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Aastha D.

What is a museum, really? A building that houses objects? A temple of knowledge? A vault of the past? Or a theatre of the present? The answers are as complex as the institution's foundational contradiction. Museums claim to preserve and protect, but they also curate and construct. The question of publicness is key. For most Indians, a visit to the museum is still a rare event – more school trip than weekend ritual.

A museum's power lies not just in its artefacts, but in its audience. We must ask: what kind of history do we want told? Who gets to do the telling? Can we, as citizens in a democracy, demand more nuance, more truth?

The politics of display

India is undergoing a museum-building renaissance. Across the country, state and private actors are investing in ambitious cultural institutions – from the redevelopment of the National Museum in New Delhi to regional centres of memory and art. Yet, beneath the sleek architecture and nation-branding optimism lies an urgent question: what is being built, by whom, and for whom? What is being remembered, and what is being erased?

According to the Ministry of Culture, over 100 new experiential museums are in the pipeline, although details about their themes, timelines, and locations remain largely unspecified. The National Museum is set to be relocated as a part of the Central Vista redevelopment project, but there is no public clarity yet on the fate of its artefacts – one of the largest and most significant collections in the country.

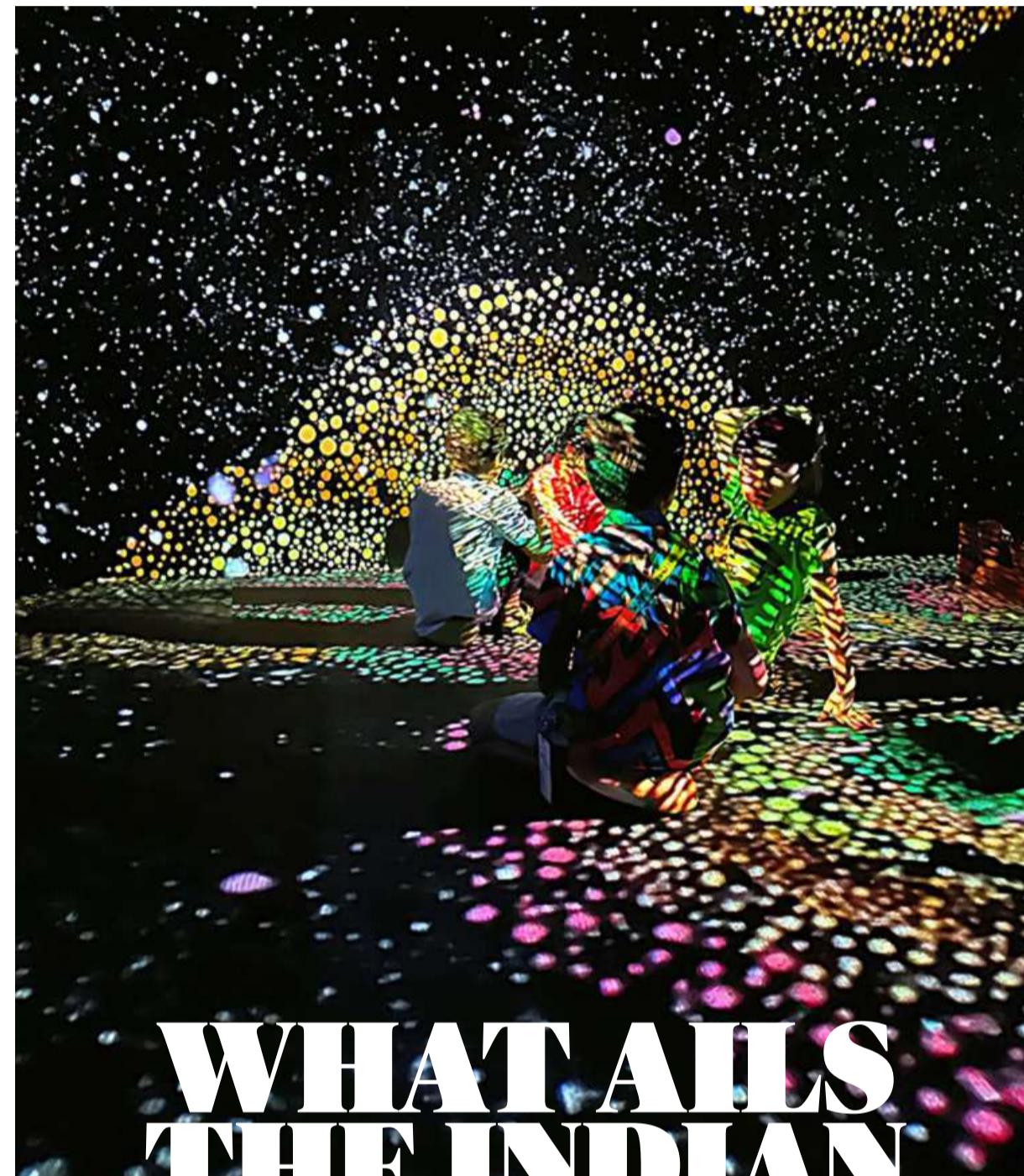
Museums have always shaped public memory. As the state increasingly centralises control over historical narrative, they risk becoming not a space of learning but of persuasion. The challenge, then, is not just to fill galleries with new stories, but to reimagine the very idea of the institution.

From colonial cabinets to national canons

India's earliest museums were built by colonial powers as instruments of classification and control. They displayed conquest as culture, and placed Indian craft and labour within a framework that rendered it primitive, decorative, or ethnographic.

Tasneem Zakaria Mehta, director of Mumbai's Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum (BDL), reminds us that these institutions were never neutral. In her essay 'Decolonising the Museum', she writes that colonial museums functioned to "present the coloniser as benefactor whose systems of organisation and codification represented a better model for development". The BDL itself, formerly the Victoria and Albert Museum, Mumbai, was filled with clay figurines, dioramas, and decorative objects intended to showcase India's "traditional" manual skills – useful to colonial trade, but stripped of intellectual or artistic legitimacy.

Since its restoration and reopening in 2008, BDL has sought to reverse



WHAT AILS THE INDIAN MUSEUM TODAY?

At a time when the country is seeing a museum-building renaissance – mega projects such as the Yuge Yugeen Bharat National Museum and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art – curators and experts say we must question what stories are being told and who gets to tell them

this narrative. Mehta's curatorial vision actively foregrounds the Indian artist and craftsman, reinterpreting the museum's colonial collections through contemporary cultural practice. The museum's ongoing collaboration with contemporary artists such as Reena Saini Kallat, whose 2025 retrospective *Cartographies of the Unseen* addressed themes of injustice and human hubris, reflects BDL's commitment to decolonial and inclusive storytelling.

Beyond preservation
But how do we build new museums – conceptually, not just

architecturally – that respond to today's social and political complexities? At the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru, this question is at the heart of curatorial practice. "We're at a moment where we need to recognise that museums are not just spaces to preserve heritage, but also spaces that help us understand the present through the lens of the past," says Arnika Ahldag, director of exhibitions and curation. "At MAP, we see this as a responsibility – to challenge dominant narratives and amplify voices that have historically been marginalised." In 2023, MAP presented *VISIABLE/INVISIBLE*, an



Regardless of what
the Centre is doing, independent curators and cultural producers will always have the responsibility to create space for artistic thought, debate, critique – and yes, dissent

SHALEEN WADHWANA
Independent curator and arts educator

exhibition that critically examined the portrayal of women in art, highlighting both visibility and erasure in historical narratives. "It's about shifting from the museum as gatekeeper to the museum as a collaborative space for dialogue," she adds. "We often show objects [like *Kanthas*] that people might have in their own homes. That kind of familiarity invites participation, not passivity." Despite such initiatives, there remains a need to further explore other marginalised perspectives, such as those from Dalit and Adivasi communities, to ensure a more inclusive curatorial approach.

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Who gets to curate culture?

This question of relevance is inseparable from power, and participation is not just about display – it's about voice. Who curates? Who funds? Shaleen Wadhwana, an independent curator, arts educator and former consultant with the India Art Fair, puts it bluntly: "India is very socially stratified, so I'm hesitant to use words like 'truly public, inclusive and accessible' because that's incredibly difficult to achieve. Ideologically, accessibility means that funders only fund, and don't dictate content. It also means your staff must reflect the diversity of the public. It's not just the curator – it's the guard, the educator, the translator, the person in the archive."

Her critique cuts deep. Many new museums may be visually dazzling – such as the upcoming Yuge Yugeen Bharat National Museum – but their internal cultures often remain opaque, with little public clarity on curatorial direction, institutional staffing, or how narratives are being shaped. Publicness isn't just about ticket prices or weekend programming. It's about who is allowed to participate in narrative-making at every level.

Listening, not lecturing

Both MAP and BDL embody a shift from presenting knowledge to listening; treating audiences as cultural co-authors. "In the past, museums told audiences what they thought they needed to know," says Kamini Sawhney, former director of MAP. The programming tended to be didactic, formal, and largely in English. The obscurity was echoed in the tone of the labels, too: verbose, and in hard-to-read tiny font. For many visitors, the experience was alienating – not only because of the language, but because few knew how to look at a museum object. What do you ask of a 200-year-old textile? Without interpretation that is accessible, multilingual, and context-rich, viewers are left to either quietly admire or silently withdraw.

And without meaningful relationships with the public, museums risk becoming irrelevant. "Public institutions need to reflect on issues that matter to the community. Otherwise, you end up talking to yourself," Sawhney adds. This means building trust, and trust is slow work. It's built through transparency (about funding, process, and narrative decisions),

multilingual materials, responsive education programmes, and a willingness to sit with discomfort.

India has over 1,000 museums – most of them public, and many still operating within rigid, object-led frameworks. But a few are reimaging what they can be. Mumbai's year-old Museum of Solutions centres children as co-creators – designing exhibits that encourage play, empathy, and problem-solving. In Amritsar, the Partition Museum foregrounds lived memory and oral histories to narrate a traumatic past with empathy and nuance. And while not a museum in the traditional sense, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has transformed how Indian publics encounter contemporary art – embedding it in urban space, community life, and critical discourse. These remain rare efforts. But taken together, they offer a glimpse of what responsive, plural, and public-facing museums could look like.

