

ALSPHERE

LITERARY & ART MAGAZINE

JUNE, 2022



SPECIAL FEATURE

**INTERVIEW WITH
AMARENDRA KHATUA**

**AUTHOR &
FORMER SECRETARY, MEA**



ALSPHERE

Literary & Art Magazine

June 2022

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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Readers

I am thrilled to release the June 2022 issue of the ALSphere Magazine.

I extend my gratitude to everyone who contributed his or her valuable creative piece for the issue.

Once again, we have inspiring and enthralling pieces of poetry around life, courage and fantasy.

An intriguing read about our zeal where the writer says, *"Struggle is mandatory like the pinch of salt in the lemonade that adds taste to it,"* and insight about meditation where the writer talks about combating our mind pollution, so that we become 'human beings' and not 'human goings', is bound to captivate you.

We have stories of grit in the section on 'People of Determination'; a moving love tale of an old couple and a story that was quilled during an evening walk.

The issue covers insights of a diplomat and author Mr. Amarendra Khatua about his enriching experience as a bureaucrat and a writer.

Intricate, vibrant artworks and mesmerizing pictures also adorn the magazine.

I congratulate all the participants whose work enriched the pages of the magazine.

Do read, share, like and comment to encourage the creative souls.

Happy reading!

Vandana Bhasin
Editor



Chimera

From soft-spun gossamer webs
I weave mystical daydreams and wizardry
The sunbeams of silken gold threads to bedeck marvel-like tapestry!

It's a heady potion where I sail on swan-shaped puffed clouds above
An irenic space for fantasies and fairy tales of true love

It's my snug cocoon of twilight darkness
In this cradle, I find immense happiness

Shimmering and morphing in a world of magical land faraway
I dream I'm a songbird in a midsummer sky on a cloudless day

In woodland of soft, light and crisp pine air
I conjure up pegasi and unicorn of dazzling glare

Buzzing bees in a meadow of wild clover
Larks and Magpies too in an embellished bower!

The angels and fairies in my dreams, in voices convincing and pure
"The night is always dark, that's why God created stars," they assure
To guide me and you, to the keys to the right door

They are blessed, given, gifted
Found in the starlight, in the moonlight
If they go unseen, unnoticed, you're guided to it by your own divine light.

Sangeetha Kamath Prabh

Poetry

Greek Daedalus I Became

Ritu Kamra Kumar

Greek Daedalus I Became

In the maze of life, I was caught
Didn't know which way to walk
In whirlpool of mind, my canoe got stuck
Perplexing was the labyrinth of heart

Untying the knots of dilemma of mind
Walking free in delight to unwind
I started the journey free of any bind

The tantalizing tunnels led me to the caves
Intersection of roads held me in its grasp
I endeavored to release myself from the clutches of their hold
Bruised with cuts of blades of life and sickle of time
I stood aghast and stupefied

Hot oleanders of worldly entanglements stood in my way
And in an epiphany in labyrinth, a lamping fly I became
Whose little spark came in and went away
Bashfully treading on paths untrodden

I flew to the beckoning horizon,
Greek Daedalus I became, leaving the worldly entanglements far behind
To be confined in a cage, I declined
An enlightened me was now ready to shine!

Ritu Kamra Kumar

Poet's Note: *In Greek mythology, Daedalus (Greek: skillfully wrought) was inventor and sculptor who is said to have built paradigmatic labyrinth for king Minos of Crete. He also fashioned wings of wax and escaped the labyrinth.*

Poetry

A Lifelong Romance

Staffy Bhateja

A Lifelong Romance

Words are multifaceted
Cathartic at their crux
Oozing out of the grey matter,
Trickling down onto a piece of paper
They bring out my emotions, which knew no hindrance when I was a child

They are the musings of a gypsy mind,
A mind that would let all phenomenon sync,
But would remain silent otherwise

Contemplating, philosophizing, penning down my views against the unfair ways of the world
But also showing gratitude to the Almighty,

For giving me a chance to live on this beautiful Earth

I want to live, not just survive
So, poetry becomes my best friend,
Inculcating in me the zeal, the vigor

Poetry never leaves me alone
For it walks like my shadow

Protecting me like someone
Who prophesies to love me
For it's a lifelong romance!

Staffy Bhateja

Poetry

Peaceful Sleep

Pradnya Surve

Peaceful Sleep

Going into the depths of my heart
To find the silent caves
Secluded, serene, oblivious
The fury of waves
Lashing against rocks
Silent quietude
Where a wearied me rests

My awry spirit holds a communion
In the solitude
Beneath my deep ocean
Seeking to be blest

In the purity of my soul
And then go to sleep,
A peaceful sleep

Pradnya Surve



Colors of a Rainbow

Listen children,
Do you know what makes a rainbow?

