

CURIOSITY

What is e-waste?

Electronic waste or e-waste as it is more popularly known refers to discarded electronic products like old computers, TVs, refrigerators, mobile phones etc. Basically any electrical or electronic appliance that is surplus, broken or obsolete is categorised as e-waste. Even changes in fashion can tempt people obsessed with keeping up with the times to dump these products for newer gadgets.

Given the rapid advances in modern technology, there is a growing surplus of e-waste around the globe. Each year, USA discards 30 million computers while Europe disposes of 100 million phones. In India, e-waste is mostly generated in big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

The problem arises when we do not dispose of e-waste properly. E-waste contains not only valuable materials such as gold, silver and copper, but also harmful substances like lead, cadmium and mercury. If e-waste is not recycled properly using suitable techniques, it can release toxins into the air, water and soil, posing a serious danger to our health and environment.

K. SANKARAN NAIR, IP

Principled and brave officer (1920-2015)

K Sankaran Nair was born on 20 December 1920, at Ottapalam in Kerala State. His father was Superintendent of Post Offices. He graduated from Loyala College, and was not successful in the examination for ICS which he attempted twice. He qualified for the Imperial Police (IP) and joined the Police Training School at Vellore in April 1943. He was posted to Cocanada, the District HQ of East Godavari. In 1948, he was posted as District Superintendent of Police in East Godavari. He had in the meanwhile passed the BL examination in law.

He had a good experience of police work, ranging from brilliant detection to managed confessions and encounters. The Rajamundry Police Station had a unique system of crime detection and punishment. The area was inhabited by criminal tribes. When any burglaries were reported, the police Sub-Inspector would force some members of the tribe to confess. They got a light sentence and the police looked after their families during their period of imprisonment. It gave a good performance report to the police station!

He left for Delhi on 5 December 1950, to join the Intelligence Bureau (IB). Earlier, he had declined to join the IB due to his aversion for sycophancy prevailing there. He looked forward to it now as he was promised a posting to Paris. Such hopes were dashed as Mr. Mullik, Director, IB, decided a change in his duties. He was advised to learn Burmese at the Foreign Languages School. Mullik appreciated his work, but ticked him off on some trivial matter. Nair requested to be reverted to Madras. The offending file was closed. On one occasion, he accompanied Prime Minister (PM) Nehru to Amritsar for security arrangements during the Congress session. He was put up in the circuit house where the PM and Indira Gandhi were staying. In the morning at breakfast, Indira Gandhi responded with a smile to his salute. A little later, some Congressmen came and started looking for the sandals of Indira Gandhi. They asked Nair also to join in the



search. He replied that his job was looking after security and not to search for sandals. Next morning, Indira Gandhi was icy when he wished her.

On request from Nkrumah, PM of Ghana, Kao was sent to organise their Intelligence Agency, and he was succeeded by Nair in December 1959. He accomplished this job brilliantly in two years, and gained the complete confidence of Nkrumah. He returned to Delhi in early 1963, and was assigned to Pakistan desk in the IB. Nair refuted the allegation of inept intelligence gathering by the IB in the 1965 War

by sending 65 reports sent by the IB to the Army. Indira Gandhi had approved his name for the post of Director IB on retirement of Kao. Sanjay Gandhi called him to judge his loyalty. Nair declined and the proposal to promote him was cancelled. Nair joined RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), the new organisation set up for external intelligence, as deputy to Kao in 1968. He is credited with the success in 1971 War by training Mukti Bahini guerrillas.

Three months after taking over as RAW chief, he requested to be reverted to Madras when PM Morarji Desai wanted to downgrade the post of Director. He convinced Desai not to stop aid to Chakma refugees from Bangladesh who were being pushed out from their land. He stood up to the next PM Charan Singh too on the issue of rank of Director, and was appointed Secretary to the Minorities Commission. He did not oblige the Chairman of the Commission who wanted government pay for his driver and cook.

