

THE INTERNATIONAL FREELANCER *with* MRIDU KHULLAR RELPH

9 QUERY LETTERS THAT SOLD

When I started my freelance writing career over a decade ago, the almost non-existent freelance industry in my country at the time forced me to look for writing work online and in foreign, mostly American, publications. My biggest problem then was not finding the time or sustaining an income, but getting editors to trust me with that first assignment. I needed to convince them to have confidence in my abilities despite the fact that I lived thousands of miles away from them. In India.

I knew that the only way I was going to get assignments was to write queries so irresistible that an editor immediately saw how good not only my ideas were, but how good I was. No editor was about to take a chance on a writer all the way across the globe unless she saw writing ability, unique ideas, and most of all, dependability.

A lot relied on the queries I wrote. So I wrote the very best.

These queries got me into TIME, The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, Ms., GlobalPost, The Christian Science Monitor, Elle, Glamour, Vogue, Marie Claire, Self, and many more.

In the pages that follow, I'm going to share some of those query letters with you as well as brief introductions to each with the backstory and my view on why they sold.

My wish for you is that this book helps you achieve your freelance writing dreams. May your ideas never go out of vogue!

Happy Querying!

Mridu

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1. TIME

THE BACKSTORY:

I had just returned to India after a year in the US when I got in touch with the India bureau chief of Time. The magazine had recently had a few staff changes and I met the editor for a drink and we discussed some ideas. I'd written for her a couple of times by the time I sent this idea through and was, in fact, at this point, one of her go-to writers. As you can see, the pitch is fairly informal because of this reason, at least in the greeting.

PUBLISHED PIECE:

In India, Banking on the 'Morning After' Pill:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1991879,00.html>

time

DEAR EDITOR,

How've you been? Hope life and India's treating you well.

Two stories for you this afternoon. Let me know if any of them interest you.

1. While the West celebrates the 50th anniversary of the pill, in India it's been a largely different story. Over the last fifty years, as sexual freedoms for women have remained curtailed, the pill has added to the responsibility of women to be solely responsible for birth control. The National Family Health Survey-3 statistics show that only 49 percent of Indian women use modern contraception methods, and of these 49 percent, only 3 percent are on the pill. Further, the poor Indian woman is not a good candidate for the pill—she is often malnourished and anemic, and has low BMI.

In contrast, in the last ten years in urban India, the use of over-the-counter morning-after contraception has skyrocketed, and is often used by young women in lieu of the pill. Around 200,000 units of Cipla's i-pill have been sold every month since its launch in 2007. The long-term effects of overuse of the morning-after pill are still unclear, but doctors worry that it could replace the condom, leading to the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

[Second idea] Let me know what you think about these ideas, [Editor]. Thanks, and looking forward to working with you again.

Cheers,
Mridu

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2. MS.

THE BACKSTORY:

I'd written for Ms. Magazine once before I sent my editor this story idea. I was in the US in 2008 and Don't Ask Don't Tell and other LGBT issues were getting a lot of play after President Obama's first election. LGBT rights were not something I'd looked into before as a writer because not being gay and having no access to that community, I'd never really come across anything worth writing about. Then, while making a presentation on women's rights in India, I looked into the rights of gay women and found that the issues were almost endless. I proposed this story as a way to talk about the information I'd uncovered, but every time I researched, there was more. So you'll find that I ended up writing quite a few stories about the LGBT community and placed them in national publications, including the New York Times.

PUBLISHED PIECE:

Where Lesbians "Don't Exist":

<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/06/29/sneak-peek-india-where-lesbians-dont-exist/>

ms.

DEAR EDITOR,

While gay rights activists in America fight for same-sex marriage, campaign against Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and take to the streets every year in celebration of Gay Pride, their counterparts in India face a very different problem.

According to the Indian government, lesbians don't exist.

As per Indian law, homosexuality is illegal, since it falls under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which categorizes it under "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." But while the law covers gay men—it specifically mentions penetration—there is no law governing the status of gay women.

