

# THE SUNDAY EXPRESS MAGAZINE

# EYE



**POINT OF VIEW**  
**The Master's Voice**  
Remembering Pandit Jasraj



**ARTS etc**  
**In Solidarity**  
Raqs Media Collective on art as renewal, working on the ongoing Yokohama Triennale and our new unaccustomed terms of engagement



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

## DOING IT ALL

As workplace collapses into home during the pandemic, urban working women are engaged in a struggle to find a fine balance

Paromita Chakrabarti

**A**MIRTA MAHALE was about five months pregnant when the first lockdown was announced on March 22. Overnight, her doctor shut her clinic, medicines became harder to find, and the bustling city of Mumbai, at the heart of her acclaimed debut novel, *Milk Teeth* (2018), became an unfamiliar place. While she wrote on weekends, her job as a product manager at a non-profit AI-for-social-good innovation lab meant adapting to working from home. Her husband, who runs an education startup, moved to online lessons, that made a part of the house out of bounds for most of the day. Mahale, 35, found her world shrinking into her apartment in Bandra. "I am not great at multitasking. I need proper separation between work and writing. I was checking the rising COVID-19 numbers obsessively and following the migrant crisis with despondency. It's impossible to not question your decision to bring a new life into a world that seems to be falling apart," says Mahale, whose son was born a month ago.

As the COVID-19 upends lives across the world, a disproportionate amount of its burden has fallen on the urban upper-middle-class working women. In addition to professional duties, the responsibilities of managing home and care work have grown. In India, which has one of the lowest female workforce participation rates in the world, of which only 20.4 per cent are urban women (source: 2018 Periodic Labour Force Survey, released last month), this has been aggravated by pre-existing inequalities in gender roles, the sudden absence of networks that facilitate participation in the workforce, loss of jobs, salary cuts and the guilt of not doing enough.

A year ago, Madhujha Bandyopadhyay moved to Mumbai with her eight-year-old son, after a long stint as the senior vice-president of a leading Bengali entertainment channel in Kolkata, to work with a national entertainment channel. "Given Mumbai's distance, I made sure that my office, apartment, my son's school, daycare and after-school activity centres were all in one area so that it would make the commute less stressful. My mother and my husband (filmmaker Anindya Chattopadhyay) flew in from Kolkata frequently. The only thing I hadn't factored in was a pandemic," says Bandyopadhyay, 41.

As work and lives shifted online, it was the distance from her family and anxiety over their well-being that got to her the most. "I have only lived for about a year in this city and have just begun to know people. Suddenly, it felt like my life had come to a standstill. I felt incredibly lonely and wanted to see my husband, my mother, my friends and there was no way I could," says Bandyopadhyay, who took to long conference calls with family and close friends for a sense of community.



**WOMEN AT WORK**

(From left) Anurita Mahale; Gitanjali Yadav; Madhujha Bandyopadhyay and Anisha Karthikeyan

For Manu Gulati, mentor teacher with the directorate of education, Delhi government, the new normal required a completely new orientation. The 37-year-old had always been interested in the intersection of technology and education; since the pandemic, she has been conducting training workshops for teacher-development co-ordinators (TDCs) of Delhi's government schools, together with a colleague, Rohit Upadhyaya, in effective use of social media for pedagogic support. The pandemic made technological intervention a matter of urgency. As daily virtual training sessions began for the TDCs, Gulati's days began, like and stretched well into the night. A nine-member family living in a MIG flat is often pressed for space, but now, with everyone working from home, creating quiet corners was often an issue. Gulati says there were days when the house would go unvisited or she would bristle at the sight of a sink overflowing with dishes, but, slowly, people learned to work around each other's needs and gender roles got diluted. "Often, my husband did the dishes while I trained teachers online. As a software engineer, he supported me immensely with the use of technology," says the 2018 Fulbright scholar.

Bengaluru-based instructional designer Shubani Chakraborty, who works with a multinational professional services company, recalls the early days of the lockdown as one of her most traumatic. Unmoored from the meticulous schedule her technical-architect husband and she had worked out, that included the services of a daycare for her four-year child and help to manage home, she found herself floundering. "I was not able to provide enough time to either my work or my child. I was exhausted trying to cope with the changes — the guilt of being the worst mother, an inefficient employee and an indolent homemaker. It was tough to deal with, and, at one point, I con-

templated seeking an expert's help to cope with my mental health, but I adapted eventually," says the 32-year-old.

The distinction between the workplace and home is unique to the urban workforce and is particularly enabling for women, says Aditi Ratho, junior fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, Mumbai, who works at the intersection of labour and gender. "It makes space for transition into their different roles and enables essential social interactions," she says. Anisha Karthikeyan, 36, a human-resources professional with a multinational financial services corporation in Delhi, says one of the toughest things to master during this work-from-home phase has been the constant engagement that it has required of her. "I am running out of ideas to make home an interesting place," she says. While the chores are divided between her husband, mother and her, keeping her two sons, aged nine and two, occupied takes constant work. "My younger son is now at the stage of pre-primary learning. I feel guilty that he should be given more time and attention," she says. Now, with flexible work hours and breaks between meetings to allow her to regroup, Karthikeyan says she has settled into a makeshift routine. "But as simple as that sounds, realise it's not easy to be a work-from-home mom," she says.

