



# magazine

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Sunalini Mathew

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A friend recently joked about needing more young people on his team. “The rest of us,” he declared, half joking, “are uncles”. I asked him what he meant. “Uncles hold on to the ‘me’ factor,” he elaborated, a feeling that ‘you cannot reach anywhere without me’, whether it’s at work or in life.

Said friend, let’s call him Samarth, based in Kerala, introspected: “I think it [uncle-dom] starts with a lack of understanding of new beliefs, and then goes into dislike, and then even resentment.” This deteriorates into being ill-tempered and writing off an entire generation as useless. It also springs from “experience and self-proclaimed seniority”.

Samarth and I, both 47, talked about many things: books, movies, our children, technology, and history. At one point in the conversation, I held forth on something, and said that we were better in our 20s than a lot of people in their 20s now. “You’re being an uncle now,” he said, and we laughed, cognisant of our own biases. But uncles are not just men with prejudice. The threat of the ‘Boomer uncle’ (someone who grew up in the 1950s and 60s), as someone who clings to old ideas and rejects new perspectives, runs deeper.

Like when the Film Federation of India’s all-male panel chose *Laapataa Ladies* for India’s 2025 Oscar nomination. The chauvinistic citation read, “Indian women are a strange mixture of submission and dominance.” Or when a BJP leader from West Bengal allegedly said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee should ‘identify her own father’ since she went around calling herself the daughter of whichever state she went to. Or when Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy stated last year that the youth must be prepared to work a 70-hour week to boost the economy, and how he himself worked ‘85-90 hours a week’ till he retired.

### Comedian Radhika Vaz’s ready reckoner

An uncle does not... follow his own advice.  
An uncle says... everything in a condescending voice.  
An uncle will always... know what is good for you.  
An uncle looks... for faults so he can feel superior.  
An uncle thinks... he is God’s gift to woman and mankind.

### The saffron uncle

Since 2020, when Mumbai-based journalist Faye D’Souza gave her ‘Uncle, Are You With Us?’ Kommune India talk (you’ll find it on YouTube), the word uncle has featured frequently in public discourse. D’Souza’s talk brought out the politics of the uncle: a fearful, middle-class, middle- to retirement-age man toeing the conservative line because he didn’t have the guts to stand up for the truth. She spoke about men who wouldn’t even forward a video that challenged the government. At one point she asked, “Is the government reading the Constitution? Are you reading the Constitution, Uncle?” But uncles love the status quo, perpetuating the mainstream ideology.

Today, D’Souza says, “I don’t think uncles have changed. I have changed – I have become more accepting of uncles and feel the need to conflict with them less.” So, she’ll stick to polite conversation at dinner parties, and on WhatsApp groups “roll my eyes in private but stay

They ‘protect’ everything from tradition to their apartment block’s paint colour. But beneath the bad jokes and loud voices runs patriarchy, control, and a generation-defying sense of entitlement

# INDIAN UNCLE INC.



ILLUSTRATION: SAI

quiet on the group”. She feels people (who once were more open to calling out such behaviour), post-COVID, have become more protective of the family circle, and hence take on less challenging roles in the public sphere.

“The state imposes control through non-state actors, and uncles

are these non-state actors,” says professor Sujata Sriram, dean of School of Human Ecology, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. “The state uses this masculine power to make their voice heard.” And because throwing their weight around is a very strong part of being an uncle, it reinforces the dominant

power. Patriarchy and the control that comes with it, are at its heart.

It’s uncle-thought that will make rules about women healthcare workers being only assigned day duty, ‘for their safety’. It’s uncle-behaviour to call up a person and ‘complain’ that their daughter was ‘seen loitering’ with a boy. It’s



**There should be a movie called *Uncle No. 1*, where all types are explored: the no-filter uncle, the *sanskari* uncle who is hanging on to ideas from a Sooraj Barjatya movie, the *gyan* spouting uncle**

ANIL ABRAHAM  
Dermatologist and comic



**The uncle’s way stems from an older man’s perspective that says, ‘We are going to tell you what society expects of you, and we’re going to enforce it’**

HENA FAQURUDHEEN  
Psychologist  
Hank Nunn Institute



**I don’t think uncles have changed. I have changed – I have become more accepting of uncles and feel the need to conflict with them less**

FAYE D’SOUZA  
Journalist

uncle-emotion to express rage to people within their ‘control’, mostly a family member – never their boss.

It has taken women in public life to call this out. In June 2021, Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra had called then West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankar ‘uncle ji’ on X, saying his family members and others close to him had been appointed in the Raj Bhavan. This year, during the Lok Sabha elections, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra compared Prime Minister Narendra Modi to a ‘*shaadi waale* uncle ji’ (uncle at a wedding) who sits in a corner, gathers people around him, and talks of eye-rolling political conspiracies. This was after the PM had alleged that the Congress, of which Gandhi is a leader, has its eye on people’s earnings and wealth, as well as the gold and the *mangalsutras* of women.

Comedians, despite the threat of cases being filed against them in the current political regime, are the other set of people to call out uncles (see box P4). Aditi Mittal says, “It is our constant deference to uncle-hood in our private spaces that has led to the current political state.” She adds that by centring the uncle in the family experience, we move from ‘*Uncle aa rahe hain tho ghar pe shorts mat pehno* [Uncle is coming home, so don’t wear shorts]’ to ‘*Unhone kiya hai tho kuch samaj ke hi kiya hoga* [He made this decision, so he would have thought about it before doing so]’.

“The uncle’s way stems from an older man’s perspective that says, ‘We are going to tell you what society expects of you, and we’re going to enforce it’,” says psychotherapist Hena Faqurudheen, who heads the Hank Nunn Institute, a not-for-profit mental health organisation in Bengaluru. One reason for this cognitive rigidity (the inability to adapt to new thought), she explains, is the older education system, which did not allow its students to question. Another, is India’s traditional deference to authority and the male ‘head of the family’.

### Politics and patriarchy

Shalini Singh, 43, who works in the social sector in Delhi, talks about how uncle-hood is played out on dating apps, especially with married men struggling to “figure out what is happening here; many think it’s a free-sex app”. She notes a “sense of entitlement that comes from low self-awareness”. Their “confidence-booster is money and power from a job or social status or inheritance. There’s a lack of evolution that characterises him”.

However, it’s not always just about age. She talks of a friend in his 90s, who, though she did call uncle in the way that most men a generation or two older get tagged, didn’t fit the stereotype. “He wanted to study about climate change,” she remembers, adding that he was broad-minded, spirited, and curious about the world. “He didn’t have those ugly qualities of being tied to tradition,” or living covertly.

As technology takes over lives and women grow more powerful within the household, uncles may feel redundant. A loss of control and a feeling of being unessential may result in many “taking over the neighbourhood watch”, as Sriram puts it, with moral and administrative policing.

Dermatologist Anil Abraham, 61, who through his Instagram account @docanilabe parodies everybody from politicians to “WhatsApp uncles as doctors”, says uncles are boundary-setting men who put everything and everybody firmly in a box. “But they themselves are trapped. They realise they are hopelessly irrelevant and are holding on to dated ideas for dear life.”

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**Beyond stories** Along with being a poet, Keki N. Daruwalla had a long and decorated career in the Indian Police Service. (VIVEK BENDRE)

TRIBUTE [1937-2024]

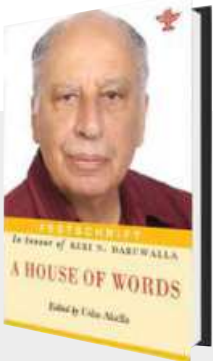
KEKI N. DARUWALLA:  
LET THE  
LYRIC LEAF

A friend of four decades and more remembers the celebrated poet and author who leaves behind a rich literary imprint and a far greater human legacy

Namita Gokhale

W.H. Auden's poem 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' begins thus:  
*Time that is intolerant  
Of the brave and the innocent  
And indifferent in a week  
To a beautiful physique  
Worships language and forgives  
Everyone by whom it lives...*  
Keki N. Daruwalla knew the weight and value of words, and used them carefully and consistently, leaving behind a literary legacy that spanned 15 collections of poetry and 10 works of short and long fiction. His poetry and prose had range and clarity of vision, with an underlying world view and belief system that was robust yet deeply philosophical.  
My friendship with Keki spanned some 40 years. I knew of him before that, as a colleague of my father from the Indian Police Service. Both he and my father were associated with the intelligence services and with the Research & Analysis Wing.  
When my debut novel *Paro* was published in 1984, it got flattering international attention and unexpected hostility from the Indian literary establishment. That was the year Keki received the Sahitya Akademi award for his collection of poetry, *The Keeper of the Dead*. Keki took it upon himself to defend me and wrote a long, thoughtful and fair-minded review in *The Indian Express*. This act of generosity won my gratitude and

cemented what was to become a precious friendship.  
**Penning stories until the end**  
Let us examine the legacy: the poems, the novels, the short stories, the memories. Keki's first collection of verse, *Under Orion*, was published in 1970 by P. Lal. This was followed by 14 collections of poems, the most recent of which was *Landfall*, published in 2022 by Speaking Tiger.  
He excelled at short stories, and there are seven outstanding collections to show for it. The most recent of them, titled *Going*, was published in 2022. It opens with 'The Brahmaputra Trilogy', a tender yet savage story of race, identity, and the remains of the British Raj.  
The three outstanding novels include *For Pepper and Christ* (2009), *Ancestral Affairs* (2015) and *Swerving to Solitude* (2018).  
I believe that Keki's prose, his novels and short stories, were as important to his writing as the poetry. His understanding of structure, his deceptively simple style, his grasp of society and the larger polity, give the novels a vast scope of reference and document the recent history of India and the region.  
In 2022, Keki had shared with me a version of the manuscript of what was possibly his last novel. Titled *Alexandria and The Fallen Priest*, it was an ambitious and magnificent work. The narrative



No requiem  
A tribute to a  
warrior, map maker,  
storyteller...

Anu Majumdar

*Keki, they say you've gone,  
no longer part of our  
firmament.  
Not true.  
From under Orion  
you stride the stars  
between heaven and earth -  
warrior, map maker, story  
teller, friend -  
a migrant, breaking  
past our seeing -  
before the word  
and after it, in the fire,  
in the changing wind.*

*The writer is an author and poet based in Auroville, and coordinator of the Auroville Literature Festival.*

voice was vibrant and commanding. He later sat down to script further corrections, and to retrieve bits that had gone missing. The work has not been published; I hope it will see the light of day and receive the acclaim it deserves.  
He had also told me about another new work of fiction he had embarked upon, set in ancient India. He remained regular in his output of poetry, often laced with contemporary observations, which he took to sharing on social media. Tireless in his dedication to the discipline of writing, he paced himself to contemplate and comment.  
**Inspiring young talent**  
Keki stayed young through his engagement and interaction with a new generation of poets. He was generous in giving introductions and blurbs for their publications. The human legacy he leaves behind is the kindness, affection and belief he imparted to aspiring writers.