The law has been in effect for over 140 years when under British colonization, homosexuality was outlawed. It is rumored that when it was suggested to Queen Victoria in 1885 that the law be extended to address female homosexuality as well, she refused to believe that this was even possible.

Government officials frequently refuse to even acknowledge the existence of homosexuality in Indian culture, and specifically, gay women.

Culturally, it's no different. In a male-dominated society where female sexuality is taboo and even heterosexual couples cannot express their love in public, gay women face a dual battle: They're female and they're homosexual.

For this reason, while gay men have relative access to independence from social structures as well as economic autonomy, gay women are often forced into

arranged marriages, thrown into mental institutions, and frequently, given electric shock treatments to "cure" them of what's seen as a disease or disability.

Which is why suicide pacts among homosexual women is a common occurrence –between 1996 and 2004, there were 24 documented cases of lesbian suicide pacts in the state of Kerala alone. While middle and upper class women still have some social structure in place, the real victims are lower-class women such as Christy and Rukmini, who after leaving their husbands and being discovered together, were threatened, abused, and led to finally set themselves on fire. When relatives discovered their charred bodies, they were still hugging each other.

While there are several organizations in India that aim to bring about a change in homosexuality laws, there are still very few that cater specifically towards lesbians, who in this patriarchal culture, have very different needs to those of men.

Would you be interested in a story about lesbians in India and how they're the invisible and oft-ignored story behind homosexuality activism?

As you may remember, I wrote a story for Ms. last year on suppression of sexuality in India by banning sex education in schools. I also contribute to Time, Marie Claire, Elle, Vogue, Glamour, Women's eNews, and The Women's International Perspective, among others.

Currently, I'm a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Journalism. I'm nearing the end of my year in Berkeley and will be headed back to India in early May. Before arriving in America, I worked for six years in India and Ghana, reporting mostly for American publications on women's issues and human rights.

Let me know if you have any questions about this story. Clips and credentials are available on my website www.mridukhullar.com.

Thanks for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

3. THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE BACKSTORY:

This was the second story I pitched to the Times and got a nod on it pretty much immediately. However, before I did, the editor had a few questions and wanted to know a bit more about the subject and how I'd handle it. I wanted to include a full e-mail exchange here because it helps show you how the to-and-fro on these stories sometimes works. (I mention that I got married because I changed my byline and because, hey, I wanted to announce it from the rooftops!)

PUBLISHED PIECE:

India Could Be The Next Big Destination for Gay Tourists:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/01/business/global/01outbiz.html>

DEAR EDITOR,

Sorry for being out of touch for several weeks—I took some time off to get married I'm back to work now and have two very timely business stories for your. Let me know if you have any questions about either of the stories or how I intend to report on them and I'll get back to you right away. Since these are timely and as-yet-unreported stories, could you please let me know at your earliest convenience whether they might be of interest to you?

Thanks so much, and I look forward to working with you again!

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1. In Pursuit of the Pink Dollar

Less than a year ago, the Delhi High Court passed a ruling that nullified a British-era law that made homosexuality in India a crime. Following the ruling, a new wave of gay-oriented tourism has sprung up in the country, aiming to bring in the Pink Dollar, the Pink Pound, and the Pink Euro. For years, while India has been destination for homosexual and heterosexual couples alike, travel trips and packages for gay couples, especially Western couples, were a rarity. Now, with this new law and newfound confidence, travel companies are quickly targeting a whole new demographic, one which has proven to be both interesting in traveling to new places and has a higher income than heterosexual couples. (Surveys show that same-sex couples have more disposable incomes than heterosexual couples in the same age brackets.)

EDITOR'S NOTE:

I have a few questions: is the change in the law reflective of a broader change in attitudes in society? (I have heard, for example, that gay listings in New Delhi's Time Out, etc, still don't give addresses for events). To what extent is there an "out" community at all? How are gay couples received, when, say, checking into hotels? Were/are there instances of gay tourists being harassed, or refused service?

What was the previous punishment for homosexuality? Were people actually prosecuted? Is there a difference in reception for male-male and female-female couples? What cities are on the forefront of this trend? Does the government tourism office support the new efforts to chase gay tourists?

