Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Leela Soma’s Boxed in

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**Laura Dolan:**

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**Leela Soma**

I'm Leela Soma, and I was one of the 21 writers invited to take part in this project of the GWL and I feel very honoured to be part of the amazing 21st celebrations. I feel very privileged because I felt very strongly that there should be Asian Scots voices also contributing to mainstream literature, and being given this opportunity was wonderful. The remit given to us was quite wide. To just use the resources in the library. Laura Dolan, the Archivist, and a few other members of staff, were extremely helpful and they brought a range of resources. There was a playing card set called Panko, there was a clock, there were lots of old newspapers, and I was quite tempted with different ideas, but as you know to write a story you need to feel it in your gut, and I was looking through or browsing through various books and the name Annie Besant jumped out of this book, and it immediately transported me to my birth city which is Madras in India, and that was, if I can use a pun on the word, it sparked this story:

Boxed in, I stood at the doorway as I heard my mother pleading with a man. ‘I have more mouths to feed. I know that I'm working in two houses as a maid and I can't do any more. Please give me more time,’ her voice shook as she implored. ‘Then that rogue of a husband of yours shouldn't have taken a loan. I'm no charity. The full amount tomorrow, or else you'll be out of this miserable hut.’ he roared, His moustache quivering. He strode away; his menacing look burned my face. I ran and stood beside my amma (mother) tugging at her sari, she was shaking her head, her voice reaching a keening that I had heard four years ago when my father had drowned in the river. ‘Suicide, shame, leaving the family destitute,’ words that I had understood with creeping fear. My little brother Ram came running and tugged at my sari. I put an arm around him. My mother beat her chest and cried "What will I do? God help me! Someone help me! I said to her gently, Remember amma, when I joined the match factory, Mani, the gaffer said he'll give you an advance if you let Ram work there. You didn't want to take him away from the school, but we have so much work now and they're looking for extra hands. I know he'll take him. Let's go right now, we can't wait any longer.’ My mother sat on her haunches. Her sobs were quieter now and her face crumpled with deep lines. With little energy, she wiped her tears and her nose on her sari.

She nodded and got up slowly. We walked the two miles to the gaffer's house in the blazing sun. Mani was annoyed that we had disturbed him on the one afternoon in the week that he could take rest.

‘See me tomorrow at the factory, right’ he said, but I spoke up and explained. ‘Sir you also need that order for Diwali completed by next week. Rama is a quick learner. Please Sir I'll make sure he works hard. Please help us.’ He took his time, then said in his gruff voice, ‘I'm only doing this because you're a good worker Devi right and it is temporary, till the Diwali order is completed. If he is no good I'll turf him out the next day, do you understand?" My mother fell at his feet and cried her thanks. We offered a coconut to Ganesha temple on the way back to the house. Amma kept the money safe in the tin trunk and locked it. But Ram was excited. ‘I can go with Devi in the van. No more school!’ he exclaimed. At 4am next morning the van arrived and a sleepy Ram and I got in, greeted by the 15 other children from the neighbouring villages who were in the van. The van trundled along on its way to Sivakasi. The long shift at the factory started as soon as we reached the shed.

Ram was to pack the match sticks into bundles and then into the boxes. It was simple, and he did it with an enthusiasm, so I carried on to my end of the shed, where we older ones dipped the match stick tips into hot sulphur.

The smell still irritated my eyes and nose. Sometimes a strong chemical seemed to stick to my skin and I scrubbed hard when I bathed. The radio blared out a Tamil film song and we worked till lunch time. The shade of the mango tree was better than sitting inside in the stifling airless room. Chatting about film stars, dreaming about good food, and mimicking the gaffer, saying ‘Right, Right!’ This man who made our life so wrong, gave us something to laugh about and took the boredom out of the day. I hoped that amma had paid the loan shark and we could have peace for a few weeks at least. At the end of the day, Mani shouted over to me to come and see him. I walked over nervously. ‘Right Devi, your brother's coping okay. I'm doing you a favour, right.’ He was sweating profusely. The rivulets running down his cheeks, making the dark pock marks glint. ‘Right if there's anyone poking their nose in this place, he needs to say he's 14 not 10. Got it?’

‘But even I'm not 14..!" I interrupted. He rolled his eyes. ‘Right?’ he shouted. A bit of a spit fell on my cheek. I cowered, lowered my head and said ‘Yes Sir.’ ‘Right. He needs to work a bit faster tomorrow,’ he said and turn this back to me. I went home with a light heart. Two months later, our routine was set. Ram and I settled down at work, and I was proud of him. He was fast at making the bundles, packing them in the safety match boxes and made the gaffer happy. ‘Amma we even got some crackers and a tiny bonus for Diwali,’ he cried as he jumped off the van that evening before Diwali. Amma had been given some second hand clothes and a packet of sweets from the houses where she worked as a maid. It was the first Diwali that we had celebrated after father had passed away. We went back to work feeling good, and then it happened.