2024 BOOKER PRIZE-SHORTLISTED

Mice in a convent

A plague is only one of the plot points in this powerful story of moral failings, hope and the human condition

Sudipta Datta

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If Charlotte Wood's aim was to reach what Saul Bellow called "stillness in the midst of chaos", as she has said in interviews, then the acclaimed writer has achieved that and much more in her latest, *Stone Yard Devotional*. In the process, she becomes the first Australian to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize in a decade. Five out of the six authors in contention for the £50,000 prize this year are women.  
Wood, the author of seven novels – including the award-winning *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), and three works of non-fiction – sets her new work in the Monaro plains of New South Wales with the story revolving around an unnamed narrator who disappears from the city (Sydney), giving up her marriage and work, to cloister herself in a monastery run by nuns. Written during the pandemic lockdowns and after a serious illness, Wood whittles down her prose to the bare essential, and tells a powerful story of love and loss, hope and despair and the changing nature of grief and forgiveness.

While the narrator is at the abbey, where "noise is discouraged", there are three events which shake her up. One is in the form of a vicious mouse plague; the second visitation is when a murdered nun's body (or bones) is returned from Thailand to the monastery for burial; and the third is when a childhood schoolmate, Helen Parry, now a radical environmentalist nun, arrives.

"When I think about the phases of my life, it is as a series of rooms behind me, each with a door to a previous room left open, behind which is another room, and another and another," the narrator recalls. As she looks back, there's a reckoning with various moments in her past, particularly the grief about the loss of her mother, and the guilt she carries of how she and other children behaved with Helen (who clearly had a troubled mother) in the classroom. "Nobody knows the subterranean lives of families," she contends.

**A dreadful truth**  
Bristling with questions about moral failings and forgiveness, old and new hurts, "a great restfulness",



**Stone Yard Devotional**  
Charlotte Wood  
Hachette India  
₹799

however, comes over her in the church though she doesn't believe in god. One of the nuns, Sister Simone, puts her at ease by telling her that praying is "a way to interrupt your own habitual thinking... It's admitting yourself into otherness, cracking open your prejudices. It's not chitchat. It's *hard labour*".  
But no amount of quiet reflection makes the mice go away, and when the plague worsens, the narrator "hates" the creatures. There are several descriptions of the punishment meted out to the mice, with the nuns devising new ways to kill, "like luring them with peanut butter onto swing-top kitchen bins full of water, letting them fall and drown". The narrator finds this duty "morally appalling". The learning from the plague is an understanding about "a dreadful truth": death, and the fact that "this knowledge remains mostly hidden from the self but is always there, gaining ground inside us, unstoppable".  
This great chastening leads the narrator to also savour the moment and choose her two favourite words: "And yet." These two words, she says, are applicable to every situation, happy or sad. "The sun is rising? And yet it will set. A night of anguish? And yet it too, will pass." If she feels at home with the nuns, it's because absolutely nothing is asked of her, and "nothing expected", managing to reach a semblance of calm amid the madness.



Australian novelist Charlotte Wood. (GETTY IMAGES)

BROWSER

Island

Sujit Saraf  
Speaking Tiger  
₹499

When an American missionary seeks his help to introduce Christianity to the remote Sentinelese in the Andaman Islands, tribal expert Nirmal Chandra Mattoo finds himself in a catastrophic denouement involving the Indian state, the tribal group, and his own fate.



When A Forest Walks

Neha P. Lal  
Nu Voice Press  
₹299

When she encounters a wailing ghost one evening, Alki's acts of defiance end up unravelling a folkloric mystery. With nosy neighbours on one side and disapproving parents on the other, she stands her ground, supported by her friends, and takes on the spirit world.



**Anniversary edition**  
Author Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi's Betty Trask Award-winning novel, *The Last Song of Dusk*, set in 1920s Bombay, turns 20 this year. The debut book was translated into 16 languages, with Shanghvi's writing style being compared to that of Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth's. A story of hope amidst loss, *The Last Song of Dusk* is about a young husband and wife who move to an old house by the sea to rebuild their lives after the sudden death of their child. The book, along with Shanghvi's second novel, *The Lost Flamingoes of Bombay*, has been brought out by HarperCollins in an anniversary special edition with a new jacket. Shanghvi is also author of the 2018 illustrated fable, *The Rabbit and the Squirrel*, and the non-fiction work, *Loss*, a collection of essays on death, grief, and healing.



# Space constraints

An overambitious agenda mars what could have been a great book on contemporary Indian architecture



A touch of Rajasthan The courtyard at Vanaja, a project by Vriksh from Manipal. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Manju Sara Rajan

India has great diversity and skill across the country when it comes to architecture, says Gauri Kelkar, and she has tried to capture “a slim slice” in her new book, *20 x 20: Twenty Architects x Twenty Iconic Homes of India*. While the criteria for picking the 20 projects are not clear, Kelkar does present architecture from all corners of the country, Ladakh in the north, Assam and West Bengal in the east, Rajasthan, Goa, Maharashtra in the west, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the south, and other places in between. The studios featured range from some of the country’s most awarded to a few greenhorn practices. There are projects by Abin Design Studio, Architecture Brio, Ini Chatterjee & Associates, Khosla Associates, Labwerk, Mancini Enterprises, Matharoo Associates, Mathew & Ghosh Architects, RMA Architects, Romi Khosla Design Studio, Sanjay Puri Architects, SPASM Design, Stapati, Studio Lotus, Studio Sanath, Wallmakers, SAFE from Shillong, Ladakh-based Field Architects, Sketch Design Studio from Alwar and Vriksh from Manipal. The TikTok-born tendency to exaggerate has certainly played a part in the naming of the book – its title giving the collection of residences a magnitude some may not deserve. For instance, the project by Field Architects in Ladakh is interesting but it is oversold in a book of residential icons.

**Design deficit** Kelkar has tried to tie things together with a simplified editorial structure. Each profile begins with a synopsis of a firm’s work and an overview of its projects before moving to the residential project in focus. It can sometimes feel like too much information but for the lay person, it could be helpful. Every project is illustrated with photographs and drawings. However, for a book on the topic of design, *20 x 20*’s design meanders all over the place. For instance, the drawings are far too small. Since the project photographs have been collected from each practice and photographed by several people, the presentation lacks a consistent visual point of view. While there is no doubt that there is a dearth of Indian publications surveying contemporary Indian

architecture, it is also the reason why every book on the subject carries a heavy burden of responsibility. There is so much construction in the country and so many practices that Indian design is evolving too fast for anyone to really understand what is going on and even magazines can’t keep up. Which means we’re ready for publications that pick up specific threads of investigation, from material innovations to geographic particularities, or even stylistic tendencies. But *20 x 20*’s type of generalised look at contemporary Indian architecture is misleading. Also, the information is based entirely on the designers’ descriptions of their own projects, when in fact the only way to really tell if a building works is to go there and experience it so that basic information is enhanced by



20 x 20: Twenty Architects x Twenty Iconic Homes of India Gauri Kelkar Roli Books ₹3,995

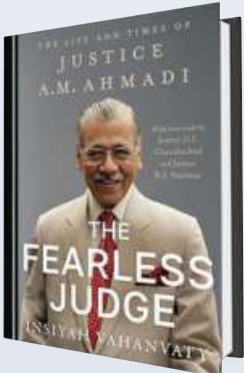
its emotional, experiential context. That also allows writers to fact-check creators’ often flamboyant statements. Unfortunately, writing projects today simply don’t have the budgets for that kind of in-depth reporting, so my sympathy lies firmly with the author. Roli Books’ own *The Anthology of Contemporary Indian Architecture* by Jagan Shah, and Edmund Sumner and Robert Gregory’s *Contemporary House India* for Thames & Hudson, are the last sweeping explorations I can remember on the subject. *20 x 20* should have been a great follow-up, if only its ambition was something simpler than finding icons. The reviewer is an author and editor-in-chief of Beautifulhomes.com, and former editor of Architectural Digest.



Wheel of time (Clockwise from left) General A.S. Vaidya, Chief of the Army Staff, addressing troops at the Sikh Regimental Centre, Ramgarh, Jharkhand, in 1984; Justice Ahmadi with then Vice-President M. Hamid Ansari; and Sikhs taking out a rally on the anniversary of Operation Blue Star, at Golden Temple, Amritsar. (THE HINDU ARCHIVES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, AND GETTY IMAGES)

not do so on behalf of the convicts. In the pitch blackness of the night, the original verdict was upheld. The next morning, on October 9, 1992, General Vaidya’s assassins were hanged until death. During this time, a subtler implication began to emerge from the shadows. One of Justice Ahmadi’s most trusted secretaries happened to be a Sikh gentleman. There had already been two high profile assassinations at the hands of Sikh individuals, and it was feared that Justice Ahmadi might be the next target for his verdict that upheld the death sentence for Jinda and Sukha. Whispers of concern were voiced. The Chief of Security offered a proposition. He suggested that Ahmadi dismiss his Sikh secretary, offering to replace him with another, equally capable gentleman of a different religion. Bristling at the suggestion that an employee be dismissed based on their religious background, this struck at the very core of his principles. A true secularist, Justice Ahmadi was also a member of a minority community himself, and as such, he was no stranger to the experiences that come with bearing a minority identity. He too belonged to a community that is vilified for the acts of a select few. He too had been the subject of many a whisper that questioned his motives because of his religion. He knew all too well the humiliation of being singled out, of being forced to prove one’s loyalty when others are not. And so, in a resolute stand against any form of prejudice, Justice Ahmadi rejected the proposal outright. The Sikh secretary remained faithfully and steadfastly at Justice Ahmadi’s side until the day he retired and even beyond.

Excerpted with permission from Juggernaut.



