THE HINDU
Sunday, January 7, 2024

magazine

backpage

The LuxUnlock model to grow regional tourism

GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE

Bhutan's king and his futuristic mega-city project

GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai: the anti-colonial struggle

GO TO » PAGE 3

Track the latest stories via #ThMagazine on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) Get connected » www.thehindu.com

From within the din of the country's urban hubs emerge exemplary cities and towns that topped the charts in 2022-23 for everything from nurturing their environment to putting safety norms in place

IMAGING: KANNAN SUNDAR

INDIA'S BEST CITIES

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
sreeparna.c@thehindu.co.in

A video shows a snaking queue of bikes moving with robotic discipline, stacked one behind the other, the riders with their helmets donned, unhurried, riding on the right side of a narrow road. Besides them a line of cars snakes through its designated lane in peaceful tandem. Then there is something even more unusual: silence. No one honks, no one hollers. This is the way traffic is supposed to behave – but could this footage have possibly emerged from India? The answer is yes: this 2022 viral video offers a snapshot of a stretch of road in Mizoram's capital Aizawl, dubbed a 'silent city', recognised widely for its adherence to traffic rules.

By the end of the decade, some 40% of India's population is expected to inhabit cities, according to Hardeep Singh Puri, minister for housing and urban affairs. And while most of the country's urban landscape is a chaotic din, there are cities that top national and global charts for a variety of reasons: for sensitive street-scaping, for rejuvenating lakes, for putting in place safety norms. We bring to you a sampling of cities famed for nurturing their urban environment, for their scholarship, philanthropy and more, from across the nation.

Indore | Cleanest city

The city is garbage bin-free despite generating 1,200 tonnes of dry waste and 700 tonnes of wet waste daily

According to Debolina Kundu of the National Institute of Urban Affairs, Indian cities are gearing up to take advantage of Central and State missions. "They have understood the importance of planning," she says, citing States such as Madhya Pradesh, which were nowhere in the picture until now. Indore, for instance, was ranked the 'cleanest city' in 2022 — for the sixth year in a row by Swachh Survekshan Awards by the ministry of housing and urban affairs.

The largest city of Madhya Pradesh, with a population of 35 lakh, is garbage bin-free despite generating 1,200 tonnes of dry waste and 700 tonnes of wet waste daily. The key is segregating dry, wet and hazardous waste, and processing it. Here, waste generates money and also fuels its buses: a bio CNG plant has been set up by the Indore Municipal Corporation, on a public private partnership model, with an initial investment of ₹550 crore; it is likely to soon generate 19,000 kg bio-CNG gas. The corporation will buy bio-CNG at ₹5 per kg to fuel nearly 400 buses.

Tipper trucks carry the waste from households to the transfer station. Wet waste is turned into compost. Dry waste is segregated into components such as metal, rubber and plastic. Hazardous waste is incinerated. Kundu has a word of caution, though: Indian citizens must understand that urban health is not the responsibility of the government alone. "I was in Kigali in Rwanda recently, and was amazed by the cleanliness. Every month, a citizen is given a specific area to clean."

Delhi | Best public transport

The capital has a metro network of 12 lines, serving 286 stations

If Aizawl is known for its road discipline, the capital has been lauded globally for its efficient public transport in The Urban Mobility Readiness Index report by Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023. This index doffs a hat to Delhi's diversity of public transit modes such as a metro network, affordability, speed and operating hours. In 2022, the Delhi metro network had 12 lines serving 286 stations.

The capital made it to the 35th place among world cities for best public transport. The only other Indian city to make it to the top 60 was Mumbai, at 41. City authorities are also investing in an electric vehicle transition, to address pollution.

"When I moved to Delhi 11 years ago, my biggest worry was how I would travel, as I don't drive. I would say Delhi has the best metro rail system in the country. It took me wherever I wanted to go. The auto-*walas* were another revelation, as they never rejected a trip," says Haripriya K.M., who works at a media company.

Bengaluru | IT capital

The city is home to 450 research laboratories and over 400 of the world's Fortune 500 companies

When we talk transport, the urban legend of Bengaluru's traffic jams cannot but spring to mind. But the southern city has a more benign reputation: it is the country's indisputable intellectual hub. It is the IT capital, science capital, biotechnology capital, avionics capital, space capital, start-up capital, and innovation capital.

It was ranked 20 in Startup Genome's Global Startup Ecosystem Report 2023. The city is home to 450 laboratories that research science streams such as the brain, biotech and AI, and over 400 of the world's Fortune 500 companies. As far as human capital goes, it boasts an impressive pool of 1,00,000 doctorate degree holders, 30,000 automotive software engineers, 15,000 aeronautical engineers, and more than 3,00,000 chip designers, testers and embedded software engineers.

Rajeev Gowda, vice chairperson of the State Institute for The Transformation of Karnataka believes, however, that much needs to be done to capitalise on this human resource. "We need to strengthen a culture of research and innovation, and gain confidence to craft breakthrough products. We need more synergy between institutions, mentoring and internships. Bengaluru has already shown how the moneyed give back to society through philanthropy, or an engagement with social causes," he says.

Pimpri-Chinchwad | Streets for people

The city has developed 120 km of 'healthy streets' (with adequate walking and cycling infrastructure) in the past five years

The people of urban India have begun to take the initiative. Citizen-led movements have turned the small industrial city of Pimpri-Chinchwad in Maharashtra into a walking and cycling haven. It reclaimed space from carriageways and turned them into cycle lanes and footpaths. Authorities and the community worked closely and came up with a street design. Pimpri follows a 'Test-Learn-Scale' approach, where temporary designs are tested in consultation with experts and then permanent infrastructure is created. Stakeholder consultation made all the difference: local residents, media, traffic police were all roped in. The city was among 11 that won the 'Streets for People' challenge of the urban affairs ministry's Smart Cities Mission initiative in 2022. The city has developed 120 km of 'healthy streets' (streets with adequate walking and cycling infrastructure) in the past five years.

"The new streets are well laid out, the footpaths have been improved. People can now walk along the road and cross it safely," says Dagdu Velankar, a local resident.

Kovai at a glance

Water bodies revived by conservation organisations

Siruthuli
75+ (since 2003)

Kousika Neer Karangal
16 (since 2016)

Kovai Kulangal
10 (since 2017)

Citizens involved in regenerative work
1,15,000

Conservation events in a year
360

Coimbatore | Southern city of lakes

The Periyakulam Lake, for instance, once polluted, is now a recreation hub

Coimbatore has also reclaimed urban spaces — but this time, for the environment. Seven lakes, built by the Chola kings in the 8th century and historically used for irrigation, have now been restored. Today, they draw visitors from all walks of life.

The Periyakulam Lake, for instance, is spread over 300 acres in the heart of the city. It was polluted and encroached upon. But now the lake front has amphitheatres for cultural activities, and cycle tracks.

Shankar Vanavarayar, entrepreneur, educationalist, and chairman of CII Tamil Nadu State Council, says the city has always been seen as a comfortable place to stay in terms of climate. "Suddenly, when we were water-starved in 2002-03, it came as a shock. But citizens got together and worked with the government and NGOs to solve the problem. This was important because while someone can come in and clean a waterbody one day, what happens in the next three years? So, our sustained self-reliant culture was reaffirmed in Coimbatore."

Now, the most important problem, says Vanavarayar, is to keep garbage away from water systems. "Even more critical is distributed, isolated treatment plants for wastewater. If all of us treat our wastewater as much as possible, the larger water systems will be less polluted."

The focus today is on *nalla thanni* (good water), adds Rajesh Govindarajulu, a jeweller with an interest in local history. "We are looking into the treatment of sewage water and the prevention of effluent discharge into storm water drains, underground sewage systems and water bodies. We are checking out methods and solutions, including the creation of floating wetlands to treat various types of wastewater."

Surat | Climate smart city

The city, way back in 2013-2014, included a line specifically on climate change in its budget

Surat has a vision for the environment, too. It has emerged a 'climate smart' city, according to the Union urban affairs ministry. It has an Urban Health and Climate Resilience Centre that works towards climate change resilience. This includes an end-to-end early warning system to reduce the intensity of flood damage, and public awareness campaigns to help citizens understand flood warning systems.

Way back in 2013-2014, its municipality budget included a line specifically on climate change. The strategy was funded by The Rockefeller Foundation. In 2021, the Union urban affairs ministry declared Surat the best model for climate and environment initiatives, among 126 cities in the country. The Climate Smart Cities assessment used five parameters: energy and green buildings, urban planning, green cover and biodiversity, mobility, air quality, water management and waste management.

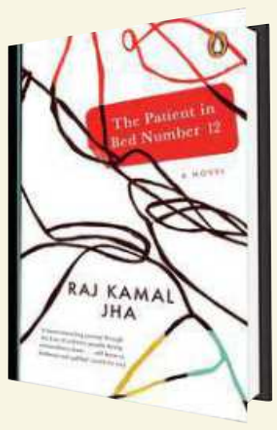
CONTINUED TO » PAGE 4-5

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Surreal flashes of reality

Editor and novelist Raj Kamal Jha's latest book attempts to capture a slice of "Modi's India"

Jaideep Unudurti



The Patient in Bed Number 12
Raj Kamal Jha
Hamish Hamilton
₹599

The Spanish flu killed around a 100 million people worldwide. Yet its visible impact on popular culture has been minimal. Psychologist James Wertsch, while researching how a society forms a collective memory, had said that, "The virus is just not an ideal character for an ideal narrative." He went on to boldly predict, in mid-2020 as COVID-19 raged, that "In a matter of a few years, we might forget this."

The changeless days of the lockdown fostered a kind of amnesia, resistant to the grip of memory. Basically, people forget. The brain forms event boundaries. Pandemic becomes endemic. We move on.

Journalist Raj Kamal Jha's novel *The Patient in Bed Number 12*, set during the second wave, marks the beginning of the post-pandemic era, at least in letters. Nothing marks the end of a phenomenon than stories being written about it. Turning the pages of Jha's latest is like finding a long-forgotten stash of face masks and hand sanitizers; here, schools are still in "hybrid mode", those with "comorbidities" are at risk, and there is talk about a time that will come "after the curve has flattened".

The story begins in the ICU ward of a corporate hospital. Jha evokes the lexical architecture of this anteroom to death, with its sepsis, saline drips, pleural effusions, and nasogastric tubing. The unnamed narrator, who is a professor of Sanskrit, is estranged from his only daughter, as she has married a Muslim man. At death's doorstep, he now hopes for a reconciliation, and is desperately waiting for her.

Dose of life

The head nurse, Sister Shiny, tells him that "you won't last long if you just lie here sleeping, staring at the ceiling or the floor". And the only way is that every day, "you need a moment of a life being lived to the full" which is "your daily pill". This is the conceit of the novel, and so, in "the city beyond the bridge... maybe some will get to see an old man from the hospital flying above, looking for a story".

