

# IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Twenty-four years after a fatwa was issued against Salman Rushdie, it remains active. While he's not coming to the Jaipur Lit Fest, it's freedom of speech and India's image that have taken a battering

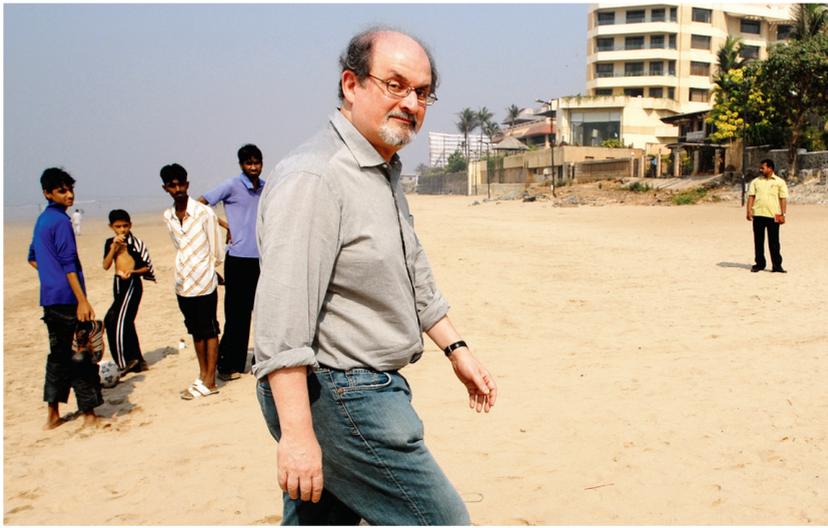
Archana Khare Ghose | TNN

The world's biggest democracy is a country of a million paradoxes. Salman Rushdie is not present at the Jaipur Literature Festival, yet he is the author most talked about. Though Sanjoy Roy, the festival producer, kept insisting that there were 258 other authors and scholars to discuss, it hardly mattered — the festival was abuzz with the Rushdie controversy and how he wasn't coming here due to protests and threats.

It was in September 1988 that Rushdie's fourth novel, 'The Satanic Verses', was published. More than two decades after its publication and aftermath — Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa against Rushdie — this work is still considered blasphemous in India and thus, banned.

The latest hullabaloo regarding Rushdie is the talking point here. Most feel the government has given in too easily to certain religious leaders with the impending UP assembly polls in mind. It's been a shameful experience for many Indians to explain to foreign delegates and authors as to why Rushdie's arrival would have an impact on the polls.

Kamin Mohammadi, the Iranian au-



IS HE A FREE MAN?: Salman Rushdie enjoys a walk on the beach in Mumbai in 2008; (left) A man protests against the author in Ajmer recently

**It's been a shameful experience for many Indians to explain to foreign delegates why Rushdie's arrival would impact UP elections**

thor of 'The Cypress Tree', who spoke at the session 'The Arab Spring: A Winter's View', said, "The general view of India that most of the world has is that this is a tolerant, pluralistic country, where more than anywhere else, people with diverse opinions live in peace with each other. That makes the Salman Rushdie case more shocking. Why should literature pay the prize for craziness in politics?"

If there wasn't such political spinelessness, Rushdie would have found it easy to come to India, as he did in 2007, when he attended the same festival.

Girish Karnad, veteran theatre personality, playwright and author, known not to mince words, says that the politics behind the Rushdie issue isn't worthy of debate. "We all know it's a political reaction. What is more worrying is that by surrendering so easily, the government has set an example for other such groups to follow suit. As and when they want to pick up a grudge against somebody, they will let themselves loose," says Karnad. And that's been the biggest setback to this whole sorry episode. By not invoking Article 19(1)(A) of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, the government has set a bad precedent. And the fact

that this Article can be open to infringement is not comfortable. This has happened in the past too when books and other creative pursuits were banned simply because they displeased certain groups who could muddle delicate political equations.

But the intelligentsia isn't easy to cow down. British Indian novelist Hari Kunzru protested by reading from 'The Satanic Verses' on January 20, prompting the festival organizers

to issue a statement saying they did not approve of such activities. Speaking to Sunday Times earlier, Kunzru had said that such an act painted a negative image of India abroad. "It's pathetic, especially now, when the world is looking at India with a sharper focus than ever before. The economy is growing and Indians are doing well globally. And here is a government that cannot support one of its best-known authors." Though Kunzru's act went beyond what most at the festival would risk doing, almost every author and speaker here has expressed apprehension about how it will impact India negatively.