Please let me know who you think would be the main sources for the story, and what you think you would build it around.

MY RESPONSE:

To answer your question: The law is reflective of a broader change in attitudes in society, but those attitudes are changing slowly, and the changing of the law has helped to that end as well. For instance, we're seeing gay online bookstores come up now, where earlier something like that wouldn't have stood a chance.

Businesses catering to homosexual couples are also beginning to show up, while earlier, even if they could operate, they didn't have any legal protection from violence or any sort of backlash. So to that end, I think the difference is huge.

The previous punishment for homosexuality, on books, was a fine and imprisonment for up to a year, but no one was actually ever prosecuted under that law. What that law allowed to happen, however, was corrupt police officials threatening, abusing, and extorting money from homosexuals. Police officers are also known to rape gay people and arrest them arbitrarily under this law. While the courts never handed down a sentence, the police often used this law to abuse citizens.

Before, when homosexuality was still outlawed, because of the lower stature of women in the country anyway, lesbian couples had less acceptance in society (though male couples were beaten more often), and there were an alarming number of lesbian suicides in the country over the last decade. It hasn't actually been that long to comment on whether or not those numbers have gone down, but seeing as that was a societal problem (as opposed to a legal one), I'm guessing it will take some while longer.

The significant shift, and why I think it makes this a good business story, is that because of the legalization of homosexuality, so to speak, businesses catering to this segment can operate without any threat of arrests. I'll have to check up on government initiatives on this, but as of now, I'm not sure that there are any. I'll see if any are forthcoming. Private players, however, have suddenly sprung up.

For the story, I'd speak to Western gay couples who've come to India after the law was repealed, someone from the tourism ministry would also be a good idea, and of course, operators who've seen and followed up on this trend. If there's anyone else that you think should be included as well, do let me know.

Happy to answer any more questions. Let me know what you think.

Thanks,
Mridu

4. GIRLS' LIFE

THE BACKSTORY:

I first contacted Girls' Life with a couple of pretty serious ideas. One of the editors wrote back to me almost immediately and sensing that I wasn't quite getting the tone of the magazine, sent me a couple of issues, a sample query letter, and notes of what she'd like to see from me. It's probably one of the nicest things that an editor's done for me, sending me issues all the way to India. I studied those two issues like I'd be quizzed on them, but didn't end up pitching GL for a while. When I did, it was to a new editor and she thought I had understood the voice of the magazine perfectly and made an immediate assignment.

girls'
life

DEAR EDITOR,

Do your buds come to you when there's a need for gossip or are you tightly zipped when it comes to sharing other people's secrets?

Finding out who the hottest guy in school is crushing on can be super cool, right? But are you the type of friend your buds can trust with their secrets or do you toss and turn at night wondering how many people you're going to tell in school the next day? Read on to know your secret-keeping quotient.

I'd love to write the quiz "Can You Keep a Secret" for you. With real-life situations specifically suited to GL readers, it'll help them figure out how they rank in the secrecy department.

I'm a full-time freelance writer and have written for [details of previous work]. Clips are included below.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Have a great day!

Mridu Khullar

5. WOMEN'S ENEWS

THE BACKSTORY:

This was my first query to Women's eNews. I had sent the a Letter of Introduction and the editor e-mailed me back the writer's guidelines and encouraged me to pitch ideas. So I did. Some things to note:

(1) Even though the project isn't aimed at women in particular, I emphasize why it's of importance to women and therefore relevant to the publication's audience: "The project is particularly of help to women, many of whom are widows and have children from their previous marriages."

(2) The article idea speaks of a huge problem (one written about hundreds of times) but also gives details of a unique solution (which has almost never been written about at all). There's a freshness about it, a newness that captures attention.

(3) I've done my research. This means that I was able to give many details of the background of the people involved and why this project isn't simply some government-funded effort. It's something that has held meaning to the people behind it, and I show how through my query.

PUBLISHED PIECE:

Marriage Bureau Specializes in India's HIV Widows:

<http://womensenews.org/story/the-world/070611/marriage-bureau-specializes-in-indias-hiv-widows>

In a country of arranged marriages, it's hard enough for a woman to exert her identity. Add AIDS to the equation and you have women who can never have healthy relationships.

