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**GENDER AND INDIA INTO THE 21ST CENTURY:
POLICY, PARADOXES, AND THE PERSONAL**

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Introduction

If one wants to understand gender changes in India over the past 25 years, the life narratives of the women of my generation would be the best examples. We have seen and experienced the paradox called India. We have contributed to its complexities, while empowering ourselves in the process. We have been struggling to evolve into more responsible citizens and complete human beings.

I am an Indian citizen, a literate woman, a post-graduate, and an independent professional. Just like many other women in India, my life has undergone tremendous political, legal, and social changes over the past 25 years. These formative changes have not been linear; rather, they can be compared to the sides of a Rubik's cube. Any change in one had repercussions on the others.

When the Mandal Commission report granting 27 percent reservation to Other Backward Castes was accepted by the V. P. Singh government in 1991, the resulting alarm of reduced accessibility to government jobs was one of the factors that prompted me to accept a job at a Malayalam newspaper, my first job in media.

Located in Kottayam, I was the first woman sub-editor to be appointed to the editorial of that newspaper in its 108 years of existence. CMS College, the very first college in Kottayam and the second oldest in the country, was established in 1815. Kottayam is hailed as the land of letters because it is also a leading publishing hub, home to the head offices of three newspapers, including the two oldest ones in Malayalam.

One of the factors that made my appointment possible was the impact of economic liberalization that India initiated in early 1990s. Whether or not it was a coincidence, I received the appointment in July 1993, just after India ratified the

constitution of the National Commission For Women and the Convention the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly.

In 1993, I walked alone after dark, for the first time in my life and travelled in auto rickshaws all by myself even after six o'clock at night. Until then, going outside after six o'clock in the evening had been strictly discouraged all my life. I realized soon that no residential hostel for women in Kottayam would allow its guests to check in after seven o'clock in the evening. Likewise, it was next to impossible for a single young woman to rent out a house anywhere in Kottayam or easily check into a hotel. It took me yet another year to check into a hotel all by myself and that was possible only because I had the care of address of my newspaper.

After my appointment, my newspaper recruited more women journalists; there were a few senior women at some of the other newspapers but they were largely unknown to the outside world. The only woman reporter we knew was Leela Menon, a correspondent for the English daily, *The Indian Express*. By 1994, after the launch of the first privately owned television channel that year—which was also the second in India—, the number of women journalists in the media steadily increased.

In 1995, I flew for the first time to a USIS conference. Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve as a Justice in the U.S. Supreme Court, was the chief guest. I stayed in a five star hotel and attended a formal dinner—all first time experiences. The same year, I purchased my first two wheeler, a scooter, with a vehicle loan from my office, and inadvertently became the first woman in Kottayam to ride a scooter in the wee hours of the day!

The purpose of this rather detailed elucidation is not to claim I represent all the women of India. No single woman can represent all the women of India. One can safely surmise that the changes in my life would be representative of a large cross section of women in the vast and rigid “middle class” of Kerala who hold the unique distinction of being modern and traditional at the same time. These women were born and brought up in a state hailed as the model state of India with the lowest infant mortality rate, lowest population growth, highest literacy, and highest life expectancy.

To be sure, there are hundreds more liberated women in many parts of India who overcame the barriers of gender and were liberated in every sense of the term. Sadly, millions of women are yet to travel alone, participate in a strike, or even attend a school. Many of these women are condemned to give birth every single year in the hope of a male child. And even today, millions of women throughout India, have to wait until after dark to answer the call of nature. Many have no concept of safe sanitation or, even worse, have to sleep on the pavement with a stick next to them to drive away the stray dogs as well as potential rapists.

The uniqueness of India shines forth in its complexities and contradictions. The past twenty five years have been bustling with changes. These initial political and legal sparks of change eventually roared into flames over the past five years and have played a critical role in changing the gender parity in India.

1. The Political Is Personal

When I was an undergraduate student in 1990, the most talked about issues were the Panchayati Raj Bill and the Mandal Commission Recommendations. At that time, I had no idea of the deep-rooted implications of both, except a reduced

accessibility to government jobs for people like me who belonged to the economically and socially upper caste.

In Kerala, I was the elder daughter of highly educated and well employed parents. I was educated and aware of women's rights and human rights. However, all of my awareness was akin to a pair of well-worn shoes that had to be removed before entering our own home, a place of worship, or the office of an authority figure.

Everything about my life was decided by my father: my college, my dress, my freedom, my future, my friends. There was no space for negotiation. He used to remind us every now and then that women should be pious, gentle, obedient, simple, and chaste. It triggered for me a subversive double life—I'd heard of women empowerment from different sources even while my daily living was being routinely suppressed and controlled. Women could read about laws favoring women but had to silently endure extreme domestic violence.

Although my mother was educated, employed, and empowered, she waited for her two daughters to grow up before she left that terrible oppression, relying on our validation to ignore the societal dictums. It took a lot of strength for my sister and I to defy the unforgiving middle class society we were living in and move out to live by ourselves.

There was great pressure to "reunite" with my father, but each reunion ended in more prolonged separation. It was soon after one such reunion that I stood up for myself and demanded "permission" to join an MA course in Communicative English in Tamil Nadu. It was only because my mother left my father once again that I could pursue journalism and join a newspaper where we had to work evening shifts year round. Neither education nor employment could help a woman like my mother until

she made the decision to defy the rules of the society which decree a good woman should be ready to suffer all sorts of violence. Even today, a woman's strength to suffer is appreciated while her strength to walk away from abuse is deplored.

The Great Divide

It's no coincidence that these events occurred in my life during the first decade of the twenty-five years that were eventful to India's empowerment of women. It was the period that decided the course and character of my life, and was also the decade that demolished and shattered my idea and dream of India as a nation.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution were the epicenter of the upheavals in the later decades. They brought in constitutional status for local body governance in rural and urban India and mandated reservation of one-third seats for women and scheduled castes and tribes—that not only members, but one-third of office bearers have to be women. This statutory reservation for women was meant as an opportunity for the formal involvement of women in the development-through-political process at the grass roots level, thereby enabling them to influence decisions in the local governments. The tabling of the Mandal Commission Report in Parliament in 1989, the Muslim separatist groups beginning their campaign of violence in Kashmir in 1990, followed by L. K. Advani's Ram Rath Yathra all now appear to be aftershocks of the "give power back to people" quake. As a result of this, two seismic waves—politics of social justice based on caste and politics of religion based on Hindu nationalism, which was marked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, triggering widespread Hindu-Muslim violence—were set into motion.

A number of scholars including Rajiv Bhargava believed that the demolition of the mosque was in a way not just the demolition of a structure but the demolition of the discourse of secularism that existed in India. I believe it reignited the hostility between the two communities. I still remember how surprising it was to spot a group of purdah-clad young women in the neighborhood for the first time in 1994. The Muslim women in Kerala were dressed in saris and blouses like the rest of us until then. The older women used to cover their heads but younger women would seldom follow the practice.

