PEN PAPER DREAMS

THE MAGAZINE



Featuring conversations with Chef Ranveer Brar, Vandana Nair, Lipika Bhushan, Parini Shroff, Nitika Arora, Shantanu Dey, Falak Chowdhary and more.

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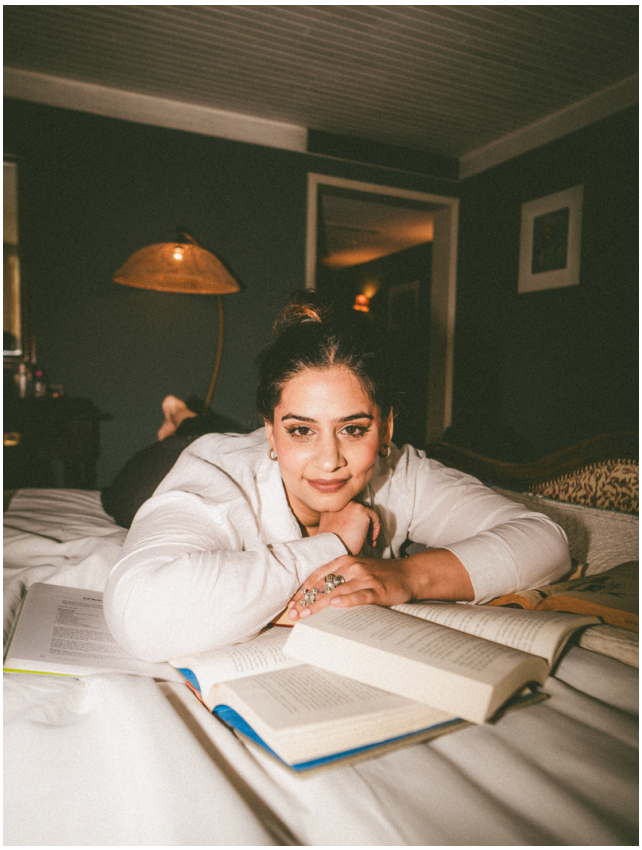
FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

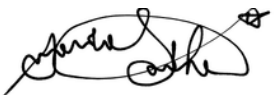
Welcome to the fourth issue of Pen Paper Dreams' quarterly digital magazine.

In our last issue, we explored the many hands that shape a story long before it reaches us. In this issue, we explore the many ways stories become part of our lives, through food and the memories it carries, the rituals that make festivals our own, the histories hidden in our cities, and the books and characters that help us understand ourselves and others. We also look at the pleasures of spending time alone, the unexpected comfort of a favourite café, the work of bringing books to their readers, and what recovery can look like beyond treatment. Each offers a different perspective on the everyday experiences, relationships and choices that shape us.

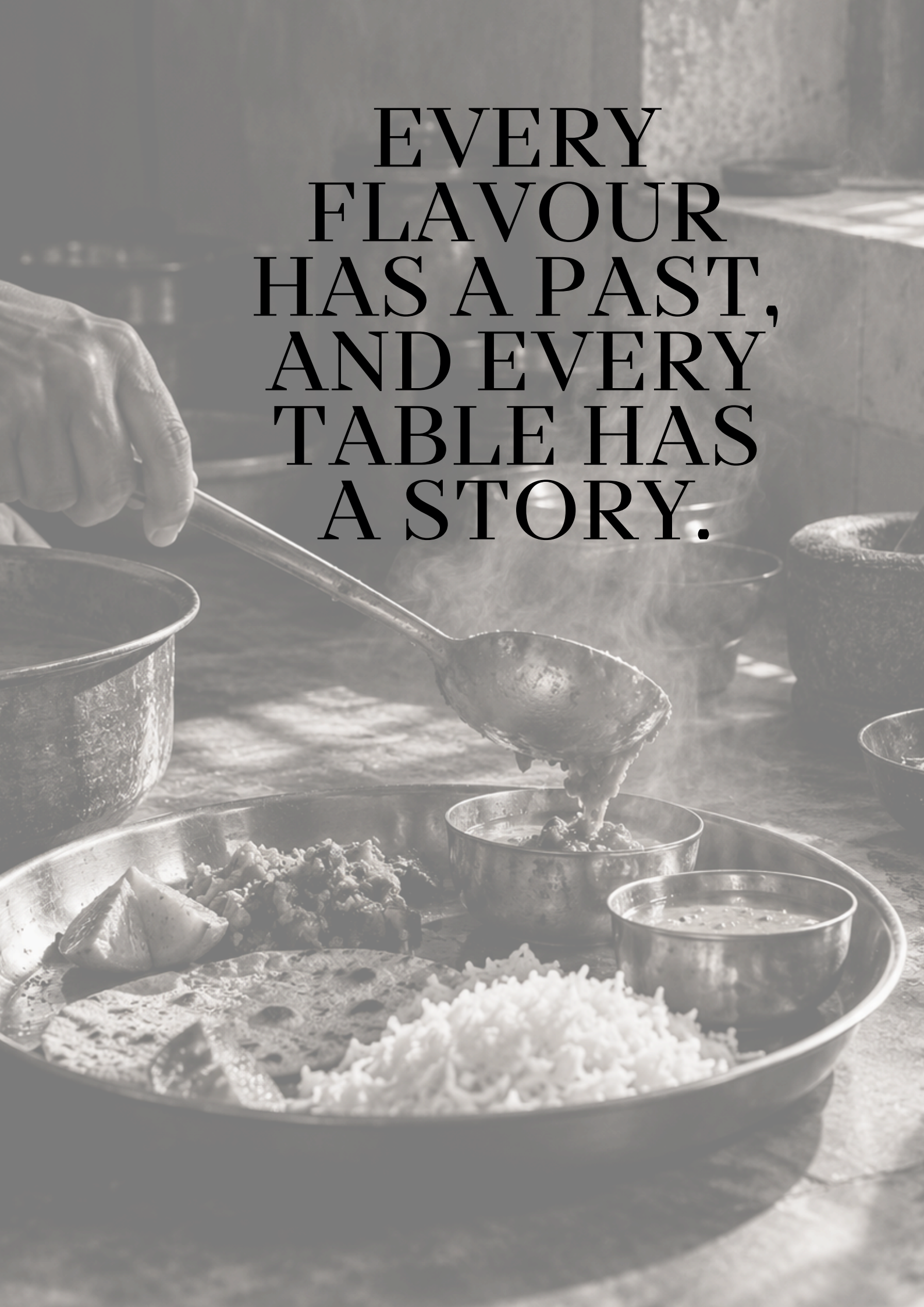
On a personal note, on October 31st, as this issue reaches you, Gabbar Singh, my pug, turns two (yes, on Halloween!), and we will be moving to Pune. There is something lovely about a day that marks both a birthday and a beginning. I'm looking forward to discovering what awaits us there, and finding ways to bring Pen Paper Dreams closer to people through writing workshops.



Thank you for reading, and for being part of this growing community. As I get ready to make a home in a new city, I'm reminded that getting to know a place takes time, curiosity, and an openness to the stories it holds. I hope this issue leaves you curious about the stories unfolding around you, often in the most unexpected places.



Amanda Sodhi
Founder, Pen Paper Dreams


EVERY
FLAVOUR
HAS A PAST,
AND EVERY
TABLE HAS
A STORY.

In Conversation with
CHEF RANVEER BRAR

A celebrated chef, television personality, author, restaurateur and actor, Ranveer Brar is known for bringing Indian food, culture and storytelling together. For him, food is more than what arrives on a plate. It carries memories of home, the rhythms of Lucknow's kitchens, his grandmother's wisdom and the histories of communities. In this conversation, he reflects on how a meal becomes a narrative, why tradition must evolve without losing its meaning, and how a familiar taste can take us back in time.



When you're creating a menu rather than a single dish, does storytelling happen across the meal as a whole? What makes one dish belong before another?

I think a dish has a language, but a menu has syntax. And syntax is about what you say and where you place it.

When I'm putting a menu together, I'm thinking about what the diner knows at that particular moment. If I've just given you something rich, perhaps the next dish needs acidity, but it may also need to change your mood. Sometimes you build intensity; sometimes you deliberately break it. Sometimes you introduce an ingredient early and allow it to appear again much later in another form.

I learnt a lot about this outside restaurants. In Lucknow, a meal was rarely just food arriving in increasing order of richness. There was an instinctive rhythm to the table – something sharp against something fatty, bread arriving at a certain moment, a pause for conversation, something sweet changing the pace.

So yes, I think the story exists across the meal. But I don't want every dish screaming, "I'm an important chapter." Some are commas. Some are full stops. And if you're lucky, one or two deserve an exclamation mark.



What makes a curated meal feel like a narrative rather than simply a collection of good dishes?

For me, there has to be movement. You should finish a meal somewhere slightly different from where you began. Not necessarily emotionally transformed, that is too much pressure to put on dinner! But perhaps you understand an ingredient differently, or a place differently, or the chef's point of view becomes clearer.

I remember watching cooks in Lucknow long before I became a professional chef. What fascinated me was that they never thought only about the individual preparation. They understood the dastarkhwan. One thing existed in relation to another.

That's something tasting menus occasionally forget. Seven individually clever plates don't automatically become one idea. A narrative needs contrast, anticipation, repetition, surprise. It also needs editing. If everything is a climax, nothing is.

The real question I ask is very simple - why does this dish need to come after that one? If I don't have an answer, I'm probably still assembling dishes rather than creating a meal.

How much can you consciously design an experience so that the diner begins creating a story of their own?

You can design the trigger. You cannot design the memory. As a chef, I can control a surprising amount - temperature, aroma, texture, the vessel, what you see first, perhaps even what you smell before you see anything. All of that is storytelling. But then something wonderful happens. The plate leaves my hands.

Charcoal smoke means something very specific to me because of Lucknow and the old kitchens I grew up around. But I can't decide what charcoal smoke means to you. Maybe it takes you to your grandfather's house. Maybe to a winter holiday. Maybe nowhere.

That's where food becomes different from many other forms of storytelling. The person eating isn't simply receiving the story. They're bringing half the material with them. So I don't think a chef should try to control the diner's emotions too tightly. Create enough specificity to provoke something, and enough space for the diner to enter it.

Can food deliberately trigger a memory or emotion even when you don't know what that memory is?

I think food can open a door, but you don't know which room is behind it. My grandmother, my Biji, used to make churi. Thick hot rotis would come off the fire and she would crush them with her bare hands with ghee and sugar or jaggery. As a child, I was fascinated by how her hands could even tolerate that heat.

Today, I can make something technically far more complicated than that churi. But if I encounter that combination of hot roti, ghee and jaggery, the technical part of my brain becomes completely irrelevant. I'm somewhere else.

