

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a red t-shirt, is sitting in a blue boat on a river. She is smiling and looking towards the right. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees. The text is overlaid on the image.

PRIYANKA GUPTA

JOURNEYS BEYOND AND WITHIN...

*an indian woman's
life-changing travel adventures*

Journeys Beyond
and
Within...

Journeys Beyond and Within...

*An Indian Woman's Life-Changing
Travel Adventures*



Priyanka Gupta

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Dedication

For Sagar

For all those who have ever been scared

And for those who wonder if there is more to life

For those who feel they do not belong and that their own
don't understand them

For those who dare to venture beyond the boundaries they
are told not to cross

Author's Note

Journeys Beyond and Within... holds true stories, featuring real people and real events. A few names have been changed to keep those concerned anonymous and some events have been shifted slightly to make the story flow better.

Other than that, I have tried to be as truthful as I could be. To write the book, I have referred to my memory, photographs, videos, friends, notes and journals, blog posts, audio recordings, my partner and his photographs and his memory. Though memories can only be trusted so much, the book conveys my intent. What I wanted to say is here on these sweet-smelling pages.

Needless to mention, everything in the book is my own experiences and interpretation and doesn't reflect the opinion of others.

“No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

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Introduction

Raised in a bustling Indian city with traditional values, I had a simple life. I studied, got into a fabulous university, and started working. I wasn't happy. I shifted gears. I tried different jobs, brainstormed many careers, and began exploring around, first on shorter trips and then on months-long ones. There was also a time when I said no to travel and outings.

Then something changed in 2016 when I visited Southeast Asia solo. I had been laid off. I didn't have to return by a fixed time. There was no end date. I went to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, alone. Those six weeks on my own were excruciating but they showed me a new world. A world of travellers. I met backpackers and tourists who travelled for months with a bag and a zeal to see. Every day they set out with curiosity, excitement, and joy.

This, this joy, was infectious.

I had already signed up for a volunteer programme in Chile to teach English as a second language. The programme was four months long. I told my family it was six. I wanted to travel and explore. There was no turning back then. Since, I have visited more places than I can count, have been on the road more than I have been at home, and most days I am so out of my comfort zone I'm like a fish on a tree.

To say this is a collection of travel stories wouldn't be enough, or appropriate. These are tales I lived, breathed,

thrived in, and in some cases, survived. I went to places beyond and far and close by and next door. I packed, unpacked, commuted, checked in, got lost, saw, left, suffered, enjoyed, and laughed.

Why do I go away from home so often into a strange world where I don't know anyone?

For me, the pleasure of travel is finding my way in an unfamiliar land amongst unknown faces. My eyes, ears, nose, skin, tongue, and mind all churn, sense, and discover as if it's their first time alive. They would like to know this new world, they whisper. I ask: What do you see? They all chatter at once.

I witness scenes I passed every day but didn't notice. Like a garbage collection van parked in front of every house, its loudspeakers blasting a catchy cleanliness song. I hear even the faint cries of little kittens climbing in and out of the neighbourhood home's window. Also the loud yelling in the ground-floor home where an old mother and her single son try their best to live together. As I stroll on the sunny rooftop, the appetising fragrance of fresh garlic being fried in strong mustard oil washes over me. My tongue demands the dish, which I promise to give it. I also smell the pungent fresh paint which the households are being pasted with in preparation for the festival of lights, Diwali. When I wake up in a thick duvet with all my body hair raised, I realise September has turned into October, and I will have to ask the guesthouse host for a thicker blanket.

I'm overwhelmed. It is not my world. I might not be here tomorrow. But I like it. I venture into every nook and turn into every alley. I want to hear this space breathe.

That my travels transformed me is an understatement. To say I've just learned something would be undermining this school of life.

I stood at the summit of the smoky volcano I was sure I could never climb. I had been standing in my way. The limits I had set for myself were habits, some luxuries I could afford, some customised by society. I wanted to break those boundaries.

All the trails I wanted to be on. All the challenges were now mine.

For me, the universe is to explore, to marvel at, and to understand. How the birds sing, how the crabs crawl out of the sand, and how the trees hold hands. I would love to know it all.

This book is about those many, many months and weeks and years I have lived looking. I hope you enjoy these journeys beyond and within as much as I did.

PART 1



Growing Wings

1

Adventure Begins at Home

My parents reminisce that a few months old, I shrieked as soon as I heard the vroom-vroom of my father's Bajaj scooter. My mother, my two siblings, and I would be on the first floor of our independent house. We lived in a corner of a small noisy city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous. Papa parked his scooter in our large garden, across from two white and black pied cows neck-deep in the standing cement trough. I bawled until Papa put me down in his two-wheeler's leg space. Sitting cross-legged, I also expected to be driven around the street, a live choreography of cows, carts, and cycle rickshaws.

