

## Pinjra Tod Kar

### Pinjra toh todna hi hai

*This is a Suno India production and you're listening to Pinjra Tod Kar.*

This podcast series Pinjra Tod Kar is conceived and produced by Goethe-Zentrum Hyderabad with the support of Suno-India and Bol-Hyderabad as a podcast with powerful and poignant stories told by the women whose lives were impacted by Shaheen.

This episode, however, is slightly different. We bring to you, a panel with our editor Padma Priya, Shaheen founder Jameela Nishat, Usha Raman, who's the journalism professor in the University of Hyderabad, Goethe Zentrum's director Amita Desai and program coordinator Jyothi Bezawada. They speak about using art, poetry and audio for socio-cultural issues, including community radio and podcasts. Through this series, we have heard tales of horrors and survival, from the victims themselves, who are rebuilding their lives with author-activist Jameela Nishat's NGO Shaheen.

Shaheen, which has worked to rescue and rehabilitate vulnerable women like victims of domestic abuse and violence, early marriage, sexual abuse, gender bias, etc and helped them get back on their feet. They have started important conversations towards structural and social change.

**Padma Priya:** For years, Goethe Zentrum has been at the forefront of highlighting and bringing to forth many social cultural issues. As far as I remember, it has never shied away from initiating difficult discussions. How important is the topic of woman empowerment and projects linked to this issue for you? And also, could you tell us why is it a topic that is so close to your heart?

**Amita Desai:** You know, I think it's important that as a cultural organization, while we may spend time celebrating and commemorating, it is essential that the cultural institutions see their role as catalysts. So we do, we do try to pick up subjects which are topical, and deliberate over that. But be it women empowerment, child sexual abuse, minorities issues, environment is a very big thing that we work with. And unfortunately for us, our decades of work, women's empowerment and abuse has not gone out of style. So this is definitely an issue that must be brought up at all instances possible. It is close to my heart or the agenda of Goethe Zentrum is I am a woman. I do see issues that need to be adjusted. And I do see a lot of pain and requirements for us to dialogue. And really that is what Goethe Zentrum is. It serves as a catalyst to create platforms for discourses.

**Padma Priya:** Thank you so much, Amita. Usha, just, you know, you're being someone who's been in the space of, you know, community and in communications and, you know, also in the space of community radio, what has been, you know, and, and, you know, the Pinjra Tod Kar will be add on Bol Hyderabad also in the coming days, what kind of an impact or reaction do you think it will garner from the communities listening to these episodes? And

How important do you think is the role of media in sort of creating awareness on these very sensitive topics, such as violence against women, child sexual abuse and so on?

**Usha Raman:** I think really the media has a huge role to play. Yet, I don't think we should overemphasize the role of the media because we've seen despite years of media led discussion on development. There's still a lot of change that we still have to see. So the media certainly can be a catalyst. It can be a reinforcer of messages, but I don't think that it can be held responsible for actually creating the change. It can probably push change a little bit. It can, you know, keep things in the public conversation and so on. So, I think the media plays an augmenting role and an amplifying role. but I think perhaps, you know, in relation to Bol Hyderabad, since you mentioned Bol Hyderabad, Bol Hyderabad is what we might call small media. And I think the role of small media has really not been recognized sufficiently because small media, like community radio, community newspapers, these are, you know, these target very specific populations. They are usually made by the people or the communities that they target. So there's a much richer conversation around media creations that air or make themselves present on community media. So, if we have content that is bilingual that is addressed at this kind of a diverse demographic, it has the opportunity to create rich conversations among the people who are all listening to it. So I understand that it's something like Pinjra Tod is aired on Bol Hyderabad, and it will be an opportunity for students to get into the conversation. And perhaps also for, you know, the workers in, let's say who work in the university areas, it might be playing in the department while they're working. So it's something that will reach them as well. Yeah.

**Padma Priya:** Thank you so much, Usha. Jameela ji coming to you in episode one, you told our listeners about the motivations and reasons why Shaheen was formed. Can you tell, tell our listeners what is the way forward for Shaheen and also a bit about what Shaheen has been doing during this pandemic and how have you been able to, have you been able to work and how have you been able to cope amidst this pandemic?

