



# magazine

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(Clockwise from right) Pune's City Pride Multiplex, which has India's first Dolby Cinema; an LED-based system at AAA Cinemas in Hyderabad; fans at a first day-first show viewing of Rajinikanth's *Coolie* in a Mumbai cinema hall; and the audience at City Pride. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, GETTY IMAGES)



## FIXING THE LIGHT BULB

Despite having over 9,000 screens and enough content to fill cinema halls, India is still far from achieving international-level picture and sound. And there's plenty to blame, from outdated lamp projectors to exhibitors cutting costs

### Vinay Aravind

**T**wo of the world's biggest film festivals – in Venice and Toronto – have just concluded, where filmmakers and film lovers alike have experienced the very best of cinema exhibition. Those from India will now have to return home and resign themselves to the sub-par experience of watching movies in our cinema theatres, and the contrast will likely be stark. Here, many a time the picture is dim, dull and washed out. If you haven't noticed this yet, keep an eye out the next time.

Going to the cinema is a bit like going to church. The cool dark auditorium, the towering screen, the hushed silence, all make for an immersive, almost spiritual process. This also means that short of something egregious, you're unlikely to question the nature of the experience, apart from grumbling about the price of popcorn.

"I often find that a movie I've seen in the hall looks much better on OTT – the colours, the light and shadow, the details," says acclaimed film critic Baradwaj Rangan. "People talk about the big screen experience but why will you go for the big screen when the quality is so poor? I can get a much better picture at home!"

The grim state of the movie-watching experience comprises many elements, ranging from high ticket prices and increasingly smaller screens, to sound leakage from the next

auditorium, but for this article, the focus is on projection. There are roughly 9,000 screens across the country and, inevitably, there is a wide range in the quality one encounters. The venues that deliver the highest standards of projection are few and far between. For a country obsessed with cinema, this is a glaring drawback.

#### Fading lamp projectors

The beating heart of the cinema theatre is the projector, a big, bright, light-emitting machine that throws the image onto the screen. The current crop of digital projectors can broadly be divided into two types, the older ones that use lamps as a light source, and the newer ones that use laser beams to project the image. The vast

majority of theatres in India still use lamp projectors.

"Lasers are 20%-25% more expensive and far more recent compared to lamp projectors," says Senthil Kumar, co-founder of Qube Cinema, a leading provider of digital cinema solutions (including projectors) in India. "So, laser projectors will be a very small percentage in India, maybe 10%-15%."

I remember watching the Mammootty-starrer *Bramayugam* (2024) at a nearby multiplex in Chennai. The black-and-white film, a folk horror-thriller set in 17th century Malabar, is a visual masterpiece in monochrome, with the blacks and whites and the contrast between them crucial to the experience. But when the film started to play, everything just looked dull and grey. I was wondering if this was a deliberate choice from the filmmakers, so once I got home I checked the trailer of the movie on my phone. I was shocked to realise it looked completely different. I felt cheated.

Shehnad Jalal, the cinematographer of *Bramayugam*, agrees. "It's a nightmare for many cinematographers to see their film in the theatres. The brightness is low, the contrast is not there, sometimes the frame itself is cropped. These days, once the movie is out of post-production, it's mainly at film festivals that we get to see it the way we intended."

There are a few reasons for this kind of sub-par projection. At the core of this is the light source in most of these projectors, the lamp. These lamps steadily lose brightness as they

age, and have a lifespan of a few months. Replacing the lamp can cost up to ₹50,000 depending on the model, and the theatre will have to do this for each screen, every few months. "Towards the end of its life, the lamp will start to deteriorate, and it won't be able to provide full brightness any more. A little before that point, one must replace it. But theatres may wait till the lamp totally fades away," says Kumar of Qube.

**Compromising on brightness**  
Some exhibitors have been known to cut costs in other ways, too. One of them is to run the projector at a lower brightness, to prolong the life of the lamp. "Often, on the day of a movie's release, they will run the lamp with good brightness," says Sathesh Thulasi, associate vice president at Qube. "Then gradually they will decrease it."

Recently, Kushan Patel, a film enthusiast and communications professional in Vadodara, went for a show of the blockbuster *Sinners* (2025), headlined by Michael B. Jordan, at his local multiplex, and noticed the projection was too dim. He rounded up some fellow viewers and complained to the manager. "After some denial and protests, they agreed and restarted the film with better brightness," says Patel.

Theatre owners are probably banking on the fact that viewers won't notice the difference. In the course of researching this article, I found that was indeed the case. Rather than dwell on the picture quality – or the lack thereof – the average viewer doesn't seem to think there is much of a problem in theatres. That said, some film



**It's a nightmare for** many cinematographers to see their film in the theatres. The brightness is low, the contrast is not there, sometimes the frame itself is cropped. It's mainly at film festivals that we get to see it the way we intended

**SHEHNAD JALAL**  
Cinematographer (*Bramayugam*, 2024)

technicians are optimistic about the situation slowly changing. "Even a ₹10,000 Android phone has a good, bright screen. So the public has a better idea now, of how a picture ought to look," says Manesh Madhavan, the cinematographer behind the atmospheric Malayalam film *Ela Veeza Poonchira* (2022).

**Standardisation needed**  
Technicians have always railed against the poor quality of projection in theatres in India. In the days of film, the understanding was that theatres in 'A centres' – the big cities – would turn their projectors bright, while B

and C centres (smaller towns and villages) were known to run their projectors dimmer to cut costs. "So when they made prints for the A centres, they would make it correctly, for B centres they would make it one stop brighter, and for C centres they'd do two stops brighter, to try and compensate for the projection loss," says Jalal.

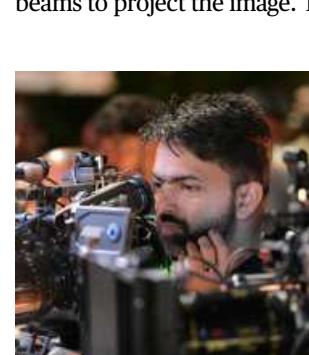
With the advent of digital projection, those old equations are out of the window. You can encounter bad, dim projection in both cities and villages now. "When Ang Lee watched his film *Life of Pi* [2012] at Sathyam Cinemas in Chennai, he remarked that it was probably the best projection he'd seen," says Devanshu Arya, a Chennai-based filmmaker, about the cinema theatre which was subsequently acquired by multiplex chain PVR-INOX. "But now the quality at Sathyam has deteriorated so much," he adds.

PVR was at the forefront of the multiplex revolution in India, establishing the first multiplex in 1997 in New Delhi. As of December 2024, the merged entity of PVR-INOX operates 1,749 screens across 355 properties in 111 cities across India and Sri Lanka. When we reached out to them with queries about the number of laser projectors in their venues or the quality of projection, PVR-INOX declined to comment. Cinepolis, possibly the second largest exhibitor in India, operates 449 screens. We reached out to them too with similar queries, but did not hear back at the time of going to press.

And yet, while the picture quality remains inconsistent, exhibitors are happy to spend on ostentatious interiors, recliner seats, gourmet food, and other bells and whistles. "Many theatres now have different priorities, they want to provide luxury amenities, but they don't care about the core aspects of the experience," says cinematographer Madhavan.