"Wasn't I scared?" I asked my mother recently.

"You clutched onto the front plastic basket and laughed," she exclaimed. Even after thirty-six years my daring charmed her.

Beyond my first few years, many little ventures outside home jiggle in my memory bowl. Further ahead of our house was the open ground on which massive effigies of the mythological Ramayana villain Ravan were burnt on Dussehra festival. Beyond it was the Kali river, named after its black water, the riverine cremation grounds, and a temple, and further away, villages and their fields. Farmers, electricians, policemen, labourers, and jewellers lived wall to wall around us. None of my schoolmates stayed nearby. Their houses were in the city centre or the further, more

posh, non-cow-dung side of the city. Meanwhile, our neighbours brought each other farm-grown gourds, sent their cattle together to graze at the riverbank, and watched over the adjacent house in the family's absence.

I was allowed to play in two homes only, both right across the street and visible from our house. In a knee-length frock or matching skirt and top, I raced up the two steep staircases of one of the homes every evening. Though it was known as the lawyer's place, for me it belonged to his wife, the plump and rosy-cheeked Aunty. Every married woman was called Aunty. Sitting on her open terrace, Aunty pointed to the gods' paintings on the roof's parapet above us. "You see them?" Wearing salwar-kurta, the traditional knee-length shirt and loose trousers, she raised her flabby arms over her head and said to me, "They had put you in my hands." She added, "God ji. I gave you to your parents for they had asked me." After retelling the tale I had heard countless times, she continued knitting. The couple was childless. My parents smiled at Aunty's joke, never refuting her claim. I would get confused, still happy that at least now I was in my home.

Aunty always housed either a young niece or nephew. The child was sent by her brother from her ancestral village to study in the city. From our balcony, I could see the young one sweeping the floor. When I went to bed, the boy or girl would be washing dishes on Aunty's terrace. My first memories of this are from when I was eight and already taller than most classmates. I felt bad for the child. My mother was sorry for the kid. She said their parents didn't know the aunt made the children work. "As if they'll become doctor or engineers if they stay here!"

When I was about eleven, Aunty asked me to teach her niece Mathematics. I scored high marks in school. One early evening, the stocky girl and I were on the rooftop with her books. My self-proclaimed birth mother was downstairs.

Instead of explaining addition to the village girl, who was almost my age, I said, "Run away." I hated to see her wake up early to do house chores, get scolded, and return from school to wash, her shoulders stooped.

My freedom speech, urging the girl to play and study rather than toil, stirred her into action. We looked down at a plastic sheet awning on the adjacent roof, wondering if she could escape through that house. Before I knew it, she plunged onto the sunshade and landed with a thud that sucked the air out of my lungs. I had imagined her leaping from roof to roof like the monkeys in our neighbourhood. Instead, she was sprawled on the rooftop, writhing in pain.

Aunty's repeated throaty cries of "What happened?" shook the building. I froze, my mouth dry. Aunty rushed up the narrow staircase. Terrified, I ran home. *Will everyone find out I provoked the girl?* I couldn't imagine what my parents would do. I kept quiet.

In the evening, Aunty waved over my mother, who stood on our balcony wrapped in a five-yard sari, a round red bindi on her forehead. Over sugary tea and bakery biscuits, Aunty told her the girl said I spurred her on. Sitting next to my mother, inhaling the sweet scent of her lipstick and talcum powder, I refuted the girl's claim. Mummy, her braid reaching down to the waist, shook her head. "She can't do it. She's a little girl."

Back on the road, my mother and I crossed the scorching gravel, my hand in hers, her red glass bangles clinking. The overstuffed grocery, stationery, and medical shops were all open. Pallid-faced people trudged in and out of the clinic of the physician, who was our family doctor. I turned to my mother and said, "Mummy, you know me. Do you think I could do something like that?"

I was shaken but didn't think I had done wrong by goading the girl to run free. I was sure my mother knew the

truth and was just protecting me. Now she would scold me hard.

Big gold hoops glinting in her ears, Mummy replied through clenched teeth, "What story was your Aunty cooking up?"

I took a deep breath. *She believed me! They don't know I could have encouraged the girl?* For the first time I learned that others – even our closest ones – don't know how we think or who we really are.

The injured girl was sent to her village where she recovered. The matter would close, and I would be back to running up and down Aunty's house in a fortnight. For then, I dashed through the dust clouds to Aunty's next door: the second house in which my parents let me play.

The two giggly and shy daughters of the family were a few years older than me. Both always wore salwar-kurta. Up on their hot cement rooftop, the younger sister Mona and I chalked the nine hopscotch squares. The sun hung low; the sky was bright. Crows and kites cawed and shrieked, flitting between TV antennas and power lines strung high above the street.