The Fearless Judge: The Life and Times of Justice A.M. Ahmadi Insiyah Vahanvaty Juggernaut ₹899

# UNMOVED BY WHISPERS

When Justice Ahmadi rejected a proposal to dismiss his Sikh secretary

Insiyah Vahanvaty

A dotting account of a grandfather’s life also becomes an objective narrative of the life of a public functionary in service of the Constitution, writes Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud in his Foreword to *Insiyah Vahanvaty’s* biography, *The Fearless Judge: The Life and Times of Justice A.M. Ahmadi*. He was part of landmark judgments like *S.R. Bommai* and *Indira Sawhney*, and as Chief Justice of India, Justice Ahmadi ushered in transformative reforms. He was also a “true secularist”, as this edited excerpt highlights.

In June 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the controversial Operation Blue Star, a military operation to reclaim the Golden Temple from Sikh separatists. Horrified, the world watched as the death toll grew, and Sikhs across the world responded with outrage. Four months later, Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, sparking nationwide riots. Two years later, General A.S. Vaidya, Chief of Army Staff during the operation, was also assassinated. These events would finally culminate in 1992 – in Justice Ahmadi’s courtroom. It would become the only judgment of his career in which the typically restrained judge handed out the death sentence.

**Two assassins** General Vaidya’s assassins, Jinda and Sukha, were captured and subsequently tried for murder. Shockingly, this was not their first assassination. The two men had previously assassinated Lalit Maken and Geetanjali, son-in-law and daughter of then future



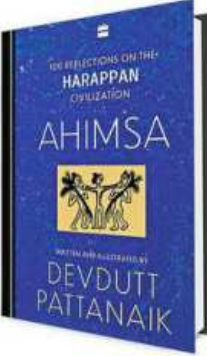
President of India Shankar Dayal Sharma as well as Congress leader Arjan Dass. Upon capture, the two men boldly admitted that they had, indeed, assassinated General Vaidya. Further, they informed the trial court that they were proud of their act and unafraid of death. The trial court viewed the case as ‘rarest of rare’ and awarded both men the highest form of punishment – the death sentence. Appealing to the Supreme Court, the case was then brought before a bench which consisted of Justice Ahmadi and Justice K. Ramaswamy. This bench also upheld the sentence of the Designated Court. But the fervour around their cause had catapulted Jinda and Sukha into the spotlight – they had morphed into legends and demi-gods within certain segments of the Sikh community. As the execution loomed, attempts were made to stall its implementation. In September 1992, the president of the Akali Dal, Simranjit Singh Mann, filed a petition seeking a stay on the execution orders of Sukha and Jinda. Two days

before the scheduled execution, fifteen Sikh leaders and their followers assembled in the Supreme court, seeking an audience with the Chief Justice, Justice M.H. Kania. Another petitioner, an undertrial who had spent six years in Tihar jail for an attempt on the life of Rajiv Gandhi, approached the court as the ‘next friend’ of Jinda and Sukha.

**Diversionary tactic** Viewing this as a diversionary tactic, Justice Ahmadi took a bold and unusual step. Determined not to be arm-twisted into delaying the execution, he decided to hold a late night hearing at his residence. Calling upon his brother judge, Justice Ramaswamy, the bench was constituted, and the proceedings unfolded into the wee hours of the morning. Krishna Menon Marg was sealed off. As the clock ticked, the two judges deliberated upon the maintainability of the petition before pronouncing their judgment. It was found that the petitioner had no locus standi to move the court as he did



**Ahimsa** Devdutt Pattanaik HarperCollins ₹499 In the centenary year of the announcement by the Archaeological Survey of India of the discovery of Harappa, and amid the controversy surrounding its name, Pattanaik provides an insight into the ancient civilisation. He highlights the extent to which Harappan memory endures in modern society.



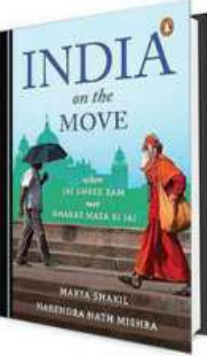
**The Truths We Hold: An American Journey** Kamala Harris Penguin ₹699 As November election day nears, Presidential candidate and Vice-President Kamala Harris’s 2019 memoir has been republished. Daughter of immigrants, Harris was raised in California. In her book, she reckons with the challenges and talks about a shared struggle and purpose.



**My Palestine: An Impossible Exile** Mohammad Tarbush Speaking Tiger Books ₹699 With memories and political commentary, Tarbush writes about the tumultuous events that have shaped Israel, Palestine and modern West Asia. Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah says the book has been written with “profound sympathy and knowledge”.



**India on the Move** Marya Shakil, Narendranath Mishra Ebury Press ₹699 Arguing that slogans like ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ and ‘Jai Shri Ram’ have become political tools, the book explores the growing divide between those who equate patriotism with conformity, and those who believe in a more inclusive vision of India where dissent is vital.





The joke's on you

Comedians parody men they hope not to turn into

This year in February, Kunal Kamra put out a video, with over 3 million views now, titled *Uncle Logic*, with the description: "Wrote a few jokes in an attempt to understand the least constructive and most heard people in our communities — uncles." In 2023, Atul Khatri, did a YouTube Short called *Tag a gym uncle you know*, on the Gujarati gym uncle (his neighbourhood is predominantly Gujarati), their energetic 'good mornings' and random exercises they create. "I don't know what these Gujarati uncles eat in the morning and come. Where they get their energy. Maybe some whey protein *chaos* (buttermilk) or steroid *thelaps*..."

In 2021, Punit Pania did a video, *The great Indian uncle*, which talks about the pseudo-patriotism of uncles standing on their balconies to piss doing *anulom vilom* (a breathing exercise in yoga) and celebrating Independence Day and Republic Day loudly. "Ye *unka Sunburn hai* [This is their Sunburn music festival]," he says. He jokes about the "gang" of right-wing "building secretary uncles" in banyans who "deliver justice every day via print-out" and WhatsApp uncles who relentlessly forward both "Good Morning" messages and paranoia-filled ones. "Uncle has the one thing that you will never have in your life: dangerous levels of clarity."

In 2017, Danish Sait put out a video called *When you have a politician uncle* on the YouTube channel Jordnian — a series of sketches that mirrors the muscle heft of local politicians. Each has the phrase "You know who my uncle is?" with Sait playing the politician who has influence over a range of areas, from a quick-service restaurant to a cricket selection test.



Laugh riot (Top to bottom) Kunal Kamra; Punit Pania; Danish Sait; and Atul Khatri. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



It is our constant deference to uncle-hood in our private spaces that has led to the current political state

ADITI MITTAL  
Comedian

# INDIAN UNCLES INC.

CONTINUED FROM  
PAGE 1

He jokes that there should be a movie called Uncle No. 1, where all the 'types' are explored: the no-filter uncle who doesn't think before he speaks, the *sanskari* uncle who is "hanging on to ideas from a Sooraj Barjatya movie", the pretender uncle who only changed outwardly "and may even sport a tattoo", the gym spouting uncle, and the creepy uncle at work who will put his arm around a woman's shoulder to mansplain.

**Gen X and boomer roll call**  
All uncles are not built alike: they move along a spectrum — call it an uncle-o-meter. The caricatured uncle at his most tolerable is overbearing and pompous, but means no harm. Sriram says that at the opposite end of the spectrum are the sinister uncles who infringe on personal space, making sexual advances to younger women.

Suhani Ranjan (name changed on request), 50, a corporate employee from Chennai, says there are quite a few men in

senior jobs who are somewhere in the middle of this uncle-o-meter. Like the head of the HR department in her company, who told her not to put out the fact that she was a single mother. "I asked him why, and he said, 'Because you look so happy. You don't conduct yourself like someone who is going through a divorce.' I informed him it had taken me 20 years and a lot of hard work to get here, but the attitude is that a woman on the brink of divorce should be struggling, and portray herself as

a martyr living an austere life." Natasha (name changed on request), 23, a corporate lawyer, also talks about how men, playing the role of mentor, will talk about the kind of law she should be pursuing as a woman, "because soon you'll get married and have children". The most rigid "bully-like atmosphere" though is at family gatherings, where men will hold forth on religion, politics, and the news, imagining that a young woman can never have a perspective, she says.

On the street, she feels the uncle gaze everywhere. "Once, I had called the cops because a man had tried to take my mother's wallet. This uncle who had nothing to do with the situation came up to me and said that as a young woman I shouldn't involve myself with the police," she remembers.

Double standards are more Gen X than Boomer, because men in their 40s and early 50s understand what is expected from them, so play out those roles in public, lapsing into the Boomer-hood of their father's generation, in private. "It's the man who will say, 'See, I know you like to wear a short skirt, but it's for your safety that you need to cover up,'" she says.

In her 2022 article in *Mint Lounge*, "The tyranny of the Indian uncle", economist-author Sharanya Bhattacharya says, "Women and oppressed communities are constantly scrutinised when they make demands for greater dignity and equality. Perhaps it is time we placed the Indian Uncle under rigorous sociological scrutiny for his reluctance to credibly supply these."

Or as comedian Mittal says, "What we should be doing is taking a bite out of uncle authority."

Anitha Pottamkulam

Saryu V. Doshi has been a force in the art world since the 60s. At the time, as a newly independent country, India was finding ways to express its civilisational inheritance in a universal language. Doshi, in 1956, accompanied her husband to the University of Michigan and ended up pursuing art history. Once back in Mumbai's intellectual scene, she never looked back.

This Padma Shri and octogenarian is known as a premier scholar of Jain art and architecture, but it is quite difficult to draw a perimeter on the spheres of her influence. She has worked in an honorary capacity as editor of *Marg* magazine, and also as the founder director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, in addition to serving as pro tem chairman of the Lalit Kala Akademi. In the 70s, she was a visiting faculty at the University of Michigan and University of California, Berkeley. She is an honorary fellow at the Bombay Asiatic Society and is the editor of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya's (CSMVS)



IN CONVERSATION

# 'WRONG APPROACH TO ART SCHOLARSHIP'

We tend to document more than we analyse, says art historian, curator and editor Saryu V. Doshi, ahead of a series of illustrated lectures in Chennai

research journal. Her peers speak of her warmth, enthusiasm, and always, of her meticulousness. Last week, Doshi was in Chennai to deliver a lecture series on Jain art and spirituality, organised by Prakriti Foundation and INTACH (Chennai Chapter). Edited excerpts from an interview:

**Question:** You are currently writing, travelling, speaking, planning, curating, mentoring, advocating and advising a range of institutions and individuals. How has this love been sustained?