Andrew Phillips, CEO and president, Penguin (India), went so far as to say that this episode wasn't going to be such a big deal in the world press. "But that's not what should bother Indians — whether it affects their image or not. The bigger issue is of freedom of speech which everybody enjoys," he said.

Joseph Lelyveld, Pulitzer-winning journalist and author, whose book on Gandhi, 'Great Soul', was banned by Gujarat last year, said that preventing Rushdie from entering India showed poorly on the country as "Rushdie has been travelling and speaking freely for almost 15 years now." Lelyveld's book had attracted controversy for apparent 'unsavoury' references to

Gandhi's relationship with his German friend Herman Kallenbach. Despite this, it has been received well in India, claims the author: "If you say India is touchy about certain things, then let me give you the example of some self-appointed Americans who refused to eat French fries after the French president had condemned the US invasion of Iraq. Politicians do small-minded things the world over," he adds.

But should people follow is the larger question.

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## 'Fatwas are a different game'

Mohammed Hanif, the author of works such as 'A Case of Exploding Mangoes' and 'Our Lady of Alice Bhatti', was one of the most sought-after persons at the Jaipur Fest. He tells Archana Khare Ghose that fatwas are rarely followed by the average Muslim



**What do you think of the ruckus around Salman Rushdie's participation in the festival?**

You should go to the website of religious bodies that issue fatwas every now and then and ask Muslims on the streets if they follow them faithfully. More than 90% will say no. So, it's a different game altogether. It's unfortunate that Salman Rushdie is not able to participate in this festival.

**What is the outlook of the young in Pakistan?**

I'm not too sure of the statistics but Pakistan is a very young country — apparently, 60% are under 24 years of age. The young here are sick and tired of traditional and dynastic politics and they want change.

**How would you analyse the political drama unfolding in Pakistan today?**

The media looks for drama and the collapse of the government would make dramatic news. Pakistan has always been a struggling democracy and no elected government has completed its term. This one has completed four years and the opposition wants to pack it off. There is tension between the elected government and its political rivals and it's a 4-5 way fight. This situation can't be resolved overnight and we must not draw any dramatic conclusions.

**How important are literary awards for an author's career?**

Literary awards are good only if you get them. When you are nominated for a certain award, you start thinking that maybe you would win it too but it's like a lottery ticket. A friend of mine told me an interesting thing when I was nominated for an award — that it would help me get more readers. He said the three people in the jury would have to read the book and at least, I would have got three more readers.

**And what about your readers in Pakistan?**

Frankly, when there are so many wars going on in Pakistan at the same time, I don't think anybody cares for a real book.

**Is there any real life inspiration for your last book, 'Our Lady of Alice Bhatti'?**

My first job was with a group of women who were very brave and I was a token male employee with them. I learnt a lot from them. I have come across many other brave women who are not direct inspirations for my writings but have affected it in some way. But this book is not at all their story.

# We don't think of success or failure, they are just phases

In an exclusive interview with *Sunday Times*, Kumar Mangalam Birla, one of the richest Indians, and his wife Neerja talk about their motivation, passions and values

**Kumar Mangalam Birla, 44, the chairman of the \$35 billion Aditya Birla Group which operates in 36 countries, is one of the faces of the India growth story. His wife Neerja, the vice-chairperson of the Aditya Birla World Academy, an international school in Mumbai, is a well-known collector and patron of arts. The Birlas tell Shobhan Saxena and Archana Khare Ghose about the values they share. Excerpts:**

**You took over the group at the age of 28, and in just 15 years you have taken it from \$2 billion to \$35 billion, from eight countries to 36. That's phenomenal growth. What is your key motivation?**

**KB:** The motivation, of course, is to take forward the legacy of my father (Aditya Birla). He was a pioneer in taking India overseas. In the 1960s, when globalization was not even a word in the corporate lexicon, feeling strapped by the license raj, he looked overseas. And over the next three decades, he made investments in south-east Asia. He exposed our group to the forces of globalization, competing with the best companies from Japan, US and Europe.

My father taught us that to thrive, excellence in technology, quality and customer service along with cost competitiveness is a prerequisite. His contribution to business, the economy and society at large can never be underscored. Creating wealth for our multiple stakeholders was always on his radar. There is a huge canvas to paint and a lot of excitement and energy for sustainable growth to take this legacy even further. That's the key motivation.

