

## A BUTTONLESS PATCHED SHIRT



Soon after leaving one of the biggest media groups anywhere in the world in 2011 to edit a literary magazine and look after its publishing arm, I had a strange feeling – that I was a complete nobody. Moving around the city to go through the formalities – paperwork, meetings with glum-faced men and women in the police establishment and government offices, going to court for documentation – I realized how difficult life could be without an institutional banner above. Cops would no longer allow me to drive beyond the barricades; in the government behemoths, officers friendly until the other day were now indifferent, if not exactly harassing. A literary magazine did not merge into the landscape of power and glory

that Delhi is all about. No one was interested in it, for you're not going to write about yesterday's win and loss.

I often asked myself, Why did I leave the familiar for the uncertain, for this cratered road? After all I had lived almost my entire adult life in the offices of big publications – *Eenadu*, *India Today*, *Indian Express*, *The Times of India*. It was strange that with the smell of newsprint and hot metal still lingering and memories of newsroom warfare fresh, I sought to explore the literary genre in a publication. The thrill of political reporting, excitement of predicting a close electoral battle, twists and turns throughout the night to see my scoop on the paper's front page in the morning – I had just walked out of that volatile zone to edit a literary magazine which is about new writing and trends in many areas of life.

The freeze-frames from the past came crowding in: I getting off a minibus at Clock Tower in Darjeeling to the greeting of open kukris of the Gurkha militants in the midst of a violent campaign for a separate state in the hills, an Indian Army officer pushing me off the road moments before a car was set on fire by marauding rioters in Aligarh, I being taken blindfolded to the hideout of a Naxalite area commander in Jharkhand for an interview... Yes, my road had taken a sharp turn and I was all set to go the route.

Print, or rather the mainstream of it, had by then realized its *value* and decided to move out of a past of sublime stasis for greater *proactivity*. It's just not enough for a newspaper to be the nation's conscience keeper. The idea of the fourth estate being the live wire of a culture, a vibrant liberal platform, had begun to migrate elsewhere – to small press, to cyberspace. *The Equator Line*, a themed quarterly magazine of the new world, we decided, would focus on issues the mainstream of the media tended to overlook.

For India to survive, to remain what the world has always known it for, it needs to cherish robust cultural pluralism as its mainstay. Shorn of its core values of liberalism, democracy and social equity, this country is a burnt-out case, an unforgiving, hateful waste where a

civilization cannot flourish. For thousands of years India has been a recipient of influences and ideas from all over the world, and in its turn, India too has offered its vast reserves of ancient knowledge and wisdom to others. Insularity – both cultural and political – therefore, is a dangerous proposition for us. This is all the more reason to explore closer ties with our neighbours streamlining the process of cultural osmosis. Hate, intolerance and chauvinism as ideologies are both repugnant and abhorrent.

This in short then was the charter for our roadshow. And we have neither looked back nor stopped since.

Someone suffering from mental illness runs away from home, for in that small town people are not sensitive to the plight of the malady. She recovers with support from her doctors, with care and commiseration from people she had not known until she came to the city, she is back to normal – almost. Has read literature at university and is thinking of a writing career. One day she walks into my office looking for work. She writes the incredible real-life story of her daring escape on the night train, heroic struggle and ultimate recovery. A writer who lives in a forest somewhere in New York state writes about the Beatles' trek of epiphany to the deeply wooded ashram of Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh. The much-hyped trip actually ended in quite a bit of unpleasantness. Someone else travels from Bhopal to recollect the tales lost under the dust of Baba Allaiddin Khan's legendary Maihar Band that produced musicians of the calibre of Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Annapurna Devi and many more. Or a doctoral candidate at a UK university captures the loneliness and hurt of a New York cabbie pushing them into poetry writing. *Uptown rich dude, hates to talk...* Stopping at a traffic light I often recite the line surveying many signs of the class divide around.

In the second issue itself almost an equal number of writers were lined up from either side of the Radcliffe Line recalling their experiences of engagement with the other. Buoyed up by the response from both countries, a year later we brought out a number fully focused on Pakistan; everything between its covers by writers from that country or its diaspora except for my editorial. It was guest-edited by a young Pakistani writer. The malaise and mistakes that torment Pakistani society come out authentically and poignantly in their writing. Aspirations of the new generation in Pakistan to celebrate liberal values shaking off the burden of conservatism had never before come out more candidly. Since then we have regularly published liberal writing from Pakistan and in the process discovered a so far unknown territory – an urban community, concerned, sensitive and connected to the world, intolerant of the cleric-dictated orthodoxy. Reassuringly, the fresh voices in Pakistani writing have sought to question the forces out to stifle the impulses of change in society and to cope with the new realities of their life.

These are some of the milestones we have crossed on the way and are looking forward to meeting many more. I have resigned as *The Equator Line* editor without an iota of doubt that my colleagues who largely share my idea of TEL as a literary magazine, will take it along the charted path. This issue, possibly a turning point in our journey, carries some essays and short stories from the past only to see the miles we have come so far.

What TEL writes and stands for must have made sense to a whole lot of people, particularly the twentysomethings. Quite a few literature students from Delhi University came to work for us. 'I don't mind if you don't pay me, let me just work,' one of them said on the phone before coming for the interview. We of course did pay him.

Our office address is an enigma, a study in social obfuscation. Flanked by Panchsheel Park and Mayfair Gardens, this should have been an enviable elite location. But that's only the geography. Socially we're an extension of the amorphous Shahpur Jat, the intriguing urban village that juxtaposes the city's soft underbelly with a chic fashion district with prominent name brands.

Nine years in an office was enough time for a few little traditions to grow. We celebrated the arrival of every number of TEL from press – with burgers, ice cream, pakora, samosa, coffee, Coke... I would hand one copy to a colleague and ask, 'Just see if everything is fine inside.' I would hold my breath... Once an editor came up hesitantly pointing out that the pages had gone haywire, 36 coming after 75. Before I could see for myself the extent of the printer's madness, someone else came with the good news: the mess seemed limited only to a few copies; the rest were just fine. So – the party could begin.

TEL will be relevant so long as it stays ahead of others in term of new ideas. With newer and more exacting challenges coming up in many areas of life, this magazine needs a younger leadership and more radical responses. In a similar situation almost half a century ago, the poet Sunil Gangopadhyay wrote:

Young man, I give to you  
The cloudy sky that  
Hangs over Bhubandanga,  
The buttonless patched shirt  
And lungs full of laugh –  
These are now all for you. ■

**Bhaskar Roy**