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The true man

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FACE TO FACE

**Kamalakar
Venkat Rao**



NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS BE LIKE...



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Tracking #MeToo

The #MeToo campaign has opened a Pandora's box of sexual harassment and exploitation, especially in the movie and media industry. Janaki Viswanathan chronicles the movement, and cites examples from personal experience.

WHO would have thought that two seemingly innocuous words, strung together, and fitted into a hashtag, would serve as a trigger to redefine gender dynamics at the workplace? From Hollywood movie moghuls to politicians across the international spectrum, and from corporate head honchos to media personalities, the #MeToo movement has successfully pulled the rug from under the feet of several powerful men that have sexually harassed women, and men too.

While it is early days yet to pass judgment on the success of the movement, there can be no denying that tremors have rocked the workspaces, and provided a shot in the arm to women engaged for long in a battle to correct the lopsided power equation between the sexes. Hitherto browbeaten into feeling deep shame and guilt for actions that they felt powerless in the face of, women across the world have drawn strength from the collective testimonies of the sisterhood, and gained the courage to face up to their tormentors.

Although #MeToo as a movement has derived tremendous mileage from the shakeout in Hollywood in 2017, that saw the names of powerful men like studio boss Harvey Weinstein and actor Kevin Spacey being called out, and the publishing of what is known as the Raya Sarkar list closer to home, naming and shaming several top Indian academicians, the origin of the movement can be traced back to the efforts of American social activist and community organiser Tarana Burke, in 2006. It took the hashtag trending on social media in 2017, of course, for the movement to truly capture the public imagination and trigger off testimonies en masse, naming not just perpetrators of abuse at the work place, but also those within the inner family and friends circles.

The Indian context

In the Indian context, even while the Raya Sarkar list did create ripples, it was the Bollywood shakeout, quite akin to what happened in Hollywood, which set off an avalanche of sorts in 2018. It shouldn't come as a surprise given that

news of the shenanigans of Bollywood stars, right down to the sartorial choices of their tiny tots, is what provides fodder for 24/7 news channels and news sites to feed on. So when a major Bollywood star like a Nana Patekar, or a filmmaker like Sajjid Khan, or more recently, an A-list filmmaker like Rajkumar Hirani, have sexual harassment allegations slapped on them, the news media devotes major chunks of primetime or newsprint to covering the news. So much so that a layperson could even be forgiven for imagining that sexual harassment is the exclusive preserve of the film industry in India, such the focus on the industry related cases.

A den of inequity?

So is the Indian film industry some kind of den of inequity, where women are preyed on all the time? I don't know if I am truly qualified to answer this one since I can only comment with certainty based on personal experience, and going by that, the answer would be a resounding 'No'. In my close to two decades of being a member of the film fraternity, albeit not really inhabiting the mainstream space, I can say in all honesty that I have not been propositioned a single time. As shocking as it may sound, I have encountered far greater misogyny and sexism during my brief stint as a journalist. I have had male colleagues pass vulgar comments and crack crude jokes on the genitalia of prominent female politicians. I have been propositioned by a United Nations official when I approached him for support to a project. In contrast, I have been treated with utmost courtesy by my

film industry colleagues, and never has my gender been a cause for any kind of harassment or mistreatment. I must add a rider here of course that I have been extremely careful and selective in my associations, and have guarded against the kind of vulnerability, which desperate efforts to gain access or opportunity forces one to subject one's self to.

Obviously, like in any other industry for that matter, the film industry too has its share of men who choose to coerce or subjugate women co-workers or staff, as drunk as they are on the power of their position or influence. The film industry does not subject itself to as strict a scrutiny

So is the Indian film industry some kind of den of inequity, where women are preyed on all the time? I don't know if I am truly qualified to answer this one since I can only comment with certainty based on personal experience, and going by that, the answer would be a resounding 'No'.

as a corporate set-up for one, although the 2018 shake-out has seen a sea-change on that front, and there is a certain element of arbitrariness involved in granting opportunities and access, that allows for a greater chance for harassment and exploitation. Keen to gain a foothold in the industry, and brainwashed into believing that sex is the currency that will buy them the opportunities that they so desperately seek, young women and even men often succumb to what is called the 'casting couch' phenomenon. The #MeToo movement has triggered allegations against two high profile casting directors among others. In one case, an audio has been released in the voice of the alleged perpetrator, where he is heard telling the listener that she won't get an opportunity unless she is willing to offer sexual favours in return.

The post facto event

It is important to take note here of the often heard murmurs on how sexual harassment allegations are being made post facto, even in cases where there was explicit consent. In other words, the woman knew what she was getting into and she went into it willingly. I believe a more nuanced understanding of consent is required here. While the legal validity of consent obtained under duress can be questioned, it must also be understood that the duress may not necessarily be in the form of a gun to the head. When it is someone's burning ambition to be a part of the world of showbiz, and when she is told that granting sexual favours is the only way to do it, the coercion is certainly implicit. Another important point to note here would be that the consent is also contingent on the granting of the access or the opportunity that is being sought. When there is a breach of contract, as in one of the parties to the contract does not fulfil the conditions on the basis of which the exchange of sexual favours took place, there are instances of rape charges being filed by the women. Since the law neither recognises sex as currency and hence, any charge of breach of contract involving said currency would not be legally tenable. Reason why we find rape allegations being made in such cases, where the claim is made that the consent stands nullified post facto given that the conditions on the basis of which it was granted remain unfulfilled. I believe we may need to revisit the relevant provisions of the law in this context to ensure that there is scope for legal relief in such cases.

Another often heard argument is how allegations are sometime baseless and the reputations of innocent men even are taking a hit as a consequence of the movement. We recently saw the case of a corporate executive, who committed suicide where he was not allowed an opportunity to present his case. Then there was also the case of Varun Grover, a film lyricist against whom allegations were made, following which the Netflix show that he was writing was almost cancelled. However, the allegations remained



Bollywood men accused of #MeToo

further damage could be done.

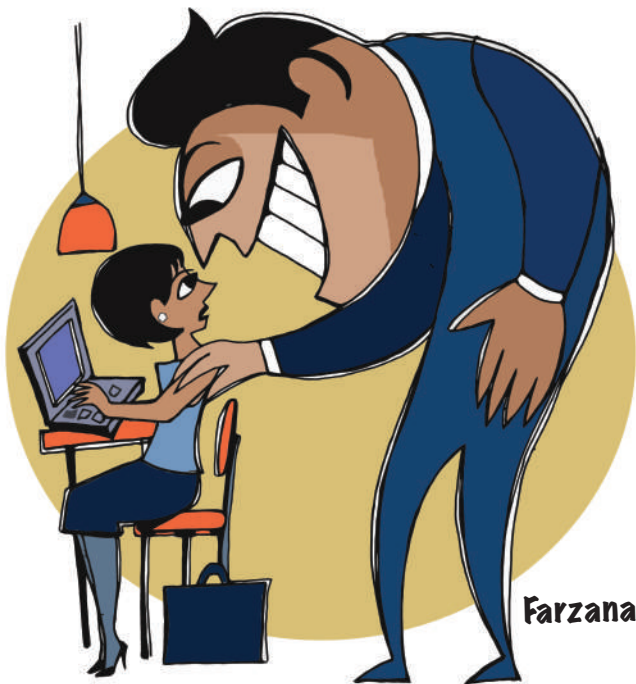
While instances of unsubstantiated allegations and hit jobs, and the misuse of the public support that the movement has garnered, cannot be brushed aside as collateral damage, the larger issues that #MeToo hopes to address remain and the validity of the movement per se cannot be questioned. I believe this shakeup was a long time coming, and I can only hope that the purview of the movement would extend beyond the salacious coverage of sordid celebrity dramas, and provide relief for marginalised women working in various unorganised sectors too, that offer no scope for relief and redressal to the victims of sexual harassment.



Janaki Viswanathan is a journalist turned filmmaker from Chennai. She won the National Award for her debut film *Kutty* (Little One). She has three features and several documentaries and short films to her credit.

Predators at work

*Succumbing to, or keeping quiet about sexual harassment at the work place, whether a construction site or a corporate office, cannot be held against women, especially if it has implications of job security, says **Shoma A. Chatterji**. She discusses this issue at length.*



Farzana

SEXUAL harassment at the workplace is a reality that sustains for Indian women across all sectors – rural and urban, class, status, education and caste, primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, including indigenous and organised sectors. It is structured into the social system ruled by patriarchal conditions, and we are aware of this reality. Elements of the social system seep into the work sector too, and men as well as organisations take it for granted that the woman will be willing to walk that extra mile to hold on to the job.

Complaints have been made, laws have been passed, cases have been filed, a few won by virtue of the importance of the complainant, and/ or wide media coverage. But this devil continues to dog us right through time, space, and person. Specifically, it was the Harvey Weinstein scandal that lifted the lid on this terrible crime which involved blackmail of every kind – emotional, psychological, financial, and of course, physical too.

Most women who are victims of sexual harassment do not have either the means, or the support that someone like Rupan Deol had, since she herself was an IAS officer. Yet, it is now common knowledge that Deol was under constant pressure to drop the case because her molester,

K.P.S. Gill, was known to be a super cop, almost a national figure, whose image could hardly be tarnished. Juxtaposed against this is patriarchy's tendency to trivialise any issue that involves the humiliation, oppression and insult of women. The pressure, like in any rape case, is on the victim, and not on the culprit. This is a living example of misuse of power, a modern-day sin. Is it perhaps, also envy, of a woman occupying a high administrative post, that still has room at the top?

Defining sexual harassment

Broadly stated, sexual harassment is defined as any attention of sexual nature in the context of the work situation, which has the effect of making a woman uncomfortable on the job. It can manifest itself in looks, jokes, gestures, bawdy remarks, or plain proposition. A large section of women employees face sexual harassment in varied degrees. Some are presented with the unpleasant alternative of putting up with it, possibly giving into it, or looking for another job or a less attractive posting, without any guarantee that the same thing would not happen at the new place. The biggest drawback is that its threat keeps many women out of certain occupations and places where such behaviour is implicit in the very nature of the job itself. However, before jumping to attack the system that, despite legal avenues, continues to flourish at the cost of women and 'advantage' of men, there are areas where women would prefer to keep silent and accept the sexual harassment as part of the job. A daily-wage labourer at a construction site is forced to sleep with the overseer because if she does not, she will be wiped off the roster. She has children waiting to be fed and clothed and sheltered. Is she consenting to the harassment? In literal terms, she is, but in moral terms, she is not. Her choice is between giving up her daily-wage or contractual job and sticking to it. If she sticks to it, her values have been compromised. But her children will be fed and clothed. If she quits, her children's lives and her own, are placed at risk.

This can happen to a single woman working in a bank who has no support for her family, or, a top brass in a corporate organisation. Hospitals are a fertile ground for sexual harassment which sometimes becomes consensual. But when an ambitious woman greedy enough for a quick promotion to the next higher post finds that this is either followed or accompanied by unwritten compromises of sexual nature, and if she agrees to this compromise, then she has engaged in consensual sex because she gave first priority to the promotion, and less to her values as a woman.

She had the option of quitting her job and finding another. But she does not take it. Research scholars have a tough time with their supervisors who often pressurise them for sexual favours, and they find it almost impossible to opt out because their research would remain incomplete, thus blocking their future in academia, forever. This is an impasse that is really tough to solve.

Nirmala Bhatt, who worked in a nationalised bank in Mumbai, endorses this. "We, as women, are conditioned by our families that if someone pinches us on the street, it is better to keep quiet. The same thing extends itself in our lives when we grow up and face similar or worse situations at the workplace." Under existing labour laws, it is the responsibility of the employer to provide a safe work place and conditions that do not violate the physical and mental well-being of any employee. A work place that treats women as sexual commodities, forcing them to respond as such, clearly violates this provision, even if legal experts may not agree. Women who are seen to have slept their way to promotions are blamed and stigmatised for taking advantage of the clichéd weakness of men, absolving men of all responsibilities. Any woman who advances rapidly in her career on her own merit, is seen as reaping the benefits of the casting couch.

The threat of 'or else'

Every single profession that engages women, with or without men such as domestic work, media, advertising, modelling, works on the unwritten assumption that if forced a bit, or a bit more, subtly or bluntly or sharply or with the invisible gun pointed to her head, every single member of the female sex will surrender to sexual demands. The "or else" is kept dangling in the air, the answer a given. Some professions are more open to a bartering for sexual favours for work, for higher pay, for a better role, for a big banner production house, for a promotion, than other professions such as teaching and medicine and banking. These are professions that demand youth, beauty and body or any one of these three.