Despite the immobile narrator, we dip into other people's lives through a series of interconnected chapters, whose connections are not apparent at first. The characters could be a security guard in the mall next door or a woman whose marriage is breaking down or an out-of-work photographer. There are also surreal flashes, for instance, the "*raat ka karkhana*" where child labourers toil to "fill glass jars with night which will be shipped across the world. The Prime Minister makes a cameo as "Our Great Doctor" who glides like a ghost every night through the ward, his beard is "a cloud leaving a trail of raindrops" on the floor to "rummage in their minds" and snip out thoughts that "pose a threat to the nation".

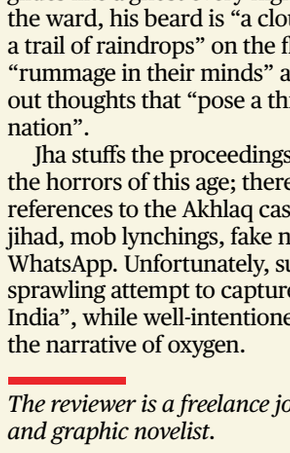
Jha stuffs the proceedings with all the horrors of this age; there are references to the Akhlaq case, to love jihad, mob lynchings, fake news on WhatsApp. Unfortunately, such a sprawling attempt to capture "Modi's India", while well-intentioned, starves the narrative of oxygen.

The reviewer is a freelance journalist and graphic novelist.

Charming whodunnit

Policewoman Mona Ramteke makes her second appearance in journalist Aditya Sinha's latest novel

R. Krithika
krithika.r@thehindu.co.in



Death in the Deccan
Aditya Sinha
HarperCollins India
₹399

Can four people die of a heart attack in the same place on the same day? Obviously, this raises a dust, especially as all are connected to a well-known media house. ACP Mona Ramteke is put in charge at the request of the Chief Minister's daughter. An outsider to Hyderabad, where the crime took place, Mona wonders how she came into the picture but picks up the gauntlet flung at her feet.

And thus we plunge into *Death in the Deccan*, a whodunnit that keeps you turning the pages. Of the four people who died, three belonged to the Reddy family that owned *Deccan Testament*, a newspaper that had filed for bankruptcy, and the last was a senior employee: the HR head. With no money on the one hand and COVID-19 lockdowns on the other, salaries have not been paid for months. At this point, I can't help wondering if author Aditya Sinha, a senior mediaperson himself, is basing his narrative on the travails of a well-known media house from Hyderabad.

Assisted by SI Pavani, Mona swings into action and finds herself embroiled in a murky mess involving politicians, her colleagues in the force, journalists, doctors, businesspeople and many others. Add to this the confusion around her own personal relationships and the stage is set for a rollicking read.

This is Mona's second appearance (she was a sub-inspector in Sinha's first outing in fiction, *The CEO Who Lost His Head*) and she continues to charm. Right in the first chapter, we get a hint of the battles she's fought when DGP Shrivastava thinks, "She is a Dalit, probably in the force through reservation." Then, there is the fact that she's a lesbian, and the blocks stack up. But Mona doesn't let all this faze her. She's feisty, courageous and unafraid of speaking her mind, whether to her juniors or seniors. Like Kalpana Swaminathan's Inspector Lalli and Harini Nagendra's Kaveri Murthy, Mona Ramteke is another welcome addition to the female detectives club.

Author Abdullah Khan

INTERVIEW

'Pathan, Muslim, Bihari: these identities intrigued me'

Author Abdullah Khan on how identity and politics play a huge role in his writing

Swati Daftuar
swati.daftuar@thehindu.co.in

Abdullah Khan's journey with literature began with a discovery – that he shared his place of birth, Motihari in Bihar, with one of the most prominent authors of the 20th century, George Orwell. Since then, the written word has remained Khan's constant companion. From his debut novel *Patna Blues* (2018) to his latest, *A Man From Motihari* (2023), Khan employs a deft handling of sensitive subjects and hot-button issues to tell stories of everyday characters in Indian society. A speaker at *The Hindu* Lit Fest 2024 in Chennai on January 26-27, Khan discusses his thoughts on identity, desire and aspiration. Edited excerpts:

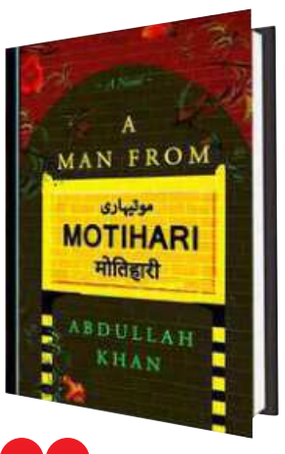
Question: *How much of what you write is influenced by your own story?*
Answer: During my school days in Bihar, my history teacher once asked, "Are you Muslim first or Indian first?" I confidently replied, borrowing the answer from my grand uncle: "I am both, born to Muslim parents, I'm Muslim; born in India, I'm Indian. Both identities came to me at birth." As a boy, I didn't fully grasp the complexities of identity.

During college, I pondered over how identity shapes thoughts, realising we're not always aware of every facet of our identity. Sub-identities and super-identities emerge, revealed by others' prejudices. In my village, I was Pathan; in school, a Muslim. Beyond Bihar, a Bihari. These identities intrigued me.

As I ventured into fiction writing, my reflections on identity seamlessly became woven into my stories. And, conflict between circumstances and desire is integral to human existence and is a vital element in crafting engaging narratives. I found inspiration in Bihari IAS/ civil services aspirants, news, historical incidents, real-life characters, beautiful places, and even SMS/ WhatsApp forwards for plot ideas.

Q: *What comes first – the plot or the point it makes? And in the case of* A Man from Motihari, *what was the genesis of the story?*
A: Plots and characters naturally come to me without any preconceived plan. As I create the story, some significant points or messages often emerge organically.

Take, for instance, the inspiration behind *A Man from Motihari*. A few years ago, a Bangladeshi newspaper asked me to write about the house in Motihari where Orwell was born. While standing in front of that house, I had an idea: what if a boy from Motihari is born in the same room where Orwell was born many years ago? How would the boy react when he finds out, and how would it change his life? That's how I came up with the character of the protagonist, Aslam Sher Khan, who is born in the same house as Orwell.



While writing about politics, I do not shirk my responsibility as a writer and chronicler of the truth. I strive to be as impartial as possible. I generally don't allow my personal beliefs or political ideology to creep into the story

Q: *Tell us about your journey – from writing to publication.*
A: Fresh out of completing my Master's in chemistry, when I began writing *Patna Blues*, I had no knowledge of the technicalities of fiction writing and no background in literature. So, writing *Patna Blues* served as a kind of training for me, a sort of MFA, where I learned everything from scratch through trial and error. It took almost 10 years to write and nearly 9 years to get it published. I didn't have a peer group then for beta reading or sharing comments. The journey to publication was challenging, enduring more than 200 rejections before it was published.

For my second novel, it took no more than a year to write, and finding a publisher was comparatively easier. Style-wise, I have improved significantly and gained more confidence in my writing.

Q: *There are strong political notes in your stories. What kind of responsibility do you feel towards your readers in terms of what you write about?*
A: I believe no story exists in a vacuum. I allow the politics of the time to become a part of the narrative as I believe it is the only way to tell authentic stories.

While writing about politics, I do not shirk my responsibility as a writer and chronicler of the truth. I strive to be as impartial as possible. I generally don't allow my personal beliefs or political ideology to creep into the story. Instead, I focus on the characters' take on the politics of that time and keep myself a bit distant from those events.

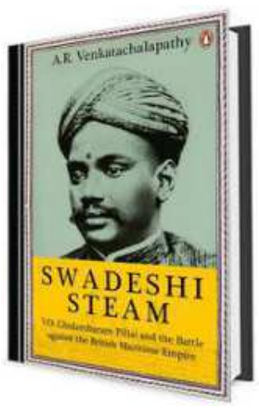
Q: *What's your take on literature festivals? What can they do for writers, and their readers?*
A: Literature festivals offer writers a chance to share ideas. They gain inspiration and build a community, while readers enjoy insights into the creative process. As writers, we also get a chance to meet authors from all over the world, and learn from each other.

I think we should do more at these festivals for aspiring authors, like arranging pitching events or conducting writing masterclasses.

I have also observed a disturbing trend at many literature fests, where organisers invite celebrities such as film stars or cricketers to boost attendance. This often shifts the entire limelight to them, sidelining writers.

Gsquare Group presents The Hindu *Lit Fest 2024 in Association with NITTE Education Trust & Christ University. Bookstore partner: Higginbothams*

Sketches of the past (Left) Children give finishing touches to a sand art of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, at the Tirunelveli District Collectorate; (below) a still from *Kappalottiya Thamizhan* in which Sivaji Ganesan acted as VOC; and A.R. Venkatachalapathy. (SHAIKMOHIDEEN A., THE HINDU ARCHIVES, AND S.R. RAGHUNATHAN)



IN CONVERSATION

An audacious patriot

For V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, launching a shipping company was not merely a business enterprise but a front for the anti-colonial struggle

Sushila Ravindranath

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, freedom fighter from Tamil Nadu, has been celebrated as the man who took on the mercantile might of the British in the early 20th century by starting a shipping company under colonial rule. How did he pull off this audacious act? In his new book, *Swadeshi Steam*, historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy gives a detailed account of how VOC (as he was known) did it and what happened subsequently. Excerpts from an interview with A.R. Venkatachalapathy, who will be talking about his book at *The Hindu* Lit Fest 2024, on January 26-27, in Chennai.

Question: *V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (VOC) was not a businessman. How did he take the audacious decision to launch an indigenous shipping company?*

Answer: VOC was not a man who blew his own trumpet. In whatever little he spoke or wrote about the great Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company that he launched in 1906, he underplays his role. But his political interests date back to 1893 when he came under the influence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Clearly the nationalist fervour that was triggered by the Swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal powered his venture. Indigenous enterprise and boycott of British manufactures were constitutive elements of the movement. Many were involved in simple manufactures such as making soap, buttons, bangles and needles.

VOC dreamed big. More than a century later, it remains difficult to trace the roots of this dream.

Q: *Coming from the deep South, how was VOC influenced by the Swadeshi movement?*

A: I have already referred to his early exposure to Tilak. In 1900, VOC moved to the port town of Tuticorin and was active in public life. He keenly followed the press and was well aware of contemporary political developments. In his verse autobiography, he mentions meeting a Swami Ramakrishnananda, who he says sowed the seeds of Swadeshi in his heart. Under VOC's leadership, Tuticorin became the hub of the Swadeshi movement in South India. Tirunelveli and Tuticorin drew all-India attention and VOC became a national hero.