**Jameela Nishat:** During This pandemic period we had tough times like It was really a lockdown kind of thing, but our minds were also locked, but we did not stop it there. We thought we should work with the police and volunteer ourselves so that we can reach out to the women because the violence had increased. See the work that we had done earlier was so much against violence. And suddenly during this lockdown period, the violence increased. And that was a big tragedy that we faced. The women who were trying to come out of the wedlock, also went into the lockdown, into their homes and locked and outside There was a police inside the husband, the patriarch of the house. And in every house we have one door and one door, we have got 10 houses. So all the men of 10 houses covered the space and women had no space to talk about to spend time or even to go to the toilet. The toilets were also hijacked. Everything was just hijacked and controlled by men and it was really difficult for women to come out of that. We actually work in 20 slums and in all these 20 slums, we found this and we could find this only because the girls from Shaheen volunteered themselves with the police and to counsel the women about the pandemic. But

during the pandemic, they found all these things. We really had a tough time. We thought we should not stop it here. And we went and thank god, thanks to Azim Premji, that we got some, a budget, some amount for helping these single women so we could help some single women. And then we could work with the women and counsel them continuously every day, we go door to door and counsel them so that they come back to the normal life, the patriarchs of the bastis, the pehelwans also had their say and they started controlling women, not allowing anyone to go out. So this was a tough time, but we hope the Shaheen has a lot to do. During lockdown, I was also very far away from the old city. So it was all the pillars of Shaheen, the girls of Shaheen, who worked out hard and they reached out to the women and I'm sure all these women will stand against violence. Talk about it, not stop talking about it and continue to fight against patriarchy.

**Padma Priya:** Amita , I think we discussed this at the beginning of you know, when we were planning this entire project, but for the sake of our listeners, can you tell us a bit about how your association with Shaheen and Jameela ji's work began and give us a sense of why Goethe Zentrum wanted to do this project?

**Amita Desai:** Goethe Zentrum has been doing something called the women's March. So we felt that eight of March one day was not enough, but rather we would have a full month where we would bring up various issues that concern women. And on one of such occasions in one of the, one of the events that happened, I happened to hear Jameela Nishat talk. I of course also had the occasion to hear her poetry and they are women centric, a good part of them and the pain that is the agony and anxiety that she represents through her very simple, yet very layered, lyrics, really touched me to the core. So I have been following the work that Jamila and Nishat have been doing. And Shaheen seemed to be a place where not only was a sympathetic ear available for women, but there was a systematic approach to see how they could resolve the issues or assist to resolve the issues. And I thought that this is a very unique way of working, there are a lot of NGOs and there are a lot of people like we are, we are a platform and we create various opportunities for people to come together and talk and reach out through the various voices that may be brought together. But, I found that the reach of her organization was the hands on activism, unlike candle marches, which I have also attended. This particular work is not only dealing with victims, but with real issues and sometimes even very scary threatening environments. And therefore the work that Shaheen has been doing and Jameela nishat has been spearheading to me has been an awe inspiring experience. I actually feel that there is very little that can be done, but that what can be done is being done 150% of the time. And therefore my impact of, impact on me of, of Shaheen and Jameela has been enormous. And I have sought her out several times, various platforms To talk, and we have worked together over now, almost over a decade, but through poetry, through translations of poetry through the Qawalli that she brings in with her young women who sing, sing their stories. And of course, through film that, that she has been making, we have been working on various platforms because all of this is

required to really begin to make an impact. And that's where I think my journey with Jameela began. And I must say, it has been a great learning experience.

**Padma Priya:** Jameela ji just a question for you. You have consistently used as Amita was also talking about; you have used art and poetry as a form to educate and to empower women. How important do you think art and storytelling is to bring a change in society?

**Jameela Nishat:** They are the only way to bring change in the society. See, by talking, by giving, giving lectures, it doesn't make nothing happens. Only the first few words go into their mind and that's all. But when you create something differently, whether it's a theater form or painting or singing or poetry, it reaches people because it touches their heart. And the change happens only when their heart changes. That's why we keep talking about it. We keep singing Qawali in the bastis. We don't sing only for the middle class people. We sing in the basti, the girls, although they wear Burkha, that is in Qawali they sing without burka. And they feel happy to sing because the men also connect themselves. And when you want change, you want the change from the men of the society. And many of the young boys, we found a lot of change in them.