In India, few women—married or unmarried—can afford to come out in the open about their HIV status because of the stigma attached to AIDS and the morality issues that surround it.

Daxa Patel of the Gujarat State Network of Positive People, has come up with a unique solution—a marriage bureau for HIV-positive people.

The bureau was set up by Daxa and her husband Vithal Patel, both of whom are HIV positive. Daxa found out she was positive when she got pregnant, though neither of them have been able to determine how they got infected. On a doctor's advice, Daxa aborted the baby, but has been in a happy relationship with Vithal for the last seven years.

The couple became HIV counselors and thought other people deserved to be in happy relationships as well. The idea behind the project was that people with HIV might be happier together than alone or with partners who were HIV negative. The project is particularly of help to women, many of whom are widows and have children from their previous marriages. Many of them need not only social security, but economic security as well.

I propose a piece on this marriage bureau and the people behind it. I will also

interview couples who have come together through the network and others

who're seeking partners with their help. The article will additionally explain the situation of AIDS in India, which according to recent UN reports is now considered the country with the most number of AIDS cases.

As I mentioned in my previous e-mail, I'm a freelance journalist based in New Delhi, India, and have written for publications such as Marie Claire, Elle, The World & I, The Times of India, Yahoo.com, Chicken Soup for the Soul, and East West Magazine.

Details of my work and published credits are available on my website www.mridukhullar.com. I'm happy to send samples of my recent work.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm Regards,
Mridu Khullar

6. SPIRITUALITY & HEALTH

THE BACKSTORY:

I was just finishing up my first assignment for this editor but I knew this one, too, would be right up his alley. I also didn't want to waste any time because I was leaving the country very soon. Since we'd been e-mailing back and forth regularly through the week, the inclusion of credits and bio wasn't necessary for this pitch.

DEAR EDITOR,

Hope you're well. I'm putting the finishing touches on the [previous] piece and should have it to you within the next couple of days.

In the meantime, I came across a very fascinating concept here in Ghana and since I'm only here until April 15, I thought I'd run it by you in case you're interested.

Here's a brief:

A large fish. An oversized Coca-Cola bottle. A hammer. Even a mobile phone. They could be art exhibits in a gallery in Paris. Instead, they're coffins. Handmade, very detailed, and created to carry a deceased Ghanaian to his afterlife.

In the West African country of Ghana, funerals are as much a time of mourning as they are of celebration. The significance of symbols is strong and hence a person, in the event of his death, is placed in a coffin that symbolizes his life. So a farmer may bid farewell in a cocoa bean coffin, a pilot in an airplane, and a cellphone salesman, in, what else, a Nokia cellphone.

Death is taken very seriously and the body of the deceased may have to be preserved for months while the coffin is carved out. The coffins themselves cost about \$400 and up, in a country where a majority live on less than \$2 a day. A death ceremony can send families into several years of debt. All so that their loved ones can leave in style and find peace in the other world.

Near Accra, the capital of the country, skilled craftsmen have their stores and are open to the public to come view them at work.

I think the concept is fascinating on many levels, and the primary appeal I see for Spirituality & Health's readers lies in the concept of celebrating death. Seeing the positive in what appears to be negative. Finding joy in moments of pain. A sad event, a death, is a colorful celebration, so much so that coffins makers are a tourist attraction. And a minutely-carved piece of art is buried, making it special and impermanent, just like the body that lies inside it.

What do you think? Let me know if you like the idea and I'll hop on over and get my research, interviews, and photography done.

Thanks, [Editor]. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Mridu

7. GLOBAL POST

THE BACKSTORY:

While this was an editor I had only worked with once before, we got on very well right from the beginning and so were quite comfortable with one another. Because of that, even though he was still editing my earlier piece, you'll notice that my query is laidback and doesn't try too hard. I don't need to mention credits or bio because we were in the process of editing the first piece and he didn't need to be reminded of what I brought to the table.

