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**Vol XV Rajnikant, The Urban Poor, Breakfast at Boogaloos, & Gauhar Jaan;**

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It was a sunny December morning. A stiff breeze whipped the leaves off the trees. In my little village Mundakotukurussi in Kerala, I soak in the sounds, sense and sights from a window. In the distance I could hear the whirr sound of the mill across the road from my house. The warm spicy scent of coriander seeds being ground wafts through the air. All day long the mill works. Rice, wheat, coriander, chilly, turmeric, coconut and sesame.... In a strange way the mill is symbolic of the village and its economic well-being. Its constant note of industry the music of prosperity.

In Mundakotukurussi, there are neither vagrants nor the homeless. Even the poorest man has a roof of his own over head and I think of how in The Better Man when I sought to capture the spirit of this village, I knew I had to be careful to not portray this village as the clichéd image of an Indian village. For while Mundakotukurussi may be rife with emotions, complexities and politics, there is no actual instance of brutal poverty.

The only homeless man in this village was someone who refused to have anything to do with his family after a quarrel. And even he has been carted off to an old age home by the villagers and when he needed to be treated for a stroke, they took a donation drive to pay his hospital bills. Genteel poverty exists – that is no escaping this truth. Luxuries may not have too much of a place in many houses but no one sleeps hungry or worries where the next meal is coming from. Children go to school and there are jobs available if one is trained or inclined to do them.

***Once upon a time Mundakotukurussi is used to be called Moscow because of its Marxist leanings. Today several political parties – The Congress, The Bharatiya Janata Party, The Muslim League and the Communist Party of India – Marxist, all exist and thrive in this little village. Nevertheless this hasn't changed the almost egalitarian society that so characterizes this village.***

And as I sat there in Mundakotukurussi my mind wandered to the drive I took a few days ago from Bangalore to reach my village. 500 kms and three states – Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. I drove through many villages, three cities and one big town. And perhaps it is this drive that made me look at my country differently than any other experience.



Everywhere the world media talks about the heart wrenching poverty in Indian villages. India still has world's largest number of poor people in a single country. As per the Millennium Development Goals India Country

Report 2011, of India's 1.2 billion inhabitants, an estimated 37.2 percent are below the poverty line. And of the total urban population 25.7 percent are below the poverty line.

***But there is a world of difference in the degree of poverty that exist in a village and a city in India. Perhaps this contrast in accentuated by the affluence that one get to see in many Indian cities. Sometimes the quality of life amongst the urban middle class would even beguile ourselves into actually believing that "India shining" is the undisputed truth. Where is this poverty the development agencies seem to talk about? I wonder. It is then a drive such as this prised my blinkers away.***

In most Indian villages there is usually a handful of the very rich while the rest totter in and around the 'below poverty line'. Good roads, power, drinking water and sanitation may all seem like distant dreams. But there is still to life a certain sense of wellness. Expansion of non-agricultural employment, the casualisation of labour contracts, agricultural labour becoming caste-heterogeneous, the improvement in agricultural wages etc. have all lead to a decrease in drastic poverty in villages.

What is alarming is urban poverty. The main causes of urban poverty are predominantly the breakdown of an agricultural livelihood that makes villages abandon their homes in search of some subsistence living in the towns and cities. In this process, they even lose the open space available in villages. When they come to the cities, they manage to forage food but everything else eludes them. In fact, sometimes they live in conditions that are sub-human.

While many of the Indian government's development planning has focused on over all poverty reduction, somehow this doesn't seem to percolate down to the urban poor. I think of the cities that I passed through. Starting from Bangalore in Karnataka which is a IT hub, corporate capital and glitzy cosmopolitan city flaunting the world's best brands and expensive designer labels. The homes here would rival that of the rich and famous in world capitals. In fact, in a survey conducted by the global HR consultancy service Mercer found it the best city to live in India.

Then there is Salem in Tamil Nadu, the city with large textiles, steel, automotive, poultry and mining industries. The next city I drove through was Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, an important textile, industrial, IT and manufacturing centre. Palakkad in Kerala is a large town. Each of its urban centres has its wide roads, bustling shopping zones, a multitude of humanity all of which made me lean back into the seat of my car with a complacency of thought- India is certainly making rapid strides in all spheres.