Some see a scientific reason behind it,
Some say it's a demon's bow
Some say it is a bridge from sky to the earth
By which a king frog gets landing to his burrow
That's why mostly in a rainy season
Often appears such a rainbow

Listen children,
Do you know how a colorful rainbow is made?

When light travels into a droplet
It reflects from within
And just like a prism it makes a rainbow

Listen children,
Do you know how many colors are required to make a rainbow?
Seven colors need to glow

To make a luminous rainbow
These colors are red, orange, yellow,
Green, blue, violet, and indigo

Listen children,
Do you know there are few other kinds of rainbow?
Fog bow, a moon bow, twinned rainbow
Multiple rainbows and full circle rainbow

Listen children,
Do you love the rainbow?
I also love the rainbow
It gives color to our life just like God has made us
In different skin colors to glow
Everywhere altogether, like a rainbow

Perwaiz Shaharyar



The Last Train

I'm on board the last train of my life
My station is near
Reminiscing I travel, recalling the journey so far.

Eschewing every bond - I am ready to de-board
Traveling on a one-way ticket
I won't carry any baggage along, no, not today.

On this last train journey of mine
I wish to travel very light as I walk towards that light
There is no turning back.

Few unknown passengers travel along
Some with a forlorn look, some snivel in distress
Some scared as hell.

But me? I am awaiting the last station,
Indebted to each breath that has got me so far, to each rise and fall
Indebted to my sedulous intrepid self.

An exceptional taste runs through my veins today-
The sanguine taste of my past.

The grey in my hair lordly yet subtly shines
Proudly blithe just like the fine lines under my eyes
I am full of everything yet nothingness at the same time.

When you board your last train on the last leg of your life
Make sure you forgive, forget, let go and smile
Fill yourself with gratitude; don't resist the quietus.

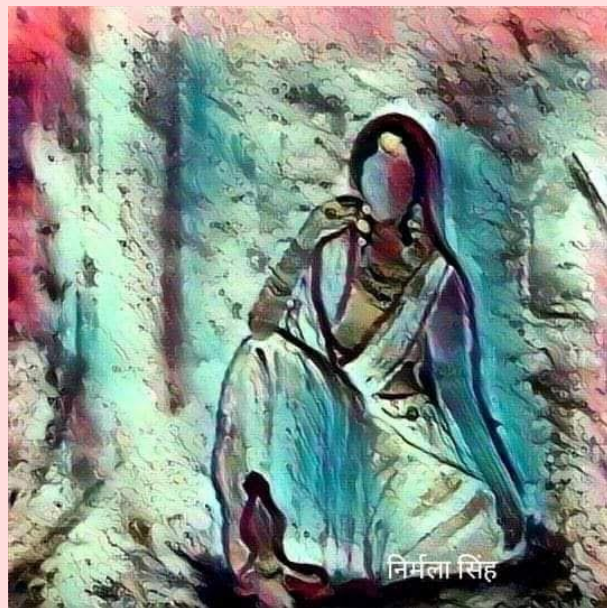
Your new journey begins here.

Preeti S. Manaktala

Artworks

"The worst enemy of creativity is self-doubt."

