

# Letters from Hindustan



# Letters from Hindustan

Stories of Hope from Around  
the Country

Kopal Khanna

 juggernaut

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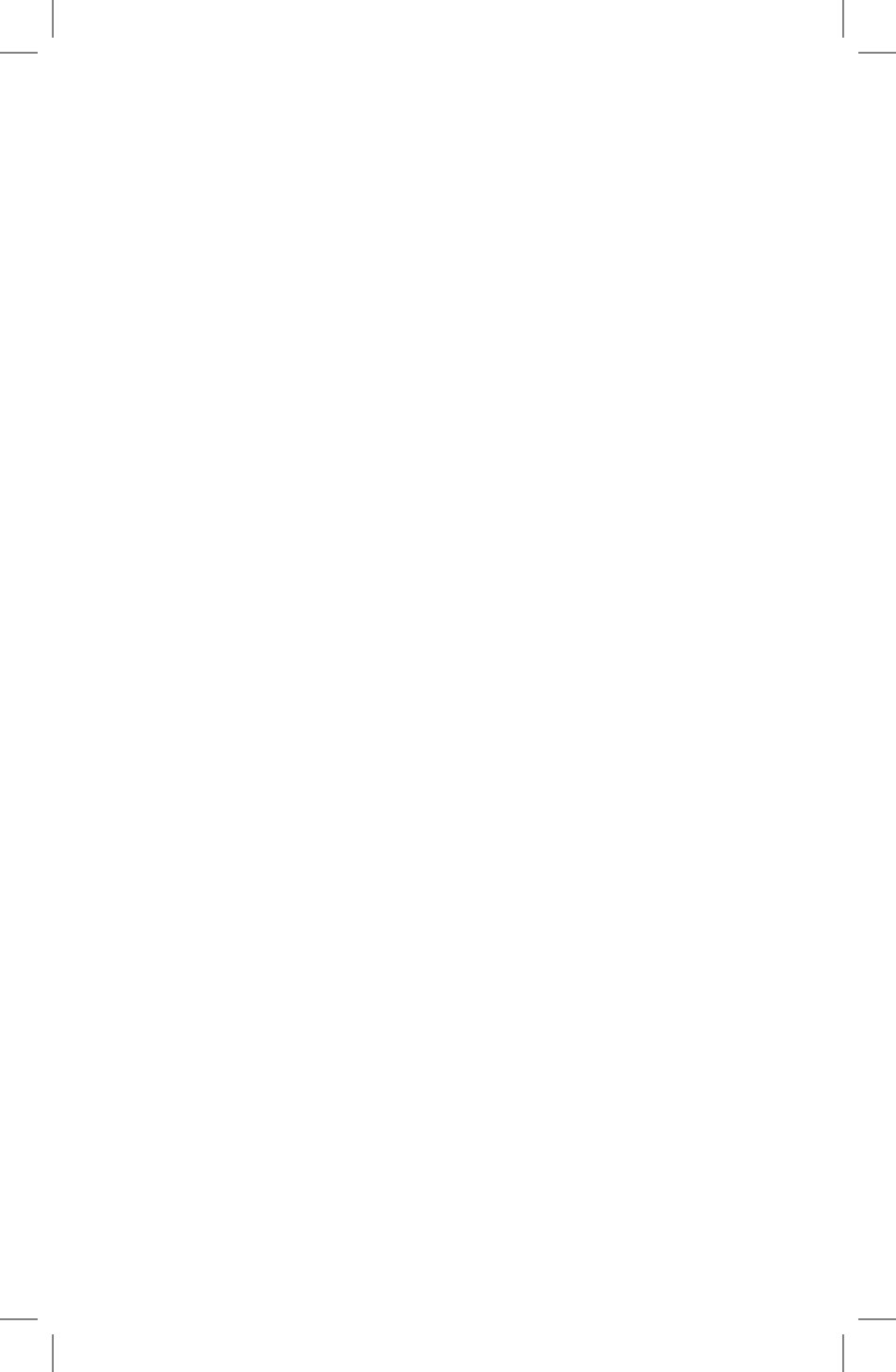
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*To Majnu, my late beloved dog,  
who taught me love and empathy*