**Padma Priya:** One of the things, you know, some of the challenges that, you know, Shaheen has set to take and consistently comes across The stories that we're telling in the podcast is that of, you know, the role of patriarchy. And like you pointed out, like, you know, sometimes these Kaballis when they are heard by men, they associate with it. Do you think it is helpful to tell these stories, you know whether it is through mass media or podcasts or through a poem, like also to reach men, do you think like these are the spaces where we do it or should there be other mediums also to tell these stories.

**Jameela Nishat:** Every medium is important for us through whatever form we are not even particular that it has to be in this form or that form, but communicating the pain, see what happens for example, if Sultana had been the way that she was earlier suffering her pain and not talking about it, by talking about it, it heals her in some way. She feels a little empowered. That I'm important that I'm talking to people. So that empowerment helps the survivor of the violence, as well as to others. The others think there is so much violence as act and how are we living with such violence in this society? So the change happens, people, especially now, we have got some MLAs also coming, requesting Shaheen that we will be helping you out. We want you to be with us. So that happens only when they keep listening to us, listening to us thinking about these issues, because every family, no father wants his daughter to suffer. And that's how we try to bring change in the society that you empower your daughter so much, that she doesn't suffer in her life.

**Padma Priya:** Usha I'm coming to you because you've been pretty critical and also sort of framing this podcast and in helping us in putting together this podcast. how, what do you think, like, do you think audio has the ability to capture stories in a different manner

compared to other mediums? and how do you think it is impactful, say compared to a video or any other medium?

**Usha Raman:** I think there's something about listening to a story that makes you actually, listen or listen with your mind. I think often when we read there's a, there's a certain way in which the, you know, the words sort of skim through our heads, right? We understand the meaning, but it's often there's an understanding that's happening at a fairly superficial level, but there's something about being told a story, you know, listening to a voice in than see it with all the emotion that it has, especially if you have people who have experienced these things, talking about it themselves. I think there's and, and talking about it without the interference of image, I think there's a way in which we're able to experience it, you know, much in a much deeper manner. And I think the more emotional the story is, the better it is for it to not have an image, and for us to really gain access to the emotions and to the inner feelings of the narrator through just the voice. And, and I think a lot of you know, studies recently have shown that, we had forgotten for a long time. I think, we had forgotten how to listen. And, the Resurgence of audio in the current moment, means that there's something very primordial, you know, about listening to sound. And I think we're rediscovering that through stories like the ones that are told by the survivors or, you know, those who have come through difficult times, like those at Shaheen. we are able to privilege those stories by listening to them in a much deeper way that audio affords than other media.

**Padma Priya:** Amita, can you give us a sense of why you chose podcasts as a medium for the story was whether your motivation was similar to what Usha was talking about, and what kind of an impact do you hope this podcast will have in the long term? Because I think that's the beauty of a podcast. It's like a slow burn.

**Amita Desai:** Yeah, that's an interesting question. I think I've been considering podcasts for a while, and in these particular times isolating ourselves from each other, I can't tell you how much more relevant this has become. And I do resonate with what Usha has said, that there is this act of listening or storytelling or a moment of quiet where you, where you perceive far more than you otherwise would, not in the den of daily lives. And that this format, this technology, the podcast allows for you to really listen. And as Usha very nicely put it with your mind and with your heart. And I think that is very crucial that it's not just listening for the sake of something going in one way and coming out another that also happened but there might be that quiet that, that solitude, that space, that particular format, the podcast format I think does offer is that you can decide and choose your time and your space. And to think of this particular podcast on women's issues to me is crucial because if it is an exhibition opening or a Qawali or a film screening, you have 80-100 people together as we do, I mean, that's what our work is not exhibition would bring in about 70, 80 people. A film would bring them up to 100 people and what have you, but this is where the voices are going to the individual in their own spaces, in their own quiet and possibly allow young women or women in general, space for them to take this in at their own

convenience and, and make what they want to. And podcasts, of course, unlike radio can continue to, can continue to listen to it and listen to it again and over and over again and pass it on and, and therefore offer a possibility of being able to reach out beyond the usual target audience or the shelf life of a podcast obviously is longer. And, what does one want to achieve Priya? That's a very good question, very difficult to quantify. but I would say one is to reach out. Two, is to reach out to those who really need to hear these voices so they can in their own discerning manner, begin to come to terms with the situation and look for solutions. Three, to find know that there are solutions through the examples that Shaheen offers and that this podcast has really taken through the various, various episodes that you have presented, but also to give a possibility to exchange and dialogue with other people by sharing these podcasts. Difficult As I say to quantify, maybe the response may surface months later years later but I do hope that this issue remains a matter of discourse and dialogue that not only the victims, but rather the victimizers and the society is able to hear that there are voices, serious voices, strong voices who represent a community who should not be messed around with. that's the hope.