Sylvia Plath

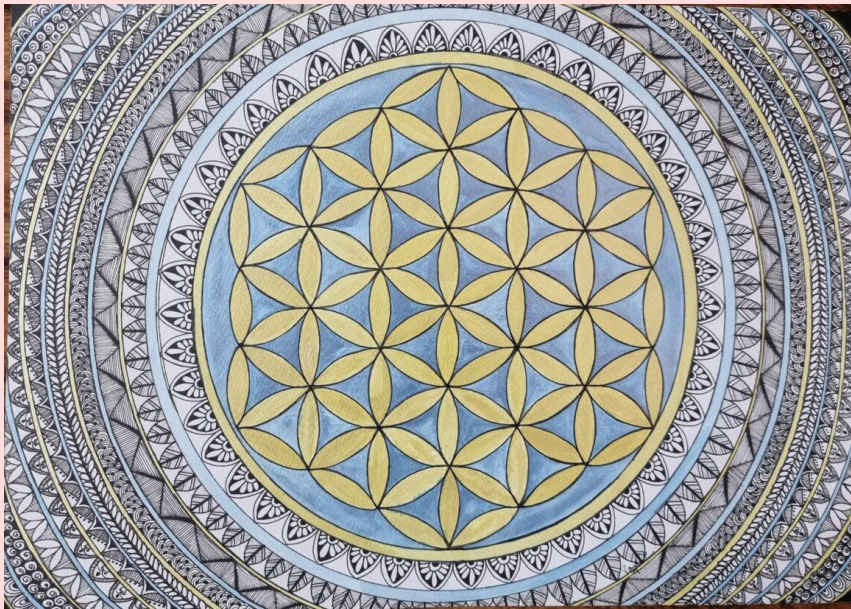


Mixed media painting titled "Ma Ganga" by artist Nirmala Singh

In the words of artist:

This painting was created by me as part of a national level art workshop organised by a reputed art gallery in

New Delhi. I participated in the benign company of nine more senior artists. The theme given for the artwork was "A Religious Deity". While other artists started painting various Gods & Goddess, I stood spellbound to see their works yet my canvas was blank for almost two hours. Suddenly a figure emerged in my mind; it was Ma Ganga and the end result was highly appreciated.



Mandala art titled "The Labyrinth of Life" by artist Vandana Bhasin

In the words of artist:

The artwork represents the myriad layers that constitute our life. Each circle is like a layer of our relationships, dreams, aspirations, hopes, expectations and responsibilities while the centre of the artwork is akin to our soul, which is the focus of our being. It is vibrant yet peaceful like flowers and still connected to each of the layers that make us who we are (notice the color yellow and blue of the flowers, spreading to all circles- differentiating or connecting each circle).



Oil Painting titled 'जलम् जीवनम्' – 'Life' by artist Ritu Bhatnagar

In the words of artist:

This painting was done as a series of two paintings depicting village life, importance and role of water in the development of human civilization and above all, the role and importance of females and their contribution in daily life. There are two parts of the Title. 'जलम् जीवनम्', stands for the importance of Water and 'Life', stands for Female Power.



Painting titled "Murlimanohar" by artist Sabita Parida

In the words of artist:

This artwork is a mandala inspired by kalamkari art. The name kalamkari originates from Persian words qalam (pen) and kari (craftmanship). Mandala is a Sanskrit word that means "circle". Mandalas generally have one identifiable centre point. Sri Krishna is the symbol of supreme beauty, and bliss of life and happiness. In this painting Krishna is the centre, representing the combined art of mandala and kalamkari.



Painting titled "Village Life" by artist Shalini Mathur



The Zeal Amaranthine

The mesmerizing rainbows, vibrant and full of happy hues, often leave me wondering about life. Don't we all aspire to become one someday, to leave that distinct mark, to make people forget their rainy day, to leave at least someone awestruck? But then we lack that zeal a wee bit- to deal with the struggles, to face the scorch and the rain or to stand tall until the eleventh hour. Our immured imagination needs to peep through the cracks, beyond the massive walls of setbacks and defeats. Yes I know, it's easier said than done. But the whole hullabaloo is about taming our mind to keep calm through the down and the dark. It demands strength, it urges for nothing but patience.

Struggle is mandatory like the pinch of salt in the lemonade that adds taste to it. Tribulations do shape us. All that we go through makes us stouthearted and intrepid, both mentally and emotionally. As we move through the labyrinth, we perceive how we ended up there in the first place. As we pass through the thorns, we know who was, and is there to walk along, or to even pluck them to smoothen our path. We savvy that we had it in us- the courage to keep up the pace.

Do the people who make it through all the odds and come out with flying colours (Yes! Like the rainbow), possess something different? Yes, they do- an amaranthine zeal. The fire that doesn't die with the downpour, that which cannot be put off by the winds and that which does not dry out, come what may. If you are unstoppable, no force can flinch you.

Oscar Mosquera, a Colombian weightlifter, and Olympic Champion made it to the Olympic finals each time since 2004 but won a gold only in 2016. What if his ardour had not been indomitable and had he sought contentment in the silver? Karoly Tacaks, a world-class shooter lost his hand in an explosion. When he started training himself to shoot with the left hand, Olympics were cancelled for two consecutive terms. He never gave up and his diligence helped him reach the pinnacle. An indefatigable will power, an incessant urge to bear the odds and an

undying patience is what they possessed and what we think we do not.

'Turn the mental blocks into building blocks.' This reminds me of a seminar being conducted for students, joined in by thousands of enthusiastic youngsters. The orator asked them, "How many of you see yourself in the top five ranks?" Contrary to his expectation, only a handful raised their hand. He said just one line before concluding the session (saying it all), "Remember my dear folks, you will only if you will to, and if you will to see a rainbow, you got to put up with the sun and the rain."