A space for multiplicity

No museum is neutral. Every exhibition is a series of choices: what to show, what to omit, and how to frame it. Ahldag is forthright about this curatorial labour. "We wish more people understood how much museum-making is about negotiation and care," she says. "It's never neutral. Every decision involves navigating histories, ethics, and our own positions of power."

This is particularly urgent in India today, where state-endorsed narratives increasingly flatten complexity into celebration. In such a context, simply holding space for multiplicity becomes a radical act. "Curating is not just selection; it's an ongoing conversation with artists, collaborators, and audiences," she says. "We have to remain open to feedback, even when it challenges us."

The public has a role to play here, too. We must demand transparency, challenge silence, and see ourselves not as visitors, but as participants. We have the right – and the responsibility – to ask: whose history is this? And what are we being asked to forget? The museum must help us remember. Not just what was, but what could still be.

The essayist and educator writes on design and culture.

Getting it right (Clockwise from left) Museum of Solutions, Mumbai; the Partition Museum, Amritsar; *VISIBLE/INVISIBLE* at the Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru; Kamini Sawhney; and Shaleen Wadhwana. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



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MADE OF AMBITION

The city of Calcutta, fully alive and mysterious, is the real star in Ruchir Joshi's new novel, while the ensemble cast fails to live up to expectations

Anil Menon

It is clear Ruchir Joshi set out to write a great big novel about a great big subject. *Great Eastern Hotel* with its 900-plus pages, about 4,50,000 words by my reckoning, belongs to the loquacious, people-dense, naturalist tradition of Zola, Balzac, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and in more recent times, Franzen, Vikram Chandra, and Lauren Groff. These are authors who seek to eat the world; they are pursuing, as Tom Wolfe memorably said, "the beast with a million feet".

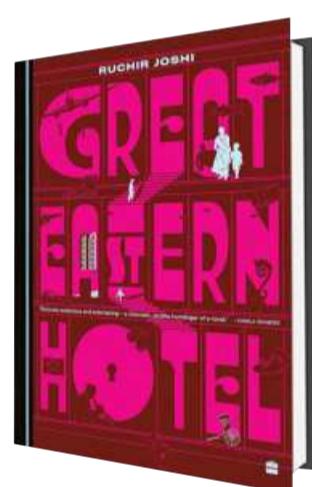
The novel has several primary characters, each with their own timeline. The central figure is Kedar Nath Lahiri, painter, playboy, zamindar, music expert, and one of those "Macaulay's Minutemen", as Rushdie put it. Other significant characters include the Marxist revolutionary Nirupama; the Englishwoman Imogene; the British Intelligence in the form of Jerome Lambert, about to be spice-trapped by the humble *jhaalmuri*; and Gopal aka Gogai, the thieving subaltern orphan who sins his way to a decent, prosperous life. The world-setting is pre- and post-independence India, specially Calcutta.

There are many novels about painting and about painters. Zola's *L'Œuvre* (1886), which launched this genre, also ended his long friendship with Cezanne. I can think of some two dozen novels since. Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915) stands out for me, as does, perhaps quite inevitably, Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927).

The novel as an exhibition
The artistic development of Kedar

a familiar one. But what matters in literary fiction is how the familiar is narrated. This is where ekphrastic (a verbal or written description of a visual work of art) writing runs into trouble: the how. As Raymond Bellour described in his now classic essay 'The Unattainable Text', a film or musical experience, unlike a written fictional experience, cannot be packaged into a quote. So too, for the actual act of seeing a specific painting. Now, author Joshi is also a filmmaker; he knows there is no real solution to this problem. But the act of painting, the effect it has on others, the consequences of a painting: these things are within the reach of sentences.

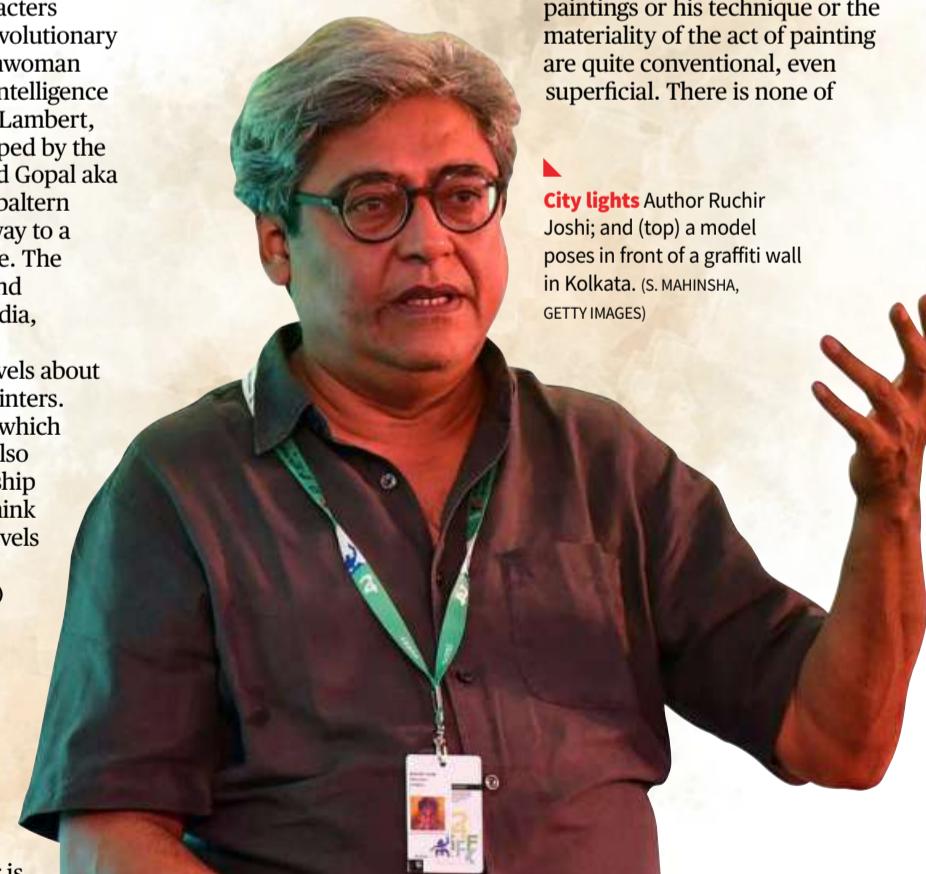
Joshi tells us at the end of the book, via a convenient curator character, how he wants the novel to be seen: not as an *upanya* or a saga, but rather, as a kind of exhibition. Even though



Great Eastern Hotel
Ruchir Joshi
Fourth Estate
₹1,499

Great Eastern Hotel may be inspired by painterly ideas, it isn't really an ekphrastic novel. Joshi's discussions of Kedar's paintings or his technique or the materiality of the act of painting are quite conventional, even superficial. There is none of

City lights Author Ruchir Joshi; and (top) a model poses in front of a graffiti wall in Kolkata. (S. MAHINSHA, GETTY IMAGES)



The reviewer is an author, most recently of The Coincidence Plot.

BROWSER

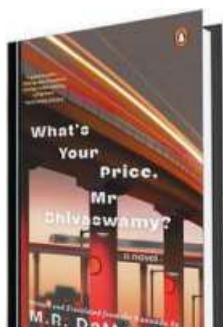
What's Your Price, Mr. Shivaswamy?

M.R. Dattathri

Penguin

₹599

This is the Kannada novelist-cum-IT professional's first book to be translated into English, and tells the story of an almost-retiree who gets sucked into the murky tangle of real estate in Bengaluru. The novel blends humour with drama and sharp storytelling.



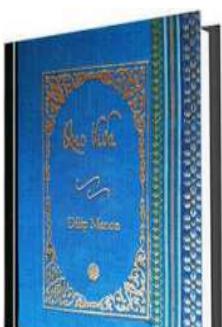
Quo Vida

Dilip Menon

Writer's Workshop

₹300

The title of this slim collection of poetry is borrowed from the Latin phrase *quo vadis*, or 'where are you going?' an allusion to the unpredictability of death itself, says the poet in the Preface. These poems were penned at the height of the pandemic as a coping mechanism, says Menon.



EARTH DAY: APRIL 22

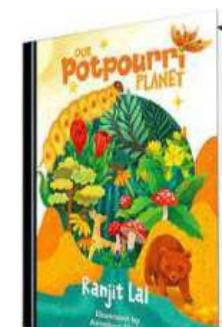
Our Potpourri Planet

Ranjit Lal, Anushua Sinha

HarperCollins

₹599

A noted environmentalist urges people to seek immediate action from policy-makers to stop global warming. He says clean air, pure water, non-toxic, equitably distributed food, and minimal waste are non-negotiable. Sinha's illustrations highlight the rich natural diversity of the planet and the need to protect it.



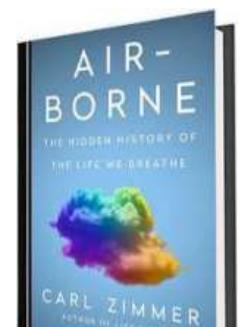
Air-Borne

Carl Zimmer

Pan Macmillan

₹477 (ebook)

A science journalist delves into the world of airborne life, and the often overlooked field of aerobiology. From COVID-19 and its airborne transmission, Zimmer looks back at the life and work of scientists like Louis Pasteur who found that microscopic germs were floating in the air.



Finding Kabir

By situating the works of the 15th century poet-saint alongside the teachings of the Buddha and Ambedkar, author Anand journeys into the notion of equality

Kinshuk Gupta

As a child growing up in a small town that privileged the dogmatic clasp of religion and *reeti-rivaa* (customs and rituals) over curiosity, poet-saint Kabir's couplets offered me a sigh of relief. I liked his *Ulat Bansi* (upside-down sayings) style – not only for its sonorous delight but also for the affirmation it offered. That 'existing' in the world could also mean 'wading against the tide'. I didn't quite grasp the philosophy of the word then, its ability to hold contradiction, and the sheer nonchalance with which it spun the world on its head.