**Usha Raman:** So, you know, particularly in relation to what Amita was saying about life, the shelf life of a podcast, I think I think that's really important to keep in mind because these days media are so ephemeral, right? I mean, a meme comes and a meme goes, and, you know, before, you know, there's a new story on the, on the thread but somehow that doesn't seem to be happening with podcasts. So, people share at different times when there's a moment in the public conversation that demands a certain kind of content, you can always pull it out and reshare, and then there's a whole new audience that discovers it. And I think so far the, you know, while recommended algorithms are doing their job in the podcast space as well. I think they're not as insidious as they are in the video space. So you can still serendipitously discover a material in audio that you know, that kind of accident doesn't happen as easily in the video space and it often doesn't happen at all in the print space. So I think that way, or do you think there's still hope of, you know, constant discovery of new audiences.

**Padma Priya:** A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine with whom, I mean, a classmate rather whom I haven't spoken to in almost two decades. She reached out to me and saying that she had heard that episode and she shared her experience of going through CSA. You know, as when she was in school, when she was a school going kid and she told me that after she heard the episode, after she heard the people in the podcast speak about their own experiences, it gave her the courage to go and tell her mother that this had happened to her and also to talk about it with her own daughter who is now 10 years old. And for me, it just came like out of the blue, right? I mean, I was like, Oh wow. Because I hadn't spoken to her for two decades. And she discovered the podcast through my Facebook page and she heard it. And yeah, it was a very powerful and at the same time, a very profound moment because here she was plugged in, she told me she was cooking dinner and listening to the episode when the memories, came the skin hit hitting back, you know, hitting really hard,

what had happened with her and she chose to, you know, sort of open up then after all these years. So just thought, I'll share that with you guys.

**Padma Priya:** Jameela ji sorry you were saying.

**Jameela Nishat:** Again, referring back to Sultana because when Sultana speaks, she's always conscious of her face and the podcasts helped her not to have her face, but only her pain, her talk. So that was really helpful to her. And she felt very comfortable when she was recorded and other people also felt very happy. The girls who came and they in front of the camera, they are not that comfortable as they're comfortable to narrate their stories in podcasts. And they're very happy to share their feelings, express their agony, everything in this especially during this pandemic now, we got child marriages increased. They all are asking, where is that podcast again? We want to have that record. Yeah. But I said, we will have it again. Don't worry.

**Padma Priya:** Yes. I think this is a discussion that unfortunately will continue for I don't know how many, how many more years we have to battle this. Just moving on. I think I want to go to, I mean, I'll ask this question to all of you, because one of the common threads that again came through all the episodes and through all the guests that we were speaking to was the need to shift, you know, change in attitude, the need for changing this, the way that women and men interact with each other. I just want to get a sense from all of you, you know, from your personal and professional experience of interacting with, say, young women, young women and men, day in and day out. Do you think that this change in attitudes is coming through, so i will go with you first Amita.

**Amita Desai:** Is the change coming through? I think it is. I think it's rather slow and I think it is confined to a very small group of people who may have been exposed to different points of views but is it really happening? Is it impacting our environment? I'm afraid Not yet. I think we have a very, very long way to go before. We can say that there is a beginning of gender neutrality of safety for young people, or even older people. This is not an issue of class and a group and, and regional space. This is really a very large problem that can afflict anybody. And is the change happening. I do feel that the younger generation is beginning to talk about it. I do feel, and I think this is very important that whatever my generation has done, our young girls are beginning to open and be different. And I think that's very nice. It's very heartwarming to see that they have a voice that they do use this voice and that they are willing to use this voice for their community in groups. This is a very heartwarming feature, and this is not true. Only for young women. This is happening for a lot of young men as well, but the group, the number, the people that really are participating in this discourse I feel is still far too small. And the damage that is being done nonetheless is far too large, far, far, too large for us to, you know, be complacent with one or two activities. We have to possibly continue such efforts for a very long time. Unfortunately,