And so is the truth of life.

The fetters, the chains, the thralldom are all in my mind
This sojourn I so tread on, to emancipate the confined
Fire and thorns and frustration, await like landmark
In my willing heart I keep, an unquenchable spark
As I forge towards myself, on this walk labyrinthine
I see a measured volition, and that my zeal is amaranthine.

Ankurita Khajanchi

Musings

Being Human

Aarti Agarwal

Being Human

Ajahn Brahm, the British-American Buddhist monk has said, "*It is very rare to find a human being today. They are always going somewhere, hardly ever being here. That is why I call them human goings.*"

In this one power-packed line, Brahm says it all. Pause to observe your thoughts at this very moment. Are your thoughts focused on your device as you read or have they galloped elsewhere?

When air fills a balloon, it takes the balloon's form; when it is filled in the tyre of your vehicle, it assumes its form; and when released in open, it expands to fill the vast expanse we call space. Similar is the case with our mind, it assumes the shape of our thoughts and wanders with them. How do we then rein our galloping minds? The answer is simple- through meditation.

Contrary to common belief, meditation doesn't necessarily encompass chanting mantras or confining your thoughts to a point. Neither does meditation mean getting lost in divinity. Sage Patanjali, the father of Yoga defines meditation as "*Tatra pratyaikatanata dhyanam,*"

An unbroken flow of consciousness directed towards the object is Dhyana (meditation).

That object could be anything- an idol or a picture, a sound, an imagery or even an experience. The keyword is consciousness. If you are playing with a child and the whole of you including your thoughts is completely conscious of the moment, you are meditating. You then do not have to take out time separately from your schedule to meditate. It is difficult to believe that meditation is as simple as mindfulness. Just by being aware

of the moment, accepting it as it is, without wishing for any amendments, you can bring about a remarkable change in your experience of life.

Among the umpteen blessings of meditation, the biggest one we hear is that it gives us the power to rewrite our destiny. A little pondering over the science of meditation will give us reasons for it. Our unconscious thoughts assume the form of our thoughts- good, bad or ugly. Until we tame our unconscious thoughts, these thoughts can direct our lives, without our knowledge, on a trip that is not even meant for us. On the contrary, meditation helps us to explore the sanctuary of calmness within us. And for a quiet, focused mind, the sky's the limit.

We talk and act to combat pollution in air, water and soil. Astonishingly however, we never speak about the pollution in our minds. Thoughts, both good and bad, pollute the mind. A polluted mind suffers from anger, anxiety, depression, insecurity and fear. So do we then have to eliminate our thoughts to nurture a healthy mind? Absolutely not! We just have to be careful enough not to let our minds take the form of our thoughts and that can be achieved by practicing mindfulness.

It will take time to tame our vagabond minds to experience being human. The good news is that every resource we need, to experience the calm in ourselves, is within us- wisdom, patience and perseverance. We just need to make use of them. Today, let's use these resources to combat our mind pollution, so that we become 'human beings', and not 'human goings'.

Aarti Agarwal



Living out a Life

Life is an anagrammatic, never-ending file. The papers in this file consist of our struggles, our memories of success and failures. All success stories of enterprising and enigmatic people from all spheres of life are built upon pillars of failures. The failures, though apparently demoralizing in the beginning, instigate us to move on.

Though I was a fairly good student in my school, my graduation score wasn't too good. But instead of being heart-broken, my father inspired me at that time. Baba was a painter, and even he had scored just fairly well at the Government Art College. He told me again and again that I should never lose heart. That if I did not come first in class this year, there would always be a next time. He said that the grass may appear greener on the other side but it is green on this side too.

We have got only one life to live. And it is too short to spend hours on brooding over drawbacks and failures. Failures might come, but the next stepping-stone may bring success too. Self-contentment, as opposed to envy, is the basic requirement for achieving success in life. 'Make hay as the sun shines,' thus goes the proverb.

Living a life is different from counting the years. This is the lesson that I have learnt from my parents. *Joie de vivre*- the joy of living, is only experienced when one has enjoyed life to the fullest. It will only come when one has left the pursuit of material gain behind. It may sound didactic at this point but the glaring fact remains that there's more to living than material success. If and when one realizes this, that's the time when

the person will be able to overcome all failures.