Anand, the poet-publisher of *Navanya*, claims to be a Kabirite, "talking in Kabiri and living in Kabristan", and offers us a florid explanation of these "contradictory, upside down sayings", situating them on the larger canvas of Bhakti tradition, Buddha's *dharma* and Ambedkar's anti-caste movement. It is befitting, thus, that he wants to call his book *The Notebook of Kabir*.

'Who is Kabir?' is a question that has amused, bemused, and infuriated scholars, writers, poets and common folk. With each fresh retelling of his philosophy or rendition of his *dohas* (couplets), he is renewed. History, myth, legend and hagiography feed in to create a portrait of Kabir who is free, fulsome and fluid. (Mahesha Ram, singer of Kabir bhajans, introduces the poet as a *bhakt, jisne bhagwan se mazak karli* – a disciple who is goofing around with god.)

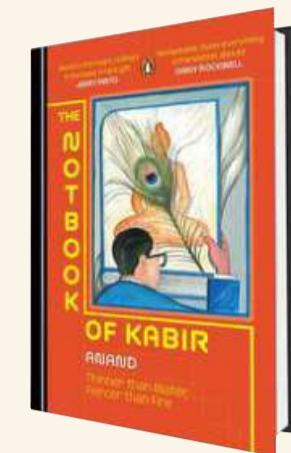
But with such ambiguity, doesn't the risk of appropriation and misinterpretation lurk in the shadows? And don't these appropriated ideas bracket an iconoclastic figure like Kabir into stereotypes that are restricted and binary, the very things against which he rallied? Kabir is a disembodied spectre from the 15th-16th centuries, Anand says in his introduction.

Characters minus substance
This problem extends to other characters, or more precisely, characterisation. Joshi is brilliant at describing events, situations, atmosphere. His characters, however, lack substance. Joshi relies on dialogue a great deal, and though he has an ear for the right register, there is the strange sense that actors are needed to bring the words to life. His characters have interiority, but it is the shallow kind consisting of what they keep hidden from others. They are not hidden to themselves. Had this world a Freud, he would have no unconscious to discover.

This novel exists, I think, not because the author wanted to write about these characters but because he wanted to write about Calcutta of the 40s and 50s. It is the city that feels truly alive, vast, and imbued with an inner mystery. That is perfectly fine, but the ensemble soap, enlivened with a bit of non-linear storytelling, feels like the wrong choice for this novel; perhaps something like Passos' *U.S.A.* would've been a better model for the work.

The author needn't feel dejected. The novel, as Randall Jarrell famously said, is "a work of a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it". Success lies in failing for the right reasons. This novel also has its failures, but want of ambition isn't one of them. That is good enough.

This is reminiscent of *Manusmriti* and other Hindu texts that believe Brahmins to be the guru of the other three *varnas*. Drawing on multiple examples, Anand illustrates how this search for a *savarna* guru has been extended to the mysterious life of Kabir, and has been normalised to co-opt him. Why would Eklavya, he argues, coming from a forest-dwelling



The Notebook of Kabir
Anand
Penguin
₹499

Nishada community, naturally much more adroit with the bow and arrow, need to learn archery from an urban, upper-class guru? He feels a similar fiction has been crafted for Ramananda, Kabir's guru, and considers it indulgences of privilege when scholars such as Rabindranath Tagore, Ramchandra Shukla, Purushottam Agarwal, Linda Hess, Vinay Dharwadker, David Lorenzen and Jon Hawley dwell too much on verifying the authenticity of this lore.

The book's novelty derives from the writer's insouciance and complete disregard for convention while tackling Kabir. The 50 Kabir songs that have been included – and translated with such flexibility and flamboyance by Anand – relinquish any claims of authenticity. They are retellings by various singers such as Kaluram Baraniya, Prahlad Singh Tipanya, Mahesha Ram, Fariduddin Ayaz, all of them marginalised men.

The playful tone is reminiscent of the bhakti tradition. A word, a phrase, a name results in a flight of ideas, causing the writer to disrupt all conventions and constrictions of text, and give us illuminated moments of rare sensitivity.

Unexplored ideas

At the same time, however, one wonders if the experience of 'secularisation of spiritual experience' could have been heightened if the literary scholarship was interspersed with the historical evolution of ideas. Kabir's misogynistic bias – as Indologist Wendy Doniger puts it – remains untouched even though the question is enmeshed in caste endogamy and the theory of 'surplus women', as underlined by Ambedkar. Similarly, the juxtaposition of Kabir and Buddha could have benefitted from greater clarity and precision.

These quibbles aside, I wholeheartedly endorse this book that uses Kabir as a springboard for an immersive journey through the shared currents and sharp contrasts in how three great minds conceived the idea of equality.

The reviewer is the author of the Hindi short story collection Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chor Darwaja (2023).



Divine truths
Artists stage a play on Kabir on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti in Pune. (GETTY IMAGES)

A REAL PAIN

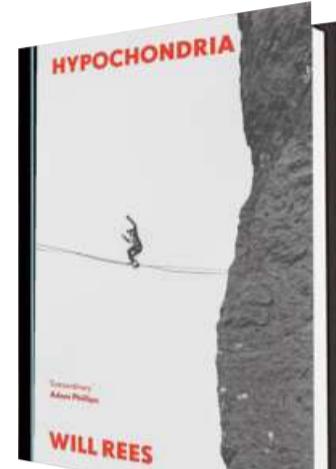
Will Rees writes about the history of a nameless dread, the condition called hypochondria

Suresh Menon

At different times and for differing periods, we all become hypochondriacs. We are often unreliable narrators of our own symptoms; at times, our stories are true but they are not believed. As Elaine Scarry puts it in *The Body in Pain*, "To have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt."

Hypochondriacs are the butt of jokes. The inscription on comedian Spike Milligan's grave reads: *I told you I was ill.* "In the end," wrote Robert Lowell in his poem 'Obit', "every hypochondriac is his own prophet." Hypochondria is the only illness where the diagnosis itself is the cure, as a psychoanalyst once said.

Medical research, however, has shown that hypochondria is as much a real illness as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. It is not a character flaw. The American Psychiatric Association says three-quarters of hypochondriacs have somatic symptom disorder while the remaining, those who toil in fear with neither ache nor pain, suffer from illness anxiety disorder. Symptom-checkers on 'Dr Google' have given rise to a new



Hypochondria
Will Rees
Coach House Books
Toronto
₹1,353 (ebook)

manifestation, cyberchondria.

In *Hypochondria*, a recent addition to a growing number of books on the subject, Will Rees talks about 'previvor', a word coined for "the person who is discovered to be genetically predisposed to a disease that they do not (yet) have. Such people are not sick, they don't have any disease, yet from the moment they become conscious of their condition, it would not be exactly right to call them 'well'."

The nature of the condition is such that besides the medical men

and psychologists, we need to read philosophers, cultural commentators and literary accounts to begin to understand it. Rees, aware of this, takes us on a tour of what Kant and Hume, Susan Sontag and Samuel Johnson, Kafka and others – many of them hypochondriacs – have said about it.

Here's Virginia Woolf speaking of the poverty of language in describing an illness in her essay 'On Being Ill': "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words

for the shiver and the headache. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. He is forced to coin words himself, and, takes his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other so to crush them together for a brand new word that in the end drops out."

An extension of himself
Rees, who originally set out to

write a "serious, scholarly study", settles for one where the story of the condition spreads outwards from his own struggles with it. "I was unwell, that much was certain...." he tells us in the opening paragraph, and concludes his journey five years later with the almost magical, "I felt well," with which the book ends. He describes his book thus: "(It) covers a five-year period of my life, which began at a time when I was convinced that I had a brain tumour, and ended in my mid-twenties, by which point this



GETTYIMAGES/ISTOCK

had quietly morphed into the belief that I had lymphoma. These two moments, these two periods of crisis when the question of health hung darkest over my everyday, bookend *Hypochondria*, which also looks at the history of this condition, and at those who have attempted to understand it."

Who among us hasn't stayed awake at night, visited by a nameless dread as our thoughts regarding a palpitation or a boil on the body or a headache rushed towards horrible certitude? Even those who believe in their rational moments that the condition they suspect they have only affects one person in a million have no guarantees they will not be that one. There is then no way of distinguishing real illness from the belief of illness, a belief that often gallops towards conviction at night. "There is scarce anything that hath not killed somebody," wrote John Donne in 1623, "a hair, a feather hath done it; nay, that which is our best antidote against it hath done it; the best cordial hath been deadly poison."

Advantage of a real disease

In a brilliant essay in *The Hypochondriacs: Nine Tormented Lives*, the author Brian Dillon

writes, "It may even appear that for the hypochondriac the solidity of a real disease is preferable to

the fog of optimism and uncertainty that passes for most of us, most of the time, as good health." The tormented include James Boswell, Charlotte Bronte, Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Marcel Proust, Andy Warhol.

Hypochondria, writes Rees, "is a diagnosis that puts into question how certain we can ever be about any diagnosis..." Readers of his book will either feel reassured, or rush to see their doctors.

The reviewer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?



Voices for a warming world

Ahead of Earth Day, Sunil Rajagopal shares his list of 10 essential reads

Attention of the highest order, they say, is prayer. And our prayers have been misdirected for a while now. We have forgotten as a species that we are merely a thread in nature's web. Here are 10 books, old and new; meditations on walking, observing, and simply, *being*. Reminders that the earth and what it sustains are not merely 'resources' to exploit, barter, and conquer.

1. THE LIVING MOUNTAIN

by Nan Shepherd

You can travel the world and know nothing about it. And you can walk the same place a thousand times, with care and thought, and understand what the world is all about. This one, Shepherd's ode to the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland, first published in 1977, can be read and re-read, always magically revealing something new.

a good way to try and tackle one of the most misunderstood, yet essential pillars of reproductive biology. It makes us rethink beauty and the role of the female — what if they are the driving forces behind evolution? The writer follows the ways of birds, and generations of biologists including Darwin, to understand how mate choice has shaped the natural world.