Then my eyes lit on a street overflowing with garbage in one city, a group of raggedy migrants in another city, a hovel made of cardboard and tin in another and my breath snagged. I wasn't prepared for what I saw. In many ways I had always considered cities as nerve centres that could change the economic destiny of a person if they wanted to. Instead what I saw in the cities (and with a certainty knew would be replicated in most if not every Indian city) was an abject poverty that wrenched my heart. My own tubular vision until now made me feel both ashamed and guilty.

Of the five novels I have written the first four The Better Man, Ladies Coupe, Mistress and Lessons in Forgetting dwelt in the world of the middle class. This is an almost monogeneous strata where the human

condition is dictated by societal pattern and the demands of the human mind. With Cut Like Wound I moved to the urban landscape where there is no escape from the abyss that exists between the rich and the poor. For the first time in my writing social commentary made its appearance. That the urban poor is a reality and that I cannot close my eyes to it made a conscious appearance in my writing.



In my travels as I have trawled various Indian cities, be it New Delhi or Kochi, Hyderabad or Bhubaneswar, everywhere I see the same multitude of images again and again: The speculating eyes of a young man, follow a Jaguar being driven down a road that he is sweeping. The parted lips of a child outside an ice cream parlour watching a teenager dressed in expensive clothes buying an ice cream the cost of which would be enough to buy the child a full meal. A diamond dripping woman emerge from a designer store with a hand bag that would have paid to keep a family housed for a year. I see the plethora of riches and the absence of a social conscience. I see how in the urban landscape the rich get richer and the poor stay poor and how every day for them is a feat in survival. And I ask myself: What am I going to do about this except perhaps be able to write about it. And ask the world – why? And how is this going to change....

**Anita Nair**



is the best-selling author of *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe*, *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting*. Her books have been translated into over 30 languages around the world. Her new novel *Cut Like Wound* was published in late 2012.

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### **Speakeeasy**

This week The Heavenly Bliss Salon for Men features **Kunal Mukherjee**.



Originally from West Bengal, he is a San Francisco-based poet and writer. He holds a Master's degree in Physics, has done postgraduate work in Energy Studies and has worked as a restaurateur and an IT manager. His passions include acting, music, travel, the environment and animals. Kunal's work has appeared in India Currents, Hot Flashes: Sexy Little Stories and Poems and Hot Flashes 2. My Magical Palace is his first novel and he is currently working on his second novel.

Connect with Kunal at <http://www.kunalmukherjee.com> to read about his creative works.

### **Breakfast at Boogaloos**

A steaming cup of coffee  
acrid and bitter

burns the last  
wisps of my hangover  
from the caverns  
in my head.

I sit  
at my table  
waiting for my eggs and toast.  
My back straightens  
As coffee lashes my spine.  
Neurons fire.  
Caffeine drains  
the bags from under my eyes.

You sit  
so close,  
I can smell  
the musk of your skin,  
taste the salt of your lips  
and softly brush  
last night's dreams  
from your eyelids  
with my lashes.

If I stuck out my tongue  
surely it would trace  
the outline of your stubble,  
taste the sweat coating  
each hair  
burnished bronze  
in the shaft of sunlight  
streaming in from the window.

I stab my eggs  
with my fork.  
Yellow yolk  
Bleeds onto my toast.  
For a moment we look  
at each other -  
you  
and I.

My face feels hot.  
Startled I drop the fork.  
The diner stops still.

Flashing steel  
turning slowly  
in the sunlight  
scatters the dust motes.

I am deafened  
By my heart beat.

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### Pick-me-up



When...