Q: *You have said local merchants and traders had to suffer because of the highhanded treatment from the British shipping industry. How badly were they affected?*

A: As a colony, Indian economic interests were always subservient to the British. There is a long history of Indian enterprise being crushed by the empire. Nearer VOC's own town, in the Zamindari of Ettayapuram, his close friend, the great poet Subramania Bharati's father's cotton ginning company was ruined by European machinations. In the early 20th century, Tuticorin was the fifth largest port in India. The British Indian Steam Navigation Company held a virtual monopoly over freight and passenger traffic. In association with the South Indian Railway Company – again British-owned – it had ruined all the small ports across the Coromandel coast bringing misery to local traders. The crushing of trade interests was laced with everyday racism. The Swadeshi movement was the catalyst that led to the shipping company experiment. VOC gave the leadership and married it to ideas of economic nationalism, which was an integral part of the movement.

Q: *The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company took British interests head on. In hindsight, was this a foolhardy thing to do?*

A: VOC dreamed big. For him it was not a business enterprise but a front for the anti-colonial struggle. In a poor country with no capitalist class to speak of, he raised over ₹6 lakh as capital – that too in barely a year. He purchased two steamers from Europe. Rather than embark on this venture, should VOC have continued his flourishing legal practice? Should he have underplayed his nationalist politics? Should he have compromised with the European merchants? Should he have taken up the district collector L.M. Wynch's offer and left Tuticorin, escaping a draconian prison sentence? Yes, but then he would have not been VOC. There would have been no heroic tale to narrate. Madras Presidency would not have shed its infamous image of being 'a benighted province' and 'a sleepy hollow'. The region would not have produced leaders and intellectuals – Subramania Bharati, Subramania Siva, Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, V. Chakkarai Chettiar – who contributed to the social transformation of the region.

Q: *Why was starting this company seen as sedition? Why did the British feel so threatened?*

A: It was the congruence of politics and economics that so threatened the empire that no less than the governor of a vast and sprawling presidency targeted VOC. More than a decade after VOC, Gujarati merchants started the Scindia Steam Navigation Company purely as a business enterprise. Despite the nationalist movement having become much stronger, it was not easy sailing for the Scindias. But in Tuticorin, VOC used an economic venture for political mobilisation with a strong anti-colonial message. For the first time, the masses joined the movement. As the judge who sentenced VOC to a double life imprisonment pointed out, he had no business to talk, in their own language, to the common people, who had no political rights. It would have been surprising if VOC was to go scot-free.

Q: *How did you come to write this book? What were the challenges?*

A: VOC was my boyhood hero. The absence of a good biography led me to start this research in 1981. It has taken me over 40 years to research his life. It has shaped my vocation as a historian, my life as a social being and my conscience as an individual. Most of the records have been lost. Following the assassination of Robert Ashe, who played a big role in crushing the shipping company actors in the Swadeshi movement, officials possibly destroyed incriminating papers in their possession. I had to search archives across the world. Piecing together tantalising bits of information from government records, secret police reports, press reports, correspondence and memoirs has been challenging. I believe this is the first time an Indian historian has used the records of shipping classification societies. In narrating this story, I have often wondered if this incredible story of an audacious patriot is indeed true. It is so full of drama. I hope I have done justice to this great adventure.

The interviewer is a Chennai-based journalist and writer.

Her father's voice

From Pranab Mukherjee's diary jottings, Sharmistha Mukherjee writes a memoir, but it is as much a story about her father as it is of the family

Nistula Hebbar
nistula.hebbar@thehindu.co.in

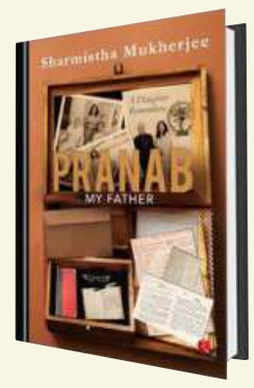
There is a tendency to look at Sharmistha Mukherjee's book, *Pranab, My Father: A Daughter Remembers*, on the late President as a political history of post-independence India through the prism of one man's life; or as behind-the-scenes disclosures on what the famously discreet Pranab Mukherjee thought of these events, confiding to his diary.

To consider her book only through these two prisms would be an injustice to the author, who, while using the late President's extensive diaries as a primary source, has written a book from a daughter's point of view – and it's as much her memoir as it is her father's.

Pranab Mukherjee's three-volume memoir was a meticulously written chronicle, but, as he himself said during the launch of his second volume, there was much more in his diaries, secrets he would take to his grave. In that context, Sharmistha Mukherjee's book completes the Mukherjee family's journey lived through Pranab Mukherjee's long public life.

Friends and enemies

A poignant anecdote is her first recognition of fair weather friends in Delhi, especially in the aftermath of the Congress's loss in the post-emergency polls of 1977. A Bengali journalist and his family who had been close to Geeta and Pranab Mukherjee drifted after having been a part of their family circle for long. When Mrs. Mukherjee pointed this out to Pranab Mukherjee, he dismissed them as "Basanter Kokil" (springtime Koel), a remark overhead by young Sharmistha who, along with her friends then nicknamed the journalist "Kuhu", mimicking the koel's call. With Pranab Mukherjee and the Congress's return to power, "Kuhu" started visiting again, but was now held at arms length without the previous intimacy. The incident, Sharmistha Mukherjee writes, helped educate her on how growing up in a political family also means never being sure of friends and enemies.

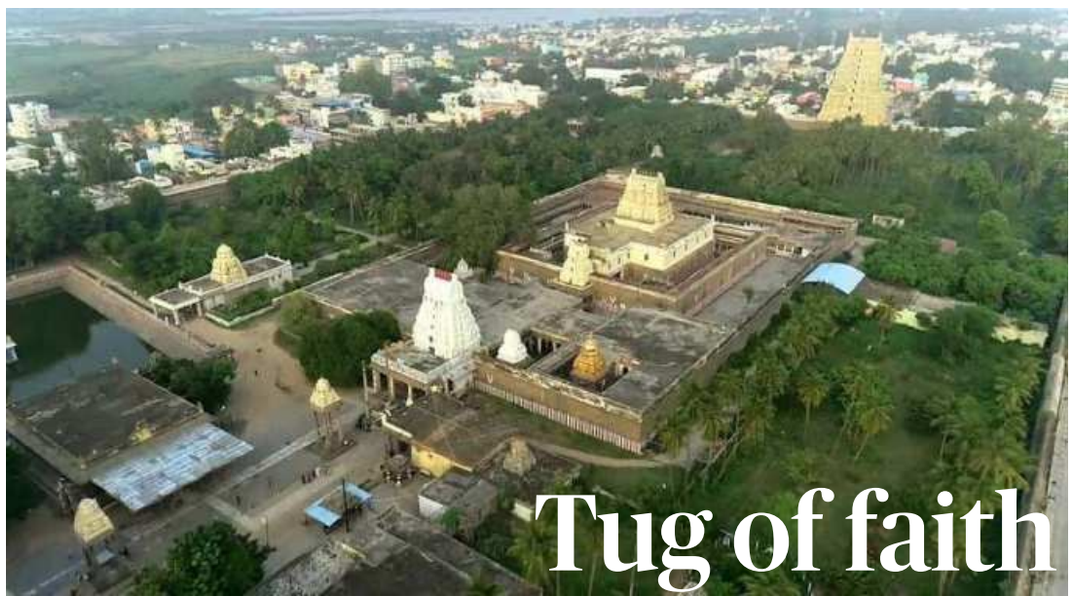


Pranab, My Father: A Daughter Remembers
Sharmistha Mukherjee
Rupa
₹595

Her mother, Geeta Mukherjee, and Sheikh Hasina shared a special relationship, from the time that the latter was living in Delhi after the assassination of her father and Bangladesh founder Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and several other members of her family. At Geeta Mukherjee's funeral, Sheikh Hasina's tears were testament to that deep personal bond of friendship.

For me however, what Pranab Mukherjee wrote as his personal observations of big events, personal failures (his famous inability to sometimes keep his temper in check), and the way he interacted with Sharmistha Mukherjee, trying hard to insulate her from assuming that the privileges of his public role were permanent, are the real takeaways from the book. What he says about why he visited the RSS headquarters, to why he pulled up Sharmistha Mukherjee for extending an impromptu invitation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to her dance performance at Rashtrapati Bhavan, make one appreciate the structure of the book – the life of one of India's most storied public figures and that of his family.

A lot of what has made news is of course interesting as well, but this is a family memoir too – it is as much a story of Pranab Mukherjee as it is a story of Geeta and Sharmistha.



Tug of faith

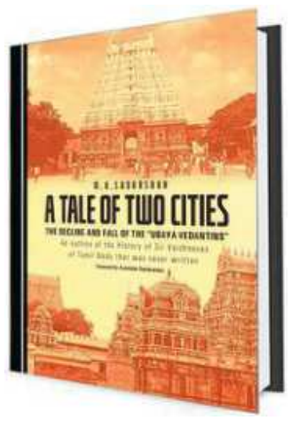
Tracing the conflict between two sects of Vaishnavites in Tamil Nadu and its impact on contemporary life

Divisive lines An aerial view of Deverajaswamy temple in Kancheepuram. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

T. Ramakrishnan
ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

Tamil Nadu is home to diverse schools of thought, theological, philosophical, social and political. It has seen clashes of ideas not only between two groups but also within groups. One such case is the conflict between two sects of Srivaishnavites – Tenkalai (southern branch) and Vadakalai (northern branch).

For the Tenkalai sect, the other group – Vadakalai – attaches utmost importance to Kancheepuram, about 75 km from Chennai. Kancheepuram, the seat of power during the Pallavas, is famous for its temples, most importantly (in the given context) the Deverajaswamy (Vardarajaswamy) temple, where the two sects have been locked in one legal battle or another for over 175 years.



A Tale of Two Cities
M.K. Sudarshan
Westwood Books Publishing
Price not mentioned

A prolonged struggle

Capturing the prolonged struggle between the two sects in *A Tale of Two Cities*, M.K. Sudarshan, a chartered accountant, has sought to provide clarity to a subject that is less written about despite being a matter of public debate for long. The author has deftly handled different facets of the subject. He does not overtly display bias in favour of or against any group, even though readers can understand his sense of pain over the schism between the two sects and his wish for reconciliation.

While dealing with the core matter, Sudarshan's book provides an account of the history of south India in the last 1,000-odd years in a lucid manner. Besides, it has touched upon contemporary political happenings that may have an impact on the community in one form or the other. On the whole, the book should be of interest to anyone interested in the subject of the Vaishnavites and Tamil Nadu.

INDIA'S BEST CITIES

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Kolkata | Safest city

The city reported just 86.5 cases of cognisable offences per one lakh people in 2022

At the other end of the country is a city with its own distinction, as being the 'safest', according to the data of the National Crime Records Bureau: Kolkata.