That's what makes sensory memory so powerful. It often arrives before language. A chef can't know what your equivalent of that churi is. But we work with aromas, textures and tastes that have lived in human memory for generations: toasted grain, smoke, fermentation, caramelisation, warm fat.

Sometimes we're not creating the emotion at all. We're simply giving an old emotion permission to return.

Does the impermanence of food change how you think about creating a dish or a meal?

I actually think impermanence is one of the most beautiful things about cooking. We spend hours preparing something whose success requires its destruction. If the plate comes back exactly as it left the kitchen, we've failed! And perhaps that's why food has such a peculiar relationship with memory. The physical evidence disappears.

When I think about the meals that shaped me, I don't remember their plating. Many weren't plated at all. I remember sitting around a langar. I remember watching Biji's hands. I remember smells from the streets of Lucknow. I remember conversations with cooks. Very little of that exists as an object anymore.

So as I've grown older, I've become less interested in whether somebody remembers every component of a dish. I'm more interested in what remains after they've forgotten the components. A great meal disappears from the plate and reappears somewhere else.





Can a dish tell us something about a community that a historical account or written description can't?

Definitely, because food records the lives of people who often didn't get to write history.

Growing up in a farming family made this very real for me. A season wasn't an abstract thing. The crop affected what was available, what was cooked and even the mood of the household. You begin understanding very early that food is connected to rain, land, labour and uncertainty.

Look closely at almost any traditional Indian dish and it starts revealing things. Why was something dried? Why fermented? Why was one grain used instead of another? Why is a particular cut of meat celebrated? Why is something cooked collectively? Those answers can tell you about climate, migration, trade, religion, scarcity, caste, economics and ingenuity without anybody having consciously written them down.

And then tasting adds another dimension. You can read that a community learnt to make extraordinary food from very little. But when you actually taste something delicious created from those limitations, you understand the ingenuity differently. History tells you what happened. Food can sometimes tell you how people lived through it.

How do you know when you've pushed a traditional dish far enough, and when you've lost the story?

This is something I still wrestle with, because I don't believe tradition means freezing a recipe at some imaginary perfect moment in history. Most traditional dishes are themselves the result of hundreds of changes. So before I reinterpret something, I try to understand what made that dish worth preserving in the first place.



And surprisingly, it isn't always the recipe. Sometimes it's a technique. Sometimes it's the ingredient. Sometimes it's the occasion. Sometimes it's the generosity of the dish, the fact that it was designed to be shared. Sometimes it's ingenuity – somebody had very little and found a brilliant way to make it delicious. Once I understand that, I can change quite a lot.

I've certainly made dishes in my career where I've stepped back and thought, this is clever, but why am I still calling it by the original name? That's usually the warning sign. Technique has started showing off and the original idea has disappeared.

I think tradition is not just a recipe. It is an intention that has survived time. Modernising it means changing the language while keeping that intention intelligible.

If you had to tell the story of your own life through five meals, what would those meals be?

The first would have to be langar at the Gurudwara. That's where food first became larger than cooking for me. Seva, equality, feeding people without asking who they are. I didn't have those words then, obviously. I just knew I wanted to be around that kitchen.

The second would be a meal from the streets of Lucknow. Not one restaurant. Kebabs somewhere, bread somewhere else, chai, conversation, walking. I spent an enormous amount of my childhood asking cooks questions. That meal would represent curiosity.

The third would be a meal in a professional kitchen, probably eaten standing up or after service. That represents the years when food became ambition: discipline, hierarchy, technique, exhaustion, ego, failure, learning.

The fourth would be a meal from my years away from India. Because distance did something interesting to my relationship with Indian food. Sometimes you have to leave home to understand what home has given you.

And the fifth would be a simple meal at home with my family today. After spending a lifetime making food more complex, you slowly discover that the meals you value most often aren't complex at all. Perhaps that's the arc of my life with food – I started with simplicity, travelled very far looking for complexity, and eventually began understanding simplicity again.

Is there a meal that, no matter how many times you experience it, still brings out the strongest emotions in you?

It isn't one grand meal. It's the ordinary food of home. That affects me much more deeply than celebratory food because nobody was trying to create a memory when those meals happened.

As a child, you don't realise that the smell coming from the kitchen, somebody tearing a roti, the tadka going into dal, the way a particular person serves you, are all being stored somewhere. You assume they'll always be there. That's the strange thing about nostalgia. The original moment was often completely ordinary. It becomes precious only because time makes it unavailable.

I can recreate recipes. I can measure ingredients. I can reproduce techniques. But I cannot recreate being that age, in that room, with those people, eating without knowing that one day I would miss it. And maybe that's ultimately why food is such a powerful storyteller. Sometimes the story isn't in what you're eating.



THE BEST WAY TO READ A CITY IS TO WALK THROUGH IT.

ROUNDTABLE

STORIES HIDDEN IN OUR CITIES

Delhi and Mumbai are cities layered with history, where old neighbourhoods, winding lanes, architecture and everyday encounters hold stories waiting to be discovered. Through their heritage walks, Nitika Arora, co-founder of @Darwesh_taleweavers, Shantanu Dey of @the_roamersclub and Falak Chowdhary (@falakchowdhary1235) invite people to look beyond the familiar and engage with the histories that shape these cities. We brought them together to talk about the stories streets preserve, the details we often walk past, and how exploring a city on foot can deepen our connection to it.

A city has thousands of stories, but a walk can only carry a handful. How do you decide which stories are worth passing on?

Nitika: I am drawn to the moments where history becomes intimate - a poet imprisoned by her own father, a woman negotiating power within a patriarchal court, soldiers held captive in a baoli, a forgotten Sufi, a neighbourhood shaped by migration, or a river whose ecology tells us how a city has changed. My first filter is the possibility of a connection between a place and a person, between the past and a question we might still be asking today. I look for stories with layers, contradictions and room for conversation, rather than a sequence of dates and facts. I also look beyond the familiar "great men and great monuments" narrative. Delhi's history is equally made by women, poets, artisans, prisoners, performers, communities, migrants and ordinary people whose lives often reveal more about a city than its rulers do.

Because my walks are immersive, performative experiences rather than lectures, I ask myself - Can this story be experienced, heard, imagined, questioned or performed? A poem, a letter, a dramatic episode, an architectural detail or a strange historical question can become an entry point into a much larger history.

Shantanu: I don't have a fixed formula. When I'm researching a place, I'm looking for things that make me say, "I didn't know this!" - an unknown piece of history, a little-known connection with a famous person or event, or something people normally overlook. If the story can make someone look at an otherwise ordinary place differently, it's worth telling.





Falak: Mumbai is not a very monumental heritage city in the conventional sense. Of course, we have UNESCO World Heritage Sites and several iconic monuments, but these places are already well documented, and many people can take you around them. What interests me more is everything beyond these familiar sites.

I choose stories because they make people see a place differently. I look for stories that reveal the personality of a place - stories of people, communities, architecture, migration, food, trade, conflict, celebration and everyday life. Bhendi Bazaar, Chor Bazaar, Dongri and Mumbai's slowly disappearing mohalla culture have so much to offer, yet people are often unaware of these histories.

The most powerful story could be an old signboard, a forgotten shop, a peculiar architectural detail, the name of a street, a small religious site, or even a local word or slang. These small details often become entry points into much larger histories. Before including a story, I ask myself one question - Will this make someone look at this place differently after they leave?

Can you make someone feel nostalgic for a place they've never lived in?

Nitika: Yes. Nostalgia does not necessarily belong to memory; it can belong to imagination. You can feel that you have lost something you never actually possessed. In my walks, I move beyond monuments to the human lives that once animated them, using poetry, letters, personal histories, sounds, smells and sometimes performance to help people imagine the past.

Absence is also a powerful tool for creating nostalgia. Sometimes it is not what remains that moves us, but what has disappeared – a river that has changed course, a neighbourhood whose inhabitants have moved away, or a courtyard that no longer echoes with the lives it once held. I want people to leave a walk with a strange sensation – "I have never lived here, and yet somehow I miss it." That is when history stops being information and becomes an emotional experience.

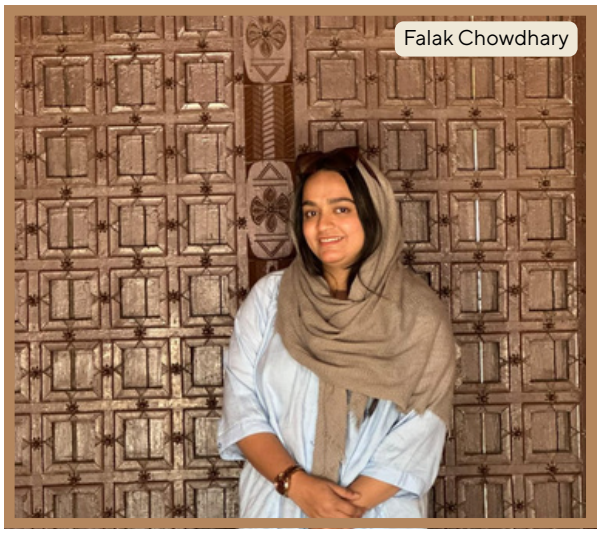
Shantanu: I think it's very possible. It's about understanding what a place used to be, who lived there, what happened there and how it has changed. The before-and-after story of a neighbourhood can be quite powerful. Add an iconic event or an interesting personal story, and you can feel nostalgic for a place you may never have experienced yourself, even a Mumbai you never knew.

Falak: I think you can. Nostalgia doesn't always belong to our own memories. Sometimes we feel nostalgic for a world we have never personally known. Mumbai is a city of people shaped by migrants, workers, traders, communities and families who came from different parts of the Indian subcontinent and made the city their own. Its old neighbourhoods hold traces of these lives – an old staircase worn smooth by generations of footsteps, a fading shop sign, the smell of food coming from a narrow lane, or a story about how families once lived.

Sometimes a community settlement can take you back to a place you have never visited. An occupation carried out by the same family for generations, a food tradition, a language, or a religious and cultural practice can connect someone to their own family or native place. Perhaps it reminds them of their grandparents, a childhood they barely remember, or a slower, more intimate world. A heritage walk can create memories of places people have never lived in or of places they lived in long ago. For me, this is time travel on the streets.

What's a story you discovered about your own city that genuinely surprised you?