The second boom of Gulf migration had started by then. Unlike the first boom which occurred in 1970s, the second boom was more palpable. It coincided with the time of economic liberalization, globalization, and the Babri Masjid demolition. India's rate of growth had become the eleventh fastest in the world. Just as the Ambassador cars and taxis and Maruti 800 cars gave way to bigger cars, radicalization of religions also had become noticeable.

1996: A Landmark

In addition to getting married in 1996, I consider that year significant for two reasons. One, of course, was the emergence of the BJP as the single-largest party in the Lok Sabha. The second was the Suryanelli case, in which a 16-year-old girl was trafficked for 40 days and raped by 42 men—the first major sex racket case to shake Kerala. I consider it a pivotal point in my own life as a journalist, a writer, and a woman.

While my marriage had been of my choice, I had no say in the way it was conducted. I had to compromise for the sake of my younger sister and agree to a

traditional wedding. Truthfully, by then, I was also yearning to be accepted as a part of the mighty and overbearing middle-class.

The society, or the group of people I had chosen to be with professionally, consisted of journalists. And I had chosen that particular society out of my desire to live as per my ideals—those that were shaped by reading what they wrote about. I soon realized that the world of journalism was no different or better than the reality outside. Malayalam print journalism was a man's world.

Looking back, I understand how we all got invariably sucked into the whirl pool of “being appreciated and fitting in.” It was caused by the middle class complex, which was getting stronger day by day. The chance to get it right, to be accepted for what one truly was, for me, came down to a sensational revelation. That was the moment I rebelled, decided to fight back, to answer back, to question, and to ridicule. I was determined to write better than anyone instead of craving for appreciation and acceptance, although it was not easy to be a lone, hated woman in a newsroom full of men (especially when you are fresh from college and presumed that all the journalists were enlightened persons and true champions of the human rights that they preach in the stories). It was a do or die situation and I was the first woman on the editorial team. I had to live up to the popular image about women in that position. I also had to live up to the image I had about myself as a professional.

I wanted to yell for the world to judge me based on my professional competence and not on my gender. I still remember what my News Editor told me on my final day at the paper: “You are the kind of woman I would never allow anyone in my family to marry. Your arrogance, egotism, and obstinacy are unbearable. But as a professional, you are the best of all men and women I have seen in my service.” I had to be a failure as a “potential partner” to be considered successful as a professional. Or in other

words, one shouldn't be "family material" if one wants to be successful. "Family material" would imply being overly pleasing, apologetic, subservient, and adjusting to the whole world.

I was a part of the election desk which handled the first Panchayati Raj elections in Kerala in which 33 percent of the seats were reserved for women in 1996. Almost all politicians and mainstream journalists were sceptical of the idea of reserving so many seats to women, and stories were circulated to prove how foolish this idea was.

Nonetheless, this period witnessed the rise of three strong women leaders—Jayalalithaa, Mamata Banerjee, and Mayawati—and the implementation of 33.33 percent reservation to women in the local governance. In 2007, India elected its first woman President. On August 27, 2009 the Indian Cabinet approved a proposal for enhancing the reservation of directly elected seats for women from one-third to 50 percent in all the tiers through an amendment of Article 243(D) (3) of the Constitution. Rajasthan, Kerala, and Gujarat had already implemented it during their panchayat general election of 2010. Tripura not only amended its own panchayat act to this effect, but also brought its urban local bodies within this ambit through the Tripura Municipal (fourth amendment) bill.

Today, except for Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Goa and Jammu, and Kashmir, and the five Northeastern states of Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh all other states have implemented 50 percent reservation for women in the local bodies.

So, after twenty years of women's participation in governance, what is the situation? In Kerala, the women panchayat presidents have proved their mettle. In Karnataka, in the first elections, no men filed nominations protesting the reservations

which resulted in all women panchayats. The women, illiterate or poorly literate women, ruled their panchayats well and proved they could be good administrators.

According to the survey of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj of the Government of India, an increased participation of women is observed in the the Gram Sabha meetings where the president is a woman. The expenditure on the counts of drinking water, housing, and social welfare programs are comparatively higher in panchayats where the pradhans are women. This improves the living quality of the women in the wards. Women Pradhans have performed better than their male counterparts in the areas of road construction, upkeep of drinking water facilities, and administering government loan schemes. For example, in Haryana, the women have brought forth significant changes such as building houses for the poor, installing water pumps, and campaigning against female feticide.

Women-headed panchayats are found to be more effective in curtailing social evils like child marriage, indiscriminate sale of liquor, and witch-hunting. In Tamil Nadu, women pradhans run campaigns against child marriage and take measures to curtail girls' drop out rates.

The Largest Women Movement in Asia

In Kerala, Kudumbashree, the women empowerment and poverty eradication program, framed and enforced by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala has assumed large dimensions by bringing together about 4.3 million women, making it the largest women's movement in Asia. Kudumbashree perceives poverty not just as the deprivation of money, but also as the deprivation of basic rights.

Kudumbashree has a long history involving a number of struggles against the mindset that opposed the establishment of a program dedicated fundamentally to women. Its members are women who are simultaneously burdened with domestic work. Lack of security is another issue. Women members and presidents find it extremely hazardous to visit remote areas at odd hours. Lack of awareness about government programs and limited exposure to formal education are some of the critical hurdles they have to overcome. These factors pose as barriers to Kudumbashree's development as most of the correspondences, rules, and regulations are in English. Additionally, surveys conducted to determine Kudumbashree's effectiveness showed that women members faced difficulty in asserting themselves. The fact that the majority of women enter politics through reservation and kinship arrangement only accentuates this problem. Although women are welcomed to shoulder responsibilities, they rarely remain in politics because of the rotational reservation. Therefore, a very small percentage of first-time women members/pradhans get elected for the second or third time. The male members who had been ruling these wards used to field their women relatives.—In states like UP, people are greeted by pictures of Pradhan-Pathi (Husband of the President) on big Flux boards and cut-outs.

Kudumbashree has mobilized a sum of Rs. 2,073 crores as thrift and disbursed loans amounting to Rs.8539.55 crores to the members of Neighbourhood Groups. It runs 25,050 individual enterprises and 1,757 group (with a minimum of 5-10 members) enterprises of women developed in urban areas. It manages 3,516 individual enterprises and 10,620 group (with a minimum of 5-10 members) enterprises of poor women formed in rural areas. It has brought together about 201,650 women cultivators in 47,611 groups for collective farming. It also manages

376 group enterprises and 319 individual enterprises started under the Special Employment Programme (Yuvashree). The Ashraya-Destitute identification and Rehabilitation Project implemented in 745 Local Self Governments as a part of this identified about 58,389 destitutes. There are 44,586 houses constructed under the Bhavanashree housing loan scheme (without subsidy) for the poor in rural areas. It has formed 248 entrepreneur groups (Thelima) for the municipal solid waste management in urban areas. It has set up 55 special schools called Buds for physically and mentally challenged children under the leadership of the Local Self Government. It also formed 54,000 Balasabhas (Children's) Neighbourhood Groups with 4.25 lakh children in urban and rural areas. In 2012, Kudumbashree was recognized as a National Resource Organisation (NRO) by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India, under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)—not without criticism, as it is aimed at poverty eradication rather than empowerment of women. But in states like UP and Bihar, even this is not possible. Women in many North Indian states still believe they need to work only when the husband fails to earn; an issue of prestige, rather than the need to empower, that exists even today.

