

The reporter, her story

Women reporters have faced misogyny and sexism, and yet they have travelled a long distance. MeToo provides an acknowledgement of the hurdles in their way, and their resilience



LINA MATHIAS AND MEENA MENON

THE METOO movement's impact on Indian media led to strong responses from senior women journalists and even controversies. One such was over veteran journalist Tavleen Singh's three articles in the Indian Express ('Stories beyond MeToo', January 1, Fifth Column: 'Why I am not MeToo' October 15, 2018, and 'Can MeToo get beyond me', October 21, 2018). The burden of her song was that women journalists must not become the story themselves by writing about the sexual harassment they face, but focus on the exploited women in the country. In a pithy response, another veteran journalist Pamela Philipose has pointed out fallacies in Singh's argument ('Her blind spots', Indian Express, January 2).

As women journalists who entered English media newsrooms in the mid-1980s as junior reporters, we feel that both Singh and Philipose have, in separate ways, left out some significant aspects. Their stress on investigative stories and exposures etc does not do justice to the long way that women reporters have travelled.

Winning the right to do "hard news" beats, night duty and cover "difficult" beats did not happen overnight. Besides the prominent veterans, there were and are many women reporters who performed a difficult job very well and handled themselves with aplomb in the newsroom. Their number has grown tremendously in the past few decades.

The focus cannot be on whether women journalists should seek to become celebrities or not, should report on other exploited women or not or how many investigative stories they have broken. The point is how far women reporters have traversed in terms of doing "hardcore" reporting and not simply being ghettoised into doing lifestyle features. In fact, Singh is seeking their ghettoisation by arguing that they should report on the exploitation of women and girls in the country. Why cannot male reporters do so? In the newsroom, often women find themselves writing on women because the men simply refuse or are not assigned those stories.

In the mid-1980s when both of us entered journalism, there were very few women but those numbers rose gradually and today they are a critical mass. Yet, most of the stories on women, still considered a soft beat, are still done by women. We still have to see male reporters doing a series on rapes or dowry deaths or prostitution unless there is a perceived hard news angle. Women are yet to break the proverbial glass ceiling in many media houses, but they are doing beats earlier considered male terrain. By writing on gender and violence or "women's issues", they are keeping the flag flying, but that alone cannot change a patriarchal newsroom.

As young reporters, we looked up to women like Singh and Philipose, Coomi Kapoor, Olga Tellis, Usha Rai, Mrinal Pande and so many others. Lata Rajee, who was the chief sub editor at Indian Express, was one of the few women in a senior position in the late 1980s, as was Carol Andrade who was the only woman reporter when she joined the Times of India, and went on to become a chief reporter of an evening paper. Women faced undefined and unarticulated but nonetheless gargantuan obstacles to become political and crime reporters.

In the mid-1980s, the issues facing women reporters specifically were about being "allowed" to do night duty, and cover



Suvajit Dey

"dangerous" areas like crime and riots. For instance, the United News of India (UNI) did not allow women on night-shifts which went on till 1 am, till three women — Bharati Sadasivam, Sujata Anandan and Meena Menon — demanded it and were willing to put up with the resistance to the idea.

What needs to be celebrated and written about is that, in twos and threes, and later in larger numbers, women reporters carved out spaces for themselves and for the generations that followed. The issue is not simply that of investigative reporting or exposures. It is doing beats that were different and doing them well.

Even then, in sports and business reporting, women were rarely seen. Female reporters were readily assigned campus reporting or education and lifestyle interviews and so on but political reporting (considered the *crème de la crème*) eluded them as did reporting on sports and business. The arguments against were all couched in "protective" language around their physical safety, commuting late at night, fending off unwanted attention and so forth.

These were the days when the mobile telephone was in the realm of science fiction. All that we had was the MTNL black box that sat on the Chief Reporter's table. No personal calls were allowed to be made or received by young reporters except in cases of dire emergency and it was to be used only to fix appointments or get an urgent deadline-bound quote. You were expected to roam the streets in search of stories and meet your contacts and others face to face. That it did wonders for our contact diaries and our reportage is another story. Covering fires or riots in the night meant we would be exposed to unwanted attention, but many of us realised that the main danger was in the newsroom itself where standing up for women and doing stories on them identified you as a "feminist" or an "activist".

We remember the first smell of newsprint and the mad delight of a "by-line";

the joy of going out there and getting a story, persuading reluctant bureaucrats or others to talk. It was bliss to know that your story had forced the authorities — municipal, police, corporate — to redress the grievance. Nothing came close to the euphoria of knowing that your report had made a difference.

It is this that must be celebrated whilst talking of women reporters — they have carved out a space despite so many hurdles. In many places, women are not hired since it is too much for the management to provide for their security after night shift. Then, there were other problems: No separate rest rooms, lack of sleeping space after a night shift, male reporters feeling their turf is being challenged, sexism not only in the newspaper but everywhere else.

All this was compensated by the freedom to roam and report, get inside the "news", meet people, stand up for rights and report on what was wrong, and be appreciated for exposing that. Women have covered wars, riots, bombings, politics, crime, the economy and social sectors, exposed and unearthed so many facets of the world that had not figured as news, and are responsible for "mainstreaming" gender in the news.