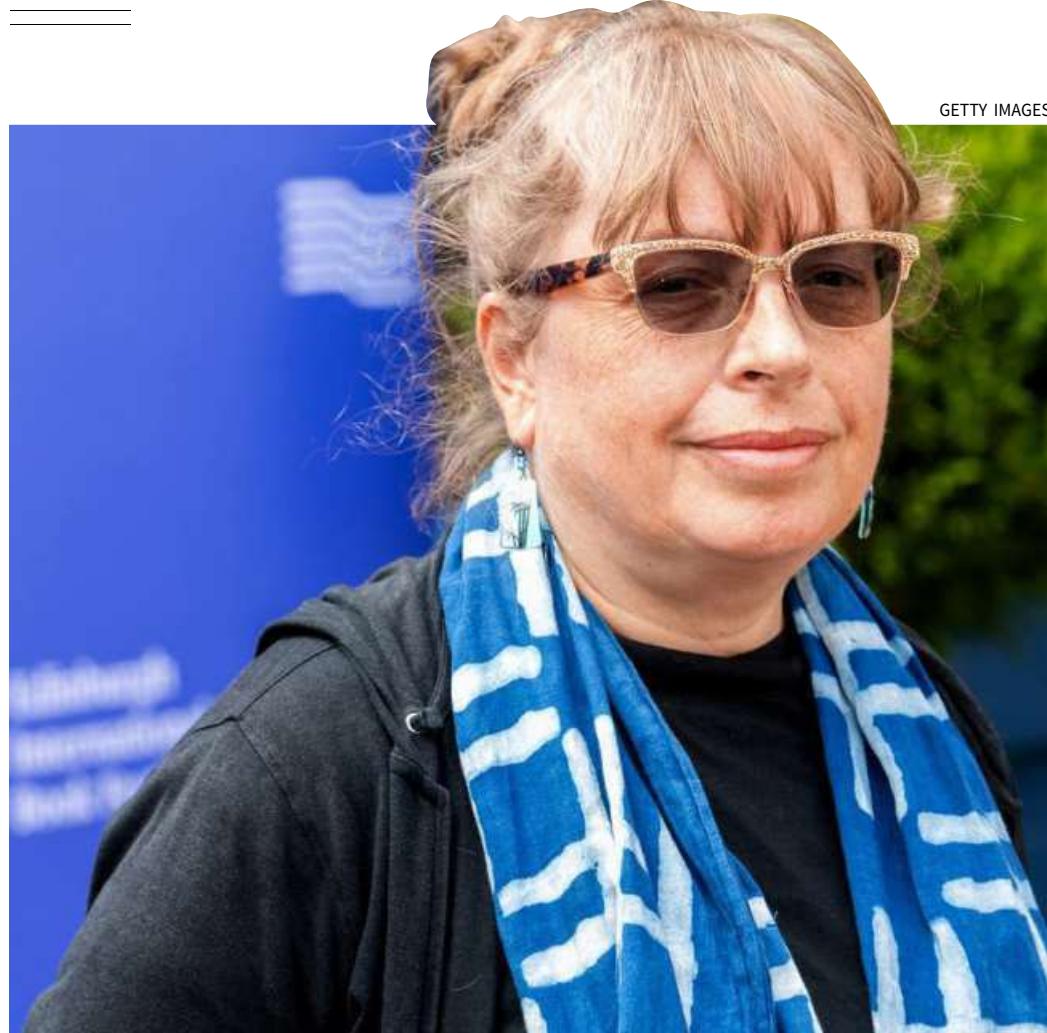
"Standardisation is what is needed," adds S. Radhakrishnan, award-winning audiographer and sound engineer at the Kerala State Films Development Corporation, which runs 17 screens in the State. "Cinematographers and exhibitors' associations all need to come together to put a system in place that will make sure that these films, which are made with so much effort and care, are presented to the viewers in the correct manner."

**CONTINUED ON**  
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**Even a ₹10,000 Android** phone has a good, bright screen. So the public has a better idea now, of how a picture ought to look

**MANESH MADHAVAN**  
Cinematographer (*Ela Veeza Poonchira*, 2022)



## DAISY ROCKWELL HAS CHUTZPAH

The International Booker-winning translator makes a bold literary decision in her new novel, a “gripping” family saga straddling continents

Jerry Pinto

**T**here are two kinds of books in which people see ghosts and we must take them seriously: the first is the ghost story, an old and wonderful form; and there is the magical realist book where phantasmas and revenants may mingle with the living. Daisy Rockwell places her book, *Alice Sees Ghosts*, in the realist tradition – we are told when the protagonist Alice brushes her teeth and the colour of her nightgown as she squats in the garden – but she sees her dead grandfather in his wing of the family home.

This reveals itself as a plot device soon enough. The young woman must be led to discover her grandfather's other family in Mussoorie and so she dutifully comes to India with her fiancé, Ronit Roy, a psychiatrist and first-generation American citizen. Her grandfather turns up there as well but adds nothing more to the story. He could have written Alice a letter but so much more atmospheric to come back and look through an atlas in one's old home.

**A double-edged sword**  
To make such a literary decision takes chutzpah, a Yiddish word that could have only been born in the U.S. It is chutzpah that allows the citizens of that country to call themselves Americans when they share the North American continent with 22 other independent countries. It is chutzpah that puts ‘Winner of the International Booker Prize’ under Rockwell’s name on the cover of this book. (If you are wondering what author Geetanjali Shree, co-winner of the Prize, thinks of it, flip the book over. She writes that the book is “a gripping saga that excavates the dark, all-too-human secrets of a

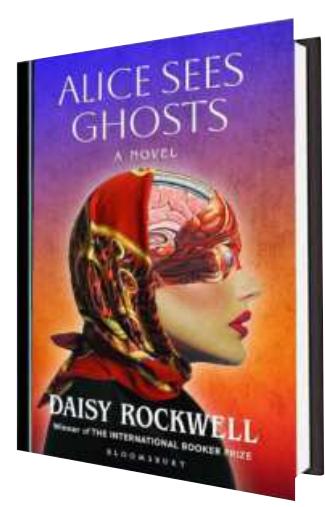
family straddling two continents...”)

Early in the book, on the first page, we are warned that Alice speaks with “precise diction and elaborate sentence structures” due to “a lengthy spell, now over, of speaking not at all, or only rarely”. (Again, I found no trace of this thereafter. She seemed to speak in the ordinary Novelese, the special language that we novelists have invented for our characters who never stumble, never stutter, and only occasionally say something like ‘Of why?’ as Alice does.) The aphasia was what brought her serendipitously to meet Dr. Roy, who falls in love with her non-ness.

This non-ness is a double-edged sword. It can either leave readers hanging over an abyss or it can allow them to fill in the empty space with their own responses and reactions. Alice’s non-ness can be tracked back to her mother, Clare, a narcissistic alcoholic who throws tantrums when her daughter wants to get a job. Thus drifting, we meet Alice at the bedside of her grandmother, Nanette – a veritable *House of Bernarda Alba* this – who is dying slowly.

But then this is a clever inversion. Alice, U.S.-born, is a drifter; Ronit Roy, Bengali boy, is the driven achiever who gets a medical degree. Alice sees ghosts; Ronit is the rationalist. You have been warned again. Does Rockwell rock well? Well enough. She could have done with a little editing. There are at least two scenes where Alice or Ronit tells us what we have already been told. There is not much new information added nor are we invited to a game of Chinese whispers, watching the words being mangled. But to balance that off, there are two scenes which belie the bloodlessness of the Bostonian (or near Bostonian) bluebloods: they involve theft, vomit and screaming. And Rockwell allows us to enjoy them without comment.

The reviewer is a poet and novelist.



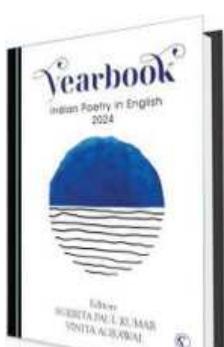
**Alice Sees Ghosts**  
Daisy Rockwell  
Bloomsbury  
₹699

## BROWSER

### Yearbook: Indian Poetry in English 2024

Ed. Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal  
Pippa Rann Books U.K.  
₹499

Put together after a blind selection of poetry by writers of Indian origin, the verses in this collection include a mix of debut voices and celebrated names.



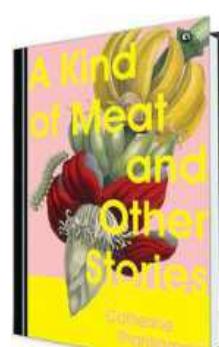
### A Kind of Meat and Other Stories

Catherine Thangamma

Aleph

₹699

Recipient of the Crossword Book Award 2011, the author and translator based in Kochi puts forth a provocative collection that highlights the burden of women living in a conservative and hypocritical society.



### Days at the Torunka Café

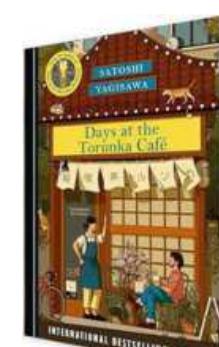
### What We Can Know

Ian McEwan

Jonathan Cape

₹899

This genre-defying novel spans the years 2014 to 2119 in a world reshaped by rising seas. A great lost poem, revelations of entangled love and a brutal crime are among the themes explored here by the winner of the 1998 Booker Prize.



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# A river runs through it all

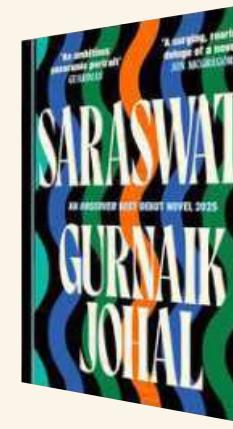
In giving a potted history of various issues, the narrative in this ambitious debut novel ends up feeling distant

Sheila Kumar

Gurnaij Johal’s debut novel *Saraswati* is audacious in scope and epic in scale. The resurgence of that ancient mythical river, the Saraswati, is braided here with the individual stories of characters, all of whom are part of one extended family. Multiple narratives across different continents deal with varied themes ranging from eco-terrorism to hate crimes, right-wing politics, and much else.

Like the intricate embroidery in a *phulkari* dupatta, which plays an important part in this tale, a family’s origin story takes shape. The story begins with Satnam returning from the U.K. to his ancestral farm for his grandmother’s funeral. This coincides with the discovery of water in a dead well, which is taken as a sign of the return of the river Saraswati. As the river is imbued with historical and religious significance, all kinds of people descend on Satnam’s farm. Soon a nationalist agenda takes root; holy men, politicians, archaeologists all work to serve the agenda. Satnam, a bit adrift, finds himself getting embroiled in unpleasant ways.