Nitika: One story I return to again and again is that of Zeb-un-Nisa, Aurangzeb's poet daughter, and her association with Salimgarh Fort. What surprised me was not simply that a Mughal princess wrote poetry under the pen name Makhfi ("the hidden one"), but the contradiction in her life – she was a highly educated woman, poet and scholar, deeply immersed in the literary culture of her time, yet eventually became a prisoner of her own father. Her story turns a familiar monument into something more intimate. I want people to imagine her not just as a name in a textbook, but as a woman who wrote poetry, corresponded with people, lived within a deeply political court and experienced confinement within


Falak Chowdhary

the very imperial world she belonged to. What I find particularly powerful is that her poetry survives, while much of the physical world in which she lived has disappeared or changed. It creates a strange encounter between the voice of a seventeenth-century woman and the Delhi of today. That is probably why I keep telling the story – sometimes the most compelling history is hidden inside a human contradiction.

Shantanu: One story that really stayed with me is about a chawl in Girgaon that looks like any other old Mumbai chawl, but I discovered that meetings held there were attended by people from very different political backgrounds, including Lokmanya Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Barrister Jinnah. That genuinely surprised me. You can walk past a place every day thinking it's completely ordinary, only to discover that it has been quietly holding on to an extraordinary story.

Falak: There are many stories in Mumbai that continue to surprise me. Take Bhendi Bazaar. For many, it is simply a bustling market and neighbourhood, but it holds layers of migration, trade, food, architecture, language and community life. Then there is Sopara, whose history goes back almost 2,000 years, when it was an important port and gateway to the subcontinent. Mumbai is not just the financial capital; it also has a rich archaeological history. Another story that fascinates me is that of Mahim Police Station, minutes from the famous Mahim Dargah. Inside the early twentieth-century building is a room dedicated to the Sufi saint of Mahim, beside the offices of senior police officers. Every year, during the Urs, the saint's death anniversary, the first sandal, a religious offering, is offered by the Mumbai Police. The procession begins at the police station, and policemen from across Mumbai come to pay their respects. The station also displays remains of ancient temples found in the surrounding area. Where else do you find a story that brings together archaeology, colonial history, policing, religion and living traditions under one roof? Stories like this changed the way I approached Mumbai – I began noticing doors, windows, signboards, street names, markets, food stalls and even the gaps between buildings. They all have something to say. Mumbai's history isn't only preserved in its monuments. It is hiding in plain sight. You just have to learn how to read it.


THERE IS
STRENGTH
IN THE
STORIES WE
CHOOSE TO
TELL.

In Conversation with
VANDANA NAIR

Vandana Nair is a writer and reviewer whose fiction explores the relationships, social expectations and everyday details that shape our lives. Having lived in Bombay, Singapore, the Philippines and the US, she draws on the nuances of different cultures and communities to create settings that feel lived-in and characters that are recognisably human. Her debut novel, The Wedding, *reflects her interest in the complexities of family life and the unspoken rules that govern relationships. We spoke to her about the fine line between memory and invention, the small details that bring fictional worlds to life, and the importance of understanding characters rather than judging them.*

You've lived in Bombay, Singapore, the Philippines, and the US. When you write about India, or return to a place through fiction, how do you distinguish between what you remember, what you've forgotten, and what you've unconsciously invented over time?

I am a chronicler of the ordinary, so the emotional stakes of seemingly small moments always stay with me. If I have forgotten something, it just means that it didn't touch me in a meaningful way. I have lived in different countries, and these movements, makeshift homes, and communities have taught me that the setting or cultural ethos of a place plays a defining role in how people behave, especially how they react in small, everyday moments. For example, a character living in an expat community in Asia would be the one to tell you that she has installed humidity sensors in her bedroom to keep her designer bags and shoes safe from mold or leather cracking; a character who lives in the Pacific Northwest will tell you that CeraVe mixed with vegan glycerine is their magic mantra for Asian skin to survive harsh winters - I say this with no judgement that both are recognisable, interesting characters to me.

Settings come alive for readers when you share secrets about them, which only you know, so as far as possible, I stay true to the physical details of my settings and do extensive research to double-check facts about them, but the micro-world and scenes within which a character moves and interacts are something that I create for the story to progress.



Image: Adrianne Mathiowetz

As a fiction writer, I never invent unconsciously, because I deliberately reinvent characters to avoid ethical conflicts and preserve their identities. Because my stories are born from real-lived experiences, conscientious character-work gives me a chance to step out of that situation and approach my characters with curiosity, not judgement. We are the products of our exposures, our conditioning and the quiet assumptions we absorb as kids born to certain parents, in certain cultures, in certain geographies.

When I begin my stories, I want to understand how a person became who they are, and what happens when they find themselves in an unfamiliar situation. Then I write them and see how they react to these situations according to their own internal logic, which may be shaped by the worlds they inherit. This is the most inventive part for me - I truly believe it's not my responsibility to fix my characters; my honest intention is to understand them first and write them realistically, so they fit into the world of my story.

In *The Wedding*, family life is full of things that are understood without necessarily being spoken - what someone wears, who eats first, what a relative is allowed to say, who is expected to



marry. Were you deliberately collecting these small social details and invisible rules, or did you realise only while writing that they were carrying the larger story?

A story begins when its emotional stake or theme refuses to leave my mind, and sometimes that happens in how a certain interlude or moment has ended. So, I know my endings before I know the beginnings. For instance, I changed the beginning of *The Wedding* eleven times, but the ending remained carved in stone, written in detail as it is in the book. A big part of my writing process is instinctual, and I strongly believe in the principle of first the clay, then the sculpture. So first I "write" the full draft, then I "right" the full draft.

Also, I am bilingual - I think in my mother tongue, Hindi, and write in a universal language, English, so my intention is always to honour both languages - their texture, rhythm, roots - and yet make sure my prose says what it wants to say without showing any fear. When I am writing the draft, I don't think of syntax, grammar or any political correctness, and I listen only to my instincts, which take me everywhere.

Sometimes writers don't acknowledge this mystic part of their process, but during these digressions and wanderings, happy accidents of the mind happen. That's when phrases, ideas, images, fragments from memory, and character traits you have privately secreted away in your mind fully emerge and slam into you, and if you listen carefully to your subconscious, you will instinctively use the bits that carry the larger story.

For me, the deliberate part isn't the observation and collection of details, but how you use them - where they need to appear, whether they are needed at all in the narrative, and that usually happens during revision, when you are making your draft right.

Ahilya begins convinced that she must protect her independence from every form of arrangement. Yet, when she meets Vivek, she finds herself willing to consider a life she had previously rejected. What did you want to explore about the difference between freely choosing something and finding yourself drawn into a choice already made for you?

What I wanted to touch upon was how much literacy and economic independence influence a woman's choice and agency. In a perfect world, that wouldn't be the case, but we don't live in a perfect world, and Ahilya's economic independence has given her the space and right to choose, unlike Radhika, who is being herded into an early marriage.

I also meant to allude to mother-figures in families who unconsciously perpetuate patriarchy by drawing the next generation into making choices that are expected of women - choices that were perhaps piled on them when they were younger. It always seeps into my work because the heart of the matter is that as women, we struggle to see each other as independent human beings. Especially, mothers and daughters see so much of themselves in the other; just as in The Wedding, Shanti Ma often views Ahilya as an extension of her own identity, and that part of her does not want her to be alone in life.

Even though Ahilya is an independent woman, she has grown up with a certain expectation from her mother, who has passed on her conditioning, her unfulfilled dreams, and her limitations to her. In a patriarchal society, mothers often feel it's their responsibility to teach their daughters how to navigate a male-dominated world. It's like a girlhood shorthand that Ahilya has grown up with wherein she chooses which battles she wants to fight, because at the end of the day, it is her mother Shanti who has been instrumental in sending her to medical school, too, despite her father's objections, and that has worked well for her. So, it's very natural that Ahilya is drawn into considering Vivek, her suitor, a choice that would please everybody, especially her mother.

Radhika and Ahilya appear to stand on opposite sides of the question of marriage. Yet Radhika is not simply passive, and Ahilya is not as free from the desire to be chosen as she initially believes. How important was it for you to complicate the apparent contrast between the two cousins?

It was important to show human desire in the context of a woman's right to choose, which is your only dignity in an imperfect, incomplete world. I believe that feminism in its purest form is a woman's right to choose, whether she chooses to work, to sleep away the day lost in a book, or even if she wishes to marry a jerk - it's her right to choose. As human beings, we have the right to desire the moon and run a pros-and-cons process in our heads and hearts to decide and reach for it, even if it's a foolish thing to try for. When we're denied this process, it kills our agency, and we don't learn to make decisions for ourselves. Whether it is Ahilya, the protagonist, who wants to choose a life partner by spending time with him, or the bride Radhika, who is perfectly happy to marry the guy who has chosen her through a photograph - even when there is a virus on the loose - the choice needs to lie with the woman - that's what this book emphasises.

The word "simple" acquires a particular weight in *The Wedding*, especially when Vivek uses it to describe the kind of woman he believes his family would accept. What did that word come to represent for you, and why did it become more



troubling to Ahilya than the more obvious forms of prejudice she encounters?

Most Indian weddings include daily rituals and festivities controlled by the women of the family, which seems like a fascinating paradox to me. They are expected to pull off all the work and wedding rituals without complaints, and yet most basic things like when to eat, what kind of clothes to wear, when and how to step out of their homes, and what kind of life partner they need are often not in their control. I believe women in a social milieu, whether it is a wedding or any family celebration, are also expected to wear their most "simple and virtuous" social mask, which is a huge burden to bear.

I used the word "simple" in the book in connection to women and girls to show how women are "dumbed down" in a large public gathering. The literal meaning of simple is uncomplicated. In the book, it is projected as an aspirational quality for suitable girls to acquire, but it carries the hidden subtext of dismissal or condescension, almost like a label of simplicity is created to put a woman in her place.

Used by Vivek, the word "simple" also reveals the contradiction in his character. Initially, when they first meet, he engages Ahilya in a conversation about Queen Ahilyabai, which demonstrates that he respects strong, independent women. Later, when the two families meet for lunch, Vivek stays silent as his mother attacks Ahilya's independence as a doctor and researcher, because he wants his mother to like the girl he wants to marry. But when he implies that his family would prefer a "simple" girl, Ahilya finally sees that he is an entitled male child acting from an inherited framework he still doesn't know how to dismantle. Despite being a man of science, it is completely normal for him to choose a girl from an array of photographs, make sure she fits into his life and family without any fuss, and take her consent for granted, because it must have happened a hundred times in his family. And to see that red flag in a modern man, and that too, a cardiologist, is heartbreaking for her.