Thus, there are invisible lines that remain unread where victims unwittingly lend themselves to sexual harassment and find it is too late to turn around and go back to square one. Let an example underwrite this argument. In her beautiful article – *Harvey Weinstein and the Economics of Consent*, Brit Marling writes (TheAtlantic.com October 23, 2017), "Acting felt like a noble pursuit and maybe even a small act of resistance. Hollywood was, of course, a rude awakening to that kind of idealism. I quickly realised that a large portion of the town functioned inside a soft and sometimes literal trafficking or prostitution of young women (a

commodity with an endless supply and an endless demand)." Marling rightly points out: "Once, when I was standing in line for some open-call audition for a horror film, I remember catching my reflection in the mirror and realised that I was dressed like a sex object. Every woman in line to audition for "Nurse" was, it seemed. We had all internalised on some level the idea that if we were going to be cast, we'd better sell what was desired — not our artistry, not our imaginations — but our bodies." Young girls, and now, even young men who aspire for a career in films or modelling or politics, become cry-babies after the fact, screaming their lungs out about men in the industry – from the producer to the make-up man – of forcing themselves on these youngsters. The casting couch is structured into the construct of the careers described above. So, nothing comes of these complaints after the fact because the perpetrators, more powerful than their so-called victims, go scot free claiming that it was consensual sex, and there was no force involved.

Dhiman Dasgupta, a film scholar, author and one-time media person, gives us the other side of the story. He says, "This is not unique to films and television. In my 22 years with the media and advertising, I have seen the prominence of the (casting) couch. The last six years, I had been trying to become a writer. I have witnessed this in the publication industry. When I probed a bit more, I found that this exists in banks, real estate, finance, and across the corporate world. I have seen that a sizable section of women take advantage of this phenomenon. It would be very difficult to solve it by unionising it. In today's world, the system has shown absolute disregard for the Philadelphia Convention which says "eight hours of work." Most men and women I know in the corporates work for 12 hours, and that is the unwritten norm. Now, if you cannot protest against the violation of one global norm of human working condition, how will you protest against these extractive institutions that do not respect women's issues? It is a problem where the white collared, in its obsession for growth as ignored alienation, has forgotten its crises of repression. The media filth pours out because of its so-called celeb status. Otherwise, it is all pervasive, exists across the spectrum in the world drained of sexual morality. We are truly a soulless world."

"Sexual harassment of women at the workplace is an important instance of the oppression of women through sex and terror", writes Sujata Gothoskar (*The Sunday Observer*, May 13, 1984.) "This combination of sex and terror is central to the oppression of women in the family, on the streets, at the workplace. This sexual aggression is not an aberration or some spontaneous act. It is part and parcel of a systematic and consistent strategy of men to dominate and maintain their power on women", she sums up.



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.

The limitations that stall #MeToo

*In one aspect, India offers better conditions for victims of sexual abuse – there is no limitation period to rape charges brought by victims. This is not the case worldwide, says **Gajanan Khergamker**, as he discusses the infamous Harvey Weinstein case of Hollywood.*

TO understand the #MeToo movement, it is vital to understand the legalities of the claims brought about by the victims, and the efficacy of the laws in the respective countries. While we, in India, are prone to ruing about 'lengthy processes' and other issues, the issues that plague the rest of the world are worse, if not deplorable.

In India, there is no limitation period to rape charges brought by victims. That proving the crime may be difficult or near impossible, is another issue. The law itself does not prevent the victim from filing charges at any time after the incident.

Statute of limitation, worldwide

Now, where #MeToo is concerned, a sexual harassment claim brought by actress Ashley Judd against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein – which triggered the movement across the world, has been dismissed by a court in California. The producer has been accused by more than 75 women of 'varying degrees of sexual misconduct', over time that spans decades. Weinstein denies all allegations. He has also been charged with five counts of sexual abuse that include rape.

The charges brought by the two women will stand trial in New York later this year. Ashley Judd, who was Mr Weinstein's original accuser, re-filed her sexual harassment lawsuit filed following a change in California state law after her initial claim was rejected by Judge Gutierrez in a Los Angeles federal court last September. In the suit, she alleged she rejected unwanted advances from him, who then tried to wreck her career. Interestingly, in a judgement indicative of similar takes from judiciaries across borders, Judge Gutierrez maintained the law that dealt with sexual misconduct claims in professional relationships, revised to include directors and producers, could not be applied retrospectively to Judd's case. The logic being: A person could not be held liable for an act s/he committed if it wasn't a crime or an offence at the time s/he committed it. Even if the act constitutes a crime by dint of any legislation brought after the act was originally committed, the person cannot be held liable. Law is to be applied prospectively, and not retrospectively.

The part of her lawsuit that states that "Weinstein used his power in the entertainment industry to damage Ms Judd's reputation and limit her ability to find work," could however be examined in a court of law. Apparently, in 2017, *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson said he had been considering Judd for a role in the 2002 film, but that she was "blacklisted" following conversations with the Weinstein

Company. Jackson said Weinstein had warned him the actress was a "nightmare" to work with. Weinstein, however, said he had no role in the casting of the movie, and denied trying to derail Ashley Judd's career. Judd's lawyer, Theodore Boutsouros, said, "While we respectfully disagree with the Court's decision as to the one claim it ruled on today, we look forward to pursuing the three claims for relief that the Court has already ruled can move forward," he added. Weinstein's lawyer, Phyllis Kupferstein, welcomed the judge's decision. "We have said from the beginning that this claim was unjustified, and we are pleased that the court saw it as we did," she said in a statement, adding: "We believe that we will ultimately prevail on her (Ms Judd's) remaining claims."

Meanwhile, in Florida, a bill that seeks to halt statute of limitations in rape cases has been introduced. Donna Hedrick says her high school chorus teacher forced her to have sex with him in December 1971. The freshman had just turned 15 and 'really didn't fight him off,' because she was scared and 'almost convinced that this is what you have to do to be in a safe place.' She said she needed that safe place because she was having trouble at home, so she turned to her mentor for guidance, and was invited to his home. The teacher, who is now retired, was never arrested or charged in the case. Now, decades later, Hedrick is going public with her story to launch a fight to change Florida law and eliminate the current four-year statute of limitations as it pertains to sexual abuse. Hedrick, married and with grown children, met with State Senator Linda Stewart (D-Orlando) to present her story, and Stewart immediately took action. "There needs to be no clock on sexual crimes for our young people," offered Stewart, who filed Senate Bill 130 to remove the statute of limitations for prosecution of rapes involving victims under the age of 18.

Now, under current state law, first-degree felonies involving sexual battery must be prosecuted within four years after the offence. Prosecution of any other degree of felony sexual battery must commence within three years of the crime. If approved by the legislature, Stewart's bill would take effect July 1. Yet, even if approved, the former teacher will never face potential charges in the case because the law would not be retroactive.

It may be recalled that following the Delhi gang rape case, the four held guilty by a fast-track court could not be punished under the new amended stringent rape law brought in 2013, as the amendments were carried out after the commission of the crime.

(continued to page 10...)

#MeToo @home?

Violence against women in love affairs gone wrong, or even the rejection of a suitor, have taken horrific forms like immolation and murder. Manu Shrivastava writes about this shocking trend.

THE year 2018 will be remembered for many things - good, bad and ugly. But that one movement that took over the media and shook our collective sensibilities, was the #MeToo movement. Not only did it resonate with millions of working women from all walks of life, around the world, it brought to fore the extent of discrimination and harassment women face, when they chose to work. The movement definitely provided the much lacking support in incidents of molestation and sexual harassment, as thousands of women got the courage to speak up about their abuse, and many even publicly named their abusers.

What started as a one-off revelation by a Hollywood actress abused by a multimillionaire producer, spread like a wildfire in Hollywood, USA, and around the world. Many women followed up with legal action, several chose not to, and a significant number of allegations were even dismissed as they turned out to be false and baseless - a price every well-intended movement pays. The #MeToo movement went on to prove one more thing - women around the world and in all walks of life face similar harassment at the hands of 'more powerful' men who are in position of authority.

The movement reached India when actress Tanushree Dutta leveled allegations against Nana Patekar and others of sexually harassing her at the sets of a movie in 2008. Post this, multiple women from media and entertainment industry revealed stories of abuse, molestation even rape. Many true, some false, and almost all high profile.

The missing piece

The movement, however, has entirely missed out on tackling one very important area of violence against women. The one that happens at home. The #MeToo movement failed to bring out and provide support to women who are abused, even killed, at home, in the 'safe' custody of their family.

In the last week of December 2018, was the horrific murder of a 15-year-old girl in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, burnt alive by her cousin and his relatives for not reciprocating his 'feelings' for her. The boy had been making advances towards the minor girl, but she rejected all proposals, as she considered him her brother. This infuriated the boy who wanted to avenge his rejection.

Such incidents are not uncommon. They occur, constantly, in all parts of the country, and in rural and urban zones alike. The killing of this minor girl in Agra proves two things: First, the deep-rooted patriarchal mindset where a



Farzana

man believes he has the right to 'control' a woman, her choices, her decisions, her body and her life. Second, there is no deterrence or fear of the law or authority whatsoever in the minds of perpetrators. The law has failed to protect the women. The #MeToo that happens at home has no voice and no support.

Domestic Violence, as it is commonly known in India, is defined in 'The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005', as:

- Physical abuse - any act that causes bodily injury or hurt such as beating, kicking, punching
- Sexual abuse - any humiliating or degrading sexual act such as forced sexual intercourse
- Verbal and emotional abuse - insults, threats causing harm or injury
- Economic abuse - deprivation of the basic necessities of life

The shocking figures

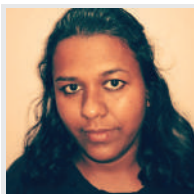
Domestic violence extends far beyond rape, molestation, and spousal relations. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) data, the most recent, released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, indicated shocking figures. Every third woman, since the age of 15, has faced domestic violence of various forms. The survey further reported that among married women who have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, 83 per cent reported their present husbands as perpetrators of the violence.

For unmarried women, the experience of physical violence originated from the most common perpetrators including mothers or step-mothers (56%), fathers or step-fathers (33%), sisters or brothers (27%), and teachers (15%). The data on sexual violence at home is even more alarming. The report stated that the most common perpetrators of sexual violence on unmarried women were other relatives (27%), followed by a current or former boyfriend (18%), their own friend or acquaintance (17%) and a family friend (11%).

A majority of the victims of domestic violence do not seek help or report incidents of violence fearing social ostracism, humiliation, concerns of future prospects of marriage, etc. Many also do not approach authorities particularly the police as they are not reliable or sensitive to the situation. One of the most important reasons for the failure of law to curb incidents of domestic violence is perception in society and among authorities. Policemen, who are supposed to protect the victim and provide support by registering cases, fail to do so as they are part of the same society that looks at women as inferior, and not equal citizens. Families of victims of domestic violence, especially when abuse is not spousal but perpetuated by a member of the family, usually discourage the victim from reporting such incidents to authorities. They, instead, continue to protect and harbour the perpetrator, who in turn, continues to abuse the victim.

In instances where the abuse is inflicted by a family member such as a father, mother or brother, it becomes all the more difficult for the victim to report abuse. Authorities across spectrum, even at centres instituted for rehabilitating abused women, are insensitive, unaware and unlikely to believe a father or a brother can also abuse or harm a female relative. Very often, they brush off such incidents as 'ghar ka maamla' (a domestic problem where outsiders can't intervene), and coax the victim to 'patch up' with the family. Also, in such cases, the reputation of the victimised woman is at risk as she has 'dared' to complain against her own family.

In the last few years, there has been a certain level of acceptance of the concept of spousal abuse. Many institutions, government centres and NGOs are active and the stigma has decreased. But victims of abuse by consanguineous members have a long drawn battle to fight. The authorities also need to understand that abuse is not always sexual or physical. Emotional abuse or mental oppression is as much an abuse as physical and can disrupt normalcy in the life of a woman and her dignity. Any act of domestic violence is not only a violence of the Domestic Violence Act, but also a violation of the fundamental Right to Life as laid in the Indian Constitution that extends to Right to Life with Dignity. An act of violence against a woman strips her of her dignity as an individual, and is violative of her fundamental right.



Manu Shrivastava is a Media Legal Researcher with DraftCraft International, and co-convener of 'The Woman Survivor' initiative that documents abuse of women and children within families.

(...continued from page 08)

The India story

In the #MeToo Movement, the one issue that needs to be addressed is the #MeToo Beyond Borders where the perpetrator either marries the victim or promises to marry the victim back in India, or takes her with him to a foreign land and ill-treats her throughout her stay in isolation; even physically abuses her while seizing her legal documents to ensure she doesn't escape to freedom.

This issue needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency, and despite the law being in place, it's the reluctance of the victim to come out and file charges against her 'husband and his family', compounded by the need for Indian authorities in foreign lands to reach out especially to women and dependants of NRIs to ensure they are safe and sound. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), a total of 765 complaints were received in the first 200 days

of 2018, more than half of the number of complaints received in 2017, and a similar number from 2015. Offenders tend to take advantage of the fact that most offences committed are across borders, where the laws regarding woman are weak.

Harassment and ill-treatment by the husband and his family and abandonment, are the most common complaints received by MEA. In September 2017, the Indian government increased the amount of legal and financial assistance to distressed women from \$3,000 per case to \$4,000. Also, from June 2018, it was mandated that all NRI marriages must be registered within seven days.

