By Ranjitha Gunasekaran
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A world of difference

Desraj Kali puts it like this. “There is a writer at this festival who like me is from Jalandhar. We have both written novels set in a particular period of Punjab’s history. There was a king and in his employ, among others, were a group of flour grinders. They were untouchables, their salary for a long day’s work was one meal. Now, this writer comes from a higher caste and he has written about the king and his court. I am a Dalit, my novel is about those untouchables. That is the difference in perspective.”

Kali, whose humour transcends linguistic barriers, is a prolific writer in the Punjabi. His take on what sets Dalit writing apart came in conversation on a chilly January evening at the Jaipur Literature Festival. The festival’s focus this year was on Dalit writing (though the sessions themselves were titled the “Bhaskar Bhasha” series) and Kali was among eight other luminaries who are little known beyond their region and rarely translated or recognised.

Kali, in fact, was meeting another prolific writer for the first time at the festival. The Delhi-based Ajay Navaria teaches at Jamia Milia Islamia and writes in Hindi. He too is Dalit.

“The spirit behind our writing, literature is the same. They are related to Dalit ideologies, our struggles. Only the creative translations of that are affected by the cultural regions we come from,” Navaria explains. The Assistant Professor from Jamia Milia Islamia writes about the experience of the middle class urban Dalit, unlike Kali whose work involves narrative accounts gathered from rural Punjab. But Navaria points out, “There is a grey area of atrocities and untouchability even in a city.” He gives examples. “For instance, at lunchtime at work, when you open your tiffin box, your colleagues who share everyone else’s food, avoid touching yours. When that happened, I stopped taking food from them either.” His wife experienced something similar while she was completing her graduation. “Her classmates stopped sharing her food when they found she was Dalit.”

“There appears to be a natural hatred in the minds of some people, which may come from they training they receive in their families, these things become part of the culture,” he says, at the same time stressing that his position teaching Hindu Ethics is a triumph of democracy and modernisation. “You couldn’t even imagine something like that 15-20 years ago.”

For Kali, the treatment the writers received at the festival itself seemed unimaginable — the mainstream literary bodies in India have never honoured them in this manner. “This is the first time we are receiving so much love and honour from readers and other writers,” he says, excitedly listing his favourite authors that he got to meet, such as Girish Karnad. His works have looked at various kinds of marginalised peoples. For instance, in Thumri, he focused on the Dalit musicians who had been protected by the Mughals. “They enriched their music and made it very rich but after the Mughals, their contributions were sidelined by the hegemony of Sikhism,” he says, adding that ultimately English is the medium you need to know to be able to sell your books.

Kali and Navaria also met the legendary Laxman Gaikwad, a Maharashtrian writer belonging to a De Notified Tribe, whose work both had been reading for the past 20 years. Gaikwad, who says he became a writer purely out of hunger, adds a few more dimensions to the debate: firstly on neo-brahminism — how a Dalit becomes successful and then chooses to cut himself off from his community, secondly on why there was never any debate on ending casteism itself. “I am the only one from my family who went to school. I became a writer on my own because of hunger. That is why while anyone can write about Dalits, our writing is the most powerful.”

P Sivakami is in the unique position of one who can relate to both the rural and urban experiences of a Dalit. “I grew up in a small village and was later sent to hostel because I was a good student,” she smiles. But she recalls how as a young girl, when she went to her friend’s house and tried to drink from the well, the friend’s grandmother tried to bar her entry because she was Dalit.

“At that time it didn’t matter because my friend was important to me and she stood up for me. Later, when I grew older, these things hurt,” the former IAS officer says. Indeed Sivakami, who has been writing from the ‘80s was initially wary of being called a Dalit writer, but later accepted it. More difficult to accept was the subtle discrimination she faced in her career as a civil servant. “I was put in charge of the Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Welfare Board, but many of my suggestions or inputs were brushed aside as being communal,” she recalls. “I didn’t ask to be put in that department but my work was always viewed through the prism of my caste,” she sighs.

Her children, however, faced little discrimination. “In fact no one in their school bothered about caste until their Class X board exams when they had to produce a caste certificate. Their friends could not believe they were Dalit, because they didn’t look like Dalits, whatever that means,” she laughed.

