



MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL OF LETTERS



Together for tomorrow

K.K. Shailaja & Sarah Joseph

Two women born into communist households grew up to become global representatives of Kerala in their respective fields. Politician and former state minister for health, K.K. Shailaja, and renowned novelist and torch-bearer of the feminist movement in Kerala, Sarah Joseph came together for a dialogue on 'Kerala created by women' (Streekal Srishticha Keralam) during the fifth edition of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters. The session, which was moderated by senior journalist K. Madhu commenced with the release of 'Lilliappa,' a children's book by Sarah Joseph. Talking about the politics of freebies, Shailaja said that the development of a nation can only happen when the daily needs of the people are met. For this, Rs1,600 pension has to be given, subsidy needs to be provided and scholarships must be offered and this cannot be deemed as an offering or considered a freebie, she added.

Citing an anecdote from the US-Vietnam war, Sarah said that women do not think about bombs but about grains and water. The basis of development as far as women are concerned is the availability of food, water and shelter. There are no means for women to develop policies that the nation actually needs. Even 33 percent representation of women is not seen in actual decision or policy making, she said. "People on the outside like me believe if we constantly raise such issues and make noise, people on the inside like Shailaja teacher will be able to do something about it. Why are women not given equal rights as per Article 14? There is no need for half the population to demand representation. It should naturally exist. The confidence and comfort that teacher (Shailaja) gave us during the Covid period is incomparable. Could any of the male leaders have done the same? It's not that women are not capable. Women possess the knowledge, empathy and

the ability to make decisions and form policies. They have a vision of the world, the future and their children. The 33 percent reservation is merely welfare; it should be 50 percent if equality is to be maintained," Sarah opined. Responding to this, Shailaja listed out the women-oriented policy decisions made by the CPI(M). She also pointed out that a tendency exists among women to avoid taking up positions of power due to their familial responsibilities. "Change needs to come and that needs to take place at the societal level. Scientific growth needs to be encouraged. But we are now living in times where even scientists are ascribing to superstitious beliefs. Taking up positions of power from the grassroots level is the way to go," Shailaja stated. She also pointed out that processes are ongoing within the communist party to change mindsets and create more spaces for women and ended her words with the hope that such a change might occur soon.





I feel at home with Indian literature, not American literature.

- Fuat Sevimay, Turkish writer



Mistaken Identity, Beheading And A Missing Head! Yes, Everyone Loves Crime

Bhavik Nair

It was a confluence of true crime and crime fiction on the second day of Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024 when authors Shevlin Sebastian and Anupama Mohan discussed their books titled 'The Stolen Necklace' and 'Where Mayflies Live Forever,' respectively.

'The Stolen Necklace,' co-authored by V.K. Thajudheen, narrates a sensational case of mistaken identity where he was arrested and incarcerated for 54 days for allegedly stealing a gold necklace. Although Thajudheen was later exonerated, the trauma continued to persist, says Shevlin.

"Thajudheen had never seen the inside of a police station before he ended up spending 54 days in prison. So you can imagine what a shock that was," he noted. A middle-class person who has just flown from Doha to Kannur for the wedding of his daughter and is at the peak of his happiness ends up finding policemen waiting for him outside his house when he returns home following a dinner at his sister's place, narrates Shevlin.

The author not only highlighted the injustice of the entire episode but also elaborated on the nitty-gritty of the incarceration focussing on the small, often neglected pieces of information that provides depth to a book. "I asked him what the smell



Thajudheen had never seen the inside of a police station before he ended up spending 54 days in prison. So you can imagine what a shock that was

Shevlin Sebastian



of a prison was. Thajudheen told me one was the stench of urine. Then there was the smell of rust and the smell of wet mud due to rains. There was the sour smell of the blanket, too," said Shevlin.

The author strongly advocated the need for financial compensation in cases of wrongful incarceration, akin to the system followed in some developed nations. "We are the fourth largest economy in the world. We should come up with a system when somebody is exonerated, we should pay in crores. You have to enable this person to survive for the rest

of their life. Their career has been destroyed!" the author argued.

While Shevlin's book focussed on true crime, Anupama Mohan discussed her fiction 'Where Mayflies Live Forever,' a mystery set in a Sittannaval, a small town in Tamil Nadu's Pudukkottai District, where residents are stunned by the beheading of a prominent man. The suspect Veni, a geography teacher at the local school, appears to have disappeared. But Anupama's literary debut not only deals with mystery; it also reflects on a woman's self-discovery in the natural world. "I never went to Sittannaval. I wrote it entirely from my imagination. The goal was not to be naturalistic," she said.

"When I began writing the story, I never thought of it as a 'whodunnit,'" Anupama said, adding that for her, it was a philosophical meditation on the question of violence. "The goal was to look at crime not as an isolated incident that shocks us but to try and see if it is networked into social relations. If it can be understood through psychology, either of the criminal or what makes a person a criminal," she explained.