The law needs to change in sync with the progression of crime in any country. The rate of change has to be at pace with the progression. And, the law does catch up with the felon...finally!



Gajanan Khergamker is an independent Editor, Solicitor and filmmaker. He is the founder of the international think tank 'DraftCraft'.

#Me Too in the choo-choo train!

How do women in government jobs, especially in the junior rungs, deal with sexual harassment at their work place? Nivedita Louis, who was herself once employed with the Indian Railways, gives us a rather sordid peek into that world. Will things improve any time soon?

WHEN wave after wave of #MeToo hit the country, I looked with awe at the sheer grit and determination of the women who spoke up. “It is easy for the women in the corporate world to speak up. Women in media and fine arts are already all over the place, they own something called a ‘space’ to spill the beans”, I mused, transported back to my Railway days. Seventeen years in Railways is time enough to surmise that ‘nothing is going to change’ there, especially the situation of women.

Terrible tales

I remember very particularly this cancer survivor in Tiruchirappalli’s famed coach maintenance yard. The elderly woman nearing her retirement was dragging a drum of grease, almost her size through the platform. I was part of a team trying to collect information on problems faced by the women workers on behalf of a trade union. When I enquired about her with the other female workers, all they could say was that the woman was victimised because she vehemently refused to be part of the most favoured trade union, and refused to part with a share of Diwali bonus subscription to that union. In retaliation, her immediate boss had made her perform the strenuous task of refilling grease at the work stations.

When I spoke with her, Lakshmi Amma had no qualms about it. “No, this has nothing to do with union or anything. This is usually a punishment post earmarked for women who don’t ‘fall in line’ with the bosses. It is good that I am here, so the other young ones can be spared of this hard work”. She shooed us away and walked down the grease laden platform. The next time I went to the shed, a year later, I was told her cancer had relapsed, and she had gone on medical leave.

Mani Amma’s story was different. She was a gang woman at Tiruchirappalli Junction. Most of us don’t know how difficult it is for women to work in the lower rungs of technical/mechanical departments. Mani was employed with a gang of about 25 people, along with 10 other women

The problem they had was something I couldn’t comprehend – they had a common bathing place. It was just a portion of their common staff room, the bathing area had taps lined up along a wall. The women had tied a couple of sarees along the last few taps to cover up what little modesty they had left, and were using it since ages. Trouble started when Mani Amma highlighted this to the trade unions and administration. Her boss thought the best way to silence her would be to ‘teach her a lesson’ in his style, which included sexual advances too.

When Mani fought off the advances, she was punished. Made to carry cement blocks on her head till she bled through her hair profusely, Mani Amma stood her ground. The last time I saw her, her daughter was taking the mother to the hospital.

Music lessons, courtesy Railways!

This is how the system works. I owe all my musical prowess to Railways. The first station I was employed - a major junction station that, mind it, had a unisex rest room and a rickety door that couldn’t be locked from the inside. What did we do to counter this? We women used to sing. Loudly, of course. The men were a different lot though. The decent ones announced to everyone that they were making a visit to the loo. The rest were happy to flash their goods. There was this supervisor who was so lazy that he used to zip up his pants only on his way out, inviting attention to his privates. The action was so gross that when I, for once

decided to complain directly to him, his response was simple- “Close your eyes!”

The ‘Jhansi Ki Rani’ sleeping within me woke with a start at that and wrote a written complaint to our Divisional Manager, and the rest they say is history. I was hardly 20 when the incident occurred. Then there were no Vishaka Committee guidelines, but the officer concerned was kind enough to conduct a personal enquiry into the incident, and finally the accused was found guilty and punished with a transfer. The accused staff was merrily chatting away with friends saying this was the first time in history that a person

The prime targets for middle level managers and supervisors in Railways are the poor widows who join work on compassionate grounds. The initial credential check by the outdated Railway’s personnel department ensures the women are ‘in line’ with the system.



Women at all rungs are vulnerable to exploitation

was punished for zipping up his pants in public! To him, unzipping was a crime, and this wasn't!

The king of all predators however came to light at the fag end of my unfortunate public career. The perpetrator was an officer and women staff were only doubly happy to be sending the guy "Good morning" and "Good night" messages, laughing at his lame sexist jokes across social media. This was not offensive at all. But when the hunt for my phone number started, I resisted with full force and all hell broke loose. The misuse of power with those holding key posts in such organisations are alarming. Called into chaperone officers' children in a garden party as part of my training programme, asked to work at places with limited or no infrastructure, the cat and mouse race continued until I decided to quit. Not all women are lucky. I know of a woman who was 'caught in the act' with her boss on a railway platform, with her name doing the rounds all over the place.

The prime targets for middle level managers and supervisors in Railways are the poor widows who join work on compassionate grounds. The initial credential check by the outdated Railway's personnel department ensures the women are 'in line' with the system. The so called 'good looking' ones get appointed in the favourite places, landing plum posts, subject to 'adjustment'. Adjustment – the common word that is used to sweep under the carpet all misdeeds and sexual overtures. The women who don't 'adjust' are of course the cast-aways, the ones who 'deserve' posting to punishment areas and punishment posts, to bring them under 'control'. Sad, the women around them just do not understand the plight of these women and gossip as the

grapevine teaches them. There is a saying that goes – gossip travels faster than the Rajdhani in Railways!

A ray of hope?

Things have got better these days, my close friend still with the Railways, tells me. She promptly complained about one of her colleagues who stepped over the friendship line, to the superiors. An enquiry by the Committee formed on Vishaka guidelines revealed the guy was guilty, and he was punished with a transfer. The details of Vishaka guidelines and officer to be contacted in case of trouble have been plastered across the offices, and thanks to this, the trade unions and front runners have been able to stir up some awareness in the lower rung of women working for Railways. I wouldn't say all is robust and rosy. There are misgivings. There are still women who haven't found a way to speak up after years of abuse.

One can only hope that the sound #MeToo has created reaches these women without voices, to open up, and speak out boldly. It has taken me 20 years to do so and for them it might take few more years. But yes, instead of asking "Why not earlier?", "Why now?", "Have they fallen out?", it would be better if the world just would sit up, take notice of these voiceless women, and listen to their stories. And of course, as women, let us not think women doing manual labour are 'prone' to such misgivings, given their economic background. Rich or poor, blue collar or white collar, it is a woman who says "#MeToo" and her voice needs to be heard, period!



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.

Slow justice, no justice

The media is supposed to be a watchdog of democracy, yet, it has more than its own share of sexual misconduct and harassment. Dr. Rina Mukherji, who worked for The Statesman newspaper and faced repeated harassment, writes about her ordeal, and justice, which took fifteen years!

THE Constitution of India guarantees us all the Right to Equality, irrespective of sex, religion, caste or creed. This means each one of us is assured of equality of opportunity, equality before the law, and the right to work and settle anywhere. I grew up believing in it, and the strength of our democracy.

My story

As a precocious, brilliant achiever, I saw myself as more than an equal to boys my age, and opted for a profession that I believed (and still do) could change the world for better. I entered journalism in Mumbai (then Bombay) with stars in my eyes, way back in the mid-1980s, when discrimination on the basis of gender was disgustingly rampant. Plum assignments went to males, and those with “pull”, females like me were left to make the most of beats that no one cared for. Yet, my discerning eye found a lot that was under-reported or unreported, and very soon, I found there was a lot to look forward to. Within a decade, I had covered business, politics, education, medical research, public health, film exports, industries like shipping, textiles, labour issues, and the environment. Meanwhile, a UGC doctoral fellowship had helped me earn my doctorate too, before I relocated to Kolkata following marriage. The arrival of my daughter forced me to take a break from work for a few years. In 2002, with my daughter joining regular school, I joined *The Statesman* in Kolkata as a Senior Reporter. The position did not do justice to my vast experience; but that was the only opening available, and I was desperate to return to work.

I was to work for the city pages; and since I was going to report on the environment and public health, I was more than happy about it. I was to report to the Chief Reporter, and through him, to the News Coordinator. The colleagues were friendly and welcoming; so I felt satisfied. This was in June, 2002. Within a few weeks of joining

The Statesman, I noticed that the News Co-ordinator, would keep accidentally bumping into me. The peculiar part of it was - it was not in a crowded newsroom, but along empty, wide corridors that offered enough space to manoeuvre about. I dismissed the first few instances as accidental. Instinct told me soon enough, that these were stage-managed. Moving away would not help. Things got worse; every time he touched, his hands would keep feeling me up. It was the kind of street sexual harassment that one encounters in the worst alleys in India. Only that it was an educated colleague who was choosing to misbehave.

Decades after the Vishaka Guidelines came into place, there is a #MeToo movement in India that has made the authorities take notice. We must thank the Minister for Women & Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, for having prevailed on the Prime Minister to have an offender removed from his ministerial berth following a volley of accusations against him.

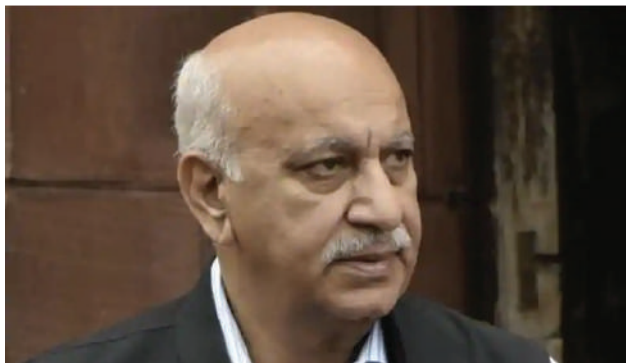
By September, the harassment had reached horrendous proportions. Since I was avoiding him, the harassment became professional. My stories started getting spiked. And then, there came a time, when nothing written by me was allowed to be published if the News Coordinator got his hands on it. That was when I made a verbal complaint to the Managing Editor. However, rather than act on it, *The Statesman* decided to terminate me. The termination was on Dassera day - October 10, 2002.

Initially, I felt relieved. However, the injustice of it all made me a medical wreck.

My recourse

But we humans are built to bounce back. And that is what I did. There were hits and misses, though. The

first organisation I approached, after being counselled, was a non-governmental organisation, (NGO), Sanhita, which claimed to especially focus on cases related to sexual harassment at the workplace. But after dilly-dallying over two months, they expressed their misgivings in taking on a media house. Thankfully, they put me through to the newly-formed Network of Women in Media in India (NWMI), which was more than willing to lobby on my behalf through the coordinators – Rajashri Dasgupta and Ananya Chatterjee. On the advice of a journalist friend from the fraternity, Partho Pratim Nag, I approached the West Bengal Commission for Women.



Union Minister M.J. Akbar had to resign following allegations of sexual misconduct

The resultant pressure that built up ultimately saw *The Statesman* set up an Internal Complaints Committee in keeping with the Vishaka Guidelines. But in spite of several requests from the State Women's Commission, as also the NWMI, *The Statesman* refused to investigate into my complaint. In fact, my complaint remains un-investigated to this day. I had believed that my complaint of sexual harassment would be internally settled by *The Statesman*. But I was wrong. On the advice of the State Women's Commission, I lodged a police complaint. I also took up the matter of being illegally terminated with the Chief Labour Commissioner.

In both cases, *The Statesman* proved intransigent. Since they refused to cooperate with the Labour Department for conciliation proceedings, the matter was transferred to the Industrial Tribunal. My police complaint had to be investigated by senior (IPS) officers from Lalbazar, since they would not cooperate with police officers from the local police station. The State Women's Commission under Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi did a commendable job in fighting for justice. But as they set out to act, the various lacunae in the law became evident. *The Statesman* successfully took advantage of the loopholes to delay justice, by refusing to cooperate with the august body. Although a Bengali by birth, my family had no West Bengal connections. My parents had grown up in the Hindi belt, and I had been educated and brought up in Mumbai. My husband had no Kolkata connection either. There was no network of friends or contacts to fall back on. So matters were doubly difficult. The Vishaka Guidelines had been formulated by the Supreme Court in 1997; but cases related to sexual harassment were hardly heard of. Senior lawyers I approached were reluctant to take on a case they had no experience of. This was when a chance acquaintance I made at a Maitreyee meeting suggested meeting Sutapa Chakravarty of the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) in Kolkata.

Even as I focussed on my legal suit at the Industrial

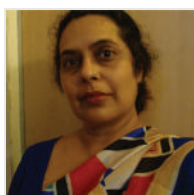
Tribunal, *The Statesman* and my harasser, (then) News Coordinator Ishan Joshi, slapped defamation suits in Kolkata and New Delhi, respectively. I ultimately won my case of illegal termination at the Industrial Tribunal on February 6, 2013, exactly a week prior to the The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (SHW Act). The Revision Suit filed in the Calcutta High Court too was ruled in my favour. Exactly 15 years after the filing of my criminal defamation suit, I won it in the Patiala House Courts in Delhi. Without dwelling much on the legal aspect of my fight, I would like to elaborate on the toll that a fight like this can take on the complainant.