PUBLISHED PIECE:

In India, C-sections are in the Stars:

<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/india/090928/astrologer-c-sections>

**global
post**

DEAR EDITOR,

Hope you're well. I know you're still looking at the [earlier] piece, but I came across this timely story that I thought I'd send your way. Let me know if you find it interesting.

When's the baby due? Ask your astrologer.

As the concern over the rising rates of caesarean sections grows around the world, in India, the opposite is happening: Couples are increasingly opting for them. In consultation with their astrologers.

Middle-class Indians today, with access to some of the best healthcare in the world, are opting for premeditated caesarian sections in order to perfectly time the birth of their babies. In this practice that is both dangerous and controversial (but increasingly popular), couples consult with their astrologers to make sure that their child is born at an "auspicious time" of their choosing, at great risk to both mother and baby. No doubt astrologers—and doctors—are profiting. Some hospitals now even boast of astrology departments.

The story hasn't been picked up yet by any international media and I'd love to report on it for you. Let me know if you can use it.

Thanks so much, [Editor]. I look forward to the edits and hearing what you think of this story idea.

Best,
Mridu

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8. TIME

THE BACKSTORY:

I'd been working with the magazine frequently by this point and was doing quite a bit of work for the website, Time.com, on a regular basis. I was still pitching the editor my own ideas even though she was coming to me with assignments much more frequently. I think it's always a good idea to have your own story ideas even when editors are handing you frequent assignments because (a) it makes their job that much more easier and they like you for it, and (b) it keeps you in the habit of looking for new and interesting stories.

PUBLISHED PIECE:

India's 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots: Waiting for Justice:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1931635,00.html>

time

DEAR EDITOR,

October 31 will mark the 25th anniversary of the anti-Sikh riots that rocked Delhi after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, killing 3,000 people and displacing thousands more. In a corner of Delhi, in the colony of Tilak Vihar, is a small block of homes known as "the Widows colony," which is home to the widows and children of these riots.

But what is more interesting is that over the years, this colony has gained a reputation for gambling, prostitution, alcoholism and drug abuse. Rikshaw drivers won't go there for fear they'll be robbed or stabbed, and after dark, unlicensed alcohol shops open up around the area in plain view.

The widows complain that this is because they were never given proper compensation and the jobs they were promised never materialized and while the NGOs get foreign money in compensation in their name, they've never seen any of it. Many of them—single mothers—did not have enough money to support their kids and no counseling was ever available to them, which has led to most of the kids in this colony being unemployed and/or drug addicts.

9. ABC

THE BACKSTORY:

I'd been writing for my editor at ABC for a while and I frequently sent over list of story ideas from my neck of the woods. In this particular instance, I had two ideas, both equally powerful that I thought would work for this publication, so after the usual pleasantries, I outlined them both in one single e-mail. My editor bought this one.

PUBLISHED PIECE:

Is India exporting radiation to the world?:

<http://www.abc.net.au/environment/articles/2011/10/18/3342455.htm>

**australian
broadcasting
corporation**

**DEAR
EDITOR,**

[General chitchat]. I've got two more ideas that hit me over the head so I'm hoping they'll do the same for you. Let me know if you agree!

In April 2010, eight people from a metal junkyard in Delhi suffered from exposure to radioactive material identified as Cobalt-60. These were scrap dealers, and fearing the presence of more radioactive sources in metal scrapyards in Delhi, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) planned to carry out a multi-pronged approach survey in the area. Mayapuri, the junkyard where the workers were originally exposed, is the biggest and most prominent junk metal yard in India and contains waste material that arrives from all over the world, without any checks for radiation or other lethal materials at the ports (nearly 4,000 tons of junk metal enters India each day). A multilayer radiation check system proposed by AERB has not been followed to prevent the import and export of radioactive contaminated material, which means that this radioactive metal has, in fact, ended up being exported from India in the form of lift buttons, etc. I think a story on this growing threat to scrap dealers, as well as the population at large, from waste radioactive material coming in would be a very interesting story to explore.

Let me know if you'd like more information about either of the two stories. Thanks again and I look forward to writing for you again soon.

Best, Mridu

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