

'Women carry a lot of internalised patriarchy'

'Bombay Begums' is at its strongest when its women are forced to confront their own prejudices

CONVERSATIONS AT LARGE
ANINDITA GHOSE

As in real life, all the crucial conversations in *Bombay Begums* unfold in the ladies restroom. Underneath her designer linen saris, Rani (Pooja Bhatt), the CEO of a private bank who was once a "bank teller from Kanpur", has middle-class values—she isn't comfortable with the domestic staff washing her lingerie. In easy messaging, we learn that the "best local broker" is a woman. It is details like this that make *Bombay Begums* get under your skin.

Best known for writing and directing *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, Alankrita Shrivastava's six-part series, which launched on Netflix on International Women's Day on Monday, follows five urban women from different demographics. The ensemble cast includes Pooja Bhatt, Shahana Goswami, Amruta Subhash, Plabita Borthakur (the girl in the burqa from *Lipstick...*) and Aadhya Anand. It marks Bhatt's full-fledged return to acting after 20 years.

While Bhatt and Subhash deliver stellar performances, *Bombay Begums* often has too many tracks to follow. There's work-life balance, infertility, infidelity and the idea of motherhood, all stitched together with a pretentious teenager's voice-over. The best parts of the show are not when the women battle the external world but when they are forced to confront their own prejudices. It is also perhaps India's first post-#MeToo show, though Shrivastava sees it as "much more than that".

In a video call, Shrivastava spoke about how a conversation with her mother led to *Bombay Begums*, the thrill of casting Pooja Bhatt, and how OTT platforms are helping film-makers serve alternative narratives. Edited excerpts:

Each of the six episodes take their titles from iconic feminist literature. Did books like 'The Bell Jar' and 'The

Color Purple' guide your storytelling or were these added later?

I had this idea that I would love to name the episodes after books by female writers about the female experience. But it was a passing thought. During post-production, I decided I am going to do it. The titles resonate with what's happening in the episodes. The last one is named after Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own*—it's one of my favourites and I feel that the book says about women having their own space is important.

'Bombay Begums' picks up many threads from women's relationships with their bodies, to subverting the evil stepmother cliché, to #MeToo. Did you have a checklist of issues you wanted to address? What was the seed?

The seed of it was when I had a conversation with my mother, who is from IIM (Indian Institute of Management), Ahmedabad. She graduated in the late 1970s. There were 70 people in her batch, of which four were women. None of them pursued their corporate careers. My mother entered the development sector, someone else was teaching, etc. That conversation stayed with me. It got me thinking about women in the corporate sector, about these women being in marriages where they have to do well but they want their husbands to do well. I was interested in examining that.

Once I thought of the characters—I have been incubating this idea since 2014—it came to me very instinctively who these people are. I did want someone at the entry level, someone who is mid-career, and someone right at the top. The last character that came to me was the sex worker Lily (Subhash)...

Who is completely out of the system, so to say?

Exactly! I got her in because it was a very sanitised world and I needed a view from another world to reflect on the ethics and dilemmas of this world. I am character-driven. The moment I start digging into a character and what's happening in their life, it brings up issues, rather than the



Alankrita Shrivastava says she doesn't like the idea of women being boxed. ARIJAY PRASAD

other way around.

It's not possible to imagine Rani without Pooja Bhatt. I read one interview in which you said that you watched 'Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin' 21 times. She was busy when you approached her and you changed the schedule to accommodate her?

It was when my casting director and I were jamming that Pooja Bhatt came up. She's someone I have been fond of since my school days—so fresh, so real, so ahead of her time. *Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin* was my go-to video-cassette for the summer holidays. I also loved her in *Zakhm* and *Daddy*.

When we reached out, she was busy working on *Sadak 2*. When we met in person, I was just so amazed. She had read all the material and she responded to it so well. She had the same magic of her youth in terms of energy, but also vulnerability and strength. I left that meeting knowing she was the one. After that I didn't meet any other actor and just hoped that she would agree.

Your 'begums' have their contradictions. Was it important for you to focus on their ambivalence?

Yes, I don't like the idea of women being boxed. People are never one thing. I enjoy

characters making conflicting choices. Women carry a lot of internalised patriarchy and in *Bombay Begums* I wanted to explore how the characters unlearn that. In our heads, there's so much conditioning that what you are battling is not just the obstacles outside, you are always battling the ideas inside you.

The idea of women as enablers is tough terrain in a post-#MeToo era. One international show that did it well was 'The Morning Show' with Jennifer Aniston. Have you watched that?