He retired from the Commission in December 1978. He was detailed to organise the Olympic Games in Delhi and served as High Commissioner in Singapore. He had a sterling character not open to any compromise. He retired in 1988, and passed away on 17 November 2015. ■

– Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd)

CHO S. RAMASWAMY

A multifaceted actor and comedian (1934-2016)

CHO Ramaswamy who passed away in Chennai at the age of 82, was a man of many parts. Hailing from a family of lawyers he too graduated in Law, and served as a legal counsel for a conglomerate for a few years. But law was not his only calling. Right from his college days he had a passion for the stage, and this turned him into a playwright and as he inevitably played the lead in the plays, he honed his acting talents as well.

From the stage to the screen was a small jump in those days, and Cho became an actor with his forte being comedy in which he excelled. He also scripted and directed films, and the five films for which he wielded the megaphone were mostly adaptations of his successful plays. He also ventured into television and directed and acted in as many as 27 TV serials which were all extremely popular with the viewers. In addition, he also penned 10 books, most of them thought provoking and serious, in sharp contrast to his screen image as a comedian. But as if all these activities that filled his plate were not enough, he hit upon the idea of editing a periodical, and thus was born the Tamil weekly *Tughlak*, which never flinched when it came to unraveling the darker side of Indian politics. Satire and substance were the two mainstays of the magazine which perhaps was the only one of its kind in the country to have a cartoon on the cover of every issue, and which not only drew readers to it like a magnet, but also conducted an annual meet where the editor would take questions from the audience, and the attendance was always in thousands at these meets.

While Cho the actor was loved by all, Cho the journalist was dreaded by the political fraternity for he always believed in calling a spade a spade, and never let personal friendships come in the way of his unbiased assessment of those in power. Cho was also a social commentator whose opinion on events and people were often sought by news channels across the country.

The playwright was a strong critic of the Emergency, and

he used his play *Mohammed Bin Tughlak* to flay the violation of human rights, but managed to stay on the right side of the law by reminding his audience that every line in the play was written years back and that it was up to them to judge the relevance of the script.

Cho acted with all the leading heroes of the time like MGR, Sivaji Ganesan, Jayalalithaa, Jaishankar and others. He was considered the friend, philosopher and guide of the late Chief Minister Jayalalithaa with whom he shared a friendship that lasted nearly five decades. But far from endorsing all her actions, Cho often turned into a bitter critic of her policies, though that never came in the way of their cordial relations at a personal level. With the legendary MGR too, he often had differences of opinion, but continued to share the screen with him. Cho was nominated to the Rajya Sabha by the then President K.R. Narayanan, and served the Upper House for six years from 1999 to 2005. He was also reportedly an advisor to powerful politicians and ideologues like socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan, former Prime Ministers (PM) Morarji Desai and Chandrasekhar, former Congress President G.K. Moopnar and RSS chief Balasaheb Deoras, former Deputy PM L.K. Advani and also PM Narendra Modi, though Cho was hardly the type to flaunt his proximity to the mandarins who adorned high office.

Cho who was a recipient of the prestigious B.D. Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism always believed that it was sheer luck that was behind his success in various fields. His memoir was aptly titled *Adhirsham Thantha Anubhavgal* (Experiences born out of luck). A repository of knowledge and wisdom, the late Cho was also well versed with religious texts, and had a keen intellect that enabled him to gauge political trends and developments to a nicety. ■

– C. V. Aravind is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.



DILEEP PADGAONKAR

Editor with wit and panache (1944-2016)

THE veteran editor and journalist, connoisseur and former consulting editor of the *Times of India* passed away on 25 November 2016, at age 72, after a prolonged illness.

The comments which poured in are testimony to his myriad qualities. He lived a life of the mind as well as the senses, on his own terms. A scholar with eclectic tastes, he was a treasure trove of knowledge, a mentor, guide and a great friend to colleagues. An astute thinker, analyst, liberal and level headed man, he remained humble, helpful and kind, the quintessential common man, full of life and humour, despite hobnobbing with the powerful.

He was truly a global citizen, with a wide range of interests, from politics to the arts, music and food. As editor, he encouraged people to write on varied subjects. In the newsroom, he was accommodating and always polite, easy to approach, and his door was always open. Perfect in using words, he maintained the highest standard of journalism. He gave his reporters space.