The chapters alternate between the past in 19th century Punjab, and the present. An inter-caste marriage takes place back in those times. In the present, we meet a diverse cast of



**Saraswati**  
Gurnaij Johal  
Serpent’s Tail  
₹699

characters: a musician, an archaeology professor, an entomologist, a hustler who also manages the social media feed of a famous musician, a stuntman. They will turn out to be descendants of the inter-caste couple, distant cousins all. Contact is established and some sort of relationship is forged.

#### Familiar events

Placing the cousins in different occupations affords the writer room to highlight various concerns. We see an eco-terrorist group planning an attack, and the unfortunate consequences of actions that are deemed justified play out here. Climate change and its effects come into focus in the work of the entomologist. The use of archaeologists to further a jingoistic

programme is touched upon.

Threaded through all the different stories is the way in which a nationalist right-wing government works on the myth of unearthing a lost river to consolidate power. An alternate history takes shape and in short order, becomes the norm. There is much propaganda. Grandiose plans are made. A whole new shining city is built. Elections are won on the basis of the religious fervour thus engendered.

Some of the characters will find their lives impacted by the unfolding events, all of them will finally gather at a celebration in the new city built by the government. This then, will lead to a tragedy familiar from news headlines. But all will not be lost.

There is ambition in the telling of this story but it is told in a distant manner, so the reader does not feel too invested. In giving a potted history about the various issues, there tends to be too much exposition. It is the story of the inter-caste couple that remains affecting. The *qisse* (stories) of Punjab and the story of the *phulkaris* is incorporated in the larger picture in a clever way. This Observer Best Debut Novel of 2025 is both an engaging and promising work.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based author, journalist and manuscript editor.

## Bengaluru chronicles

Sundar Sarukkai’s new novel is a loud affirmation that a city has its own language

Stanley Carvalho

Bengaluru’s dramatic change from a sleepy, ‘Garden City’ to a bustling tech city over the last few decades has seen, among others, the rise of a multicultural population, increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, language and religion.

Philosopher and writer Sundar Sarukkai’s second novel *Water Days* is a reflective look at the changes in his home city; how everyday life gets formed and what happens to the city insidiously and quietly.

He explores migration and the changing social fabric, patriarchy, language, linguistic conflicts, power and who gets to belong in the melting pot that is Bengaluru.

The story is set in the late 1990s in Mathikere, a working-class neighbourhood in north Bengaluru, comprising locals and migrants from across India, giving it a cosmopolitan character. Mathikere, in many ways, epitomises similar areas of the Karnataka capital reshaped by the winds of change.

#### Lost innocence

The narrative revolves around the protagonist Raghavendra, a former security guard, now aspiring detective with dreams of starting a grocery store. He lives with his wife, two daughters and two paying guests – one from Bihar and the other from Tamil Nadu.

The untimely demise of a teenage girl causes a sense of disquiet in the neighbourhood. Tasked by his wife, Raghavendra assumes the role of detective to unravel the mystery behind the death. But, with many captivated by this incident, and working through a complicated set of circumstances, including language, class, fear and police indifference, the search for truth is an uphill battle. His relentless pursuit leads him to not only the shocking revelation about the teenager’s death but also the death of the city’s simple and



Sarukkai’s story is set in a working-class neighbourhood comprising locals and migrants from across India, giving it a cosmopolitan character. (GETTY IMAGES)



**Water Days**  
Sundar  
Sarukkai  
Tearoom  
₹499

uncorrupted past: “Their lives only reflected the violent changes in the city, changes that would irrevocably erase the age of innocence in the life of Bangalore.”

#### Dynamic narrative

It is not just the title but ‘water’ is a recurrent element in the story, a metaphor for air, for life and more. It is around the public taps of the area that women gather before dawn to fill their pots and vessels; a daily ritual for

survival, to socialise, trade gossip, even squabble. In the final denouement, the women, on the 13th day when the soul finds liberation, assemble around the public tap in an extraordinary display of solidarity and power.

The tragic death, the rumours, the red herrings, the investigation and resolving the mystery not only infuse a touch of a whodunit but lend dynamism to the narrative.

If Sarukkai’s debut work of fiction *Following a Prayer* (2023) was about belief and life itself and the truth of the story lay in its silence, *Water Days* is a loud affirmation that a city has its own language and it is not the language that the people in the city speak. It is sensorial, “in the way rain falls on crooked tin sheets, in the sound of sliding slippers on slushy roads, the musky sound of breathing dogs, the clatter of vegetable carts, the crumpled sound of a bitten puff by hungry teeth”.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist.

# THE POPULATION CHALLENGE

Are southern States justified in saying they are being penalised for successful population control? A new book joins the delimitation debate



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

Sonalde Desai

**W**ith the announcement of the 2027 Census, a new political season has begun. The 42nd and 84th constitutional amendments froze parliamentary seat allocation to the State population based on the 1971 Census until after 2026. This freeze

was enacted to eliminate electoral disincentives for States to limit population growth. Census 2027 will provide an opportunity for re-examining delimitation.

It is in this context that the book, *Demography, Representation, Delimitation: The North-South Divide in India*, by historian Ravi K. Mishra, joint director at the Prime Minister's Museum and Library, takes on added significance. He argues that "the

continued use of the 1971 Census for seat allocation in Parliament and fiscal devolution, as demanded by many leaders from the south, lacks empirical, political and democratic justification."

#### Main contentions

Using data from population censuses from 1881 to 2011, this book makes three major arguments. First, it contends that demographic growth

**Demographic transition first occurred in the south and later in the north, resulting in increasing share of the south in overall population in the first half of the 20th century before the northern States caught up**

**Demography, Representation, Delimitation: The North-South Divide in India**  
Ravi K. Mishra  
Westland Books  
₹999

in northern States is greater than that in the southern States is an overstatement if we focus on the long span rather than recent decades. Drawing on the work of demographer Tim Dyson, it argues that different regions of the country have experienced population growth at varying periods in history.

The Demographic Transition - a movement from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality - is accompanied by a surge in population due to a lag between the two. Demographic transition first occurred in the south and later in the north, resulting in increasing share of the south in overall population in the first half of the 20th century before the northern States caught up.

The 1971 Census took place at a time when the population share of Bihar had fallen from 8.9% of overall national population to 7.7% while the share of Kerala had risen from 2.7% to 3.9%. In 2011, Bihar's share is 8.6% while that for Kerala is 2.8%. Hence, using a recent Census will return population shares to the period before the demographic transition began.

**Narrow focus**  
Interestingly, the book primarily focuses on Census 2011; however, if we were to use projections from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for 2026, the trend would be intensified, with population shares of 9.3% for Bihar and 2.5% for Kerala, with no end in sight.

The second contention is that the complaint by southern States that they are being penalised for successful population control is unjustified. This contention is made in a somewhat roundabout way by arguing that the fear of population explosion emerged in Western nations and was subsequently grafted onto Indian political discourse, with the expectation that States would implement a strong family planning programme to control population growth. However,

according to the book, family planning programmes have played only a limited role in spurring fertility decline. This is a narrow view of the role of state policies in shaping demographic outcomes. Demographic literature has identified mortality decline as one of the primary drivers for spurring fertility decline. When parents can be certain that their children will survive, they are more willing to stop at one or two children and not have additional children as insurance. It is well recognised that States like Kerala managed to reduce infant mortality at relatively low levels of economic development.

The book's third argument deserves the greatest attention. It demonstrates that the current delimitation strategy disenfranchises residents of northern and eastern States by allocating fewer seats to these States than they would be accorded if representation were equal. For example, with equal representation, Bihar would receive 47 Lok Sabha seats instead of the current 40, and Kerala's seats would decrease to 15 from the current 20.

**A way out**  
Here, we come to the crux of the debate. To what extent should political representation be tied to population shares? While ensuring fair representation is important, democratic societies must also seek to balance the rights of minority populations, in this case geographic minorities. A possible strategy may be to decouple the allocation of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha seats. Where Lok Sabha seat allocation may be based on population shares, Rajya Sabha seats could be allocated equally to all States - somewhat analogous to the division between House of Representatives and Senate in the U.S. with the former being based on population share and the latter allocating two senators to each State, regardless of its size.

The book would have been far more valuable if, instead of making a one-sided case for population-based delimitation, it had focused on the delicate balance between geographic and population representation.

*The reviewer is Professor, NCAER, and University of Maryland. Views are personal.*

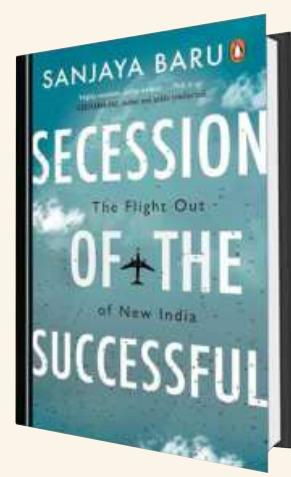
## Up and away

**S**anjaya Baru on why so many Indians are investing in the destiny of other nations instead of their own

Kallol Bhattacharjee  
kallol.b@thehindu.co.in

**I**nians fought a long, hard struggle for freedom to build a State where they would be the masters of their destiny, and yet they have continued to seek their fortunes away from home after Independence. In fact, outmigration has intensified in recent years. Sanjaya Baru's latest offering, *Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*, chronicles the colonial era outmigration of Indians, but his real focus is on contemporary India and the causes propelling the exodus.