The city recorded the least number of cognisable offences, per a population of one lakh, among all metropolises. Kolkata reported 86.5 cases of cognisable offences per one lakh people in 2022. In comparison, Delhi's cognisable offences per one lakh population was 1,952.5 in the same year.

"Right from my childhood and through my teenage years and now as an adult, I have been able to walk down the streets feeling safe: from school, college and now office. Nobody harasses me," says Dhriti Banerjee, scientist and director Zoological Survey of India. "Kolkata has given me confidence."

Writer and academic Saikat Majumdar says that "the most unconscious expression of this sense of safety has always been my habit of walking long distances here, something I never do in Delhi and Gurgaon, where I've lived for the last seven years". But something strange happened a couple of days before this Durga Puja. "I was walking back from an evening at the Press Club in Esplanade to my home in Baghbazar, along the stretch of Central Avenue. To my right were brightly lit *pandals* and images of Durga, with crowds already starting to throng. But to my right were sleeping, homeless bodies. The post-COVID influx of migrants has sharpened poverty and homelessness in this city to a shocking degree."

There is also some scepticism around the 'safest city' tag. A section of civil right activists feel that the crime data is rationalised at the State level so that policy makers can take credit for better law and order. Incidents of recurrent political violence in West Bengal, including Kolkata, however, tell a different story.

Mumbai | Leader in education

The city has more than 1,300 colleges and over 4,000 schools

When it comes to education, Mumbai takes the lead. The Indian Institutional Ranking Framework's list for 15 best cities in India for education included Mumbai. It has some of the best schools and higher educational institutes, too.

"I think Mumbai has all kinds of schooling available across the spectrum. Many institutes have morphed into larger institutions over the years when we were growing up. Narsee Monjee, for instance, has emerged as a reputed university from a small management institute set up in 1981. Many institutes have diversified and are offering more specialisations," says Anju Saigal, founder director of Centre for Equity and Quality in Universal Education.

Mumbai is also home to several well-regarded engineering colleges. "The design schools are also doing fairly well," says Saigal, adding that Mumbai attracts talent from across the country. "It's a fun city to be in. It has great night life, which is an attraction for the young. All the institutes are acclaimed and give the students great academic rigour. But Mumbai is not a newly created educational hub, it has a long history of world class institutions, which exists to this day," says Saigal.

Silent traffic jams

The Mizoram capital's road etiquette is a sign of a broader patience and acceptance, says this legislator

Baryl Vanneihsangi

When I was a corporator, my office was on the other side of the hill and it took me over an hour to get there. Because of the small lanes and roads in Aizawl, we have traffic jams. But we know that just by honking at people, we're not going to get there any faster. So, we wait for our turn. We grew up with this etiquette – we know how to wait. We also have the habit of leaving home an hour or two early, just to make room for the traffic.

I used to go to Guwahati [Assam] often as a corporator, and I remember hearing a lot of honking. It was so loud sometimes they almost gave me a heart attack. There are horns meant for big vehicles, such as trucks and tempos, but over there, I felt even the smaller vehicles, like autorickshaws and bikes, had installed these big horns. It doesn't make sense. A horn is supposed to warn you about someone's approach or call attention to some hazard. But they used it so much that we didn't know where to look: back or front, right or left.

I don't drive. When I get into a vehicle with a driver and we're in a rush, if he wants to bypass the vehicles in front by honking, I tell him no, be polite to them – it could be an elderly person, and honking might shock them. This is not restricted to the traffic alone. In Aizawl, we don't rush things or put pressure on others by trying to hurry them along. When we go to a store or to an office, we patiently wait for our turn. Sometimes, that's a disadvantage because we often get late! [Seling, a small town not far from Aizawl, has a unique practice of 'shops without shopkeepers', where, operating on the principle of trust, money is collected in a safe deposit box outside the shop.]

The government has been experimenting with traffic policies in the last few years. For instance, on the 7th of a month, all vehicles with numbers ending with 7 are asked to stay off the road. Another test is where, on odd days, only vehicles ending with odd numbers can ply the roads and vice versa. The alternating vehicles concept is still being tested.

Our state is known for its peace and progress. The main reason we're focussing on traffic is because of the broader peacefulness it has brought people. We're still not where we're trying to be as a city, but we'll keep progressing and get there one day.

(As told to ***Neha Mehrotra****)*

MLA Baryl Vanneihsangi

The writer recently became the youngest MLA to be elected to the Mizoram Legislative Assembly.

Secure in a crowd

The busy streets have contributed to making his hometown feel safer, says the author from Kolkata

Sandip Roy

The other day, a friend at an art exhibition in Kolkata asked me, "How far is your apartment from here?" "Not more than a 20-minute walk," I replied. But then grumbled, "Except it's not easy to walk it because the pavements are so crowded with stalls and hawkers."

Last month, when I read about Kolkata being called the safest city in India for the third consecutive year based on statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), it made me realise that all the things that make it hard for me to make that 20-minute walk in peace probably also help make the city a little safer.

Congestion is also about life on the street. There are people setting up stalls, dismantling stalls, shopping, bargaining or just loitering. As the shops shut down, people set up makeshift kitchens and start cooking meals. Even late at night it rarely feels unsafe. Recently, I was in New Delhi. The neighbourhood was beautiful. In the morning, it felt delightful to walk through the gardens and the tombs, past people doing their stretches and *pranayam* and walking their dogs. But at night the streets were deserted. "Make sure the Uber drops you to the door," warned a friend. "This is not Kolkata."

Feel-good data?

The NRCB statistics say Kolkata reported 86.5 cases of cognisable offences per lakh population in 2022, way below Pune (280.7) and Hyderabad (299.2). In 2021, that figure was 103.4 for Kolkata. Ruling party Trinamool, unsurprisingly, took credit, tweeting that crime rates had plummeted under the "able guidance" of Mamata Banerjee and the "constant vigilance" of the Kolkata Police who had given the city "a sense of security seldom found elsewhere".

The opposition BJP claimed the data had been manipulated. But it's understandable that a city often accused of living off its bygone glory days would seize on this bit of data to feel good about itself. However, a cynical friend commented that this was yet more proof of the "decline" of Kolkata. It was not even a city with enough business to attract criminals. Kolkata had to be content with non-cognisable petty crimes.

It's not all good news for Kolkata. The NRCB data also showed the number of crimes against women rose from 1,783 in 2021 to 1,890 in 2022. In that regard, Kolkata is behind Chennai and Coimbatore. And these are just cognisable offences. When a woman gets into a share three-wheeler in Kolkata and reflexively places her bag as a barrier to the man next to her in case he tries to cop a feel, that does not get recorded in these statistics. Crowded streets and jostling crowds can make you safer in some ways but also offer cover to pickpockets and perverts.

Author Nilanjana Bhowmick who grew up in Kolkata says, "In North India, the fear is very real. I remember coming back from somewhere at 1 a.m., the car stops, I'm surrounded by all these trucks and I can actually touch my fear." Kolkata felt safer, a city she had roamed around in as a young woman, though she admits it was always in the more genteel areas of the city, areas that already had a lot of other women in it.

Neighbourhood bonding

Yet it's also a fact, as the State government pointed out, that the city celebrated Durga Puja with millions of people on the street, without any major crime being reported. And some people are realising that gentrification and development do not have to mean sweeping people off the streets. It can also mean encouraging street life.

City activist Mudar Patherya has been getting some pavements in South Kolkata painted in bright colours, paying tribute to local musical celebrities through a Walk of Fame, and turning them into venues for al fresco concerts with the likes of Usha Uthup. He says people think it's neighbourhood beautification but it's really about "neighbourhood bonding". Old-time neighbours who complained about cafe noise otherwise joined in and sang along when there was music on the street. He hopes it will drum up business of local cafes and that will help homeowners think their properties are worth preserving instead of selling them off to be torn down.

He says, "If the buildings are retained then you conserve the neighbourhood. Then you see the same neighbours year after year and that in turn makes for a safer neighbourhood where people know each other." And thus, while the "painting of the neighbourhood might have nothing to do with creating a safer neighbourhood, in the long term it is exactly directed towards that".

Instead of painting the town red, these Kolkatans are trying to paint the city safer.

The writer is an author and columnist.

Sandip Roy; and (top left) Usha Uthup in an impromptu concert on a bustling Kolkata street. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND MUDAR PATHERYA)

'Revive waterbodies and leave them alone'

A long-time Coimbatore resident on why water conservation should also consider the local ecosystem

Sai Vivek

I moved to Coimbatore from Bangalore in 1997. Back then I didn't know much about the ancient system of water tanks and lakes. However, in 2011, I started birdwatching and in 2014, a small group of us started a bird count in Perur Lake. That's when I really started understanding the importance of these water bodies – how they support a huge ecosystem, and sustain not only endemic birds but also migratory ones.

Over the last decade, we have found a lot of changes in the waterbodies, mostly through human intervention. Due to this, the ecosystems are failing. For instance, Perur Lake had many small natural islands on which birds would alight or sometimes nest. During the dry spell in 2016-17, the sand in the lake was mined, depriving the birds of these. Other lakes have systematically been 'beautified' too, without giving importance to the natural flora and fauna of the place.

Another major human intervention is commercial fishing. Fish species ideal for human consumption are introduced into the lakes thereby decimating the endemic inhabitants. The fishermen also scare away their competition, which are the birds. A good example is Vellalore. Water flow into the lake was revived a few years ago (after it lay dry for nearly 15 years), and pelicans started nesting there. But the next year, when the birds returned, they found fishermen, who drove them away.

So, yes, there's water in the lakes. But does that mean the lakes are doing well? They are not. The ecosystems are disappearing.

We presented a scientific paper with six years of data (published in the *Indian Birds* journal last October), which concluded that there has been a rapid decline of waterbirds – from 41% to 100% in some cases. Not only migratory birds, but common birds too are unable to survive in these water bodies. People should revive the waterbodies and then leave them alone.

(As told to ***Surya Praphulla Kumar****)*

With the right approach, the city can be another Bharatpur (bird sanctuary), says Sai Vivek.