He could speak on food with rare eloquence. Dileep was considered a good cook of continental food and dreamt of creating a map of India based on *dals*, *achars-murabbas* and *papads*.

He had a vast and eclectic taste in reading. His French fluency enabled him to read most of the original works of France's great thinkers. He also knew Sanskrit really well, was well-versed in the Vedas and was very secular in his views. He was a raconteur extraordinaire and his stories enthralled his peers and juniors alike.

A personal friend of some of the greatest thinkers of our time like Andre Malraux, Isaiah Berlin and Claude Levi Strauss, he derived his friends from the academia, the world of film, gastronomy and politics. A classic liberal, he was a believer in the values of free speech and individual freedoms. An excellent Hindustani classical singer, with a deep knowledge on the subject, he also had an abiding love of cinema and wrote a book on Roberto Rossellini called *Under Her Spell* in 2008.

His incomparable, abundant humour and wit and ability to mimic in a variety of languages and accents, used to keep many in stitches, a rare honour, since oftentimes he maintained a poker faced solemnity before the outside world.

Dileep, born in Pune and educated at St. Vincent High School and Fergusson College in Pune, began as a cub reporter at the age of 24 with the then *Pune Herald*. After a doctorate from the University of Paris-Sorbonne, in June 1968, he joined the *Times of India* (ToI) as its Paris correspondent, from where he chronicled the epoch-making May '68 Movement that spread swiftly through all of Europe - East and West.

From 1978 to '86, he had an UNESCO stint, where he set up the controversial non-aligned news pool, much despised by some Western powers, but embraced warmly by newly emerging nations. He was also editor of Sharjah's *The Gulf Today* daily.

He returned to the *Times of India* in 1986 and continued as editor till 1994. He then became chairman of the Asia-Pacific Communications Associates, a multimedia organisation active in news and current affairs on TV and in print journalism. He founded 'Biblio: A Review Of Books' and was its editor.

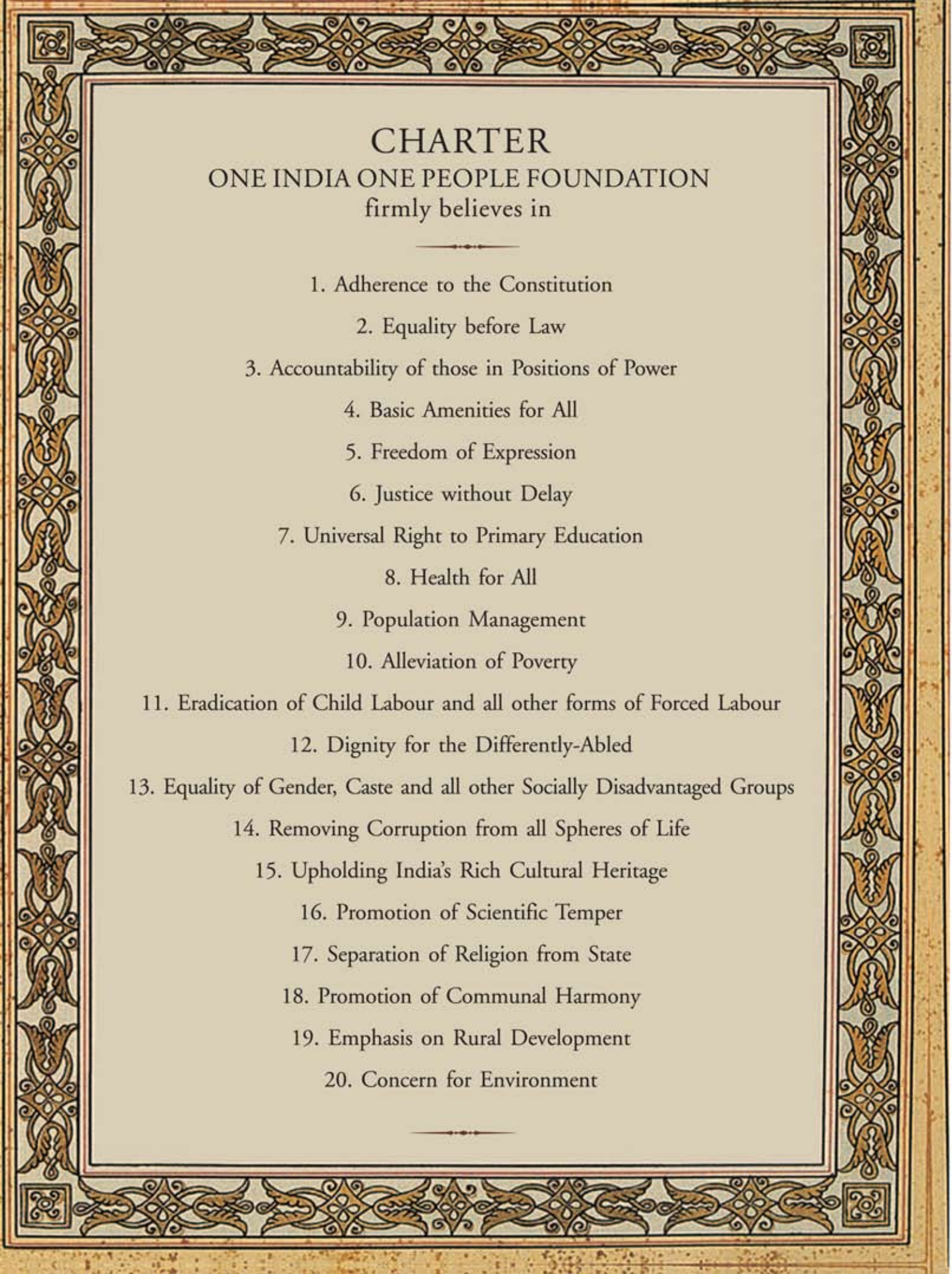
He returned to the ToI as executive managing editor in 1998, and then was consulting editor before retirement in 2002. He settled in Pune, and was closely associated with the R.K. Laxman Chair that was established at Symbiosis.