***The Wedding* begins as a carefully controlled performance of tradition, status, and family expectations, but the pandemic gradually strips away that performance. Did the outbreak function for you primarily as a plot disruption, or as a way of exposing what the wedding and its rituals had been concealing all along?**

The first early draft of this book – which was almost 75 pages – was ready in November 2019. While the basic premise of the story was already established, along with Ahilya's worldview on the rituals of her family and community, I was restless – the stakes for Ahilya to choose her career over a man she likes just did not seem high enough. If anything, her choices made her appear to be a particularly difficult person who looked down on her family and their eccentricities because she had moved away and started living in a big city. Then COVID happened in 2020; I either had to scrap the entire draft because how could I have a protagonist who was a public health professional untouched by this global crisis? – or give extra instructions on the timeline – before COVID kind of thing – which felt a bit lazy to do.

Then one of the first hard-hitting tragedies happened in Paligunj, Bihar in June 2020; a large wedding party of more than 350 people fell prey to COVID because the parents of the groom refused to postpone the wedding even though he developed symptoms two days before the date. That wedding became a super spreader as almost 170 guests contracted the virus, and the young bridegroom died two days after the wedding. When I read that report, I realised that true courage happened in these seemingly small moments, when you challenge habits, when you are ready to test your knowledge against the world, and suddenly Ahilya's character became very transparent to me – only a character who is particularly difficult and not a people-pleaser would have the courage to go against her family, knowing what she knows, and say, "to hell with 350 grumbling guests, to hell with arrangements and financial losses, to hell with what will people say, let's postpone the wedding..." There's a quote in the book where Ahilya thinks, "Would she chase the virus or the man?" And that is exactly what I thought when I decided to scrap that early draft and start afresh.

Interestingly, writing that new draft showed me that fighting a virus and confronting old rituals and beliefs that no longer serve us are similar in nature – both spread quietly, both take root in familiar places, and both resist change even when the harm they cause is pretty apparent. And in both cases, breakthroughs happen when people choose knowledge over comfort, courage over habit, and are willing to break cycles





that have lingered simply because no one questioned them. So, the pandemic definitely functioned more than a plot-disruption.

Ahilya's professional life is built around recognising patterns, connecting scattered evidence, and responding to crises. She applies the same instinct to her family, although they do not always welcome what she sees. Did her work in epidemiology shape not only the plot, but also the way she observes people and relationships?

That's an interesting analysis. I guess if an epidemiologist spends 40+ hours a week practising her skill - recognising patterns, connecting scattered evidence, and responding to crises - chances are that a healthy amount of occupational conditioning will slowly and steadily become part of her temperament. Ahilya's intense focus on hygiene, masks, and transmission of vectors during the wedding ceremony is triggered as a natural response to imagining a worse public health scenario. Because she spends most of her day modelling future trends and projecting curves, she may refuse to make long-term plans or predictions in her personal life, which aggravates her family. One way Ahilya might be compensating for the rigid scientific control in her professional life is by embracing chaos and preferring to live entirely in the unpredictable present.

When drawing on stories or observations from real life, how do you decide what can be transformed into fiction and what should remain with the person whose experience it was? And when different people remember the same event, tradition, or relationship in different ways, is there ever a single "true" family story, or does each person's version become true through the telling?

That's a great question. For me, the emotional truths of a story matter, but I do honour the fact that everyone's version of the truth comes from their own point of view, and people respond to events, traditions, or relationships with the tools they have inherited from their cultures, families and environments, even if those tools are flawed or outdated. I want readers to remember that my characters are not terrible people, but they are capable of making terrible choices. Their contradictions, their blind spots, their biases and missteps are all part of their humanity.

In *The Wedding*, the character of Radhika, the bride, was the hardest for me to write because it was drawn from real life. Where Ahilya sees injustice, Radhika sees only happiness. That is why I chose fiction to tell this story, because most of us engage with fiction to know our world and our people a little better. So, I felt I had to write Radhika in a way that her situation gets judged, not her as a person, which is why I gave her character more spine, a proper narrative arc, and a chance to tell Ahilya her version of the truth in their face-off scene.

Lastly, is there a creative writing prompt you recommend to others, including those who do not identify as professional writers?

Since inhabiting different places has been an important part of my life, I'd be delighted to suggest a "place" prompt, rather, a series of linked prompts that can help any writer to begin writing about a possible setting for their work or pay closer attention to the place they wish to write about. What is one secret you know about the place you live in that others don't? Did you stumble upon something others knew about that place, but you didn't? Is there something about that place you want to forget?




SOME
MOMENTS
ASK
NOTHING
OF US.

Cafe Spotlight

STEPS CAFÉ, MUMBAI

Some cafés are made for catching up with friends, others for working through a to-do list. And then there are places like Steps Café, where you can turn up by yourself, order something nice, find a comfortable spot, and let the afternoon unfold without much of a plan.

When I visited, there was a lovely sense of ease about the place. Two elderly women sat chatting, while another customer worked on a laptop for a little while. I settled in without feeling hurried or interrupted. The music wasn't noticeable, and there was enough natural light to read or write comfortably. It felt less like somewhere to grab a quick coffee and more like somewhere you could spend a little time with yourself.

One of the things that makes Steps distinctive is its treehouse-like setting. There are a few different corners to choose from, depending on the kind of afternoon you're after. The outdoor seating is dog-friendly and has a more sociable feel. Upstairs, there's an indoor area with a small collection of books to browse if you haven't brought your own. And above that, there's a level overlooking the surroundings where you can see the tree in all its glory.

Ravi Kanal, Founder of Steps Cafe, shared that people had initially been hesitant about the property because of the tamarind trees, which are often associated with superstition in India. The tree, however, has become part of the charm of the place. In fact, they've even spotted a few people hugging it on CCTV!

There's something lovely about being able to spend an afternoon surrounded by greenery, with a view that makes you want to put your phone away for a while. And weekday afternoons are your best bet for this kind of slower visit. The team recommends arriving before around 4:30 or 5 pm, when the café tends to get busier. Bring a book, your Kindle, a journal, or absolutely nothing at all. You don't need to arrive with a plan.

The café's approach to service adds to that sense of ease. Ravi mentioned that the staff are trained to be courteous without being overly chatty, giving customers room to settle in rather than assuming everyone wants conversation. You never



quite know what kind of day someone is having when they walk through the door. Sometimes, the nicest thing you can do is let them be.

There are thoughtful practical touches, too. The team keeps sanitary napkins for female customers and if there's a female customer leaving the premises alone after 11 PM and she seems hesitant, the staff or anyone present from the management team escorts them to their ride. If they are using a taxi or auto, they offer to take down the license plate details. They're small gestures that help customers feel comfortable, safe and a sense of belonging.

What makes Steps especially lovely is that, while it's a good place to come alone, it hasn't become a place where everyone stays a stranger. Ravi shared that the café has built up a steady following of regulars over the past four years, largely through word of mouth. Someone comes in for a quiet afternoon, enjoys it, and tells a friend about it.

Cafe Spotlight
STEPS CAFÉ, MUMBAI



Steps sees an estimated four to six solo visitors a day, many of whom arrive with a book or Kindle, or pick up something to read from the café's own collection.

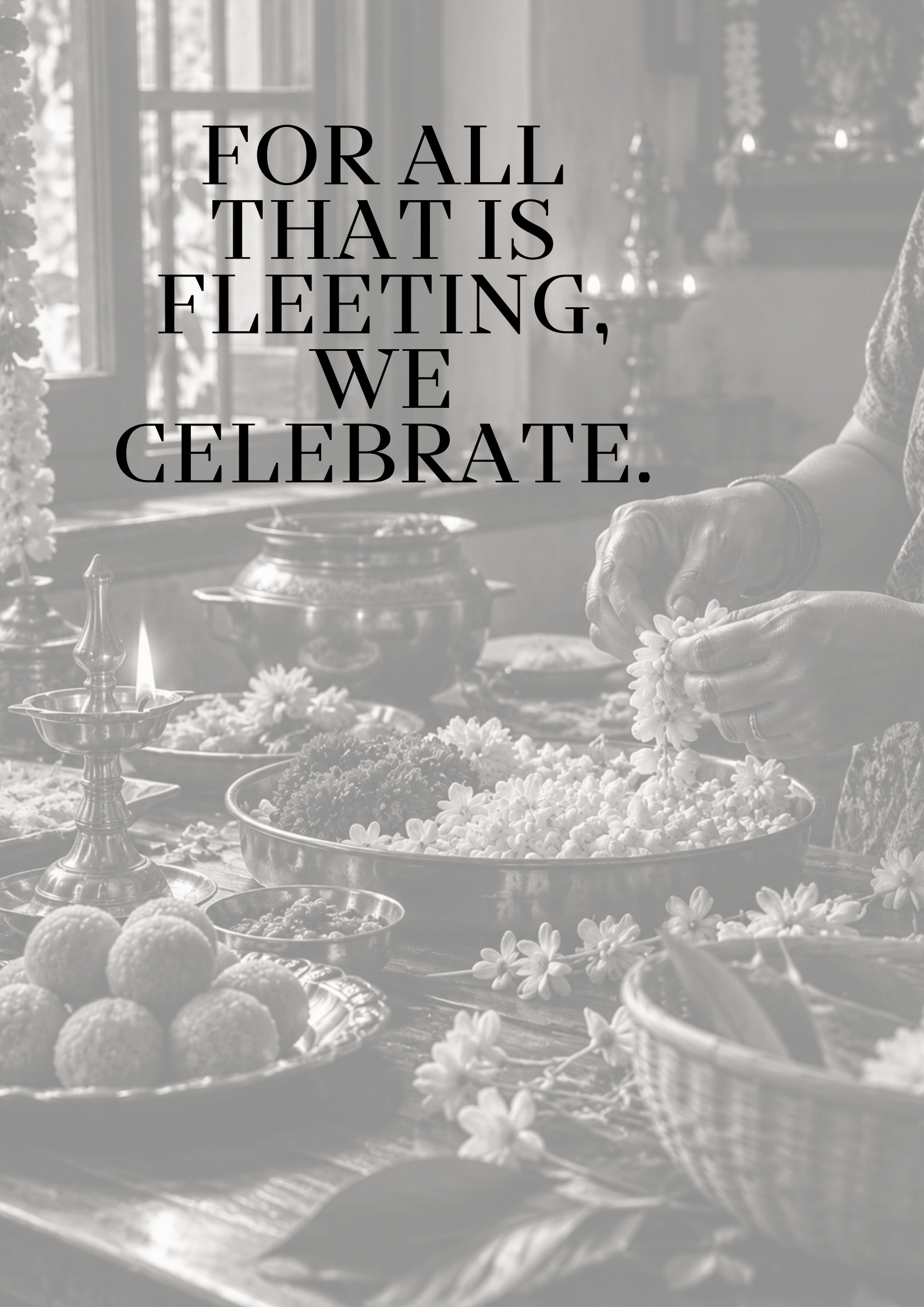
Some regulars have become so familiar with the team that they notice when someone is missing. As Ravi shared, there are customers who walk in and ask the staff, "Hey, where were you? Why weren't you at work?" It's a sweet sign of how a place people visit for a little time to themselves can become part of their everyday lives, too. Others have struck up friendships, and a group of customers is even planning to meet for a meal outside the café.