Mona and I took turns to throw her silver anklet onto the squares, the thing jingling. Barefoot, we hopped from block to block, picking it up. Every day we played for hours without a pause.

On the roof that breathed fire, the rhythm of the game took over. Time stopped. The cement and the shiny anklet and my sweat-soaked friend and I, we were inseparable.

Whether I lost or won, I was a winner. I would be flying, thrilled, every inch of my body exhilarated and every ounce of breath engaged.

I went back home before sunset. If I didn't, my mother called me from our balcony.

Putting my airborne leg on the ground, I ran downstairs, across the street, through the garden, and up the stairs into our home. I insisted on reciting school lessons, the questions and answers from the textbook, to my mother. Sitting on a jute charpoy¹ in our open courtyard, she held my notebook open. I said aloud the questions and answers word by word, pausing only to ask her to turn the page. I spoke so fast she didn't notice I had gone onto the next one.

"You remember everything!" Laughing, my mother ambled back to her chores. I trotted to the kitchen. My sister, six years older than me and in salwar-kurta, would be making spicy vegetable curry and rolling rotis and parathas for dinner. Apart from my father who had rotis, the flat dough bread cooked directly over the flame, all of us ate parathas, rolled out as rotis but cooked over the iron girdle with a teaspoon of oil.

Every evening, we closed the west-facing windows to block the smoke billowing from the potter's kiln. Meanwhile, sparrows, tailor birds, bulbuls, mynahs, crows, and cuckoos created a ruckus in the garden. Cows mooed, waiting for the milker. Guava, lemon, neem, jasmine, marigold, queen of the night, frangipani, and many other flower and fruit trees stood like old friends in the yard, sighing with relief from the heat. The earth let out hot breaths, exhaling the sun that had scorched it all day. We took off our footwear to keep it dry and threw buckets of cold tap water on the blistering marble-floored courtyard. Steam rose from the floor, encasing us, and we sweated, our burning feet slowly cooling down.

Sundown was my favourite time of the day, with every being and object singing with joy for surviving another blazing afternoon. The air itself was merrier.

If we failed to hear the ground-floor gate being unlatched, my father, back from his wholesale shop of plates and bowls

made of leaves², called my brother's name until one of us replied. Papa never shouted out the name of my mother or us sisters. In our world, families protected women like a watermelon keeps its seeds buried.

Flip-flapping in rubber slippers, one of us darted across the courtyard and through the balcony or the drawing room, both leading to the first-floor door. We unbolted it and took the packets of sweetmeats and groceries Papa bought on his walk home daily.

All summer, a water air cooler throbbed in the courtyard. Propped up on four iron legs, the cooler, a big fan with a water tank and pump, threw moisture-laden, cool air. In front of it, I grabbed a few freshly fried hot round mathri from the oily packet. I pasted them with homemade raw mango pickle. Crunching on the chilli-mango-laden deep-fried dough, I oohed and aahed. My family teased me. "How much sour pickle she eats!" Sweet-scented golden mangoes were drowned in an ice bucket. After a cold bucket and mug bath, I had two crispy parathas with the curry and gobbled as many mangoes as I could.

In winter, my parents boiled water chestnuts and roasted sweet potatoes in the wood fire. They built it in an iron vessel in the corner of the roofless courtyard. Sitting cross-legged around the fire on soft cotton rugs and coarse jute sacks, we ate dinner, talked about school, and discussed whether my father needed to put more hay under the cows. When our eyes started to close, we scurried to our rooms and lay under heavy cotton-filled quilts.

On winter mornings, fog enveloped the balcony-fronting giant neem tree that my parents grew for shade and the world beyond it. All the rooms opened into the courtyard. Fog threatened to chill me if I even peeked out the door of the room I shared with my sister. I stayed inside.

The grey winters didn't last more than three months. The rest of the year, the heat baked us alive.

The airless summer stank of our sweat-caked bodies. At night, we spread cotton rugs on jute charpoys and folding beds lined up one after the other in front of the air cooler. Sometimes one of my siblings and I lay on one bed, feet to face and face to feet. Otherwise, I was the first one on the smallest charpoy, inches away from the cooler. Behind me, my parents and siblings got the full blast of the chilled air. Long and thin, I was a pencil throughout my school years.

When the power was cut off – which was often³ – I could hardly breathe. The world became a still vacuum. Mosquitoes sang in our ears. We grabbed our pillows and cream muslin sheets and climbed upstairs to the open, and breezy, rooftop. We slept on charpoys, like most neighbours. Despite the earthen pots, drying cow dung cakes (for fuel), and handmade mud stoves scattered on their roofs, the large families had enough space to fit in as many charpoys as they needed. Our home was then the tallest in the immediate streets, no towering buildings around. Once I lay down, cobalt-blue sky rose around me. Whatever floor I was on, I stared at the stars until I fell asleep.

