



An *as/i* bullet, indeed!

Revving to Go

Shobhaa De

Unstoppable • Unputdownable

She comes from a unique mould. She is sharp, she is witty, she is intelligent. And she is unapologetic about anything. For quite simply she lives how she wants, how she dares to. True to her nature, true to herself. That she looks how she does, smashing at 70, is an ode to her way of living, her way of thinking

Text & Photographs: **Farzana Contractor**

For Shobhaa De the journey is the destination. It's not about climbing Mt Everest, reaching the peak and planting a flag and saying, 'Hey, look at me, I've reached the top!' There is no top for her, no pinnacle, no peak. In fact she is on ground zero, happily doing her thing, endlessly sprinting here and there, stopping not even to catch her breath. She is a woman in a hurry, there is just so much to do. "Absolutely!" declares Shobhaa, "I don't look at life as pinnacle-shinicle and all the rest of it. You live it, with all your *josh*, and forget about any pinnacle. I've never had any mountain to climb, ever in my life! All I do is write and it feels fantastic to still be relevant in a very competitive business of writing. Of expressing opinions. On being productive." For which she can take a bow. For while you may love Shobhaa, or hate Shobhaa, you cannot ignore her. She is there! Larger than life, in person and in print, and, everyone reads her. And responds to her writings, negative or positive. And she takes it well, plays the field. Always a forthright person she expresses herself honestly and fearlessly.

In my opinion, she is writing better than ever. For she is seeing everything clearer and clearer. As if the process of ageing is, for her, a

process of decanting and distilling the decades of high octane living; of understanding life, people, events, experiences. It is as if it has all crystallised now and she sees things for what they are; her intuition helping her, popping answers in her mind, the writing jumping on the wall, as it were. "That's true, I see things for what they are and I never stop writing even when I am not writing, words just go on in my mind, all the time!" she shrugs, showing helplessness.

But she loves it. Being a writer, an author (of what, one million books!), is probably the best part of her life. Yes, I know, apart from being a very prolific writer she has also played out many roles, that of a journalist, editor, wife, mother, even grandmother, but that of a writer, coming up five decades, has been the most constant, her mainstay, one that has sustained through all the others. And she is brilliant at it. Four columns a week; spanning four newspapers and a mega magazine – *Times of India* (Sundays), *Mumbai Mirror*, *Asian Age*, (goes to London, too), *Deccan Chronicle* and *The Week*. Her reach is vast and carries her strong voice afar. Add to that *Twitter* and her three million followers! Well, she has reached that age and stage where how she thinks and what



Taking people down the garden path is not Shobhaa De's style

she says, matters. Case closed. So let's just get on with other things. Fun things, little things. Things that matter, things that give joy. Stuff that life is also made of. The fun side of Shobhaa De.

Do you know, Shobhaa is curious? Meaning, curious, period. Yes, her curiosity never ends. She wants to know. She is like that little pup, going in every nook and cranny, curious about everything, raising its cute face and sniffing the air, nose twitching! And she rejoices when she learns more, digs out something, finds her answers, knows she was right... And she can regale you. With stories and anecdotes, with her unique thoughts and actions, her interpretations. And she never finds any human being boring. She is a peoples' person. People interest her. She can talk to them, listen to them. She can mimic them. And make you reel over.

"Life should be fun, no?" Shobhaa asks with her trademark wicked smile. "Absolutely," I agree. There have been many a time I have been witness and party to crazy times with Shobhaa and nostalgically I rewind to one evening, 25 years ago, at her farmhouse in Alibaug. I wouldn't talk about it then, it was our big secret, but it can now be told. It was an all girls thingy and there we were a dozen of us, chilling out on the lawns, *al fresco*, downing wine, listening to music, dancing, gossiping, laughing with gay abandonment, when guess what Shobhaa does. She saunters out of the house, languidly she approaches us, arms outstretched to display some colourful skimpy rags dangling from her forearm. We peer at her in the candle-lit darkness to see just what is it??? Thongs? Thongs! You know, more daring than the teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy kind. And she says, "Alright now, let's wear them, let's see how creative we can get!" She challenges us to wear them whichever way we want. Whatever. And we did!! Over our jeans, under our skirts, on top of our heads, across our chests, as armbands, even substituting them for our hotpants! Fun for sure, mad actually, but what the hell, where would you find such an adventurous, creative hostess. She had spotted them in a shop at Colaba and just picked them up, knowing immediately what she would do with them!