One thing definitely stands out in Anupama's novel. The case is not just about a beheading. The head is missing too! Read 'Where Mayflies Live Forever' to find out what finally transpired in the small town.



Life cannot be measured or calculated.
Just let things be; the universe will play its role.
-Samuthirakani, Tamil actor and director

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Photos | C.H. Shaheer


Making Kids Excited About History

Sadhana Sudhakaran

 *How can you make children excited about history?*


● Devika Cariapa knows that it is a dull subject for most kids and, instead of talking about the past, she adopts a more engaging approach - using pictures to captivate young minds.

Embracing the wisdom of the adage 'A picture is worth a thousand words,' trained archaeologist and Bal Sahitya Puraskar winner Devika Cariappa creates a genuine passion for history in children by bridging the gap between the past and present. In a brief chat, Devika shares insights on her approach to writing for children.

 *How do you, as an archaeologist, believe connecting children to the past can*


foster a better understanding of the present?

● I started writing eight years ago. I am particular that my writing has to be in a simple and approachable way for children to connect with the past. Rather than presenting dry facts, I aim to weave interesting narratives that capture children's attention. I write interestingly, not just with facts. For instance, when writing about a dog, I might narrate its role in a historical battle, creating an engaging storyline. Through my writing, I encourage young readers to observe history all around them, fostering a curiosity about the world's past.


 *Does interest in history start from tales by grandparents?*

● Yes, it certainly begins at home when our grandparents start sharing tales with us during leisure times. When we ask them questions, they often reply by weaving in a story format. As the children grow up, they develop

an interest in the past.

 *How do you balance storytelling and factual accuracy to ensure children are entertained?*

● I don't simply present my stories with dry facts. Instead, I engage in considerable research on history from ancient to modern times. Archaeologists are academics. They write and research a lot. I just write it in a simple way and put it out to anyone interested in history. 'India through Archaeology: Excavating History' is my award-winning book which encourages a more critical and holistic understanding of India's multihued history.

 *Which place of historical importance do you wish to visit, and why?*

● I have long wished to visit the monuments and captivating buildings of the Vijayanagar Empire in Hampi. Every nook and cranny of Hampi tells a story and I would love to visit it soon.



Rather than presenting dry facts, I aim to weave interesting narratives that capture children's attention. I write interestingly, not just with facts

An Exploration of Life's Purpose and Fulfillment



suit of Ikigai is indispensable for attaining lasting happiness and fulfillment.

The discussion delved into the profound impact of purposelessness on mental well-being, particularly among the elderly. Geriatric depression often stems from a lack of purpose and so the importance of embarking on life's journey with clarity and intentionality was emphasised.

Likening life to a soccer match divided into two halves, Miralles poetically likened the first half of life to being a beacon of light for oneself, while the second half entails becoming a lighthouse for others, illuminating their paths with wisdom and compassion.

Miralles also dwelt on the concept of forgiveness and the transformative power of letting go of the past. The resilience of the Japanese people in the aftermath of tragedy is a testament to the efficacy of forgiveness and daily acts

of contribution towards a brighter future, he said.

Addressing contemporary challenges, Miralles examined the pervasive issue of work-life balance in modern society. "The secret is in finding the middle path - how much you give yourself and how much you give others," he explained.

Miralles also reflected on his forthcoming book on India, underscoring the nation's rich tapestry of wisdom and resilience. He urged the audience to embrace life's insecurities and find solace in the simplicity of existence, echoing the sentiment championed by authors like Haruki Murakami. "The essence of life lies in insecurity. We need to learn to flow with that," he continued.

It was a profound journey into the depths of meaningful existence for the audience at the 'Festival Hall' of Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024 during an enlightening session on 'Purpose of life: The Ikigai Way' with Francesc Miralles, the co-author of the acclaimed book 'Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life.'

Miralles commenced the discourse with Manoj K. Das, Editor of Mathrubhumi Daily and Digital, by drawing a captivating parallel between Buddha and modern psychology, stating, "Buddha is the first psychologist of the world." This assertion set the tone for a thought-provoking exploration of life's purpose and fulfillment.

The conversation seamlessly transitioned from the individual quest for meaning to the broader societal implications of Ikigai. Miralles eloquently elucidated how Ikigai transcends cultural boundaries, offering a universal framework for leading a purposeful life. He emphasized that regardless of one's background or circumstances, the pur-



photo gallery

When two people with unique voices express their view of the world, one could definitely expect shocks, surprises and some musical thoughts. Veteran writer T Padmanabhan and CPM Politburo Member M.A. Baby shared their concerns about the wonder that was India.