Haimanti Dutta Ray

Interview

Amarendra Khatua
Author &
Former Secretary, MEA



Interview with Mr. Amarendra Khatua

This month we are featuring a diplomat with a charming personality, a kind heart and a mighty pen.

Mr. Amarendra Khatua is a 1981 batch officer of the Indian Foreign Service. In his diplomatic career, he has held trade and economic positions in the Ministry of External Affairs and Indian missions abroad. He has also served in the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Planning Commission and Ministry of Industry. He is also the Director Founder of Millennial Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture.

Mr. Khatua is an accomplished writer with more than 40 collections in Hindi, English, Odia and Spanish and in all other major Indian and international languages.

Here's our discussion with the versatile diplomat.

Vandana Bhasin: Mr. Khatua, being an Indian diplomat, you have travelled and served in various countries. How has this experience enriched you as an individual and as a writer?

Amarendra Khatua: I joined as a Foreign Service Officer in 1981. However, I started writing when I was only 10 years old and I got published at the age of 12 in Odia and English. I always kept my profession separate from my identity as a writer. Though I have published collections of poetry, short stories, novella, and essays, I mainly remain a poet.

I have served in Pakistan, Russian Federation, USA, Spain, Ivory Coast and Mexico and also in Guatemala,

Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Uruguay, Paraguay, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. I am still in touch with many writers of these countries and being a voracious reader, I have read many authors of these countries. Besides translating them sometimes, the fact that you live like a resident for three years in other country, your poetic imagination and vocabulary start borrowing the part of their richness, style, imagery and experience, and use these as expressive additions in one's creativity. As an individual, such experience teaches you humility and to appreciate cultural differences, and as a writer, it points out that everyone's literary creativity is unique and we all writers are trying to define our creative tradition.

Vandana Bhasin: Sir you have been writing for many years, how do you think the technological advancement has changed the paradigm of writing space?

Amarendra Khatua: Writing space no more belongs to so-called few. Literature and literary activity has become globalized. Technological advancement has created diversified literary fraternity across the continents, facilitated exchanges, encouraged new and young writers, and made publication within reasonable reach of the talent. The domain is vast, varied and helpful to tap global audience. To some extent the problem of translation and transcreation have also been resolved and this extends the literary fraternity all over the world. Example of such reach during difficult COVID time must be illuminating for all of us who are writing and publishing and seeking readership.

Vandana Bhasin: Despite holding a bureaucratic position that demands a lot of time and energy, you have kept your love for poetry alive by writing numerous books in multiple languages. What drives you to be a writer? What inspires your pen?

Amarendra Khatua: In India we have a large number of authors who are also bureaucrats. However, I started writing at an early age from my remote life in rural Odisha under the love and guidance of my great grandfather. He taught me to keep my poetic self away from my professional and familial responsibilities. I am a known trade specialist of India and WTO negotiator and have promoted India's trade and economic relations across the globe. Along with this role, I kept on publishing in my limited way with great difficulty and interacting with global literary personalities. However, I have not used my diplomatic position to publish more or exploit my position to get my books translated or buy laurels. I love poetry and live like a poet. Curiosity, dignity, meaning of relationships, exile from Odisha due to professional and familial realities, love in all its multipronged divine and mundane colors, influence my themes and poetic march.

Vandana Bhasin: Poetry is believed to touch the chords of the soul and connect people at a deeper level. Do you think being a poet has changed your persona or your attitude towards people or life in general?

Amarendra Khatua: Yes, poetry has made me soft in seeking meaning and defining attitude. Poetry has simplified my life as a human being. Poetry is a reflection of all your inner struggles, psychological impressions, relationship modes, and dreams fulfilled or boiling in imagination. Poetry connects with people and readers and does not aim to bring revolution but to awaken love, empathy and smiles. Evolution, more than revolution, for me is the light and sound dimension of poetry.

Vandana Bhasin: We live in a fairly competitive world that is full of distractions. What advise would you like to give to aspiring writers to garner attention of readers and to make their writing appeal to masses?

Amarendra Khatua: Remember, poetry must have a platform and readership to satisfy. 'Only me and myself' approach has ruined many poets. If I am an aspiring or young poet, I must reach out to fellow poets who have appreciative critical outlook for others' poetry. I must publish regularly with the help and consultation of other writers and publishers. I must read and become aware of my gradual evolution as a poet in my language, in my expression, in my style and in my treatment of right themes in a way that it would resemble my uniqueness. Seeking controversy for the sake of controversy must be avoided and love, friendship and brotherhood must be the aura around your poetic self and creativity.