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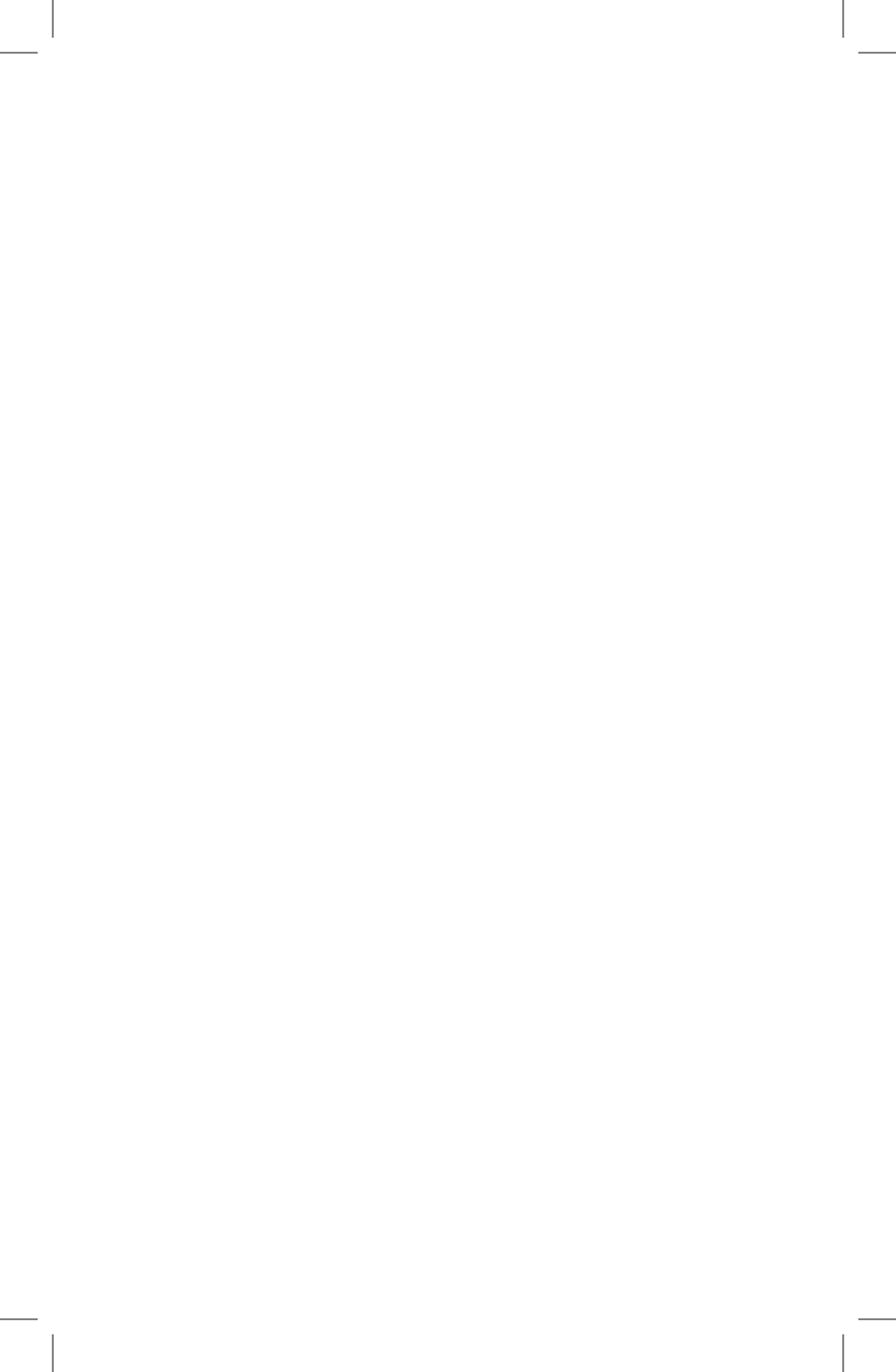
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# Introduction



Story.

Well, allow me to start with one. Actually, three.

It was 2013, and I was volunteering with an organization in my home town, Lucknow. My internship entailed documenting the impactful work done by the organization. Everything was going well until my supervisor informed me of a change in plans. She needed someone's help with the Jail Programme – a unit within the organization that focuses on improving the lives of women inmates by upskilling them and enabling them to rebuild their lives once they are out of jail. The English teacher who worked with the inmates was ill and would not be able

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to take her regular sessions for some time. So, my supervisor asked me if I'd be okay to fill in. Of course I said yes. I was barely 20 and open to new experiences, even though a part of me was scared. I'd seen jails in movies and read about criminals in newspapers, but I'd never really met one in real life. Naturally, I had several apprehensions, not the least being the thought of teaching them English. It was daunting in more ways than one.

The jail was an hour-long drive away. My mentor, Meena Ma'am, asked me, 'How are you feeling?' I told her the truth, but she didn't say anything to me then. No words of consolation. No 'You will be okay'.