And then, of course, there's coffee and something good to eat. The staff recommend the Farmer's Sandwich and Mushroom Melt, which can be served in multigrain focaccia or sourdough. They also have vegan and jain options, as well as croissants and desserts such as Biscoff tres leches and chocolate whipped caramel duet. For coffee, ask about their Coorg-sourced beans; the coffee is free of acrylamide and mycotoxin - they test after every harvest for this.

The nicest thing about finding a place like this in Mumbai is the chance to breathe. You can sit in the treehouse, read a few pages, people-watch, or do nothing at all except eat and sip. You can take charge of a little pocket of time that belongs entirely to you.

Steps Cafe is located at Tertulian Rd, off Doctor Peter Dias Road, Mount Mary, Bandra West, Mumbai. It is open from 10 AM-11:30 PM, Monday-Friday and 8:30 AM-12 AM, Saturday-Sunday.

This is an independent editorial feature. The visit was not sponsored.


FOR ALL
THAT IS
FLEETING,
WE
CELEBRATE.

Readers Respond
FESTIVAL MEMORIES

With many holidays in the pipeline for the remainder of the year, we asked three members of our community – Ayesha Tamboowalla (Mumbai), Rahul Chowdary Paladugula (Tirupati) and Bipanchi Sarma (Guwahati) – to share memories of festivals they hold close to their hearts. Read on!

What smell, sound, taste or texture do you most associate with a particular festival? Which festival, and why?

Ayesha: I've always associated the taste of chocolate with Christmas and the smell of motichur ladoos with Diwali. As a child, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, who would always have these two items in their house during the festivals. My sister, cousins and I would indulge in them recklessly.

Rahul: Months before Ganesh Chaturthi arrives on the calendar, it has already arrived in the lanes. Somewhere a man is sitting cross-legged with a mound of river clay, his hands dark to the wrist, coaxing out a curved trunk, a round belly, two small feet. The smell drifts before the god does – mineral, damp, faintly sweet. The smell of soil that hasn't decided yet what it's going to become.

Growing up in Andhra Pradesh, I learnt early that the festival is not simply about having an idol. It's about the one you bring home being unlike anyone else's.


Rahul Chowdary Paladugula


Bipanchi Sarma

There is a quiet, joyful competitiveness to it. Which street got the taller Ganapati? Whose pandal has the better lighting? In Hyderabad, the Khairatabad Ganesh presides over it all, an idol so enormous that people plan a whole day around standing at its feet and looking up. Every year, the question is the same – how tall this time? Somewhere in that is a very human impulse, dressed up in devotion, to be seen, remembered, and the biggest thing on the street.

Then there is the food, which is where Vinayaka and I have always understood each other. He is unapologetically a foodie, and so am I; for a few days that is treated as a spiritual qualification rather than a flaw. Undrallu, Kudumulu (the Telugu modak), Laddus, Payasam (Kheer), Pulihora – names that make your mouth water before the food arrives. Everything is offered first and eaten second, which somehow makes it taste better.

Bipanchi: The smell of shiuli flowers is one of the first things that reminds me that the festive season of Durga Puja is coming. It brings

Readers Respond
FESTIVAL MEMORIES

a beautiful feeling that soon there will be five days of celebration, happiness and togetherness.

What's a festival ritual you love, or one you'd like to start?

Ayesha: Every Christmas since we graduated from school, I've had a reunion brunch and tea with close childhood friends. So far, we've never had a year where someone is missing!

Rahul: Visarjan. The idol is carried out, the drums are loud, and the thing you spent weeks building up to is lowered into water and allowed to dissolve. Clay returning to clay. The same smell you started with, rising off the wet edge of a lake at dusk. This is where the festival stops being a celebration and starts being a lesson. Watch what happens to him over those ten days. He begins as clay. He is given a shape he didn't choose. He is dressed, lit, garlanded, measured against the one on the next street. He is fed better than anyone in the house. He is celebrated, photographed, adored. And then he is carried out and returned to the earth he was lifted from. Now read that again, and put your own name in it. Nobody says this out loud, but everyone in the

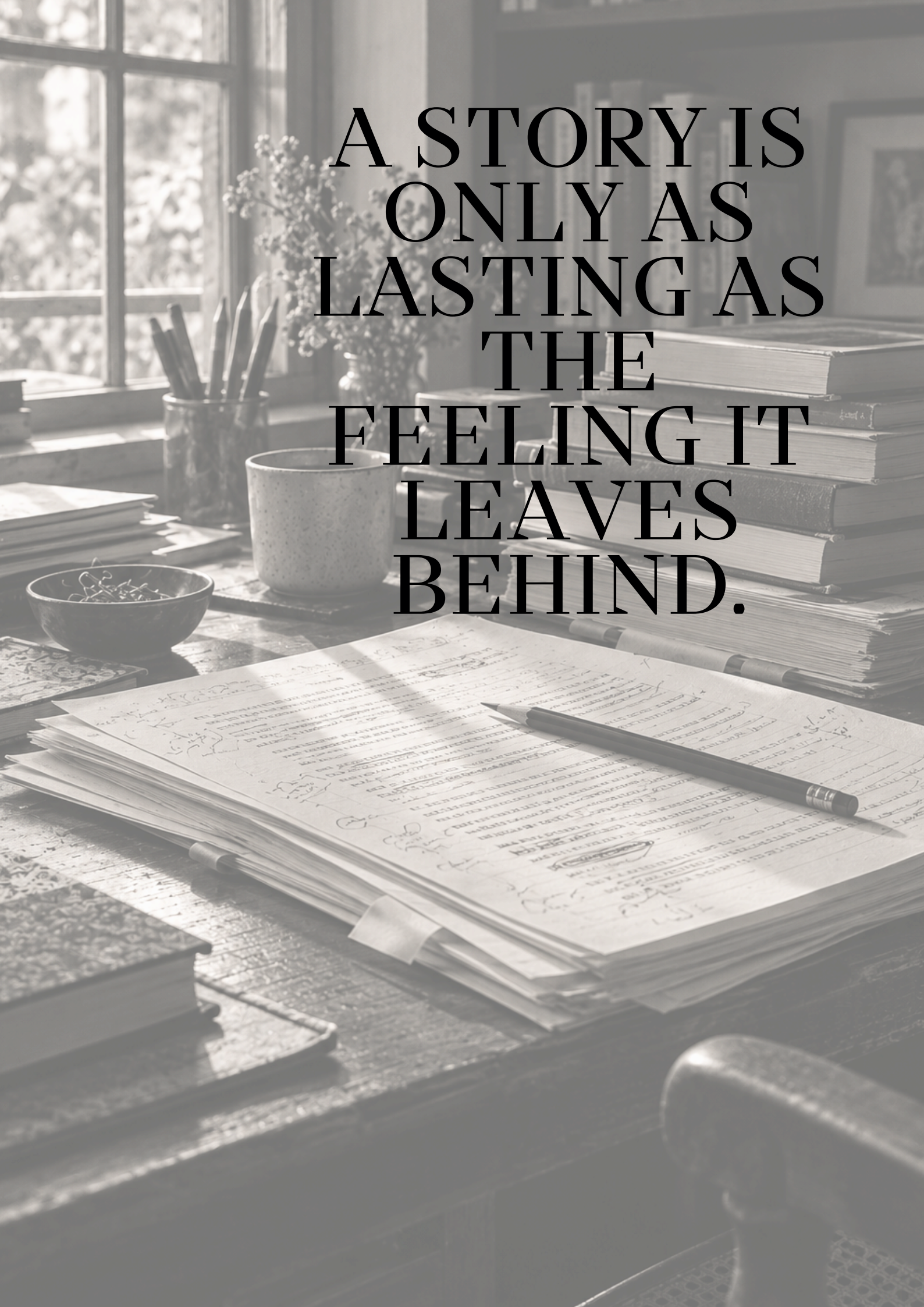




room already knows the story was never about him. That is not a festival. That is a rehearsal.

The mistake is thinking the Visarjan is the sad part. It isn't. It is the point. Everything before it – the clay, the food, the marigolds, the noise – is only beautiful because it ends. The god we make with our hands is temporary on purpose, so that we can practise loving something we know we will have to let go of. For me, the true smell of Ganesh Chaturthi isn't the sweets or the flowers. It's the soil at both ends of him. The same handful, borrowed and returned.

Bipanchi: One Durga Puja ritual I especially love and look forward to is pandal hopping, with the sound of the dhak and the beautiful smell of dhuno from the dhunuchi. I also love pandal hopping and eating delicious food from the stalls around the pandals with friends and family. But the biggest joy for me is praying to Maa Durga, offering pushpanjali and receiving her blessings. For me, these little traditions are what make Durga Puja so special.


A STORY IS ONLY AS LASTING AS THE FEELING IT LEAVES BEHIND.

In Conversation with
LIPIKA BHUSHAN

Publishing consultant, author and podcast host Lipika Bhushan is the founder of MarketMyBook and TheIndicPen. Her love for books began in childhood, with illustrated storybooks and the worlds they opened up. That early fascination grew into a career helping authors bring their books to readers. In this conversation, she talks about what makes a book's message resonate, how authors can find and build an audience, and why thoughtful marketing begins with an honest understanding of the story itself.

What is your earliest memory of reading - perhaps from your childhood?

My earliest memory of reading is of the atmosphere the words created, sitting tucked away with illustrated storybooks my dad and my uncles brought me as gifts, completely absorbed in worlds very different from my immediate surroundings. Early on, reading felt like a private form of travel. I soon took to the written word with Enid Blyton, H.G. Wells, and Ruskin Bond, picking up a fancy for entering a world of mysteries with Sherlock Holmes. Long before I understood publishing as an industry or narrative structure as a craft, I understood that a book could alter your internal weather. That early sense of quiet magic of being transported by someone else's imagination never really left me; it ultimately shaped both my desire to tell stories and my career in helping other writers find their audiences.

You've said that getting the selling point right is one of the hardest parts of marketing a book. What makes a selling point feel true to a book rather than simply clever enough to sell it?

A clever selling point focuses on the hook; a true selling point focuses on the emotional promise. It is true for all products and services. This understanding differentiates a good marketing campaign from a great one!