The success of the Kudumbashree program has encouraged other states to implement it. These women, representing 4.3 million families, are under the community-based organizations (CBOs) consisting of 2.59 lakh Neighbourhood Groups (NHG), 19,773 Area Development Societies (ADSs) and 1,072 Community Development Societies (CDSs)—rural and urban.

The Missing

Still, India is a big paradox, as proven by what happened in Nagaland in the beginning of 2017. The civic polls in Nagaland were delayed for over ten years. Nagaland Mothers Association filed a written petition in 2011 challenging the State government's refusal to hold municipal elections in Gauhati High Court. Four months later, a single-judge Kohima bench of the court upheld the Naga women's petition and directed the government to hold elections to municipal councils and town councils on or before January 20, 2012. The Nagaland government filed an appeal claiming that such an action "would upset the peace" in the state before a Division Bench of the Gauhati High Court, and got the hold on the previous ruling. On September 22, 2012, the Nagaland State Assembly adopted a resolution rejecting the women's reservation on the grounds that it infringes on the social and customary practices of the Nagas, which Article 371(A) safeguards.

The government announced panchayat elections in December 2016, which various tribal bodies, including Naga Hoho, the apex organization of all major tribes, opposed. On January 28, 2012, violence erupted in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland in opposition to granting 33 percent reservation for women, arguing that it would be against the Naga customary laws and tradition as protected under Article 371(A) of the Constitution of India. Different organizations called twelve hour bandhs in different districts. It was like all the men were coming against the women. Two people died and several got injured in the violence. Mobs set fire to the Kohima Municipal Council building on February 2, 2012. The fire spread and damaged the adjoining transport authority office along with private buildings, resulting in the indefinite postponing of the elections.

In short, as far as the struggle for gender equality is concerned, the challenges are manifold for a democracy as big and as diverse as India. Additionally, consider the

gloomy picture portrayed by the 2011 Census when it comes to the number of women present in India: 940 females for every 1,000 males. The rest are “missing.”

As Simone de Beauvoir (who has lived in another part of the world) said, “The point is not for women simply to take power out of men’s hands, since that wouldn’t change anything about the world. It’s a question precisely of destroying that notion of power.”

2. Law of the Unjust

Soon after the birth of my daughter in 1997, I was called for an interview at of the private television channels looking for an experienced journalist. I was reluctant to leave print media, but at the same time, I was yearning for a change.

After the job interview—which was more of a chat—I was asked to leave my resume and was casually informed by a senior channel professional that if I was vying for a top job, it might antagonize the two male editors who had been part of their channel from the inception. Instead, they asked if I would consider joining at the same designation of my previous job. I refused outright, but not because of the potentially misogynistic work atmosphere. In my view, my resume did not showcase any outstanding achievements at that juncture.

I felt ashamed of myself. I had no serious by-line stories, no investigative stories, no big reporting—even though I was working relentlessly. To borrow from the Bible, “I was like a bird flying through the air, leaving no proof of its passing.” I’d never been assigned a single election coverage, nor asked to report on any big event. All those years, I was waiting for an invitation to report on a great story.

I strongly believe I was not considered because I was a woman. There were no women photo journalists in any of the newspapers in Malayalam (including mine). It was profitable for the organization to assign a male reporter with a male photographer to report events. It was not socially acceptable to send a male-female pair; Kerala is still very parochial regarding such interactions. You could easily be branded as immoral for pillion-riding a colleague's bike or staying at a male colleague's house (even if his wife and children were at home).

I was disturbed to the core and continued to be depressed for days. I told my husband I must write a good report to satisfy myself. Thus, I did my first study on the women laborers of Kerala, without anyone assigning me the task.

I did the story by visiting different parts of the state on my weekly holiday. My husband would drive me to nearby districts and we would take our baby daughter along, waiting in the car as I interviewed the laborers. Once, after returning from interviewing a female coir worker, I returned to our 1975 Premier Padmini car—which used to break down every time we went on a trip—to find my daughter sleeping on my husband's chest, and he, himself, dozing off inside the vehicle.

That story earned me my first national level award: the PUCL award for Human Rights Journalism in 1998. It was a great moment for me. I was convinced that I was still good, that I could still dream. After that, I did many such assignments, one of which was a series on the plight of women living in villages torn by political violence.

The Visakha Guidelines

In 2000, I was summoned by my Chief News Editor to do an investigative report about the sexual harassment women faced in Kerala in light of the Supreme

Court's issuance of the Visakha Guidelines on the sexual harassment of women in the work place. He said that a leader page series was being considered.

I was not whole-heartedly happy to take up this assignment for two reasons: one, my dream was to become a great political reporter since there were no women political reporters in Malayalam at that time; I wanted to compete with men to prove my mettle in reporting and analyzing politics. I wanted to report war, earthquakes, landslides, and terrorism and prove to the Malayalis that given a chance, women also can do it all. Two, reporting on women's issues appeared trivial, especially since women and children issues were seen as a reservation quota for women journalists all over India. I was apprehensive that I would get branded as a reporter who only covered women-related stories.

However, I couldn't refuse the assignment. To someone tied to their desk as I was, any such opportunity was a great relief. I went to the library completely unenthusiastic and started reading about the Visakha Guidelines.

I found out that the Visakha Guidelines are the directives from the Supreme Court issued as a result of a Public Interest Litigation petition by a women's organization called Visakha in Rajasthan. And I found out that they had petitioned in fury over the Rajasthan District Court's acquittal of all five accused in a heinous gang rape case.

The victim was a lower-caste woman working as a grassroots social worker against child marriage, and was employed under the Women Development Program run by the Rajasthan government. In 1992, she reported a one-year-old child's marriage, infuriating the upper caste community that had conducted the ceremony.

While working with her husband in their farmland, five men attacked her. They brutally beat up her husband and raped her. The traumatized woman informed the block level worker who took the couple to the local police station to file a complaint. The police were indifferent to the victim and asked her to hand over the dress she was wearing. She had to cover herself with her husband's blood-stained turban on the walk back home.

When she was sent to the Primary health center for a medical examination, the male doctor refused to examine her. There was no woman doctor around. She was referred to a hospital in Jaipur, but the doctor wrote in his referral letter that "she was being sent for a test to confirm her age." The doctors in Jaipur refused to conduct any medical test without orders from the Magistrate, who refused as it was past working hours.

Finally, the medical examination was done 52 hours after the incident took place, even though it is mandatory to conduct such a medical test within 24 hours. When the incident became public, she was ostracized by the villagers and called a blatant liar. The case was tried in the district court, where the judges were changed five times and the sixth judge acquitted all the accused.