The snail's pace of judiciary

The SHW Act, as also its recent amendment, is certainly full of good intentions. But given the snail's pace of our judiciary, what justice can a complainant get? I lost 15 of my most productive years fighting for justice. What compensation can I expect for that? Even when one gets a lawyer, the level of commitment one needs for an issue that is absolutely new and challenging may not be easy, and especially not from senior lawyers. Thankfully, the young lawyers who ultimately agreed to handle my case were highly committed to my cause, though lacking in much experience.

My experience has also set me to question the prevalent hypocrisy in the media. I have seen so-called celebrity journalists and feminists prove totally untrue to the values they cry hoarse about. The Fourth Estate is an important pillar of democracy; committed to upholding the values of the nation's citizens. It keeps holding a mirror to the wrongdoings in society; but, there is no effort made at punishing wrongdoers within its hallowed portals. In my case, while I could not return to a mainstream media job in Kolkata, and found it difficult to continue with other full-time jobs (owing to the strain of rushing from one court to another in two cities), my harasser was promoted at *The Statesman*, and went on to become Editor-in-Chief in another publication in Goa.

Decades after the Vishaka Guidelines came into place, there is a #MeToo movement in India that has made the authorities take notice. We must thank the Minister for Women & Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, for having prevailed on the Prime Minister to have an offender removed from his ministerial berth following a volley of accusations against him. This impetus needs to continue. Only then, can women feel empowered enough to justly contribute to nation-building, in keeping with our rights enshrined in the Constitution.



A senior journalist, Dr. Rina Mukherji specialises in all aspects of sustainable development, with special focus on the environment and climate change. She has been a UGC doctoral fellow, and holds a doctorate in African Studies, with specialisation in Third World conflict and developmental issues. She is currently an independent journalist based in Pune.

A broken promise

*Life can be a cocoon, or not, says **Enya Kumar**, a young, high-schooler in the US. She talks about growing with security and love, but the rude awakening that awaits every female, in the form of misogynistic comments, and blatant sexism, from the playground to the class room.*

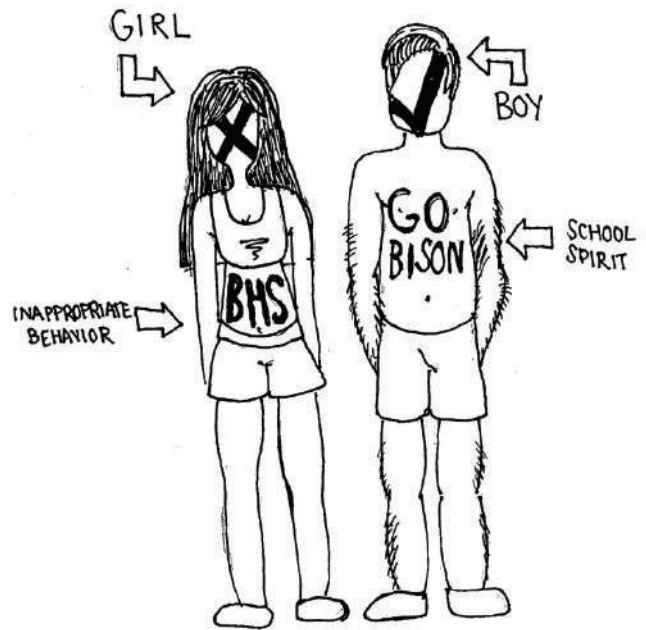
MY life has been composed of safety and opportunity. I wake up each morning knowing I have the freedom of going to school and returning home, with food on the table, and a family that loves me, surrounding that table. Plagued with little discrimination, I lived sheltered from racism and sexism.

I spent the first ten years of my life on the playground, a secluded, beautiful place that quarantined my childhood innocence. Sometimes, a girl would call out “Hey, Indian girl!” instead of calling out my name, or the boys would exclude the quiet, brown girl from their game of Ultimate Football. But the beauty of childhood is that a quiet brown girl couldn’t be bothered by anyone’s ignorance, when she lived in the oblivion of innocence.

The awakening

Eventually, like most girls, I grew up to recognise that sexism surrounded me. Transitioning out of girlhood sucked me out of oblivion. Accepting the discrimination my mother and grandmothers had to face, and what my sisters and I would have to face, felt like a broken promise. Every now and then, when the room felt just safe enough, my friends and I talked about what we’ve really experienced. A friend rolled her eyes as she spoke of the boys that thought the feminist reading in her English class was sexist against them. Another told us about a coach telling her entire soccer team they’ll never be the athletes the boys’ team are. Another mentioned that after confiding to her boyfriend about a tough day, he asked her “Are you on your period?”. Another narrated how her male friend “playfully” choked her in a public setting. Of course she just laughed it off. It would be unladylike for her to complain. Another girl confessed that her grandfather physically abused her grandmother. Someone else said that her father told her that the sexism she experienced in her school isn’t real, that it was an illusion she concocted in her mind.

Throughout my life, strangers and loved ones alike have commented some sexist, unintelligible things. I’ve listened to grown men with more experience and wisdom than me (or so they claim), tell me that sexism isn’t real. Or that they are the real victims of oppression. Or that a feminist stand is a stand against them. A family member once told me, “Boys will always be stronger, better athletes than you.” I’ve heard variants of this over my life. What hurts the most, though, is that if I, a



fortuitous, middle-class seventeen-year-old kid, suffer from sexist comments, then billions of women and girls are going through what I undergo, and worse. Sexism knows no bounds by nation, race, heritage, age, or sexual orientation. Sexism is a monster feeding on the spirits of young women who are capable of thriving in education and their chosen passions; however, the monster suppresses them, so young women cannot succeed without risking never being taken seriously and sacrificing their dignity or safety.

Feminism has been skewed by society. It is necessary for all young women to understand that feminists have differing opinions on gender-related and other world issues, but the one belief that feminists share is the belief that men and women are equal. Unfortunately, it’s so taboo to talk about feminism, that girls wait until the room feels safe enough to say someone was sexist towards them, or someone they love. If young women understand the establishment of sexism and the meaning of feminism, then maybe those girls will grow up to be proud feminists with appropriate standards for themselves and men.

(continued on page 29...)



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Buddha Kanchi, Jina Kanchi

Exploring the religious plurality of Kanchipuram

The town of Kanchipuram near Chennai, is an astonishing repository of not just Hindu temples, but also Buddhist and Jain temples and monuments. The plurality of Kanchi is so reminiscent of India as a whole, and it's worth reiterating this aspect of this ageless town.

Text & Photos: Nivedita Louis



Earth touching Buddha, Karukkinil Amarntha Amman Temple, Kanchipuram

KANCHIPURAM. The very name evokes pleasant memories for every Tamil in the state. To the wanderers around the globe, it is the city of temples and silks, and the famed Kanjivaram idlis. The capital of Pallava kings, this is indeed a temple town, bustling with about 1,000 big and small temples, most of them more than a few centuries old! This quaint temple town was also the hot bed of religious pluralism, though the remains of such pluralism exist very vaguely all around the town. So, when dear friend and historian Kombai Anwar organised a day trip to the town, I gleefully jumped at the opportunity. The best part of the trip was that we were going to relish the forgotten Buddhist and Jain remnants lying scattered across the town. On an unusually hot October morning, we started on an enticing journey.

The famed Kachabeswarar Temple

Our first halt after a sumptuous breakfast of piping hot idlis and ultra-strong filter kaapi, was the famed Kachabeswarar Temple that lies in the middle of the town's commercial district. Located in the southern corner of West Raja Street, and about a couple of hundred meters from the famed Kamakshi Amman Temple, the sprawling campus is strewn with Pallava lion sculptures. The principal deity of this temple is God Shiva – a 'Swayambhu' Linga known as Kachabeswarar, and the Goddess is Soundarambika. The legend has it that Lord Vishnu prayed to Shiva in the form of a tortoise (Kachyapam) here, and that is why the name Kachabeswarar. As we approached the seven-tiered main



The Buddhas on pillars, Kachabeswarar Temple, Kanchipuram



Buddha statues on the outer wall of the Ekambareswarar Temple, Kanchipuram

entrance 'gopuram', our curator and guide of the day pointed to a couple of tiny Buddhas sculpted on the lower tier of the gopuram. The Buddhas showing 'dhyana mudras' smile at us from above.

He pointed out one more in the inner side's gopuram and explained that the temple must have been rebuilt during Nayak/Vijayanagar period and the religious pluralism probably of the 16th or 17th centuries. The original temple is older, we find many mention about the temple in the seventh century grammar work Thandiyalangaram. We moved into the temple and found the temple tank – Ishta Siddhi Theertham, one that fulfills our wishes. There are separate shrines for Dharma Siddheswarar, Saraswati, Chaturmukeshwarar, Satyamoli Vinayakar, in the temple.

Ambling along, we came to a pillared inner mandapam, that has unique sculptures. The typical Naga style pillars of Vijayanagar era boast of more Buddhas, all in the common meditating form with dhyana mudra. Sad, most of them within reach are smeared with oil and the ones above it are 'touched' with cement. Iconographic details of the statues suggest they might have been much earlier than the Vijayanagar period.

Our next stop was surprisingly, a school! The CM Subbaraya Mudali High School stands in a nondescript bylane near Kachabeswarar Temple, and we were clueless as to what might be there in store for us. As we reached a newly erected caged enclosure on the school grounds, under a tree, a huge surprise awaited us. The four-feet tall Buddha

beamed at us, his hands folded on his lap. The probable date of the sculpture might be sixth/seventh century, going by the details. The Buddha was found on the school grounds somewhere around the 1980s, only his face showing outside the soil. Since then, he has braved the sun and rain, until recently a team of volunteers decided to excavate the statue with permission of the school authorities. Little did they know that they would be digging more than five feet underneath to excavate him! They erected a small enclosure right under the tree where he was found, with a tin roof. So there he sits, peace and quiet in his face, framed by curly locks of hair. The wide eyes, pursed lips and long ears, remain etched in our memory.

The Ekambareswarar Temple and its Buddhist icons

We reached another narrow alley, leading us to the famed Ekambareswarar Temple. As we were running short of time, we were instructed to watch for the Buddhist icons in the temple's outer compound wall, and leave. To our awe, we found a handful of Buddhas on the inner side of the parapet wall. Almost all of them sit with their hands folded. Though there are no clues about the period when the sculptures might have been made, there is absolutely no doubt that these were dismantled from some other structure (probably a Buddha Vihara that is extinct now), and replaced here as parapet wall blocks. There was apparently a reclining Buddha (Sayana Buddha) in the external side of the same wall, a couple of years ago, which has gone missing now. Feeling sad that only a few such tiny sculptures exist now of



The Tirthankara statue, Chandrapraba Temple, Tiruparuthikundram

the once famed Buddha Kanchi teeming with Viharas, we reached our next point on our tour – the Karukkinil Amarntha Amman Temple.

Situated in Mettu Theru of Pillaiyar Palayam, this temple is said to be at the southern end of town, and the guarding deity of Karukkinil Amarntha Amman Goddess sits here to protect the town. The name “Karukkinil Amarntha-val” might denote the fact that the Goddess is worshipped during ‘Karukku’(sunset) or that the Goddess sat under a ‘Karukku’ (palmyra) tree. The sthala vriksham of this temple is palmyra. Said to have been constructed during the Pallava period, the only remnants to denote the period are the sole inscriptions belonging to Pallavas, and the typical Pallava lion and elephant face sculptures that greet us at the entrance of the temple’s main mandapam. But our eyes were directed to the scattering of statues outside the sanctum. Under the tin roof, sat two Buddhas, belonging to the 6th century, one, a rare “Earth Touching Buddha”, sporting the Sparsha Mudra, his right hand touching the ground, and the other in the common dhyana mudra. This sparsha mudra is very common in Thailand, which signifies the moment of enlightenment for Buddha.

The statue of Manimekalai

It is common belief that Buddha meditated for six long years, and was on the verge of attaining enlightenment. It was then that Mara, the Demon of Illusion tried to dissuade Buddha from his meditation in the final stage. Buddha continued his meditation into the night, and called

upon Earth Goddess to witness that he achieved enlightenment, by touching the ground. Earth Goddess, witnessing the scene, is said to have been enraged, and released flood waters that swept away Mara and his temptresses. As our Buddhist guide, Mohan Raj, explained the story, we listened with rapt attention, and as he pointed to a small bust submerged nearby in cement and said, “This is Manimekalai, the only statue of her you will ever see in India”, we forgot to even breathe. A moment of silence, and then all hell broke loose as we scrambled to have a closer look at the tiny beauty. The ageless bust has somewhere lost her hands, but has her hair done in an elegant top bun, with arched eyebrows, wide eyes and well-defined lips.