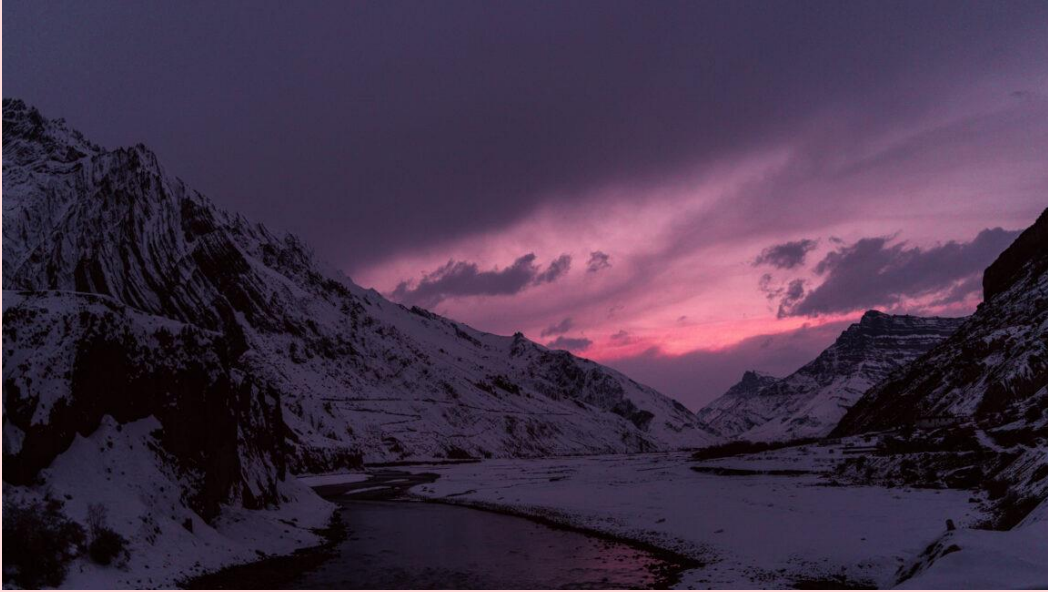
Photography

"Photography is an art of teleporting
the past into the future."

Mehmet Murat Ildan



"The Tiger of Tadoba National Park"- A photograph taken by Aditi Lahiry



"Pink Retreat"- A photograph taken by Jeevanesh



"A little birdie"- A photograph taken by Navya Arora



"Etching of the Nightfall"- A photograph taken by Tvarita Meena



"Kamkazari- The King of Tadoba"- A photograph taken by Lakshmi Ajoy



People of Determination

100 Word Stories

The Cubicle

Jayesh walked solitary, across the corporate campus and took the stairs to the first floor. The engineers' cubicles were empty. He systematically moved from cubicle to cubicle, picking up the worksheet on each table. Taking the paper stack to his cubicle in the darkest corner, he removed his shoes, positioned his laptop bag next to his feet, switched on the monitor, folded his hands in prayer and started working. Before the engineers arrived, floor manager Rakesh had placed the right worksheets on their tables. Jayesh had picked up dummies. Rakesh knew Jayesh's habit, knew he was on the Autism Spectrum.

V R Ferose

Breaking the Barriers

It was Shreya's monthly visit to the orphanage where she performed every year. Shreya worked in an MNC but Bharatnatyam was her passion. As she did her moves gracefully, her eyes kept wandering towards the little girl with brown eyes. The girl's expressions made up for her immobile legs. Shreya felt an instant connection and her heart melted. Next moment, Shreya was completing legalities to adopt Amiya.

Shreya quit her lucrative job to create a perfect world for Amiya. Today Amiya assists her mom in their dance academy as a choreographer. Her expressions have taken the dancing world by storm.

Nisha Tandon



Connected

Leela didn't give into nostalgia. Not very often.

However, while rummaging through her old documents, an old forgotten picture found itself in her hands. She stared at it for a while, a thousand emotions hitting her as she looked at herself as a child with her maternal family. Everyone was laughing at something. In fact not just laughing but throwing their heads back and laughing like never before- one aunt even seemed to be wiping her eyes.

The picture brought an instant smile on her face. She had little memory of it now, but it was a good time to remember. She traced the fading picture with her arthritic fingers, wanting to bring it back to life but the moment had passed. Almost that is, she corrected herself- she held a fragment of it in her hands.

Her twenty years old granddaughter caught the smile on her face and peeked over Leela's shoulder, "Well, that is something. When was this?"

Leela took her time to answer, "Some wedding or a function- hard to recall. Well, everyone attended every event those days. No RSVP or conflicting work schedule."