The fact that women put up with so much harassment which has now been exposed, is a tribute to their spirit. The trauma has stayed with them for so many years, and has only surfaced now. It is something to be acknowledged and addressed, not dismissed. To eradicate patriarchy is a common goal. Sexual harassment has to be addressed and acknowledged as a reality.

Quite simply, if women journalists have been victimised, courage lies in their standing up for themselves.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Nicolás Maduro has failed his country. Now the US response has raised the stakes. —THE GUARDIAN

Faith, science and spectacle

At the Kumbh, they meet and melt into one another



IN GOOD FAITH
ANANYA AWASTHI

WHAT IS SHRADDHA? Is it analogous to "faith" as defined in the English language? According to the Oxford dictionary, "faith" is a "strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof". In this case, spiritual conviction is merely seen and understood through a scientific lens, thus requiring proof for its validation. While in Sanskrit etymology, shraddha is made of two words, srat which means heart and dha that means to place - taken together, they mean to put one's heart to. This stands in direct contradiction to the Western understanding of faith, which seems to signify a blind belief based purely on spiritual conviction.

In this scientific context, it becomes pertinent to question the faith of millions of devotees who assembled at the Kumbh Mela this year. Does their faith contradict science or does shraddha have a deeper transcendental meaning beyond the realms of science and proof, though not necessarily unscientific?

Let us first examine the relationship of science with the timeless tradition of Kumbh. The "mela" or festivities typically spin off on the day of Makar Sankranti. This signifies the Uttarayan or the upward movement of the sun in the northern hemisphere, which was scientifically calculated by the sages over a thousand years ago, much before the invention of the telescope. As has been corroborated by advances in science, the Kumbh is accurately designed to fall on the dates marking the sun's transit to Capricorn, thus signifying the end of the winter solstice. Moreover, traditional learning talks about the churning of the sea or the "samudra manthan", where demigods emerged with a "life nectar". This nectar is believed to have been poured over the meeting point or the "sangan" of Ganga, Yamuna and until very recently, the mythical Saraswati river. Recent advances in satellite imagery have indeed traced the underground bed of the Saraswati in the northern plains, which is further believed to re-emerge at the "sangan" (until the latter is also proved through scientific rigour).

Again, the Kumbh is specifically celebrated every six or 12 years based on precisely calculated solar cycles. Imagine, in a pre-scientific world where one could not have possibly predicted the existence of any planets or calculated their orbits, in India, astrology and astronomy had advanced to a complementary association. Scientific and mathematical calculations confirm that the

Kumbh has indeed been traditionally celebrated to match the entry of Jupiter in Aries or Leo and the entry of the sun and moon in the Capricorn orbit. This planetary alignment is shown to enhance the electro-magnetic field of the earth which in turn affects biological systems. Studies in the area of bio-magnetism have shown how human bodies not only emit electromagnetic forces but also respond to charged fields in the environment. Uses of diathermy in pain reduction and low amounts of pulsed electromagnetic field therapy in improving emotional wellbeing and treatment of psychiatric disorders has been widely documented.

This brings us to the second realm of faith, meditation and energies. The Kumbh attracts a diverse set of audiences. These include sadhus and sadhvis who use this opportunity to practise meditation, a large proportion of the so-called illiterate people who travel by foot, carts or trains to experience this "mela" with an attitude of bhakti or reverence towards the gods or city-bred people, who, for the most part, visit the Kumbh to just behold this magnificent spectacle of the largest gathering of human kind — of course, some of us, do have a hidden intention of "washing our sins". Again, our stereotypical and limited understanding of faith will make us believe that all of the above is nothing more than blind faith that seeks an abstract liberation through an endless pursuit of a mythical nectar.

The field of public health has now woken up to the scientific benefits of yoga, meditation, intermittent fasting and emotional regulation through meta-awareness. Mindfulness-based stress reduction or transcendental meditation using mantras has shown clinical evidence for improved patient recovery. Richard Davidson, head of the Centre for Healthy Minds in the University of Wisconsin, in *Altered Traits* describes experiments done using MRI and PET scans conducted over various cohorts of meditators and yoga practitioners, trained in Indic practices. The results have shown improved brain function, concentration, stress reduction, treatment of psychiatric disorders and cultivation of enduring personality traits like equanimity and selflessness — thanks to our knowledge about neuroplasticity. And the Kumbh or a "pot of knowledge" precisely symbolises the very amalgamation of the mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing, albeit in a "not so cool", traditional format.

Can it be said, then, that faith by itself has been scientifically designed? Traditional knowledge and rituals like the congregation of devotees in Kumbh has over the ages stood its ground on pure shraddha and "blind" confidence. The modern scientific community often tends to ignore, belittle or worse, berate our intangible heritage for want of proof. But what happens when scientific research, starts paving the way towards evidence in favour of faith and its useful impact on our health, wellbeing and happiness?

