



**MINNIE VAID** has juggled multiple roles over a three decade stint in mainstream media. She is a print and television journalist, a documentary filmmaker, creative producer and author of four non-fiction books including *Those Magnificent Women and Their Flying Machines: ISRO's Mission to Mars* (2019). Her areas of interest include social and political issues in rural India, human rights, the environment and gender.

Her latest non-fiction novel (*Those Magnificent Women and Their Flying Machines: ISRO's Mission to Mars*) throws light on the lives and odysseys of women scientists and engineers of ISRO involved in MOM (Mars Orbiter Mission) and other missions.

In an e-mail interview, she talks to **VRITANT KUMAR** about her latest non-fiction science novel, her interactions with women scientists and their grit and determination in face of all hardships.

# If you aim for the sky there is no limit!

**Vritant Kumar:** *Please tell us something about your life, your childhood and the moment you decided to make your way in journalism?*

**Minnie Vaid:** I did my school and college from Pune – St Josephs Convent of Jesus & Mary and Political Science Honours from Fergusson College. I then went to Mumbai for post graduation at the Sophia Polytechnic in mass communications.

**VK:** *Why did you choose the field of journalism?*

**Minnie Vaid:** I had an innate sense of curiosity always as a child...plus I wrote well even in class 10...so my teachers encouraged me to choose my own path which I did and which was none other than journalism.

**VK:** *Apart from a journalist, you are also a documentary filmmaker, creative producer and author of four non-fiction books. Please tell us something about your professional journey.*

**Minnie Vaid:** I left Sophia Polytechnic to carve out my career for the next 20 years. Those years were spent doing jobs



Minnie Vaid with actress Vidya Balan at the launch ceremony of her novel *Those Magnificent Women and their Flying Machine: ISRO's Mission to Mars*

in print and then television media as a journalist, in organisations such as the *Times of India*, *Illustrated Weekly*, *Imprint* and *News Track*... this was mostly political and social journalism, nuts and bolts stories and politicians and election coverage, etc. All this was very exciting stuff but I think I really came into my own with producing and directing *Roots* for Business India Television... it was a one-hour programme on issues in rural India in 1994. Nobody had covered rural India then, very few do even now; it's a huge pity that BITV didn't survive to allow me to tell more stories. Rural India remains an abiding interest and in fact almost all of my documentaries are set there.

Star Plus where I spent three years making more friends than television programmes — was interesting. But when the *saas and bahu* serials entered Star Plus I knew it was time to say goodbye.

When I started working for myself as a freelance documentary film maker, I did the work that I feel

SCM laid the foundations for...pursuing a social conscience through my films, later also through my books.

My work has a running thread of injustice and how it affects people... so I would always get attracted by topics such as whistleblower Satyendra Dubey, killed for speaking out against corruption or Dr Binayak Sen, pediatrician and rights activist who spent 30 years helping tribals in Chhattisgarh. Coincidentally, this leads to my also writing my first book on Binayak Sen followed by a short one on another rights activist, Irom Sharmila. A little later the women of Kudankulam, fighting against having a nuclear power plant in their backyard, were the heroes of my third

book When I asked them how they planned to survive against the might of the state they gave an answer that became the title of my book, *The Ant in the Ear of the Elephant*.

**VK:** *How did you decide to write a book on the Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM) and exclusively about the women scientists involved in the Mission?*

**Minnie Vaid:** I was attending a women empowerment summit and three of the Mars mission women scientists of ISRO were speaking there...one of them said, "We worked on the mission in the day and in the night, we took care of our families and children and somewhere we also launched a rocket into space..." It was such a throwaway remark, said with such casual confidence — like the Tata Steel catchline, *We also make steel* — that I was hooked.

This book on the ISRO women scientists has perhaps been my most popular work so far...it profiles the incredible story of women scientists of the Mars mission

and other missions...how these women work in significant roles in ISRO, Ritu Karidhal for example who was the deputy operations director in Mangalyaan was the mission director of Chandrayaan 2...all of these women come from conservative modest backgrounds, many from second-tier cities, having fought with fathers to get to ISRO, and going on to do stellar work, while balancing families and children.

**VK:** *What were some of the stellar qualities you noticed in the women scientists at ISRO?*

**Minnie Vaid:** The women were all really nice and warm, shared their stories, told them in simple language that a non science person like me could understand. I was really impressed by how humble they were, also how calm and collected under tremendous pressure to deliver...space is a very tough environment to work in and they were superb in their work.

**VK:** *Please also tell us about some challenges and difficulties you faced in your life and how you confronted them?*

**Minnie Vaid:** I did not face any real gender problems in my 30 year career in media as in media women rule! I had women bosses most of the time...the challenges were the usual ones related to work-life balance. I actually ended up focusing a lot more on the work part instead of life and that is one regret I have.

**VK:** *What message would you like to give the students and the young?*

**Minnie Vaid:** Dream big, don't get limited by any dogmas or prevailing social beliefs. If you aim for the sky there is no limit! At least for this generation, the sky will not be the limit.

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