Cleverness is engineered for click-throughs; it uses trending tropes or flashy comparisons that look sharp in a pitch deck. But if the book itself doesn't deliver on that specific premise, the reader feels subtly cheated, and word-of-mouth dies instantly. A selling point feels true when it captures the core idea of the manuscript and contextualises it for a reader today. It answers: What human truth or exact feeling does this story evoke? When your positioning aligns with the actual reading experience, the marketing feels like an accurate translation of the book's heart.

Today a book can be discovered through Instagram, BookTok, podcasts, influencers, festivals, newsletters, traditional media and retailer algorithms. Has book marketing actually become more creative with all these possibilities, or has it mostly become noisier?

It has become both, but the noise currently outweighs the creativity.

The increasing spread of platforms gives us extraordinary freedom to experiment. A book can find a massive audience through an authentic 15-second video essay, a deep-dive podcast interview, or a niche newsletter. That's genuine democratisation. However, the volume of content means the book marketing strategy often gets replaced by hyperactive multi-platform broadcasting. Everyone is shouting into the same crowded room using the same playbook.

Real creativity today isn't about being on every channel; it's about curation and resonance, having the restraint to choose the two or three avenues where the book's specific audience actually gathers, and speaking to them deeply rather than loudly.

There is often an assumption that if an author has written the book, the publisher will take care of getting it to readers. In reality, how much responsibility for building an audience now sits with the author? And what should an author actually be doing that publishers often cannot do for them?

The reality of modern publishing is that publishers provide distribution, production, and initial credibility, but long-term audience building has largely shifted to the author. A publisher markets a product during a specific window around its release date. With multiple books in hand, the focus is divided, and the time needed to build credibility and visibility shortens. Therefore, it's up to an author to build a relationship that lasts across a career.

Readers don't fall in love with corporate imprints; they connect with human perspectives. Authors need to focus on improving their visibility offline and online, cultivating an audience that isn't dependent on social algorithms or publisher priorities, consistently showing up before, during, and long after the launch window. The responsibility of building the brand increasingly is on the author, and thus finding a good partner - an agency that can work with the author helps ease things out.

How much of successful book marketing is about understanding readers, and how much is about understanding the media ecosystem around them?

I would say both are equally important. While the media ecosystem is dynamic and keeps changing, therefore tougher to keep pace with, understanding the reader is easier. You need to know why someone picks up a book after a long day: Are they seeking escape, validation, intellectual rigour, or comfort? Once you deeply understand the reader's internal motivation, navigating the media ecosystem becomes straightforward; you simply place the message where those specific emotional needs are seeking satisfaction. On the other hand, the media ecosystem algorithms, press outlets, and platform mechanics are simply the plumbing. It changes constantly. If you focus exclusively on gaming the ecosystem, you end up building campaigns that look trendy but lack staying power.

You've been on both sides of the table, working inside publishing houses and then building an independent marketing business. What does the industry look very different from the outside that you couldn't see when you were inside it?

Inside a publishing house, you are bound by institutional inertia, seasonal lists, and rigid trade calendars. You view books in batches: the "Q3 Lead Titles", the "backlists and frontlists" and success is often measured by trade distribution, bookstore placement, and initial media coverage.

From the outside, you realise how little the end-reader cares about any of that. Readers don't buy lead titles or frontlists in batches; they buy single books, often months or years after publication. On the outside, you see the massive gaps between trade presence and actual reader engagement. You also realise how many unconventional, highly effective routes to readership exist completely outside traditional publicity channels, routes that large organisations simply lack the agility or bandwidth to explore.

What are three things authors tend to misunderstand about how books actually find their readers?

Authors misunderstand three things. Firstly, that



publicity equals sales - authors often assume a major newspaper review or high-profile interview guarantees book sales. In reality, publicity creates awareness, but word-of-mouth creates buyers.

Secondly, that their book is for everyone - trying to market to "all readers" usually means reaching no one. Books find momentum when they start with a hyper-specific, passionate seed audience who then act as advocates.

Thirdly, that marketing begins at the launch; the work of finding readers starts long before the cover design is finalised. It begins with understanding your ecosystem, building relationships, and laying narrative groundwork months ahead of publication day.

The book market has changed enormously since you started in publishing. Where do you think the next meaningful growth in Indian readership will come from - languages, genres, formats, age groups, or something else? And what are publishers currently underestimating?

The next wave of growth in India will come from regional language translation and audio formats targeting non-metro, tier-2/tier-3 demographics. There is a vast, aspirational audience across India that prefers consuming content in regional languages or audio formats while commuting or multitasking.

What publishers are currently underestimating is twofold. Readers are increasingly fatigued by polished, derivative Western-style tropes and are hungry for authentic, deeply local histories, folklore, and regional perspectives. Audio isn't just an add-on for print; for millions of modern listeners, it is their primary relationship with long-form storytelling.

You've worked in the marketing side of books for years, and you're also writing fiction and poetry yourself. Has knowing exactly how books are sold made you more comfortable with, or more resistant to, the idea of marketing your own work?

It creates an ongoing internal tension, but ultimately brings clarity. On one hand, my background makes me acutely aware of how essential it is to market a book - and to build a distinct author brand. I truly view marketing as an extension of storytelling.

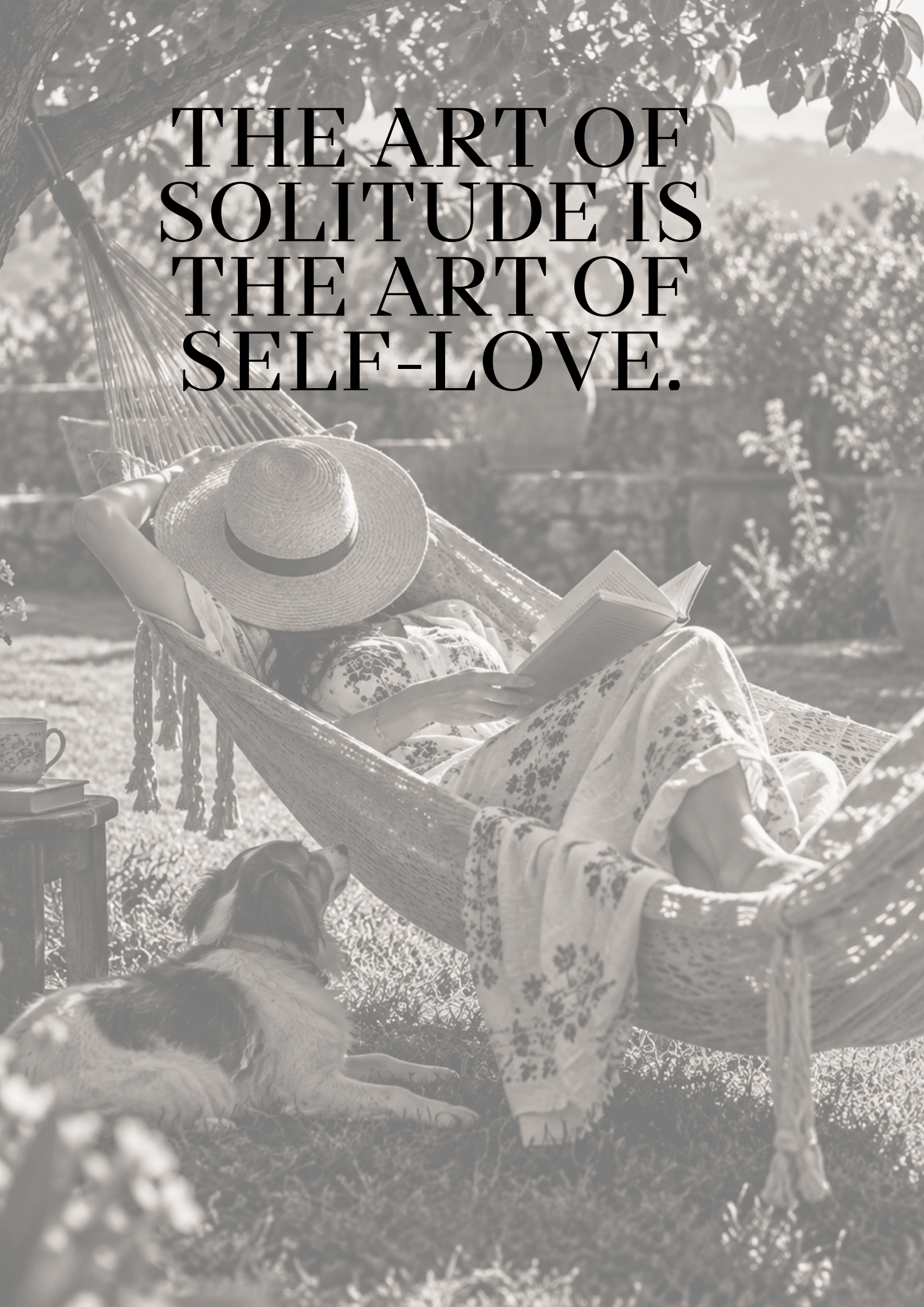
On the other hand, knowing the machinery so well makes me far more self-conscious about promoting my own work. When you've spent years working alongside the best writers in the business, it's easy to second-guess your own voice and feel an impulse to retreat.

For an author who has no idea how much they should set aside for marketing, what would you consider a realistic starting budget? And if they have a limited amount to spend, where should they put that money first, and what should they avoid spending it on?

For an author looking to invest personally, a realistic baseline for a focused campaign is typically between Rs.1,00,000 and Rs. 2,00,000 per month, depending on the book's scope and goals.

If budgets are limited, they should invest in getting media visibility, as that helps build long-term brand credibility. They should avoid spending on expensive launch events.




THE ART OF
SOLITUDE IS
THE ART OF
SELF-LOVE.

Readers Respond

THE PLEASURE OF SOLITUDE

From little everyday pleasures to cherished personal rituals, some experiences are simply better when enjoyed solo. We asked three members of our community - Gopal MS (Mumbai), Payal Vig (Nashik) and Krisha Sutaria (Mumbai) - to share the moments they love having all to themselves.



What's something you enjoy doing alone?

Krisha: I enjoy painting while listening to music. It helps me completely switch off and take a break from the constant pace of work and everyday life. I don't paint with any particular goal in mind; I just enjoy the process.

Gopal: I like walking around the city I live in, or any place I'm visiting, with my camera and discovering new places. It is a great way to learn about people, places, animals, geography, weather, and culture.

Payal Vig: I love walking alone in the mornings and beginning the day without having to speak, respond, or keep pace with anyone. I can let my thoughts wander or simply notice what's around me. Some mornings, I arrive with my head full of thoughts, and by the second or third round, a few have sorted themselves out, and a few have simply disappeared.





Any particular place where you especially enjoy this solo activity?

Gopal: Mumbai is home, yet when you point a camera at it and go back to look at the pictures, you discover many layers you may have missed. The first impression isn't always the lasting one.