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

MACHINES DON’T LIE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Let EVM be' (IE, January 25). It is highly unfortunate that every now and then opposition parties start criticising electronic voting machines for their defeats. They allege that the ruling party is involved in rigging the elections through faulty EVMs. If that is the case, the BJP would not have lost Karnataka, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. By raising questions on EVMs, they are not only blaming BJP, but an institution like the election commission as well.

Bal Govind, Noida

PRIYANKA IN FOCUS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Politician Priyanka' (IE, January 25). This is certainly a daring move as she has been given the charge of a region that will be under national spotlight. All failures and victories here shall be magnified in front of the nation. She needs to take a strong guard as she will be facing a flurry of questions about her husband's land deals or the scams during under the ten years of UPA rule. Priyanka has always been considered a dead ringer of her grandmother. Hopefully, just like her grandmother, Priyanka will also tackle all adversaries and ride the wave of success.

Prakhar Agarwal, Hyderabad

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Politician Priyanka' (IE, January 25). Priyanka's entry is unsurprising as she led the party campaign before in Raebareli and Amethi for her mother Sonia and brother Rahul respectively. Her new po-

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

sition may be seen as a natural culmination of her journey as a campaigner. She has the ability to galvanise people, especially the youth. She looks the mirror image of Indira Gandhi. And Priyanka's past record of public engagement suggests that she does not turn the other cheek. However, a face and a famous surname are not enough to win the upcoming election. Congress's organisational and electoral machineries have to be rebuilt in most part of UP. That is not easy. She has to prove herself even as many difficult challenges lie ahead of her.

M Z Ansari, Kanpur

VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



A weekly look at the public conversations shaping ideas beyond borders — in the Subcontinent. Curated by Aakash Joshi

PAK POLICY 101

"WHEN NATIONAL POLICY is substandard," writes Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, a former Pakistan ambassador to the US, China and India, "it puts a ceiling on the success of foreign policy no matter how good it is". In an article in *Dawn* on January 26, Qazi defends the Pakistan foreign office, arguing that weak governments are risk averse and as a result, make poor policy, including with respect to foreign affairs. Qazi describes this as "the soft state" syndrome, which is often a prelude to "a failing state".

India, Qazi states, wants Pakistan to "end the use of terrorist proxies" while Pakistan desires the "progress towards a Kashmir settlement acceptable to opinion in the Valley and radically improving the horrendous human rights situation there". While this deadlock remains, Islamabad ought to continue with an attempt to keep the conversation going: "Pakistan should continue to extend its hand of cooperation irrespective of a lack of response from India. It should keep the LoC quiet as best it can. It should build on the Kartarpur initiative. It should extend normal trading or MFN rights as promised. This is arguably a WTO obligation also."

He also asks that Pakistan be the more magnanimous party in its relationship with India, not least because it makes strategic sense: "India is justly regarded as a large neighbour with a small heart. Many Afghans see Pakistan similarly despite the massive Afghan goodwill accumulated during the Soviet occupation. Why? Pakistan need not create a two-front situation for itself. Being large-hearted towards a smaller neighbour is actually good strategy. Specific issues are more easily resolved when the fundamentals are okay."

BIG BROTHER

DESPITE CRITICISM FROM multiple quarters, including and especially sections of the media, the Pakistan government has approved the creation of the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority. This new body will be able to "enable the government to 'regulate' all media in the country from one platform," according to the January 26 editorial in *Dawn*.

The editorial does acknowledge that there may be need for regulation, it must not be imposed by the government: "Indeed, democratic societies, while they may see the

necessity to have regulations for the 24/7 electronic media, allow news publications to check their own content through a code of ethics — in keeping with the principle of freedom of expression. Unfortunately, the PTI's move to bring all media under state control, smacks of an authoritarian streak that should have no place in a democratically elected setup. Remarks such as those uttered by Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry on Thursday that all bodies representing journalist bodies would be taken 'on board' in formulating rules for the PMRA gloss over the fact that these very bodies i.e., CPNE, the Press Council, APNS and PFUJ, had already opposed the creation of the new regulator."

The editorial argues that the current PTI government has nurtured an adversarial relationship with the media, and party cadres have often "hurled invective" at journalists.

MYANMAR’S IMPUNITY

THE JANUARY 25 editorial in *The Dhaka Tribune* reiterates a familiar lament, one that large sections of the government and media in Bangladesh have been making for about two years.

The thrust of the editorial is that Bangladesh has borne the brunt of the Rohingya refugee crisis, "been extraordinarily generous", while others have not done their part. "The international community's role is of utmost importance: Not only can they ease the burden on Bangladesh by providing the necessary support, they can also play a part in coming up with a long-term solution to the problem. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. The fact that, over the last few months, more than 1,300 Rohingya refugees have come into Bangladesh from various places around the world goes to show that the pressure on Bangladesh is constantly increasing."

The editorial also believes that Myanmar has escaped the consequences of its actions: "The initial delay in recognizing the atrocities notwithstanding, the international community must do more to meet the needs of the Rohingya people and ensure that Myanmar does the right thing. Myanmar has continuously evaded their responsibilities and denied the Myanmar army's involvement in the heinous crimes carried out against the Rohingya people. This is where the world must act."

