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Book review: Bheja Fry - Heartfelt stories from a neurosurgeon's clinic

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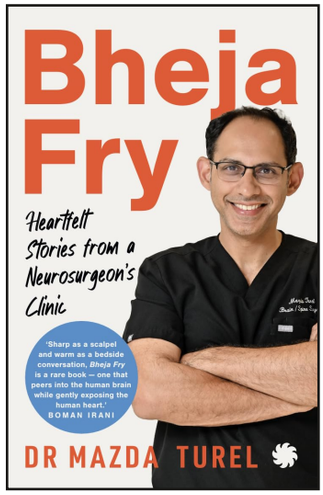

Bheja Fry
Heartfelt Stories from a Neurosurgeon's Clinic

Author: Dr Mazda Turel
Publisher: Juggernaut Books, Delhi

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I like reading biographies. What doctors do, nurses' experiences, technicians' tales make me curious because once upon a time, I worked in a hospital and now make trips whenever health issues warrant a visit there.

I liked the title 'Bheja Fry' and the cover picture of practical spectacles resting on Gandhian ears and the broad smile on an OT-uniform wearing human with folded arms.

There's no do-it-quick method to become a neurosurgeon. Like with fighter-pilots, it takes an inherent talent to develop expertise, beginning with crazy hours of training to hone extremely fine motor skills for five to ten years, steady hands, quick reflexes, a calm demeanour, instant recall from a vast memory, the ability to take risks, to work alone, to have an 'error-free' eye for detail, get along with team-mates, to concentrate deeply, and have high physical and mental stamina. One more similarity: the uncertainties of daily sorties/surgeries.

There's a difference. If a fighter-pilot or the Air Traffic Controller or any of the mechanics that worked on the engine, or the quality of the parts, or a passing bird or big black cloud causes trouble, the pilot dies. If a surgeon makes a mistake, the patient and their family suffers the consequences. Conscience and the overcoming of guilt or worry takes a toll, which lay people outside the healthcare industry find difficult to comprehend. Another difference: fighter-pilots don't have to deal with unreasonable or sorrowing family members or quirky patients.

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Mumbai's Dr. Mazda Turel has brought out the nitty gritty of hospital life, a neuro-surgeon's practice in particular, with gentle humour. As Indians, readers will relate to the rule of religion, superstition and family opinions over rational thought. The lonely decisions, the hard ones, the negotiable choices, he's covered them in sections: Consulting Room Confessions, Cuts and Bruises, Clinical Crossroads, Cliffhangers, Conundrums and Curious Characters.

The chapters are compilations of his column in *Mid-Day*, a popular Mumbai newspaper.

We get a glimpse of what happens inside an operation theatre, including how clothes are changed in restricted spaces, again similar to life in a squadron or a submarine (no, this is far more restricted). We learn about lesions, tumours, sclerosis, stroke and what is revealed in blood tests, MRI scans, and ultra-sonographs.

Turel wields a fluent pen. This stayed with me:

"Diseases have a way of lacerating families and pulverizing dreams. The ongoing challenge in life as a surgeon is how to maintain outward confidence and stoicism in the face of internal cataclysm and upheaval. How to achieve an inner stillness amidst extraneous cacophony. How to make loss a reason to live more deeply."

Biology is unpredictable and googling is not a substitute for rigorous training and judgement.

"A minor procedure spirals into catastrophe, while a hopeless case returns from the brink and asks for tea."

I had to look up meanings of words like 'bloviated' and 'trephination', amongst others, prodding me to wonder where he learnt the English language, and pleasantly noted, it was in the school where I had studied. I obviously did not expand my vocabulary as much as he did.

Every chapter has some quotes that resonate with the reader. In the chapter Loneliness, are these verses:

Mujhe tasalli na do, sirf baithe raho,
Waqt mere marne ka tal jaayega.
(Don't console me, just sit with me;
time itself will delay my death).

Yeh kam hai ke maseeha ke rehne se hi,
Maut ka bhi iraada badal jaaye?
(Isn't it something, that mere presence
of a healer can make even death
change its mind?)

It's important to note that a doctor's success is realized after months sometimes. Like on page 151, he ends the chapter with "I had hit a Roger Federer backhand winner, realizing its brilliance about half a year later." This, after a patient had taken several months to recover, surprisingly well. He ends a later chapter with Philip Roth's words: "All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing."

In another patient's case, whom he could not help, he recalls lines from Australian poet, Erin Hanson:

"You can't remember how it started,
And you don't know when it will end,
But you know that you'd give anything,
To stand up on your feet again.
Sadness is that feeling,
When the falling doesn't stop,
And it saps your life of meaning,
And of the good things that you've got..."

I agree with him when he says "there is something miraculous about the mundane that we must celebrate." It's not the parties, but the daily grind, the little joys, that accumulate happiness. Hospitals have plenty of such grinding, mundane moments.

Last but not least, is how patients' families and doctors deal with the ultimate winner, death. All in all, Bheja Fry is an easy-to-read book full of enough information to stir an interest in the world of healthcare in general and neurosurgery in particular.