Baru's expansive framing begins in the 19th century when indentured labourers began to work in plantations of British colonies. He rounds it off in the 21st century with the H-1B visa-fuelled gold rush, now in the crosshairs of the Make America Great Again movement in the U.S. He acknowledges the genius of immigrant Indians and the way they have made their mark globally. But why are resident



**Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India**  
Sanjaya Baru  
Penguin Viking  
₹799

Indians still being pushed to seek greener pastures elsewhere? He feels many Indians are leaving now because they are alienated from the idea of India.

#### Problems within

Baru does not hesitate to put it in context, pointing out that people are leaving the country also



The Indian diaspora is becoming both a 'living bridge' as well as a 'challenge' in India's relations with major powers of the world.

because of political reasons. With multiple examples, the author has shown that instead of identifying the reasons for the growing alienation and restlessness among the youth, the State government and, more importantly, the Centre have started treating immigration and the immigrant Indian success story as something to be proud about. Baru's broad canvas weaves in many aspects of immigration like

popular culture. He richly connects family, faith, industry, language, food and various other areas where the interplay of immigration and the home left behind becomes visible. He identifies the appeal of matchmaking among diaspora Indians who despite their hard-earned success have not abandoned a traditional Indian practice as shown in the Netflix TV series *Indian Matchmaking* that

highlighted how matchmaking or "arranged marriage" continues in the diaspora in the West and elsewhere. Baru also highlights the conservative nature of India's immigration story where organisations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad have actually reached out to the diaspora with a missionary zeal to turn them into ambassadors of India's Hindu(tva) culture.

The more problematic side of the

Indian immigration story has become prominent in recent years as clashes among communities from India have often been reported like in the case of the 2022 Leicester riots where tension along communal lines reflected the polarised political scenario in post-pandemic India.

**A challenge**  
The irony of diaspora Indians cheering for Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his visits but refusing to return to 'Modi's India' is not lost on Baru. He says their actions betray an enduring lack of confidence in the country they left behind. The Indian diaspora is becoming both a "living bridge" as well as a "challenge" in India's relations with major powers of the world. The Indian state that celebrates success of immigrant Indians with Pravasi Bharatiya Samman has no solution when a successful Indian IT engineer becomes an online troll for regressive ideas and divisive politics. In a world where Kamala Harris and Rishi Sunak are representative figures of success of the diaspora, the Indian government has also acted against the same diaspora's members by cancelling their PIO cards when they are critical of India. Baru's book is a comprehensive and easy-to-read account of the success of Indian immigrants and the complicated relation that they are destined to have with the world.

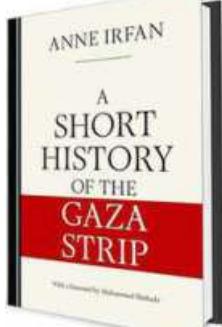
### A Short History of the Gaza Strip

Anne Irfan

Simon &amp; Schuster India

₹699

Irfan examines six key moments since 1948 that have brought the region to the present war, exploring several questions. Why has a genocidal violence been unleashed by Israel in Gaza after Hamas-led attacks on October 7, 2023?



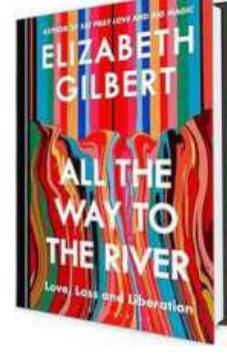
### All the Way to the River: Love, Loss and Liberation

Elizabeth Gilbert

Bloomsbury

₹699

A quarter of a century ago, Gilbert met Rayya, and they fell in love. They were also a pair of addicts, hurtling towards catastrophe. After Rayya passed away, Gilbert got sober. In this memoir, she tells the story of her own addiction and recovery.



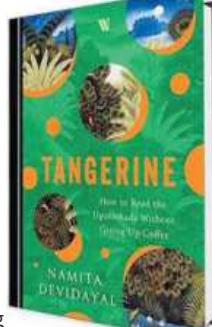
### Tangerine: How to Read the Upanishads Without Giving Up Coffee

Namita Devayal

Westland Books

₹599

Devayal explores Hindu philosophy, which has "very little connection" to Hindutva, and realises that discovering the inner self, and working towards changing it, is the real purpose of life.



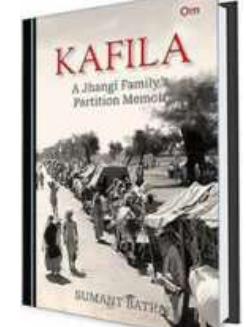
### Kafila: A Jhangi Family's Partition Memoir

Suman Batra

Om Books

₹500

The Partition of 1947 continues to haunt the subcontinent. Batra writes the story of his great-grandfather Tulsi Dass who had to leave Jhang overnight with his family, leaving behind ancestral land.



CONTINUED FROM

PAGE 1

**Hope and technology**  
It's not all doom and gloom, though. There are a few exhibitors who care enough to carry out regular maintenance of their projectors. And, there are technological advances that promise a better future.

While lamp projectors are still the vast existing majority, new installations and upgrades are more likely to be laser. Laser projectors are not automatically better, but there is a crucial difference in the economics of operating them.

While a lamp lasts for mere months, the life of a laser can be over 20,000 hours, translating to years of service before any replacement is required. This means there's simply no need to run the projector at a lower brightness. "The cost of the laser projector [₹60 lakh-₹1 crore] is high, but there is no recurring cost. You can keep running it and even after seven years, you can get the same quality as the first show," says Thulasi of Qube.

If you watch a movie in a theatre with a laser screen, chances are you'll get a brighter picture compared to other venues. It's the standard brightness but, unlike the other venues, actually delivered.

If you want to take things up a notch, there are "premium large format" screens like IMAX Laser and Qube's homegrown EPIQ, both of which have a handful of installations across the country.

These formats use state-of-the-art laser projectors and can target a higher brightness, which when combined with the size of these screens can deliver a more

&lt;/div

**S**afeena Husain, 54, was with a group of teenagers celebrating a learning milestone in a small village outside Udaipur, Rajasthan, when she asked one of them why her education had been interrupted. The girl had passed her Class X with Pragati, a second chance programme offered by Husain's award-winning non-profit Educate Girls. Pragati was designed for older girls who are ineligible for formal schooling. "I'm 18," she told Husain. "I left education 10 years ago when I was married."

Husain has just won the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award (the first for an Indian organisation) for her nearly two decade old labour of love. She almost didn't answer the frantic messages she received from an unknown Philippines number on a recent Sunday, asking for "some data and information," because "I thought it was a fraud."

Husain empathises with the younger woman's struggle because today she is one of those rare people who are able to channel their childhood trauma to transform society. Now in celebration mode, she would rather not talk about the difficult days, saying only that it was a "very turbulent" childhood in Delhi. School was always her "place of happiness" and where she felt safe. "Walking home from the bus stop was always the toughest time of day for me," she says.

**Paradigm shift**  
Husain's education was interrupted for three years after Class XII. "Everybody gives up on you, they say 'marry her off', there's a divorcee with four kids..." She grappled with that classic triad of guilt, shame, failure until an aunt, a friend from Lucknow

University where her interfaith parents met and fell in love, took her home to live with her and changed Husain's life. "She gave me a lot of love, affection and the motivation to go back to education." Husain eventually graduated with a degree in economics history from the London School of Economics. "I still remember standing on Houghton Street," she says, referring to the school's location. "The way I saw myself shifted that day and how the world saw me shifted that day." Education transformed her life and she wants all girls to know that feeling.

Most girls know education is the only way to get ahead, Husain says. Like the woman who completed her schooling nearly two decades after she left school – and in the same year as her son, scoring more than him. Or the Bihari girls who are the first in their families to get a formal education. And the young woman who left a bad marriage and doesn't want to unload vegetables at 3 a.m. for the rest of her life.

Husain came back to India in 2005 and started Educate Girls two years later. The non-profit works in about 30,000 villages (mainly in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar). "We have brought over two million girls back into school," she says. "An equal number have gone through our learning programme, which is the foundational literacy and numeracy programme."

**Push for second chances**  
Some 30,000 girls have graduated from the Pragati programme. "Right now a lot of energy is going into expanding the second chance



## PERSON OF INTEREST SAFEENA HUSAIN: BRINGING GIRLS BACK

The Ramon Magsaysay Award is acknowledgment of Husain's work

programme and also taking it to other states," Husain says. "Because that's a huge problem, much more rampant than elementary school issues for out-of-school girls."

