

A Life in Search of Fulfilment

Kalpana Kannabiran

THE LAST COURTESAN: WRITING MY MOTHER'S MEMOIR

By Manish Gaekwad

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₹ 599.00

I was the last courtesan to leave Bandook Gully. By the time I had to leave, everything was over... The kotha was in a shamble... I found myself again living alone on the first floor, with all other rooms shut... I looked after a few stray cats... They were the only friends I had left. I wore Dilip sir's gifted nose pin and looked into the mirror, counting the creases and wrinkles that time had strewn on my face. The diamond glinted like a humbling, sacred truth (p. 176).

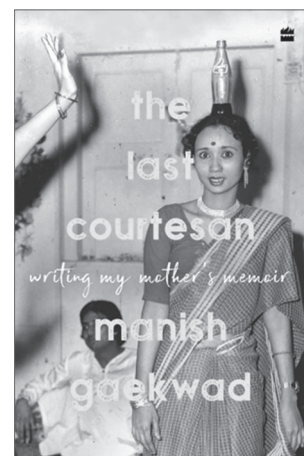
An extraordinary story of a life pieced together, precariously poised on the precipice (of bare life, survival, and violence)—accepted ‘like a warrior’, lived with compassion, dignity, love, detachment, and wry humour, and narrated as it was lived, with brutal honesty. This is the texture of Manish Gaekwad’s Introduction and Afterword as well—and his writing of his mother’s memoir. This is the story of Rekha Devi (‘Dulari’ to her mother). It is a story of Dulari’s birth in grinding poverty and hardship: ‘I was born at night in a ramshackle hut on the outskirts of Poona. The tin hut was situated on a barren, dusty stretch on the side of a highway. On the other side were green fields. Fields as fertile as dreams we had never seen’ (p. 1). Nine sisters ‘on display as failed attempts...we did not have the time to think and seek love and affection from our parents. We simply crowded in a corner of the room’ (p. 3). Memories of a nine-year-old being traded off as a bride—no ceremony, no jewellery, no flowers, no special meal, no songs, an ominous rather than a happy event (p. 11). Memories of brutal assault by the husband ‘in a way that I have tried to erase...completely from my memory...But the truth is so horrible that even recollecting it makes me recoil in horror. I did not understand that I had been violated. We did not know what a good touch or a bad touch was’

(p. 12). Virtually caged and living slave-like in the husband’s home in Agra, near the Taj Mahal, she ponders, if as they say love was in the air in Agra, ‘it certainly never came knocking at my door’ (p. 17). Instead, she finds the train journey to Calcutta and her arrival at Bow Bazaar where she is deposited by her mother-in-law the beginning of a release of sorts, as a life begins to unfold. Getting her first period on the train and realizing on reaching the *kotha* that she has in fact been sold yet again, this time by her mother-in-law who trafficked girls—she considers herself lucky to have landed in a *kotha* and not a brothel.

It is here, in the *kotha*, that Rekha Devi begins to piece together the shreds of her life and secure it from one day to the next, discovering herself in the process—learning music although she ‘sang like Neelkamal’, her goat, and wondered how she could ever sing, when she hardly ever spoke (p. 20). Her body, however, responded instantly to music (p. 22). She wished the ustad who tried to teach her music would use a spittoon and ‘not open his fountain mouth which sprinkled red spittle all over’ (p. 21). Dancing was not so bad, because the ustad who trained her in Kathak would clap to Keherwa *taal* and ask her to stomp her feet to his rhythm—‘Here I did fine. Herding goats, I used to be jumpy in the fields...I knew in my heart that I could do this...’ (p. 21).