**Answer:** I have been on a film script writing committee, was on the tourism board, even on a committee that allotted telephone connections. I wondered, why me, and concluded that these institutions needed a representative from the field of art. I am interested in everything. I attend talks, lectures, exhibitions, art shows, theatrical and music events, and dance performances in particular. I enjoy meeting people from different disciplines. My home was a meeting place for artists, actors, directors. My in-laws supported Marathi theatre and classical music. It was an exciting time in the field of art and a new energy enlivened artistic endeavours. Perhaps because



Space to imagine Large numbers of young visitors now flock the biennales and museums in India, says Saryu V. Doshi (left). (R. RAVINDRAN & NYT)

of all the engagement with art in my family, I even did costumes for a Marathi adaptation of the play *Tughlaq*.

**Q: Sabyasachi Mukherjee, director of Mumbai's CSMVS, says you have a nazariya, a way of seeing.**  
**A:** That is most kind of him. Maybe because of my intense curiosity as to what the artwork is conveying apart from what is visible. I am also

particular about methodology and a disciplined approach. Thinking about it, the difference between an art historian and an artist is that while the former tends to be interpretative the latter is intuitive.

**Q: India has multiple artistic strands. How did you choose to explore Jain paintings and become a specialist in this area?**

**A:** It was a curious chance and a coincidence. Jain paintings were not really studied, primarily because their subject matter tended to be repetitive. Art historian Moti Chandra advised me to explore artworks stored for centuries in the

Jain temple bhandars. And truly, I did come across some unique works of art.

In a Digambar Jain temple near Nagpur, around 50 years ago, I came across a beautiful painted scroll. My study led to the discovery of an interesting confluence of Rajasthani-Mughal-Deccani elements and I was able to ascribe the source to Aurangabad. There had never been any association with the Deccan before. My research revealed that the Mughal armies that came to the Deccan had Rajasthani military generals, and since their stay lasted years,

they formed little settlements near the military camps. Sometimes they brought artists as well, which led to a confluence of regional Deccani stylistic elements with those from Rajasthan, as also the adoption of Mughal motifs.

**Q: While there is a rise in the number of new museums, biennales and art fairs, is there worry of dwindling attendance?**  
**A:** I don't agree that there is dwindling attendance. A lot of young people have started coming in, showing that the demographic shift is in favour of these places. There is also a surge of interest in art history. This indicates an interest in the field now, which was not there earlier.

The new museums, both government and private, have magnified the demand for passionate and well-trained staff. But I think there is no systematic approach to prepare them for this field in India as yet.

**Q: What are some of the misgivings about art scholarship in India?**

**A:** In my opinion, we tend to document more than we analyse. We need to ask "what is the evidence indicating". Although many have begun to employ it, students are yet to master it.

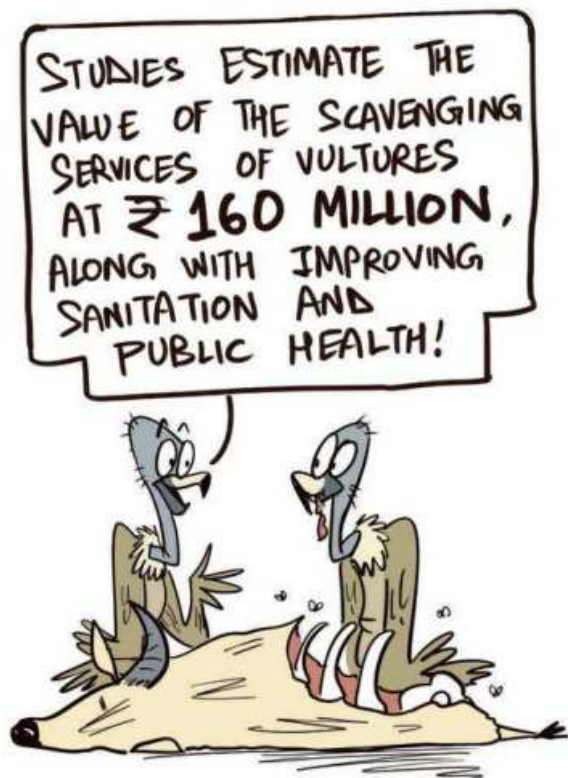
**Q: What is exciting to you today?**

**A:** Just all the things that are going on — the art fairs, biennales, the new Bihar Museum that has opened, and so many more. You see, we looked at historical trajectories in curating art. Now, they are taking a civilisational approach to themes and also debating whether an object should remain in situ or in a museum with all the attendant infrastructure. Both are valid approaches.

The writer is Director-Culture at DakshinaChitra Museum.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



20 YEARS OF RANGA SHANKARA

As Bengaluru's cherished theatre space completes two decades, founder Arundhati Nag reflects on its journey and says "there is much more Ranga Shankara can do"

# THE DREAM IS NOT OVER

**Month-long theatre**

The Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival, from October 10 to November 10, will feature 20 plays, showcasing performances in multiple languages, including Kannada, Hindi, English, Lepcha and Sanskrit. Iconic Kannada plays *Mukhyamantri*, *Hoyavodana*, and *Karimoyi* make a return alongside newer productions with contemporary social themes. The festival will feature prominent artists such as Alyque Padamsee, Manav Kaul, Ravindra Khare, Shabana Azmi, Lakshmana K.P., G. Venu, Kapila Venu, Rajiv Krishnan, T.M. Krishna, P. Rajagopal, Abhishek Majumdar, Kumud Mishra, Atul Kumar, Ratna Pathak Shah, and Naseeruddin Shah. Beyond stage shows, there will be workshops, seminars, and platform performances. Highlights include seminars on Kannada and urban Indian theatre led by renowned artists, and musical *baithaks* featuring Sangeetha Katti, Ustad Faiyaz Khan, and others. Tickets available at Ranga Shankara and on in.bookmyshow.com.

Yemen S.  
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**A**s Ranga Shankara, one of Bengaluru's cherished theatre spaces, prepares to celebrate its 20th anniversary this month, its founder, theatre and film personality Arundhati Nag, finds herself in two places at once. Contemplating the past and the realisation of a dream, and envisioning a bigger, brighter future with the support of the government and corporate patrons. Amid preparations for the Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival that kicks off this month, Nag takes some time off to share her ambitions for the space while remaining committed to keeping Ranga Shankara accessible to all. Edited excerpts:

**Question:** What do 20 years of Ranga Shankara mean to you?  
**Answer:** Not many people have the privilege of dreaming and seeing it come true. I would say I am in the middle of it now. The dream is not over, there is so much more a space like Ranga Shankara can do. Hopefully, there will be more layers

added, as theatre changes and grows.

**Q: The biggest challenges in sustaining such an institution, both financially and in terms of shaping the space?**  
**A:** The financial concern never really left the table, which in a way is good. Because one has seen many institutions go backwards with tremendous financial comfort. But at the same time, it has not been easy. It is a lean and mean organisation we run with just nine people, with each person doing the job of two or three persons. Salaries are not great. But compared to other theatre institutions, we are at a fairly decent level.

**Q: From your experience, what can be the role of government and corporates in evolving such a space and the theatre community?**  
**A:** It is not fair to expect the government to do everything. Yes, the government has money, it should be funding the arts, which it is. Ranga Shankara has been constructed on a civic amenity site; no other state in the country has the facility of such a site for an art space. There are schemes by the



government for artists, who must know how to get them. When it comes to corporates, Bengaluru is blessed. We have people such as Sudha Murty, Rohini Nilekani and Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, the first wave of IT-Rich people who are educated and have a sense of culture. They all came forward and funded Ranga Shankara in many ways. In the old days, we had kings. Who are the kings of today? It is the corporates. So, they should have a mandate to

make sure art survives, like they have for eliminating poverty and making education accessible.

**Q: Is there a secret to running a space like Ranga Shankara and keeping it pocket-friendly?**  
**A:** For 20 years, we have not increased the rent at Ranga Shankara. Twenty years ago, our auditor friend fought with Suri (S. Surendranath, theatre maker and trustee at Ranga Shankara) and me,

**On show** (Clockwise from left) Ranga Shankara founder Arundhati Nag; and snapshots of plays that will be performed at the theatre festival next week. (K. BHAGYA PRAKASH & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



when we said ₹2,500 would be the rent per show. He felt it was too little. We said our community cannot afford more. But today when we are planning to increase the rent a little, our auditor says no. He says you will defeat the purpose. Our mandate is to make more theatre happen, so the only way to keep this going is to go find more money. That is the secret.

**Q: Have you had to compromise on your acting career to build and maintain Ranga Shankara?**  
**A:** By the time I decided to build Ranga Shankara, I had already done a lot of theatre. So, I was a very satisfied actor. When I got offers for two big Hindi films — *Lagaan* and *Dil Chahta Hai* — I said no, because I did not want to be absent when someone showed up, offering to fund Ranga Shankara. I told Aamir Khan that I would get the chance to play the role of a mother in many films, but I would not get the opportunity to do this again.

**Q: What does the future hold for Ranga Shankara?**  
**A:** I think theatre has lasted for thousands of years. If human beings and relationships are there, there will be theatre. As long as people tell lies, there will be theatre! Ranga Shankara will be as good as the people who inhabit it. As long as the integrity of the people who use this space is similar to those who run it, it will continue.

**T**he year's concluding quarter is proving to be an action-packed one for DC Studios. *The Penguin*, their 'prestige TV' series with HBO, starring Colin Farrell as the titular Batman villain, is being well-received by audiences and critics globally. Their biggest theatrical release of 2024, *Joker: Folie à Deux*, starring Joaquin Phoenix and Lady Gaga as The Joker and Harley Quinn, respectively, just opened this week.

And with much less fanfare, DC's animation wing has quietly been churning out high-quality fare of its own, most recently Brandon Vietti's *Watchmen: Chapter 1*, a 90-minute film adaptation of the first half of the 1987 graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. Released on August 13, the film is a remarkably faithful adaptation of this 'anti-superhero' text, retaining a lot of Moore's dialogue as well as Gibbons' colour palette. *Chapter 1* is the latest among a batch of engaging, genre-diverse animated films and TV shows from the DC universe.

The three-part film *Justice League: Crisis on Infinite Earths* (2024) used a classic comic book animation style to unfurl a thoughtful and surprisingly poignant 'multiverse' story. *Batman: Caped Crusader* (2024) is a 10-episode series with noir-style visuals and witty, laconic dialogue inspired by Frank Sinatra gangster movies and 'hardboiled' detective novels. Next month, we'll see the fifth season of the much-loved animated series *Harley Quinn* (2019-present), a postmodern black comedy specialising in send-ups of the superhero genre.