The writer is an architect and birder.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Royal edict (Clockwise from below) A mandala shaped inhabitable bridge designed by the Bjarke Ingels Group as part of GMC; Bhutan's 116th National Day celebrations in Thimphu; King Jigme and his wife Jetsun Pema. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, GETTY IMAGES)

In the middle of elections, Bhutan's Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has announced a mega-city project for the sleepy town of Gelephu

A KING'S MASTER PLAN

Suhasini Haidar
suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

It was nearly midnight on a sub-zero December night, but the Bhutanese capital Thimphu seemed to be just waking up. Lines of thousands of people, young and old, snaked around the city's major roads and town square, queuing up for the National Day celebrations the next day. They were queuing up just to ensure a seat at Thimphu's Changlimithang Stadium, which normally hosts football matches, archery tournaments and rock concerts. But the venue was about to become the setting for what would be the most important speech by the nation's 43-year-old King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

Assisting the crowd to move along, distributing hot porridge overnight and helping clean up, was a massive army of volunteers, or *desuups*, part of the 'Desuung' (Guardians of Peace) project, launched by King Jigme in 2011. Clad in orange jumpsuits, these young women and men are trained for community projects, skilling and work opportunities, disaster management, security and 'nation-building', according to the Desuung charter; at more than 40,000, they are a significant number in a country of just 7.8 lakh people. Desuup Lhendup, 17, told me he volunteered at the National Day event to hear King Jigme speak about the Gelephu infrastructure project, and then added, with a shy grin, "to glimpse the newly-born princess", the three-month-old baby Sonam Yangden Wangchuck. His patience at his guard post paid off later that evening as he witnessed the entire royal family return to the stadium for a music concert.

Bhutanese brand

What is the Gelephu project, and why is it so intricately linked with the Bhutanese king, a monarch with a rock-star appeal in this fledgling Himalayan democracy? As he stepped onto the podium, King Jigme made it clear that his mission was to explain to the nation his plans to turn Gelephu, a sleepy town of 60,000, near Bhutan's southern border with Assam, into an "economic hub for South Asia". Fifty years after his father, the fourth king, Jigme Singye, announced that Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness would be an alternative to growth led by GDP, King Jigme said the 'Gelephu Mindfulness City' (GMC) would build a new Bhutanese brand, giving the world its first carbon-negative special economic zone.

"[Gelephu] will be a mindfulness city, encompassing conscious and sustainable businesses, inspired by Buddhist spiritual heritage, and distinguished by the uniqueness of the Bhutanese identity," he announced, with his father and his seven-year old son seated behind him. "I became king at 26, and now I am 43 years old. I will do everything in my power to realise this vision. I will put my own life on the line... Let us work together with fearless determination to build an extraordinary legacy during my reign, and for the next generation," he said, his softly-intoned voice in contrast with the heavy import of the words of a 45-minute speech.

An inflection point

GMC would be spread over a massive 1,000 sq.km. (bigger than Singapore), and would attract non-polluting companies, IT centres, hospitals, schools and resorts, dams and hydro-power projects with business-friendly laws in a demarcated Special Administrative Region separate from Bhutan. "The land connection from Gelephu through Assam and Northeast Indian States, to Myanmar, Thailand, to Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, is a vibrant economic corridor linking South Asia to Southeast Asia," he said, painting GMC as an "inflection point" for the South Asian region.

King Jigme has picked an international firm to design the GMC: Bjarke Ingels, the Danish architect and founder of the Bjarke Ingels Group, behind the 'CopenHill' building in Copenhagen that houses a 'waste to energy' power plant with a ski-slope and trees on its roof, and has many other unique projects to his name, including one for 'lunar architecture'.

Comparing Gelephu to the famous Taktsang monastery or 'Tiger's Nest', perched high up on the Bhutanese mountains, Ingels said GMC "will be a man-made monument to the divine possibility of a sustainable human presence on earth". A representational video of the city unveiled for possible foreign partners and investors in Thimphu showed 11 neighbourhoods set in the flat plains of Gelephu, criss-crossed by rivers, with an airport, healthcare and 'Vajrayana' spiritual centres, a university, hydroponic and aquaponic agricultural facilities.

By announcing the Gelephu plan right in the middle of Bhutan's general elections, King Jigme has made it clear that it is his project, not that of any government. It is also clear that the need for the project arises from deep economic worries in the kingdom, that have driven more than 1,00,000 of its meagre population to jobs abroad, mainly to Australia, Thailand and Singapore and the U.S. This is in addition to about 1,00,000 Bhutanese-Nepalis who were driven out from the south of the country in the 1990s and became refugees abroad. Among those who have left most recently are the country's youth, skilled workers and government officials (more than 800 resigned in just 2021-22), who, when asked, say, "*gokap ra mindu*" in local Dzongkha, or "there are no opportunities".

"Our challenge is that we have barely 7,00,000 people in our country. Unless we find the right solution, our population may dwindle to the point when we have more shops than customers, more restaurants than diners, and more houses than tenants," the king said in his speech, appealing to Bhutanese abroad to return now to participate in the Gelephu project.

But Bhutan's challenges are much greater than providing openings for its next generation. To begin with, the government will need to sink in a large investment to get Gelephu started, to either extend the current airstrip or to build a whole new airport for larger plans to land. Then there are worries of entering a debt-trap that has engulfed many neighbours. Moreover, Gelephu receives copious rainfall, which could make parts of it inaccessible for several months. Tensions in neighbouring Northeast States of India, from Assam to Manipur, and the use of nearby forests by various insurgent groups, including some from Myanmar and Bangladesh, could pose security concerns, and so could India-China boundary tensions.

Enter India Inc

The vision for Gelephu, however, has to be seen in the context of other South Asian urban hubs: Sri Lanka's Hambantota port city and Pakistan's Gwadar have tried and failed to do so, and India has a number of mega-cities catering to the IT sector. According to Tenzing Lamsang, founder and editor of *The Bhutanese* newspaper, India's support to the Gelephu project is "absolutely crucial". It explains why King Jigme made not one but two visits to Delhi to meet Prime Minister Modi last year, and also to Mumbai and Guwahati to bring both the government and India Inc. on board as stakeholders. India's plans to build a rail link from Kokrajhar to Gelephu will close the loop on land transportation, while Indian infrastructure companies and labour will be needed for the big projects planned.

A concern for the traditionally shy and inward-looking Bhutanese is the loss of their culture and environment. Author and TV show host Yangday La said Bhutan's USP was its mandated 60% forest cover and high-end tourism to limit the numbers of people entering the country. "When we look at the Gelephu project, I believe that Bhutan will need to find the balance in the Buddhist way, to balance growth and environment, happiness and sustainability."

For the Oxford-educated and Indian National Defence College-trained king, his age is perhaps his greatest asset in this quest. He is able to connect to the restive youth of his country. When a camera found King Jigme at the national day concert, the image flashed on a screen. The crowd of about 30,000 sang 'Kupar' performed by Bhutanese singer Baby Floyd in his honour, lighting up their phones. When the camera zoomed in on the king, his eyes were visibly moist by the reception. Then quick as a trick, as if reminded of the massive responsibility he must face, he turned around and disappeared into Thimphu's star-filled night.

Watch | More about the transformation of Bhutan's Gelephu city on **magazine.thehindu.com**

GETTYIMAGES/ISTOCK

BINGE WATCH

Women celebrating women

Her Kajal Won't Smudge, a podcast on the *desi* female experience, is helping to take important conversations forward

It's safe to say that in both India and Pakistan, the political and legal reforms achieved by feminist activism have led to a kind of backlash by conservative commentators, 'men's rights activists' et al. Here in India, the latest Bollywood blockbuster is an aggressively misogynist film, a paean to 'alpha males' where the very last scene shows the unrepentant protagonist facing the camera and pointing towards his own penis in a crass gesture of defiance.

Over in Pakistan, the annual 'Aurat March' is the target of harsh, tending-towards-deranged, criticism year after year. Challenging the patriarchy in these parts of the world can feel like a Sisyphean enterprise. This is why it's doubly important that these efforts are documented with clarity and insight – precisely what Maed in India's new podcast, *Her Kajal Won't Smudge*, brings to the table.

In the six episodes of the first season, Shana (a Pakistani-American lawyer with a Ph.D in economics) interviews *desi* women from many different realms. There's Sheema Kermani, the classically trained Bharatnatyam dancer from Pakistan, who you must have seen in the music video for Coke Studio's 'Pasoori'. There's popular sex educator Leeza Mangaldas, comedians Radhika Vaz and Sabah Bano Malik, illustrator Priyanka Paul and most recently, satirist Mariam Shafqat Goraya. Each of these individuals has, in her own way, fought against gender-based discrimination and helped move important conversations forward, including on social media.

Sharing notes Pakistani-American lawyer and podcast host Shana interviews women from different fields.

Different lives

During a video interview, Shana (who goes only by her first name) speaks about the genesis of the project. "I am fascinated by women observing women in society," she says. "This was always very important to me. As a part of the diaspora, I am aware that my experiences will be very different from those of, say, someone who currently lives in Pakistan. When I lived in the U.K., I faced a certain amount of racism but that's just one kind of discrimination. During the podcast, when I spoke to comedians from both India and Pakistan, for instance, I was very impressed by the way these women took stock of their own life experiences and were able to create humour or satire out of it. Those are the kind of conversations I have always wanted to have with *desi* women."

Shana mentions how these conversations made her think about the marginalisation and discrimination that *desi* women face. Priyanka Paul, for instance, speaks about the hazards of being a vocal Dalit woman online. The abuse and the trolling are along several axes – caste, gender, body-shaming, and so on. Similarly, both Radhika Vaz and Sabah Bano Malik talk about how making comedy about patriarchy has earned them a degree of notoriety, especially among extremely-online men who just cannot stomach the idea of a woman making them the butt of the joke. That being said, according to Shana, social media has been a net positive in these women's lives and has enabled a better quality of discourse.

"I think we tend to see street protests as something that happens only once in a while or when something horrible has happened," Shana says. "But social media – which the press tends to discount as somehow 'not real' – has enabled feminists from around the world to have meaningful conversations with each other. It's no longer one-way traffic, no longer discourse handed-down-from-the-West. It's this consistent engagement that I feel has led to this point in culture where we have so much *desi* representation, whether it's in TV shows and movies such as *Ms. Marvel* or *Polite Society* or the Oscar-shortlisted *Joyland*, or even something relatively 'lighter' like the web series *Made in Heaven*."

Legal framework

As a lawyer, Shana is especially sensitive to the advances made in the laws that address gender violence in both India and Pakistan. Progress is often slow but the efforts of legal activists as well as influencers like the women interviewed on this podcast have been bearing fruit.

"Some of the biggest gains for *desi* women in the 21st century have been in the form of an array of new laws – this is true of both India and Pakistan," Shana says. "These laws cover things like sexual assault, acid attacks, length of punishment for rape and so on. As a lawyer, I'll tell you that it's not just about the law, it's about how well the law is implemented, how the courts adjudicate. In this area, it has been a mixed bag so far but I am optimistic about what the future holds for us."

Her Kajal Won't Smudge is an engaging, interdisciplinary series of conversations that between its six episodes, manages to cover a lot of ground when it comes to women's issues in the subcontinent. Definitely recommended for the average listener, and especially if you're looking to educate yourself on the '*desi* female experience'.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

Still waters John William Godward's 1897 oil painting *Dolce Far Niente*. (WIKI COMMONS)

MODERN TIMES

The sweetness of doing nothing

This year I will put my feet up and not be guilted into being productive all the time

Usually, I start each year with a couple of goals. I don't call them resolutions, to my mind that word suggests something that needs improving. Goals have the lilt of being a loftier aspiration, an accomplishment to chase. These ambitions are extra – things I hope to achieve outside my everyday existence of having a job and raising a child. It infuses in me a sense of purpose as well as a spirit of optimism, as though my life and the world will be positively altered if I just focused my energies appropriately.