Not yet, it's on my list. Women have been trained to be watchdogs of patriarchy. Patriarchy works as the idea of a collective of men, the idea that they will back each other, but women are trained to bat against each other.

There has been criticism about the depiction of "progressive" urban women. The idea that film-makers take the short-cut of showing women smoking, drinking, using cuss words and casual sex. What are your views on this?

I get asked that a lot: Why are your women smoking and drinking? I think it's so funny that we never ask that question of our male characters. I feel the question itself comes from a very deep-seated patriarchal mindset. I have been asked this question right from when I made my directorial debut with *Turning 30* (2011). I have never reduced my characters to being cool just because they are doing a certain thing. I find this question problematic because that means somewhere you feel women should not be doing something. I am not a schoolteacher with my charac-

ters. I feel women should be represented in all ways so that we normalise women doing whatever they want.

Projects with Raveena Tandon and Madhuri Dixit Nene have just been announced. Do you agree that we are in the midst of a peak with women's stories in India? Is it about more women as creators or the audience appetite changing?

It's definitely about women being in deciding positions. When representation behind the camera changes, everything changes. Many more women are gatekeepers too—they are running the networks, green-lighting shows. They see merit and depth in these stories.

It's also a reflection of changing audience tastes. But with audiences it's a chicken and egg story. Audiences have been forced to consume a male hero narrative because the machinery was like that.

You have made it clear that the idea of the male hero does not interest you. How did you write the men in this show? Apart from the character of Deepak (Manish Chaudhary), all the men are unidimensional wimps. I felt sorry for them.

The stories I am telling are from the POV of the female characters. I don't have the space to tell the stories of the men in their lives independently. So you only see the men in relation to the women. It is definitely a conscious thing. It is a female universe.

Conversations At Large is a fortnightly interview column. Anindita Ghose is a writer and journalist based in Mumbai.

— Medium Talk — More than small talk

Tales from a chef's road trip

During an intense, immersive trip through Uttarakhand, chef Thomas Zacharias discovers spectacular new ingredients and flavours

Shrabonti Bagchi
shrabonti.b@livemint.com

I have eaten & experienced a lot of crazy things during my 8 years of food trips across India & abroad, but never in my wildest imagination did I think I'd be out in the cold 'foraging' for snow to use as an ingredient in a special local dish here in the mountains," wrote chef Thomas Zacharias in a tweet on 3 March with the hashtag "#COTRuttarakhand" ("Chef on the Road Uttarakhand"). For two weeks over January-February, Zacharias, former executive chef of the award-winning modern Indian restaurant The Bombay Canteen (TBC) in Mumbai's Lower Parel, ate his way through the mountain state, discovering local dishes, ingredients and cooking techniques that are practically unknown to most of us, and documenting his discoveries on Twitter and Instagram Stories.

The "crazy thing" he refers to is a local dish called *hyun*, somewhat like snow cones or ice *gola*—except it's made by gathering fresh snow and flavouring it with a sweet syrup made from seabuckthorn berries and a souring ingredient like *chulondh* (dried apricot pulp) or *tithrai* (a tamarind-like herb).

This wasn't Zacharias' first immersive trip planned around food. It all started in 2013 with a trip across 36 cities and towns in France, Italy and Spain, continued with a whirlwind two-month research trip across India before he joined TBC, and similar tours of Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and the North-East.

The Uttarakhand tour is a great example of how each city, town and village in India has a distinct food culture, and the opportunity each region holds for anyone willing to spend time discovering food traditions that have largely been unexplored and undocumented. One of the reasons Zacharias chose Uttarakhand was the fact



A 'pahadi thali' with Sisod ka Saag, Taur ki Sabji, Gahat ke Bidvey, Bhat ka Jaula, Jhingore ke Kheer; and Thomas Zacharias. TWITTER/@CHEFTZAC



that the state's food is woefully under-represented on Indian menus, and he felt it offers a fresh complexity and unparalleled use of local, seasonal ingredients.

These are just a few of the dishes and ingredients he found: *chakora chaat* (grated local pomelo garnished with lemon juice and other condiments), *gethi* (a local tuber with a distinctive black skin and firm white flesh), *jakhya aloo* (a potato dish flavoured with wild mustard

or *jakhya* seeds), *anthe* (blood sausages made of goat blood encased in intestine, often being an intrinsic part of Pahadi cooking), *faaf* (a mould that acts as a fermentation starter used to make a local drink called *kachchi*), *kandali saag* or Himalayan stinging nettle (also called *bichhu buti ka saag* in some areas), and one of his favourites, *nimbu saan*—a simple Kumaoni dish made of local lemons tossed with hemp seeds (hemp or *bhang* seeds are a common ingredient in Pahadi food, and are even mixed with rock salt to make *bhang ka namak*, used to flavour many dishes).