Today, Sivakami has plunged into politics. “I don’t think there is adequate representation for the community so though we have no funds, we are forging ahead,” she says.

— ranjithagunasekaran@expressbuzz.com.com

The New York Times

January 25, 2010

At Festival in India, Books Are the Buzz

By VIKAS BAJAJ

JAIPUR, India — A crowd, some members sitting on the floor, listened attentively last week as the author Amit Chaudhuri described the influence of writers from Ireland and the American South on his work.

Outside the tent where he was speaking, fans and photographers mobbed the Indian poet Gulzar, who shared the Oscar for the song “Jai Ho” in “Slumdog Millionaire,” blocking his exit from a hall. Elsewhere the Pakistani wunderkind Ali Sethi was fending off people who wanted to have pictures taken with him.

That was just the first day of the Jaipur Literature Festival, a five-day extravaganza that in only five years has become the official annual celebration of a vibrant and resurgent Indian and South Asian literary scene. By the time the festival ends on Monday, organizers estimate that some 30,000 people will have seen more than 200 authors and other speakers.

Indians might be known worldwide for being mad about cricket and Bollywood musicals, but they are also increasingly embracing literature in all its forms. Book sales have been rising as incomes and literacy have steadily climbed in recent years. Even the country’s once insular Hindi film industry, known for its formulaic song-and-dance dramas and thrillers, is taking notice of the boom and adapting popular novels into movies.

Vikram Chandra, the author of “Sacred Games,” said that when he was attending boarding school near Jaipur, few authors commanded the kind of celebrity that was on display at the festival, where schoolgirls — some from the elite Mayo College, at which he studied — chased him and other authors down for autographs.

Literature in India “was a cottage industry confined to the university,” he said. But in the past decade, and especially in the past five years, a booming economy has created big audiences for books, including genres like literary fiction, young women’s literature and children’s books, which were tiny niches earlier. Book sales here are increasing at about 5 percent a year, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers.

“What we see now is intimately linked to the economic growth,” said Mr. Chandra, who teaches creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley.

One indicator of the vibrancy of literature in India today was the presence of film stars from Mumbai and socialites from Delhi at the festival, Mr. Chandra said. “That itself is a sign of strength, when you can get the beautiful people in any culture to connect” with a medium, he added.

But for all the promise and potential of India’s literary scene, plenty of challenges and tensions remain.

Chiki Sarkar, the editor in chief of Random House India, said that while book sales were growing very quickly, most books still sell just a couple of thousand copies, a fraction of what even poorly performing books sell in the United States.

“Our worlds are growing, and our markets are growing, but they are just beginning to grow,” said Ms. Sarkar, who grew up in India but studied and worked in England before returning to work at Random House’s new

Indian operation three years ago.

The same could be said of the Jaipur Literature Festival. Started five years ago as part of a broader cultural festival, it has taken on a life of its own in the past three years.

The festival is a product of two very different personalities: William Dalrymple, who has spent much of his professional career writing about South Asia; and Namita Gokhale, a writer of Hindi books who started an earlier literary festival to highlight lesser-known Indian writers working in Indian languages.

From the start, Mr. Dalrymple said, he wanted the festival to be a stage for Indian literary luminaries like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Mr. Chandra, who, though born in India, live outside the country. But Ms. Gokhale was just as determined to make it a place to showcase lesser-known authors writing in Hindi, Tamil, Bengali and other regional Indian languages.

At one level their different aims dovetail, bringing together different threads of India's diverse linguistic and artistic traditions. At the festival, for instance, Ms. Gokhale organized a handful of sessions with writers who are Dalit, members of the lowest rung of the caste system. Mr. Dalrymple, for his part, delivered notable and sought-after writers like Wole Soyinka, Alexander McCall Smith and Niall Ferguson.

That literary pedigree, combined with late-night music sessions by Indian and Western performers — and the fact that the festival is free — was a potent draw for visitors, who swelled into the front yard of the Diggi Palace, built in the 19th century.

But the two themes — the global India and the domestic India — do not always easily blend. Some authors in India said they had little interaction with foreign writers. The foreigners, for the most part, spent time with one another and with Indian writers from the West. Mr. Dalrymple and Ms. Gokhale acknowledge that their different interests often turn into heated arguments about the festival program.