"Sounds like fun!"

Her granddaughter who opted out of most get-togethers/weddings/ functions replied with little feeling. Leela never understood how she stayed absent, both mentally and physically, all the time.

She replied quietly, "It was."

She smiled again as she got transported back to the past, "Meeting up, joking, gossiping, laughing- all was

fun. Sometimes the journey was cumbersome, sometimes the people and sometimes both- but it was a good burden to carry.”

It was true. In retrospect, it was.

Her granddaughter looked at her and nodded, “Uh huh.”

Leela thought more questions would follow but her granddaughter had already immersed herself back in the phone.

Leela sighed and looked at the joyful faces in the picture again. One picture had innumerable memories associated with it. They all were imperfect, and yet she couldn't visualize anything more perfect. It felt good looking back. How she wished she had more pictures! Or a video from back then!

She shook her head. Well, she should be grateful she had at least this picture. She smiled again and kept it back carefully in her trunk, picking up the newspaper to complete her crossword- a daily exercise she did unfailingly to stay mentally active.

Meanwhile, her granddaughter had started debating on which emoji to send on a random text. Her grandmother and their short exchange were already forgotten like most of her offline conversations.

She didn't consider ADHD a problem else she would have realized that she had just missed a wealth of emotions in the last five minutes even when she had been intimately involved in it. Nostalgia wasn't an issue with her either. Chat histories were easily erased and there would be a hundred pictures to capture something perfectly. Otherwise, “Delete” was just a touch away.

Staying connected was always an invisible thread in someone's life and an option in someone else's.

Akshata A. Hegde



Walk and Talk

Every walk has an element of cool freshness, a story untold and nature's bountiful offerings in the most surprising manner. And when you have some company for walk, it's like *Sone pe Suhaaga!*

Remember, walk and talk go hand in hand to boost energy levels, improve immune system and rejuvenate the pulsating heart. If you don't agree with me, go take a walk!

Try for yourself and check it out. The only prerequisite is that you must have a friend to walk along. A penny for your thought!

My neighborhood friend Renu calls me every evening to ask, "Are you coming for a walk?"

"Yes, of course we will meet at 8pm," I reply enthusiastically.

And we start our walk with happy gaiety.

Every new bend leads us to a new lane and so does the flavour of our talks.

During one such walks, on reaching the corner bend, we crossed the cremation gate and walked along the road that had Jain temple in the middle of neat rows of houses on the right and the entire stretch of M-Block park on the left.

Keeping up the pace along the boundary of the park, I noticed a spark and cried aloud, "Renu, look!"

Something is shining over there.”

Taking a closer look I shouted again, "See, someone has lit a diya in the hollow of the *peepal* tree!"

Both of us kept looking at this simple yet divine view. The light had spread its halo around the tree. It looked serene and pious.

"What day is it today?" I asked Renu on impulse.

"Saturday," she replied.

"No wonder! People light a diya under the *peepal* tree on this day," I said.

"Why?" enquired Renu as we resumed our walk and of course, our talk.

"The *peepal* tree is revered in Hinduism and many mythical tales are related to it. Not only this," I continued, "it is believed that the *peepal* tree represents the trinity of Hinduism. The roots represent Lord Brahma, the trunk, Lord Vishnu and the leaves, Lord Shiva. Many believe that Hindu Gods hold their council under this tree," I elucidated.

"Really? I didn't know this," Renu admitted.

"There are two short stories attached to the lighting of diya under the *peepal* tree," I added.

"Which ones?" asked Renu.

"Devi Lakshmi had a sister called Kulakshmi. She was known to live in misery and bring bad luck; that's why she was also called *daridra* (the one who lives in poverty). She lived under the *peepal* tree in darkness and misery. God Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi visited her every Saturday and brought her some gifts. To welcome her sister, Kulakshmi would light a diya. Believing this myth, people light a diya every Saturday under the *peepal* tree so that it may bring them wealth and good luck."

"Wow! I didn't know that. This is quite interesting," Renu quipped.

"Not only this, there is another story attached to it," I said smilingly.

"Yet another story! Which one?" exclaimed Renu.

"It is given in the *Puranas* that once, demons defeated gods and goddesses and Lord Vishnu took refuge in the *peepal* tree," I stated.

Renu had a good laugh.

"There is no end to our mythologies," she added.

"What I know about the *peepal* tree is that Gautam Buddha got enlightenment under this tree and it is also called the Bodhi Tree. Also it releases oxygen even at night," she explained.