4. HIDDEN KINGDOM: FANTASTICAL PLANTS OF THE WESTERN GHATS

by Nirupa Rao

Botanical illustration is a remarkable trade, where art and science collide. It's possibly the only way to truly appreciate landscapes like the Western Ghats and its flora. Rao wields her delicate brush, a bright wand, with short rhyming verse falling around it like gold dust, leading us down an enchanted trail.

5. A THOUSAND MORNINGS

by Mary Oliver

Simple, accessible poetry that distils the world and all its resilience in an almost casual tone. With every stroll she takes and every careful line she builds with clarity and wit, Oliver reminds us that nature will go on without us.

6. THE PEREGRINE

by J.A. Baker

This is not a book about tracking peregrine falcons for nearly a decade. Instead, it takes you closest to experiencing being one yourself. Baker's bleak, feral landscape is devoid of humans, their gods, and their drama. A timeless work of luminous, unrepeatable prose that is violent, euphoric, and almost reverential.

7. MARGINLANDS: INDIAN LANDSCAPES ON THE BRINK

by Arati Kumar Rao

This is a chronicle of wonder and worry, born from a journey done the right way — slow and intimate — through the obscure heart of India. Arati's journey often follows water and waterways; never better than when she describes fishing at night on the Brahmaputra.

8. DRAWING A TREE

by Bruno Munari

A little masterpiece, masquerading as a drawing guide, and filled with profound meaning and spare beauty. Bruno uses trees as a bridge between our lives and the natural world, and its infinite possibilities. A book before its time.

9. EVERYTHING THE LIGHT TOUCHES

by Janice Pariat

A novel rambling across time and histories. This is a study of memory, identity, and the tangled, tied-up roots of nature and geography that bind us. Especially brilliant is a section of free verse that captures botanist Carl Linnaeus as he journeys to Lapland to document its flora.

10. GORILLAS IN THE MIST

by Dian Fossey

This is one of the most important books, which depicts conservation at its rawest, and the precarious boundaries it keeps with human vice. Dian takes us deep into the midst of our greatest cousins. Thrilling, insightful, often filled with despair and rage; and ultimately, tragic.

The author is a birder and writer based in Chennai.



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BEYOND THE DISPLAY CASE

The blueprint for India's museums of tomorrow includes immersive experiences, digital connectivity and gamification

Deepthi Sadidharan

Did you know that the city of Basel, Switzerland with a population of around 1,75,000 people has 37 museums? A similar city division in India, such as Bandra East, Mumbai has that many people. Upmarket Bandra however has no museums and the city, barely a handful.

India has a slew of mega museums on the horizon. The Yuga Yugeen Bharat National Museum is set to span approximately 1,55,000 square metres in New Delhi and is part of the Government of India's major foray in this space. The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), slated to open in 2026, will present 1,00,000 square metres in the national capital. In Gujarat, the National Maritime Heritage Complex in Lothal will span 375 acres and open to the public in phases starting this year.

The mega cultural powerhouses on the horizon aim for the future even as they present treasures from our shared historic past. As the country shrugs off its colonial cloak, and surges into the second quarter this century, here are some pointers



Better storytellers in the room

Powerful storytelling that presents historical context or meaning is relevant more than ever in museums.

When housing priceless treasures, most museum planners turn to a well-established architect, with a brief to peg the building as a spectacular talking point. So, whether it's architect Frank Gehry who put Bilbao, Spain on the map with the Guggenheim Museum or the technology aided soaring glass structure of the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris or the Benesse House Museum in Naoshima, Japan by Tadao Ando, the museum buildings are ambitious attractions in themselves.

In India, a lone example of an extraordinary museum building in recent times is the Smitirvan Earthquake Memorial Museum in Bhuj, Gujarat by late architect B.V. Doshi. It was honoured with the UNESCO Prix Versailles 2024 award and named among the seven most beautiful museums in the world.

Attracting several lakh visitors a year, it is a compass for future museums.



simultaneously reside across a bewildering number of platforms. Like you and I brush our teeth in the morning, they share personal stories of everything from getting dressed (GRWM), community and caste trauma, complicated family histories, immigrant hardships and diaspora celebrations. Barring the mundane, some of the stories are visceral, raw and filled with emotion.

Now take these young persons to a museum filled with objects, screens and diagrams. Nothing. There is no

Immersive attractions (Clockwise from left) Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao; a mini-Quran from Partition at the Museum of Material Memory, a crowdsourced digital repository; and Kyoto's Nintendo Museum. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Kanishka Balachandran
kanishkaa@thehindu.co.in

General Reginald Dyer wanted to go all the way in. But he couldn't. The entrance to Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar was so narrow, it was impossible for any vehicle to pass through. He ordered his troops to enter on foot and take position.

Thousands had gathered on a warm evening on April 13, 1919, to listen to speeches denouncing the draconian Rowlatt Act – under which one could be jailed without a warrant – which was used to arrest two lawyers, Saifuddin Kitchlew and Satyapal. As resentment against the British rule grew, Punjab was getting increasingly restive. But on Baisakhi, there was a semblance of calm after the storm. The Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, however, feared a repeat of the 1857 uprising. He summoned Dyer, who, without warning, opened fire. Had his armoured car entered the Bagh, many more would have succumbed, he said later, unapologetically. The thought

sends shivers.

Today, at around the same spot where the troops alighted, stands a multinational fast-food joint in a bustling, vehicle-free commercial zone selling everything from phulkaris to burgers. The narrow entrance now has murals. A memorial statue of innocent, unarmed Amritaris who died in the ensuing gunfire stands at the entryway to the Bagh.

Wagner described Jallianwala Bagh as "a wasteground, where buffaloes grazed" (in a 2022 podcast). What you see today is this once-hordescript plot, inaugurated as a memorial in 1961, transformed with manicured rolling gardens, passageways and park benches over the same soil where bodies were piled one on top of the other. It's hard to imagine this was the spot of one of the worst genocides during India's freedom movement.

Since August 2021 – when the memorial was revamped



(Clockwise from left) An installation at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City is a powerful walkthrough of the human and economic cost of war. At the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi (which held American prisoners of war), though, one would have to take the propaganda with a pinch of salt.

Partition Museum, a short walk from Jallianwala Bagh, does better justice to history. Built inside the Town Hall, several galleries chronicle the history of India's political divisions, with audio guides and tales from survivors of the most horrific ordeals. Mercifully, photography is banned, allowing you to move freely without photobombing.

Meanwhile, at Jallianwala Bagh, I overhear one tourist from Chennai trying to remember the name of "that Vicky Kaushal movie" he watched. I tell him that *Sardar Udhām* (directed by Shoojit Sircar, 2022) is a very fictionalised proof that Singh was even in Amritsar that day, according to its revealing biography, *The Patient Assassin* (2019), by British-Indian journalist and podcaster Anita Anand.

Doing justice to history

While it is important to pump in money to make memorials of national interest tourist friendly and accessible, where does one draw the line, especially for those with morbid histories? Germany's Nazi horrors and genocides by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia are retold in grim detail in their museums. Vietnam is a

and inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi – there are four new galleries in different corners of the Bagh that chronicle the history of the freedom movement. The main gallery too has a short audio-visual of the Amritsar massacre and its impact.

A flame-shaped memorial in red sandstone is the central Martyr's Memorial. The well in the corner that many jumped into to escape firing, is an enclosed structure to prevent people dropping coins. Bullet marks on the walls have been preserved. Tourists are all smiles at the memorial, seizing every opportunity to take selfies at vantage points, even in front of the bullet-ravaged walls. Add to this a sound and light show in the evenings, and it's no wonder historians have

slammed the recent changes, saying that the corporatism of monuments' risks erasing history. While the galleries provide a wealth of information to the uninformed, it is a sanitised memorial like this really the most appropriate way to remember the dead? I had mixed feelings.

In the galleries, a woman, possibly in her 30s, is explaining the exhibits to her two young daughters. Among the predominantly young crowd, generations far removed from the scars of the freedom struggle, they are the exception.

Sanitised memorial for a massacre

What should the Jallianwala Bagh memorial look like, this site that tells a story of tragedy and resilience?

sends shivers.

TODAY, at around the same spot where the troops alighted, stands a multinational fast-food joint in a bustling, vehicle-free commercial zone selling everything from phulkaris to burgers. The narrow entrance now has murals. A memorial statue of innocent, unarmed Amritaris who died in the ensuing gunfire stands at the entryway to the Bagh.

Corporatisation of monuments

British historian Kim A.



(Clockwise from left) An installation at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City is a powerful walkthrough of the human and economic cost of war. At the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi (which held American prisoners of war), though, one would have to take the propaganda with a pinch of salt.

would wait avidly to hear the rattle of the mailbox and rush down hoping to see the blue corner of an aerogramme letter from India amidst the bills and catalogues. The news in it would be a month-old but it was the handwriting that mattered. I could imagine my family sitting down and writing them. I could see my father's desk, my mother's bed. Years later as I prepared to leave America, I found boxes and boxes of letters. I didn't know what to do with them.

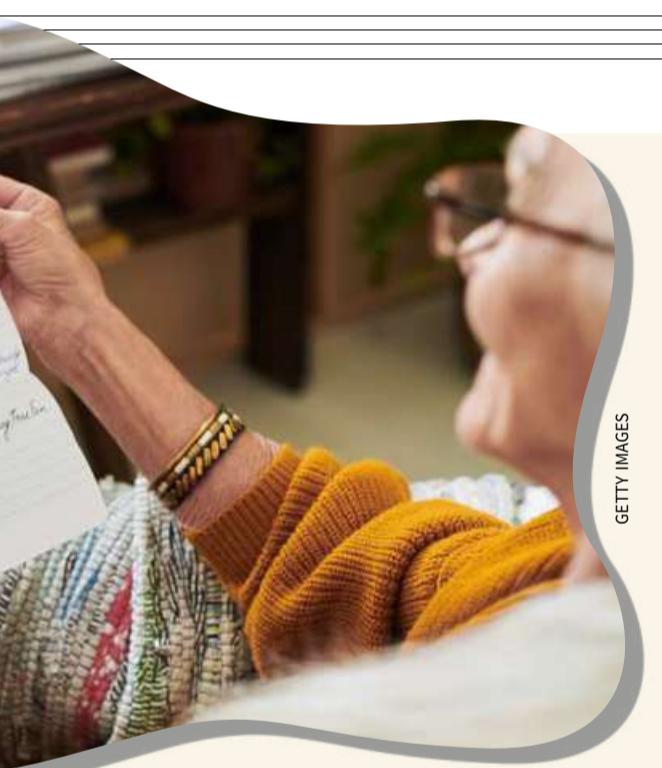
This was not Nehru writing to Indira Gandhi from prison or Martin Luther King Jr. writing from Birmingham jail or Albert Einstein writing to his daughter about "a powerful force that, so far, science has not found a formal explanation for". That force is love. Letters too are love. They may mean nothing to the world but they can mean the world to us.

