

THIRD EYE EDITION

Between the lines...

In order to get somewhere in life, you need to have a friend like Teresa Rehman. There are things about her that of course you already know – the many national and international awards she has picked up for her journalistic work and her exciting online magazine www.thumbprintmag.com. As a friend, she is loyal, undemanding, ready to laugh at your jokes, but also quick to point out your misconceptions in the gentlest manner possible. But what is most appealing to me about her is how she plays around with ideas. “*Baideo*,” she calls up every now and then, “I have this idea... what do you think about it?” Since it is her idea, I at once know it is interesting, filled with possibilities, ahead of its time. From the initial euphoric conceptualisation, she proceeds onwards in painstaking detail and before you know it, it is off the ground and she is somewhere in the sidelines, smiling quietly in satisfaction, crediting others with its success. This is exactly what happened with her latest initiative, ‘Back to books’, which took place at Gauri Sadan, Guwahati, this Wednesday. So, let us hear it in Teresa’s words:

“Listen to the colour of your dreams strummed The Beatles in their album *Tomorrow Never Knows*. It seems incredible as I sit to write this that I am actually living a dream in its different shades and hues. The Thumb Print (www.thethumbprintmag.com) is already five-months old. From what appeared infeasible sitting in the living room of my residence in a district in Assam, a State in India’s North East, this online news magazine on a shoestring budget has already stormed its way into the cyberspace and has managed to win hearts of people all over the world. Such is the might of the internet.

“The genesis of this media venture penetrates deep into a wounded sentiment which has witnessed long years of neglect and apathy for a region which is a ‘paradise for journalists’. However, this is not a plaint or a requiem. We decided to carve our own space where we would be heard and seen. We want to tell the world that we are not a museum. We are not yet another killing field. But we are a vibrant and living world with our moments of joy and sorrow. We are men, women and children who wish to write our own stories and take it to the world and bring the world closer to us. No wonder, we call ourselves a ‘savvy international’ venture.

“The Thumb Print, at the moment, can best be described as a scaffold trying to maintain a precarious balance between the region and the world. But we hope to grow, not only in numbers and figures, but also as an institution that will help dispel many myths and stereotypes about the region and aid in bonding with the world. This is a dream to go global with local stories — tales of the marginalised, the under-reported, criss-crossing through geographical terrain and psychological barriers. We will also talk about popular stories and tales which strike the right emotional chord. Our soul lies in North East India. We hope to live and delve in the contemporary times and tell stories with a difference.

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"We are treading an untrodden path since this region has grossly been under-reported. It has completely been out of the radar of the Indian as well as the international media. It's a challenge we chose to take up in spite of the odds in our way. But we are brimming with ideas and promises to engage with our readers with novel and riveting stories. We have already started associating ourselves with social causes and concerns as media partners in the Kaziranga Green Marathon on the occasion of World Environment Day, Symposium on Disability Scenario in North East India: Status, Challenges and Prospects and a Mobile Photography contest.

"We have floated this venture with paltry resources. We do not know if we will be able to sustain this dream. But the unexpected response from our readers and encouraging messages from all quarters imbues new hope in us.

"We hope to continue this tradition of bringing delectable stories from the world over and of course, North East India. I can't help getting lyrical again and hum a John Lennon number. *You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one, I hope some day you'll join us. And the world will be as one.*

"Recently, The Thumb Print organised an interactive session with some of the finest writers of the region in an event called 'Back to Books'. The event was organised in collaboration with Foundation for Social Transformation (FST) and supported by Actionaid India at Gauri Sadan on October 10. After the introductory remarks by me, Editor, The Thumb Print, the inaugural address was given by Dr. Monisha Behal, Chairperson, Foundation for Social Transformation (FST).

"The event was steered marvellously by Robin Borthakur. Borthakur is former Secretary of the Assam Branch Indian Tea Association (ABITA) and former Additional Chairman of Bharatiya Cha Parishad. He is a writer and columnist and writes on subjects of varied interests, including tea-related matters. He writes a column called *Tea Stall*, which has riveting tales from the tea estates of Assam.

"Eminent writers like Mitra Phukan, Indrani Raimedhi, Dhruba Hazarika, Janice Pariat, Kuladhar Saikia, Imran Hussain, Manoram Gogoi participated in the discussion which revolved around issues like — Are reading habits dying/Literary festivals/Do book publishers cater to all fields of Indian interest/Do we have enough books in terms of India's history and varied geographical diversity/North East India and publishing world/Self-publishing — does it work?

"The publishers point of view was given by Caroline Newbury (Vice-President, Random House). In tune with the diversification of reading habits with the introduction of e-books and gadgets like i-pads, kindle and nook, a presentation on E-publishing by Syed M. Raza, social media strategist."

Reading is one of the most intimate of human activities, best carried out in solitude, an act of intense communion, liberating us from the constrictions of ourselves, the specificity of

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our existence. In his memoir *Joseph Anton*, just out on the stands, Salman Rushdie writes that humans are the only creatures that tell stories, and they do so to discover what it means to be a human being. Therein lies the dichotomy in which a reader is placed — by the act of reading, he places himself aloof from his fellow beings, but in his engagement with the story in the book, he aligns himself with humanity. One who curls up in the couch with a book delves deep in the joy of youth, the will to live, the power of hope, the fact of death, love and solitude. Our love for reading seems to me somehow to be intricately tied to our yearning for immortality. When I read *Jane Eyre* for the first time, I was barely seventeen. The improbable love of Jane for Mr. Rochester bowled me over and the mad woman in the attic was the stuff of adolescent nightmares. Decades later, a mother of grown up children, I revisited Bronte country and rediscovered, along with the poignance of hopeless love, my own lost, wide-eyed teen version preserved in a world that was so comfortingly immutable.

Just as you do not need a reason to fall in love, you do not have to justify the act of reading. When you read a number of things, wholly pleasurable, happen to you — you escape into another world, you experience delights beyond your reach, you grow in experience, you reach a state of self-awareness, you find bliss in solitude, you gain perspective of your own dilemmas and most wonderful of all, you are in the company of great minds.

Sadly, people are becoming more self-conscious about reading. You know there is something wrong when people consider reading as something good for you, like eating whole wheat bread or walking briskly around the block. In its true sense, reading ought to be for its own sake, indulged in as a pleasure, without expectations of benefits or advantages to be gained from it. There are parents who nag their children into reading only the classics, only to put them off books forever. People are also of the view that television has effectively snuffed out book reading, but it must be understood that the media covers other areas of human experience and television cannot be blamed for the slow passing away of the reading habit.

Alarmist are of the view these days that reading in itself is fast on its way to becoming a lost art. This process begins right from childhood. The schoolboy's heavy schoolbag gets in the way of his reading for pleasure. His days are rigidly structured into classes, tutorials, swimming, art, workshops. In his 1967 memoir, the author Frank Conroy described his initiation into literature in Manhattan's Upper East Side as, "I'd be in bed and read one paperback after another until two or three in the morning. The real world disclosed and I was free to drift in fantasy, living a thousand lives, each one more powerful, more accessible and more real than my own." This is a scenario that would absolutely horrify any modern-day parent, who would want his/her offspring to read only so that he can win prizes and better his prospects in life.

Reading is not to be dismissed as an indulgence of the leisure class. The very progress of civilisation depends on this act. No less than the UNESCO has it that the biggest single indicator of whether a child is going to thrive at school and in work is whether he reads for

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pleasure. But parents are advised not to bombard their charges with classics and compendiums of knowledge. Let the child decide for himself the world he wants to enter.