**Padma Priya:** Jameela your words, what would you like to say on this?

**Jameela Nishat:** See, when I started Shaheen, I had many challenges. Patriarchy was the first challenge, but now when I look back recently, I told you again, that MLA had come to Shaheen. I was not there in Shaheen. He came and sat with the girls and spoke to the girls. So that is the change. The men are ready to listen to you, and unless they listen to our problems, I don't think that things can be resolved. So that change is happening at the ground level. So when, once the change happens at the ground level, things will definitely change. I'm very positive about change. And a day will come. When we talk about equality and justice, just talking is not enough. The girls feel it. And they questioned the system, they voiced their opinions, and they negated. They create their own space. They want to create this space in public life. And at home, this pandemic had created a problem. I hope it will go soon. And in the old city we have, Shaheen is in the red zone. We have at least 130 people dying with corona last week, we got this information. So every family, whether it is a Waseem, you did not interview or Sultana's family or the Taslim's family. Every family, there are, we have cases of Corona, but the girls are fighting throughout. They are going out, they are on scooters, They are on bikes and they are working hard to stop this and have their own public space. And unless they create this space and have their voice and have political space, why not? We should have not just a social voice, but a political voice. And we are waiting to see if, if we find anybody good too in politics, we'll be very happy to do that.

**Padma Priya:** Usha, Would you like to comment on it?

**Usha Raman:** Yeah. I mean, I, I agree with Amita in that, you know, yes, there is change. And Jameela also said, you know, in a very hopeful way that we can see change. but it's just not as much as we need and definitely not. You know, as widespread as we need and, and what happens is, you know, every time you take two steps forward, it looks like there's change in terms of you legal reform, social reform, you know, cultural changing, and then there's a backlash. So you keep seeing from the patriarchy unit, these periodic waves of backlash, which we see in the Western culture and, and in India as well, right. With the rise of certain kinds of politics. but this is an ongoing struggle. So, you know, just like the wave has to keep for going forward and, you know, meeting whatever resistance is. There are we have to keep working at it, but on a more concrete level, in terms of the young people I interact with, you know, being in education and seeing new waves of you know, 20 somethings come into my classroom every year. I can definitely see that there's more willingness to talk. There's more willingness to call out when there is injustice or unfairness and, on the part of the boys or the men also there's more willingness to listen. So again, you know, the space of a university is a very privileged space. It's not definitely, it's not the rest of India. But I think at the same time, it also is a microcosm because as a public university, one can only hope that, you know, then the next generation that follows this one is going to start in a position of slightly more advantage than the generation that came before. So, yes, we have a long



way to go. Yes, there is reason for hope, but also I think we have to keep watching out for the backlash and dealing with that when it comes. Yeah.

**Amita Desai:** Yeah. There is, the title I think is, is correct. There is still a cage that is a Pinjra and there is this drive to break it. So Pinjara Tod Kar is absolutely correct. And that is what this underlying motto is of this particular podcast "Ki Pinjra Toh Todna Hi Hai" and I hope that we achieve that sooner than later. Yeah.

**Padma Priya:** I actually wanna ask, Jyoti, this question has been at the backbone of this project. Jyoti, what's your take on this? Do you think that there has been a change in the attitudes in the last few years with regards to, You know, the issues that we're discussing?

**Jyothi Bezawada:** Thank you Priya. Thank you for raising that question. Yes. I see a change and yes, I see that, we are going forward. However, the change is so minute compared to where we must go, that it's barely noticeable. You know, the fact that Five of us are sitting on a call and discussing all of this, is already progress according to me, but I would say miles to go before we sleep.

**Padma Priya:** Thank you, Jyoti. Any other last words from any of you?

**Usha Raman:** Yeah, Just, just to say that, you know, I, I think the cage metaphor is really, you know, it's, it's really apt because yes, we need to break the Pinjra but we also have to recognize that there is a cage. And I think perhaps where we are is that we are able to articulate the shape of the cage. You know, what it looks like, what it's going to take to break it and who might prevent us from breaking it. And that's a huge first step but then to actually break it into, make sure that nobody closes it up again is the next thing.

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