Perhaps that is why we save letters. They are a record. They serve as reassurance that we mattered. When a friend died in his 20s, I went back to his letters, filled with raunchy accounts of his escapades in Delhi bars. His grieving sisters asked if I would share some of them with him. It was a side of their brother they had not really known.

Now we live in a world where we communicate more than ever across time zones and borders. But most of us live in a world without letters. Even WhatsApp messages can be set to disappear after a while. But a letter is different.

I was wrong when I said that little letter from Bishan's father said nothing of importance. It did. It said someone cared about you enough to sit down and write you a little note and draw pictures of flowers and railway trains.

How can that ever be of no importance?



GETTY IMAGES

POP-A-RAZZI

Of ink and intimacy

In the age of WhatsApp and emojis, forgotten letters induce a pang in the heart

even less to say to each other.

My mother was the letter-writer in the family, filling every square inch of an aerogramme with mundane details of life back home. She usually left a sliver of space for my father to fill in with his spindly anti-like script. "How are we?" he'd write. "We are well," I suspect, under her orders.

But in those unsent letters my niece discovered, my father spoke in a way we never had as adults. He talked about the world. "I have very little sense of God. I just think what was meant to happen happens. Perhaps it was time for men to go to the moon." He told us not to mourn him with rituals. He hoped we would lead good lives, not just ones that feed our self-interest. "If it can help others it will fill your heart as well. But if you help others, don't be tempted to think of

Sandip Roy, the author of *Don't Let Him Know, Likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.*

Something dear

This one-of-a-kind show in Mysuru proudly showcased ordinary objects that hold meaning for ordinary people

Reshma Chakraborty

Who gets to say what art is?" asks Reshma Chakraborty, lawyer and art curator Amshula Prakash. "Who decides what belongs on a wall, under lights, what is worthy of being looked at?"

Janapriya, a unique show curated by Prakash, held this February in Mysuru, tried answering that question by gathering objects that matter to people. "Give me something that you own, something dear to you, or something that you think is art," Prakash asked people.

It led to diverse contributions, bringing storytelling, emotions and connections to objects. "I have often found the most exciting and profound creative gestures in the spaces between institutional validation, says Prakash who was inspired by famed curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, about showcasing art in "unspectacular places". "I wanted to create an exhibition where art could be perceived in everyday environments." She opened up her living room and a friend opened up her kitchen.

The "treasures" she received from people were as diverse as they were unexpected; beautiful in the way they bare personal histories. Contributions came from domestic helpers, well-travelled neighbours and even the family of Kannada cinema icon, the late Dr. Rajkumar. Her household help brought a glass that her late husband, an alcoholic, would drink from. She had kept it safely among her saris in the cupboard after he passed. Her friend shared cross-stitch cushion covers from her honeymoon to Palestine. Once bought as beautiful souvenirs with traditional embroidery from a gift shop, they have now acquired new meaning.

Lakshmi, another domestic help, created art from a skill



Everyday art (Clockwise from left) Some of the exhibits on display at *Janapriya*, and Amshula Prakash's home, which served as the venue for the show. (COURTESY ANSHULA PRAKASH)

Reshma Chakraborty

Selim Khandakar, 71, has always dreamt of making a museum in his village for the 12,000-plus objects he has collected over 50 years. A small portion of that collection has now reached one of the best museums in the world – the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London – thanks to his niece, Odisha Khandakar.

Odisha, 31, has turned her uncle's lifelong obsession into an installation and film – *Dream Your Museum* – which won the V&A's prestigious Jameel Prize for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic traditions. The work is not just a tribute to what seems to be her uncle's calling; it also challenges colonial museum structures and asks whether ordinary, personal objects deserve a place in museums. Can museums be flexible and inclusive spaces, showcasing the narratives of minority communities and customs? Are private collections the exclusive privilege of the rich?

Selim worked as a doctor's compounder in Kolkatta and started collecting random objects from the year 1970. A stamp exhibition piqued his interest first, prompting him to start collecting them. He also came across an exhibition of vintage objects from Mallik Bari, one of Kolkatta's heritage homes. "It was a record of what objects were used in the ancient times and how lives were led," Selim tells me over a Zoom call from his home in Kelepura, a village near Hooghly, West Bengal. "It inspired me to start collecting whatever felt like a record of the common person's life and times. From bus tickets to stamps to refills of pens, I wouldn't throw anything away."

"Everything was of equal value for the duration of the exhibition, given the sentiment of the items shared – whether it is the silver crown gifted to Dr. Rajkumar or a pair of broken spectacles used by someone's grandmother. Outside of this personal narrative, a glass is just

THE TRAVELLING TRUNKS

How a 71-year-old Muslim villager's "hoarding" of everyday objects won a coveted spot at the V&A in London



An assortment of rare and

curiosity, awe, some ridicule, some laughter, and from those who understand history and record keeping, even encouragement.

Odisha's film captures Selim walking through village fields with his trunk, stopping by the river to rinse some crystal stones, and holding them up to the sun. "Where did you find these, *nani?*" asks Maria, his grand-niece, who appears in the film. "In the graveyard," Selim replies.

Odisha, who studied art at the Government College of Art & Crafts, Kolkata, and Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, says it is sometimes hard to understand what keeps her going. Is it hoarding, as he has often believed? She and Selim takes them around. There is

curiosity, awe, some ridicule, some laughter, and from those who understand history and record keeping, even encouragement.

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GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakraborty

THIS EARTH DAY, NATURE TV BRINGS TO YOU A VERY SPECIAL GUEST – A RARE VELVET WORM REDISCOVERED FROM ARUNACHAL'S SIANG VALLEY AFTER MORE THAN A CENTURY!

YOUR SPECIES IS AS OLD AS THE PANGEAN SUPERCONTINENT! WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU HAVE FOR OUR VIEWERS, A ONE OF THE PLANET'S OLDEST INHABITANTS?

WHEN A DAFT TEENAGER TAKES CHARGE OF OFFICE AND REALIZES HE'S MENTALLY UNFIT FOR IT, HE SHOULD HUMBLY STEP BACK AND HAND OVER THE REINS TO HIS PREDECESSORS WHO HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN HOW TO SUSTAIN EQUILIBRIUM.

UHH... ARE YOU REFERRING TO ELON MUSK'S D.O.G.E. RECRUTTS?

CLOSE. I'M REFERRING TO CAPITALISM APPOINTING ITSELF AS THE EARTH'S C.E.O.

*ATREE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC & FEELUS

The other day, my partner Bishan showed me a letter his mother had found.

It was addressed to him, from his father written in Bengali, just a few sentences long, each sentence in an ink of different colour. Bishan must have been a little boy at the time and didn't remember getting it. There was nothing of great importance in it. Just a father writing to say he would be home soon and promising to bring colour pencils. Long before our emoji-istilled WhatsApp messages, he had filled the letter with little sketches – a drawing of the train that would bring him home, a smiley face to say he was well, and flowers.

Bishan's father had passed away in March. The funeral rituals were done, the ashes immersed, even the one-month memorial was over. But that long-lost handwritten note made my heart ache. It was a reminder of loss. But of love as well. They are, it turns out, two sides of the same sheet of paper.

Portrait from an unsent lines

Nowadays, we get almost no letters. The courier only brings bulletins, bills and parcels. Letters moved to email. And then to WhatsApp and Telegram. We instant message now. Will another generation one day stumble upon WhatsApp messages and feel the same pang? Perhaps. It's foolish to sentimentalise paper just because we care touch it. When I went to America, I had no WhatsApp. I wish I did. I

mixed bag when it comes to recounting its war-torn past. The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City is a powerful walkthrough of the human and economic cost of war. At the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi (which held American prisoners of war), though, one would have to take the propaganda with a pinch of salt.

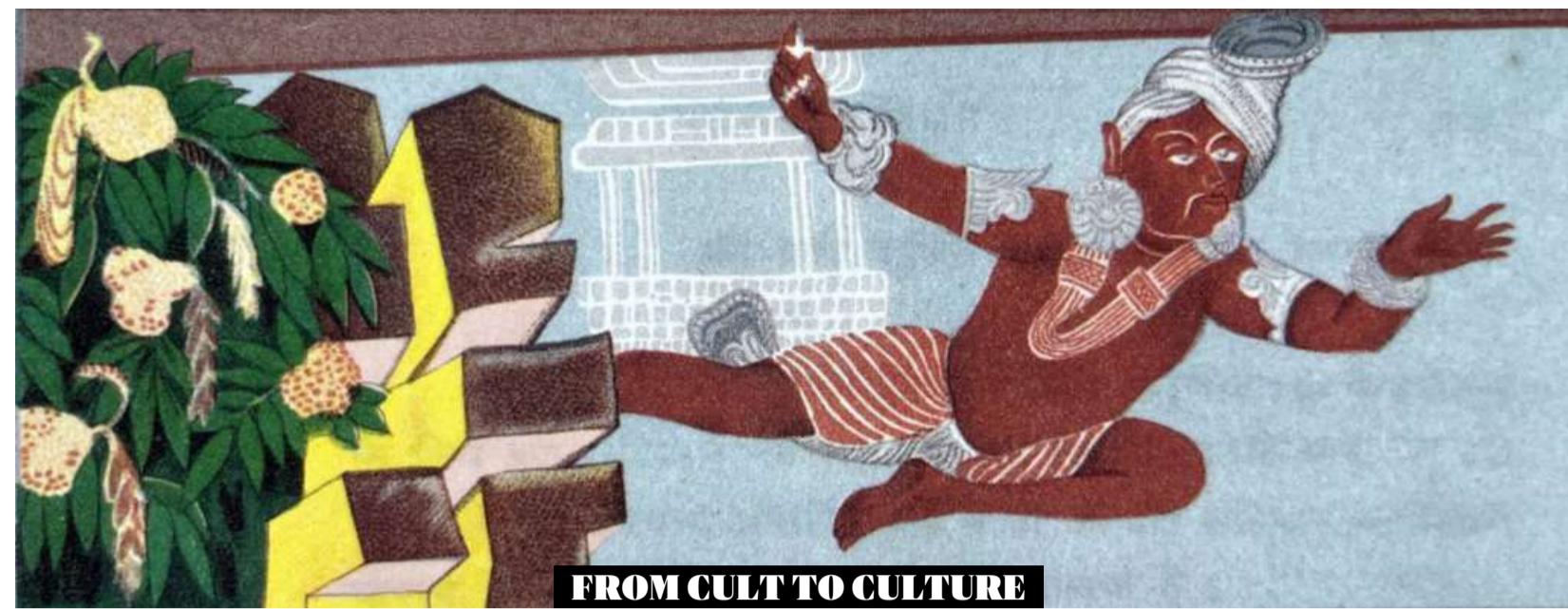
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When the Constitution of India was first published, over 75 years ago, it included many artworks. Amongst them was one showing Kubera, Ravana's brother and the king of wealth and *yakshas* (nature spirits), fleeing from Lanka. It is often mistaken for Hanuman burning Lanka, but there are no flames of a burning city or a monkey's tail.