It is common knowledge to the Tamils that the epic *Manimekalai* written by Seethalai Sathanar is one of the Five Great Epics of Tamil, a sequel written to another of the Five Epics Silappadhikaram. Manimekalai is the daughter of the protagonists Kovalan and his love Madhavi, who becomes a Buddhist *bhikkuni*. The epic *Manimekalai* traces her travel and life and is said to have been composed around the 5th or 6th century. The epic compares Buddhism with other religions prevalent in Tamil Nadu at that time, and establishes its strength over the others. It also propagates the teachings of Buddha. Manimekalai, born a Hindu, converted to Buddhism inspired by it, and attained the highest stage of attainment, ‘arhant’. This epic is the only extant Tamil Buddhist literary work, the lost ones being Kundalakesi, Virasoliyam, Tiruppadigam, and more. We were indeed excited to see one of Tamil Nadu’s iconic women here, a totally unexpected tiny temple.



A rare statue of Manimekalai, Karukkunil Amarntha Amman Temple, Kanchipuram

In the same set of sculptures was another Goddess – the Thavvai. Called Kotravai or Thavvai, and worshipped as Mother Goddess before the advent of other Gods in Tamil Nadu, the earliest mention of this Goddess is found in the Sangam literary work *Tholkappiam*, dating to the 5th century.

The ancient Mother Goddess is a warrior identified with Goddess Durga, always flanked by her son and daughter, Mandan and Mandhi. Though once considered a sacred female icon and mother of Lord Muruga, now she is shunned in most temples, as people think she is a Demon Goddess, and brings ill luck. There are instances where her sculptures have been thrown out of the sanctum, and land up along roadsides and fields these days.

On the way out, I stumbled upon another interesting ‘Saptha Matrika’ type panel, a rare one dating to the Pallava period (6/7th C.) It has the usual ‘seven women’ and in addition to that, interestingly, Thavvai or Kotravai. So, it is indeed ancient and rare. Marveling at how Buddhist sculptures are being venerated in a Hindu temple with regular ‘abhishekam’ and ‘aradhanas’, with people offering flowers and lighting lamps in front of them, I could not but feel the essence of the country, its unity in diversity, and its very fabric of religious tolerance, in glorious display here!

A true temple to India's pluralism

Across the Palar River, we drove through lush greenery, paddy fields and palmyra dotted landscape with small streams, and landed up in a small village called Kanikiluppai. The place was so ‘ordinary’, a very tiny hamlet of a couple of streets that we were definitely not prepared for the surprise in store for us at a tiny, locked up Pillaiyar (Vinayak) temple.



A rare panel supposed to be of Sapta Matrikas with Kotravai and her children, Agni Matha and Nandhi Thevar at the Karukkinil Amarntha Amman Temple



A fresco at Trilokyanatha Temple, Tiruparuthikundram

The 'temple' was hardly a small house, the hall boasting of a three feet Buddha statue, alongside which was a statue of a Jain Tirthankara, of white stone, and in the inner sanctums, a Lord Vinayak and Krishna, with Bama and Rukmini. A small temple in a nondescript village has Buddhist, Jain and Hindu sculptures, all worshipped with equal fervour by the villagers. Goes on to prove small places have big hearts! The 10th century Buddha was seated on a beautiful pedestal in Artha Padmasana pose, in dhyana mudra, sporting a marvelous ushnisha (3-dimensional oval at the top of head of Buddha). The Tirthankara's period is unidentifiable though, as it is too damaged to decipher the iconography. The statue was salvaged from a field nearby, a couple of decades ago, and since then has been worshipped here. The bronze idols of Krishna and his wives though relatively very new, are so enthralling! The priest narrated the story of how thieves lifted off the Buddha sometime ago from the temple, couldn't carry him, and so dropped him into a nearby stream and escaped! We had a hearty laugh commenting on the poor thieves, and walked along the street to reach a panel at the end of it.

The three-feet-tall sculpted panel has a kalash at the top with a gopuram shaped stupa over it. On either side are *chaur* or *chamara* (yak hair fans), hammer and plough. At the bottom is the word "Buddha Sree" sculpted in Granta text. And then there are the Dharma Chakras of Buddha sculpted on them. Scholars date the panel to 14th century and might have connection to a trader/agriculture group that thrived at Kanikiluppai. We moved on to our next halt – the



Statue of Bodhi Dharma, Vathiyar Kuttai, Kanchipuram



The Buddhist panel at Kanikiluppai

humongous Jain temple of Jaina Kanchi or Tiruparuthikundram. Kanchi was once a melting pot of various faiths- The Saiva Kanchi (Saivite temples), Vishnu Kanchi (Vaishnavite temples), Jina Kanchi (Jain temples), and Buddha Kanchi. Jaina Kanchi refers primarily to the Trilokyanathar Temple at Tiruparuthikundram, a small hamlet near Kanchipuram.

The Trilokyanathar Temple

The Trilokyanathar Temple built in typical Dravidi-an architectural style is a prime place of worship for the Digambar Jain sect. Said to have been constructed around 800 CE, the temple has the oldest inscription dating to Narasimhavarma Pallava II's period, 700-728 CE. The temple built by Pallavas has been expanded during Chola rule by Rajendra I and Kulothunga Chola, and then by Vijayanagar rulers. There are three inner shrines with sculptures of Mahaavira, Neminatha and Lokanatha, around seven feet tall. There are exquisite bronze idols belonging to Chola, Vijayanagar and Nayak periods, and we explored the inscriptions all around the sanctum. As we emerged out of the temple, the 24-pillared "Sangeeta Mandapam" allured us, with some of the most beautiful paintings done on the ceilings.

The Sangeeta Mandapam is said to have been built by Irugappa, the minister of Vijayanagar's famed King Bukka. The name Sangeeta Mandapam arises from the number of musicians carved on its pillars, playing different musical instruments. What caught our attention were the exquisite fresco paintings on the ceilings. Originally painted during the 13th century and restored in the 15/16th century by King Krishnadevaraya. The paintings depict the lives of Tirthankaras - Neminatha, Mahavira, Dharmadevi, Krishna, Agnila and Rishabanatha. All the paintings are captioned in Grantha script, the catchy paintings are of course Krishna Leela, done on a side. The dancing girls and their embellishments, various flowers, horses, elephants, tigers, deer – the frescoes take us to an imaginary world of colours and shapes.



The Sangeeta Mandapam with its ceiling frescoes, Trilokyanatha Temple, Tiruparuthikundram



The Buddha and a Jain Tirthankara in the Hindu Vinayak Temple, Kanikiluppai

We sat down in the Shanti Mandapam for a traditional Jain lunch on banana leaves, and after a short break, moved to the dilapidated Chandrapraba Temple adjacent to the Trilokyanathar Temple. With overgrown vegetation, the temple stands precariously, the outer wall of the ground floor boasting of Pallava lions. Carefully ascending the staircase, we enter the first floor where we observe Tirthankaras, and move out for some air. With most Tamil Jains moving out of Tiruparuthikundram, the place now remains a shadow of what it once was, a lively town teeming with Jain schools and members of the sect. The house opposite to the temple was once such a school where the last caretaker of the temple lives. Chandrakanti is a frail looking woman who holds the key to the temple, and to a lively past. And she will be the last of seven generations that

have held on to the temple, saving it with all they could.

With heavy hearts we moved to a recently constructed Buddha Vihara near Vadhiyar Kuttai. The Vihara had a lively Buddha statue seated under a bodhi tree and also a statue of Pallava Prince Bodhi Dharma, the master who introduced Shaolin Kungfu and transmitter of Chan Buddhism to China. After a calming Vipassana session guided by audio for about 10 minutes, we set off on our journey back to Chennai.

India has always been a country of religious plurality and has maintained the plurality down the ages. A trip such as this makes one realise a simple saying by Einstein - "All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree".



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“Making matchsticks models is a very time consuming hobby. You have to have patience and spend a lot of time on it.”

Kamalakar Venkat Rao, 66, is the ‘match stick model man’. This genial, retired, banker, patiently and painstakingly indulges in his unique passion of creating miniature models using matchsticks. He spoke to **A. Radhakrishnan** about this hobby and its future.



What is matchstick modelling?

Matchstick models are scale models made from matches, as a hobby. It means models made with matchbox sticks – natural or of the special modeling type. They are replicas and miniatures of the original.

What is your family background?

My father was an artist of the old era, and worked as a draughtsman in the Government Ordnance depot till retirement. He was also a good charcoal sketch artist, and at home he used to make/paint saree designs and shirt designs for block printing.

His creativity perhaps has rubbed off on me too. In my childhood and school days I was good at drawing and painting, and was also interested in crafts like making skyscrapers out of coloured cardboard paper.

Is it an ideal hobby? Do you have a special workspace for your hobby?

It is an ideal hobby if you have a flair for it. It has negligible expenses, and also needs very little space. A small table/desk is sufficient, even a small teapoy will do.

What attracted you to this hobby?

In my teens and early twenties, I enjoyed tinkering with small blocks of wood discarded by the carpenter, and did make a few models like a lorry, locomotive, sports racing car, etc. I still retain a miniature model of a sports racing car

made by me way back in 1970. It wasn't until years later that I attempted building with matchsticks.

Landing a bank job in 1985, I was promoted and transferred to Lucknow. It gradually dawned on me that I could make models with matchsticks. I thus made my first attempt at making small models of a BEST double-decker bus, and a bus stop, and gifted it to an office colleague.

However, it was intermittent. I could not devote enough time to my hobby due to job constraints. Retiring after more than three and half decades from the bank, I now devote a fair amount of my free time making matchsticks models. I don't make complex and detailed models, but specialise and love making miniature models which can be kept on the palm of your hand. I paint them with poster colours to give them a more natural look. From models of vehicles, gradually I went on to other slightly more tiny and complex models.

How many hours do you dedicate to it daily?

Making matchsticks models is a very time consuming hobby. You have to have patience and spend a lot of time on it. Once I start making a particular model, I devote a minimum of six hours daily, and sometimes even more than 10 hours.

Where do you derive your ideas from? Do you incorporate some of your own ideas and eventually your own designs?

I get ideas from magazines, newspapers, watching TV and watching life. In making matchsticks models, sometimes you come across a situation where you cannot make it exactly like the original. You have to incorporate certain changes in the design and the way it should look.



The various models made with matchsticks

How are the models constructed? What are the tools you need to get working?

First of all, you need to have some photos /pictures of the items of which you are going to make a model, and you have to conceptualise the same in your mind.

You need a few things like a glue bottle (fevicol), a few packets of shaving blades, a pincer to catch hold of small pieces, and a few shades of poster/water colours for painting the finished product, and, of course, packs of match sticks boxes.

I sort out the match sticks and use the good ones after breaking off the phosphorous ends. The models are then constructed step by step by glueing the match sticks one by one together with Fevicol.

How do you decide the thickness, terms of scale, etc.?

The terms of scale, thickness and size of the models come naturally to me, and as far as possible I try to keep the size of all the models of the same length and thickness.

Have you read about some famous practitioners of this art?

I have watched some videos on You Tube and browsed the net. They are mostly huge models which occupy lots of space. There are some famous practitioners of this art, but to be frank, I have not done serious research.

I was amazed to find that a matchstick artist Patrick Acton, 59, has painstakingly recreated a stunning replica of the Notre Dame Cathedral. He has used 2,98,000 matchsticks, 2,000 toothpicks, and a whopping 55 litres of wood glue to assemble the 7.5ft long by 5ft high 2.3m x structure. He

spent 2,000 hours on the piece, but he can take solace in the fact it took over 180 years to build the stone cathedral in Paris!

He has devoted 35 years to making matchstick models and his latest creation features a staggering array of spires, arches and towers that capture the iconic building in minute detail. He spent eight years collecting research material on the building before he began to assemble the model in 2010. Another example is that of a retired British oil rig worker, David Reynolds, 51, from Southampton, who has completed an epic 10-year project to create a 'matchstick armada'. He spent more than 10,000 hours gluing 250,000 matches to make a fleet of 20 legendary vessels.

Which was the first model you made and the last one? How many matchsticks did it take?

My first model was a miniature sports car made out of a single small piece of wood and my first model with match sticks was a BEST double-decker bus. It consumed about 4-5 matchboxes of sticks. My last one, a model of the famous Gateway of India, took about 20 boxes. I had to change certain things, but it still retained the overall charm.

Can you list the other of models you have created?

They include the BEST single decker bus (old), BEST double-decker bus (old and new), locomotive engine, vintage car, lorry (water tanker), Volvo bus, state transport bus, mono-rail with track, the Kolkata tram, village side bungalow, English countryside cottage house, Gateway of India, local train, one bogie of an express train, etc.

Do you use normal match sticks or special ones without combustible heads?

I use normal matchbox sticks and scrape off the combustible heads. I have not made any attempt at getting matchsticks without combustibles as also matchstick kits, which are available in the market. In fact, sometimes I collect and use used matchsticks also. Sometimes I use toothpicks and other materials wherever it is needed, so that the final model has a more appealing effect.

How much of patience do you need in this hobby? Isn't it a delicate art?

You need lots and lots of patience, endurance, and passion for this hobby, and at no point of time should you lose it. It is indeed very much a delicate art as sometimes you have to use very tiny pieces of match sticks for glueing and that requires immense patience. I try my best and pay particular attention to details so as to bring out the effects. The final model must look like the real ones.