The Judge concluded the following:

1. The village head cannot rape.
2. Men of different castes cannot participate in gang rape.
3. Elder men of 60-70 years cannot rape.
4. A man cannot rape in front of a relative—this was in reference to two of the men, an uncle and nephew

5. A member of a higher caste cannot rape a lower caste woman because of reasons of purity.

Above all, the observation in the verdict given by Judge Jagpal Singh was that “It isn’t possible in Indian culture that a man who has taken a vow to protect his wife, in front of the holy fire, just stands and watches his wife being raped, when only two men almost twice his age are holding him.” It was the first time in the history of rape cases in India, that a woman was coming forward to say publicly that she was raped and that the shame was not on her, but on the accused. I could visualize this poor woman running from pillar to post for justice.

While reading it, I couldn’t help noticing the similarities in the insensitive behavior of the police in a similar case in Kerala in 1996 that is as infamous as the Suryanelli case.

The victim of the Suryanelli case is known to all Malayalis as the Suryanelli girl. She was a ninth standard student when she left home, lured by a bus conductor who handed over her to a sex racket run by a lawyer. The man raped her and sold her to 42 men who raped her continuously for 40 days.

On January 16, 1996, the girl went missing. Her father frantically registered a complaint at the local police station, but the police told him that an old jeep had gone missing in the area and its recovery was their priority. When her father came to know about the bus conductor, he shared the information with the police. Although the police took the bus conductor into custody, they let him go without questioning. Had the police interrogated him, they could have rescued the child immediately. Instead, the child returned like a walking corpse on February 26, 1996.

When the child's father registered a fresh complaint, the police advised him to withdraw it, warning him that it would bring great shame on his family. But the girl's parents were determined that no other child should face such horror again. The next day, the police called the child to the police station to record her statement. The news leaked fast. Large crowds gathered to see the girl "who enjoyed it with 42 men." The ravaged child and her father were forced to wait outside on the verandah for hours in front of the lascivious eyes of a perverted crowd.

When she was sent for a medical examination, the crowd followed her. The gynecologist who conducted the exam recorded "Cuts and bruises all over the body. Bite marks and festering wounds visible. The injuries in her private parts have become severely infected. They were so bad that pus and blood spurted at a mere touch. The severe infections have affected the uterus and she will never be able to bear a child. Bodily fluids have collected to cause swelling all over. Her throat was festering."

It was discovered that she was raped 67 times by 47 people and transported over 3,000 kilometers in 40 days. When she named a prominent Congress party MP, the case became politicized.

The Suryanelli case was the first case of child sexual trafficking reported in Kerala. To be sure, that does not mean there had been no such prior incidents. But it was the first time such a crime was reported, and the first time a simple middle class family came forward risking their social honor and dignity, and risking their elder daughter's future to tell the world what kind of society they were living in.

Once my research progressed, I was disturbed beyond words. I started interviewing women from different parts of the state. Each woman I met had a shocking story to share, further exposing me to the horrific evils of many men. I began

to feel paranoid about men and their mental make up, and became convinced that the real challenge of a journalist was not in reporting scoops, but in forcing change within the inner workings of society. There was only one way: keep on telling them that they needed to change their ways and not stop until the change was all-encompassing. To provide a metaphorical example, imagine people standing on a steep cliff top with another cliff ahead, separated by a gorge. The people are supposed to leap from one cliff top to the next. Invariably, some may fall into the gorge, while some may reach the other cliff top successfully. The number of people who've jumped to the other side increases slowly but steadily. These are the young ones.

That assignment gave me a sense of direction. After that, I never wanted to be known as a political reporter. I never wanted to report "big events." All I wanted was to report on women and children. I realized that it was the greatest political activity to which one could participate, and I am happy that I could reach out to readers in a very powerful manner. Soon thereafter, I was recognized by my by-line and remembered for my stories on women.

I believe that journalism is not about news. It is all about life. If it cannot change the lives of the poorest of the poor, it is meaningless. If it cannot empower the weakest of the weak, it is useless.

The Era of Violence

2002-2012 was earmarked by multitudes of violence. Major terrorist attacks, communal riots, and several incidents of violence towards women and children occurred during this period. There was a suicide squad attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. Communal bloodsheds broke out after 59 Hindu pilgrims

returning from Ayodhya were killed in a train fire in Godhra, Gujarat in 2002. In the violence that ensued, more than 1,000 people, mainly Muslims, were killed. A government investigation in 2005 found out that “Godhra” had been an accident. And from 2005—after the surprise victory of the Congress in the General Elections—the country witnessed at least one major terrorist attack every year. In 2007, a Maoist attack killed more than 50 policemen in Chhattisgarh. In 2008, almost 200 people were killed and hundreds were injured in a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Mumbai. But considering the number of murders in India every year, the death toll in such clashes were fewer. In the international scene, India is second only to Brazil in the number of annual homicides.

According to the Indian Penal Code, there was a steep 69 percent increase in crimes against women in 2012 (186,033) compared to 2002 (109,784) . Over this decade, rapes increased by 52 percent—24,923 in 2012 compared to 16,373 in 2002. At the same time, kidnapping and abduction of women increased by 163 percent—38,262 cases in 2012 compared to 14,506 cases in 2002.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, 327,394 cases were reported in 2015 alone, including 34,651 cases of rape, 4,437 cases of attempted rape, 59,277 kidnapping and abductions, 7,634 dowry deaths, and a whopping 113,403 cases of domestic cruelty. It’s important to keep in mind that the number of unreported or unrecorded cases are likely to be many times these figures.

In the courts, the outcomes of these cases were not favorable for the victims. In Kerala alone, less than 5 percent of crimes against women result in convictions. For example, even in the Suryanelli case, the trial court awarded jail terms to 35 of the accused, but all except one were acquitted by the High Court in 2005. When the prosecution appealed to the Supreme Court, the High Court was asked to look afresh

at the case. Subsequently, 24 persons were convicted, 16 of whom appealed to the Supreme Court soon thereafter. The Supreme Court has issued notices to the Kerala government and the petitions are pending. Meanwhile, one of the judges who looked into the case in 2005, remarked off the record that the girl was a “child prostitute”, which was aired by a television channel.

In a highly discussed case in August 2011, the police busted a sex racket—allegedly run by the only woman ever to be convicted under the goonda case in Kerala—and rescued a minor girl. The girl alleged that her parents had sold her to the woman criminal for Rs 100,000 and that she was exploited by at least 200 people in several places in and outside Kerala. Police registered 26 cases and identified about 80 people, of whom 72 were arrested. Charge sheets were filed in nine cases. The trial is pending.

In 2009, a schoolgirl in Paravur in Ernakulam was raped by her father, who then presented her to local politicians, retired professionals, bureaucrats, and film professionals. Over 18 months, she was allegedly abused by more than 200 people. Police identified 130 accused and registered 52 cases. A trial court has convicted some of them, however the endless process of judicial appeals and further probes continues.

Another major problem has been harassment of women at their work places. According to the Crime Records Bureau, there has been a 51 percent increase in cases relating to harassment at the workplace in 2015 compared to 2014. In 2017, 70 percent of harassment was not reported at all. In 1998, there were some very serious cases reported under this category. One was a case filed by a woman IAS officer, then serving as transport secretary, against the transport minister. Even in this high profile case, he was acquitted.

The Major Laws

Ironically, if 2002-12 was the period that saw a steep increase in gender crimes, this decade also witnessed the Indian Parliament's passing of substantial women's rights laws.