The stars, those sparkling otherworldly things, were as out of grasp as the future and as enticing as it.

All my school years, I was woken up at six. Bent above my charpoy, my father slid the cool sheet from my face and immediately told me the golden peacock had visited our garden like every other dawn.

“Where's it?” I asked, my eyes wide open.

“It flew from the parapet to the neem. From there to the guava. Perched next to the kingfisher and then flew off. To see it, wake up early tomorrow,” Papa said and smiled.

My disappointment at missing the peacock was as fleeting as the bird itself. As the symphony of squirrels,

birds, and cows soared louder, I quickly brushed my teeth. After a cold bucket bath, I put on my blue bib skirt⁴ over a short-sleeved white shirt. My mother fixed my old bowtie with a safety pin. I grimaced and downed a steel glass of the strong-smelling steamy and sugary cow milk, running down at the call of the hired cycle rickshaw-wallah.

The three-wheeled cycle rickshaw⁵ was crowded with tiny humans dressed in white and blue, all students of my school. I clutched the rickshaw as it squeezed between donkeys, scooters, animal carts, and other rickshaws on the road. The air rang with a cacophony of bleats and honks. Through sprawling vegetable markets fairs, skirting stinky open ditches, and past children squatting butt-naked, we arrived on time.

My school was a co-ed convent and one of the two only good schools in the district. The girls and boys, almost equal in number, were made to sit with each other. In kindergarten⁶, I brought red roses from our garden for the resident Christian teachers. They were from Kerala, the Malayalam-speaking southernmost state of India unknown to me. I was also known for pulling the sari-clad teachers' long, dark braids, as I pulled my mother's hair at home. I was sure long hair was to be played with, and the thick and wavy hair of my instructors were irresistible. They didn't scold me but at every parent and teacher meeting exclaimed to my mother about my mischief, and also that I had too many friends and talked too much.

In the higher years, I listened wide-eyed to the heroic adventures of Robin Hood and Tom Sawyer. I vividly remember the curly-haired English teacher Miss Elizabeth reciting the stories. Holding the thin book, she stood in front of us in a cream sari, her index finger bent sharply at escapades or crucial dialogue. I loved the tales so much I

forgot to breathe. I couldn't imagine living in a forest or running away from home to sail to an island.

In the books, everything was possible.

For then, either I sailed on the rickshaw or on the bike of Bhaiyyan, my father's helper at the shop. Before I started cycling myself, he often gave me a ride on his bicycle.

Bhaiyyan's name was not Bhaiyyan. It meant big brother in the helper's native state Bihar, from where people migrated all over India to find manual work. He lived in the middle godown among the four on the ground floor of our house. The large, shuttered godowns once held leaf plates and bowls, my father's business inventory. But as the supply chains became more robust and faster, we didn't need to store so much. At Bhaiyyan's time, they contained our wheat granary, stacks of wood, extra charpoys, an electric water motor, shovels, Papa's dumbbells, and the cows and their calves and wheat straw.

Apart from transporting me around, Bhaiyyan invited me for dinner every Tuesday, our shop's weekly day off. He called our meals dawat, Hindi for a feast.

Those dinners are to me as special as a friend's party must be to a big-city kid (I imagine). Except Bhaiyyan, no one invited me to lunch or dinner. My school friends lived further away from me. I was allowed to visit them on rare occasions when I was about twelve. Not yet, for I was nine, a bit little to be left on my own far from home. Nor later, because then I was grown up and teenage girls weren't permitted to roam around. Also, Bhaiyyan asked my parents for me, not my brother or sister.

I descended to the ground floor grinning. The front of the high-ceilinged godown was filled with yellow light from the bare bulb on the cobwebbed brick wall. The earthen stove was lit with wood and homemade cow dung cakes. Bhaiyyan and I sat in front of the fire on low wooden stools,

our bare feet resting on the cool, muddy brick floor. It smelt musty and of earth, and of smoke and food. The aroma was unfamiliar but very comforting. Cicadas shrilled and frogs croaked in the garden.

I might have been miles from home.

Chatting non-stop, I scooped up rice with a spoon from the aluminium plate. If the eye-stinging smoke dared to approach me, Bhaiyyan adjusted the burning logs with his curry-smearred fingers. The rice from his village was thicker and shorter than the long basmati rice at home. Soaked in potato-tomato curry or mixed with cauliflower, it tasted exotic, unlike anything I had ever had. My mother always served those curries with rotis she cooked fresh and slathered with homemade ghee. I picked up every grain of the curry rice. For dessert, Bhaiyyan took out chunks of dark jaggery he brought from his village. We bit into the sweet jaggery, the unrefined product made from sugar cane, discussing the next Tuesday's feast. Then we bid each other goodnight.