I have begun most of my big projects in this manner. I have written books, learned new things and climbed mountains only because I had told myself at the beginning of the year that I would. So much so that even having a child was once a new year goal, articulated in December and efficiently delivered the following October. I grew up in a small town and in navigating a challenging life and career in a big city, I felt my goal-based, no-nonsense approach was the best way to accomplish things, do something meaningful. Usually, I have been on target and accomplished my goals.

This year, for the first time, I have decided on a new strategy. I have decided to give up. Partly, this is because of a sense of ennui that has been building up. We started this year with one major war and are ending it with two. Our careers and livelihoods have become unstable, with artificial intelligence powering up the way it is, who knows what will remain for humans to do. Why write a book or paint a picture when AI can do it better? Forget livelihoods, life itself has become perilous, with climate change we are simply one big cloudburst away from disaster.

No time for life

Aspiring for lofty goals seems pointless in this milieu. But that is not the only reason I am seeking to do nothing. In the last few years, I have increasingly become aware that being a goal-oriented person has left me with no time to enjoy life. Any activity that is not productive is laced with guilt. When I meet with a friend, I am thinking about the eight articles I meant to read; when I'm reading a book, I am wondering if I should embark on another publishing project.

Even going on a holiday is a task. I can only envy the people who can lounge about in a pool all day, soaking in the sun and reading a book, whose only physical activity is raising a colourful cocktail from the table to their lips. If I haven't hit all the spots on my intended agenda for the day, the holiday is a failure. The idea of "wasting time" doing nothing is the antithesis of every value that a 1980s childhood taught, where watching television for 30 minutes meant 30 minutes away from the books.

Measuring every moment

But the past is not alone in this. The modern world significantly contributes to this never-stop, always-on burnout. Every day, we are scolded by our phones for things we haven't accomplished – steps we haven't taken, breaths we haven't measured, journals we haven't written, language lessons we haven't finished. Even at the end of a long day, when I have managed to tick all of these boxes and collapsed in front of the television for a minute or two, my watch suggests that I stand up for a bit and read a book that someone else has written. I'll silence the notifications that tell me I haven't exercised enough or slept enough or walked enough steps. I'll stop worrying about the clock and the calendar. Apparently, the Italians have a term for it – *Il dolce far niente*: the sweetness of doing nothing. That sounds about perfect. Maybe I should learn Italian while at it! Maybe.

> **Even at the end of a long day,** when I have managed to tick all the boxes and collapsed in front of the television for a minute or two, my watch suggests that I stand up for a bit

Veena Venugopal is the author of Independence Day: A People's History.

GOREN BRIDGE

Only one

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a recent competition in Europe. No pair, we are told, reached the excellent six club contract, and only one declarer was successful in a six no trump contract. That was Czech expert Anatol Filip, South in this deal. The auction is not known to us, so we offer the imperfect auction above.

	NORTH ♠ A 9 8 ♡ A 9 2 ◇ K 7 4 ♣ Q 10 5 3	
WEST ♠ K J 10 6 5 4 ♡ J ◇ Q J 3 ♣ 9 7 6		EAST ♠ 3 ♡ 8 7 6 5 4 ◇ 10 9 8 6 2 ♣ 4 2
	SOUTH ♠ Q 7 2 ♡ K Q 10 3 ◇ A 5 ♣ A K J 8	

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♣	2♠	3♠*	Pass
4NT	Pass	5♡	Pass
6NT	All pass		

*Club fit, good hand

Opening lead: Seven of ♣

Filip won the opening club lead and cashed all his clubs. He followed this with four rounds of hearts, leaving this position with West still to discard on the last heart:

	NORTH ♠ A 9 8 ♡ Void ◇ K 7 ♣ Void	
WEST ♠ K J 10 ♡ Void ◇ Q J 3 ♣ Void		EAST ♠ 3 ♡ Void ◇ 10 9 8 6 ♣ Void
	SOUTH ♠ Q 7 2 ♡ Void ◇ A 5 ♣ Void	

What could West do? A spade discard and Filip would simply duck a spade. West shed a diamond, so Filip cashed the ace of diamonds and led a diamond to the king. He led the eight of spades and played low from his hand when East couldn't cover. West won with the 10 but had to lead away from his king of spades and Filip made his contract. Very nice!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

'For last year's words belong to last year's language and next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning'

Berty Ashley

1 A ___ ___ is 360° because the Babylonians used a sexagesimal numbering system. It is defined as a shape consisting of all points in a plane that are at a given distance from a central point. The same term is used as an adverb to mean 'through a series of developments that lead back to the original source, position, or situation'. What term is this?

2 The division of another important factor is also due to sexagesimal counting. Instead of using 10 and 100, which would end up having complicated parts, the Sumerians used subdivisions of 12. The number 12 is divisible by 2, 3, 4, 6 and 12 itself, whereas 10 has only three divisors. This meant that they could split a very essential entity into two equal parts of 12. What entity was this, and what globally accepted value was it split into?

3 Another ancient community that studied the heavens was the Scandinavians. In their mythology, the most revered god was Odin (Wōden in Old English), the god of war and death. He ruled with his wife, the goddess Frigg and went on to have a son Thor, with another wife. How are Odin, Thor and Frigg immortalised in our calendars today?

4 Harald 'Blåtand' Gormsen was a great Scandinavian king who ruled over Denmark and Norway in the 10th century, bringing peace to the area. He got the name 'Blåtand' because of a blackish-blue dead molar in his mouth. In 1997, two engineers from Intel and Ericsson were having a drink, and proposed the English translation of the king's name for a new technology they had developed. This technology's logo is also made up of the king's initials. What was the name of this new technology?

5 Ruth Kedar was asked by two Stanford students to design the logo of a new software they had developed. She was told that it 'defies convention and breaks the rules'. So she changed the order of the primary colours, and used green, a secondary colour. Which famous logo did she develop, that all of us see at least once every day?

Solemn musings Statue of Leonardo da Vinci in Milan. (GETTY IMAGES)

6 This is a website that horizontally flips search results, and was created for fun. In 2002, it became popular in China after the original website it was named after was banned. It allowed Chinese users to circumvent the firewall – users just needed a mirror to read the results they were looking for. What is the name of this mirroring search engine?

7 Leonardo da Vinci was an expert at mirror writing, putting down his observations in reverse so no one could decipher them. He was one of the first to put down the correct human dental formula and describe the morphology of the four types of teeth. In honour of this, a company named itself DaVinci, whose most popular service is provided using lasers. What does this company do?

8 It is a common misconception that the sun is yellow or orange. It is essentially all colours mixed together, which appear to our eyes as white. This can be seen in pictures taken from space, or when the sun's rays are reflected off our neighbour, the moon. These two celestial bodies have fascinated humans for centuries, and hence in pretty much every language, two important days are named after them. Which two days are these?

9 These two heavenly bodies also are responsible for the two calendars humans follow: lunar and solar calendars. How many days are in each of these calendars in a normal year, and what is the average of both?

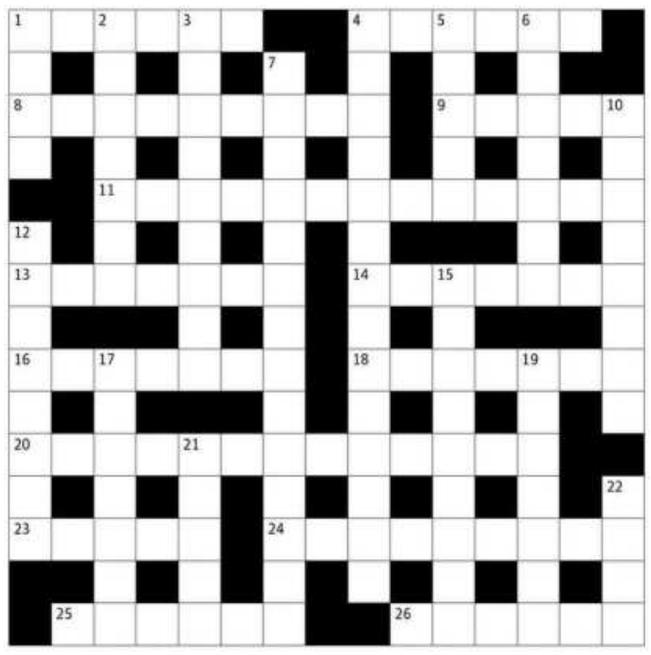
10 In 1995, Michael Palin stood next to the International Date Line on Little Diomede Island in Alaska and began his 80,000 km, 245-day long journey around the rim of the Pacific ocean. He travelled through Russia, Japan, South Korea, most of Southeast Asia, Australia, Chile, Peru, Mexico, United States and Canada. Unfortunately, this anti-clockwise trip had to stop 3 km before it could reach __ __ due to bad weather in the Bering Strait. Palin had to stop before he could do what, which is also the name of the documentary series?

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

Answers

1. Full Circle
2. A day, 24 Hours
3. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday
4. Bluetooth
5. Google
6. Elgoog
7. Tooth Whitening
8. Monday, Sunday
9. 354 days, 365 days, 359.5 average
10. (come) Full Circle

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3288



Across

1 Audibly gawps in flight(6)
4 Careful now, girlfriend (6)
8 Liz seen by the French border in holy town (9)
9 £1,000 in German currency (5)
11 Those seen in total swelter, sore, endlessly struggling? (4,9)
13 Knowledgeable, listening to the radio (5,2)
14 Requisitions fruity drinks (7)
16 I will leave banlieue swirling in clouds (7)
18 Revolted by Harry offering flower(3,4)
20 It's enumerated poorly? (13)
23 Abrupt, harsh split(5)
24 S. American, somewhat peculiar gent, in essence (9)
25 Journalist with 'no weight' rejected: fair? (6)
26 Commercial extremely detailed on Bravo. 'Extremely'? (6)

Down

1 Help to circumvent bachelor's woeful utterances (4)
2 Appelation reckoned to indicate something's authentically 'natural', primarily? (7)
3 Doddery older mole, one that's admired by others (4,5)
4 During first half of supper, DMs me about desserts (6,8)
5 Group of rowers fed, we can hear(5)
6 Here you may store socks and pants (7)
7 Time to cut – and put to rest – uninspired play (3,7,4)
10 Fragment of asteroid? Is asteroid bringing cataclysm? (8)
12 Comedians cancel date with a hint of shame (5-3)
15 England having wet weather, pervasive liquid finally permeated (9)
17 Trouble: bishop lived up to expectations (at first) (7)
19 Thrice, Everyman having temperature taken, being old (3-4)
21 Arles, Rouen regularly ignored; it's all been seen before (2-3)
22 Rosemary? That lady's bold (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3287

Respect personal space

It is important to learn the art of leaving people to their own devices

Cheera Das
cheeraadas@gmail.com

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R KUMAR

We love spicy food, we love to dance, we love drama, and we love to brag about our culture. But there is something strange that we love equally – it, worryingly, is the habit of interfering in the lives of others.

