

'I tend to return to memories of mountains for inspiration'

Siddhi Jain

Her early childhood was spent in Nainital, and thus, this popular hill station of Uttarakhand usually acquires quite a character when author Namita Gokhale spins a tale. And so it did when she penned her novel, *Things To Leave Behind* (2016). Recently announced as the winner of Sahitya Akademi Award in English language category — among 20 languages — this book is set in Kumaon of mid 1800s, and chronicles the mixed legacy of British Indian past of the region.

Describing how her identity, as a woman from the hilly region of India, influences her storytelling, Gokhale says, "My fundamental identity, how I see myself, is as a Pahari woman from Kumaon. That perception is the key to my sense of self. I tend to return to memories of the mountains for inspiration when I'm searching deep within myself for stories to tell myself and my readers."

The author says she's "overjoyed and overwhelmed" that the book has been chosen for the award. She adds, "It's a book close to my heart. It is also a novel that will endure, as it is framed carefully in time and place." It makes her recall the hard work that went into writing it, and shares that the research for it came to her through several sources.

"I had written a book of oral biographies titled *Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*, on the lives of my maternal grandmother and three great aunts. That provided me a treasure of



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material memory. My paternal great grandfather, Kumaon Kesari Badri Dutt Pande had written *Kumaon ka Itihas*, which is an excellent history of Kumaon. And I had over the years delved deep into

▲ Namita Gokhale; (inset) her award-winning book *Things To Leave Behind* (2016).

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Atkinson's Himalayan Gazetteer. The internet, of course, provides the most amazing information and reading," she adds.

The pandemic gave Gokhale the chance to write her latest, *The Blind Matriarch*. "The past two years have been chaotic, but they have also provided an opportunity for deep reflection. I have changed in so many ways; some of which I still don't fully recognise or comprehend. And I've tried to teach myself not to be afraid of change," the author concludes.