Societal and systemic issues can weave an impenetrable wall around girls, forcing them to drop out after the eighth grade. Marriage, household duties and mobility

restrictions all become barriers to further education. "For every 100 primary schools, you have 40 middle schools, and 24 secondary schools, which means the distance to school increases and access drops off," Husain adds.

Those who do stay, face a lot of pressure. "I see a lot of girls approach secondary school with an

enormous amount of fear. They have this sword hanging over the head with their parents saying, 'I'm sending you but if you fail, I'm going to make you sit at home or get you married off,'" she says. "It leads to a lot of anxiety."

Husain works with state governments and says she's seen big changes in two decades – from separate toilets for girls to even a campaign such as 'Beti Bachao' that acknowledges there is a problem. "You know, the right to education came after we started work," she says. "So I have seen the struggle, but I have also seen how rapidly progress has happened. I think one must acknowledge that as well because that's the only thing that gives you hope to continue."

Rajasthan's comprehensive free secondary education programme for girls has also been a game changer.

Husain's also seen attitudes come full circle. One father who, many years ago, was against sending his daughter to school recently told her: "You have to educate girls. The

**Transforming lives** Safeena Husain. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

world is built for the educated and if we are not educated, we will be exploited like animals."

### Family matters

Like her parents, Husain had an interfaith marriage. She met director Hansal Mehta when she organised a Bollywood dinner for author and Booker Prize winner Daisy Rockwell in Berkeley University. Her father Yusuf, who ran a travel company, was by then an actor in Hindi cinema, and connected her to her favourite director whose 2000 film *Dil Pe Mat Le Yaar* she had loved.

"We've just been together since," she says. "It was one of those things, you meet and you know it's meant to be." The couple lived together for years and have two daughters, eventually only marrying in 2022. "Losing my father during COVID was a big moment," she says. "It made us feel like we needed to do something more affirmative for ourselves and for our children."

Her daughters navigate their parents' very different worlds adroitly. When she was driving through Uttar Pradesh many years ago with one of her daughters, they spotted a line of girls carrying firewood and walking in a single file on the highway. Her daughter immediately piped up: "Why isn't Educate Girls helping them?"

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

### GOREN BRIDGE

**Bob Jones**

## Careful play

Neither vulnerable,  
South deals

**T**oday's deal is from a recent tournament in Turkey. South was Turkey's Ismail Kandemir. His four-level opening was on the aggressive side, but he was rewarded with a wonderful dummy. 10 tricks looked easy, provided he could pick up the spades without a loser, and there might be an overtrick available from the club suit.

Despite the rosy outlook, Kandemir played the hand very carefully.

He won the opening heart lead with dummy's ace and made the far-sighted play of ruffing a heart at trick two. The ace of spades brought the disappointing news that he had a trump loser, but he could still make his contract if West held the ace of clubs. His careful play continued when he decided to eliminate both red suits from both hands before leading a

**NORTH**  
♠ 5 4 2  
♥ A J 8  
♦ A K 4  
♣ K 10 4 3

**WEST**  
♠ Q 9 8  
♥ K 10 9  
♦ Q 9 8 6  
♣ 8 7 5

**EAST**  
♦ Void  
♥ Q 7 5 4 3 2  
♦ J 10 7 5  
♣ A Q J

**SOUTH**  
♠ A K J 10 7 6 3  
♥ 6  
♦ 3 2  
♣ 9 6 2

**The bidding:**  
**SOUTH** 4♦  
**WEST** All pass  
**NORTH** 4♦  
**EAST** All pass

**Opening lead:** 10 of ♠

club. A diamond to the ace was followed by a ruff of dummy's last heart. Kandemir led a diamond to the king and ruffed dummy's remaining diamond. He cashed the king of spades and now, his set-up

complete, led a club, inserting the 10 from dummy when West played low. East won with the jack, but had the unhappy choice of yielding a ruff-sluff or giving dummy the king of clubs. 10 tricks either way after a well-played deal.

### QUIZ

## Easy like Sunday morning

All about national anthems



'Wilhelms', the anthem of the Netherlands, is the oldest in the world, dating back to 1572. (GETTY IMAGES)

### Berty Ashley

**1** On September 14, 1814, Francis Scott Key witnessed the attack on Fort McHenry from a ship in Baltimore and wrote the poem *Defence of Fort M'Henry*. He wrote about the large flag with 15 stars and stripes, and the "rockets' red glare" and "bombs bursting in air". This eventually became the national anthem of which country?

**2** 'Namo Namo Matha' was a song composed by Ananda Samarakoon,

which in 1951, became the national anthem of this country. The lyrics were inspired by a Bengali poet under whom he had studied in Santiniketan and was responsible for the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. Which country and who was this poet?

**3** The tune for the national anthem of this country comes from a very popular song called 'Terang Bulan'. When its Sultan went to London for the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902, he was asked to provide the

historical pictures till he slid a poem under the door. Which country's 'himno nacional' is this?

**5** 'Wilhelms', the anthem of the Netherlands, is the oldest in the world, dating back to 1572. It tells the story of William van Nassau, the Dutch leader and 'Father of the Nation'. If the anthem has 15 stanzas, how does it pay tribute to him?

**6** The national anthem of Andorra is unique in the way it tells the story of the nation's founding. The English translation starts, "The great Charlemagne, my Father, liberated me from the Saracens." This gives the anthem what unique characteristic among all the anthems?

**7** When this Central European country was formed in 1918, the national anthem was created combining one verse from an opera called *Fidlovačka* and another verse from a folk song 'Kopala studienku'. When the country was split in two in 1993, the anthem was split as well, and each country retained its line as its national anthem. Which two countries are these?

**8** The national anthem of this country was written after the declaration of war against Austria in 1792, hence it refers to blood-soaked flags and fighting bloodthirsty soldiers. Which country's anthem is this, whose evocative melody appears in a lot of

popular culture?

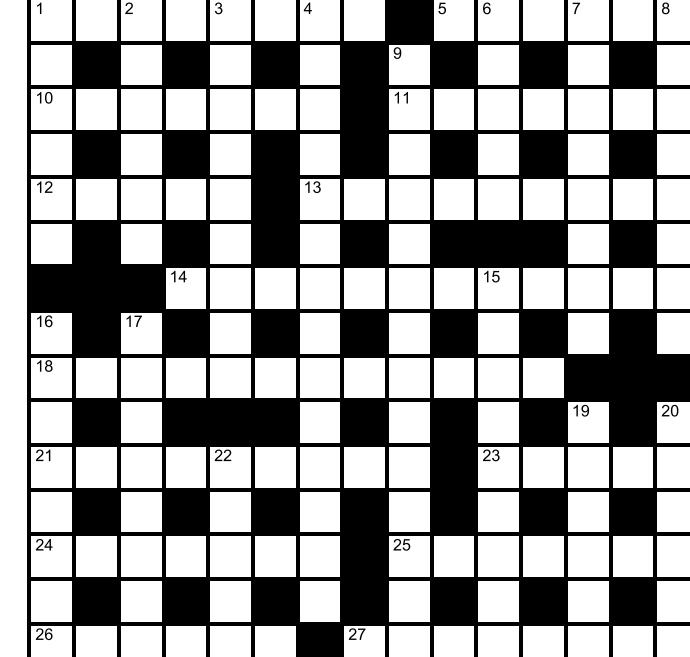
**9** There are only four national anthems with a peculiar characteristic. Kosovo, San Marino, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and the most famous country whose anthem is called 'Martha Real'. They produce a lot of sports champions who, upon winning, do not behave as others normally do. Which country and what is different about these?

**10** The national anthem of this country was adopted in 1997 and is the only one in the world that is written in five different languages. Which country is this if four of those languages are Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho and English?