"Yes, very correct." I nodded.

Our walk had finished by now and so had our talk.

Bidding goodnight to each other, I climbed the stairs of my house as she stepped hers, with the hope to resume our walk the next day.

Kiren Babal

Short Story

Mein Tenu Phir Milangi

Shweta Mathur Lall

Mein Tenu Phir Milangi

“I won’t leave you so easily. *Mein tenu phir milangi!*” The eighty-seven-year-old’s boisterous laughter and mirthful glee resonated among the white corridors. Hope and love are a rare find in our intensive care unit and among us, the white-coated people.

Ninety-two-year-old Mr Seth trudged his way out of the ICU, “You have been on my case for the last sixty-five years, and I know you won’t let me live in peace. *Mein vi tenu phir milanga!* I promise,” he hollered.

Their domestic banter nudged me to accept my mom’s constant demand to see me married. I saw him leave, knowing that he will be back at sunrise and sit all day, waiting to catch a glimpse of his ailing wife. The clickety-clack of his walking stick brought back memories of the month gone by.

“Doctor! My wife had a fall, please help her!” The anguish-laden voice alerted me in the emergency ward. I saw a frail man pushing a wheelchair-bound elderly lady bleeding from her face. The crew rushed in to take charge but the old man didn’t let go. He held onto the chair and the lady as if she was his life support. Nurses shifted the lady on the bed and asked the gentleman to take a seat but none could break their eye contact. He staggered, not letting go of her as if warning her to not let go of the tiny thread called life.

Something pulled me towards him, “Mr. Seth,” I said looking at his hospital registration papers, “please relax. I assure you, she will be fine.”

“Oh, I know she will be, she has promised me a life term. She is a woman of her words. You think I don't know that she will be back to her nagging self again!” I could see tears threatening to make an appearance in his misted eyes but the nonagenarian was schooled to hide his emotions, especially love.

The couple became a habit. Yes, their appearance every second day, to get her wounds re-bandaged, was awaited. However, her investigations revealed something that needed to be further examined, thus I approached Mr Seth, and said “Mrs Seth needs to be evaluated for her heart condition. It seems to be missing a beat.”

He was stunned into silence, but just for a moment. His witty self soon took over, “She is so busy monitoring mine that her own forgets to beat.” His words shook me; was it just humour or a plethora of love?

“We need to do an angiography at the earliest.”

“How soon, and how much shall it cost?”

“Mrs Seth told us that your daughter and son are doctors in the U.S. then why bother? I am certain they will rush, the moment you tell them,” I assured.

“*Beta*, they are busy. They won't be able to,” his eyes for the first time, took refuge behind his lowered eyelids. “They have families and careers while we are living extra innings. Please don't tell Mrs Seth, she thinks our kids send us money for our daily needs. I have been trying to make ends meet with my savings, but angiography sounds expensive.”

My heart broke. His embarrassed smile requested help and my heart couldn't deny it and I registered them as my kin. Mr Seth took his time with his vintage ink pen to fill in the forms while Mrs Seth caught me off guard, “*Beta*, thank you for your help.”

“Help? Ma'am, we are just doing our job.”

“A job that costs a lot of money but you are making it happen for free.”

I didn't know what to say, “No ma'am, your kids,”

“My kids are good for nothing, I have known it for long. Mr Seth hides the truth from me thinking I wouldn't be able to take it and I play along just to keep him strong to deal with our problems, otherwise, we would both just fade away with grief. So, thank you.”

Do they make people like them anymore, I wondered as she was wheeled away? However, her heart played truant and she reached the critical care unit directly. Her heart seemed to have given up. Did acceptance of grief break all dams?

The shrill beeping of the monitor pulled me back to the present, to the shuffling of feet near Mrs Seth's bed. She wasn't responding; her eyes were focused on the door. Her breathing was short and staggered. She

didn't struggle; she seemed tired and drained away. The continuous beep ripped my soul, I could just hear, "*mein tenu phir milangi!*" Soft sobbing and sniffles made me aware of my failure. She had gone but Mr Seth was waiting for her. I trudged with heavy steps towards him.

He sat peacefully snoozing on a chair, his stick on the floor by his side, a smile on his face; content.

"Mr Seth..."

He fell into my embrace. He couldn't even live for a moment without her. I smiled through my tears. If this was what love and marriage were all about, I wanted it more than anything in the world.

The hospital staff performed their last rites according to their children's wishes, as they couldn't come, yet again. We celebrated their passing and love by reciting, "*Mein tenu phir milangi!*"

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