Payal: The park near my home is lush and green, but never quiet. There are aunties deep in conversation, uncles doing laughter therapy, a stray dog asleep in the shade and, on weekends, the thump of a volleyball. I enjoy the hum of people living their lives while remaining in my own little world. There's company without the expectation of conversation. For a while, I belong to the world without having to answer to it.

Krisha: I usually prefer painting at home, where I can completely relax and be in my own space. But I also love sitting at one of my favourite cafes - it has a peaceful background energy. Sometimes, being around people while still having your own little bubble feels comforting.


EVERY
STEP
FORWARD
IS A
STORY OF
RESILIENCE.

Beyond Rehab:
A VISIT TO VEDA

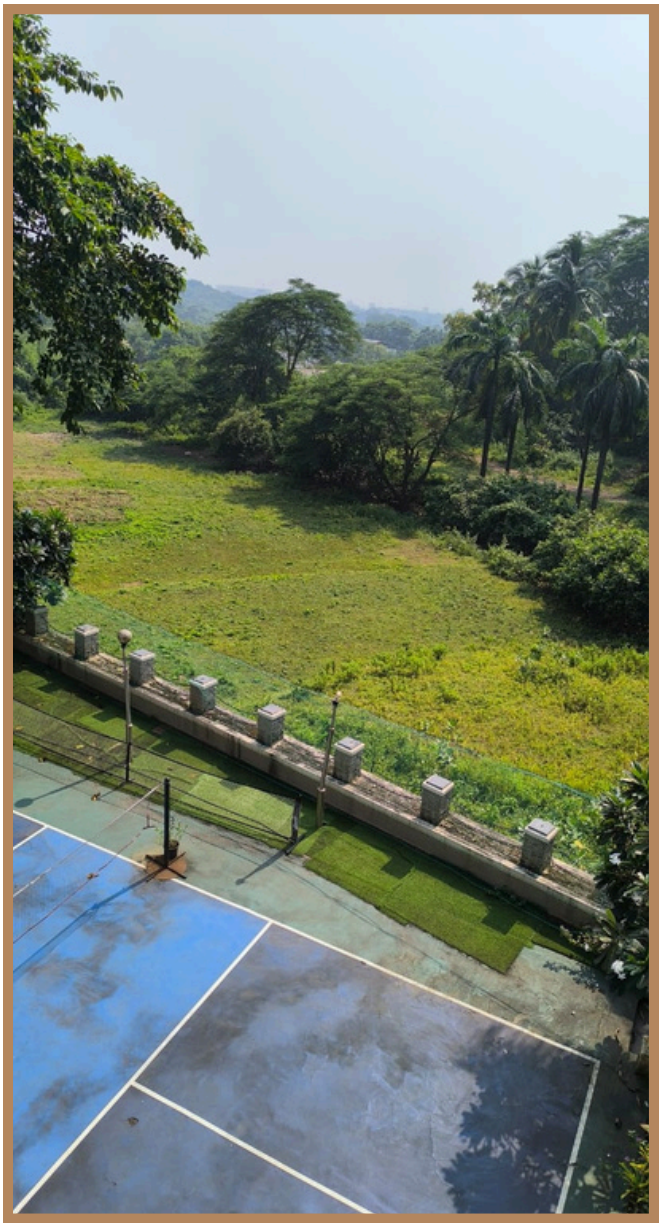
What does recovery look like when it involves not just treatment, but also shared meals, movement, creative activities and learning to navigate everyday life again? A visit to Veda Rehabilitation and Wellness' Mumbai centre offers a glimpse into a different kind of rehabilitation environment.

The word rehab can conjure up images of strict routines, locked doors and a life put on hold. However, at Veda, the atmosphere felt quite different. Residents were sharing meals, taking part in activities and spending time together in a setting that felt closer to a community retreat than a conventional institution.

There were conversations over meals, activities to look forward to and the freedom to spend time together without every moment revolving around treatment. The people I spoke to were warm and easy to talk to, with humour, relationships and lives beyond the circumstances that had brought them there. Several residents told me that their previous experiences of rehabilitation in India had been unpleasant. Their accounts were personal, but they made me think about how much the environment in which someone seeks help can shape their experience of recovery.

Veda is a luxury residential rehabilitation and wellness centre for people seeking support with addiction and certain psychological concerns. The stay typically lasts two to three months, and the programme combines psychiatric care and psychotherapy with activities intended to bring structure, movement, creativity and connection into everyday life.

That approach raises an interesting question – can rehabilitation feel less like an institution and more like a community without losing sight of the clinical care recovery requires? During my visit, I saw what Veda is trying to offer. Understanding how well that approach translates into sustained recovery, however, requires looking beyond the atmosphere to the treatment itself, the people delivering it and the





support available when residents leave.

Recovery beyond the consultation room

According to founder and CEO Manun Thakur, approximately 60% of Veda's residents seek support for alcohol dependence, 30% for substance use, mainly cannabis, and 10% for psychological conditions.

Every prospective resident undergoes a medical and psychiatric assessment before admission. Veda says this covers substance-use history, withdrawal risks, co-occurring mental health concerns, existing medical conditions and current risk. People at risk of severe withdrawal, acute medical instability, or imminent self-harm or violence are referred for medically supervised detoxification or hospital-level care before they can be considered for admission.

Admission is voluntary, and residents are not forced to stay. Veda says the team encourages a conversation if someone wants to leave early, since leaving during detoxification, emotional instability or early recovery can increase the risk of medical complications and relapse. Families may be involved where appropriate.

Each resident is meant to have an individual treatment plan developed by the treating psychiatrist and psychologist, based on their assessment and personal goals. According to Veda, plans may combine medication, psychotherapy, family work and lifestyle-based activities. Psychiatrists oversee assessment, diagnosis, medication and risk monitoring, while psychologists and counsellors provide individual and group / family therapy, including approaches such as CBT, DBT, EMDR and motivational interviewing. The centre says the clinical team reviews each resident's progress weekly, with formal month-end reviews and a family-conference recorded in a 90-Day Clinical Progress Workbook.

Alongside this clinical care, residents can participate in yoga, meditation, weight training, sports, art and dance activities, sound sessions, group meals and social events. Some of the residents experienced mocktail workshops, concerts and barbecues. A few residents had even gone on a motorbike ride in Sikkim. I also overheard discussions about a chaperoned visit to a shooting range.

The intention, as explained during my visit, is to make recovery about more than abstaining from a substance. Residents are encouraged to build routines, manage stress and cravings, find new ways to spend their time and reconnect with enjoyment without substances. The team also says these activities help give shape to the day, particularly for residents who find too little structure difficult.

The social aspect is particularly noticeable. Group meals create regular opportunities to sit together, while activities allow residents to engage without every interaction revolving around their struggles. The setting is relatively rustic rather than hotel-like, which seems fitting for a place where people live for weeks or months.

Residents generally have access to their phones and can continue essential work. Limits are set by the treating team when phone or device use is itself part of the condition being treated, such as gaming or digital dependency. Veda also encourages family visits, which take place between 10 am and 6 pm. These policies reflect an effort to maintain connections with the outside world rather than cutting off residents from it completely as punishment.

The aim is to create a space where people can participate in life while working towards recovery, rather than feel that life has been suspended until treatment is over. Several residents I spoke to described previous facilities as unpleasant, though I could not independently assess their experiences. In a country where stigma can already make seeking help difficult, a setting that allows people to retain some autonomy, maintain relationships and participate in everyday life may make the prospect of treatment less daunting.

But a welcoming environment is only one part of recovery. The qualifications of the professionals delivering care, the quality of individual treatment plans and the role of complementary therapies matter, too.

Veda shared the names and qualifications of its Mumbai psychiatrists and some of its counsellors. However, the information provided about certain complementary-therapy practitioners did not establish specific formal training in the clinical side of these practices. The centre is transparent that these add-on activities are not part of clinical intervention, and Veda does not use a formal outcome measure to assess its effects.

These distinctions are important. Art, movement, yoga and sound sessions may offer opportunities for expression, relaxation and engagement, but participation or enjoyment alone does not establish therapeutic progress. Veda says the core of its treatment is psychiatry and evidence-based psychotherapy, with complementary activities arranged around residents' clinical plans. How consistently this works in practice, and how each practitioner contributes to an individual's treatment,



are questions worth asking.

The story behind Veda

Thakur's route into this work began outside the mental health sector. He was working in business when an accidental visit to a therapist's office, between a coffee and a haircut appointment, led him to experience therapy himself. Although initially sceptical, he returned for further sessions and began to recognise how widespread mental health concerns could be. And, he often spotted a different celebrity in the clinic each time.

Later, while visiting his mother in Delhi during a period of ill health, he learnt that she had been taking medication for depression for ten years without telling the family. She had been reluctant to share this because of the stigma surrounding mental illness and the fear of worrying her loved ones. Thakur later invested in a rehabilitation centre in Pune, where he gained insight into what residents valued about their experience. One detail stayed with him – a resident appreciated being able to receive visitors and access a phone. It helped shape his thinking about the kind of environment he wanted to create.

The decision to establish Veda followed these experiences, conversations with people seeking help and encouragement from his family. The programme evolved over its early years, with its current approach becoming more established from 2024 onwards.

Today, Veda says many clients find the centre through online searches. Thakur explained that stigma can make word-of-mouth referrals difficult, as people may worry about potential employers or future marriage partners learning about their time in rehabilitation or their struggles with addiction. Often, an incident prompts someone or their family to begin researching options online.

Cost is another barrier. Veda's current fees are ₹2.95 lakh per month for a twin-share room and ₹4.95 lakh per month for a private suite, inclusive of accommodation, meals, the clinical team, therapy and wellness programmes. Thakur explained that running a residential centre involves substantial operating costs. Even so, these fees put this kind of programme beyond the reach of many people who might need support.

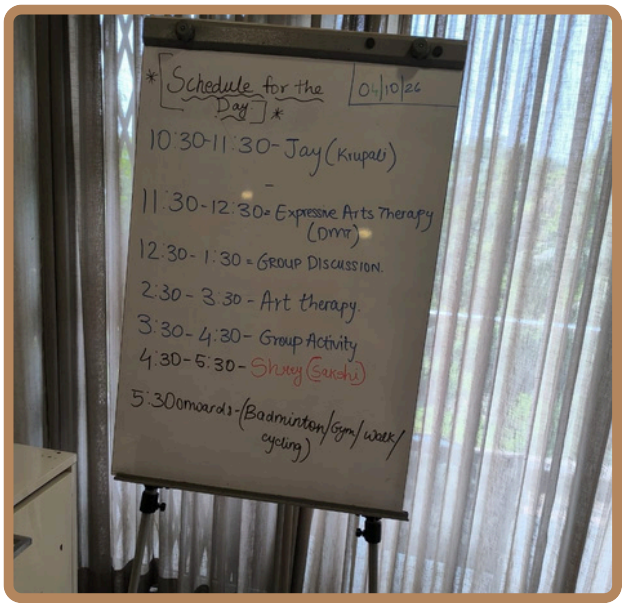
What happens when residents leave?