A tiny spark and the whole factory went up in flames. I screamed for Ram. I ran to the end of the shed where he'd been working. The fire singed my arms, but I got him out safely. Mani roared that we should all get the buckets of water and throw it to the shed, but it was not enough. The flames were huge and we stood in shocked silence as our livelihood went up in smoke. The next few days were a blur to me. Our vans came, collected us and we were crowded into the other shed to do some work, as well as help clean the surrounding area of the fire. That's when I saw them. The owner of the factory whom I’d never seen before arrived first. He spoke to all of us for a few minutes and warned us that we should be discrete and not talk to anyone. The local politician arrived next in a plush car and promised compensation to the grieving parents of the boy who had died. The newspapers clicked away, the politician and the owner and even Mani stood for photographs. They gave them lengthy interviews and smiled at his workers. When the journalist tried to talk to some of us, Mani shoot us away. I was curious, I wanted to know more but I could not get near them. They left soon after. The show was over. I spread some turmeric and oat paste that my mum had ground on the burns. They started to heal. In just over a week, the shed was replaced by a new one and we were back at work. There was a fire hose ready for use but the water supply was from the same tap, but we were glad to get paid again. Then one morning there was a commotion. A big van with a logo painted on it, squealed to a stop at the door of the shed. Three well-dressed men rushed in and asked us all to get into the van. We were petrified. Mani was enraged but a woman stopped him in his tracks. ‘Right who are you?’ he screamed at them. The woman spoke firmly but clearly. ‘We are from the Bonded Liberation Fund. We believe that most of these children are underage and unless you can prove otherwise we are here to take them away and give them a childhood. Mani's face went from dark to purple. ‘Who gave you permission? Right? Tell me who allowed you in here? I’ll call the owner, you talk to him,’ he screamed again. ‘I don't need anyone's permission, I’m Sweta Nair from the Foundation and I’ve got enough evidence that these children have been removed from school and are working here. Here's my card. Tell your boss to contact us,’ she said and turn to all of us. ‘Don't be afraid children. Come with us and we'll help you. We've met your parents already and they've given us permission to rescue you. Devi, help me please,’ she said looking at me. How do you know my name?’ I was surprised. I told you we've met all your parents and this is the only way to get you all out of here. Get in the van, quickly,’ she grabbed my hand. ‘Ah…’ I said withdrawing it. She looked at the scars. ‘You've been hurt and not even a bandage on it?’ I looked at her face and the other men. They looked kind. I knew they were right. ‘Let's go,’ I said bundling Ram first into the van and the others followed. Mani’s face was a picture; he picked up his mobile phone and talked furiously into it. We were soon on our way, and the countryside rushed past the speeding window.

They had brought some Lima and toffees for all of us in the van. We savoured the treats and looked out of the van window. Sweta explained to all of us. She said many things I could not really understand about the Child Labour Act of 1986, that it was a scandal that 11 million children were working in India. That all of us were under 14, the legal age when we were allowed to work in India and not in hazardous industries like safety matches and fireworks. She held up my hand and said that my scars, the blistered hands of some others and the breathing trouble some had were because we were working in a factory that was not for children. That made sense to me. Will we see our parents? Where are we going?’ I asked in a whisper. Of course you'll see your parents! We're taking you all to a safe place in Chennai. We will settle you in first then we'll get some court orders and people to help you, to help school you. Read it again. We'll settle you in first and then we'll get court orders to help school you. ‘Chennai?’ I was excited. The city where the films were made, and my dreams coming true, I thought to myself. I had never travelled this far before. Huge posters of the Chief Minister of Chennai and the colourful film hoardings decorated the city's outskirts. Then the traffic snarled almost a halt and inched its way to our new home.

This was a whole new experience. We had running water, bathrooms for boys and girls, and a huge dormitory where 40 girls slept, and the boys had the same. We were given food that was delicious, not cooked in mud pots like my amma did, at home. There was a garden with flowers and trees, but I thought of my amma, alone, struggling in that little hut and the tears ran down my cheeks. The next morning at 11, all the parents of our little group were in the hall. Ram and I ran and hugged amma. She looked happy for us and held us both tight. ‘Lord Ganesha has been kind. He has helped you both. I have no more worry,’ she cried. ‘Amma but I can't leave you on your own there,’ I said hugging her more tightly. I swear silly girl, you must get back to school and get a better life than me. This is a god-sent opportunity, grab it with both hands and work hard. I can manage on my own. My heart is glad now that I can see a future for both of you. In three years when you finish school and get a job I’ll be so happy. They say that we can visit each other too, so time will fly,’ she said smiling at me. Ram prattled on about the toys, the play area in the house and his bed which had a mattress. ‘It was so soft, you must lie on it,’ he said to amma. She patted him on his head and hugged him. I missed my mum, but my new life was so much better. Sveta often spoke to us about what had happened to us and helped us speak about our time at the factory. She took us to the Adyar Theosophical Society and showed us the huge Banyan tree, the biggest in the world that has survived for 450 years. The aerial roots had spread over a huge area. We looked at the tree and marvelled at the sight. Sitting on one of the branches, she told us a lovely story about the lady Annie Besant who had started the Society in Madras. She was a brave woman from a faraway country called Britain. Nearly 200 years ago in 1888 she had rescued and fought for young girls who worked in a Safety match company just like ours. She had led a strike, a hartal that forced the owners to make the factory safer and stop using young girls in such dangerous jobs. I looked at Sweta and admired her. I wanted to be like her. Maybe one day I’ll be able to help other young girls to lead a better life.

Postscript. A few years later, a local newspaper in Sivakasi reported: Social Worker Sweta Nair received a National Award for rescuing children from a match factory. Ram, a former factory boy has passed her Central Board exams and has been admitted to a course in Physiotherapy. His sister Devi works as a care assistant in a senior citizen home. These children's lives have been transformed by the determined efforts of the social worker and her team. In her acceptance speech Sweta Nair said: ‘Though India’s Acts of Parliament provides for protection of our vulnerable children, the reality is that it is hard to enforce in our area where the cottage industry is reliant on child labour. Eradicating poverty is the only measure that will prevent this happening again.

**Laura Dolan**

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