Another Bruce at the helm

What is DC doing right with these products? In both the writing and the visual department, they have shown a willingness to take risks — and commit fully to the aesthetic-set decided upon for a story. *Batman: Caped Crusader* is filled with the kind of gorgeous 'light-and-shadow' shots that 1950s Hollywood was full of, the duelling characters' shadows projected on a wall immediately behind the action. This is an old animation trick, by the way, to circumvent content regulations written for juvenile audiences. You can't show brains being splattered on the ground in a child's show, but with shadow-play you can mount an acceptable facsimile.

*Harley Quinn*, on the other hand,



BINGE WATCH

# Inside DC's animated multiverse

The studio's animation game is on point, with shows like *Batman* and *Harley Quinn* testament to great writing and visuals

with its whacky characters and fast-paced repartee, is catering to a post-anime audience. It, therefore, uses the googly eyes, the zany sound effects, and the cartoonish displays of physical strength we associate with, say, *Dragonball Z*. It's not least because every part of its storytelling hews closely to the horror-drama tone of the book. The sound effects are ominous, orchestral. The actors are sombre, even menacing, and the frames frequently symmetrical, much like illustrator Gibbons used symmetrical panels on either side of a double-spread in the book.

DC's recent efforts are a showcase for the potential of the animated medium. At a time when the live-action superhero stories — especially those belonging to their arch-rivals Marvel — aren't necessarily setting the box office on fire, DC animation is well-placed to scoop up audiences tired of templated scripts and flat visuals.

with landmark shows such as *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995) and *Batman Beyond* (1999-2001). Among other things, these two TV shows gave us the wonderful Kevin Conroy as the voice of Batman. Timm was the obvious choice to lead DC's new era in more ways than one. He is a skilled illustrator and experienced comic book writer. In the mid-90s, he won a bunch of comics awards for his work on that era's *Harley Quinn* graphic novels. He knows these characters inside out and down the years, has demonstrated a great ear for punchy yet cerebral dialogue.



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



What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. V. Ravichandar, 67, thinks this line about leaving behind the consequences of past indiscretions is key to tackling many of Bengaluru's problems. "Koramangala's garbage should stay in Koramangala. It cannot be dumped in a village, spoiling the groundwater there for the next 100 years." It's his way of saying that neighbourhoods and households should solve some problems locally. "The current way the city is working is dysfunctional," he adds.

Ravichandar, or Ravi as everyone calls him, describes himself as a patron saint of lost causes and a town crier, with emphasis on crier. He's actually quite cheery, that rare combination of talker and doer. If we could use AI to replicate his enthusiasm and drive, every Indian city could do with at least a dozen of him.

These days he has enlisted the help of the local government to ensure that you bond with your neighbourhood and the larger community. "As we are getting more and more polarised, we need spaces where conversations can be had," he says. He has turned the spotlight on a problem that gets little attention and even less funding.

**Celebrating the Garden City** Ravi says that in his 24-year struggle as a civic evangelist, he was involved in three big successes: the self-assessment scheme of property tax; pedestrian-friendly Tender Sure roads; and making Lal Bagh Botanical Garden (Bengaluru's biggest park) sustainable forever. "I have hundreds of failures," he says, including among them the recent Greater Bengaluru Governance Bill

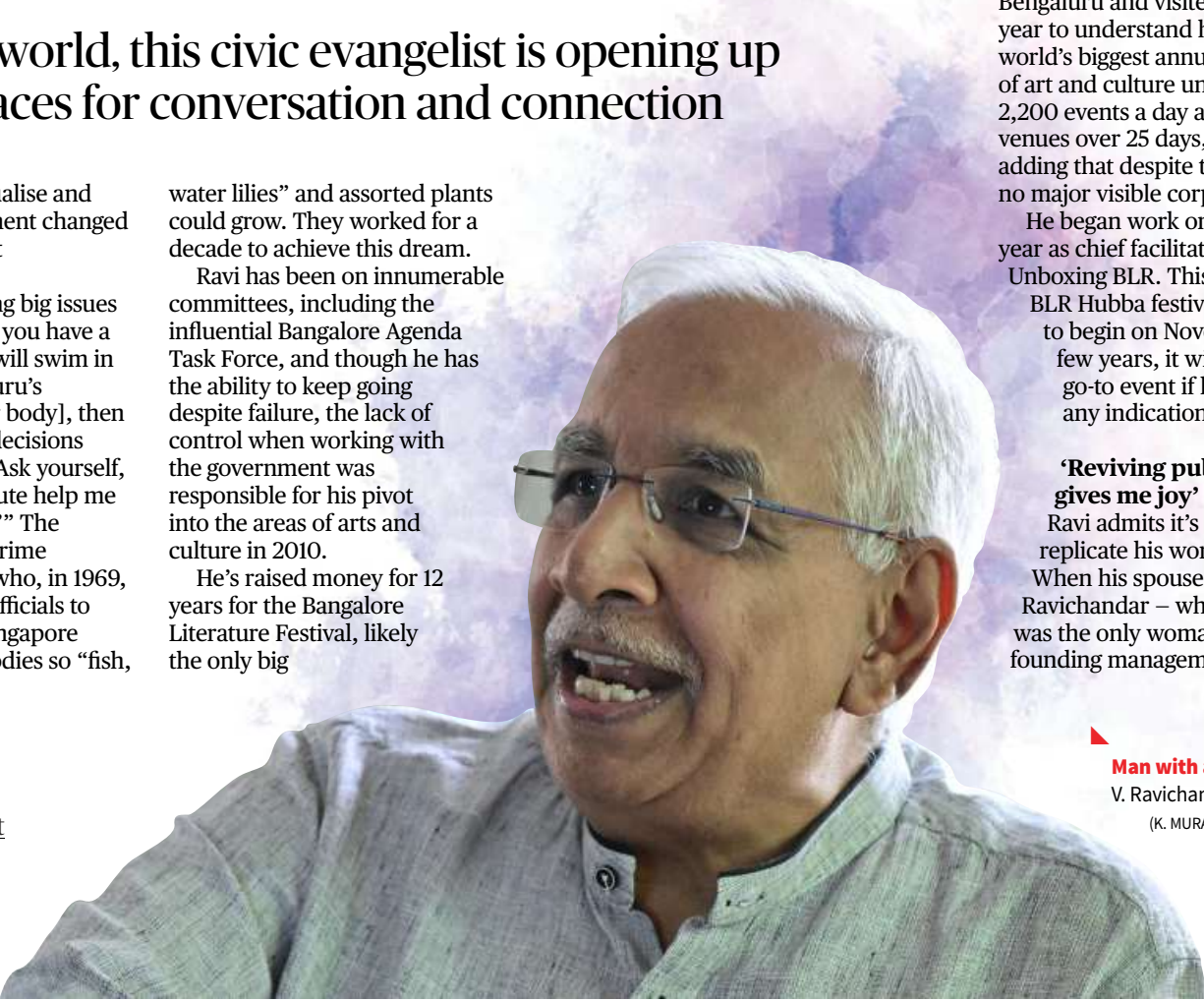
PERSON OF INTEREST

V. RAVICHANDAR: BENGALURU'S PUBLIC EYE

In a divided world, this civic evangelist is opening up common spaces for conversation and connection

that he helped conceptualise and which the state government changed before tabling, making it "anti-citizen". He believes in distilling big issues into basic principles. "If you have a dream that one day we will swim in Bellandur Lake [Bengaluru's infamous foaming water body], then work backwards when decisions come to you," he says. "Ask yourself, 'Will going down this route help me swim in the lake or not?'" The thinking is inspired by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who, in 1969, announced he wanted officials to clean up the polluted Singapore river and other water bodies so "fish,

water lilies" and assorted plants could grow. They worked for a decade to achieve this dream. Ravi has been on innumerable committees, including the influential Bangalore Agenda Task Force, and though he has the ability to keep going despite failure, the lack of control when working with the government was responsible for his pivot into the areas of arts and culture in 2010. He's raised money for 12 years for the Bangalore Literature Festival, likely the only big



'Reviving public spaces gives me joy' Ravi admits it's difficult to replicate his work-life model. When his spouse Hema Ravichandar – who, for a while, was the only woman on Infosys' founding management council –



**Our public spaces are shrinking. I want to resurrect them. Creating community gatherings and reviving public spaces gives me great joy**

Man with a plan V. Ravichandar (K. MURALI KUMAR)

got stock options, the couple could focus entirely on pursuing their interests. Hema opted to continue working in the field of human resources and mentorship, while Ravi decided he would "just jump into causes". "Chequebook charity is fine too, but my kick has been in getting engaged, getting involved," he says.

Ravi is the first to admit that he can't distinguish Hindustani music from Carnatic or that he doesn't understand classical dance. But all his forays into the world of arts and culture have centred around one key aspect. "Our public spaces are shrinking. I want to resurrect them," he says. "Creating community gatherings and reviving public spaces gives me great joy."

He's immersing himself deeper into the world of arts with a new venture called Sabha, an arts and crafts centre housed in a 170-year-old building. Though most of the work he's done until now has been pro bono, this is his first family philanthropy venture. It promises to be a space that will draw all kinds of people.

Ravi hopes that some day people will talk less about Bengaluru's traffic and garbage, and focus instead on something that unites us. If dreary Edinburgh can become a cultural hub, so can this city, he believes. "Cities can be celebrated and positioned in a manner that is positive and equitable," he says. That's the hope anyway.



Priya Ramani is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.

GOREN BRIDGE

Bad hair day?

Neither vulnerable South deals

Bob Jones

North was planning to bid on over four spades and he cue bid four hearts, falsely, in an effort to deter a possible heart lead against the final contract. South's five-club response to Blackwood showed four key cards, among the four aces and the king of spades, and North gambled out the slam. South won the opening club lead with his ace, cashed

the ace of spades, and then led the seven of diamonds. He was hoping to set up dummy's diamond suit. West, however, hopped up with his ace and led another diamond, which East ruffed for down one. South was unlucky to find a 3-0 trump split and a 5-1 diamond split, but despite that, his play on this deal was quite poor. Can you spot the winning line? After winning the opening lead, South should have cashed his other high club to

shed a heart from dummy. He could ruff a club high in dummy, return to his hand with a spade, and ruff his last club high. A heart to his ace would be followed by a heart ruff in dummy, and South could then draw trumps and concede a diamond to the opponents to make his contract. South was one of America's leading players. It is rare to see a top player "lose the plot" like this. He must have been having a bad day.