My grandmother once told me a story about her dying neighbour whose last words before her final twitch were, "Mercy, does your husband still drink"? It is a classic case of lives of others outweighing one's own life and existence. Strangely, it happens even now with an unsettling regularity.

Respecting personal space is an art that does not require talent or higher education; instead, all that you need are respect for others and common sense. Sadly, it is an art that people seldom care about.

Being a scientist, I often find the human psychology of certain souls much more baffling and intricate than xenoarchaeology. No one has a definitive answer on the evolutionary purpose of this meddling behaviour, but it is surely not a progressive evolutionary trait.

The urge to intrude in the life of everyone is so strong that one forgets the purpose of one's own life. Some wrongly describe this curiosity to get involved in the life of others as care, compassion, and empathy. Whatever you call it, nothing is an excuse to poke your nose into the lives of others.

"Why does your baby look so dark?" "Take a turmeric bath to look white." "Why does your child have a delay in speech? Maybe, your child has some physical issues?" "Oh no, your child still has trouble with maths! My children excelled in the multiplication of the trillionth number at their age. Is your child, okay?" This is what parents face. Once the children grow up, a set of bullets get fired at them on job, marriage, procreation, and what not. Days before they graduate, they are asked: "Oh, poor you, still jobless?"

While doing my Ph.D. in nanophysics at a prestigious university abroad, I was once asked by a well-rounded fellow in my family, "Are you still jobless? Why don't you try to find a 9-5 job?"

I tried explaining to him that I was doing research and following my passion. But he gave me a smirk and replied: "Eww, what passion, man? Get a job, get married, have kids, darling." My inner peace said, "Don't respond."

Once we get a job, then the so-called well-wishers start to find a partner for us and get involved in our lives again. "Why are you not yet married? You are growing older. Buckle up and find a partner."

The fun part is that even people with broken marriages try to convince us that marriage is all that we need to lead a happy life. They force us to marry as if the world will be in chaos otherwise. The definition of happiness for some does puzzle me. Who are we to tell one to get married? Who gives us the right to be the wedding planner of every random stranger we see on the road?

And after marriage, what else should be discussed? Yes, children. The very next morning after your wedding, these folks come up with this hot topic. I believe that partners mature enough to find each other know whether or not, and when, to have a baby. They don't need you to tell them what you want.

Why are you still without a baby? A question hurled at my partner and I since we married. We are having the happiest time of our life together. But sadly, who cares if you are happy or not? They comment on your life as if the whole existence of the universe depends on your decision to have children. But is it not the couple who should decide to have children? Why do we let them fall under peer pressure for society to be happy? So, always ask yourself, "Are we living in their shoes?"

What if the parents are happy with the progress of their children, what if a grown-up does not want to do a traditional regular job, what if one does not want to get married, what if they have other plans in their life, and why the life of everyone should look the same?

Let us not assume and conclude that everyone should take the same road. Some may want a different life and have different plans for their lives. You never know. Who are we to judge them and live for them? Are we the ones who are living their lives? The answer is no, a big bold no. So, stop convincing others that we are the best decision-makers for their life. The world will be better if we let others live their own life. Instead of pursuing them to do what you want, why don't you design your own life? Give suggestions only if asked. Otherwise, it is better to control your instinct to be involved in the lives of others.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Happiness goes beyond mere pleasure; it's a profound sense of contentment. ('Age of social fitness'; Dec. 31) It often originates from an internal alignment of values and the capacity to find joy in simple moments. While external factors can have an impact, genuine happiness is subjective and varies for each person.
K.P. Prasanth

The importance of attaining social fitness through close interactions, and developing positive relationships is the need of the hour. For instance, Japan's youngsters are witnessing the effects of social withdrawal and isolation, called 'hikikomori'. Development in communication technology has helped youngsters exchange thoughts and messages faster, but it has failed to create real happiness.
Viveka Vardhan Naidu Bhyripudi

Lights, camera, action

The action genre of cinema has made a spectacular comeback. ('Year of the action movie'; Dec. 31) But the extreme violence being portrayed is a matter of great concern. These violent scenes drawing the youth in droves will have an impact on their growing minds.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

The action genre has been popular for a long time. *Sholay* drew huge crowds, whereas in the South, most MGR movies have been action films. The Rajinikanth era started in the 1970s and is still continuing. In Telugu cinema, NTR played action heroes. The mindset of people in India has been that they go to movies to escape boredom, the dreariness of work and monotony. And so the predominance of action in films is likely to continue.
S. Ganesh

A lesson for all

The rise and fall of Byju's speaks volumes about the Indian education system in general, and private tutorial institutions in particular. ('The big, Byju's shake-up'; Dec. 31) The dreams and aspirations of students and parents are encashed to mint money in the absence of any regulatory mechanism.
Sri Vrinda

New frontiers

The article on Vidya Rajput should be an inspiration to all. ('How Vidya Rajput became beautiful'; Dec. 31) It is remarkable that a young person stood up to all the ridicule and scorn heaped on her in the early part of her life with very little external support, and found her own niche. Her effort has paid dividends, earning her the respect of not just her own community but also the world at large.
C.V. Aravind

Sweetening life

Through accounts of her relationship with her Phuphee, Saba Mahjoor gives us great insights into life. ('Sugared eggs and hope'; Dec. 31) She shows us how just like rays of light brighten our day, it is rays of hope that shine through darkness. When we are overwhelmed with feelings of dejection or helplessness, it is our hope that things will change for the better, that drives us.
Parimala G. Tadas

Numb to unimaginable violence across the world

Wars shock people but, soon, their conscience adjusts to the horror

Sarbani Mohapatra
mohapatra.sarbani@gmail.com


GETTY IMAGES

We are always complaining about inflation in the things we regularly use. But what about the deflation in the value of human lives that we are seeing in recent times? The Myanmar coup, Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Gaza mayhem and here at home, the Manipur crisis, all point to one thing: the constantly falling price of human lives.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to be away from these bloodbaths, read or hear about it from the news. It shocks us for a few seconds, like the blinding of the eyes when a torch is shone at it. Soon enough, however, our conscience adjusts to the horror. Dry numbers of people dead, injured or rendered homeless hardly move us.

But if we were to find out that in those that perished was a first love, a child born after years of prayers and a teenager excited about joining college the next year, could we remain equally indifferent? If we imagine the face of one of our friends or loved ones among those killed, could we let it go so easily? No matter how much we hate to admit it, we all are cocooned in apathy. This apathy sees us through our day-to-day life. It may come across as an excuse, but if all of us paused and reflected on the state of humanity at present, it would immobilise us with shock initially and shame later. Doing everyday tasks would become difficult; deadlines will remain unmet and the family would go unfed. Perhaps it explains why there are so few poets in the world.

But "poetry makes nothing happen", Auden had said. Bombs will still go off, children will still die, homes will still be razed to the ground, people's right to choose their government will still be bound by barbed wires and the hills would still look down with suspicious hate at the valley. As for us, the fortunate, troubles like running out of turmeric when half-way through the curry or a deflated tyre on the way to work will continue to appear as major problems.

Do nothing, be creative

Time-off is vital for well-being; ignoring bodily signals may lead to serious physical and mental health issues

Amita Basu
amita.basu@christuniversity.in


GETTY IMAGES

Just as many others, I had gone through a phase of planning every minute of my day. Facing my planner, feeling like the queen of the world, I would picture gliding from task to task, spending my commutes documenting co-passengers on the bus, mentally reviewing last evening's edifying reading, and transitioning from sleeping to waking and vice versa as efficiently as a robot switching itself on and off. But reality routinely quashed my plans, leading to burnout that evoked the saying about "the best-laid plans of mice and men", and finally taught me the importance of doing nothing sometimes.

"Do nothing" might seem a strange prescription in our productivity-obsessed age, when any unoccupied minute seems something to explain away and apologise for, and when ultra-achievers like Infosys co-founder N.R. Narayana Murthy are telling us to work more, not less. But the benefits of a time-off are increasingly entering public consciousness. Burnout has reached record levels, and has partly triggered, for instance, the Great Resignation in the U.S. A shift towards the gig economy has exacerbated this problem, with numerous workers worldwide spending many waking hours hustling for work, on top of actually working. Meanwhile, leave policies at many Indian workplaces are so stringent that the prospect of jumping through loopholes, like a circus lion tackling rings of fire, often puts us off from taking a day off even when we really need it. This means that employees routinely under-utilise the days of leave they are entitled to, even when these days can be neither rolled over nor converted to cash.

Time-off is vital for well being, and leave policies are a key predictor of employee satisfaction. Globally, many workplaces are recognising "mental health days" as a legitimate reason for leave. On the one hand, ignoring our own bodily signals, which are begging for a break, may set us up for more serious physical or mental health issues down the line. On the other hand, supporting a healthy work-life balance improves a company's attractiveness and ability to attract and retain talent. This makes regular doses of "doing nothing" a salutary prescription from the perspective of both employers and employees.

Doing nothing has particular benefits for creative work. Breakthroughs in any field involve creative insights – ranging from dramatic Eureka moments to a quieter series of smaller insights. Whether you are developing video-game graphics, puzzling over an ongoing conflict with your teenage child, or deciding how best to deliver a skills-based course in an online format, creative breakthroughs are the instrument of making progress and achieving your goals. And these breakthroughs often happen when we are ostensibly "doing nothing" – when our minds are resting, engaged with small tasks, dreaming or daydreaming, commuting, or exploring a seemingly irrelevant topic. We have all experienced this burst of sudden insight, and may find it paradoxical. It isn't.

Creativity, by definition, involves associating disparate ideas – ideas you will not normally link together. Such linking occurs much more readily when our minds are "zoomed out", when the details of the problem at hand are not preoccupying us.

The brain is a strange organ – it's never "doing nothing". Even when we are not engaged with a task, the brain is processing information, regulating a huge number of bodily functions, reinterpreting experiences, and synthesising ideas. This explains why it's often in moments when we seem to be "doing nothing" that our brain spits out a solution to a stubborn problem.