In April 2002 he was honoured with the Legion d'Honneur, France's highest civilian distinction for his services to journalism. Ever the Francophile, with his jaunty beret and omnipresent muffler, sometimes replaced by a *Peshwapagdi* or a *Ranatopi*, his favourite books clutched in one hand, he went out without any fuss. He is survived by wife Latika (71), and sons Nikhil (45) and Rohit (40).

– A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.

(Sketches of Great Indians by C.D. Rane)





CHARTER
ONE INDIA ONE PEOPLE FOUNDATION
firmly believes in

1. Adherence to the Constitution
 2. Equality before Law
 3. Accountability of those in Positions of Power
 4. Basic Amenities for All
 5. Freedom of Expression
 6. Justice without Delay
 7. Universal Right to Primary Education
 8. Health for All
 9. Population Management
 10. Alleviation of Poverty
 11. Eradication of Child Labour and all other forms of Forced Labour
 12. Dignity for the Differently-Abled
 13. Equality of Gender, Caste and all other Socially Disadvantaged Groups
 14. Removing Corruption from all Spheres of Life
 15. Upholding India's Rich Cultural Heritage
 16. Promotion of Scientific Temper
 17. Separation of Religion from State
 18. Promotion of Communal Harmony
 19. Emphasis on Rural Development
 20. Concern for Environment
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WHO AM I?

- Am I a Hindu first or an Indian first?*
Am I a Muslim first or an Indian first?
Am I a Christian first or an Indian first?
Am I a Buddhist first or an Indian first?
Am I a Brahmin first or an Indian first?
Am I a Dalit first or an Indian first?
Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?
Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?
Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?
Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?
Am I the Commander-in-Chief first or an Indian first?
Am I a supporter of any 'ism' first or an Indian first?
Am I a white-collar/blue collar worker first or an Indian first?
Am I a youth/senior citizen first or an Indian first?

*In all cases you are Indian First, Last and Always.
Be a Proud Indian. Make this country Great, Strong and United.*



Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor

(October 9th, 1930 – February 23rd, 2007)

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