"On paper, if you told me *nimbu* mixed with salt and some basic ingredients could taste so delicious and refreshing, I wouldn't believe it. But having it freshly made, surrounded by local people—that was a completely different experience. The sense of place is also so important," says Zacharias, who hopes to host a unique food show someday, perhaps be the Anthony Bourdain of Indian food—not just discovering previously unknown dishes but placing them within the people, culture and politics they belong.

Addressing consumer needs with thoughtful designs and aesthetics

With a keen attention to detail, backed by years of expertise and consumer research, Brilloca - a leading building materials company in India -

the bathroom is a reflection of one's lifestyle and taste. Home to the iconic brand Hindware, the company is known for being a pioneer in the sanitarywarespace. The brand provides a variety of configurations, designs and materials to inspire a unique, personalised experience to consumers looking for modern bathware. Their inventive series features collections from innovative brands - Queo (the luxury brand), Hindware Italian Collection (a premium brand) and Hindware as well as Benelave (mass segment brands).

From rich conventional designs to classic contemporary and refined European collections, the company offers a multitude of styles and finishes to complement any design aesthetic.

Chairman and Managing Director, Brilloca Limited, Sandip Somany, answers some questions about the company's innovations and growth.

Brilloca rebuilds its bathware business amid the pandemic. How is your product portfolio more customer-centric now?

Last year, when the pandemic struck, one of the ways the virus spread was through high touch surfaces and touch

points. So, we introduced a whole range of products especially for the commercial segment like hotels, hospitals and offices, where you don't need to touch anything. Our Smart Technology for consumers such as Touchless Technology, Spa-Like Showers and more products are driving Brilloca's growth and we have seen a 10x growth of these products over the last year. We are also an environmentally conscious company. Most of our products lead to less usage of water.

Bathware is an experience when combined with luxury. How is Queo making waves in the luxury bathware segment?

Our effort is to make Queo synonymous with luxury bathware products. The brand is at the top end of the pyramid with highly stylised, innovative products designed by leading international designers. These products are steeped in modern European design philosophy. When you see these products, you instantly feel the diligence, the detail, the intricacy and the thinking behind them.

This distinct positioning has resulted in a collection curated to embellish a consumer's private spaces with sheer luxury. That's why we call them Bath Lounges, i.e. providing an unmatched experience. Today, we have about 85 retail outlets housing the Queo collection across various cities in India.

Brilloca offers a multitude of styles and finishes to complement any design aesthetic in the bathware space

When you see these products, you instantly feel the diligence, the detail, the intricacy and the thinking behind them.

This distinct positioning has resulted in a collection curated to embellish a consumer's private spaces with sheer luxury. That's why we call them Bath Lounges, i.e. providing an unmatched experience. Today, we have about 85 retail outlets housing the Queo collection across various cities in India.



Sandip Somany
Chairman & Managing Director, Brilloca Limited



Sudhanshu Pokhriyal
Chief Operating Officer, Bath Products, Brilloca Limited

To be able to provide better products to consumers is really an art. As a company, we are very innovation-driven in terms of unique product offerings

Most companies attract consumers through aesthetics. But we believe in products that are not only better in design, but are equally functional

Answering questions about the company's growth and its recent brand campaign, Sudhanshu Pokhriyal, Chief Operating Officer, Bath Products, Brilloca Limited said:

What about the distribution network? How do you plan to reach out to a larger number of consumers?

Last year's lockdown was a phase to re-evaluate our distribution network, which is spread across India through our more than one hundred distributors and 2,000 direct retailers. Additionally, we are focussing on the quality of our reach by opening up brand stores. Here, the retailer displays products to give the customer a higher level of experience. We launched 45 more brand stores even during the pandemic.

What is the inspiration behind your new brand campaign?

Addressing consumer needs with better designs is our aim. That's how we came up with this campaign called "Thoughtful is beautiful". We want to build relationships with our customers and make them part of our creative process. Hence, the Hindware brand undertook rigorous research using traditional and new age tools to understand the 'white space' in the market. The research pointed out that our focus towards consumer needs to arrive at this innovative new positioning - 'Thoughtful is Beautiful'. The Campaign is running across TV, radio, digital, online and social media channels.

Created by Mint Brand Studio