Charlotte mugged and breaks her hip, her daughter Rose cannot accompany her employer, Lord Peters, to Manchester, which means his niece Marion has to go instead, which means she sends a text to her lover which is intercepted by his wife, which is... just the beginning in the ensuing chain of life-alerting events. **Penelope Lively's 22nd book How It All Began** is a delicious read and for someone like me who has been trudging through mostly middling to bad books for almost four months now, it came as a welcome relief. The joy of good writing had almost seemed elusive. Read a review of this book at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/nov/18/how-it-all-began->

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### SUPERCALL

**Naman Ramachandran** is a film critic with Sight & Sound, a film journalist covering South Asia for Variety and the UK and Ireland for Cineuropa, and the author of the book Lights, Camera, Masala: Making Movies in Mumbai. His Rajinikanth: The Definitive Biography was published last month by Penguin India.

Read about Naman Ramachandran's experience working on his Rajinikanth: The Definitive Biography



# RAJINIKANTH

## THE DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY

### • Soaring into heaven moment:

After a tremendous beginning (yes, I do say so myself and it still holds up after much re-reading), I stumbled badly, and then what poured forth was thousands and thousands of words, much beyond the agreed limit. I think the correct operative term here would be 'vomit'. The soaring into heaven moment came after, when following a period of mature deliberation i.e. getting hammered, I reread the vomit (interesting aside here, can vomit be read like tea leaves? But that's neither here nor there) and found to my flabbergasted surprise that most of it made sense.

### • That infernal fire time:

The stumbling I'd referred to earlier is just another word for procrastination.

***After having passed the first deadline with some success, I took walks, naps, cooked elaborate meals for my wife, smoked too much, drank heavily, took more naps... the cycle continued and I played with my publisher's patience as much as I could – all the while not writing a word.***

My excuse to myself was the old saw – ‘the book is processing in my head and practically writing itself’. The inertia was finally gotten rid off when my publisher sent me a politely worded note asking if I would like to downgrade the book to a slim paperback.

• **The purgatory point:**

This came after the book’s publication when the subject called me up and summoned me to Chennai without indicating what his thoughts on the product were. After two days of agony, when the meeting happened, it left me walking on air. I still am.

• .....years, .....drafts and .....words thereafter, would you do this differently and again?

No and no. Maybe add information to a later edition, but that’s it.

• **What does Naman Ramachandran the writer**



### **Fear the most?**

I'm pedantic to the point of paranoia and fear providing wrong information. That's my journalist side talking.

### **Desire the most?**

The usual cliches of being a bestseller loved by both the intelligentsia and masses and being rewarded to the point of never ever having to write again.

### **Hate the most?**

Again I will go with the usual self-loathing cliche and answer – myself.

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### **An Angel on the Rock**

She was the stuff of fairy tales: a flamboyant singer much sought after by British India's nobility; a socialite who threw lavish parties; a hedonist who went about town in expensive horse buggies; a diva whose image appeared on matchboxes made in Austria. And then, the inevitable end for someone leading a life as feisty as this: self-destruction, penury and a lonely death.

***She was Gauhar Jaan – the Subcontinent's first musician to record commercially on the gramophone when the technology came calling in 1902. Despite the cult status she achieved in her lifetime, she is a forgotten figure in the world of Indian classical music, and roams the annals of Hindustani music as a barely discernible ghost.***

Gauhar Jaan entered my life in the most serendipitous way. It was while sifting through the musty, yet meticulously catalogued, Palace archives of Mysore when researching my first book, Splendours of Royal Mysore: the Untold story of the Wodeyars, that Gauhar Jaan first caught my attention. She had been a state guest of the Maharaja who had given her shelter during the most difficult time of her life. She died in Mysore in 1930, lonely and forlorn with none by her bedside to shed tears for her. The name had a certain ring to it and I somehow felt I had struck familiar terrain. She remained on my mind for a long time thereafter before I eventually decided that I would take on the arduous and seemingly impossible task of writing her biography.



Piecing the fragments of her tumultuous life was akin to a detective trail. In a country that has little regard for history and documentation, more so in the performing arts, it was almost like searching for a needle in a haystack.