Learning Hindi film numbers, preparing and giving daily performances, earning and keeping money, winning a loyal audience and adulation, finding fleeting love and transient patrons—but choosing the man she wanted to be seen with (p. 166), travelling to faraway places for performances and pilgrimages, reading and negotiating crowd behaviour, birthing and raising a child as a single parent, feeling touched at being asked her name by a young bangle seller—‘no one had ever asked my name *itne pyaar se*, with such tenderness,’ (p. 26) while out on a tour, and being given a gift of glass bangles on her departure...feeling happiness come into her life through the cracks and split them wide open, letting the light in: ‘More than the money, I was in control. I had seen money before. Now, I owned it. When the poor are no longer weak...I cried in joy. My heart felt happiness—it was a totally new feeling’ (p. 30).

For someone whose ‘freedom came in the dark’, there was no fear of unknown dangers lurking around the corner. Dealing daily with pistol wielding goondas who looted trains, ‘policemen, party workers, politicians, businessmen, goons...[even] some Bangladeshi freedom fighters’—‘everyone was welcome’ (p. 30).



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The train ride to Poona in search of her parents—the discovery that in the intervening years nothing had changed for them. Returning to the *kotha* in Calcutta, yearning for literacy, to be able to read books, learning to read and write from a Bihari *masterji*, mixing English words with Hindi, calling her mother and sister Shanna over so she could get an education, longing for and going through pregnancy and childbirth, whispering in her baby’s ear, ‘My only love, my child, my everything. I will die to see you live. I will do everything in my might to see that you get the best love and care in the world’ (p. 100). The search for purpose and fulfilment had come full circle. The journey from there to Bombay, touching the peripheries of the film industry, meeting film stars (Zeenat Aman), back to Calcutta, standing up for the women she worked with, making life and meaning and a home—a universe—for herself and her son... Finally witnessing the decline of the *kothas*, the drying up of her *dhanda*, and dealing with a body that ‘was its own landmine, where one explosion or the other was taking place periodically’ (p. 172). But through it all, holding her head high with the knowledge that ‘I worked hard to live my life with a little respect and dignity’ (p. 166).

A most beautiful memoir narrated by a mother to her son.

Kalpana Kannabiran is a sociologist and lawyer based in Hyderabad.

Book News

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Unveiling Jazbaa: A History of Pakistan Women's Cricket by Aayush Puthran tells the story of the extraordinary journey of eleven women players led by Shaiza Khan in 1996 on a tour of Australia and New Zealand. This is a tale told through the lens of society and politics, of personal battles and triumphs against the odds, of friendships and rivalries, of favours and revenge.

Polaris Publishing, 2022, pp. 347, \$16.23

Interaction of Financial Regulation and Monetary Policy: Proceedings of a Conference on Controlling Inflation

TCA Anant

GETTING MONETARY POLICY BACK ON TRACK

Edited by Michael D. Bordo, John H. Cochrane, and John B. Taylor

Hoover Institution Press, 2023, pp. 431, ₹ 2,571.00, \$ 19.99

Getting Monetary Policy Back on Track, edited by Michael D Bordo, John H Cochrane, and John B Taylor, is based on presentations and discussions from the Hoover Institution’s Monetary Policy Conference held in 2023. The background to the conference was the post-pandemic surge in inflation in 2021 & 2022, and the US Federal Reserve’s delayed response to these developments.

The inflation surge and the slow response of monetary authorities created a crisis of confidence in monetary policy. The inflation was driven by multiple factors, including pandemic-related supply chain disruptions, a surge in consumer demand as economies reopened, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the associated sanctions regime which significantly increased energy and food prices. Central Banks—particularly in the US and Europe—and some economists initially labelled the rising prices as ‘transitory’, expecting that the price pressure would subside as supply chains normalized. This led to a delay in tightening monetary policy, which may have allowed inflationary pressures to become entrenched.

By late 2022 and 2023, Central Banks in the US and Europe began aggressively hiking interest rates to control inflation, leading to tighter financial conditions. Although inflation started to decline, the aggressive rate hikes created their own negative consequences. The chapters in the book essentially deal with these issues. Each section also includes a summary of the discussion which followed the paper presentations. These discussions are extremely