In 2005, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was passed. In 2006, the government introduced The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. The Criminal Law Amendment Act, as well as The Sexual Harassment At Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, And Redressal) Acts were passed in 2013. In 2014, the Supreme Court recognized transgender persons as the third gender.

To highlight the inherent paradoxes in the judicial system, it is worth mentioning that in 2009, the Delhi High Court ruled homosexual intercourse between consenting adults as not criminal. It thus put an end to a draconian colonial law prevalent for about 150 years. The Supreme Court, however, reversed it in 2013, declaring that the Parliament and not the courts must resolve the issue.

Many anomalies still exist in vast areas of women and children's rights. For example, in the case of Hindus, the property of a woman who dies without a will is handled differently from that of a man. In the absence of a spouse and children, the husband's heirs inherit the woman's estate and not her relatives.

Although there is a Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, the marriage of a one-year-old or ten-year-old is valid even today! The law only "prevents" the marriages of children; it does not render them illegal once they have taken place. According to the UN, this is one of the main reasons why the custom still flourishes in rural areas. The married children have the right to declare them void, but there are different norms for

women and men. Women can call off the marriage after they turn 20 by approaching a court of law; and men, after they turn 21.

Marital rape is still decriminalized in India. Another misogynistic law involves the rape of a separated wife, which carries a lesser punishment than the rape of any other woman. Forced sexual intercourse with a separated wife is punishable by two to seven years of imprisonment, while the prison sentence for raping any other woman ranges from seven years to life.

For men, the minimum age for marriage is 21. For women, it is 18, which clearly endorses the patriarchal mindset—one which believes a wife should always be younger than the man.

As per the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, women are still not equal guardians of their children. Fathers are “natural guardians” of their children, although custody of children below five years of age is ordinarily awarded to mothers.

The most interesting law is the Goa Law on polygamy, which recognizes the second marriage of a “Gentile Hindu” man of Goa if his previous wife does not have any children before the age of 25 or if she does not have a male child by 30.

Through these laws, India retains its paradoxes.

What Happens to the Victims?

The notorious Nirbhaya incident occurred in December 2012. A young woman boarded a bus with her boyfriend at night and were the lone passengers aside from the bus crew. The crew questioned the woman as to what she was doing at midnight before knocking her boyfriend unconscious with an iron pole. They dragged the woman to the

rear end of the bus and raped her while the driver continued driving. After a monstrous assault, she was thrown out of the bus critically injured. Medical reports revealed that her abdomen, intestines, and genitals were mutilated due to the assault, including the use of a wheel jack handle to penetrate her body. She died after thirteen days in hospital. Thousands of young men and women thronged the streets with placards reading “Say no to rape.” It forced the government to quickly constitute a judicial committee which suggested amendments to criminal law to deal with rape cases more strictly. The Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed in April 2013.

But what happened to the Rajasthan social worker whose rape initiated the steps to curb harassment in the work place? It has been 25 years since she was assaulted and she is still living in the same village. Her rapists live there too—and they are still unpunished; the appeal against the district court judgment is pending before the High Court of Rajasthan. Only one judicial hearing has occurred in all these years. The woman is still boycotted by her society. The then-Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao had honored her and awarded her Rs 25,000 for her courage. She reportedly told him, “All I want is justice.” When the accused offered money to withdraw the case, she told them, “I don't want money. Give me back my honor by admitting that you raped me.”

And what happened to the Suryanelli girl? She lives with her elderly parents, with no social life at all. Nobody visits them and the family is not welcome anywhere. They could not even attend their own parents' funerals—the ultimate example of disgraceful, repellent victim-shaming practiced by society.

Even so, as a woman who has lived all her life in India, I feel that we have come a long way over the past 25 years. Not every woman and child has managed to traverse that distance, but we have managed to emerge into a comparatively enlightened

world—I was especially encouraged to witness young men taking to the streets demanding women’s rights after the Nirbhaya incident.

In November 2013, when a powerful magazine’s much-feted Editor-in-Chief was accused of attempting to rape his employee, he sent her an email. In poetic language, he asked her “to forgive and forget it,” and said he would also apologize to her mother and boyfriend if she so wished. The young girl, supposedly a close friend of his own daughter, replied that “Unfortunately, your desire to apologize to [my boyfriend] only reeks of your own patriarchal notion that men own and possess female bodies, and that since you violated what you recognize as his ‘property,’ you are in some way accountable to him. The only people you owe an apology to are your employees at the magazine, for desecrating their faith and belief in you. Please do not attempt any further personal correspondence with me—you lost that privilege when you violated my trust and body.” I felt immensely proud of the young woman and her generation.

Recently, a leading actress in Kerala was abducted and subjected to a planned sexual assault in a moving car in the middle of the city. Bravely, she came forward to report the perpetrators. She also resumed acting in a week’s time. Upon hearing her story, I felt the same pride. She refused to be a victim and took charge of her life.

I felt proud of the women in the Malayalam Cinema who, for the first time in history, dared to organize a Women’s Collective in Cinema to support the victim and fight for women’s rights. And I felt proud when our police arrested a powerful male star for the conspiring in the abduction and assault.

But at the same time, male actors thronged the prison offering the perpetrators their full-fledged support. Elected legislators questioned “how a raped woman could

resume acting in two days' time." A hero's welcome was accorded to the accused upon their release from jail on a conditional bail. And a young adult educated woman named Hadiya is sent to her parents and locked up after converting into Islam and marrying a Muslim man.

I have already read a statement endorsed by the feminist organizations and individuals:

"As women and women's groups with a long history of working on issues of gender justice and with survivors of sexual violence, we are deeply disturbed by the 13th September 2017 bail order of the Punjab and Haryana High Court (HC) which cited the victim's 'experimentation in sexual encounters,' 'promiscuous attitude,' and 'voyeuristic mind' as part of its legal reasoning for granting bail to three men convicted in the Jindal Law School gang rape case. In so doing, the Punjab and Haryana HC has strengthened the dangerously patriarchal notion that rape is not rape when the woman is 'promiscuous,' and that 'promiscuous' women invite rape since their 'promiscuity' can be read as consent. It also stands in clear violation of the Indian Evidence Act that specifically prohibits referencing the victim's sexual history or character in adjudication of cases of sexual assault."

Another equally disturbing instance is the September 25, 2017 verdict by the Delhi HC, which overturned the Trial Court conviction of Mahmood Farooqui for rape. This verdict takes the legal and social understanding of consent back several decades by claiming that "instances of a woman's behaviour are not unknown that a feeble 'No' may mean 'Yes'." This verdict also formulates different legal standards required for deciphering consent in cases involving "conservative" women and those involving "intellectually/academically proficient" women for whom "equality is a buzzword." It seems that for the Delhi HC, it is the woman's character (her being conservative or

modern, educated or illiterate), not the man's failure to respect a NO, which carries weight in deciding an appeal against a rape conviction.

