

Writing OF ROYALTY

Sudha Shah's book, *The King in Exile* was nominated for the First Book Award at the Mumbai LitFest this year. **Rhea Dhanbhoora** talks to the author about her book and the nomination...



>> Sudha Shah was also one of the speakers at the Mumbai Litfest, held at the NCPA

Sudha Shah, author of *The King in Exile*, didn't start off wanting to be an author. An interesting book and a story that stayed in her mind for a while started her off on a journey to where she is now — a nominee for the First Book Award at the Mumbai LitFest, Tata Literature Live! We talk to her to find out more about her work, how she researched her book and what it feels like to be nominated.

First off, congratulations! How does it feel to be one of the nominees for the Tata Literature Live! Mumbai LitFest First Book Award?

I'm very pleased to have been one of the nominees for this award. The recognition means a lot to me.

You've been nominated for *The King in Exile*, your tale of the last emperor in Burmese history. Tell us a little bit about your book.

It's the biography of King Thibaw, the last king of Burma and his family. Their story is a fascinating one, with twists and turns more bizarre than any credible fiction could ever have. I've written this book as a human interest story, set in its historical and social context; without which it would not have had as much meaning.

Your book sounds interesting and very different. But, why Burma?

I first read about King Thibaw in Amitav Ghosh's book, *The Glass Palace*. The story stayed with me long after I had finished the book and although his account of the Burmese royal family was a fictionalised one, it was evocative and I knew it was based on fact. My curiosity was deeply aroused and that's why I chose to research the subject.

Tell us about the journey to writing *The King in Exile* — what was the process like?

I felt like a detective on a trail and enjoyed every moment of my research, from interviewing the king's descendants (including four of his grandchildren), historians and people who knew the family, to delving in libraries, government archives and newspaper archives. Every bit of information that I managed to gather was valuable and added a new dimension to my work. The challenge

was crafting a strong, compelling storyline from all this information.

Was the process a very long one?

It took me seven years to research and write this book. The information was scattered; I had to get material translated and accessing information from Burma was time-consuming. Also, it was only after I built a rapport with some of the people I interviewed, did I get more personal and detailed information.

Was it difficult to get people to believe in your idea and get on board with it?

It wasn't easy, but it didn't take too long; I was lucky. Krishan Chopra, my publisher at HarperCollins, agreed to take the book on after reading only a few chapters.

Was your book well-received?

Yes. I'm happy with its reception so far.

THE KING IN EXILE

Sudha Shah's first book, published by HarperCollins, is the tale of Burmese King Thibaw, who was exiled to the secluded town of Ratnagiri in British-occupied India after losing a war against Britain in 1885. The book is divided into three parts; before, during and after exile, and traces the story of the king and his family and how they lived and survived in Ratnagiri, closely guarded, for over 31 years. It also follows them as they returned to Rangoon and how they (especially the children) had to adjust to a new world again. The book is an interesting read and the subject has not been written about much. So, we suggest you pick up a copy for ₹799 from leading bookstores across the city.

You didn't start off wanting to be a writer. How did you move from economics and finance to writing? Was it always a passion?

Reading was something I had always enjoyed, but writing a book was not on my agenda. It was curiosity about the subject that led me to research it, and while researching it, I discovered that not much had been written about the king and his family after his fall from the throne and exile. This was a book begging to be written!

Tell us about the best compliment you've ever received for your work.

It meant a lot to me that Amitav Ghosh, whose book inspired mine and who I greatly respect as a writer, was complimentary about my book. More recently, Prince Taw Phaya, King Thibaw's only surviving grandson, who has just finished reading my book, said that he feels as though the book has been written by someone who really knows the family well! Both compliments, in very different ways, are of great significance to me.

Any future plans as far as your writing is concerned? Do you plan to dive into other genres and areas of literature... fiction, perhaps?

I think I'll stick to the same genre for my next book, but I may change my mind while I'm writing it!

TATA FIRST BOOK AWARD

Awarded to one new author every year of the Mumbai literature festival, the Tata Literature Live! First Book Award this year included nominees Nilanjana Roy for her book *The Wildings*, Sudha Shah for *The King in Exile*, Sudheendra Kulkarni for *Music of the Spinning Wheel*, Naresh Fernandes for *Taj Mahal Foxtrot*, Ruchir Sharma for *Breakout Nations* and Aman Sethi for *A Free Man*. This year, Ruchir Sharma won the award and prize money of ₹1 lakh for his book, *Breakout Nations: In Pursuit of the Next Economic Miracles*. Last year the award was given to Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee for his book *Emperor of All Maladies*.