I didn't ask my mother to make those vegetables with rice. Perhaps I thought my idea would be rejected or was scared to propose such a preposterous thing: thick rice at dinner for a roti-eating family.

I shouldn't complain about the food of my mother. Our family, relatives, and Papa's friends licked her meals clean. She also cooked feasts for an old scholar who had read all the four Hindu Vedas and whom everyone called Bauji, meaning father in Hindi. He lived two hundred metres from our home. At the age of ninety, Bauji was fairly independent. He could do his things, read and write, and make his meals. But he often requested Mummy to cook his lunch; he loved her food. She obliged, bringing me along to his mansion before I got busy with high school. I remember accompanying her from when I was very young.

Bauji's old house had an arched wooden gate so thick and high it would shame the forts. Bending through its low pedestrian entrance, I stepped inside. The screeching of the scooters, hawkers, and dogs from the street couldn't reach beyond the heavy gate. This was another universe. After passing the many cows tied to stakes, we walked through the large, entangled garden and climbed the stairs. The tall trees reached into the first floor through the opening around which the rooms and the humongous, cool kitchen opened. I chatted with my mother, handing things to her while she chopped vegetables and boiled cream to make ghee. As the spatulas clattered, I slunk out.

Fat guavas hung from the lithe branches reaching over the parapet into the square corridor-cum-balcony. They were sweeter than the ones in our garden. Stealthily, I plucked as many as I could fit in my hands and pockets. If the scholar's peppery wife appeared, I swung my thin arms behind me, my fists bulging from the coarse guavas, and ran downstairs. One had to be careful of the garden's resident peacock couple who pecked hard when surprised.

On the ground floor, the scholar's son and his team of friends, sometimes including my father, paused their daily banter to tease me. I flitted between them, pretending to mind the attention I was used to. If I stumbled into the pot-bellied uncle whose beard was as large as a beehive and who rushed towards me threatening to rub it against my cheeks, I dashed upstairs, my screams echoing with his deep laughter through the staircase.

Silver-haired Bauji swayed in the tall wooden rocking chair on the balcony shadowed by the guava boughs. He either read or spoke with visitors, the skin around his eyes crinkling up as he beamed at them. As soon as he patted my head, I ran into the enormous hall that was his room. Iron almirahs stacked with thick books fringed the walls. A large

wooden table was occupied with framed pictures of saints and gods. Fat hardcovers filled many supersized wooden beds and tables. Those books looked serious, not fun like the storybooks and comics I devoured. I scurried to the other side of the high-ceilinged mansion, searching for more treasures. I found more books.

Recently, I discovered Bauji wrote plays and directed and acted in them besides teaching and authoring books. At the time, he was someone who was always kind, even if lying in bed sick, and whose feet both my parents touched.

Not only my mother, but my six-foot strong-limbed father needed to be chaperoned too. He took me along on his chores for a few years up until I was a teenager. Then he said I was too big to go. He would look at me, from top to bottom, me in my jeans and t-shirt or top and knee-length skirt and say, "Girls should wear long and loose clothes."

I didn't insist my father bring me along. My sister never went out just like that either, only to college⁷, private tuition, and sometimes to the market with my mother, her girlfriend, or me. Mummy always said, "Your papa sits at the shop in the bazaar. He knows how bad the environment is, with girls and women."

In our district – then known as our state's crime capital – girls disappeared more frequently than cows were stolen from yards, and money was carried around in belts gripping bulbous stomachs. The *Punjab Kesari* newspaper that was slipped under our door every morning didn't help. Its local section flashed the headlines: "Highway car carrying a family of five looted at gunpoint in broad daylight", "Girl ran away with the neighbourhood boy who abandoned her later", and "Eve-teasing made the girl take harsh steps".

Not only did families worry, and rightly so for I would be subjected to indecent behaviour on the road myself, but our society liked the girls and women better indoors.

Before Papa decided I shouldn't go out unnecessarily, I was his companion, my fist wrapped around his index finger. He brought me to our litchi orchard, weddings he had to attend, and the bustling vegetable market.

Amidst the vendors' thundering calls, my father filled the cotton bags stitched by my mother with vegetables. He handed several bulging bags to me. Squeezing through the crowd, I squelched across the market strewn with rotting vegetables and leaves. Quietly repeating one of my father's favourite phrases, "We should carry our load ourselves", I clasped the packs tighter and ignored the red lines digging into my soft palms. When Papa offered to take more bags, I shook my head, switching them between my hands when he wasn't looking.