Have you considered making the hobby a commercial one?

No, it is tempting but this is purely a hobby where I derive great satisfaction. I haven't thought about it commercially. I

don't think anybody would like to pay much for such miniatures, at least in India. But I am open to the idea.

Do you think this hobby has to be more popularised?

Yes, I do as I don't see many people taking it up. I guess with the fast pace of daily life, nobody likes to devote and spend their valuable time in such a time consuming hobby.

Would you like to teach others this hobby?

Personally I am not averse to teaching this art to anybody who is interested and who wants to learn it. One drawback of this hobby is that once you are engrossed in it, you don't feel like doing anything else, and only strive to complete it at the earliest.

However, I'm not sure if I'll be able to pass on my legacy to an apprentice, as it's hard to find kids with such attention span.

Are you working on any models at present?

Yes, many. A typical Mumbai chawl, a formula 1 sports car, a one-storied ferry boat, my society building, small showcase / cabinet, an urban/city bungalow, local train (new), metro train, etc.



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

WHO AM I?



The true man

*It is not enough to be just a passive supporter of the #MeToo campaign, but it's time men vociferously, and openly supported women who have come out with their stories of abuse and harassment, says **Sajjid Mitha**. He advocates that men should take the #Irespect pledge, publicly, and manfully.*

THERE has been a rallying 'war' cry against sexual harassment building across the world with the '#MeToo' campaign. I think the time is here, for the men of this world, to come together and rally in unison, building up a campaign of their own. With the hashtag #Irespect.

Let the world know what this dismal human has done to overstep the boundaries you have laid down. How dare he! I respect you and all women, and I too will join you in shaming him. For by doing so you may stop him from crossing the line again, and that will result in one less #MeToo movement.

As old as time?

The issue of men using their physical strength to victimise women is not new. It is impossible to know how far it dates back, but what we do know is that with the advent of the internet, and the proliferation of pornography, the issue is now even more grave, widespread, global, and shameful. Thankfully, with the growing power of social media and the ample power of the simple hashtag #MeToo, more and more women are stepping forward with their stories, and publicly sharing detailed accounts of how they too were at some point in their lives, victims of horrible sexual predators, be it at their place of work, in their homes, on crowded train platforms, at parties, or elsewhere.

As someone who believes in the #Irespect pledge (See box), I will do my best to lend these women a patient hearing, and will help them share their stories with the world, and let these stories stand out as warnings to other men, and as a message to other victims, that it is not okay to remain silent. If you have been inappropriately touched or if you feel violated by a man who has crossed that sacred line, go ahead and by all means, shame him.

The #Irespect pledge

Right here, right now, I, as a man, pledge that:

- I will always respect women and treat them as my equal
- I will never objectify a woman
- I will recognise women's role in this world as strong, independent, purposeful individuals, who have possibly more to contribute toward making this world a better place than the rest of us men do
- I will never force myself onto them nor touch them inappropriately
- I will understand that when they say no, they mean no, that it is their prerogative to defend their bodies as sacred
- I have signed and imbibed the #Irespect pledge with dignity and pride, and hence can now stand out as a true man

These men (if we can still call them that) who are guilty, in their defence could label the allegations made against them as 'feeble' and 'maligning', and may even insist that their actions were a result of a consensual understanding between them and their victims. But we all know that more often than not, these beasts, are as guilty as sin. Guilty for having crossed that sacred line of respect. We need to unite and ask the perpetrator if he would ever allow anyone to cross that sacred line of respect with his daughter. What then gives him the right to think that he can do it with someone else's daughter? Is it power? Money? Or is it simply because he is a man, which offers him the free will to decide whether a woman's choice of dress or behaviour offers him a license to touch, feel, or molest. Or an innocent look in his direction is a flirtatious sign of invitation to prey on her with

innuendoes, a bad touch, a flirtatious sexual advance, or even something more provocative and distasteful. Label it how you may, the message is loud and clear, none of it is okay.

I think society has a lot of explaining to do. We have sat by silently as spectators, and allowed it to get to



this deplorable stage with men talking down at women in films, harassing women at the workplace, and even taking advantage of them in their homes. Women need to vocalise their objection in this sordid drama, and they need to demand an all-out change in both this genre, and unacceptable thought process. And while they can hashtag their individual experiences with #MeToo, the men who pledge to help and work toward a change in our world can do so with the #Irespect hashtag. We have to make the world safer for women. Your mothers, wives, sisters and daughters will be thankful. And if you have taught your sons well, they too will be, without doubt, grateful.



Sajjid Mitha is the Founder and CEO of Asia's largest petrochemical market intelligence firm, Polymerupdate. He has also founded and conceptualised the world's first smart phone application for trading of polymers – 'PolymerExchange', which has over 10,000 active global users. Sajjid is also the author of Travelmango.in, a site which has over 50,000 readers, and which chronicles the travels of his wife Laveena and him, as they luxuriously adventure around the world.

(...continued from page 15)

Educate the boys

It's equally vital to educate boys about sexism and what feminism actually is. It's clear from the way teenage boys react to the feminist discussion that men learn from a young age that a feminist stand is a stand against them. The fear is that feminists seek to switch the gender roles and push men down in society. What boys must learn is that, on the contrary, feminists have more faith in men than anyone else. They certainly have more faith in men than the people who claim you need to debase a woman to be man enough.

Patriarchal societies dating back to ancient times created the idea that men and women aren't equal and the toll of centuries of oppression institutionalised this idea. Sexism and sexual harassment have led to complicated relationships and a lot of misunderstanding today. It's difficult not to be pessimistic towards the idea of eradicating sexism. However I look today, at the nascent movement of holding men accountable for intolerable behaviour made possible by centuries of uncompromising women.

Women that didn't accept rape, being forced into the kitchen instead of encouraged to pursue professional careers, and being taught that they were the weaker sex fought for power in a society that offered them none. In spite of a long history of gender roles, abuse, and being pushed aside, women have continued to exert their energy into creating a more equal world for their daughters.

We've come to a time when women have fought so hard for their truths to be heard that people are hearing them echo out across the globe. It's incredibly brave for women to expose the trauma they've gone through and allow it to be a topic for public discourse. Voicing sexual assault stories comes with a spectrum of risks from people not believing them to ruining their reputation to not gaining any justice for their trauma. Feminists want a society that hold men and women accountable for sexual assault and harassment and doesn't exploit and sexualise women. I don't know what will result from the #MeToo movement, but I believe in women and men that understand that sexism is present, and gender roles hurt us all. I believe in the women and men that believe the next generation of young women and girls deserve more than what our patriarchal societies have offered.



Enya Kumar is a 17-year-old High School student living in Minnesota, United States. She is obsessed with literature, music, and the outdoors. She cares deeply about the feminist cause and can't wait to see her generation take it on!

The brave new world of yoga

The Yoga Institute at suburban Santa Cruz in Mumbai, a 100-year-old organisation, has been at the forefront of the global renaissance of an ancient discipline.

Vithal C. Nadkarni meets Hansaji Yogendra, the dynamic director of TSI, to explore its brave new future.



The Yoga Institute; peaceful, serene

As you cross the tree-shaded avenue next to the Santa Cruz railway station to enter The Yoga Institute (TYI), an aeroplane flies overhead. One wonders if the roar of the metal bird is a portent or an omen. For those used to the hurly-burly pace of Mumbai, the Urbs Prima of India, the sound of the aircraft adds just another element in the constant cacophony that envelops the city, which supposedly never sleeps. “But we beg to differ,” says Hansaji Yogendra, the director of the century-old Yoga Institute, with a radiant smile. “In our holistic conception of yoga, sleep is one of the greatest restoratives to have ever evolved in the universe.”

Indeed, our first meeting with the charismatic Hansaji does bring to mind the paradigm of the ‘Timeless Mind in an Ageless Body’: Of course, there’s silver in her hair, but it seems to exist only to suggest that age is just a number. In her case, over four glorious decades spent in a pioneering Yoga Institute, that became 100 years young on the Christmas day in 2018. Three days later, the President of India, Ram Nath Kovind himself flew down from

Delhi to grace the birthday bash, in a moving ceremony held on Bandra Kurla grounds in Mumbai.

The real meaning of yoga

“When people say they are going for a yoga class, they generally mean an asana class,” says Hansa Yogendra. “In its global profile also, yoga has largely become synonymous with asana. Asana literally means seat or throne. It is indeed the most athletic or physical aspect of the discipline,” she adds.

“Traditionally, however, asana has always been regarded as just one of the eight limbs (ashtanga) of yoga. The totality of this eight-limbed marvel called yoga is comprehensive and complex, including the body, breath, mind, intellect and spirit,” Hansaji explains.

It is the psyche or the mind (versus soma or the body), which occurs in the celebrated definition of yoga found in Patanjali’s classic treatise, Yoga Sutra. In his very first verse, the sage defines yoga as the restraint or controlling of the tendencies of the mind (*Yogaschitta-vritti*

nirodhah). But to say that, is not to downgrade the body at all. As defined by Vachaspati Mishra, who was one of the early proponents of the Samkhya Yoga philosophy, asana is “the manner of sitting or the seat whereon one departs oneself”.

“But the more mystical definition of asana is to be found in the Kamadhenu Tantra,” Hansaji explains, “where ‘a’ stands for self-actualisation or *atma-siddhi* (this could be seen as the transcendent or ultimate goal, which is also posited by the noted American psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs); the next letters ‘sa’ stand for *sarva-roga-pratibandha* (or prevention of all diseases) and, finally, the letters ‘na’ represent *siddhiprapti* or attainment of mastery of mystical powers.

We should bear in mind, however, that yogis do not subscribe to a mind-body dualism. In the West, the 17th century French mathematician-philosopher, Rene Descartes, was the most renowned champion of this schizoid or bi-compartmentalised scheme of things, which pits the body against the mind.



Hansa Yogendra, director, The Yoga Institute (Left); Warming up for a yoga session (Right)

The genesis of TYI

As mentioned, the centennial TYI was founded on December 25th, 1918, by Sri Yogendra (who was born as Mani Haribhai Desai in Gujarat). Through a chance meeting he found his Yoga guru, the Bengal-born Paramahansa Madhavadasji Maharaj, who himself is said to have lived for more than 125 years! With the blessings of his beloved guru, Yogendraji went forth to bring the nectar of yoga to the masses, to manifestly improve their lives. Initially he founded his Yoga Institute at “Sands”, the sea-side residence of the Grand Old Man of India, Dadabhoi Naoroji at Versova, in Bombay.

Yogendraji’s pioneering initiative yielded bountiful results, helping many people to recover from various ailments through diligent practice of yoga that was zealously supervised by the young Master. Thereafter, Yogendraji travelled to the United States of America, where he founded ‘The Yoga Institute’ in Harri-man, New York, in 1920. Here the Founder-Master undertook enlightened research with the help of trained scientists and doctors on the subtle physiological and psychological effects that yoga had in turning a

work-out (sadhana) into wellness (swasthya).

When at last he returned to India, Yogendraji acceded to his father’s wishes and became a householder, and married! He went on to write many treatises on yoga and some of his manuscripts were even preserved in the ‘Crypt of Civilisation for Posterity’. Along with his wife, Sitadevi, Yogendraji continued to showcase the wonders of yoga, and spread its holistic healing benefits around the world through his institute, until his passing away in 1989.

Thereafter, the Founder’s son (and Hansaji’s spouse), Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra, became President of TYI. A yogi renowned for his spartan life-style and a spiritual bent of mind, Dr. Yogendraji nurtured his father’s legacy with great sincerity and aplomb. He was also the editor of the Institute’s monthly journal, which has been in print ever since 1933. Jayadevaji was also a noted scholar who had specialised in the Samkhya School of philosophy.

Samkhya, which literally means number or counting, is one of the six classical systems of Indian

philosophy, founded by the legendary Red Sage (Kapil Muni). “As taught at our Institute, the philosophical principles of Samkhya and the techniques of yoga form a cohesive united entity. This also offers a practical guide to life, living and liberation,” Hansaji asserts.”

Today’s wannabe yogis also need to bear in mind that at any stage in life, all individuals possess certain qualities called ‘bhavas’, which may or may not necessarily be conducive to self-actualisation, Hansaji emphasises. Thus, at TSY, aspirants are taught the art and science of discouraging the negative propensities and promoting the positive bhavas such as dharma (morality), jnana (knowledge), vairagya (detachment), and aishwarya (prosperity).

“The effects of any practice of yoga, when undertaken in such a systematic manner, extends to the physical, emotional, ethical, spiritual and sensual faculties,” Hansaji avers. “Our mission is to guide aspirants from and through the external realm (bahiranga) progressively to an inner world (antaranga), to ultimately liberate the seeker from parochial boundaries.”



The writer is a senior consulting editor and columnist with the Times of India Group of Publications. He is also a fellow of the London-based 21st Century Trust and a recipient of the US-based Alfred Friendly Press Fellowship.