T. Padmanabhan

- I became a Hindu because my parents were Hindus.
- Musicians in North India did not sing raga Yaman Kalyan for long because it was composed by Amir Khusrau.
- Even though he was a Brahmin, M.D. Ramanathan didn't get the Sangeetha Kalanidhi award but Sheik Chinna Moulana got it!



M.A. Baby

- If you don't utter Jai Shriram, you may be killed!
- Today, efforts are on to convert the concept of Rama as the symbol of Hindutva, but Mahatma Gandhi said Rama also meant Rahim for him.
- The trajectory of Indianness has the presence of a different kind of Rama.



Ka expressions





The most famous Indian author in Turkey is Tagore. 'The God of Small Things' is also famous there, as is Shashi Tharoor.

-Firat Sunel, Turkish writer



If I can't be inclusive, I'd rather quit writing



Christina Alex

The works of Koral Dasgupta, the Indian author known for her writings on Indian mythology, are discussed in the context of gender studies, myth, art, and ecocriticism. Her books on the subject are 'Kunti', 'Ahalya', 'Draupadi', 'Mandodari' and 'Tara'. Koral's books under the Sati series have received nominations for many prestigious awards, the most recent being 'Ahalya' being recommended for the 2023 Prize Honour List of Sahitya Akademi. Koral speaks about the nuances of retelling mythology and navigating through cultural sensitivities, on the sidelines of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024. Excerpt:

? *What inspired you to become a writer?*

● I started writing when I was pregnant. A child is a beautiful gift but the restrictions that come with child-birth are not, and everything that

you have to go through at that time can be quite demotivating. My first book was a semi-academic book with Shah Rukh Khan as a case study that I wrote during this time, and it made me happy because I like Shah Rukh.

? *Can you share a bit about your writing process? Since you work mostly with mythology, how do you go about selecting which character to write about?*

● My onus is on 'Panchakanya' (the five virgins from Indian epics). Some alternate schools of thought say that apart from Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari, Sita is also a Panchakanya. But I don't have to write a book separately about Sita because I talk a lot about her in my upcoming book 'Tara' and in 'Mandodari'. My process is simple storytelling. These stories connect with a lot of generic pain and happiness that is part of everyone's life. I don't want to write stories that people cannot relate to but are valued merely due to their connection to

Indian mythology.

? Your novel 'Ahalya' touches on sensuousness and asceticism. How do you navigate through such sensitive themes without hurting any religious or cultural sentiments?

● I am not writing a male-bashing feminist text. I didn't choose my audience, it got created. My books are read by intellectuals from both the Right and the Left wings and they are quite happy about it. I'm writing with a base that even a four-year-old would be able to read. I'm just reading between the lines and expanding what's already there. I have been forgiven for a lot of things and at the same time treated with affection for a lot of things.

There is a difference between erotica and sensuality. When a book demands such an emotion, if it can be presented aesthetically then it turns into something beautiful. I want to write inclusively and if I can't do that, I'll quit writing.

? *In an increasingly intolerant world, how do you believe literature, particularly your writing, can contribute to fostering understanding and tolerance?*

● We, as a society, have come into a habit of not tolerating any opposition. That is the worst that can happen. It is very important to hear the other side as well. It helps to develop arguments from a more neutral level for our understanding.

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I don't encourage the use of the word prostitute; use the term prostituted woman instead.

- Ruchira Gupta, *Journalist and activist*

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A Break-up is never a sudden brake

Shalini Chandran

Sitting with your friends and chatting about life over a warm cup of coffee—that's what a conversation with Shenaz Treasurywala felt like. The actress, writer, and travel vlogger is a warm and bubbly person with an infectious smile that captivates the audience.

Shenaz's recent book about relationships and breakups titled 'All He Left For Me Was a Recipe' is the tale of a girl from age 4 to 40 and the boys she comes across in life.

"I believe I am a storyteller; I have always loved telling stories. When I was a small girl, I used to tell the elders in my family to give me Rs10 in return for a story," said Shenaz.

Every chapter of the book starts



afresh with a new leaf, a new boy and a new relationship. Her take on life is to just live life the way she wants to—a liberated bird true to herself.

She also spoke about being happy with oneself and getting into a relationship only when one feels it is right. "Meeting the right guy at the wrong time is like getting a South Indian thali when you are already full with a mediocre plate of food," she said.

When asked if there is hope after a break-up, she asserted that "the book is to remind you and me that there is always another chapter in life."

Speaking about the title of her book—'All He Left Me Was a Recipe'—she explained, "In every relationship, you are likely to have a favourite food, a recipe you enjoy with that one person. When the relationship fades, you may miss it. But the real recipe is the life lesson that is left behind."



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When dialects cross the swords in a novel!