Omprakash Valmiki, one of the Dalit writers, said that he felt that his and other books written in Hindi were starting to find bigger audiences at home and abroad. (His autobiography, "Joothan: A Dalit's Life," was published in English by Columbia University Press in 2003.)

Mr. Valmiki, who has a day job as an engineer at an Indian government defense factory, said he almost turned down the invitation to attend the festival because he thought it would be too exclusive. But he said he was glad he had come after all, because the sessions he participated in were packed. Though he had few conversations with writers working in English, he said he was pleasantly surprised when a former chief minister of Rajasthan state stopped him and told him she had bought his book and was looking forward to reading it.

"Things change slowly," he said in Hindi. "Literature can't create a revolution overnight. It creates a base that changes society over time."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 28, 2010
A picture caption on Monday with an article about the Jaipur Literature Festival in India misspelled the surname of an author shown at the festival. He is Chetan Bhagat, not Chagat.

Common touch draws stars to India literary festival

By Giles Hewitt (AFP) ï Jan 23, 2010

JAIPUR, India ð From extremely humble beginnings, the Jaipur Literary Festival in India has grown in just five years into a major event that attracts star writers by resolutely refusing to treat them as such.

The inaugural festival in 2006 gathered just 18 authors -- all Indian residents -- who drew a crowd of around 100 people, a fair number of whom "appeared to be tourists who had simply got lost," according to the event's co-director, the writer William Dalrymple.

The 2010 event, currently under way in Jaipur in the western desert state of Rajasthan, boasts more than 200 writers and performers, including the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, two Booker winners and five holders of the Pulitzer prize for literature.

More than 20,000 people were expected to have crammed into the packed venue of the Diggi Palace -- a converted 19th century mansion in the centre of Jaipur -- by the time the five-day gathering ends Monday.

The explosive growth of the festival -- it now claims to be the largest and most prestigious of its kind in Asia -- has been achieved despite offering invited authors no financial incentive nor pampering them in the manner to which many are accustomed.

"Some of the Americans can be quite demanding," Dalrymple said. "A good American author expects to be flown first class and bring an assistant, and we just say 'no, we don't do that'."

With no VIP "Green Room" to cosset star writers in the fashion of other literary festivals like Britain's Hay-on-Wye, the authors in Jaipur are expected to mingle, drink and dine with the crowds.

"It's just boisterous. I love it," said Tina Brown, the former New Yorker and Vanity Fair editor and a regular on the international festival calendar.

"The Hay festival has become such a huge enterprise now and it's sponsored to the point of being like Wimbledon or something. It's great but it's highly discovered. This still has a sense of being special," she said.

British writer Geoff Dyer, who gave readings from his latest novel "Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi," said Jaipur was unusual in providing a level playing field.

"In a more hierarchically organised festival, I'd always feel I was at the bottom of the pile and missing out on something," he said.

"Don't get me wrong, I like to rubberneck in the Green Room at Hay as much as the next person, but I like the way there's no Green Room here. It makes it a much more integrated experience."

Despite its exponential growth, the festival, which currently costs 550,000 dollars to organise, has never made a profit -- partly due to its free access policy, and it almost went under in 2008.

Its saviour was an unlikely literary sponsor in the form of the Indian construction company DSC, which covers one third of the cost.

"I guess it's not very glamorous building flyovers, and this way they get their name out there," said Dalrymple.

While big-ticket, prize-winning authors have played a major part in raising the festival's profile, the organisers have remained loyal to their mission of promoting relatively undiscovered, non-English language Indian writers.

"For me this festival has to represent the plurality and diversity of India," said co-director Namita Gokhale.

"There was resistance. People couldn't understand that uncelebrated writers from an Indian language could hold their own against the so-called stars," she said.

The 2010 event has focused on writers from India's "untouchable" Dalit caste, who often command large sales but remain largely unknown -- not only internationally, but also in mainstream Indian literary circles which are dominated by a metropolitan, middle-upper class elite.

For Ajay Navaria, a Dalit who writes in Hindi, the Jaipur festival provides a forum he is denied in the Hindi literary community which he describes as generally "caste-based, insular and feudal."

"Even in mainstream Hindi literary seminars and conferences, Hindi Dalit writers are often set aside," Navaria said.

"This festival is more democratic. My voice gets heard."