Walking with my chest out and head high, I was a big girl who could take care of her parents and was self-sufficient.

I could ride a bike before I was ten. My father taught me, taking me along on his morning walks. When I could cycle the two kilometres to school, I told my parents, "I'll go to school by bicycle, not by rickshaw."

They refused.

"Ride next year," my mother said.

Our city didn't have traffic lights. Pigs, pickups, and people crossed whenever they liked.

Some classmates already cycled to school. I was embarrassed to be in the cycle rickshaw amidst the weeping mass of kindergarten kids. A rickshaw puller's vivid story about finding a girl and a boy naked in a classroom alarmed me. *Why is he telling me?* My young mind was baffled. Another one insisted I read him the Hindi *Amar Ujala* newspaper on the way. He said I read out the headlines like a news anchor. The mother of my hopscotch friends asked me to see that her three-year-old son, also in my school and rickshaw, didn't puke on the way.

Anything was better than the rickshaw. I began to walk to school every day. If I had pocket money left from creamy orange and mango ice candy bars, I hailed an empty rickshaw passing by me for two rupees.

Seeing me walk to and fro from school every day, my parents allowed me to go by bike. I was not ten yet, finishing fourth grade. Ditching the narrow zigzag alleys on which my father took me practising and which he insisted I ride on, I squeezed into the traffic on a wider, more straightforward road.

I didn't tell Papa I chose a different way. I was sure I could decide for myself: a strong notion that was to bring me a lot of trouble.

The most dreaded time of the whole ride was parking the bicycle in the godown. Of course, Papa chose the perfumed cowshed for parking. Taking a deep breath in, I pushed the bike inside, skirting the nauseating cow dung. I locked the bike, bolted out, and exhaled.

The same stinky godown rescued me in a few years. In the eighth grade, as the skirts of girls in my class got shorter, mine got longer.

"You're growing fast. Skirt is needed next year, too," Mummy said.

It was bad enough that our class's bib skirts had been replaced by simple skirts and sleeveless cotton jackets. *They are trying to cover us up!* The jackets made it obvious that our breasts were growing. I was embarrassed, and frustrated.

I eyed the short skirts of cool girls – those whom boys chased. Anything was better than asking my mother to alter it or take me to the tailor again. I rolled every strand of my chin-length hair inwards, as I did every day. With neck stiff to keep the hair in place, I went down to the godown. Every morning before taking the bike out, I held my breath a little longer, pulled the skirt up, and turned over the waistband,

making it a few inches shorter. I quickly rode out of the gate so Mummy couldn't see me from the balcony.

This was around the same time my father started urging me to wear covering and baggy clothes – both outside and at home. He forced me to ride behind him on his scooter with legs on one side, not how I straddled it before. Throughout the day, my sister repeated to me, "Sit with your legs pressed together. Pull your skirt beyond your knees."

Irrespective of the Papa-appropriate clothes my sister wore or the delicious curries she cooked, she was chained to new restrictions every day. Some of those shackles rattled around my ankles too. Instead of running outside to play hopscotch, I had to help her prepare dinner.

My friends, on the other hand, wore faded Levis and short tops and sped around on two-wheelers, bathed in strong perfume. They attended after-school play sessions, friends' birthday parties, and group dance practices at each other's homes. I had to insist my mother let me go. "I want to play badminton!" "There's this dance my friends and I have to perform on Sports Day." Pedalling hard to reach home before sunset, I was in local denim bought from an unnamed shop. There weren't any branded stores on our side of the city. I imagined driving around like the girls in my class, snug in tight t-shirts and ringing with metal bangles and earrings. I tried to persuade my father to buy me a scooter. Papa said, "You shouldn't drive so young." He hadn't got my sister a scooter either. She had insisted for years. He told me, "Ride your bicycle. Focus on your studies."

Soon I didn't have any need for a scooter. My mother restricted me from going out for anything else apart from school and private tuition. I was getting good at badminton and had just started enjoying the dances, trying hard to ignore the classmates who laughed at my free style. I didn't

suggest holding the rehearsals or parties at my house. As my friends lived nearer to each other, I had been going to them. Except for one friend, no one visited me. We never discussed coming to my place. Once when I invited two girlfriends, they said, "You live too far. We don't know where you live."

To join the yearly, one-day school picnics three to four hours away in the mountainous city of Dehradun or the zoo in Delhi, I shed long tears and pleaded with my father. My mother had said, "No need to join those picnic-vicnic." Instead, I was asked to sweep the house, water the garden, and fetch the cows' milk once the milker filled two buckets twice a day.

Every other hour I faced an embarrassing round of "Girls don't behave like this" or "Girls should do this".