It must be emphasized that throughout the trial, the defense had maintained and presented evidence to show that no sexual act took place on that day, and that the complainant was not truthful. The HC confirmed the Trial Court's finding that the complainant's testimony was honest and credible and found her to be a "sterling witness." However the HC acquitted the accused, arguing that he probably did not understand the "No" because sometimes, due to the "gender binary," women's "No's" may be "feeble." Such reasoning also disregards the fact that the complainant in this case was never cross-examined on her description of rape, or whether her "No" was misunderstood as a "Yes," and neither did the accused ever state that he mistakenly assumed consent."

The verdict sets a dangerous precedent both legally and socially. Legally, it opens the door for every man accused of rape to claim that he had mistakenly read the woman's "No" as a "Yes." It weakens the principle upheld by the 2013 amendment in the rape law that consent for sexual activity is not a woman's default setting; that nothing less than clear "Yes" on the part of the woman can count as consent; and that the mere absence of a "No" does not mean "Yes." It sets an unfair and impossible burden on the victim-complainant whereby she must not only prove she did not consent, but also that her lack of consent was not misunderstood as consent by the accused.

Moreover, the verdict reaffirms the entrenched cultural practice of ignoring a woman's "No" and deliberately assuming that it actually means "Yes." It sends out the message that the responsibility for understanding and respecting a "No" does not lie with men; rather that the onus is on women to make sure their "No" is understood. It

sends out the message that even if a woman fears for her life, she must ensure she sustains obvious physical injuries so that her violation is recognized as rape. It sends out the message that even when a woman has categorically communicated a lack of consent, the Judiciary is free to displace this with its own assumptions of how women actually behave. It sends out the message that a woman who asserts her sexual autonomy will either be told that when she said “No” she actually meant “Yes” and that if she ever says “Yes” to sex she should be prepared for her future “No’s” to be disregarded, both by the perpetrator as well as the legal system.

These verdicts come at a time when there is an escalation of the backlash against any effort to displace the entrenched prejudice and bias which regulates women’s access to justice. They must also be understood in the context of the overt and covert social backlash against women laying claim to their citizenship, whether in terms of access to public spaces, education, the right to redressal for violence, equal opportunities at the workplace, or to exercise their choice in intimate relationships, marriage, and religious practice.

I am struck by the absolute irony of it all! Are we two steps ahead or a thousand steps back from where we started?

Though I had written articles about the Suryanelli victim at different stages of her case, and one of my earliest short stories was inspired by this incident, I had lost track of her after I quit journalism. In 2013, I read an interview of her when a former HC judge (who had acquitted all 35 accused in her case) remarked that the victim was a child prostitute and that child prostitution was not rape. I was in tears when I heard her speaking about her failing health, her constant headaches, and how she was ostracized by our society. Then she said that she was reading a lot, and was reading *Aaraachar*—my book—the original title of *Hangwoman*.

I felt a pang of pain. I was laughing, yet crying. I realized that the most important decision of my life had been to write about women and their issues.

In the world we live in, there is nothing more political than that.

3. Social Is Spatial

In America, my friends often ask me what it's like to be a woman in India. To borrow Arundhati Roy's words, "India exists in several centuries simultaneously." An Indian woman also exists in several centuries simultaneously.

There are no less than ten religions and about 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub castes in India. In every caste, the women are looked down upon as the lowest ones. My father used to tell me that women shouldn't laugh aloud and shouldn't raise their voices. He used to tell me that women should talk from behind closed doors. At the same time, he was forcing me to become a world renowned scientist or at least a doctor. This dichotomy was pervasive and caused me intense stress.

At this time, books, periodicals, and newspapers were celebrating women's rights. In textbooks, you learned that you had equal rights and equal opportunities. But in literature, cinema, songs, and in private conversations, you were taught that good women are always subservient.

I started wearing a sari at the age of seventeen. I wanted to please my father, who was of the opinion that the sari was the most graceful of dresses, a great symbol of Indian culture. In those days, in all the stories we read, and all the films we watched, the sari was the dress code of "good" women. All the great writers, male and female, would criticize sleeveless blouses and tight fitting dresses. But for two reasons, I changed into salwar suits, the new fashion in those days. First, the sari was difficult to

wear on a daily basis. The second, and more important, reason was from having worn a salwar when I was teased by two boys in my village. They were saying, “she has two legs, two legs!” I felt horribly insulted. I didn’t know how to respond to that taunt. If I stopped wearing salwars, they would become victorious. I didn’t want to give them that satisfaction, so I decided on a mixed wardrobe consisting of both the traditional sari and the practical salwar suit. But even then, wearing jeans was not an option for me. Jeans were an absolute taboo and considered almost blasphemous to want to wear. A girl wearing jeans said it all by her manner of dress—that was the common assumption among the general public.

The sartorial parochialism—the short sightedness and narrow vision—of the Malayalis in particular and Indians in general continues to exist today. They accord and associate “less respectability” with certain dresses, forgetting that lower caste women of our state had to strike and protest for the right to cover their breasts. It took me many years—not until my daughter reached her teens—to change my sartorial delusions. We were in Dubai visiting my sister and she took us to a shopping mall. When my sister selected some trendy dresses for my daughter, she refused them all saying, “I really wish to wear some of these aunty, but what to do? Am I not the daughter of a writer?” I was shocked and felt really bad. The last thing I wished to do was to create some sort of a stereotype out of my own daughter. I told my child that she could be truly herself and could wear whatever she liked. After all, I had been writing all my life to remind our generation that the very act of being ourselves would transform the world into a better place for the next generation.

How Safe Are Our Women?

The second decade of the past 25 years is important to me for personal and professional reasons. In 2001, I started publishing creative writing. During that time period, I became more aware of the nuances of the patriarchal hegemony. In 2005, as part of a six-member team of women, I did a report asking the question, “How Safe Is Kerala For Women?” and I proposed that we should travel all over the state and record our experiences as lone-woman travelers. We were dressed similarly in salwar suits with duppattas for draping and pretended to be solo female travelers in the city; ostensibly on the way home from a hostel.

We were surprised that the six women who travelled to different parts of the state on the same day all had strikingly similar experiences. Even the timings of these incidents coincided. It was then that the limitations of a woman’s freedom in India struck me with full force. A woman standing at a bus stop or waiting at the railway station for a while is sure to be interrogated by someone—a male—who would demand to know where she was heading and from where she was coming. It was as if every male citizen assumed an automatic authority over an unaccompanied woman. It made me realize that in all my 35 years, I never had the need or opportunity to verify whether I had freedom to sit alone in a park or watch a film alone. Later in the year—when I went to London upon securing the Chevening Scholarship for Indian Journalists—I discovered how truly liberating it is for a human being to walk freely, sit lazily, and travel purposelessly.

In *My Story: Journey of Life of a Malayali Woman*, the autobiography of N. A. Vinaya—a woman police constable who had fought legal battles to assure equality within the police force for the right to dress like the male officers and the right to drive a police vehicle—there is one incident I found eye-opening. In the book, Vinaya is travelling with her husband and both of them are looking for a public washroom. Not

finding one, her husband stops the car and goes to the road side to relieve himself, a common practice among Indian men. Vinaya narrates that she too went near him and relieved herself. Her husband was shell-shocked. “Someone will see,” he told her desperately. “So what?” replied Vinaya. I felt proud reading her response. And I felt ashamed of the millions of occasions in which I had not dared to ask that question. “So what?”—I sincerely think that is one question we in India should teach our girls and transgender persons to ask out loud.