NORTH		WEST		EAST		SOUTH	
♠	Q 10 9 4 2	♠	Void	♠	7 5 3	♠	A K J 8 6
♥	J 8	♥	K 10 9 6	♥	Q 7 4 3 2	♥	A 5
♦	K 8 6 5 2	♦	A J 9 4 3	♦	10	♦	Q 7
♣	5	♣	10 8 6 2	♣	Q J 9 4	♣	A K 7 3

The bidding:  
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST  
2♣ Pass 2♦ Pass  
2NT Pass 3♥\* Pass  
4♣\*\* Pass 4♥ Pass  
4♠ Pass 4NT Pass  
5♣ Pass 6♠ All pass  
\*Transfer to spades  
\*\*Cue bid, good hand for spades  
Opening lead: Eight of ♣

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Cinema is a reflection of its own society: actor Shohreh Aghdashloo

Berty Ashlev

1 On October 6, 1927, *The Jazz Singer* was screened for the first time at Warner Bros' flagship theatre in New York. Half-way through the film about a young Jewish singer, who rebels against his family to sing popular tunes, the character played by Al Jolson says, 'Wait a minute, you ain't heard nothing yet!'. After a moment of silence, it was followed by applause. What cinematic first was this?

2 Made in 1909, *Wilbur Wright und seine Flugmaschine* is a three-and-a-half-minute-long short film. It begins with a shot of Wilbur starting an engine and then proceeds to show the inside of his machine. It then moves on to shots of the ground and the curious onlookers. What record does this film have?

3 *In Old California* is a 1910 silent western film directed by DW Griffith. He had discovered a small village in California with beautiful scenery and decided to shoot there. What was the name of the village, and consequently the record because of its importance to the world of cinema?

4 *With Our King and Queen Through India* is a 1912 British documentary of the celebrations in India during the coronation of George V as Emperor of India. It shows the greenery of the brand new city of New Delhi, the 'Presentation of Colours', a polo match, and the Calcutta Pageant,



Iconic endeavors A poster of the 1927 movie The Jazz Singer, which was based on a 1925 play of the same title by Samson Raphaelson. (WIKI COMMONS)

among other things. Shot with Kinemacolor, what record does this film hold?

5 Moti Gidwani's *Kisan Kanya* is a Hindi film made in 1937 about the plight of poor farmers. Producer Ardeshir Irani, after making India's first talkie, *Alam Ara*, wanted another record and obtained the rights to a technology just introduced in the US called Cinecolor. What record does this film have?

6 The 1928 animated short film, *Steamboat Willie*, directed by Walt Disney is the debut of Mickey Mouse onscreen. After having

seen *The Jazz Singer*, he wanted a similar experience. What record does this movie have that one cannot imagine a modern Disney film without?

7 *Dhoop Chaon* is a 1935 film directed by Nitin Bose. Bose's brother Mukul Bose was a sound recordist in New Theatres, who along with music director Raichand Boral decided to use a new technique in the movie. What first was this, which unlike previously did not need the actors to also be good singers?

8 Taking place on planet Altair IV, *Forbidden Planet* is a 1956

American science fiction film that is loosely based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The characters travel on a faster-than-light ship and are helped by a sentient robot called Robby. What first was this film, which is now very common in pop culture?

9 This 1960 horror film is iconic for many reasons. Highly influential, the scenes, the soundtrack and even a shot of chocolate syrup running into a bathtub have become historic. It has a very peculiar 'first' as it was the first film to show a toilet being flushed onscreen as the main frame. Which movie is this?

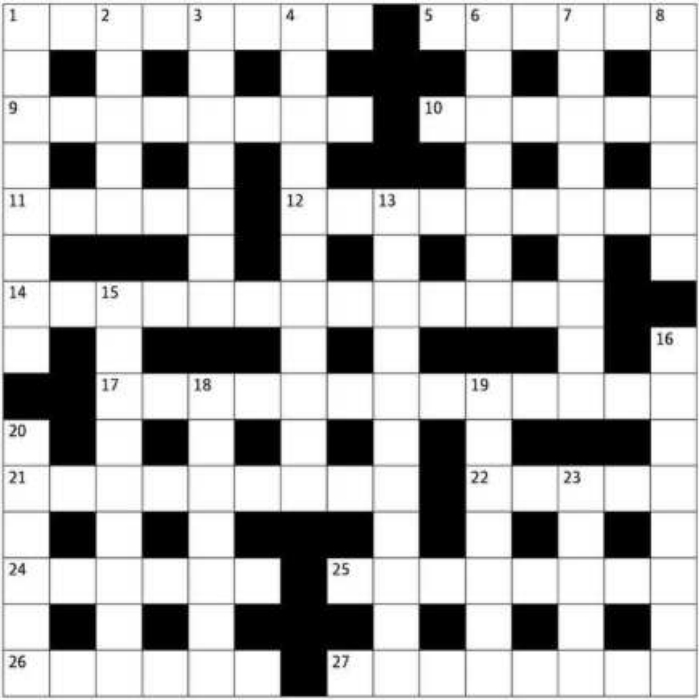
10 1942: *A Love Story* is R.D. Burman's last film as a music composer. Fittingly it was the first movie in India to be released in what sound format which is even now found on our phones?

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'. @bertyashlevy

- 1. First spoken words on screen.
- 2. The first movie to be shot from an aircraft (Wright brothers' plane).
- 3. Hollywood's first film to be made in color.
- 4. First feature film to be released in color.
- 5. India's first indigenously made color film.
- 6. First cartoon to feature a fully post-produced soundtrack (first Disney song).
- 7. First Indian film to have playback singing (earlier actors had to sing live).
- 8. The first film to be set entirely on another planet in interstellar space.
- 9. Psycho by Alfred Hitchcock.
- 10. The first film in India to be released on Dolby Stereo.

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3326



- Across**
- 1 Capital – African port – elevated Table overlooking waterside neighbourhoods, primarily? (4,4)
  - 5 Young Scout enters elite fighting force, explores underwater (6)
  - 9 Approaching girl: a nasty moment (4,4)
  - 10 Slammin' do – orgiastic to some extent – like some fireworks? (6)
  - 11 Give a hand to Everyone first ... it's the best we can hope for (5)
  - 12 Spiritualist's boring kind of wine (6-3)
  - 14 Fight vulgarisms in grand source of illumination (8,5)
  - 17 Fantastic technician, pot smoker's help in quitting (8,5)
  - 21 Hush-hush: street cop in disguise (3-6)
  - 22 Conscience ... 'Golden', you say? (5)
  - 24 Problem: some rotting litchis (6)
  - 25 Jam in Cuban club – hero! – or perhaps that's a wrap? (8)
  - 26 Shrewd batsmen, regularly dismissed, suppressing disapproving expression (6)
  - 27 From cakehole, forsakes puddings! (8)

- Down**
- 1 Ancients' brews, sharper than the rest (8)
  - 2 Greek character with spinning disc hoisted piece of crockery (5)
  - 3 Delay Spooner's green label (4,3)
  - 4 Times strewn about in part of London (11)

- 6 Usher's behaviour (7)
- 7 Harry holds boot that's redtinged (9)
- 8 Waters some flowers (6)
- 13 Maybe sit in show (11)
- 15 Never seeing use putting atomic number first (2, 2, 5)
- 16 Covers axes, since temperature's risen (8)
- 18 Manpower reduced: a short shock? (4,3)
- 19 In nightwear, trouble turning to deity in temples (7)
- 20 In the morning, jerk's shown up: shame (6)
- 23 At regular intervals, inclined railway's beginning to get more frosty (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3325





# Making sense of death

Untimely passing is scary because it may shatter the lives of the living

Arun Sahu  
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Two deaths in two weeks – first, my father and second, a close colleague – made me ponder the last rites of passage of humans. My father was 85, and the colleague was in his late 50s. I knew they were heading towards the finishing line of life’s race, but I did not foresee the race ending so soon.

I had a long conversation with my father the night before he was rushed to the ICU after a stroke. We discussed the mundane – his health, literature, our ancestral house, the recently concluded general election. His spirit was high. He asked me what would happen to our ancestral establishment after he was gone, to which I mused, “You will score a century, Papa.” He laughed. I told him I would visit him within a month or two. He was mentally alert and, as always, enthusiastic to know things, though physically frail. Something similar was with the colleague, though he had been fighting cancer for some time. His spirit was high when I met him at the hospital, though he looked feeble. We talked about diplomacy and personal lives and had some professional chatter. I left him with the impression that I could meet him again. Both betrayed my expectations. The end for both happened unexpectedly, sooner than I had anticipated.

My encounters with personal losses have been few. When I was six, I lost an elder sibling and my parents a son. He was two years older than me. He stood first in the district in the primary school scholarship examination. He was bright, the people