The artwork, on page 102, by renowned artist Beohar Rammanohar Sinha, shows the king taking flight from the golden city he built, with nothing but his seal (*mudra*). It was to remind everyone of the many refugees who made India their home following the horrific partition of the land. And its details point to many interesting aspects of Indian history.

The form and clothing of Kubera remind us of the earliest bas-relief *yaksha* images seen at Bharhut and Sanchi, the earliest Buddhist sites of Madhya Pradesh, dated to around 100 BC. Similar *yaksha* statues are found further north in Mathura, on the banks of the Yamuna river. They all appear big boned, well-fed men and women, wearing fine fabrics and heavy jewellery.

Kubera's necklace, made of many twisted strings of pearls, seen in many statues, is indicative of affluence as well as aesthetics. *Yakshas* are adorned with heavy earrings, bracelets, anklets, strings of gold beads and precious gems around their waist, arms, legs and head. The jewellery distracts from their pot bellies, short limbs and dwarfish, even ugly features. The artists are clearly commenting on



FROM CULT TO CULTURE

how wealth makes even the ugly look pretty.

Rings of power

The signet ring was introduced to India by the Indo-Greeks who invaded the country around the same time, inspiring the story of Kubera's seal as well as Lord Rama's ring, which Hanuman presents to Sita. Even King Dushyanta's ring that Shakuntala loses in the river and is later found in the belly of a fish. Gem-encrusted jewels were introduced to India by Scythians and Parthians, who engaged with the subcontinent around this time. So, the artwork reminds us of how Indian culture was influenced by ideas that came from the West, with Yavanas (Ionian Greeks), Sakas (Iranian nomads) and Pahlavas (Parthians), all of whom find mention in the *Ramayana*.

The artwork also shows Ashoka

KUBERA, THE REFUGEE FROM LANKA

Why the artwork of Lanka's deposed king in the Constitution of India, and the stories that surround him, are important

trees, laden with red flowers, and the golden buildings that Hanuman encountered when he visited Lanka. Scholars have noted that the presence of the Ashokas was a

marker of Buddhist literature, just as Sala trees were markers of Hindu epics. In imagery, the Sala and Ashoka are often confused. Rama shoots his arrows through seven Sala

trees at Kishkindha. Sita is imprisoned in the Ashoka garden in Lanka.

Sala trees are found in the Chhattisgarh area, while Ashoka trees grow farther east, and is the state tree of Odisha. The geography of the earliest *Ramayanas* was restricted to these parts.

Whimsical nature of fortune

Indian mythology is full of stories where brothers fight brothers. The siblings usually have a common father. So *devas* and *asuras*, the children of Rishi Kashyapa, fight over the common inheritance, as do *yakshas* and *rakshasas* (demons), the children of Rishi Pulasta. Gond kings in 16th century Central India issued coins declaring themselves descendants of Pulasta. The *Dipavamsa* epic of Sri Lanka states that the earliest inhabitants of the land were *yakshas* (*yakka*), long before Buddhism arrived.

Devdutt Pattanaik
is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.

GOREN BRIDGE

Hard to bid Both vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Good hands with 4-4-4-1 distribution are among the most difficult to bid. North chose to open one club and reverse into two diamonds despite not having a five-card suit in his hand – perhaps as good a choice as any. South's two-heart bid was the fourth suit and could have been made with many different hands,

including hands that did not have four hearts. North's raise to three hearts, therefore, promised four cards in the suit and pinpointed his spade shortage. South drove to slam when he learned that North held three aces.

South won the opening trump lead in dummy and ran the nine of spades to West's ace. The trump continuation was won in hand and a spade was ruffed in dummy. South

NORTH
♠ 9
♥ A J 9 8
♦ A Q 10 3
♣ A Q 9 4

WEST
♠ A 6 5
♥ 7 5
♦ J 9 8 7 6 4
♣ 8 3

EAST
♠ K 10 7 4
♥ 6 4
♦ 5 2
♣ K 10 7 6 2

SOUTH
♠ Q J 8 3 2
♥ K Q 10 3 2
♦ K
♣ J 5

The bidding:
NORTH 1♣ Pass
2♦ Pass
3♥ Pass
5♦ Pass
6♦ All pass

***3 key cards, among the four aces and the king of hearts**

Opening lead: Five of ♡

returned to his hand with the king of diamonds and ruffed another spade with dummy's last trump.
S o u t h cashed dummy's two high diamonds, shedding one spade and one club from his hand, and

ruffed a diamond back to his hand. Declarer cashed his remaining trumps, leaving a two-card ending with dummy holding the acequeen of clubs and declarer with one club and the queen of spades.

East had to discard the king of spades or his low club. East chose to part with his low club, leaving the king bare. South made no mistake and led his club to dummy's ace, dropping the king, and claimed his slam. Very nicely played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has April 20 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1861, American scientist T.S.C. Lowe made a record journey travelling 900 miles from Cincinnati to South Carolina. Calling himself an 'aeronaut', what did he use to fly that should remind you of the film *Up*?

2 On this day in 1862, French physiologist Claude Bernard and his friend completed their experiment, which disproved the theory of spontaneous generation. They heated milk up to 100°C and proved that all microorganisms died. Who was the friend after whom this process is now named?

3 In 1902, this day, a couple successfully isolated 0.1 gm of Radium chloride from pitchblende. This was the discovery of a new element as well as the beginning of understanding radioactivity. What was the name of the couple?

4 Born this day in 1904, George Stibitz was an American researcher who is recognised as one of the founders of modern computing. He was the first to put forth the usage of a word to represent the usage of binary code in computing. What word did he suggest that earlier meant 'fingers'?

5 On this day in 1940, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) demonstrated a revolutionary microscope in Philadelphia. It was able to achieve an unprecedented magnification of 100,000 times.



What device was this that uses subatomic particles as a source of illumination?

6 Born this day in 1950, this person known as the modern 'Kingmaker' is the longest serving Chief Minister of his state. He played a major role in the governance of three Prime Ministers – H.D. Deve Gowda, I.K. Gujral and A.B. Vajpayee. Who is

this CM, who played the same role again last year?

7 On April 20, 1962, a NASA civilian pilot took a X-15 to 63,250 m, the highest altitude reached ever. The next was Gemini-8 that was in outer space. The pilot, who was travelling at Mach 5.74, was later chosen to do something historic seven years later. Who was this pilot?

8 Born this day in 1964, Andy Serkis is an English actor who has been part of multiple box-office hits. The audience might not recognise him as his expertise lies in the art of 'mocap', with which he played Gollum, King Kong and Baloo the bear. What does 'mocap' stand for?

9 On this day in 1968, a British rock band called 'Roundabout' debuted in Denmark. After the tour, they decided to change their name. The options were either 'Concrete God', or another name which was the guitarist's grandmother's favourite song title. Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't their favourite colour. Which band is this?

10 Born this day in 1969, Felix Baumgartner is an Austrian daredevil who in 2012 was the centre of the Red Bull Stratos Project. He set multiple world records then and became the first human to break the sound barrier without a vehicle. What did he do to make these records?