I hadn't done anything except turn thirteen.

What had changed? Why did I have to think at every moment about what to wear and say and how to laugh and lie? Why couldn't I go to my friends' when they visited each other and did cool things? Why were their lives so different from mine? Why did my English teacher ask me what people would think of me speaking to the boys? When did we stop being friends and turn into girls and boys? Did everyone know about it?

Why couldn't I be the little Priyanka anymore? Who was this covered-up can't-do-this can't-do-that weird being called "girl" I was expected to become?

I didn't have the answers. But I learned fast.

I stopped talking about my friends. When my mother found the birthday gifts poking out of my school bag, I kept quiet. My cheeks flushed when a male friend cheered at the installation of a landline phone at my home. But I didn't tell my family how happy and special I felt.

Instead, I journalled in a maroon notebook daily, writing what I couldn't share with anyone else. I copied silly anecdotes and jokes from the *Punjab Kesari* newspaper. I

gulped the English and Hindi textbooks the day I got them and spent all my piggybank money on storybooks. A paragraph or verse that moved me went in the diary too. Soon, I was penning rhyming poems and submitted a multi-page story to an English story competition in school.

Maybe becoming a poet or writer was at the end of my inky list that read teacher, scientist, aeronautics engineer, pilot...

Life was hurtling at me with its own plan.

I had scored ninety-three per cent marks in the first test of eleventh grade when my brother recommended I study in Kota City in Rajasthan, India's westernmost state of which one-third is the Thar desert. Kota was famous for coaching schools. They prepared higher secondary school students for the competitive joint examinations to India's elite technology universities. The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) was one of them, from where my brother had graduated that year.

"Half a million students compete for four thousand seats in IIT. She has to give her best." My brother had thought it through.

My parents listened to my brother. I, too, paid attention. My class would be the first senior secondary batch to graduate from our school. It had been extended beyond the tenth grade to the twelfth only for girls; the male students had to leave. The rumour of our skirt-and-jacket school dress soon changing to salwar-kurta shocked and angered me.

Weren't the restrictions at home enough that I would also have to show up for school covered up like an old woman?

Folding sunbaked laundry and sweeping the dusty floor, I imagined myself in the future. I would have joined a private or government college in town, like my sister. With my degree certificate tucked under my arm, I would return from the graduation ceremony to find my garish wedding

party dancing outside our house. Nothing could stop me from becoming a sari-wrapped housewife, five children dangling from her hips.

My future terrified me. That couldn't be my life. I couldn't put it in words, but I had a notion of being in a state of transition. *Things would change.*

My brother's insistence on sending me to Kota – fourteen hours by train from us – shook my home. He said like the rest of the students I would live in a paying guest home. Paying guests stayed in private or shared rooms within a family's home. One gave monthly rent, meals were delivered to rooms by food "messes", and everyone bicycled to classes. I wouldn't need to go to a regular school, only take the final examinations for the senior secondary grades.

All night, my parents turned and twisted in their warm beds, wide awake. "Would our daughter be safe?" "How'll she live alone in a strange city so far from us?" "How would she do everything by herself?"

Their helplessness was obvious. We didn't know any family who had sent their daughter out of town. My mother didn't study beyond eighth grade. She would have had to travel from her village to the nearest city which had a high school. The farthest my parents had gone was to my paternal aunt's in Raipur (Madhya Pradesh) and my father on business to Calcutta in the east of India. We didn't get much news from the UK, Europe, and big cities in India where path-breaking career tales, intrepid adventure books, and solo travel blogs were being published. My parents worried that something horrible might happen to me.

It was July. The crows and tailor birds were quiet. Not a leaf quivered. All of us lay on thick cotton rugs on the drawing room's cool marble floor, except my mother who sat cross-legged beside me. Like always, she gave off the

unique aroma, a soft, inviting odour, unlike any other in the world.

As the cooler pounded in my ears, I said to Mummy, "I'll go to Kota. I'll live by myself." Droplets of water hit my face, along with the damp air.

"Like you know how to live alone!" she reproached me.

We reminded ourselves that, first, I needed to pass a test to get into the coaching school. My father booked two train tickets to Kota. In a few days, Papa and I boarded the train.

After two weeks, he returned home. I stayed on in Kota. My mother's restrictions, my home, my childhood, and my diary, all were left behind.

Or so I believed until I started writing this story.

For why can't I resist a wood-fired muddy kitchen where I eat with my hands? Whenever locals of a country direct me to an Indian restaurant, I tell them I would rather have what they are having. As I sit with them, dipping my fingers into their plates, I chat non-stop. Friends from around the world call me, telling me India is on the news and that they cooked the chickpea curry the way I showed them.