Well, she hasn't changed, even at 70 she still has fun in her heart. "And why should you change? She questions. "How does age matter?" she goes on. "It's only a number, don't get boring, keep the spirit alive, find ways to do so. Live the moment! The life we have is not a dress rehearsal. We get just one chance, so enjoy it while it lasts," she urges. That's right. There is something in that. Why should age drag us down. Why should we let it make us feel low. Why should age dictate our actions. As long as we are fit, we should keep going. And actually if we keep going, we will stay fit. Mentally, physically, emotionally, every which way.

Shobhaa's advice to the 50 and 60-year olds, who she says suddenly turn invisible to the world, which after all belongs to the young, is; "Believe in yourself. Find your own sense of accomplishment. Don't wait for the world to give it to you. Don't wait for acknowledgements, don't wait for accolades, don't wait for someone to pat you on your back and say, 'Wow, you've done so much!'" Just be yourself, just enjoy your life, be glad for how you have lived, flaws and all. Remember, the average lifespan in our mother and grandmother's era was 50 years, it's gone to 80 now, so just be glad you are alive. Stop cribbing, start living."

"I do realise," she continues, "the current world is throwing up new fears. In this fast-paced, action-packed style of living, the burnout is advancing, coming on earlier. If women in my generation dreaded turning 50 and faced panic attacks, today that age is 30. That is the level of insecurity today. Young women feel it's all over at that age. They feel all stressed out. They feel they are leading very empty lives. To these women all I can say is, relax, chill, make better choices in your life, don't let social media tell you lies. Don't interpret all that you see there as real. Don't believe everyone is happier than you. Don't give in to the pressure of 'belonging'. You don't have to look stunning all the time. Get real, get a hobby. If you can't handle *Facebook*, get off it. But by God, get on with your own life. Look into it, understand it, enjoy it, tune into it."

Like Shobhaa has. I can only admire her for that. For learning the tools girls a

quarter of her age are adept at, like working a smartphone with dexterity, being on *Instagram*, blogging, tweeting, and not being bogged down or allowing it to rule her. She dances to her own tune. She dances period.

Like she did, on the exact night she turned 70 years old. On the table. In Phuket. In a restaurant. After a lot of bubbly. Along with all her other guests; family and band of friends, all part of the momentous occasion.

You read right. Shobhaa jumped up on the table and danced to celebrate turning 70!

Listen to Shobhaa describe her happy birthday night. "It was the best birthday of my life. Dilip (her husband, who else!) and my kids started planning for it when I turned 69. For a whole year they were at it, planning this, planning that, changing, planning, it went on, till Aditya (her elder son) zeroed in on Phuket in Thailand because there was a place there which he thought was perfect



In commune with someone above? Readers' response interpreting Shobhaa's expression, welcome

for dinner on my big day! A place off the tourist map where rockstars feel comfortable enough to land up, a restaurant he wanted to bring in my birthday in, a place which was guaranteed to make me go mad, he said. And how mad did I get!!”

“So there we were, a small, intimate group (of 30) at a charming resort. We sang, danced, ate great food, drank super cocktails, swam, shopped, had so much fun for three days. But on the night of Jan 7, (her birthday), we left in a party bus, which is geared to get your mood going, with music, a moving bar, the works, to arrive at this small, most exclusive restaurant, hidden from the world, awesome food, awesome trance music, where champagne flowed and flowed, and then with dinner done and music pumped up, we start to dance. To make space the staff starts to remove the chairs, not all together, one here, two there, very quietly, unobtrusively, they move the tables closer. They do that so discreetly you don’t even notice it. Suddenly there are no chairs and all the tables are grouped together and someone jumps up on one and others follow suit and soon we are all dancing on the tables like manaics!”

I can visualise the picture. I can feel the energy, the fun of it. Happy people of mixed ages, celebrating in unison, an occasion they feel happy about. It’s quite awful that I had to pass up the invitation this year, no thanks to terrible work schedules, but I won’t miss the party bus next time. *Insha’Allah*, I will be there at Shobhaa’s 75th one, I want to dance on a table, too! Or on top of whatever she conjures!