We reached the jail, completed all the formalities, surrendered our phones and walked in. It was nothing like I had ever imagined. It was open, spacious and clean. We walked into a room that had been labelled 'The Pathshala' but it was empty. Just then a bell rang from somewhere deep inside the compound and

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about 30 women, giggling and clearly full of excitement, walked in. Some of them, I noticed, were holding a child.

Settling down quickly, several of them asked in unison, ‘Ma’am, *aaj kya padhenge?* (What will we study today?)’ Meena Ma’am introduced me, and they welcomed me. It was not a regular, impersonal welcome. It was a heartfelt one, full of warmth and sisterhood – like how you would welcome your favourite person into your house, thrilled that they were there. I was quiet for most of the session until a middle-aged woman walked up to me and said, ‘*Aap mujhe angrezi padhaoge?*’ (Will you teach me English?) I was nervous but I smiled and said, ‘Haan,’ and the woman beamed with happiness. She added, ‘*Yaha se bahar nikal jau, phir job karungi.*’ (Once I’m out of here, I will take up a job.)

On our way back to the office, Meena Ma’am smiled and asked me, ‘How are you feeling now?’ I remember telling her something about stories, about how important it is for people to tell their

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own stories. This was day one of four months of getting to meet the women from whom I'd draw strength even ten years later.

In 2016, I began working on *Tape A Tale*. The idea was to create an audio platform where people could record their personal stories in their voices and share them with the world. I knew this was what I wanted to do, but I didn't know who would tell stories on this platform or where I would find these people. I spent the initial days finding my first few storytellers from within my small network of friends and family. That is when my friend told me about her cousin, who had just ended her marriage with an abusive man. She thought it would be a good idea for me to talk to her and gave me her number. I got on a call with her, told her about my plans to start a storytelling platform and asked if she'd be comfortable sharing her story on my platform.

'I'm not a good storyteller, but I would like to tell my story,' she told me. I asked her to take her time and send me the story whenever she



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was ready. Later that night, I received a seven-minute-long voice note from her on WhatsApp. It was her story – raw, honest and impactful. She spoke about her arranged marriage, how her in-laws tortured her for dowry and how her husband abused her. She had finally gathered the courage to file for divorce. Her story was hard-hitting. Before I could thank her for sharing it with me, I received another message from her saying, ‘Thank you.’ I felt overwhelmed. She said she had been trying to find some kind of closure for over two years, and the process of narrating her story to me, just saying it all out loud, had made her see her journey in a way she hadn’t seen before. She wanted to share the story so that women like her could find the courage to let go. The courage she showed that day made me wonder if stories really have that kind of power – to shake things up, to drive people to action.

As time passed, we wove together one story after another, and slowly but steadily built

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a community of over three million people. We started doing events where people could come and share their stories – soon the videos of storytellers narrating their stories started reaching millions of people.

In 2022, I got a call from one of our most loved storytellers, Rakesh Tiwari. He had been sharing his stories on our platform for over three years. But that day he didn't call to tell me his story, but that of Rahul, one of his fans. Rahul had lost his mother when he was 20 and blamed his father for it, to the extent that they hadn't spoken properly with each other for over eight years despite living under the same roof. One fine afternoon, while the father and son were watching the IPL highlights on a computer, Rakesh Tiwari's video on *Tape A Tale* appeared on their screen as a suggestion and began to play on YouTube. The story, 'Yaadon Ka Swaad', was about how he lost his father and how all that remained was the bittersweet taste of his memories in the form of samosas that his father

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loved to eat and feed. Once the five-minute story was over, a teary-eyed father got up from the sofa and went to his room quietly. Sensing his tears, the son followed him, and just like that, what hadn't happened in eight years, transpired – they hugged each other and cried. I could sense Rakesh's emotions as he told me this. I could hear his voice crack. His throat clenched. Before ending the call, he said, 'Stories are so powerful, Kopal. They hold the ability to heal both the teller and the listener.'

With this hope in my heart, I present to you *Letters from Hindustan*, a collection of stories from India, by the people and for them. As you leaf through these pages, I hope you discover yourself in the words of individuals you may never meet, but who may not seem like strangers at all. I hope this book embraces you like a warm hug on a cold winter evening. I hope it grants you the courage to find love, heal a broken heart, overcome adversity, look into someone's eyes and express your true feelings,

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climb that mountain despite fearing its vastness and solitude, brighten someone's day and, most importantly, create space for people to share their honest stories.

Whether their version resonates with you or not, whether the people resemble you or not, whether they speak like you or not, let's make room for stories to breathe because, in the end, it is only stories that will endure. And as long as people can tell their stories without fear, hope will continue to thrive.