That kind act

*A kind act by a stranger got **G. Venkatesh** reflecting on choices we make each day, to be kind or not. Always better to be kind, as what goes around, comes around, he reasons!*



THERE are some people who leave behind memories which touch you so very deeply, whenever you recall them. They magically uplift your faith in God and the Good. You close your eyes and feel your lingering hope swelling up and boosting your 'can-do' spirit. Anand at the Turbhe branch of the State Bank of India is one such person. If I write this piece without any hyperbole, you may dismiss it as mundane. But then the context matters, and the context is usually personal and linked to the past, which for every individual again, happens to be personal. I however, will resort to a fact-reporting style of writing....dismiss it if you like, as banal.

The story begins...

I was in New Mumbai visiting my parents in November, to attend to my father, who was just discharged from hospital. I relieved my brother who had to return to work in the USA, in the process. One of the errands which had to be run was the submission of the so-called 'Life Certificate' form at the State Bank of India, the bank in which my father's pension payments are credited. This form, for those who are not aware, needs to be submitted every year to make sure that the pension payments continue for the next twelve months. However, my father could not make the journey to

the bank himself for obvious reasons, and I had to go and find out if the bank could send someone home to verify his signature, identity etc.

A little background will help to understand the context here. My life in Mumbai till 2004 (I left the country in 2004), was characterised by delays, frustrations, tiffs with government officials of all kinds, being scapegoated, experiencing many a slip between the cup and the lip...and other things of the same ilk. Hence, when I had to visit the SBI for my father's sake, I wondered if I could get the task completed for him. What gave me some hope was the fact that whenever it came to fulfilling tasks for other – friends, relatives and well-wishers, my success rate was much greater than that associated with getting things done for myself.

The first person I met at the bank was the busy bank manager, who turned out to be surprisingly extremely kind, and helpful! Well begun is half done! She then called one of the office-boys (office-men rather) and asked him to accompany me the next day in the evening to my parents' home, and do the necessary verification. I looked at him and realised that it was the same man with whom I had a little tiff when he had asked me to join a queue at another counter when I went to update my

father's bank passbook. I thought that the queue had formed after me, but perhaps I was wrong. Lesson: Be kind to one and all. You never know when you will need someone!

The next day, I had to wait for a little longer than expected but learning from the previous day's experience, I stayed patient and spent my time designing a crossword on the backside of the receipt I had collected after purchasing 'idli rava' on my way to the bank.

Anand joined me at 10 minutes past 5 pm, and we took a rickshaw to my place, which was about 10 minutes away from the bank. En route, he told me that the verification was necessary because the bank had been defrauded in the past many times. He told about sons and daughters who had abandoned their parents, and were actually living on their parents' pensions! He looked pained and told me that everyday he gets to hear stories like these from at least one of the bank's customers. We have seen such stories being filmed – we remember actors like Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan portraying old fathers abandoned by their self-serving children. But it is necessary for all readers to realise that these things happen in real life – time and time again! The Big B portraying the father of ungrateful children will attract sympathy, or for that matter, Rajesh Khanna! But how many of us can genuinely feel the plight of old fathers and mothers in real life actually enduring this bitter pain – more bitter than anything you can ever imagine. How many of us will volunteer to light a lamp in the temple or a candle in the church or kneel down on Fridays to appeal to Allah...to bring some peace and comfort into the lives of such old people?

(continued on page 34...)

The luxury of love

In this age of short-lived romances and internet hook-ups, Mamta Chitnis Sen attempts to discover what love means for lovers today.

SUMAN (named changed) looks forward to Valentine's Day each year. The 28-year-old advertising professional, my colleague at work, believes the occasion to be just another day to have a good time with her current beau - shopping for goodies, watching movies, followed by a dinner, and then packing him off to his own home. Having been in and out of several relationships since she was 21, Suman's idea of love is different. She claims that she does not believe in the theory of 'living happily ever after.'

"I don't think being in love necessarily means to be together, forever bound in a marriage, or something like that. This idea of marriage has been handed down to us over the years by our society with an agenda in mind. We are expected to go the usual route, which is, if you are in love, you have to marry the person and then later have kids! I don't think a lot of us believe in following this concept these days," she opines, adding that love for her is transient. "If a person can fall in love, then he/she can fall out of love as well. I don't think anything is permanent," she says with a smile. Intrigued, I share this conversation with a 57-year-old friend Ramachandran (name changed), a CEO of a multinational company, whom I have known for a long time. Ramachandran is a happily married man with a stunning socialite wife, and an equally beautiful married daughter, who too is well settled abroad - a complete man by Indian society standards. Interestingly, Ramachandran seemed to agree with Suman's viewpoint, that love has nothing to do with marriage or being attached to each other. He quotes one famous line of Chanakya to me. 'Drop the idea that attachment and love are one thing. It is attachment that destroys all love.' "Even Chanakya



had it all figured it out then and we are only realising this after so many years!" he laughs, and adds that one needs to work hard to keep the flame of love ignited in every bond that we create.

"Not just in marriage, but even in our relationships with our siblings, friends and even acquaintances we need a certain amount of love to survive," he points out, adding that often sexual attraction is misinterpreted for love, when young. "Love grows as you grow old together. It is a beautiful feeling which must be experienced by all," he trails off.

Modern love

For the modern generation of Indians, falling in love is being regarded more of a luxury than a necessity. A lot many men and women empowered by education and financial independence, are venturing into discovering love and companionship on their own terms, and not necessarily laid down by age-old stories of timeless romances.

In urban India, many have taken to experimenting from live-in relationships and same-sex partnerships, to having multiple partners and open marriages. Practicing love candidly, without restraint, is been seen as liberating and exhilarating for an average Indian lover. The rise in the number of dating sites too has opened up fresh opportunities for men and women to explore the kind of partner they want to fall in love with, and eventually spend their lifetime with. With technology at the fingertips in the form of speed-dating, and internet hook-ups, romances are short and fast, the best time to explore and be explored.

All said and done, we eventually do want to experience this roller-coaster called love in some form or the other. A fact evident on occasions like Valentine's Day which has couples (of all kinds), taking to professing their affection for each other all over the world, while shops and businesses go overboard, with marketing gimmicks to sell anything and everything related to the concept.



Love is something we cannot do away with. One of the most talked and written about subjects by poets and writers for centuries, it is a core of our existence in one way or the other. We may fail in our relationships, but we do not fail in our conquest of being in love or the idea of it. Whether it is a warm embrace or a peek on the cheek, a look of longing or someone to just hold hands with, whether it is taking responsibility or being responsible for someone, love is what keeps us and our existence alive. Love is life in itself.



A journalist for over 15 years, Mamta Chitnis Sen has worked with reputed publications like Mid-Day, Society and her writings and columns have been published in The Sunday Observer and The Daily. She also worked with the Sunday Guardian and handled their Mumbai bureau for eight years reporting not only extensively on various political parties but also on crime, politics, religion, art, community, human interest, and general news. She headed Dignity Dialogue, India's foremost magazine exclusively for the 50 plus age group as the Executive Editor. She presently handles Media Advocacy for Child Rights and You (CRY) – an NGO working for the rights of underprivileged children in India covering the states of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat. Mamta is also an artist having studied painting and ceramics from Sir J J School of Art, and has exhibited in various groups shows in India and abroad.

(...continued from page 32)

On reaching my home, he was gentle and soft-spoken with my father, and looked pained when he tried to step into his shoes and feel the mental agony and physical pain which comes with old age. In fact, I was getting a bit irritated at my father's behaviour – not focusing on getting the task done, but beating around the bush, even when he knew that Anand had to get back to the bank with the papers as soon as possible. Anand was patient and made good eye-contact with my father and placing a hand on his shoulder, assured him that everything would be fine. He refused to have coffee or tea which my mother requested him to have before leaving.

When we were returning back to the bank, with the signed documents, he said that he was

pained to hear stories about ungrateful children. He told me to remember that if there were living Gods on earth, they were one's parents. One cannot see God, he said, but one can see one's parents. And God watches everything. He told me to make use of every single opportunity God would throw my way, to serve my parents...for when there are no more opportunities someday, the pain would be unbearable, and one would wish one had done enough. He told me that God would reward me in the future...for my good karma. I thought to myself, and have always done – 'If I have amassed good karma, I would like to give some to people like Anand, so that God could reward them instead of me. I do not bother if my good karma is exhausted. I will collect more and give it away. And do this ad infinitum, with my only purpose for doing good being the ability to collect good karma (like gold coins) and

cross-dock it to good people who are suffering in life.'

I may meet Anand again or not. I do not know. But I will remember him always for his words...his kindness and his advice. Lesson: No matter what, we are all bound together by invisible strings, which manifest themselves when we realise that sorrow, pain, anxiety, fear and worries are common to all of us...by helping others, we help ourselves. Prayers have power. They are potent. And like the invisible strings, they travel through invisible channels to the invisible God all around us (note that I refrain from saying, 'above in the heavens' on purpose). If I can donate my good karma every day, that would be a great source of satisfaction for me! Tickets and passports may be non-transferrable, but surely good karma can be?



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The 'real' India

*What India needs is leaders who strive to unify the country, rather than polarise it by stoking extreme prejudices, says **Rashmi Oberoi**. Are there such leaders out there?*

JUST back from a family wedding that encompassed a whirlwind tour of four of my favourite cities, and involved all my favourite people, I came away with a lot of love and precious memories, but most of all a sense of peace in the interfaith relationships that define my family. Entwining people of different faiths and religions – only love and bonhomie stood out. This is the real India. Not what our politicians want or are trying to create, and not the ugly form of intolerance that India is lately known for.

What our Constitution says

India's Constitution declares our country to be secular, and there is a tradition of celebrating and embracing religious diversity. However, politicians at every turn have done their best to mar India's history by stoking religious tensions between people of different faiths and backgrounds, and fuelling hatred.

One needs to understand that unless we put a stop to the damage being done by our callous and conniving politicians, we will reach rock-bottom very soon. Let me add here that the rising tide of religious hatred is only for the politician's personal gains and coffers – inciting violence and hate, to win power. Unfortunately, racism, bigotry and fanatical nationalism are also encouraged by them.

It is time for an awakening...a political change, and the need of the hour is the belief in the time-tested faith that unity lies in

diversity. The time is right to create an atmosphere that is free of caste and religious barriers. We need fair and just politicians who believe in a secular India. Problems arise when religion and politics are mixed, and the blend is lethal – it has the power to take us as far back as the dark ages. There is also havoc when individual freedoms of faith and expression are curbed.



The real India

The real India is miraculously still alive, and when you move around the country meeting people from different regions and faiths and backgrounds, you imbibe the true essence of what it means to be an Indian. It is time to bring out the best of what our country has to offer. We need wise leaders who are not only disciplined, but understand on-ground realities, and deal with them with inclusion and empathy.

A strong foundation reflects

fairness, and is based on mutual respect – that is lacking in every corner of our country thanks to our leaders. Look around and see the chaos and conflict brewing. Unless curtailed, the swirling cauldron of religious intolerance will destroy us. The goal of achieving a prosperous and peaceful world is already endangered. The devious pattern of criminal communalism and electoral success needs to be stopped. We need mindful governance that seeks to unify and harmonise. One has to be persistent and forceful in the face of opposition, criticism and obstacles. Right now, we need positive social change and the ability to bridge the divide between existing religions and to reduce inter-faith conflicts.

It is true when they say that politics and religion should never be mixed, and people must learn to keep their personal ideologies to themselves. Religion also needs to play a less prominent role in our politics. We have to find a way to keep religion and communal life totally out of politics in a society where people's identity and character are shaped in a large part by such characteristics. It might also be more agreeable to live in a world where people don't bring religion to the table. It makes life easier.

The curse of communal hatred and cycle of violence that is omnipresent in our daily life can only be stopped by ending our history of deceitful equivalence and selective silence between the allegiance that the minority and majority have. We must have no room for religious polarisation!



Rashmi Oberoi an army officer's daughter, who 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.

Madhaviah Krishnan

Astute chronicler of the natural world (1912-1996)

MADHAVIAH Krishnan, the preeminent chronicler of the natural world, artist, photographer and perhaps only ever “polymathic” naturalist, was born in Tirunelveli on 30 June 1912; the youngest of eight children. The loss of his father, the Tamil writer and reformer A. Madhaviah, in 1925, coincided, rather indirectly, with a swiftly growing interest in literature, art and the natural world. Never a first-rate student, his early years of education were discordant with the extraordinary Krishnan would eventually become. In 1927, he enrolled at Presidency College where he nurtured a lifelong passion for Botany. According to Ramachandra Guha’s insightful monograph — in the introductory pages to an exceptional anthology of Krishnan’s essays titled *Nature’s Spokesman* — Krishnan accompanied his Botany professor on trips to the Nilgiri and Kodaikanal hills; where his innate artistic proficiency came to the fore during discussions on watercolour-painting with his professor’s wife.