In 2017, a comic strip by French graphic artist Emma, titled *You Should've Asked*, had gone viral on the internet. In it, a new mother who is struggling to attend to a dinner guest and her baby is told by her partner that he'd have chipped in "if only she'd asked". Emma posited that even when men are prepared to help, the onus of organising and remembering — a thankless, never-ending, invisible "mental load" — lies almost always with women. Early on in their lives,

women are cast in the role of homemakers and mothers and men as primary wage-earners, which doesn't change even when more women join the workforce or work in high-profile jobs. This is particularly true of a country like India, despite some changes in urban middle-class dynamics.

An online survey of urban upper-middle-class working women, of whom 97 per cent had a college degree, conducted by Sonalde Desai, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, US, and Ravinder Kaur, professor of sociology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, found that there was a significant rise in the time spent by women on housework and childcare during lockdown. "Seventy-six per cent of the respondents had help in household chores/child care before the lockdown, but, of these, only 30 per cent of the women continued to have some help," says Desai, noting that "areas where most work increase took place include cooking, kitchen cleaning, washing dishes, dusting and vacuuming and sanitising groceries." While men contributed more during this period, women shouldered additional responsibility over already high thresholds.

The pandemic disrupted networks, both formal and informal, that are crucial to women's professional lives. Most workplaces in India do not offer daycare or creche facilities, and, in their absence, women have to form their own support systems. These include parents and in-laws who watch over the children; part-time or live-in helps to carry out domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, and daycares and creches, whose numbers are still not commensurate with the percentage of working women with children. With schools and daycares closed, women have found themselves turning into not just caregivers but also teachers and playmates. As the first lecturer on a joint appointment

between the government of India and the University of Cambridge, UK, plant biologist Gitanjali Yadav was teaching and running research labs at both Cambridge and The National Institute of Plant Genome Research (NIPGR) in New Delhi, where she works as a staff scientist. The joint appointment meant working in two time zones and frequent overseas travel. With a robust support system that she and her husband, also an academic, had created for their two children, aged eight and 10, they had structured their lives around her travel schedules. "It helped that we all live together on campus — kids, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. We chose a school close to our home so that the kids would be quick to reach. We had two full-time helps and a gardener," she says.

With her travels on hold, no paid help and work spilling into weekends, Yadav says, "Overnight, I also became a full-time mother, cook, sweeper, school teacher, caregiver and pest controller; over and above all of the regular work responsibilities across two continents. It has now been five months of total lockdown for us, and we have struggled to establish a balance through shared responsibilities." The hardest part, she says, has been the complete and sudden loss of alone time and the boundaries that demarcated the work space from the home. "Earlier, I could choose when to walk into my office, or into my kitchen, and I was two different persons in each of these locations. But now, you're in a meeting and in the kitchen; You're handling homework and checking a sheet at the same time. There's no freedom or leisure to think, reflect, focus or plan for the future," she says. For women in academia worldwide, this added workload has manifested in a dip in academic productivity. Early global studies and analyses have shown that the number of pre-prints and paper submissions by women in

STEM and social sciences have fallen significantly during this period.

Audrey Truschke, associate professor of South Asian History, University of Rutgers, US, and author of *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (2017) and *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth* (2018), says, "Before the pandemic, I was asked with some regularity, usually by other female academics, 'How do you have three kids and still manage to publish so prolifically?' My answer was always: I am a huge believer in childcare. It is now August, and I have not had childcare since early March. My productivity has suffered because of this situation. I have cancelled numerous publications at this point."

When schools and daycares closed in New Jersey on March 13, Truschke, 37, was in the process of working out online lessons for the courses she was offering. "In the early weeks, my days were a constant triage situation. My husband (an attorney) and I woke up every day and discussed the bare minimum number of hours we each needed to work that day in order to avoid catastrophe in our professional lives. Then we divided up the day to specify what times I would and he would do childcare, and vice-versa. My no-screen-time rule for the kids expired quickly," she says.

Over time, Truschke has strategised to cope with the changes. Next month, she will begin an online course on pandemic pedagogy for her history of south Asia class, that will include archival COVID-19 through documentation of individual experiences. In an introductory video, Truschke offers her students some practical advice on making sense of the year, including "when life walks into the frame", "Maybe someone yells something embarrassing in the background, and you weren't muted. Or, maybe, your sibling walks by in a less than ideal state of undress; it doesn't matter. And it's going to happen on my end, too. You can actually hear my children (ages six, four and two) screaming in the background for a bit during this spiel... pandemic life is messy for everyone. Isn't it reasonable to expect us to be able to separate our professional and personal lives right now," she says.

It's a sentiment that many of the other women echo. "Women are always taught to put others before themselves at home and be one of the men at work. They are innately good organisers, capable of multitasking. The only thing they are not good at is owning their feelings. But a time like this requires an intuitive response. This crisis has shown that what we really need now — men included — is adaptability," Bandyopadhyay says. For Mahale, things began to fall in place when she was pulled into a COVID-response project at work, which helped her channel her anxiety and energy. Now, back home with the baby, she is slowly trying to get back to writing and a semblance of her earlier life. "I am trying to remind myself to be kind to myself. It was not something I did a good job at during the lockdown," says Mahale.