One of the most significant parts of any residential rehabilitation programme is the transition back to everyday life. The relative predictability of a residential setting can make it easier to establish routines and practise new behaviours, but home brings back familiar pressures, relationships and circumstances.

During my visit, one resident was due to leave the following day. She spoke about feeling nervous because her mother would be away for a few days and she would be returning to an empty home. It was a small but revealing detail – leaving a residential programme can bring its own anxieties, even when someone is ready to go.

Veda says it prepares residents for discharge through a gradual home-exposure process for those who live locally. During the final weeks of the





programme, residents visit home for short periods, with the duration increasing gradually. After each visit, a therapist discusses their experiences and difficulties with them, and the team uses these observations to refine the plan. Families are involved in relapse prevention, boundary-setting and discharge planning where appropriate.

The centre also offers anywhere between two to four post-discharge therapy sessions, depending on the package. Some former residents who live nearby reportedly return for lunch or activities such as pickleball, maintaining a connection with the community.

These are encouraging steps towards making the transition less abrupt. But I was left wondering how much support is available once the structure of residential life falls away. Recovery doesn't necessarily follow a fixed timeline, and the support someone needs after leaving can vary considerably based on the individual, the severity and duration of their addiction, their home environment and the other support available to them.

The length of a residential stay alone cannot tell us whether a programme is appropriate for someone. Two to three months may be a useful period of structured support for some residents, while others may need medically supervised treatment, more intensive or longer-term care, or sustained support in the community. Veda says people at risk of severe withdrawal or other acute concerns are referred elsewhere before admission, but the information available does not establish the range of addiction severity among those who enter the programme or how outcomes vary across residents.

Veda defines success as completion of the programme, stability in mental health and relationships, and sustained engagement with aftercare. It says clinical progress is tracked during the stay through its 90-Day Clinical Progress Workbook.

It was difficult for me to assess how residents fare over the longer term or how effectively the programme responds when recovery becomes more complicated after discharge.

This is an important distinction between the experience of rehabilitation and its longer-term outcomes. A resident may feel supported and make meaningful progress during a stay, but sustaining that progress in the face of familiar pressures can require a different kind of support. Understanding what happens when someone struggles after leaving, including how they can return to care and what ongoing professional support is available, would offer a fuller picture of Veda's approach.

A more human environment, with questions worth asking

Veda's Mumbai centre comprises three adjacent residential houses that together form one centre, with shared therapy, gym and pickleball spaces. The centre describes its model as boutique residential care, with small groups of residents and a near one-to-one caregiver ratio.

During my visit, the people I met seemed comfortable in the space, and the atmosphere felt warm rather than intimidating. There is something valuable about a rehabilitation setting where residents can share meals, try new activities, spend time outdoors and form connections with others who understand some part of their experience. Enso, Veda's emotional support dog, is another presence in the environment at the Mumbai centre.

The centre is attempting to offer an experience that differs from the restrictive settings some residents said they had encountered elsewhere. Dignity, autonomy and community matter in rehab, and a less intimidating environment may make it easier for someone to seek help and engage with treatment.

At the same time, although the centre has described incorporating assessments, treatment plans and clinical reviews, more information about long-term outcomes would help establish how well these processes translate into sustained recovery.

The value of Veda's model is not simply whether rehabilitation can feel less like an institution. It is whether a more humane environment can work in tandem with qualified clinical care, treatment suited to each resident's needs and meaningful continuity of support. My visit offered a glimpse of the community Veda is trying to build. Understanding its longer-term impact will require looking beyond the experience of the stay to what happens when residents return to their lives.

Currently, Veda Rehabilitation and Wellness operates across four locations - Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and Sikkim, extending its approach to residential rehabilitation and wellness across different parts of the country.


WE ALL
LIVE
DIFFERENT
VERSIONS
OF THE
SAME
STORY.

In Conversation with
PARINI SHROFF

Parini Shroff is an author and attorney whose fiction explores the complexities of human relationships with humour, warmth and remarkable insight. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, she reflects on family dynamics, memory, language, the art of understanding others, and the curious ways people find their way to one another. We also delve into her latest novel, Some People, *and the ideas, relationships and everyday misunderstandings that inspired it.*

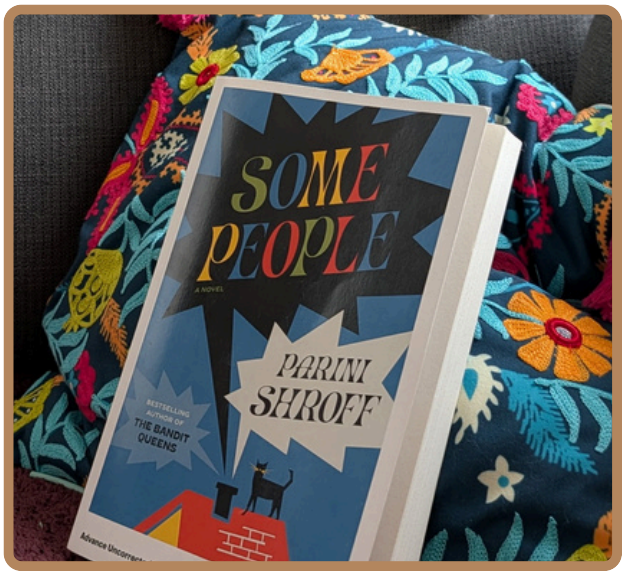
***Some People* brings together two people who have every reason to keep their distance, Malti and her soon-to-be ex-son-in-law, Nathan. What interested you about exploring the relationship between a mother-in-law and son-in-law rather than focusing directly on the couple whose marriage is ending?**

For this novel, I was not particularly interested in the daughter/wife character, Kavya. It may sound cold, but she was always a device to reach the two "strangers" I found compelling and wanted to thrust together even though they'd hate it. Parental and marital relationships alike carry so much fraught history that it felt cleaner to remove the cornerstone of Kavya and let the bricks tumble as Malti and Nathan grapple with each other, facing off and having real conversations that they would've absolutely avoided had Kavya been present to mediate.

Malti and Nathan have very different ideas about what it means to care for someone. Nathan tends to express care through practical action, while Malti often experiences those same gestures as criticism or interference. How did you think about the fine line between care and control as you developed their relationship?

I am not a parent and I don't pretend to grasp that monumental role. Much of my work muses on just how huge of an undertaking it is to be a mother. As a subsect of that, I'm also interested in how, as we change, so do our needs. It's not necessarily easy for





those in our lives to absorb these changes and modify their behavior to give us what we need when we need it. Of course tensions arise! Parents may see us one way for a long while because it's easier for them. The same can be true with spouses and siblings and friends. And yet, we show up, we try, we fail, we try again.

Kavya is physically absent for much of the novel, yet her presence shapes almost every interaction between Malti and Nathan. Both of them are convinced they understand what happened in her marriage, but neither has the complete picture. How interested are you in the gap between what we believe we know about another person and how differently they might tell the same story?

We have all observed and participated in interactions where two people walk away with different perceptions of what just took place. It's honestly amazing people manage as much as they do, given all the ways memory and communication fail us.

And I've noticed from my own relationships that the way I receive a remark does not necessarily align with how it was intended. Is that my failing or the speaker's? Trick question – it doesn't matter, you'll both suffer unless you talk it out. So often it takes an hour of unpacking to get to the heart of what was actually meant or not meant when someone asks, "Did you take out the bins?"

Malti's relationship with language is moving. After decades in the US, she is still negotiating English, cultural expectations, and the feeling that certain parts of her remain inaccessible to others. How did questions of language and translation shape your understanding of her?

The novel explores the various ways people misunderstand each other. Even Nathan and Kavya – who share a first language – aren't on the same page, which has eroded their marriage. Malti is alienated by not being able to fully explain or be herself in her mother tongue. This is exacerbated by her suffering a concussion at the start of the novel, temporarily impeding her communication further.

And this field became an opportunity to move past what people say into what they mean.

The house Malti refuses to leave becomes more than a setting. It holds objects, habits, memories and versions of the past that other people might consider outdated or burdensome. Did writing Some People change the way you think about the things people keep, repair or refuse to replace?

The house is a vehicle to discuss a variety of childhood and memory matters; Nathan and Malti are locked in a time capsule of sorts. As they begin to parse through the artifacts, they find some are far more loaded than others, like hidden mines. They then have to decide whether to let things detonate or stay buried. I hope what readers take away is that there is often a reason folks hold on to objects that offer no visible utility, and this reason can extend beyond mere sentimentality, though that in and of itself is a powerful force. Given this, maybe we can extend more patience to, say, elderly people in our lives who still own seeming "junk."

You've worked as a lawyer alongside writing fiction. Has practising law changed the way you write, particularly your attention to competing accounts, what people leave unsaid, and the gap between what happened and what people believe happened?

I'd flip that premise. I've been writing fiction in some form or another since I was seven, so in terms of identity, I thought of myself as a writer long before I became an attorney – though I published after I practiced law. It was my interest in writing and character nuance that made law feasible, as both are strengths in the field. So trying to parse the writer in me from the lawyer in me is likely fruitless; they've both had hands in my mind's workings, for better or worse.

You've spoken about how challenging endings can be. What are you trying to achieve in an ending that you cannot achieve anywhere else in the novel?

Closure and satisfaction are what made the ending of *The Bandit Queens* difficult; I'd created a fun, highly messy situation and extracting the characters in a way that felt earned but satisfying was easier said than done. *Some People*, as a more character-driven work with no defined antagonists, did not pose those challenges. But each novel's path is different and with the work I'm editing now, it is middle that's now proving challenging!

What has writing fiction changed about the way you pay attention to people in your own life?

I've been writing for as long as I've known how so I don't believe I've ever turned that narrative eye off. Even if I'm between projects, I'm habitually mining my environments for material. If I'm foolish enough to leave on a trip without my notebook, I inevitably return home with a fistful of crumpled airplane napkins scribbled with notes. My fiancé is a patient man who has hit pause on countless television programs so I can jot down notes. It's just a huge part of my identity.


MAY WE
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Thank you for spending time with the fourth issue of our magazine.

Whether it was through a conversation, a new idea, a creative practice, or a book waiting to be discovered, we hope something in these pages stayed with you.

Pen Paper Dreams builds writing spaces for children and adults alike.

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