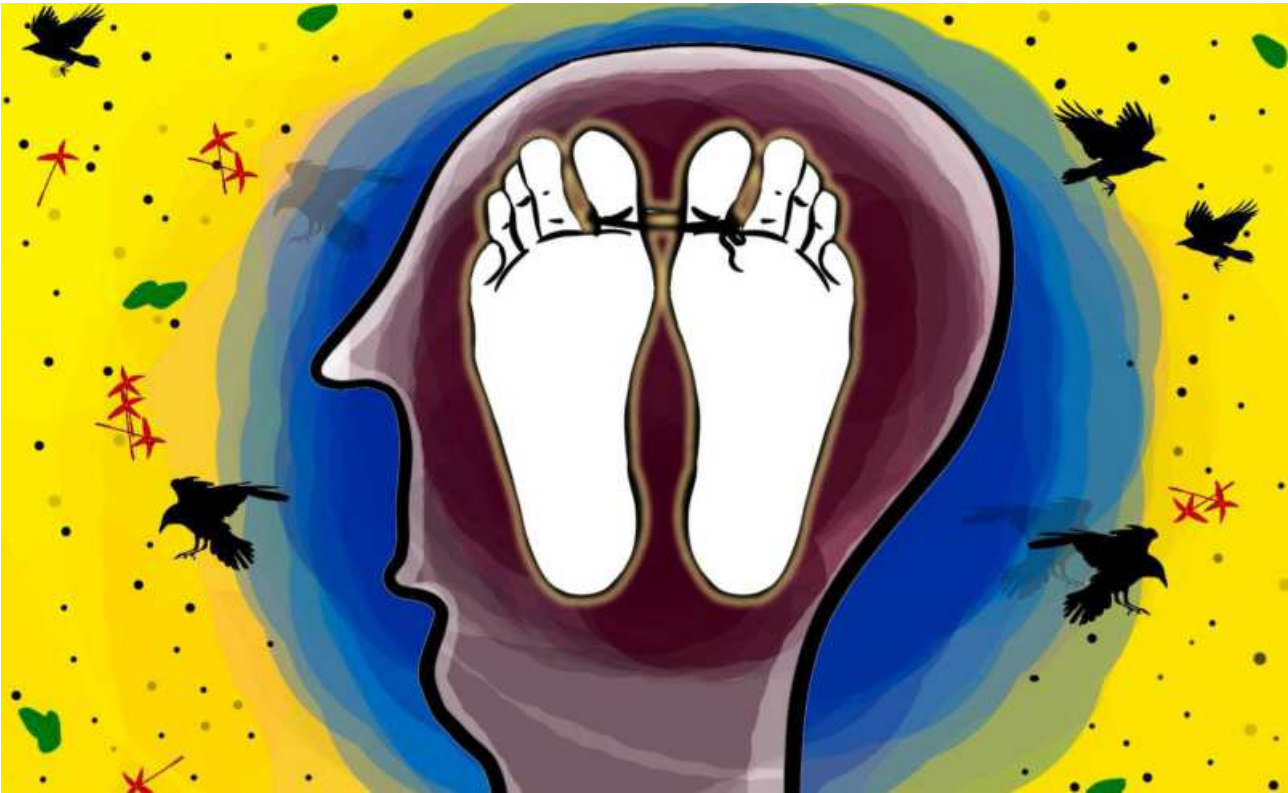


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

around him used to remark. His results came after he was gone. My parents, especially my mother, were devastated. She carried him in her heart till the end. My faint memory of him was when we were playing outside our house in the rain, wearing a grey half-piece and a white shirt. I had his only black-and-white photograph for many years in an album, which I lost during one of my transfers from one country to another.

In my youth, I do not remember attending many condolences except holding the frozen body of a friend at university who passed away in his sleep after having a sumptuous dinner and drinks.

Twelve years ago, I lost my mother to prolonged diabetes. She passed away when I was not in India. When I reached home, she was on ice. I took part in the funeral and went through the rituals. She was the most precious treasure for me. No one read my mind the way she did.

The COVID-19 pandemic was chillingly horrific. I lost both my uncles in one week. I was serving

abroad. I was told that both were lucky to receive communal funeral services at that time of catastrophe. Both were my teachers at school.

Over the years, I realised that one does not fear death for oneself but for the near and dear ones. If one has a family, one often thinks of the children, the spouse and dependent parents – what will happen to them after one is gone? In a sense, untimely death is scary because it may shatter the lives of the living. As time passes and one fulfils one’s social and familial duties and responsibilities towards the loved ones, one feels lighter and more prepared to face reality.

Over the years, my perspective of death has evolved from an intricate Shakespearean notion of “cowards die many times before their deaths” and “the valiant never taste of death but once” to a more lucid one, that of certainty. As I saw my father and colleague rest in peace, Marcus Aurelius came to mind, “Death smiles at us all; all a man can do is smile back.”



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

**Cover story**  
Carving out a space for women’s voices to be heard in a male-dominated society is an extremely difficult task. (‘The paradox of India’s woman politician’; Sept. 29) Despite women reaching new heights every day, they continue to be shackled by the past and present. **Kirti Wadhawan**

The author’s comparison of Atishi’s nomination as Delhi’s Chief Minister to Rabri Devi’s in Bihar in 1997 is unfair. The former was already a minister overseeing 13 major departments, while the latter was a homemaker thrust into the post under dynastic compulsions. Calling herself a ‘seat warmer’ while committing to the new role demonstrates Atishi’s humility — a trait so rare in today’s politicians. **Kamal Laddha**

This insightful essay on translations, reminded me of Vanamala Vishwanathan’s *The Life of Harishchandra*, which is the English translation of Raghavanka’s Kannada classic. (‘Living between languages’; Sept. 29) A few years ago, I had the opportunity of listening to Prof. Vishwanathan’s mellifluous rendition of her translated work and was completely enthralled by it. Of course, AI cannot replace human translators who are dedicated to the art of translation. **Varsha V. Shenoy**

A scholar may be killed but not his thought and spirit. (‘Unpacking the death of a scholar’; Sept. 29) Samudaya theatre group is doing a commendable job by staging Vikram Visaji’s play *Rakta Vilapa* based on the life and death of M.M. Kalburgi. This play should be shown in all big cities. **Navin Katyal**

Kalki’s world and its characters stay with you forever. (Kalki’s *Ponniyin Selvan* turns 125’; Sept. 29) His novel *Alai Osai* written in the backdrop of Independence is my favourite and the last hundred-odd pages are sure to melt hearts. The portrayal of the horrors of Partition still haunts me. English translations will make his writings reach a wider audience. **Rohith Varon S.S.**

The quality of everyday food has genuinely become an issue and this needs to be highlighted and spoken about more often. (‘Going bananas in New India’; Sept. 29) Fruits and vegetables are a crucial part of our diet and it is important that we get the best out of them. **Himani Borole**

Saba Mahjoor’s columns offer a peek into the Kashmiri way of life. (‘The wife who ‘quiet-quit’ after 60 years’; Sept. 29) They are storehouses of wisdom and a pure joy to read. **S. Lalita**

In the Sept. 29 article titled ‘Kalki’s *Ponniyin Selvan* turns 125’, the number refers to the novelist’s birth anniversary, and not as mentioned. The error is regretted. — Editor

Teachers must strike the right balance to foster inclusivity and bridge the cultural, linguistic and learning gaps **Maithiri Venkat**

The mind can be a double-edge sword, serving up both good and bad memories **G. Swaminathan**

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: [openpage@thehindu.co.in](mailto: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.

## Saying it with an emoji

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The rise of information technology has revolutionised communication, making it faster, easier, and more affordable. Traditional forms of written communication, such as inland letters and telegrams, have largely fallen out of use, replaced by digital alternatives such as emails and SMS, and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Instagram.

However, navigating the digital world requires a thorough understanding of the tools at our disposal. Emojis are one such tool.

When cellphones first became widespread, they introduced the short messaging service (SMS), limited to a few words. This service became popular for its convenience and cost-effectiveness, but it also constrained our communication skills, pushing us to abbreviate words – thank you became ‘TY’, for instance. Emojis soon emerged as a new visual form of communication, further altering how we express ourselves.

While emojis have gained popularity as efficient and expressive symbols, their widespread use has come at a cost. They have led to a decline in the use of formal communication techniques, particularly among millennials who often prioritise digital literacy over other forms of communication. However, it is crucial to recognise that digital literacy is just one aspect of effective communication, not a replacement for it. The younger generation must understand that relying solely on digital tools, such as emojis, can be misleading when it comes to developing strong writing skills.

The true test of digital communication skills lies in the ability to use these symbols to convey complex emotions and ideas accurately. Yet, in academic and professional settings, over-reliance on visual communication can be problematic. The shift from traditional writing to emoji-heavy communication may lead young people to mistakenly believe that their skills are universally acceptable, potentially threatening the richness of languages and cultures. We are already witnessing a trend toward “emojified” writing among the younger generation.

The language of emojis is inadequate for understanding complex narratives or analysing the deeper meanings of words in context. It is time for society to acknowledge this concern and take action.

## The annual ‘whitewash’

Not glossing over defects, but making a building stand out with a new coat

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The term “to whitewash” is metaphorically used to mean glossing over or concealing faults. The origin of the term could be traced to refurbishing a building with lime-wash which can hide defects and present an attractive appearance.

Long before the advent of paint, the old-fashioned and economical whitewash was the order of the day. Mark Twain’s classic account of how Tom Sawyer whitewashed a fence had immortalised this occupation.

Whitewashing was once a standard practice in many homes. It is still popular in rural areas and in old residential parts of towns. An annual ritual I remember well was whitewashing undertaken in our ancestral house. It was carried out either close to the Pongal festival

or at any convenient time during summer. All members of the family including me, a middle-school student then, would cooperate to ensure a successful operation. It was both pain and pleasure for us in equal measure. Pain, as our daily routine would be upset. It was pleasure to watch the house brightening up.

Selvam, the ebullient whitewash-painter of our family, would remind my father sufficiently early that the task was due. Father would ask him to buy the materials and complete the job.

Selvam would empty a few bags of whole lime in a big cement tank near the well in our garden. He would then pour water into the tank after which the whole content would boil with a hissing sound as if it was placed on fire. As we, children, were watching it with amusement, my father would explain: “Lime



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

reacts readily with water to produce slaked lime, which is the chemical, calcium hydroxide. So much heat is evolved during the reaction that the lime mixture starts boiling.” Selvam would make special brushes out of coconut fronds for painting.

Before the operation commenced, every one of us would start getting rid of clutter. Selvam and his two assistants would help remove the small household things to the porch. The workers would move the heavy cupboards, beds, boxes and benches away from the walls. All things would be covered by bed sheets to protect them from dust. We would be elated on

## Freewheeling ride on a bicycle

The machine was a precious possession, a symbol of hard work

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I still cherish the timeless memories of my childhood, especially the triumphant moment when I finally learned to ride a bicycle. Despite being a late bloomer, I mustered the courage to mount a bike during high school. Our ancestral house in Fraser Town in Bengaluru had a small open space where I received my first lessons from my father. “Maintain a straight path, keep your gaze ahead, and stay

attentive,” he would say and this became my guiding principle.

Given my petite stature, mounting the saddle was a daunting task. I employed a technique called “scissors”, placing my left foot on the pedal and squeezing the other foot between the frame and the crossbar.

Once I felt more confident, I explored the outdoors. Once while I zoomed on with the wind behind me, a septuagenarian neighbour with a strapped leg suddenly emerged from his house. Startled, I lost



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

control, causing me to collide with him.

He crumpled to the floor in a heap. A crowd of onlookers gathered, their eyes filled with shock, pity, and anger. They helped the man seething with pain to his feet and looked daggers at me. The injured man’s wife stormed out of the house, her face contorted with rage, hurling insults at me and threatening to complain to my parents. I was filled with fear and guilt as I saw the

consequences of my act. I reluctantly rode my bicycle home, fully aware of what awaited me. My parents gave me a dressing down and barred me from taking out the cycle for a few weeks.

During my pre-university days, I rented a bicycle for a nominal fee (10 paise per hour) from a nearby shop to explore the city.

During the college lunch break, I would borrow a mate’s bicycle, wheel home, grab a quick bite and then return to the campus. I persisted with this until I received my grandpa’s disused bicycle after his passing.