Photo 1 of 3

Best-selling Indian author Chetan Bhagat is surrounded by picture and autograph hunters

Map

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BOOKS | FEBRUARY 26, 2010

Words That Touch

India's Dalit writers come into their own

By JOHN KRICH

Jaipur, India

Untouchable, maybe. But no longer unread.

Omprakash Valmiki, born into India's lowest social group, the Dalits -- known widely as "untouchables" -- says he was the first member of his family to "ever see the inside of a school building."

For 40 years he has worked for the Ministry of Defense in Dehradun -- but by night the bureaucrat was doggedly composing poems and fiction. And when Mr. Valmiki came to the 2010 Jaipur Literary Festival to participate in a series of panels meant to recognize the importance of so-called Dalit literature, he drew larger crowds than many of the internationally known authors there. He was mobbed for autographs, and his works -- which include the Hindi-language autobiographical novel "Joothan: A Dalit's Life," published in English translation in the U.S. by Columbia University Press -- were among the first to sell out at the festival bookshop. (The English translation also appears with the subtitle "An Untouchable's Life.")

"What we're doing is creating a new history of India that's not in the textbooks," the soft-spoken, bespectacled 60-year-old says of the growing movement of Dalit writers. "To support their superiority, the majority invokes so many ancient myths. So we must create myths of our own."

The results are striking a popular chord -- far beyond a community that is mostly illiterate -- with readers both in India and abroad. Recent hits include "Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India," by Narendra Jadhav, who rose from poverty to become vice chancellor of the University of Pune; it was published in the West by the University of California Press.

"Not only have their books attracted a mass audience, but they are profoundly impacting the political landscape," says Christophe Jaffrelot, director of France's Center for International Studies and Research and an authority on the Dalits. He points to Mayawati Kumar, a Dalit who has become chief minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, as leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

Prof. Jaffrelot says the wide appeal of Dalit works lies in their being "very personal and intimate, dealing with the inner world of an individual in conflict with how society views them," while the work of Brahmin writers can come off as remote and abstract.

"We are drawing on a body of practical experience that we've gained through all the things we have made, the crafts, the carving, the carpentry, the textiles," says Mr. Valmiki. "Very little that you see in India was made by Brahmins -- and everything carries the touch of those they call untouchable."

Direct protest is the message of much Dalit literature. In one poem, Mr. Valmiki cries out, "What would you do? /If you/ Have to swim against the current/ To open the doors of pain/ And do battle with hunger/ If you/ Are denied in your own land/ Made slave labor/Stripped of your rights/ The pages of your glorious history/Torn to shreds/And thrown away/What would you do?"

The most outspoken, and political, of the Dalit writers is Kancha Ilaiah, whose 1996 manifesto "Why I Am Not A Hindu" made him the target of death threats. Given to provocative claims like "while the Greeks were producing Plato and Aristotle, all the Hindus created was the Kama Sutra -- a book that teaches what the animals already know," Mr. Ilaiah argues that a caste system like that of Hinduism is "spiritual fascism" that can't survive in these global times. (Millions of Dalits are estimated to have converted, mostly to Buddhism, but also to Islam and the appeals of Christian missionaries.)

Mr. Ilaiah, 57, credits Dalit creative writers with "building a new image for ourselves" much as pioneering African-American writers did for a people so recently enslaved. "In ending our 3,000-year slavery, the greatest vehicle for our liberation has been the English language."

Access to English-language schools has been a major advance for Dalits, though the group continues to suffer severe discrimination -- including in education -- more than 60 years after caste divisions were outlawed by India's constitution. (That founding document is the work of B.R. Ambedkar, an untouchable with degrees from Columbia who is viewed as the group's heroic role model.)

"How can we take the constitution seriously?" asks Mr. Valmiki. "There are still at least 1.3 million of us

condemned to a scavenger class sent out each day to collect human feces -- and their main employer is the Indian government."

"Though we may be one-quarter of the population," says P. Sivakami, a leading feminist voice among Dalits, "we are rarely represented in the mainstream media, in television or movies. In the past, we've only carried names like 'baby,' been portrayed as drunks or sexually lascivious, grateful to get molested by a master."