Wherever I am, I check eggplants for wormholes and if radishes are crisp, like my father did. I carry my bags myself. Following the intoxicating fragrance of the queen of the night, I lose my way. Even today I can't stop myself from plucking fruits and vegetables shining in others' orchards.

When I instinctively pull an older woman's braid on the street or joke with a security guard in ancient ruins, I wonder: *Do I still consider the world my playground and all its people mine to banter around with?* As if at any moment anyone will pull my cheeks or bend down at my one command to repeat a silly rhyme after me.

Did I leave everything behind on the rumbling train to Kota, or was I heading to the next station, everything important already with me?

Long gone, Bauji comes into my dreams. If I told him I write stories about him, he would give me writing tips, but not before asking for some of my mother's tomatoey raw banana curry, which he gulped straight from the large bowl, tilting it upwards, and which I slurp too.

I couldn't have had a rustic childhood in India without the restrictions put on me as I grew up or, in the more traditional sense, started "becoming" a woman. We are an orthodox country, and that's about as much freedom one can expect without having to snatch it herself.

Though Virginia Woolf said the below lines about bearing the difficulties of life, in particular the pain of losing her loved ones at a young age, I relate to them.

"So I came to think of life as something of extreme reality. And this of course increased my sense of my own importance. Not in relation to human beings; in relation to the force which had respected me sufficiently to make me feel myself ground between grindstones."⁸

I consider myself as the chosen one who was chained and who pulled through, dragging the stakes and shackles along with her. If I had all the independence throughout, I might have missed something else. No one knows.

There were no Levi jeans or speeding on scooters, but I ride bikes, through cities and forests, in the sun and the rain, singing songs, my hair whipped around my face. Before I know it, the bike becomes my wings. I fly, every inch of my body exhilarated and every ounce of breath engaged.

Only I need to know who I am or what I am capable of.

*

Please note: This story is dedicated to my dearest plump-cheeked, self-proclaimed mother who suddenly left us and from whose house my adventures began.

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- ¹ Charpoy: A wooden bedstead woven with jute rope.
- ² Leaf plates and bowls: Recyclable plates and bowls made by stitching or sticking dry leaves together. Commonly used in functions and celebrations in the traditional way, not so much in households. For more context see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leaf_plate
- ³ Power cuts: A common issue in India. High demand, low supply, and load busts during peak hours cause the power cuts.
- ⁴ Bib skirt: Like pinafores, they consist of a skirt with two straps joining the waistband at the front with a wider bodice at the back and are pulled on over your head. Fairly common in Indian schools.
- ⁵ Three-wheeled cycle rickshaw: The pedalled tri-rickshaw with one wheel at the front and two behind. The driver, called the rickshaw-wallah, sits on a little seat up front. There's a passenger bench over the rear two wheels. Ubiquitous in many Indian cities.
- ⁶ Indian education system: Back in my time, I started kindergarten when I was 2.5 years old (now regular admission age is at least 3.5). After three years of kindergarten, each year was a grade or standard. We called them first, second, third standard and so on up until tenth. Grades 9 and 10 were also high school/secondary school and Grades 11 and 12 were higher secondary school or senior secondary school. Though the education system changes a bit with geography and state education boards, the nomenclature has stayed the same even today.
- ⁷ College and universities: Universities and colleges are used interchangeably throughout the book. Often higher education centres which offer Bachelors, Masters etc are called colleges in India. They could be affiliated to a university, could be independent, or could themselves be deemed as a university.
- ⁸ Virginia Woolf, 1985, *Moments of Being*, Harcourt Brace & Company, p. 137.

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Thank you.

About the Author

Priyanka Gupta is a Computer Science graduate from IIT Delhi who now calls herself an itinerant writer. Growing up in patriarchal North India, she never thought of travelling. But she could always be found devouring story books, if not gallivanting around her garden or the neighbourhood. After being laid off in 2016, Priyanka visited Southeast Asia and South America, solo. The year-long trip made her hungrier for adventure, like she was as a little girl. Rather than sitting with her shoulders drooped in a cubicle, Priyanka was now running amok with joy again. She couldn't sit still anymore.

From clambering up into the snowy Himalayas to getting heatstroke in Goa, learning Spanish from an old Chilean countrywoman, and forgetting to get a visa, Priyanka has done a few things, mostly amusing ones. Meanwhile, she took up writing to share her ideas and create stories like those she loves. Priyanka runs a personal growth and travel blog, On My Canvas (<https://www.onmycanvas.com/>), and a weekly newsletter. Here she writes about the wonderful world, its colourful people, and how a step out of our door can change us forever. Now without an address of her own, Priyanka travels around with her partner, writing, discovering, and stealing fruits from orchards.

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