Shobhaa feels blessed. For all that has happened in her life. Perhaps it is from this feeling of gratitude, an appreciation for all the opportunities that come her way I see a new Shobhaa emerging. One who is more relaxed. Well, relatively speaking, because her energy is something even she has no control over. But she is certainly more giving; of her time, her knowledge, she is helping young people, mentoring them, spreading herself out, she is getting a bit mellow. “That’s true. I feel I am turning softer, from inside myself. I feel a sense of tenderness for the world at large. I connect on a more sympathetic level,

I trust easier, I am turning more and more towards my family, especially my daughters, with Dilip, too, now it’s more about being inter-dependent, as opposed to being my own individual self, like it was in our earlier days. Love is such a priority, more beautiful in a different way. It’s so comforting to know someone cares for you to that extent.”

Dilip is a diehard romantic and it would take reams and reams to put down all the Casanova-ish things he has indulged in, wooing his wife through three decades, but to be fair to Shobhaa, who is not innately demonstrative, she does her bit. Like recently when she returned from the *Lahore Lit Fest*, she actually hand-carried food back for him. Lahore is famous for its food and Dilip, for his love of food. So how could she not carry some meaty stuff for a man, her man, the gourmet who looks to see if the fish is smiling before he sends it to the kitchen for some dexterous mustard marination!

Well, Shobhaa is no less a foodie. Apart from not eating deep-fried stuff, she pretty much goes for anything. And she knows food. Though she can’t claim to be a cook. That’s one area out of her arena. And she is not a hard liquor drinker either. She used to love champagne, still does, but can’t drink much of it, causes acidity she says. For the same reason she goes easy on the whites, though she has a weakness for Cabernet Sauvignon. Used to be Chenin Blanc. However both red and white wine are her brands of poison. But to be honest, Shobhaa doesn’t need to drink. She is on a natural high all the time. Life gets her drunk. And she passes on the feeling very easily. Her happiness is contagious. And her capacity for fun, humungous. You should have seen how just four of us misbehaved at *Kode*, where we went a few months ago to celebrate Olga, dear old Olga Tellis’ birthday. We’d picked Zorawar Kalra’s *Kode* at Kamala Mills because we’d heard it was the latest haunt of the youth and we wanted to find out why. The buzz got to us. We were so bad, so mad, we made the young ‘uns seem tame in comparison. It was the Shobhaa effect. I tell you that woman is something else! She was dancing sitting on the couch, singing along, her tattooed arm punching the air.

For those who ask me all the time,





insinuate that Shobhaa has gone under the knife, that she has a super plastic surgeon who makes her look as young, blah, blah, blah, hear it from the sheep's ...er, horse's mouth directly. "Mad or what! I have not and never, never, never will go for any intrusive beauty surgeries. Just not me!" There! I told you so. As for those who think she has had a botox job done, look at the pictures carefully. I have shot these in the 4 pm sun. Out in the open, by the sea, with the wind in her hair, under full glare. With Shobhaa wearing just lip gloss and all her charming wrinkles that tell wonderful stories lined with much laughter. Does it look like a botoxed face? Have you not seen what botoxed beauties look like. Ghastly. Fake. I just can't understand why anyone would risk such medical insanity. Especially when most end in such disaster! Why can't we enhance our lives with meaningful activity instead of just trying to flog dead hormones with scary therapies. Why can't we rejuvenate our lives normally. (Please turn to page 112 and read my *Wabi Sabi* column). And yes, like *UpperCrust* Shobhaa is for all things real and honest and we never photoshop!

But Shobhaa does have a beauty regime. Which I know she has been following since forever. Want to know what it is? Well, every morning her maid prepares a little *thali* with a blob of *dahi*, a few pinches of *baladi* (turmeric) powder and leaves it in the bathroom. Shobhaa mixes it up, smears her face with it and washes it off after a few minutes. *C'est tout!* A simple, age-old, traditional face pack. And she still uses *Ponds* cream and *Oil of Olay* lotion. "That's right from 17 to 70, that's what I have been doing. And I oil my hair, too, once a week." The only thing she has given up is her afternoon nap, which, two decades ago, was sacrosanct. Shobhaa madam's siestas were a must. She would retire to her bedroom, shut herself out. No phone calls, no nothing! "No time for that now," she says, adding, "even if I did make the time, my current, constant energy won't let me do it anymore! I can't rest, I simply can't slow down, God, I just can't sit still, not even to do some *pranayam*, which I think I must!"

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