That question is important because India is the country where women wait until dark to relieve themselves if they don’t have a toilet, while men will deliberately focus the headlights of their motorcycles on these poor women answering nature’s calls on the road side at night. It’s the country where thousands of women have committed suicide because their photographs have been morphed into obscenities and circulated publicly. And it’s the country where girls are blackmailed because of a sex chat or even a love letter.

In 2006, I reported on “Poverty and Women in Kerala,” another team project and a deeply unsettling assignment that left me pondering several questions. What liberties were we talking about in a country where women do not have enough cotton pads for menstrual periods? What liberties were we discussing when a woman had to approach the pimps—waiting all day in government hospitals—and resort to sex work to procure the necessary money for her husband’s dialysis or treatment for her child? Although it is very difficult for me to cry in front of strangers, I couldn’t control my tears when some of the inmates in the short stay homes for destitute women narrated their stories. There were women who told me all they dream about when they go to sleep is a square meal the next day. There were teenagers who told me they feared abuse from their own parents. There were women who laughed at the Visakha

Guidelines against sexual harassment in the work place as they were forced to offer sexual services to their supervisors for a day's work in India's most "literate" and "women-empowered" state!

The Unseen and the Unheard

Between 2003-07, there were 317 farmer suicides in Wayanad (Kerala). They could not pay back agricultural loans and were debt-ridden in the globalized and liberated economy we the middle class women were celebrating. The news of the farmers' suicides always bring back the memory of a woman I met at Kottayam. She was all alone, her face was swollen, she was far along in her pregnancy, and belonged to the Dalit community. She looked terribly sick and I couldn't help asking her if she was alright. She said that she hadn't eaten anything so I took her to a nearby restaurant and bought her food. I asked her about her pregnancy and was shocked to hear she had never consulted a doctor, which is very unusual in Kerala. She told me her husband was a farmer in Wayanad and had committed suicide, and that she arrived in Kottayam after begging on the trains.

I took her to my gynecologist. When the doctor asked her to go behind the curtain and remove her undergarments, she was embarrassed. She told me apologetically that she couldn't buy any underwear since her husband died. I still feel the lump I had in my throat while listening to her. I tried to send her to an institution where single women were provided shelter and she left for Wayanad with the promise of returning after getting her ration card. But she never came back.

More than 2.5 million farmers' suicides have been reported officially in the past two decades. Since 2013, about 12,000 farmers' deaths have been reported annually. I

still inwardly see the swollen body and vacant eyes of the poor woman I met in Kottayam. I see her in many thousands of other women. What will become of the widows and mothers left behind to answer the question, “how does it feel to be a woman in India?” How will they live? What will they eat? How will they get the money to buy underwear?

But of course, at their expense, globalization has opened up a new world for middle class and upper class women. Satellite TV, the Internet, mobile phones, and social media have all played a big role in expanding the average Indian woman’s world. Empowering thoughts by great female writers across the world are now at our finger tips. As a result, feminist politics in India received a boost of energy and a new feminist social critique and activism came into being.

Although I hadn’t read Simon de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, or Gloria Steinem, I had read and re-read many male authors who helped me imagine the “ideal woman” I would aspire to become. It took many years before I realized it was *their* version of what a woman should be—what they wanted me to be! After trying to live up to this image for many years, I found out that this prototype of an ideal woman had one major problem: she was neither peaceful nor happy. Above all, she was not true to herself. And I was perplexed. It was only after I started reading K. Saraswathy Amma, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Amritha Priam, Asha Poorna Devi, Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Surayya, and many other strikingly individualistic women writers that my perspective changed. It was slow learning, like training my eyes to see in the darkness.

The greatest blessing we Indian women had over the past 25 years could be the presence of very active and committed feminists working in different parts of India. Medha Patkar, who has been tirelessly fighting for justice for the villagers on the banks of Narmada. Kamala Bhasin, who championed the idea of developmental feminism in

India. Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, who made women's publishing possible in this country. Indira Jaising, senior Indian feminist activist and lawyer, who was instrumental in the framing of the Domestic Violence Act (2005). Meenakshi Arora, another lawyer who worked on the framing of the Visakha Guidelines, which later became the report on Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace (2013). Leila Seth, the first woman judge on the Delhi High Court and first woman to become the Chief Justice of a state High Court, who was instrumental in making possible the Hindu Succession Amendment Act (2005) that ensured daughters have equal rights to joint family property. Flavia Agnes, the Co-Founder of "Majlis," an organization that provides legal representation for women who formed the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW). Kavita Krishnan, who initiated a series of protests that made possible the legislation for the Criminal Law Amendment 2013, which drastically changed India's existing rape laws. Sampat Pal Devi, the founder of "Gulabi Gang," a group of rural women in pink sarees who wield bamboo sticks and work against child marriages, spread awareness against dowries, and provide self defense training to women. Vrinda Grover, who has actively dealt with domestic violence cases and cases involving sexual minorities, and who played an active role in drafting the 2013 Criminal Law Amendment, the 2012 POCSO Act, and the 2010 Prevention of Torture Bill. Nivedita Menon, author of *Seeing Like A Feminist*. And J. Devika, our own ultimate feminist, who has been working relentlessly on documenting the gendering of development in Kerala and contributed an alternate reading of Kerala history through a feminist perspective in her book *Kulastreeyum Chanthappennum Undayathengine*.

In addition to the presence of these thought leaders, Irom Sahrnila fasted for a decade to get the AFSPA law repelled. The women of Manipur paraded naked shouting

“Indian Army, rape us.” A woman named Janu organized a tribal movement in Kerala. Saleena Prakkannam, a Dalit leader, led a land struggle in Chengara in Kerala. Women laborers in Munnar plantations led the Pempilai Orumai strike for pay increases. All of these women, combined with the steadily increasing number of women in universities, research institutions, and the media enable women everywhere exposure to new vistas of thought.

Literature and Cinema

As far as Malayalam literature is concerned, the 1990s were the starting point of a new wave of thought popularized by the term “Pennezuthu” (Women Writing). Two books that marked the critical transition points of gender politics in my language are *The Autobiography Of A Sex Worker* by Nalini Jameela, the first of its kind from a sex worker, and *Amen* by Sister Jesmi, an explosive revelation about the oppression of women in the church.

The 2000s showcased a new feministic sensibility in literature. In 2001, my first short story was published in a mainstream magazine. Until then, I didn’t want to be known as a creative writer, as creative writing was my personal, secret, private joy. I was saving my stories for my old age and had plans to publish a novel—a single one—much later in life after completing all my professional duties and responsibilities. It was actually my husband who submitted my stories for publication without my knowledge. I am not sure even today whether he did it to please his wife or to teach her a lesson!

For me, it was like being pushed onto a stage quite unprepared. The first reader’s feedback I received was from a junior colleague working in another unit of the

newspaper who wrote, “I read your story, although I don’t read stories of women, as they all start in the kitchen and end in the veranda with nothing new to tell. Your story is no exception.” My ego was hurt, as was my collective consciousness of womanhood. Had there been no challenge like that, I would have stopped writing altogether after my very first story!