**Of course, the economic liberalization process that began in the early 1990s must have played a role...**

Yes, in 1991 the government unleashed the power of India and created a partnership between itself and industry. As



Photos: Piyal Bhattacharjee

learning. I believe that education is not only about academic excellence. It is about character building, emotional growth and spiritual growth. Every year, children from our school go into the hinterland and work with the people there. That exposes them to the ground realities of our country.

**There is a quite a bit of art around your offices and residences. Who are the favourite artists of the family, both among the senior moderns and the junior contemporaries?**

**NB:** Both of us are very fond of art, especially contemporary art. We like art that appeals to the eye and paintings that reflect positivity and not morbid art. So our collection ranges from landscapes to abstract art. Laxman Shrestha, Jehangir Sabavala and Sunil Padwal are among the artists whose work adorns our home. We enjoy meeting with the artists and getting to know them and their art inspiration. **Some business families have brought out their art collections in public by opening galleries. Do you have any such plans?**

**NB:** We have not thought of an exhibition of our paintings. But, my grandparents-in-law recently showcased their personal art collection at an exhibition. So who can tell?

**In the middle of your demanding schedule, how do you spend your free time?**

**KB:** We love to spend our free time with our three children. Other than that, shooting is a hobby. My reading is mostly limited to management books. Both of us have a passion for workouts, which we do together.

## SUNDAY INTERVIEW

**NB:** Many moons ago, I used to play the santoor. I still listen to music. Our day begins with the Hanuman Chalisa. We also listen to meditation music, bamboo music, the Beatles and Abba. We watch movies — English and Hindi — with our children. We also organize satsang every week at home with a group of our friends.

**Do you discuss work at home? What do you talk during dinner?**

**KB:** Not in the sense of work papers, but we do talk work at home. Our children are growing up and they are always full of questions. We have healthy discussions around the dining table, on an eclectic mix of subjects.

**Obviously, your children will follow you in business...**

**KB:** They are very young, so it is too much in the future. I would like them to follow their passion and their dreams. When you grow up in a business family, I think, there is a lot of learning that happens at home. So there would be a degree of interest, and I say this, based on my experience. **NB:** Our son can be a wildlife photographer and be engaged in the business as well. He can follow that as his hobby. It's not that photography and running a business are mutually exclusive or conflicting interests.

**What is it you like the best about each other?**

**KB:** Neerja is in many ways a perfect foil for me and though we have different personalities, we share a common sense of values and sensitivities. She has almost grown up with me. We got engaged and married very young and therefore we have a very close understanding of each other and are also best friends besides being a couple. The one thing I really like about Neerja is that she really a supermom — absolutely caring, devoted and committed. When she takes up a job, she will see to it through its fruition. She will go that extra mile to make sure that whatever it is that she has taken up is completed with lot of panache. I have noticed this time and again at home and at ABWA. It's wonderful to have Neerja as a life partner and I look forward to spending the rest of my life with her.

**NB:** He is a very calm, composed and an understated person. He is a simple soul, who is very clear and focussed in his mind. For the most difficult situations, he has the simplest of solutions. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to God for my husband's success, drive and above all his values. Even though he has achieved so much, he has his feet firmly on the ground. Of course, both of us don't consciously think of success and failure. They are just a transient phase of life and we try to take it in our stride. I always feel that he is a great role model for our children.

My involvement with education is my way of giving back to society. I believe that education is not only about academic excellence. It is about character building, emotional growth and spiritual growth.

Every year, children from our school go into the hinterland and work with the people there. That exposes them to the ground realities of our country

Neerja Birla

as a result, India has emerged as an economic success story, and that is a matter of pride for all of us. But a lot more needs to be done. It's time to hit the accelerator again with twice the vigour.

**KB: Isn't it ironic that India is becoming a big capitalist economy when people in the west are raising questions about it?**

I don't think the western world is questioning capitalism. Capitalism as a concept is not something that society has written off. But today, there is degree of caution around capitalism. We believe in compassionate capitalism. Growth for growth's sake can never be an end in itself.