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Language of equality
The classroom is the best place for lessons on equality of the sexes and busting stereotypes
Saraswathi Narayanan

An orderly lifestyle
It can be a salutary lifestyle habit and a means to improve productivity
George Netto

Feathered friends
Finding company in a room of one's own
Unnati Ashar

Safety on roads
There is an inherent disregard for traffic rules in India
Sanjay Chandra

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

Access granted (Clockwise from below) Nakshatra Mana by the Kerala backwaters; one of the courtyards at Mangala Heritage in Thirupugalur; Tamil Sufi performers Abdul Ghani and Haja Maideen; a wood worker crafting; and En Vilasam in Alamparai. (LUXUNLOCK, PRASAD RAMAMURTHY)

SECRET PORTALS TO LOCAL CULTURE

A Chennai-based villa rental company's strategy might well hold the key to growing regional tourism in 2024

Prasad Ramamurthy

It was a starlit night. Flickering light from dozens of oil lamps cast long shadows. Abdul Ghani sat with eyes firmly shut. His focus, on the words he was uttering, and on the steady beat set by a duo of tambourines. As his serene voice filled the air another joined in, that of Haja Maideen. Bathed by the light from the oil lamps, they swayed as if in a trance. My brain could barely decipher the mix of chaste Tamil and Urdu they used in their praise – their *pugazh maalai* – of Allah and that of Sufi saint Hazrat Syed Shahul Hameed of Nagore. But in that moment, it seemed irrelevant. It felt sufficient to sit still and listen. Meditative even.

A poem by Tirunāvukkarasar, the 7th century Tamil saint, written in praise of Shiva was painted on the wall behind them. Its mere presence added a layer of cultural complexity to the scene. Sufi meets Shiva meets *bhakti*. The effect was simply electric. So much so, that the thought of it gives goosebumps.

The duo, if you hadn't guessed it already, were the Tamil Sufi performers made famous by the award-winning 2007 documentary, *The Laya Project*. That evening they had performed for us, a grand audience of three, at Mangala Heritage.

A tastefully arranged four-bedroom residence, partly built in the traditional style, in the tiny village of Thiruppugalur, in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattinam district. Mangala is managed by the Chennai-based LuxUnlock, founded and run by Ashish and Rucha Gupta. The company's aim is to not be your average villa rental service. Rather, as Ashish put it, "We want our guests to experience the destination through our properties." Sell the destination, and the villa will sell itself – generating revenue for both the operator and the destination. The latter through the local services engaged by the visitor and the employment generated by it.

Destination led holidays

Having had a ring side view of hospitality in India over the past decade, to me the Guptas' strategy speaks to the promise of regional tourism that goes beyond your average brick-and-mortar accommodation rental business. Moving from a present that's governed by the number of room nights filled, to a future of giving guests 'the feels', as Gen Z might describe it, of a destination. The Sufi recital was an example of this vision.

Over the next few days there were several more such interactions. A wood worker who builds temple chariots explained the intricacies of his art. A theologian dived so deep into the myths that surround his favourite temple that we were left gasping for air. And there was that temple priest who revealed frescos that showed rosy-cheeked cherubs painted alongside Hindu deities. A pointer to the cultural exchanges this land has seen. Each individual, an actor playing a role in revealing a different aspect of the art, history and culture of central Tamil Nadu.

The Guptas, too, are actors. But in another play that has resulted in what we experienced. They are characters in the evolution of India's hospitality industry. They began LuxUnlock in 2021 "as a response to COVID-19". Prior to the pandemic they had run a travel company called Milesworth Journeys, which counted among its clientele South India's wealthiest, and regularly ran trips for EO (entrepreneurs' organisation) and YPO (young presidents' organisation) chapters. There was also a homestay business named Footprint, primarily managed by Rucha. Ashish also had that Andamans stalwart, Barefoot on Havelock Island, which he co-founded. Collectively they'd had over two decades worth of experience.

The pandemic lockdowns shuttered both Milesworth and Footprint, forcing them to pause. "It acted like a trigger," says Rucha, "where we had to rethink everything we knew." As they considered "what next", a client came along to ask if they could manage a villa in Kodaikanal. Having the operational expertise and sensing that the villa rental business was starting to boom, they agreed.

Authenticity of experience

Slowly over two years their strategy and portfolio evolved to include homes that told a story. "It had to be someone's ancestral residence or have a concept that they want to share with the world," says Ashish. Another filter was the kind of owners whose homes they were taking on. "These weren't people who wanted a return on their investments," Ashish explains. "These were people who loved living in their homes. But they also wanted the homes to pay for themselves, and so were willing to share it with a few others." To ensure the authenticity of the experience offered each location was staffed with locals.

Today, LuxUnlock's roster stands at 17 villas across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Gujarat, with half a dozen more in the pipeline. The list of home owners who've entrusted their properties to them reads like a roll-call of the rich and the famous. They include the corporate house E.I.D Parry, actor Mohanlal, restaurateur and retail maven Kiran Rao, ad filmmakers Sneha Iype and Prakash Verma, and cultural activist and businessman Ranvir Shah. Incidentally, Mangala Heritage is owned by Shah's Prakriti Foundation.

Going forward the Guptas are looking at creating destination villas in "places that are underserved". Cuddalore for instance, and Ahmedabad. "Mrs Meyyappan [The Bangla] put Chettinad on the map. It was an esoteric destination six years ago. But it's a popular destination now," says Rucha. "That is what we want to do for other destinations." Amen to that.

A two-bedroom LuxUnlock villa starts at ₹25,000 per night.

The writer is based in Mumbai and reports on luxury lifestyle.

LIVING ARCHIVE

Inside the coastal Muslim kitchen

From *kuzhi paniyarams* with Dutch ties to the local cousin of the East African *injera*, Tamil Nadu's coastal food shows us that history is also preserved in our kitchens

Sumaiya Mustafa

The porous nature of the Coromandel Coast has, for centuries, allowed it to absorb influences from across the world, either through trade or colonial conquests. Early maps show us that the region was the site of frenetic activity. In one such document, circa 1733 – part of digital archive Sarmaya's collection – we see the Bay of Bengal shoreline dotted with the flags of no fewer than five colonial empires: the British, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and French. Even older than the colonial legacies are those forged by its enterprising trading and fishing communities.

Among them, coastal Muslims are identified by British anthropologists Caroline and Filippo Osella as having a greater openness towards new trends in food. In their book, *Food, Memory and Community: Kerala as both 'Indian Ocean' Zone and as Agricultural Homeland*, they write: "The whole Hindu domestic anxiety about the provenance of food stuffs, about caste purity and food 'quality' [in the *tri gunas* sense], about observing social hierarchies in feeding and serving, all mitigate against either culinary cosmopolitanism or a culture of domestic based hospitality and commensality. All this stands in sharp contrast to Muslim practices."

This felt true to me, in my childhood in Tamil Nadu's littoral lands and my family of sea-faring traders. Growing up in the coastal town of Kayalpatnam, I recall my grandmother's term for condensed milk: 'Edachi mark *paal*'. 'Edachi' is the Tamil caste name for those who work cattle – in other words, 'milkmaid'! She was introduced to the Nestle dairy brand in the 1940s, before it became an Indian pantry staple, when her father brought home tins from his frequent trips to Colombo.

Regardless of their faith, the people of the Coromandel Coast have developed a multi-cultural palate through centuries of contact with colonial traders and merchants from the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, East Africa and the rest of Asia. This is most obvious when we sit down to eat – not just in Kayalpatnam, but across coastal Tamil Nadu. Our daily fare effortlessly folds in influences from Indonesia to Sri Lanka, and from Ethiopia to the Netherlands.

***Kuzhi paniyaram* for breakfast**

In the case of the widely-loved *kuzhi paniyaram*, we see the foreign influence not of a recipe but a clever little kitchen implement. Inspired by the *poffertjes* pan introduced to these parts by the Dutch, the *paniyarrakal* or *appe* pan is a versatile tool. The original featured three semi-circular indentations made to fry the mini pancakes it is named for. But we've significantly expanded its scope to make everything from savoury *paniyarams* to sweet *unniappams*, and the *gunta* (Telugu), *guliyappa* (Kannada) and *appe* (Marathi) in between. It's no surprise that today *kuzhi paniyarams* are closely associated with Chettinad cuisine; the Chettiars enjoyed long historical trade ties with the Dutch East Indies.

Global connect (Clockwise from left) *Thakkadi*; *koliappam*; and the 1733 Malabar, Coromandel and Ceylon map. (SUMAIYA MUSTAFA, SARMAYA ARTS FOUNDATION)

***Thakkadi* for Sunday lunch**

A guarded recipe among the Tamil-speaking Muslims of the Coromandel Coast and Sri Lanka, *thakkadi* is a one-pot dish that looks a lot like pasta. Steamed rice dumplings are steeped in a runny broth of spicy condiments, pandan leaves, coconut milk and goat's brain. It's usually cooked after Bakrid when offal overruns kitchen counters and freezers in towns like mine. Given the Coast's proximity to Sri Lanka, it's not surprising that many culinary traditions like the *thakkadi* have made their way across the sea.

***Thengai* buns for tea**

Covered in see-through wrappers and heaped on bakery counters across the coast, *thengai* buns are just the thing to dunk into a hot cup of tea at the end of a long day. These are thin discs of leavened bread stuffed to bursting with sweet, grated coconut and tutti-frutti. Culinary historians believe the technique of leavened bread-making arrived in the subcontinent with the Portuguese. *Thengai* bun mixes yet another colonial influence to serve up a tropical take on the British mince-pie. Thanks to their exposure to European trade, cities like Thoothukudi in the southern districts of the Coromandel Coast have a thriving and visible bakery culture. The Portuguese word for leavened bread '*bao*' has acquired the twang of Tamil to become '*paan*', as my grandmother's generation calls it.

***Koliappam* for family dinner**

During *perunaals* (Eids), the Tamil Muslims of the coast make lacy, translucent crêpes to eat with coconut curries. The *koliappam* has less in common with the local *palappam* and more with a faraway cousin: the East African *injera*. Made from rice flour, coconut milk, eggs and salt, the batter is poured onto a non-stick pan, which is swirled quickly to form a thin layer. In the home of the *dosai* and similar savoury crepes, the popularity of *koliappam* is evidence of the coastal Tamil people's openness to cultures far and wide.

***Dodol* for dessert**

Even the resolute among us will find their pace slowing as they pass the Sellakani store in Keelakarai. On the counter are neat stacks of small tubs containing an irresistibly sticky confection. *Dodol* is a toffee-like sweet made from rice flour, tapioca balls, coconut milk and palmyra jaggery. It's a favourite with the region's diasporic community. While the dish is Indonesian in origin, it actually arrived in Keelakarai from Sri Lanka in the mid-20th century. A resident, Fathima, tasted *dodol* on a trip to the island nation and on her return, she taught her sister Jeilani Beevi the recipe. Jeilani's son now carries on the tradition at Sellakani.

The first in a series of columns by sarmaya.in, a digital archive of India's diverse histories and artistic traditions.