R Rajashree

There is a power relation between South Travancore and North Malabar, which I have been a witness to since my childhood. The early teachers in Malabar had mostly migrated from Travancore and they used to guide students how to approach and appreciate a book. But it has a flip side because it will affect the way a student will read a work independently.

Likewise, they possess the sensibility and style of expressions from Travancore, and the feeling

that they have the authority over us, and the language of power belongs to them. Moreover, most of the government employees in Malabar are from South Kerala and they use their dialect as a tool to assert their domination.

That is exactly the case when it comes to the equation of power between a man and a woman. Here men are seen as educated, sophisticated, widely travelled, modern and civilized whereas women are considered meek. So, there is a power structure ruling the relation between the man and woman.

There is an image that has already been set, which considers the language of the man as the language of wisdom and power, whereas the language of woman is the language of emotion.

I used the dialects of Travancore and Malabar in my novel 'Kalyaniyennum Dakshayaniyennum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Katha' to depict this difference. The Travancore dialect of the husband and the North Malabar dialect of the wife come face to face in this novel.





Every Keralite should become a walking ambassador for Kerala tourism, embodying the spirit of hospitality and warmth that define the state's culture.

- **Mohammed Riyas**, *Minister*



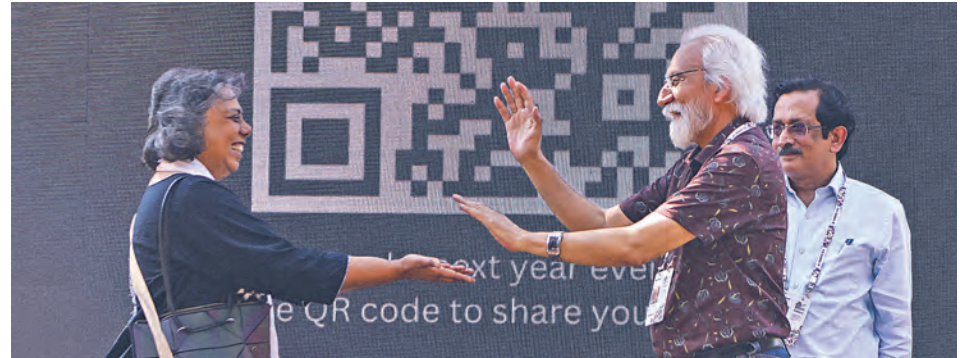
The man called Maulana Azad

P. Sudhakaran



Was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad wrong in his decision that Indian Muslims should remain in India during Partition? No, asserts firebrand historian Irfan Habib. In a freewheeling interaction at Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters with writer and critic S. Gopalakrishnan on 'The Relevance of History,' he said most of the muslims had stood by Maulana's ideas. Although there are efforts from certain corners to portray him as an education minister without any knowledge, the reality is that his thoughts and ideas have great relevance in the fields of art, culture and education in the country, he said. The conversation focused mainly on Habib's latest book, 'Maulana Azad: A Life,' which unravels many interesting aspects of the legendary political leader who fought for an inclusive India, as described by the author.

Why did he write such a book? Is there a deliberate inattention towards



the contributions of Maulana? "This is one reason for the book, but more than that, Maulana was a great scholar and a nationalist who needs to be revisited in two contexts," he said. One is in the context of global Islam, and the second is related to what we are doing with our nationalism today, Habib said.

However, writing this book was a challenge, as Maulana was a recluse who was not keen about writing his autobiography or anything about him, and what we see are materials written by others, said him. His only writings are the letters he wrote while in prison. Some of these letters brought to the fore the amateur ornithologist in him, said Habib.

Gopalakrishnan also pointed out that Maulana was passionate about music and he used to carry his radio to the prison. "If you want to deprive me of any pleasure, then deprive me of my transistor," Maulana had said. Once he took his sitar to Taj Mahal on a full-moon night and played his favourite tune.

Maulana had a very informal relationship with Gandhiji. "He was the only person who could smoke in front of Mahatma Gandhi and I came to know about this from a photograph from the archives of The Hindu, which was used along with an article I wrote," pointed out Habib.



Maulana was a great scholar and a nationalist who needs to be revisited in two contexts. One is in the context of global Islam, and the second is related to what we are doing with our nationalism today.

Irfan Habib

MBIFL24
Day
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Watch Out For More Fun!

MBIFL's Day3 Brings you the following personalities...



M Mukundan
Author
Session: Mukundante Manorajyangal



Chef Suresh Pillai
Restaurateur
Session: Ruchiyude parudeesakal



Blessy
Director/screenwriter
Session: Kadhayum Kazhchayum



Troy Onyango
Kenyan writer
Session: Contemporary African Literary Movements



Sitaram Yechuri
General Secretary, CPI(M)
Session: India after Ayodhya



Shashi Tharoor
Author/Politician
Session: Home Turf