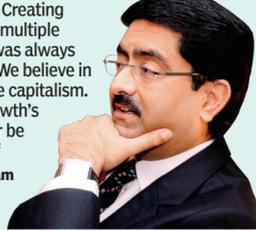
**Some time back when Warren Buffet asked Indian billionaires to give their wealth to charity, there was hardly any response...**

**KB:** The culture of caring and giving permeates many Indian families. In their own way, they are engaged in philanthropic pursuits. Several corporates are doing a lot in this space, but they are quiet about it. **NB:** Giving back is pretty much a part of the Birla family legacy. For generations, the philosophy of trusteeship underlines our operations. This entails ploughing back part of your profits in terms of giving back to society.

**And how do you give back to society?**  
**NB:** Through education. ABWA, our international school in Mumbai focuses on holistic growth through experiential

My father's contribution to business and society can never be underscored. Creating wealth for our multiple stakeholders was always on his radar... We believe in compassionate capitalism. Growth for growth's sake can never be an end in itself

Kumar Mangalam Birla



## 'R-day bravery award opened doors for me'

I got the National Bravery Award in 2003 and it changed the very course of my life. It opened doors for me, allowed me to travel extensively to 30 countries and meet people whom I could never have dreamt of meeting.

My brother, Chinmay (now 16), and I (19) fought with two robbers in a Mumbai train in 2002. This act was incorporated as a chapter, 'Sibling Gallantry' in the English textbook of Class IX in Maharashtra. We also got the 'Jeevan Raksha Padak' in 2003 from President Abdul Kalam. All this evoked a sense of fearlessness in us.

I attended Blossoms S T English High School in Mumbai and was its head girl. Subsequently, I did my XII from D G Ruparel College in the same city. My father, Dr Anil Sharma, is an interventional cardiologist at Bombay Hospital and my mother, Neha Sharma, a housewife.

My love for the performing arts saw me acting in TV shows and performing on stage. But I also love sports and represented India in an International Taekwondo Championship in South Korea in 2009. I also got the National Child Award for exceptional achievements in 2002 and 2009 and was privileged to receive the FIE Foundation National Award in 2006 worth Rs one lakh. That was gratifying as other awardees included Anjali Bhagwat, Ramoji Rao, Vithal Kamat and Om Puri.

I recently returned from an Antarctic expedition. In fact, 2012 began on a Polish research station, watching icebergs collapsing in front of me, observing whales blowing in the air and surrounded by hundreds of penguins and seals. Words cannot describe the pristine and untouched beauty of Antarctica.

I appeared for the SAT exams and got into Mount Holyoke College in the US where I am presently a sophomore. This has been an eye-opening experience. I have met senior bankers on Wall Street and senators such as Nancy Pelosi. I also got a chance to do research in world-class labs. Last semester, for example, as a marine geoscience research assistant, I conducted research on a sailing vessel in the Atlantic Ocean and studied permeability of rocks obtained from the ocean floor near Guatemala as part of the International Oceanic Drilling Programme.

I also got a chance to intern with various politicians in Georgia, which included David Usupashvili, the chairman of the opposition political party



Charu with her brother in 2003; (top) during an Antarctic expedition

## FACT FILE

**Name |** Charu Sharma; age: 19  
**Achievement |** Fought with two robbers in a Mumbai train in 2002 along with her younger brother  
**Now |** At Mount Holyoke College, US  
**Awards |** National Bravery Award in 2003; Jeevan Raksha Padak in 2003; FIE Foundation National Award in 2006

and Alexander Rondelli, chief political adviser to president Mikheil Saakashvili. All this was due to a professor of Russian Studies in my college.

I also travelled for a month to the Caribbean as I was part of a programme called Semester at Sea where engineering solutions are applied to real-world problems. Our focus was Panama Canal.

I also had a rewarding experience interning with Times of India in Mumbai where I wrote articles and covered press conferences. I studied the rain forests in North Queensland, Australia and dived in the Great Barrier Reef.

At the same time, I forged life-long friendships. There was Yoshi from Japan who I met in California and who adopted me as her cultural daughter. There was Marcello from Argentina who met me at a restaurant and took me home to chat with his wife and play with son. How can I forget Nick from Greece with whom I had a long conversation on festivals and who I made my rakhi brother? We even danced to 'Kajira Re' on a flight. Life was indeed fascinating.

I have yet to decide on a career. There are many options — engineering, finance, film making and entrepreneurship. But I have learnt to go with the flow. As Steve Jobs said, "The dots will connect in the end". But it all began nine years back on January 26.

## First Person

Charu Sharma