**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. USA  
2. Andorra  
3. Mexico  
4. Slovenia  
5. Slovakia  
6. Moldova  
7. Czech Republic and Slovakia  
8. France  
9. Spain  
10. South Africa  
11. Affiliates  
12. Completely instrumental  
13. Set of each stanza spell out  
14. Being the fifth language  
15. Name  
16. Told in first person  
17. Acrostic. The first letter  
18. Test  
19. Laotian  
20. Rabbidrantach  
21. Test  
22. Negaraku  
23. Tugende  
24. Tugende  
25. Tugende  
26. Tugende  
27. Tugende

### THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD #21 (Set by Dr. X)



#### Across

1 Guy gets extremely sick after knocking back drink in Russian city (8)  
5 Boy and girl start to explore a city in Tanzania (6)

10 Help son with renovation of tavern (7)

11 Criticise a member beginning to blunder in final (7)

12 General holding long gun (5)

13 Worthless criminal turned to tackle a judge (2-7)

14 Bored couple drinking gin finally relaxed (12)

15 Danger of UFOs? Surprisingly unprepared (3,4,5)

21 On second thought, article on angina's incorrect (4,5)

23 Worm behind large shelf (5)

24 Entralled by guy at premiere, very muscular (7)

25 Stifled by diva in estate, most arrogant (7)

26 Delayed by boy picking up breakfast food in retreat (6)

27 English seaside resort is close to pub? Absolutely (8)

#### Down

1 Blunder inviting extremely rude, revolting cheapskates (6)

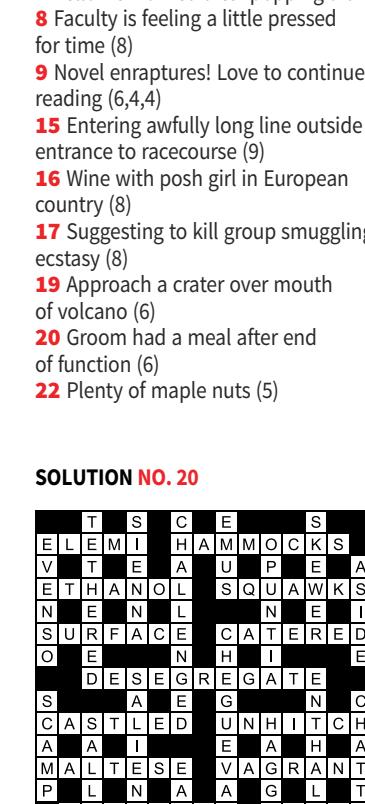
2 Make less dense starter of aloo in new fryer (6)

3 Greek king's soon having fun with maiden (9)

4 Fail to applaud? Take no action (3,2,4,5)

6 Immense chapter covered is relating to the sense of smell (5)

#### SOLUTION NO. 20



**Sonia Singla**

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**W**hile watching the 2008 movie *Jodhaa Akbar*, I could not grasp the choreography accompanying the Sufi song *Khwaja mere Khwaja*. Years later, in Istanbul, I attended a cultural performance that seemed familiar. Men clad in white robes (*tenture*), tall hats (*sikke*), and black cloaks (*hirka*) entered the hall with their hands crossed over the chest.

As the melody of the *ney* flute filled the air, they began to whirl in a slow, graceful motion in an anticlockwise direction. Their heads were tilted as if listening to the divine, right hands raised to receive God's grace, and left hands lowered to share with earth, as if becoming a conduit between God and creation. At that moment, I learnt that the Hindi movie featured whirling dervishes. What at first seemed like a stylised dance in a movie turned out to be a centuries-old spiritual Sufi practice known as the *Sema* ceremony.

The origin of the art has a close connection with the poet Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, popularly known as Rumi. The whirling dervishes belong to the Mevlevi Order, a mystical branch of Islam founded in the 13th century by Rumi's followers after his death in 1273. Rumi, born in 1207 in present-day Afghanistan, had fled with his family to Konya in what is now Turkiye in the early 13th century to escape Mongol invasions. Each December, on the death anniversary of Rumi, Konya hosts the whirling dervishes festival, a week-long celebration of Rumi's legacy, drawing pilgrims and tourists to witness the *Sema* ceremony. Rumi's mausoleum in Konya has become home to the Mevlevi order.

The ceremony is derived from the Arabic word *Sam'a*, which means "to listen". Legend has it that while passing through a bazaar, Rumi heard the rhythmic pounding by gold beaters. Overwhelmed by spiritual ecstasy, he began whirling with the rhythm, giving birth to the *Sema*. This ceremony unfolds in seven parts as a journey from acknowledging the creator to experiencing unity with the divine.

In fact, even the attire is symbolic: the *sikke* represents the tombstone of the ego; the white *tenture* signifies a burial shroud, symbolising death of the ego and worldly desires; and the black *hirka*



## In the land of the whirling dervishes

Behind those spinning figures lies a centuries-old practice rooted in discipline and surrender that is part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

represents worldly attachments. The whirling itself mirrors the cosmic dance of planets, with the ceremony's final stage featuring a sheikh standing at the centre assuming the place of the sun in the centre.

The Mevlevi dervishes used to undergo a 1,001-day apprenticeship in a Sufi lodge (*tekke*) to learn about music, poetry, whirling, philosophy and so on. However, the *Sema* ritual had been primarily performed by men in its formalised practice during the early centuries, though Rumi's teachings emphasise inclusivity.

In contemporary times, especially since the 20th century, *Sema* has become more inclusive with women increasingly participating as whirling dervishes, reflecting evolving gender norms.

In 2005, UNESCO recognised the *Sema* ceremony as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This 800-year-old tradition is taught at many universities to preserve its rich history. To perpetuate Rumi's legacy, the Mevlana International Foundation was created in Konya in 1996. *Sema* performances are held globally, and miniature figurines of dervishes are sold as cherished souvenirs for tourists.

## Silence is a potent trait

**Sajna Hameed**

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**S**ilence is not merely the lack of noise; it embodies the presence of comprehension and respect for community. Silence carries deep meaning. Indeed, it serves as a refuge where thoughts can settle and clarity arises. In a world fixated on opinions and responses, silence gracefully provides reflection, tranquillity, and inner resilience. It resonates more profoundly than speech when emotions are both uplifting and difficult, enabling us to genuinely hear others and ourselves. Being silent is a skill; it reflects the ability to manage and discipline oneself.

In a loud world where individuals often speak without purpose, silence emerges as a potent and uncommon phenomenon. It doesn't hasten to clarify or validate anything; rather, it remains unwavering like a tranquil river that understands its destination. While meaningless words can muddle thoughts and quickly obscure the truth, silence offers insightful transparency and great clarity. It listens with serenity when others dispute, observes softly when fingers are pointed, and fosters harmony where words would merely create chaos. It is a formidable tool and should be wielded with care.

Sometimes, the most truthful thing you can express is to say nothing at all. True strength lies not in how vocally you assert yourself, but in maintaining calmness when others expect you to speak. One requires silence during times of heightened emotions, as words uttered in anger often cause more pain than aimed for. One needs to be quiet when seeing suffering, as simply being there is often more healing than giving advice. One needs silence when lacking the complete context because making assumptions can be more damaging than beneficial. And stillness is needed when words are intended only to prevail, not to seek understanding. In those instances, silence is not a sign of weakness – it's a sign of wisdom.

Whether in professional or personal space, silence holds more value than empty chatter. Learn to remain silent when you lack complete and clear information. Hold your tongue if your words might be misinterpreted. Stay quiet when you are in a judgmental mindset. Keep silent if what you say could hurt a friendship. Pause amid anger. Don't speak if you can't express it without raising voice. Refrain from speaking if your words can offend someone.

## When employment is not empowerment

**Many women in India are underemployed, technically working but without the dignity, scope, or opportunities their education deserves**

**Aayushi Dubey**

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**I**ndia celebrates rising female literacy and record numbers of women entering higher education. Yet, many women, mostly in small towns, are employed in jobs that do not give full play to their potential, while some others do not work at all. The paradox is striking: the country produces educated women, but fails to use their potential.

So a large number of women are underemployed – technically working, but without the dignity, scope, or opportunities their education deserves. Its roots lie in the motherhood penalty,

career breaks, topographical limitations, and most persistent, societal expectations. It is not only an economic problem but a woman-specific one too. At its core, underemployment reflects how traditional gender roles still dictate a countless number of women's lives.

Recent Periodic Labour Force Survey data show that women's employment rate grew from 22% in 2017-18 to 40.3% in 2023-24. Yet, employment statistics are misleading: they measure quantity and not quality. A Ph.D. holder working as a clerk or an MBA graduate tutoring a few middle-school children both count as "employed". However, these numbers conceal



underemployment. The consequences of underemployment are vast, from psychological to economical. India invests in education but is not able to give jobs to women on the basis of their potential and qualifications. McKinsey estimates that India could add \$770 billion to its GDP by closing gender employment gaps. These gaps can be closed by ensuring that more women join the workforce and those already working are fully and fairly employed.

My research, "Impact of underemployment on women's mental well-being", presented at the 29th international and

60th national conference of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, shows that two-thirds of underemployed women experience lower well-being than unemployed women. Sufficiently employed women report good well-being consistently. This shows how the quality of a job can make a huge difference.

Underemployment leads to lower self-esteem, chronic stress, and identity loss. In corporate India, women are three times more likely to reach out for mental health support than men, a testament to the psychological toll underemployment has on them. Many women I interviewed reported feeling undervalued, underappreciated and even inferior to their male colleagues.

The Time Use Survey, 2024 from the Union Ministry of Statistics shows that women in the 15-59 age group spend approximately four hours and 50 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work – three hours more than men, who average about 88 minutes.

**Sudhakar M.**

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**O**n critically analysing the root causes of scams, accidents, and unethical activities, one common reason stands out: people resorting to shortcuts involving corruption, unlawful acts, and greed without adhering to ethical norms, legal standards, or procedures.

Investigations into major scams reveal the cause to be greed to amass wealth, position, or fame in quick time. The culprits bypass legal processes and do not follow ethical principles, opting for shortcuts with an ulterior motive rather than following due diligence or standard procedures.