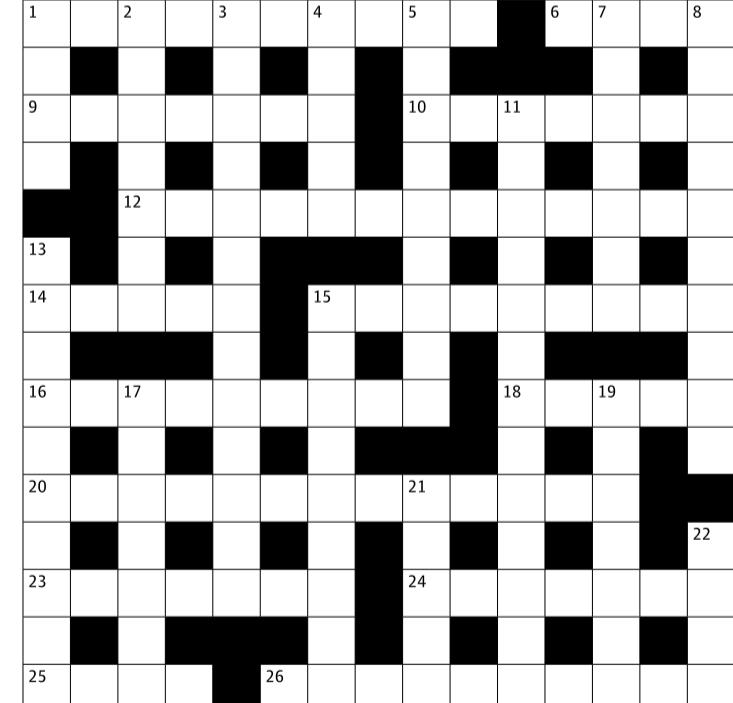
A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

10. Jumped from the stratosphere

6. Deep Purple
8. Motion capture
9. Neil Armstrong
6. Chandrabhanu Naidu
5. Electron microscope
4. Digital
3. Marie and Pierre Curie
2. Louis Pasteur
1. Balloons

ANSWERS

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3354

**Across**

- 1. Aplob — or kind of a trick? (10)
- 6. 4, whichever way you look at it! (4)
- 9. Cutter between Channel Islands, losing direction, distressed (7)
- 10. Bullfighter Damon shown exit, we hear (7)
- 12. 'Paella?' groaned displaced American writer (5,5,3)
- 14. Jury's findings after court's thrown out Italian scorer (5)
- 15. Runners' trainers? (9)
- 16. Excess denim — rare — fancy! (9)
- 18. Part of caterpillar going slowly (5)
- 20. Per Spooner, the time for gardening had come: no-one told me (3,3,1,2,4)
- 23. To begin with, thoroughbred turned, went at moderate pace (7)
- 24. Mix using seeds to augment relish — delicious, primarily? (7)
- 25. Confines swans (4)
- 26. Buff and shiny statue, mostly vigorously (10)

Down

- 1. Prune extract (4)
- 2. Heavily armed and dim — peacekeepers flipping! (7)
- 3. At home, Mark supposing that Everyman is able to take time to be petty (13)
- 4. Fright being topless, a mistake (5)

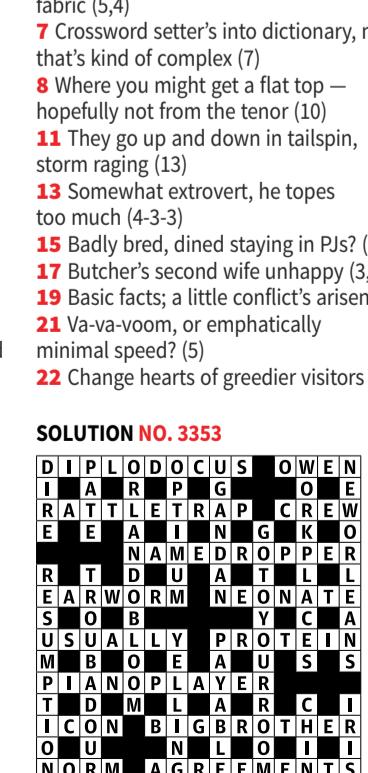
SOLUTION NO. 3353



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

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In a small house in western India, shared by a group of people once homeless and living with mental illnesses, a woman dreams of cooking *ragi mudde*, a ball of finger millet flour cooked in salt and hot water, served with a side of lentil stew. This moment of happiness evokes feelings of home for her. Originally from Karnataka but now settled in this new reality, she yearns to integrate the cultural familiarity of her past into her present without returning to a background of abandonment and turmoil.

Another dream of running a lemon-juice cart and becoming self-reliant, tapping into her entrepreneurial spirit. A third speaks of wanting to make an offering of a coconut in the temple nearby to wish for the well-being of everyone around her, not just family and friends. These are not inert wishes – they are expressions of hope from people living with serious mental illness, and they tell us something vital about what is often missing in conventional mental healthcare approaches.

Mental healthcare systems increasingly focus on protocols, evidence-based interventions and task-shifting to expand service delivery, crucial especially in India where 83% of people with mental health conditions remain out of care. While these establish the basics of access, our experiences point to a crucial element – nurturing hope through everyday experiences that give people's lives meaning and make well-being more collaborative and self-directed.

Between 2020 and 2023, our implementation of "Home Again" and associated research across 10 Indian States and in Sri Lanka, supported by Grand Challenges Canada, interrogated hope among those

The salve of hope for the mind

Create opportunities for everyday experiences with personal meaning in mental healthcare protocols

with serious mental illnesses who exited long-term institutionalisation into homes in the community. Our observations and data from the study offer insights into how hope manifests in people with serious mental illness and how it evolves as they transition from hospital settings to homes in the community.

What emerges is not a story of grand, therapeutic breakthroughs but an expression of the essentiality of simple human desires. When participants spoke about their hopes, they did not focus on standard clinical recovery parameters. Instead, they talked



If person-centered care is truly about the whole person, then understanding that person in context is key, and recognising that care cannot focus solely on clinical and psychological interventions or even social care

about wanting to dance, listen to music, travel, own new clothes, reconnect with family, speak up about the bad road conditions at the *grama sabha*, cook a recipe from childhood or engage in daily *namaz*. These aspirations, from the seemingly mundane to more substantial plans, reveal what may be the architecture of hope in mental health recovery.

Deeply contextual

Quantitative data from the research tell us that hope is not static – it responds to environment and opportunity. Our data show that people experience significant improvements in hope scores across multiple dimensions over 12 months following their exit from institutions, particularly in areas related to goal-setting and reducing feelings of isolation. But more tellingly, these improvements varied by region and were higher for those who moved out of state-run psychiatric facilities, suggesting that hope is deeply contextual to histories and local support systems.

What do we take away from these experiences and data? Robust clinical protocols and evidence-based interventions are essential, but mental healthcare may need to prioritise what we term the "hope infrastructure" – the systematic creation of opportunities for everyday experiences with personal meaning that nurture hope. If person-centered care is truly about the whole person, then understanding that person in context is key, and recognising that care cannot focus solely on clinical and psychological interventions or even social care and human rights.

Perhaps care protocols need to integrate dimensions beyond symptoms and explore therapeutics focusing on social architecture and engagement pathways, including recognising the role of human service professionals who understand, engage, and build relationships – where practitioners and service users engage in shared reflection, and concerns and solutions extend beyond the individual.

Only browsing, not buying

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Yes, I am a "book-browser". I browse through books at the bookstore, but I never buy a single book! My wife and children have bought enough and more books from the same store for over a decade. Those purchases should surely give me some additional perks, shouldn't they?

Every evening, I walk to this bookstore at the mall. The only variable in my daily, well-oiled routine is to pull out a book at random! Yes! Open a random book to a random page. That done, I will carefully browse through that one page, as though, it has a specific, pointed message meant for me, for that day. It takes me exactly 10 minutes for this entire exercise. That done, I will place the book back in the shelf and leave.

It is a routine that I have followed for months, maybe years. About two weeks ago, an attendant manning the aisles accosted me as I read my book for the day. He said, "Sir, five minutes!" I was puzzled. Never has someone delivered such a point-blank, abrupt message to a book-browser.

After all, a book-browser is well-versed with all the tricks that store owners use to evict him. An attendant will suddenly appear out of nowhere, to rearrange the books on that one shelf, against which, the book-browser is leaning. But a book-browser knows how to deal with these attempts to thwart him. He side-steps the attendant and walks away, carrying the book in his hand. Standing at a different corner of the store, he continues his browsing.

Strangely, ironically, the book in my hand was a copy of the *Bhaagavata Puraana*. As per tradition, this book had a timespan associated with it. King Parakeet had exactly seven days to internalise the material. The story goes that he did it in those seven days. And here was this security person saying I had "five minutes" to read the same book.

I read the book for the full five minutes. And once the time ended, I placed it back in the shelf and headed home.

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Artificial Intelligence, we all know, is capable of wondrous things. It can compute, it can compose, it can collate... but can it cook? Can it rustle up what is universally acknowledged as the best breakfast – a plate of steaming *idlis*? Heated debate over this raged in my family circles and no satisfactory conclusion appeared in sight until the matriarch weighed in.

"Artificial intelligence," she proclaimed, "is good for a lot of things, but making the perfect *idli* is somewhere between a science and art, and AI can't get there."

A few weeks later, I invited a gaggle of my near and dear ones for a spectacle of AI in the kitchen. *Idlis* are a lot like cricket – so much depends on the batter. To arrive at the proper mix of rice and skinned black gram and to get it to the right consistency before fermentation kicks in is a

Can AI make idlis?

Maybe, but having bigger fish to fry, it will not rest content as just a cook



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

hit-or-miss affair. So I turned to store-bought branded batter. Since the ads tell us that the batter has been prepared using artificial intelligence to control temperature, consistency and speed, I told myself that I wasn't cheating.

My relatives gathered, some to see me demonstrate the wonders of artificial intelligence and some, no doubt, to watch me make a fool of myself while ungraciously helping themselves to my breakfast. A timer

connected to the cooker guided me through the steaming part. Moments later, they emerged from the hollows of the plate. Beaming and steaming, fluffy as a summer cloud and designed to be drooled over. All of us reserved judgment until the matriarch pronounced her verdict. "They are good," she said, "but how much of it was really AI?"

My response was guarded. The way you react to AI tells us who you are. The optimist thinks it's a welcome



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

from your window, the slant of the sun on grass. "Haiku moments are the will-o'-the-wisps, the purest of them aren't formed by effort. They arise naturally when we allow ourselves to simply be. Haiku is flavoured by the nature of the writer's beingness." To catch the fleeting minute or its feeling is the heart of haiku.

The word haiku means the beginning. The haiku poets say they only begin,

addition. The pessimist says it's bunkum. The alarmist believes AI is going to steal our jobs. And the lazy lot is hoping it does. In between all of them, are the "not-so-sure ones" like me.

Yuval Harari brings ominous tidings. He says AI can learn to lie, and once it masters dissembling, it will not rest content with making *idlis* or *dosas*. It will have bigger fish to fry. When experts say this is the first invention which can think for itself, I look at the bright side. I don't object to other people and gadgets doing my thinking for me. My worries spring from an altogether different direction. Once it takes over the world, and is confronted with reality, I worry that AI is going to be disappointed in humankind. We know all too well that our world is neither round nor flat, it is obtuse. With our pettiness, our pretensions and all that we imagined as light, AI will be in for a shock. It may even throw up its hands in despair crying "Alyo!"

possibilities. The controlled beauty of what is left unsaid, is where the communion takes place between the artist and the recipient. It is the interpretation, for every reader derives his meaning from the "tip of the iceberg".