Graduating third-class, job prospects were poor; and his family concluded that the pursuance of a law degree would help substantiate the likelihood of employment. Shortly after his convocation in 1936, Krishnan married Indumati Hasabnis on 26 March 1937. During this early period, he wrote, contributing pieces and illustrations to the *Madras Mail*, *The Hindu*, *Statesman* and *Indian Affairs*; holding a hotchpotch of posts rather “irregularly”. In a fortuitous twist of fate, Krishnan moved to Bangalore in 1942, working for the Maharaja of Sandur as school teacher, judge, publicity officer and political secretary in a potpourri of responsibilities spread over eight years. His subsequent essays on nature and culture would draw much from this reservoir of experience.

In 1949, when the state of Sandur dissolved into the amalgamation of an independent India, Krishnan returned to Madras, and till his death in 1996, carved out — in his characteristic conduct rooted in the self-reliance espoused by Emerson and Thoreau — a career that made him the quintessential environmental writer, and a pathbreaking photographer. Almost indifferent to his public accomplishments, which included a Padma Shri, he was a

member of the Indian Board for Wildlife and sat on the Steering Committee for Project Tiger. Never discriminatory in his topic of choice, Krishnan surveyed the natural world with an astute perspicacity and inclusiveness, providing his audience — whom he never patronised, but met at eye-level with the humility and respect given to a reflection identical in knowledge and interests, with a flavour for the lesser-known species. Krishnan’s avowal that the conservation of India’s natural heritage for future generations was a prerequisite for national pride emphasised the perils of development and of preserving the “equipoise of nature”.

His ecological patriotism was a rallying cry for those whose nationalistic fervour did not encompass the environment, but only the socio-political spheres. The major impediment, in his eyes, seemed to lie in those who failed to realise that a country’s identity depended not wholly upon its varying human cultures, but in its “unique biotic richness... its natural basis”.



Krishnan combined the rich tapestry of India’s cultural traditions and patrimony with its natural heritage, and in so doing, interlinked the conservation of one with the conservation of the other. He was meticulous in his articulation, writing powerfully, vividly and unambiguously. Krishnan’s readers basked in the masterly eloquence of the writer, admiring his clarity of thought in oftentimes incredibly erudite disquisitions. Like Huxley, he decried the onward march of the machine, and wrote stirringly about the “lack of a popular feeling for wildlife in India”. His stunningly prescient observations of the trials and tribulations we presently face at the intersection of human-nature interactions is illustrative of his brilliance, and of the urgency for more Krishnan-inspired ecological patriots to strive towards, and realise that deeper environmental consciousness he so passionately fought for.

This month marks 23 years since M. Krishnan passed away; on 18 February 1996 at the age of eighty-three.

- Harshad Sambamurthy

Mrinal Sen

A rebellious and iconoclast filmmaker (1923-2018)

MRINAL Sen was a noted Kolkata based Bengali writer, director, producer, and filmmaker. Together with contemporary stalwarts Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, he was considered one of the greatest ambassadors of regional and Bengali parallel cinema. Born to a Hindu family in the town of Faridpur, now in Bangladesh, this physics postgraduate from the University of Calcutta was as a student, an ardent follower of Marxist philosophy, and his association with the socialist Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), cemented it further.

When just eight years old, he was arrested for participating in a protest march. The same year, he saw his first film, *Charlie Chaplin's Kid*, which sparked his interest in cinema. His stumbling upon a book on film aesthetics whetted his interest, but it remained mostly intellectual, as he was forced to take up various jobs, and finally as a sound technician in a film studio, his film career was launched.

Commercial cinema ruled then, but Sen differed from the rest and chose to make films intensely society centric, essentially affecting the middle class mores. Sen made his first debut feature film, *Raat Bhore*, in 1955 with the iconic Uttam Kumar, then unknown. His next film, *Neel Akasher Neechey* (Under the Blue Sky), a depiction of the attitude of the haves towards the have-nots, was the first film to be banned in independent India by the Nehru government, but lifted three months before its release, to wide local acclaim. His third film, *Baishey Shravana*, gave him international exposure.

What finally launched him as a major filmmaker, both nationally and internationally, and also initiated the New Cinema film movement in India was when he made the film *Bhuvan Shome*, with a paltry Government of India budget. His next few overtly political films earned him his reputation as a Marxist sympathiser at a time of large-scale political unrest throughout India, particularly in and around, the then Calcutta. He later shifted his focus, looking for the enemy within his own middle-class society. Sen's serious and forbidding demeanour masked a raconteur.

He artistically depicted poverty as a social menace inflicted by class differences. His content driven, issue based realistic cinema appealed to the global diaspora, besides creating ripples in the Indian film industry. Urging us to look into the politics behind our mundane existence, he left most of his films open-ended. Parallel cinema was ushered by him in the country with masterpiece films like *Ek Din Achanak*, *Padatik*, *Mrigaya*, *Akaler Sandhane*, *Chorus*, *Kharij*, *Khandahar*, *Bhuvan Shome*, *Akash Kusum* and *Calcutta 71*. He then moved away from the narrative structure and worked with very thin storylines. At the age of eighty, after a long gap of

eight years, in 2002, he made his last film, *Aamar Bhuban*, which went missing mysteriously. The Calcutta Trilogy which included three films: *Interview*, *Calcutta 71*, and *Padatik*, was his most defining work, where the city he loved was featured almost as a character and inspiration. But he is also accused of helping white-wash the numerous sins and crimes committed by the communist regime for 35 years in West Bengal, through his 'propaganda' movies.

A recipient of 12 international film awards, he has had retrospectives in almost all major cities of the world and served as a member on many international juries. He won 27 national awards for best feature and direction for many of his films. In 1983, he was conferred with the Padma Bhushan and in 2003, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. He was a Rajya Sabha member between 1997 and 2003. In 2017, he was inducted as a member of the Oscar Academy and also elected President of the International Federation of the Film Societies.

In 2004, he completed his autobiographical book, *Always Being Born*. The legendary man behind the camera who died in Kolkata aged 95, of a heart attack, left a rich legacy of films. With his demise also came the end of the legends of the golden era of parallel cinema.

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



Ramkumar

An accidental artist (1924-2018)

THE passing away of abstract painter and writer Ramkumar at the age of 94 has removed from our midst one of India's most celebrated artists. Ramkumar was a part of the 'Progressive Artists Group' that proudly held the banner of Indian art aloft in the international firmament. The other members of the group were the late M.F. Husain, the late Tyeb Mehta, and the late S.H. Raza, all painters of national and international repute.

Ramkumar's works too were valued highly in the international market, and his canvases sold for crores of rupees. One of his works 'The Vagabond', was auctioned by Christies for a phenomenal amount of \$ 1.1 million. Ramkumar was born in Shimla on 23 September 1924. His first brush with art came when he was undergoing his post graduate course in Economics, and he chanced to visit an exhibition of art which had paintings by the masters of the time. The exhibition interested him a lot, and he made it a point to visit it repeatedly and imbibe the nuances of the art on display. After finishing his education he landed a lucrative bank job, but later relinquished it in favour of art. He also had a short stint as a journalist with a Delhi newspaper. He initially picked up the rudiments of art from Saillos Mukerjee, and mastered still life using models as props. It was during that time that he met another renowned abstract painter S.H. Raza, and a bond of kinship blossomed between the duo that was to last their lifetime.

Ramkumar made an extended trip to Paris, then the Mecca of modern art, with the sole purpose of pursuing art. His teachers in Paris were acclaimed painters Andre Lohte and Fernand Lager. After a good grounding in art in the French capital, he returned to India and pursued his career as a full time artist and painter. With time he mastered the medium and was equally comfortable with oils and acrylic. He also gave up figurative art for abstract and later concentrated on it and his efforts to scale up the ladder were highly successful.

Ramkumar was hailed as a modernist master, and was an integral part of several arts exhibitions and

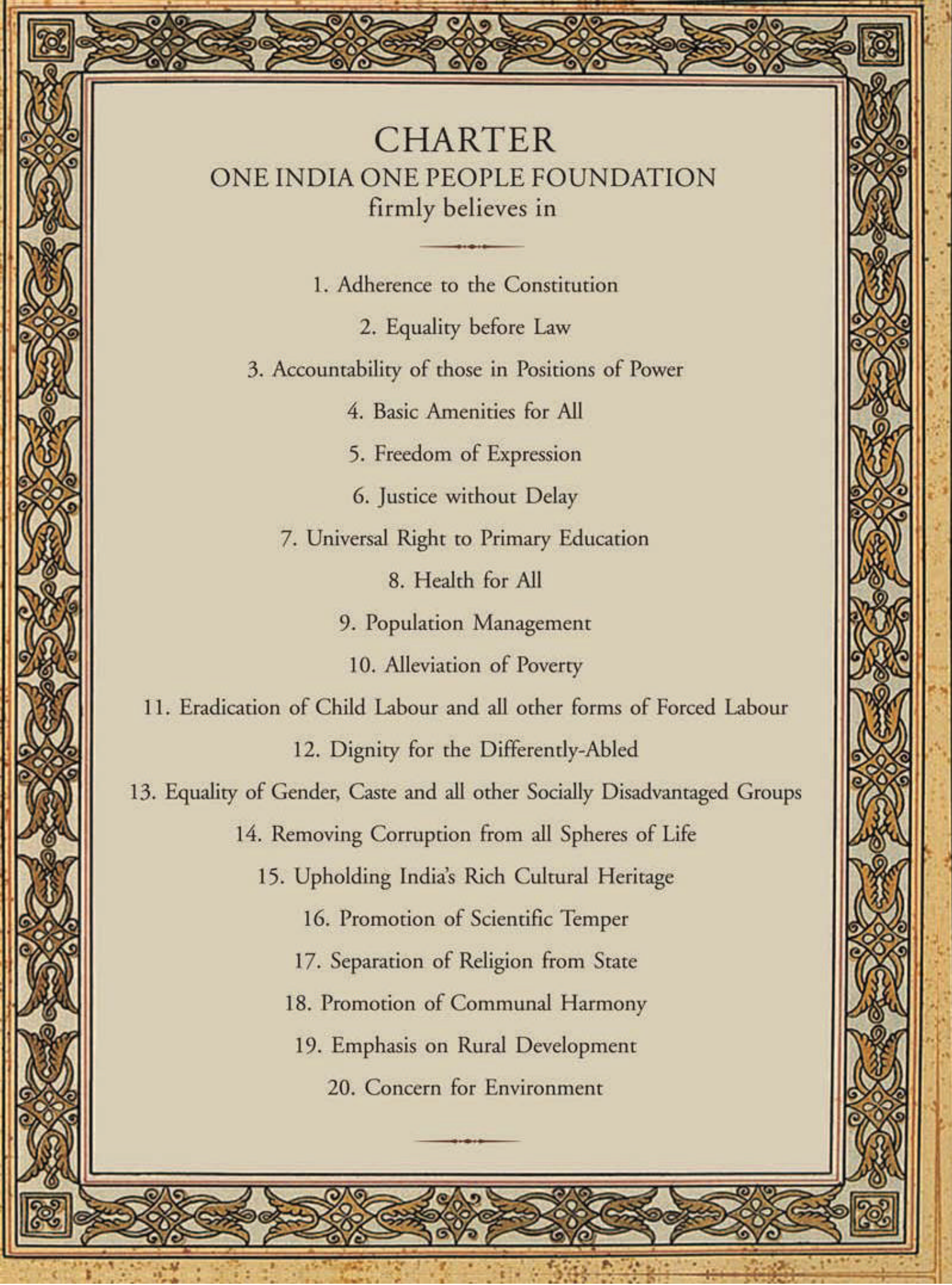
biennales across the world. Among the major exhibitions in which the artist participated was the 1958 biennale in Venice, and the Festival of India shows held in the then USSR and Japan. His last solo exhibition was held at Delhi in 2008. Most of Ramkumar's early works centred around the squalid living conditions in and around cities like Varanasi, the dilapidated buildings, crammed houses, and so on. Varanasi remained a recurring leitmotif in his paintings and he went on to paint the city in different conditions and lights. Ramkumar also excelled in paintings of glistening glaciers, flowing rivers and other panoramic vignettes from nature's bounty.



The artist was also an accomplished writer as well and wrote extensively in Hindi. Eight collections of his works have been published and among these were a couple of novels and a travelogue. Although he did not achieve the level of success of his sibling, the celebrated Hindi writer Nirmal Verma, as writing was not his main preoccupation, Ramkumar's books too were quite popular with the readers with the book *The Face and other stories* being well received.

Ramkumar received a number of honours in his lifetime, and these included inter alia, the Kalidas Samman from the Government of Madhya Pradesh, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Government of Delhi. The Lalit Kala Academy too awarded him a Fellowship. He was also a recipient of the prestigious John D. Rockefeller Fellowship from New York, USA. The Government of India conferred on the artist the Padma Shri in 1972, and the Padma Bhushan in 2010. The distinguished artist and man of letters passed away in Delhi on 14 April 2018. Rich tributes were paid to his memory by fellow artists, and art connoisseurs across the world as well.

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



CHARTER

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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
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 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
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 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
-

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 9 १९३० – February 23 २००७)
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