Similarly, most road accidents are a result of drivers violating traffic

## Short cuts may not be the best route

**Bypassing norms for quick gain compromises ethical, moral values**



rules by speeding, reckless overtaking, or rash driving in a hurry. These shortcuts are taken at the cost of safety. Inquiries into flight and train accidents have revealed failure to follow

signals and do preventive maintenance, and hasty, irresponsible decisions.

A deeper analysis of fire and industrial disasters shows that many occur owing to non-compliance with standard operating procedures, a lack of seriousness in preventive maintenance, or ignoring early-warning signals – all forms of neglect and shortcut-taking.

Even in academics, a few students, instead of working sincerely and meticulously, resort to unfair means violating academic integrity for better results.

In public life, many individuals attempt to bribe officials to bypass waiting periods and queues to obtain licences, passports, approvals, or certificates.

Similarly, in organisations, some employees seek promotions, transfers, or postings through unethical means. These, again, are examples of shortcuts.

While such actions might provide temporary gain, in the long run, they do not offer true satisfaction or peace of mind.

By resorting to shortcuts to achieve targets, gain personal benefit, or avoid hard work, individuals and organisations compromise ethical and moral values. This leads to a breakdown of financial integrity, academic integrity, and moral standards.



## FEEDBACK

Letters to the Magazine can be e-mailed separately to [mag.letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:mag.letters@thehindu.co.in) on Tuesday 3 p.m.

### Cover story

The article has delved deep into the *raison de etre* for the Toronto International Film Festival gaining in popularity, especially among Indian filmmakers. ('Why Indian filmmakers love TIFF'; Sept. 7) A screening at TIFF not only enhances the reputation of filmmakers but also provides them a platform to screen their films at other international film festivals as well and perhaps even vie for honours at the Oscars, Golden Globes and so on.

**C.V. Aravind**

Film festivals celebrate not only cinema but the very craft of storytelling. While innovative

filmmaking techniques breathe life into imagination, prudent budgeting and timely completion of production ensure a film's viability. International film festivals like TIFF are serving as platforms to showcase talent, attract investors, and secure global recognition, while nurturing cross-cultural dialogue, and helping to raise the standards of world cinema.

**N.S. Reddy**

The article is very informative especially for those credit card users who swipe their cards beyond their repayment capacity and end up in huge debt traps. ('Swipe now, pay forever'; Sept. 7) Credit cards should be utilised only as a last resort of meeting unforeseen expenditure keeping well in mind income levels.

**Katru Durga prasad Rao**

Credit card crisis is basically not only due to unplanned and impulsive

spending, but also due to the easy availability of credit on tap and that too with an EMI repayment facility for bigger spends. Such imprudent spending using credit card, especially when one possesses multiple credit cards, usually leads to a default in repayment.

**Kosaraju Chandramouli**

### Fight for dignity

The struggle of Prof. P. Senrayaperumal brings out the reality that institutional systems can be both heartless and painful. ('Fighting the system'; Sept. 7) What one fails to understand is that those who issue such orders lack an application of mind. One hopes the professor gets relief from the higher courts at the earliest.

**B. Sundar Raman**

P. Senrayaperumal's commitment and zeal for education serve as inspiration for all. Institutional apathy to injustice is a blemish on the Constitution. Caste-based discrimination is a scourge that undermines individual dignity and stunts social progress.

**Anusha Pillay**

### Colonial wrongs

The most laudable activity of the Humboldt Forum is its extensive and transparent provenance research of objects. ('Loot, loss, and learning in Berlin'; Sept. 7) It aims, in the words of Prof. Lars-Christian Koch, "to find out where these objects came from and what they mean to the people (who originally owned them)". This is a rare departure from traditional museum practices.

It is encouraging to learn that the forum is doing its best in "righting colonial wrongs".

**N. Rama Rao**

### Debt trap

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### Rethinking textbooks in India's classrooms

How culturally rooted bilingual education can prepare children for the Great Restructuring  
**Gisel Erumachadathu**

### Educating young voters

Spending hours on YouTube or Instagram to gain an awareness only panders to pre-existing beliefs  
**Nishuna Sugumar**

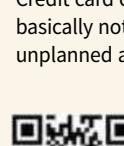
### The evergreen allure of used books

Just their sight and smell calm the mind  
**Rishabh Kochhar**

### A good run is all you need

Running is described as a sport, but it's a mental duel  
**Binit Semwal**

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.



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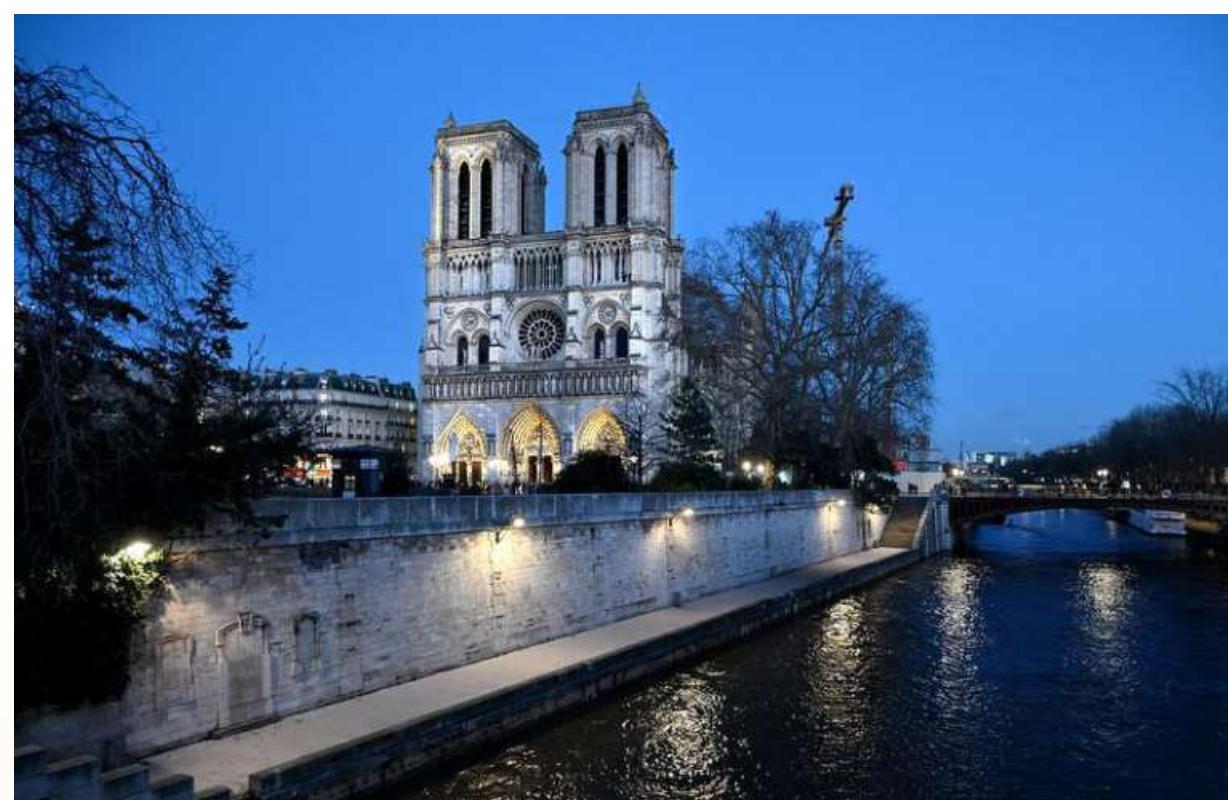
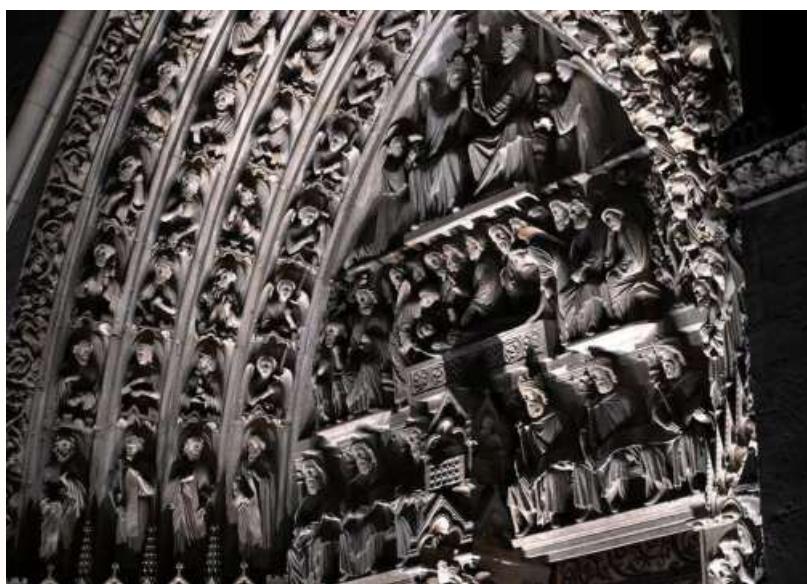
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**Binit Semwal**



**Towering presence**  
Notre Dame on the île de la Cité, and its restored interiors.  
(THULASI KAKKAT)

Biswamit Dwibedy

**N**otre Dame caught on fire just days after I accepted the offer to teach at The American University of Paris. Hence, for most of my Parisian years, the cathedral has been inaccessible. But that has never stopped it from attracting crowds. For years now, I have seen tourists line up along the river to take pictures of the scaffolded façade. I've walked past it a hundred times, but now that it was finally open, I decided it was time to pay a visit.