While she worked for years as a senior civil servant, including a stretch with the Indian tourist office in Tokyo, Ms. Sivakami says she always "wanted to be a creative writer...the most noble job, where words can generate consciousness." In 1988 she produced her first novel, "Grip of Change," which was also the first Dalit novel written in Tamil. (Translated by the author, it was published in English in 2006.)

"It's not easy when nothing prepares you for the situation of your own inferiority," says Ms. Sivakami, one of 13 offspring of an illiterate mother and a father who had only a third-grade education -- but who rose to become a local legislator. Ms. Sivakami left the civil service in 2008 to enter politics and last month established the Party for Social Equity, plumping for everything from tribal to transgender rights. "The caste system," she says, "is a kind of evil spirit that has to be fought off."

In the fight, there are new allies such as young S. Anand, who in 2003 founded Navayana, a publishing house whose books deal with "caste from an anticaste perspective," and include many by Dalit writers.

Mr. Ilaiah believes there will be more writers to come. "We have already had our Martin Luther King," he says, referring to Ambedkar, author of the constitution. "But we've yet to bring forth our Obama."

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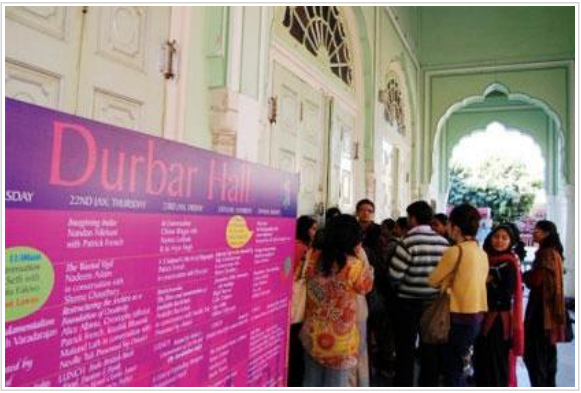
The Jaipur literary mela

January 27, 2010 | By Ron Augustin

At first, it looked like the thick fog was going to play mayhem with the Jaipur Literature Festival. Bhutan's Queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and Indian playwright Girish Karnad got stuck for hours at Delhi airport, and many of the other participants were delayed by endless traffic jams on the highways leading into Jaipur. Also, some of the international delegates such as authors HL Gates and Andrew Lycett could not make it since Indian visa procedures have become more difficult recently.



But then, after much of the initial program had been rescheduled, nothing could spoil the show anymore. For the inauguration, the Durbar Hall at Jaipur's magnificent Diggi Palace was packed with literary panjandrums who were welcomed by a concert of Rajasthani drummers and singers. Indian poet Arvind Krishna Malhotra then captured a large audience by reading from his anthology Time and Space, spanning more than 2,000 years of Indian poetry. Starting with an interpretation of Prakrit verses and arriving at translations of Kabir's Bhakti poems by contemporary Marathi poet Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar, whom he called "the greatest Indian poet," Malhotra set the tone for the festival's focal theme, the resurrection of "bhasa" or ancient and indigenous Indian literature. Following his presentation, lyricist Gulzar read from his poem Kitab dealing with the clash between books and computers.

Over the five days of the festival, 220 authors shared their ideas in reading sessions and discussions attended by large audiences. The evenings were filled with dance, theatre and musical performances. Writers included Javed Akhtar, Tina Brown, Roberto Calasso, Vikram Chandra, Amit Chaudhuri, Steve Coll, Shobhaa De, Louis De Bernieres, Mahasweta Devi, Roddy Doyle, Geoff Dyer, Anne Enright, Niall Ferguson, Michael Frayn, Indira Goswami, Christophe Jaffrelot, Prasoon Joshi, Girish Karnad, Amitava Kumar, Hanif Kureishi, Alexander McCall Smith, Ira Pande, Devdutt Patnaik, Krishna Sobti, Wole Soyinka, Claire Tomalin, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Pavan Varma, and Lawrence Wright. Other well-known attendees included filmmaker Stephen Frears and Bollywood greats Shabana Azmi, Rahul Bose and Om Puri.