But it was a time when our literary scene was vibrant. There were several youngsters writing excellent stories and I was one of the late entrants. It was thrilling to experiment with new formats and themes, and I enjoyed writing from a woman’s point of view. It was a time when all women writers and their writings were labelled as “Pennezhuthu.” Although it was an umbrella term for “women’s writings,” it was first used condescendingly to describe the efforts to subvert the masculinity of the language. Women who started writing in the 2000s wanted to escape this branding as we wanted to be recognized as “authors” and not just as “women authors.” I was once described as “the only man among the women writers” by a male writer. Later in interviews, I started using the term “Anezuthukar” (male writers) to tease them back—when combatting patriarchy, any form of criticism is useless, but there’s nothing like sarcasm. It drives a patriarch mad.

It was not a smooth journey for the women authors of Malayalam literature. All the successful writers faced severe criticism and name-calling. K. Saraswathi Amma—the pioneer of our feminist literature, starting in the 1930s, and the author of twelve volumes of short stories, a novel, and a play—was silenced for a quarter century by the powerful male patrons of the Malayalam literary scene, who branded her a “man-hater.” By the time she died, her name and works were erased from public view, so the news of her death went unnoticed, written about in an inconspicuous piece of news in the obituary pages. Lalithambika Antharjanam—the other guiding star of women’s

writing in spite of being an upper-caste woman—was attacked by fellow male writers. One of them even published a story to abuse her. But it was Kamala Surayya aka Madhavi Kutty (Kamala Das) who was attacked all through her literary life. Since the publication of her autobiography *My Story*, she had to face different kinds of attacks from patriarchal moralists—both men and women—who couldn't stand a woman writing openly about her love and lust. Currently, there are many including Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandaswamy, Sumana Roy, Sharanya Manivannan, Tishani Doshi, Bama, Salma, and Sithara S. who write with complete realization that there is nothing more political than women writing for women.

Women have been taught through the centuries that good women should not aspire to power, especially political power. There is nothing more intoxicating than wielding power over others' lives and over our own lives, which is why men all over the world are unwilling to share power with others, especially women and transgender persons. That intoxication, as well as fulfillment of power, which has been denied to Indian women over the past several centuries, is now attainable to me through writing fiction. This intoxication is not just the power of a ruler, it is the power of the almighty; while I craft fiction, I am creating a universe, sometimes a number of universes!

In writing *Aaraachaar (Hangwoman)*—a record of the escalating violence perpetrated on women of my country over the centuries—I wanted to become someone like a God Herself. In India, to be eligible for the post of hangman, the applicant should be a male, not less than five feet in height, and possessing a good presence of mind. This implies that the State cannot extend its concept of equal opportunity to a woman or a transgender person by relegating its supreme authority, that is, the power to kill. I wanted to force the world to imagine the consequences if an Indian woman actually

stepped onto that lowest rung of the ladder of power and shattered the whole concept of masculinity.

In using the terms “man” and “woman,” I do not mean actual men or women. By “man,” I mean an attitude and by “woman,” I mean a condition. By using man-woman metaphors, we can better narrate stories of power and subversion, caste and oppression, fascism and socialism, religious hegemony and faith, family and individual, and violence and tolerance.

But even after so many discourses on gender parity, it is really disappointing that Indian cinema continued to downplay the concept of equal and complete citizenship to women. In Malayalam, most of the celebrated cinemas were male centric and were repeating the trite and outdated concept of heroism. I can remember only *Parinayam* and *Perumthachan* as two films of the 1990s that tried to be fair to women characters. Though we had a *Mirch Masala*, or *Arth*, or *Fanaa*, or *Panchagni*, these were exceptions to the rule. But the feminist discourse over the past 25 years has made new age films like *Pink* and *Parched* possible. Additionally, *22 Female Kottayam* set a new trend as the first Malayalam film in which a heroine conducted a penectomy on the hero. Today, we see women who are smarter than men in the new generation of cinema. This includes remarkably-made short films and full fledged feature films by women directors. For example, for the first time in the history of Malayalam cinema, a woman director, Vidhu Vincent, won the award for Best Director for the film *Manhole*.

These days, I am hopeful that all art forms have no other option than to accept and conform to the idea of equality. In the public spaces created by technology and social media, we see public shaming of stalkers and abusers, we see women replying with the same language and shattering the male egos, we see women actively

participating in political discussions, and we see women aggressively leading rights campaigns.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a brief story:

One day, an aeroplane met a rocket up in the sky. The aeroplane, carrying hundreds of passengers, said to the rocket, “Sister, I envy how liberated you are! Look at me; I am travelling the same route every day, carrying the same burden, and I can’t change my port of departure or destination. But look at you; you are completely free. You don’t have any weight to carry or any schedule to keep.”

The rocket replied, “But sister, you know when you will land and where you will land. Look at me; I have no idea where I am heading. The people who launched me have no idea either. I may crash or reach an unknown planet or go on orbiting forever.”

The aeroplane asked, “Sister, is there nothing you are sure of?”

The rocket replied, “Yes, sister, there is one thing I am pretty sure of—that I can never go back to where I came from.”

The story ends here. I would title it “Two Indian Women” so that it’s clear what the aeroplane stands for (the women of India) and the rocket (the empowered women of India).

A village woman told this story when asked about her empowered status after being elected to the local governance. So if we need to summarize how gender rights in India have transformed over the past 25 years, the punch line of the story says it all—*we can never go back*.

The story is illustrative of the fact that even if we haven’t reached our destination, the women of India can never go back to where they started because it has

been such an eventful quarter century. It has been eventful for India as a whole and especially for its women, since although women are denied complete citizenship in practice, they are still fated to be the shock-absorbers for the political, financial, and environmental jolts, jerks, and crashes around them. If there is a riot, women in India will be the ultimate sufferers; if there is a famine, the first ones to starve will be the women; and if there is a drought, women will be the last ones to drink water. So even after being celebrated as a new world power, everything about India can be deduced from the plight of its women—what they eat, how they dress, how much education they have, what jobs they are doing, and how much day-to-day violence they endure.

On the one hand, the past 25 years have imparted high velocity to the journey of Indian women defying gender in tandem with the rest of the world, but the perpetual conflicting male mindset continues to exist, which impedes any attempt to destroy or even defy the notion of power. It is disturbing that the State as a policy is reinforcing this male mindset, thus ruining the core principle of equality which, in turn, destroys the notion of fraternity and eventually liberty; the essence of Indian democracy. The challenges Indian women face thus become increasingly three-fold, with caste and class related factors amplifying these challenges. Even Kerala, a state where the position of women is considerably better than many other states in the country, has been witnessing honor killings when the groom is from a lower caste or class.

To prepare for the next 25 years, India needs more young, daring women who are more visible, who are heard louder, who speak out more, and who are read wider. India is a country where, typically, changes are effected only from the top. The real challenge, even today, is to convince the other 50 percent—those who are not trained to take “no” for an answer—that a “no” actually means NO and that there is *no going back for the women of India*.