***Gauhar Jaan had no heirs, no surviving relatives or friends whom I could talk to and gather information about her. Starting from the place of her death, I 'chased' her through the length and breadth of India- Azamgarh, Banaras, Delhi, Darbhanga, Rampur, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai—where she had spent significant portions of her life. Looking for documentary accounts about her in newspapers of the times or regional literature, British accounts, records of stormy court cases that she was embroiled in or the exquisite Urdu poetry written by her and her mother Badi Malka Jaan—I was completely consumed by this mission.***

Good biographies seldom get written unless the creator is not maniacally obsessed with the subject and it was no different in my case. Putting together the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle to paint a portrait of a forgotten diva was both immensely satisfying and at times, intensely frustrating when one hit road blocks.

But as a musician myself, analysing Gauhar's music was as important for me as reconstructing the pattern of her life. Listening to the voice of the woman I was in 'love' with became another obsession! In her illustrious career Gauhar recorded close to 600 records in over 10 languages. Her repertoire was vast, and ranged from the weighty Khayal and Dhrupad to the supposedly lighter forms of thumri, dadra, kajri, hori, chaiti, tarana and bhajan. Thus began another odyssey, of looking out for her old 78-rpm shellac discs which I purchased in

their hundreds from record collectors and scrap shops, bargaining for a reasonable price. The early recordings were from the acoustic era, when there were no microphones to amplify one's voice. Singers had to shout into a horn and a stylus would vibrate at the other end depending on how loudly one screamed, thereby cutting grooves on a shellac master. To Gauhar Jaan goes the credit for devising a unique template for presenting something as expansive as Hindustani music in just three minutes of sound, which was all that a single disc could record.

The experience of listening to her record for the very first time would remain etched in my memory forever. I never realised that an old gramophone player at home which was the prized possession of my grandmother, but seldom used by successive generations, would come so handy. Nervously placing one of Gauhar's earliest recordings dating back to 1904 on the rotating turn-table, I switched the machine on and placed the needle on the grooves of the shellac even as I literally froze with excitement and anticipation. A young, sultry, melodious and piercing voice struggled through.



The song was a cheez in Raga Sur Malhar that symbolized the monsoons and the accompanying thunder and lightning and was sung in a breathless fashion, in increasing tempos and with single breaths packing more and more notes with each progression in a melody.

"Ghoor ghoor barasat meharava, bijuriya chamaki anek baar  
Gun gaaao more piharava, aap jage aur mohi jagaave  
Bhar bhar surava, ghoor ghoor barasat meharava."

The rains are pouring down the skies, the lightning flashing across them many a times  
Sing along my beloved one, you keep yourself awake and don't let me sleep either  
Are these torrents of rains or torrents of musical notes that are ushered in?

Almost on cue, nature seemed to respond. I was shocked to see the clouds gathering in the sky suddenly, engulfing the room in an envelope of darkness and a loud thunder that virtually shook the antique gramophone player and made the needle jump over a couple of grooves. I had gooseflesh and simply could not believe what was happening. As the record drew to a close, there emerged a shrill and flirtatious voice dipped in child-like mirth that proudly announced 'My name is Gauhar Jaan!...you have liked my song!': the second part sounding more like a command rather than as a question or comment!

On that May evening that left me dazed and numbed for several days thereafter, I knew what the title of my biography of this diva was going to be—it undoubtedly had to be 'My name is Gauhar Jaan!' After all she was telling her own story to the rest of the world that had forgotten her through my book and what better way to do so than with her trademark signature at the end of every record!

**Vikram Sampath** is a Bangalore-based author of three acclaimed books 'Splendours of Royal Mysore: the

untold story of the Wodeyars,’ ‘My name is Gauhar Jaan!: the life and times of a musician’ and ‘Voice of the Veena: S Balachander, a biography.’ “My name is Gauhar Jaan!” won him the Sahitya Akademi’s first Yuva Puraskar in the English Category in 2011, as well as the ARSC International Award for Excellence in Historical Research in New York. Vikram has been a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin and a guest speaker at the University of Queensland.



A trained classical vocalist, Vikram is the Founder of the ‘Archive of Indian Music’ ([www.archiveofindianmusic.org](http://www.archiveofindianmusic.org)) and the Bangalore Literature Festival (BLF).

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## HAPPY ENDING



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