



HER BLIND SPOTS

Tavleen Singh is a legend, but on #MeToo, she misses the point

PAMELA PHILIPOSE

TAVLEEN SINGH IS a legend. Her courageous reporting from Punjab during its most politically fraught times in the 1980s remains a valuable source of information on that period. She could — perhaps to her great displeasure — be regarded as part of the pantheon of women journalists who chose to fly over the chicken coops placed by newspaper managements of an earlier era to keep female journalists firmly confined.

It was therefore with some reluctance that I write this rejoinder to her piece, 'Stories beyond MeToo' (IE, January 1). I feel a rejoinder is warranted because it had followed two other pieces — 'Why I am not MeToo' (IE, October 15, 2018) and 'MeToo get beyond me' (IE, October 21, 2018) — that made the same broad argument: Indian women journalists, instead of seeking to be celebrities by calling out their sexual harassers and making themselves the story, would be better employed addressing through their writing the terrible assaults on women and girls in the country. There was a sub-text to these pieces as well: Singh's feeling that she was a figure of derision for women journalists.

To come to the last sentiment first, let me state that Singh is as entitled to her opinion as her critics are entitled to theirs, and calling her a "relic", if someone had indeed called her that, is patently offensive and ageist. Having said that, I would also point out that some expressions Singh employs in her pieces to describe the objects of her wrath — such as "MeToo ladies" — could also be seen as objectionable.

There is Tongam Rina, the young associate editor of 'Arunachal Times', who took several bullets for daring to expose corruption in hydro-power leases in her state, and Gauri Lankesh of 'Lankesh Patrike' would have been alive if she had stuck to 'safe' themes. These are just a few among many.

Singh begins her latest piece with the observation "women journalists were the biggest winners in MeToo India". The use of the term "MeToo India" is a bit odd, given that the MeToo "movement" has in no way been an all-encompassing, pan-national phenomenon. But let that pass. What is certainly not the case is that women journalists who actually found the courage to go public with their personal histories were "winners" in any sense. Being embroiled in a court case against a defendant shielded by the best legal talent in the country or being attacked for not assuming the stance of the perfect Bharatiya nari by keeping silent, are not exactly marks of a "winner". Even the prospect of a win is hardly bright, given the patriarchy within criminal justice institutions, the constant and hostile trolling and society's general misogyny.

The other major argument Singh makes — that women journalists should be speaking for those women who are voiceless and not about themselves — is similarly untenable. Journalism is not a zero sum exercise. Writing about the personal experiences of egregious male behaviour does not mean the same person cannot also report on sexual assaults on other women. In any case, it surely cannot be Singh's argument that female journalists are the sole custodians of reportage of this kind? It is the desk and editors, after all, who decide who does what within the newsroom, or mandate how much space needs to be devoted to a particular issue.

Claiming that most women in journalism

are in search of stardom also fails the test of reason. The reality is that, apart from a tiny segment, women employees in the media sector are actually relegated to the drudge work, having little choice but to hang on to whatever job comes their way. A greater number of women professionals in television are behind the cameras, not before them.

To insist, as Singh does, that most women in journalism seek stardom, "not because they want to speak on the issues that damage women", is to betray ignorance or a failure to register that some of our most searing contemporary news stories have been written by women. There is Tongam Rina, the young associate editor of *Arunachal Times*, who took several bullets for daring to expose corruption in hydro-power leases in her state, and Gauri Lankesh of *Lankesh Patrike* would have been alive if she had stuck to "safe" themes. It was Neha Dixit's investigative work that exposed how fake encounters have come to mark chief minister Yogi Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh, leaving behind inconsolable widows; and it is Bhasha Singh — television and print journalist — who continues to expose the intertwining of caste and deathly sanitation work. These are just a few among many.

As 2019 unfolds, here's hoping they continue with their courageous journalism in news environments that are equal and enabling.

The writer's new book, Media's Shifting Terrain, has just been published by Orient BlackSwan