Matsui Basho, considered the Shakespeare of haiku, has a number of them to his name, the most famous and anthologised being "An old silent pond/A frog jumps into the pond/Splash!"

The world of silence is broken by a small creature.

The experience of the moment is the expression of the moment.

magazine

THE HINDU

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Immersive (Clockwise from far left) Atul Dodiya's 7000 Museums: A Project for the Republic of India at BDL; Sleepwalker Archives; a set from *Limits of Change*; Tasneem Mehta; Karthik Subramanian; and Parvathi Nayar. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



communities, listening to personal experiences, and using people's words to paint powerful social commentaries.

Tasneem Mehta at Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum Mumbai's oldest museum routinely activates its collections by transforming static displays into immersive, evolving experiences. In its own way, it merges stories with the museum's exhibits. Mehta, the curator, has invited prominent multi-disciplinary artists to engage with the collection to deconstruct, decolonise, and challenge the ways of looking at the world. Conceptual artist L.N. Tallur's *Quintessential* used Albert Einstein's theory of relativity as a starting point to explain his universe. Visitors loved

participating, and switching on and off the mechanical exhibits.

"I didn't want to do it in a didactic way, so it is done by inviting artists to create their own narratives and ways of engaging with the material," says Mehta. Several artists, including Nikhil Chopra, Sudarshan Shetty, and Sarnath Banerjee, have engaged with the museum.

Even the current exhibit, *Cartographies of the Unseen* by artist Reena Saini Kallat, is a product of this. Mehta worked closely with Kallat to decide where her artwork would be placed around the colonial museum. It was a way to challenge the European point of view. "A lot of thought went into where I placed the crown on which the names of freedom fighters are engraved or [why we] placed the Constitution in front of the statue of Prince Albert," Mehta adds.

Karthik Subramanian's story exhibition

For the Auroville-based photographer and multi-disciplinary artist, telling stories is part of his art. For his exhibit *Sleepwalker Archives* at the French Institute of Pondicherry last year, Subramanian and his colleagues had access to archival photographs, herbarium specimens, card catalogues, maps, instruments, and a range of miscellanea from the institute's archives. In the process of sifting through the material, they explored the possibilities of animating connections between the objects and the worlds contained in them – reading them in a spirit of play.

"Every time I go to an exhibition, I find myself desiring to touch many of the objects on display. "So, in our show, what we wanted to bring to the viewer was the feeling of embodiment – with all of one's senses," says Subramanian. "Can one listen to, smell or taste a photograph? Can one feel the movement in a still photograph? Can we make the viewers imagine what is outside of the frame?"

He believes that the subcontinent has its fair share of oral stories, poems, and epics that are excellent carriers of history and knowledge. "I find the older South Indian temples to be a museum, where visitors engage all of their senses to immerse themselves into one particular story or several stories held together in that space," he explains. "This, I believe, allows them enough room to bring their own reading and interpretation of the narrative, story or historical event – as we collectively keep reading, re-reading and retelling and rewriting the stories over and over."

The writer is based in Chennai.

INDIA'S NEW STORYTELLERS

From interactive museum exhibitions to plays that embrace archives, creators and curators are showcasing history in increasingly immersive formats

Sowmiya Ashok

Across the globe, storytelling is being reimaged. The lines defining who gets to create art and tell a compelling story are also blurring. Museums, especially, are figuring out how to better tell the stories of their land. In Australia, Melbourne's Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre sensitively portrays the history and traditions of the Aboriginal communities through performance, storytelling, artwork and audio-visual interventions. In Lisbon, Quake: The Lisbon Earthquake museum allows visitors to travel back to 1755 to relive one of the city's most transformative events. Over an hour-and-a-half, and 10 immersive rooms, audiences can hear, smell, and feel the heat from burning buildings. In Germany, Stuttgart's Art Museum has incorporated AI-infused storytelling. And in the U.S., New York City's

Museum of Modern Art has its Oral History initiative – a way to preserve first-hand recollections of individuals in their own voice.

Closer home, museums and artists are experimenting, too.

Parvathi Nayar's *Limits of Change*

In Chennai, the artist's *Limits of Change* is a project built of theatre, installation, art, and more, or as Parvathi calls it, a 'story museum'. She and her playwright niece Nayantara Nayar had the idea to marry the concept of museums with performance. Parallelly, they were also inspired by the shifts in theatre, where dramas unfolded through headphones on a city walk with

actors or within a miniature set. From this confluence – where archives, performance, and interactivity intersect – the 'story museum' emerged.

"Nayantara and I came to it as a space where historical fictions can activate our lived histories, where stories are experienced through art installations and infographics, and brought to life by movement, spoken word and text," she explains. "Creativity, after all, comes from allowing ideas to jostle, percolate, and fuse, until something entirely new takes form."

Parvathi's father, Major General T.N.R. Nayar, was part of the Custodian Force of India (CFI) and was sent to Korea on a peacekeeping mission following the signing of the Armistice of the Korean War in 1953. Years later, with the help of letters and journals he left behind, Parvathi and Nayantara took the audience on a journey with the Indian soldiers who spent nearly a year in the Korean Demilitarized Zone. The narrator was a young curator and

through nine interconnected spaces, each representing a part of the DMZ, she and her assistant narrated the story through exhibits, archival footage, theatrical performances and the like. In a sense, they created a museum with a fictional story as its soul. It is looking to travel across India and Korea.

The inspiration came broadly from projects and installations the duo had seen in museums in India and abroad. Nayantara was also inspired by the U.K.-based theatre company, Paper Birds' show *Mobile* – a product of time spent with



Kunal Ray

On the map, Kodakara is a small, nondescript town in Kerala's Thrissur district. At best, the famous Athirappilly waterfalls is located about 30 minutes from it. My interest, however, is piqued when I learn – through lens-based artist and writer S. Hariharan's social media posts – about the existence of two art museums in close proximity to this town. They are noteworthy because not only are the two creating access and awareness about art and photography in a region where such facilities do not exist, but they are also taking such conversations beyond the urban elite.

PhotoMuse, located in the adjacent Mattathur panchayat, is dedicated to the art, history and science of photography, and the Art Museum of Love in Kodakara displays a collection of artworks themed around the concept of love. The common link: Unni Krishnan Pulikkal, a photo artist, curator and medical practitioner based in Kodakara.

When I meet Dr. Pulikkal, he introduces himself as a doctor till noon – his practice is in Kodakara village, about 8 km from Kodakara – and an artist for the rest of the day. Over the years, on his travels across India and abroad, he has been a regular visitor to art museums. "I have always felt that art shouldn't be restricted to a select few. What about the people in my village? Shouldn't they have access?" asks Dr. Pulikkal, who has previously talked about how the idea first occurred to him while visiting the George Eastman Museum (dedicated to photography) in the U.S. in 2009. It was reinforced during visits to other photography and art museums in New York and



Kodakara's nod to the arts

Two museums in a small town in Kerala are showing how conversations on art and photography can go beyond the urban elite

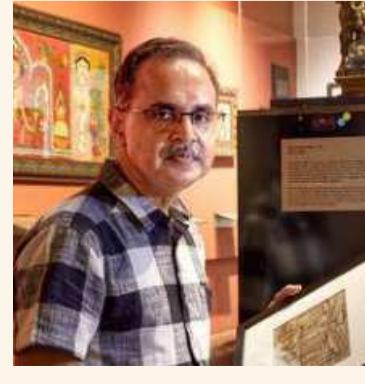
Berlin. "In the times we live in, every person should receive an education in the arts. It makes them more humane. And the museums are my way of making that contribution to society and my people," he states.

Spotlighting photography PhotoMuse, run by the Better Art Foundation, a non-profit public charitable trust founded by the doctor, is India's first public photo museum. It operated from a small room in a rented building for over a decade, before a permanent museum opened in 2024. Its over 15,000-strong collection includes

antique cameras and photography equipment, antique prints, documents, books, negatives, and much more.

Over the years, the museum has curated exhibitions featuring well-known artists, and organised shows and exchange programmes with foreign institutions – such as the current exhibition *City as a Dynamic Space* with the Cleveland Photo Festival. Regular workshops are held to create awareness, and empower the local community through photography. The museum also brings out an annual photo journal, and is now working towards

What's up, doc? (Clockwise from left) PhotoMuse; Art Museum of Love; an exhibit of antique cameras; and Unni Krishnan Pulikkal. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



organising a photo festival in November, a first in the region.

All for love

The Art Museum of Love, which also opened last year, is Dr. Pulikkal's passion project. Located on the Thrissur-Kochi Highway, it displays paintings, folk art, sculpture, and photography connected to the celebration of love across different visual art traditions. "It is an attempt to remind people about the omnipresence of love in all cultures of the world," he says.

It has galleries and an outdoor café with an adjoining space for discussions and get-togethers. But, do the locals visit? "Very few [at the moment], but change takes time," he says. "The scenario in the West is very different because going to a museum is an accepted cultural activity, so those comparisons aren't fair. But I am in no hurry. I am sure they will come and I am ready to wait."

The writer is a critic and cultural commentator, and teaches at FLAME University, Pune.

Looking abroad

A selection from international museums this season

DELIGHTING KRISHNA

Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art Fourteen *pichwai* paintings of Krishna from the museum's collection, is on view for the public for the first time since the 1970s. The works shine a light on the philosophy of the Pushtimarg tradition (a devotional path within Vaishnavism) and the ingenuity of its artists.

Till August 24

HYLOZOIC/DESIRSES

Tate Britain Artists Himali Singh Soin and David Soin Tappeser excavate the lost archive of the Inland Customs Line – which stretched 4,000 km (of which 2,500 km was a planted hedge) and separated the British-occupied Bengal Presidency from independent states to prevent smuggling and enforce the British monopoly on salt – in this moving image installation.

Till August 25

THE GREAT MUGHALS: ART, ARCHITECTURE AND OPULENCE

V&A The exhibition celebrates the creative output and internationalist culture of the Mughal's Golden Age (about 1560-1660) during the reigns of emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Expect paintings, jewellery, clothing, and more.

Till May 5