The moment I could afford one after joining a state-run bank, it became a precious possession, a symbol of my hard work and determination. It was a journey from renting to borrowing and finally owning a bicycle.





**Bishwanath Ghosh**  
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Tagore and the tram were born in Calcutta almost around the same time – the poet in 1861 and the latter in 1873 – and they both went on to become synonymous with the city. Today, more than a century-and-a-half later, while Tagore still runs in the veins of the city, the tram will no longer run on its roads.

Whether you want to pat the tram’s back that it is ending its journey after running non-stop for 151 years, or feel overcome by anger that an environment-friendly mode of transport is being needlessly put to an end, depends on the philosophy or ideology you follow. The fact is that you’ll see the iconic Kolkata tram only in photographs and reels. But it’s also a fact that nothing is final and official yet.

The matter is still in the Calcutta High Court, which formed an advisory committee in June 2023 to decide on how the tramway could be maintained. The West Bengal government, even though it has not officially spelt out its stand, has made it publicly known what it is going to tell the court: that it will do away with the tram and retain only one route – through the Maidan – for the purpose of tourism. And that is the cause for the sudden outpouring of anger and nostalgia on social media.

**‘Living industrial heritage’**  
Not many outside Kolkata know that the tram is already almost dead. Just three routes are officially functional, of them only two are actually functional at the moment – the third remains suspended due to pipeline work. The total number of trams is only about 10.

Compare this to 1947, when there



were 25 routes with some 200 tram cars. By the 1980s, the number of routes had gone up to 37, and the trams to 300. Over the years, there was a miniscule decline in the numbers, but a sharp and sudden downside happened after the Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011. By 2015, barely 10 routes remained functional, served by about 100 trams. To those who see the inevitability of the tram’s closure, what’s most disturbing is that it is the most environment-friendly mode of transport in Kolkata, the only Indian city where it still runs.

“EV [electric vehicle] is the new buzz word. Shiny new ones are being peddled. They tick the ‘eco-friendly’ box – a term that applies to a wide range of things from shampoos to saunas. At the same time, the original EV, which started trundling from Esplanade to Kidderpore 122 years ago [what began in 1873 was horse-driven] is being shut down,” mourns actor Dhritiman Chatterji.



# END OF THE LINE FOR KOLKATA’S TRAMS

Parties and protests mark the last days of the city’s iconic mode of transport. And debates about tramways being feeders for the metro and mass alternatives for EVs

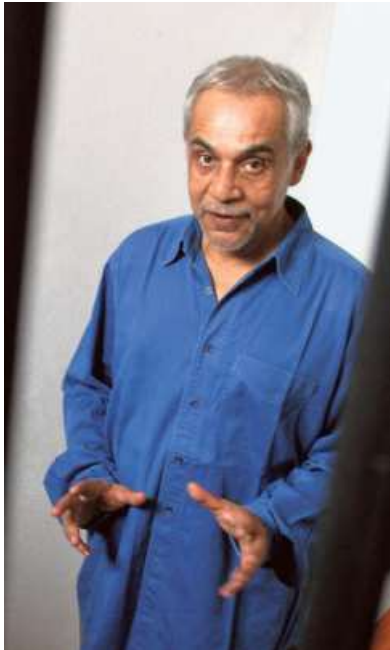


“This at a time when most cities in the world are ramping up their electric transport infrastructure. What an irony!”

Retired scientist Debasish Bhattacharyya, who is president of CTUA, or Calcutta Tram Users’ Association, and a member of the court-appointed panel, is, however, hopeful. “My sixth sense says the

departure of the tram won’t be easy,” he says. “There are two major reasons for this: one, the attachment that citizens across generations feel for this living industrial heritage; two, a modern outlook on the tramway that has emerged in recent times and is becoming popular world over.”

CTUA is perhaps the only



EV is the new buzz word. Shiny new ones are being peddled. But the original EV, which started trundling from Esplanade to Kidderpore 122 years ago [what began in 1873 was horse-driven], is being shut down

**DHRITIMAN CHATTERJI**  
Actor

organisation that has been relentlessly protesting against the neglect that the tram has been subjected to in the past decade. “People of Kolkata don’t consider the tram simply as a mode of public transport. For them, it is ancestral property. It is a signature of the city, like the Howrah Bridge. Wiping out the tram would mean the amputation of a vital organ of the city,” he adds.

**Final farewell** (Clockwise from left) Inside one of Kolkata’s trams; Dhritiman Chatterji; an archival photo from Chowringhee; the tram will now ply in a small loop for tourists; at the tram party. (GETTY IMAGES AND PTI)

**Backbone of urban transport?**  
People like Mudar Patherya, a well-known heritage activist who often personally takes up projects to restore pieces of Kolkata’s history, are preferring a pragmatic stand: that the tram was hardly serving any actual purpose. Last weekend, Patherya organised a ‘tram party’ – some 80 people getting onto a tram and travelling, over music and sandwiches, from Gariahat to Esplanade and back – in order to “break the narrative which has only been complaining about the

## Around the world

According to a survey by the International Association of Public Transport, as of 2021, 403 cities in 62 countries have trams and light rail transit systems. Besides Kolkata, Melbourne in Australia boasts one of the world’s oldest operational tramways (dating back to 1885), while Europe has the largest concentration of tram networks – having opened 624 km of lines since 2016.

disappearance of the tram”. “The idea was to celebrate what trams have done for us for decades, instead of mourning its exit. The mood was not sombre, it was fun, and a trifle regretful maybe. I don’t have much hope for the tram because it was failing to serve any economic need. It is the metro that is taking over the mass rapid transport system – the tram is neither mass nor rapid,” he says.

But many feel that the tram still has a future. “It can be the backbone of our urban transport – modernising them as feeders for metro rail is a small investment with the potential for monumental impact,” says Arghyadip Hatua, an urban transport activist and a promoter of walkability. “At present, the city has 60 km of tram tracks. All we need is willingness on the part of the West Bengal government.”

Tagore did write a short poem on the tram – in a language-learning book for children – but nothing sad, or else Kolkata would have been replaying that poem today. But there are many songs of Tagore that are sprinkled with melancholy; they will come alive once the tram is dead.

**New perspectives** Pages from Tara Books’ *Seed*, and Art1st’s *Abanindranath’s House of Stories*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



## Menaka Raman

In *A Book is a Bee* (Tulika Books), Lavanya Karthik writes: “A Book is a Bee,/ Buzzing in your head,/ With things to say,/ A Book is a Tree,/ With branches to climb,/ To see the world around.”

Much has been written about the metaphorical forms a book takes: they are doors, windows, and yes, even bees. But how has the physical form of the book been imagined? The earliest books with elements that could be manipulated were created for scholars, such as *Astronomicum Caesareum* (Imperial Astronomy, 1540) or Humphry Repton’s *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1794). But today, they have found their way to readers of all ages.

In *Children’s Books: An Indian Story*, edited by Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao (Eklavya), which came out a few months ago, V. Geetha and Divya Vijaykumar of Tara Books write how the publishing house sought to creatively ‘disrupt’ normal reading



# FLIPS, FOLDS, WINDOWS AND POP-UPS

**Indian books publishers haven’t always been adventurous with interactive books. But veterans like Tara Books and outfits such as Art1st are changing things**

practices in the country by ‘remaking the book form, changing the simple act of turning the page into a playful exercise that allows children to read meaning through engagement with the form’.

Avinash Veeraraghavan, a Bengaluru-based artist has been collecting interactive books for over a decade. I asked him what it was that drew him to the work of Hervé Tullet and Takahiro Kurashima. “A sense of play,” he responded. His answer made me contemplate why I was drawn to these books. I

realised it was because they force me to slow down and become more intentional in the way I interact with each page. I remember reading *Hello Zoo* by Rod Campbell to my children when they were younger and how each flap drew the reading experience out. Their delight at discovering what lay beneath didn’t diminish even after multiple readings.

**Seedlings hiding in pages**  
Internationally, interactive books have been a publishing mainstay,

but in India, few produce them, perhaps due to the costs involved. While Tulika Books and Pratham Books have had some forays into the space, it is Tara Books and recently Art1st, who have experimented the most.

Tara Books’ first designer Rathna Ramanathan would apparently quip: “The book, as we know it, should and must change.” From their first scroll book, *Hensparrow Turns Purple* published in 1998, to one of my personal favourites, *An Indian*

*Beach: By Day and Night* by Joëlle Jolivet, Tara has been contemplating the form of the book.

The idea for their most recent interactive work, *Seed*, by Gita Wolf and brothers Tushar and Mayur Vayeda, took root during the COVID-19 lockdown, when Wolf found herself tending to a small patch of land on a farm outside Puducherry. The narrative is in the form of four short essays each with its own unique paper form that captures an aspect of the seed: from a pop-up to leporello (long accordion folds) to a booklet to a massive foldout.

“Watching plants grow, I thought of a narrative that would call attention to the seed as straddling the realms of both nature and culture,” she shares. The meditative essays are accompanied by the Vayeda brothers’ delicate, intricate Warli art. Wolf knew from the start she wanted them to illustrate the book given their living knowledge of plants and trees and deep interest in the environment.

**Paper wheels and accordions**  
Art1st’s interactive books introduce young readers to the lives and work of Indian artists such as Meera



Mukherjee, Ganesh Pyne, Abanindranath Tagore, and Jamini Roy. Shambhavi Thakur, a designer with the publishing house, shares that all choices regarding the shape and form of each book are made to do justice to the story of the artist in a way that will speak to a child. “Whatever elements the book needs to have – emotionally and thematically, like tension, play, empathy, and drama – are translated into forms such as texture, interactivity, and materials.”

In *Abanindranath’s House of Stories* by Likla and Eva, small windows cut into the pages provide readers a glimpse into Tagore’s home at #5 Jorasanko, and the painter’s inner world and art. While in *Ganesh Pyne’s Twilight Dreams* by Vaishali Shroff and Priya Kuriyan, pop-ups and accordion folds add a feeling of expansiveness to the illustrative spreads, giving readers a sense of the breath of Pyne’s creativity.

While Art1st’s books are primarily intended for younger readers and make their way to libraries, schools and NGOs across the country, Tara sees their books as intended for readers of all ages. “We are often bemused to see adults gushing over children’s books, and young readers leafing through a book on indigenous art,” shares Vijaykumar.

Whether one is four or 40, we can all benefit from more play, intentionality and slowing down in our lives. And if we can find them in the spinning of an artful paper wheel, I can think of nothing better.

*The writer is a children’s book author and columnist based in Bengaluru.*