The Jaipur Literature Festival in its fifth year is one of the most popular literary events in India. Initially, it was established as part of the Jaipur Heritage International Festival in 2006, by the Jaipur Virasat Foundation, the brainchild of Faith Singh, who has been very active for the revival of literature in Jaipur. "In Rajasthan, we have an extraordinary culture," she said, "and the festival has played an important role in understanding the value of our heritage. It has become a jewel in the crown." So much so that two years down the road the festival was turned into a literary event in its own right, albeit every year at about the same time as the ten-day festivities of the Jaipur Heritage International Festival. According to poet Gulzar, "One thing is that we get to meet writers who we wouldn't come across otherwise. We meet writers who write in different languages, which is great. There are a lot of book fairs in India, but nothing of this scale, which is one of a kind."

Last year, with 150 authors reading from their works, more than 12,000 people attended the festival. "This year the focus is on dalit literature, "bhasa" or indigenous writing and international books that made news," said festival directors Namita Gokhale and William Dalrymple. "We have had our share of controversies with our spotlight on Pakistan in

2009. But the presence of authors like Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid and Daniyal Mohiuddin on the ground explaining the situation in the country helped impart a better perspective. This year, we are doing an encore with dalit writers."

One of the panel discussions at the festival, "Outcast: The Search for Public Conscience," featured Navayana publisher S Anand, novelist P Sivakami from Chennai, Joothan author Omprakash Valmiki, and Kancha Ilaiah author of Why I am not a Hindu. Chairing the session, S Anand said that despite the fact that India's constitution was piloted by Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a dalit and one of the architects of modern India, dalits seem to hardly figure in sectors where there is no affirmative action. Consequently, beyond sometimes questionable representation in government jobs and politics, they continue to be shunned in the realms of culture, literature and the arts. Invoking Ambedkar's 1952 speech, Anand asked the other speakers to examine the "absence of public conscience." Ilaiah said the caste system kept the brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas from introspection as they consider dalits and sudras have no right to speak let alone write. Valmiki said that caste still envelopes every aspect of life in India. The speakers found there was no reason they would call themselves Hindu since Hinduism offered them no dignity or respect.

In a talk that captivated his audience, Wole Soyinka discussed his novel The Road, explaining that the main character had been "hankering after some spiritual meaning to his existence, and thus goes among the rejects of society to find a mystic way to explain the phenomenon of existence." He talked of the three spheres in Nigerian cosmology: ancestors, the living, and the unborn, and how it is possible to leap from one sphere or phenomenon to another. Asked whether literary tragedy was still possible in a rationalist world, he replied that "tragedy involves the relationship between humanity and society on any level" so there would still be "profundity" in life compared to the "immensity" of the surrounding environment.

Amitava Kumar, author of Bombay-London-New York, moderated a discussion on "Visible Cities" with Geoff Dyer and Amit Chaudhuri reading from their recent titles. Dyer, whose book is set in Venice and Varanasi read an amusing extract about bartering with monkeys in Varanasi, attempting to trade bananas in order to get a monkey to "leave the sunglasses and start evolving." Amit Chaudhuri read from his book about Calcutta, which relayed poignant observations about his uncle and aunt. He explained that his challenge had been to "write about ordinariness, the commonplace," the things he himself remembered most about the city, whereas Calcutta was usually written about with a "mythology of extraordinariness." Dyer accepted that his view of Varanasi was that of a tourist but that there was a certain viability to the ignorant outsider coming in and still being able to say something about a place, as evidenced by DH Lawrence, who wrote primarily about "the state of his soul" so that a place served as good a mirror as any other for the author's state of mind.

Another highlight at the festival was Shabana Azmi reading from her mother Shaukat's memoirs Kaifi and I, which was recently translated into English from the original Urdu version, Yaad ki Rehguzar. It is the love story of two revolutionary artists straddling half a century since they met at a progressive writers conference in Hyderabad in 1947, providing detailed impressions of a historic epoch in cinema life and beyond. The book is all about Shaukat's life with poet and film producer Kaifi Azmi, but it is also a book about a woman who stood up for herself and her convictions. "It is intriguing how the book is so replete with vivid recreations and graphic details, as my mother never maintained a diary," commented Shabana Azmi, for whom many of her mother's memories have also been her own childhood memories. Reflecting on her own social commitment and her parents' influence in that, she said it was inevitable that she'd get involved eventually, because of her upbringing: "The ground was so fertile that the plant was bound to take root."

Asked for her view on the festival itself, Shabana Azmi concluded, "I think Jaipur is the great literature festival of Asia, it has the buzz. It has made the world of books glamourous again."