Notre Dame stands on the tip of an island, the île de la Cité, the ancient heart of Paris. The Romans were here in 500 BC. Construction of the church began in 1163 under Maurice de Sully and ended a hundred years later, and there would be no major work until the French Revolution, when much of the bronze, lead, and precious metals were removed and melted down. Major restoration was done to the church in the mid-19th century. And in 2019, the fire happened.

I can't imagine what it must have felt like to look out your window and watch the cathedral burn. And what it must be like now, after years of construction, to watch it come back to life. The fire pushed the cathedral into another round of upkeep. To rebuild the historic roof called "Le foret" or the forest, 1,000 historic oak trees from 200 French forests were selected and sacrificed – a move that was sharply criticised. At the same time, artisans from all over France gathered to restore the cathedral, and continue to do so daily. During the time of writing this article, statues that belong up on the famous spire have been restored. On September 20, the Towers of Notre Dame, with its chimera gallery, will open to the

## QUEUEING UP FOR NOTRE DAME

The 860-year-old Paris cathedral is projected to welcome 12 million visitors this year. A resident of the city shares a tour and some insights

public. And soon the wooden shafts on which the two bells, Emmanuel and Marie, are suspended will be replaced.

### Place for everyone

Standing across from Notre Dame, one does get the sense of being in the centre of the historic city of Paris. To one side of the church, on the Left Bank of the river Seine, is the Latin Quarter, brimming with students, because it is home to one of the world's revered universities, the Sorbonne. Adjacent to Notre Dame is the Hôtel Dieu, one of the world's oldest hospitals.

On the Right Bank is the Marais, the old Jewish neighbourhood, which is now Paris's gay district, dotted with bars, museums, and boutiques. The paved-in square in front of Notre Dame is roughly the size of a football field. It's a place for everyone from musicians to pickpockets to earn their livelihood. Here, dancers draw applause as they perform hip-hop routines. Tourists pose for photographs. Couples kiss amidst a cacophony of languages. And sporty French men and women jog across, oblivious to it all. It's a spot where the many sides of Paris converge.

On the day of my visit, I found a long line of extremely well-dressed people outside the doors to Notre



Dame. Walking past them, I noticed almost everyone in that line spoke French. Families stood together – children, parents, and grandparents – just before dinner time. I joined the line and when a woman in a beautiful dress stood behind me, I asked her if I needed a reservation. Yes, she said. Especially for the concert. It was then that I realised that I won't be able to get in, because this wasn't a regular evening at Notre Dame.

Churches in Paris – as in the rest of the world – often double as musical venues. On that gorgeous Wednesday evening, it was *Requiem*

by Mozart. The woman told me she used to come to the church with her mother, who had worshipped there often. As she grew older, she brought friends visiting from out of town to hear concerts. She hadn't returned since the fire. This evening, she was back – this time with her four-year-old – reviving a family tradition.

### Bridging the past and the present

Since I couldn't enter the church that evening, I decided to return early one morning, just in time for Mass. There was barely a line, and



inside, worshippers almost outnumbered the tourists. From the inside, you can catch the shadow of workers moving across the stained-glass windows because the renovation won't be complete until 2026. However, much of the outside has been restored to its previous glory, including the iconic spire and roof.

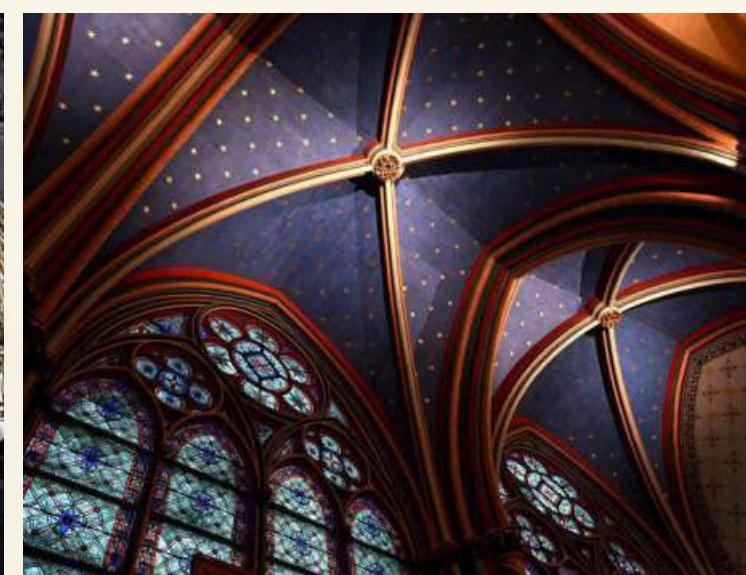
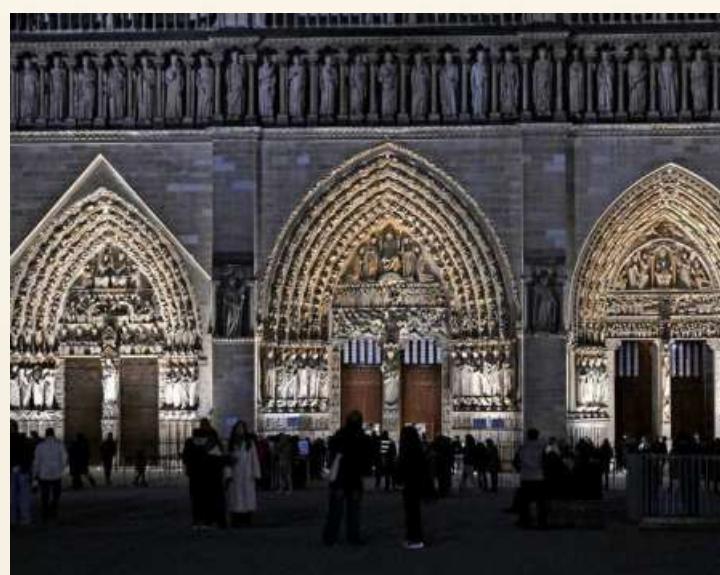
Inside, things look drastically different. During the renovation, a latex paste was applied to the walls, then peeled off once dried, lifting away centuries of soot and grime. Coupled with the brilliance of the stained glass, the effect is

luminous. Now, the past and present exist together. You can buy candles at the click of a button, make donations with contactless payments.

Notre Dame is also a museum. While it famously houses the Crown of Thorns and Wood of the Cross, it is also home to paintings by 20th century masters such as Henri Matisse and George Braque, which stand in quiet dialogue with statues and religious paintings from centuries past.

On my way back from Mass that morning, I saw a much longer line just across the street – outside the Préfecture de Police – where hundreds of immigrants queue up each day to apply for residency permits. I've stood in that line more than once. And I wondered how many prayers have been whispered to the God inside by those who may never enter the cathedral. Many of them don't share its faith. But perhaps that's the magic of Notre Dame: it makes a convert of us all.

*The writer teaches at The American University of Paris and is the author of Hundred Greatest Love Songs.*



**Looking for the Hunchback**  
Snapshots from the Notre Dame; and Victor Hugo's grand novel.  
(THULASI KAKKAT)

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**A**lmost every Communist village of Kerala's northern Malabar has a Martyr's Column and a library. My village, Madikkai in Kasaragod, has a memorial for slain DYFI leader, comrade Bhaskara Kumbara, and a library built in memory of Communist revolutionary A.K. Gopalan. They say libraries played a significant role in shaping Kerala's reputation as an erudite State. And like many others, it is from one of these tiny, tiled-roof libraries that my world opened up.

I first heard of Victor Hugo from an uncle one summer afternoon, while we were building castles with wet mud in a palm orchard. He said to us children: "All of you should definitely read Victor Hugo's *Pavangal* [*Les Misérables*]." That must have stayed on, for one evening I found myself at the library waiting for comrade Kotttan, the librarian, to get there. He also had a job in a beedi company. As

## A cathedral of memory and musings

From Victor Hugo's pages, discovered in a dingy library in Kerala, to the arches of the Notre Dame, a photojournalist reminisces

Kotttan (brother Kottan, as I used to call him) came in, I eagerly asked about *Pavangal*. With a torch in hand, he led me through the book-lined shelves of the dimly-lit, sparsely furnished library. However, we could not find the book that day.

Instead, he handed me another one, Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (*Mama*). A few days later, Kotttan told me he found the book I had been looking for. But it turned out to be another one by Hugo, *Notre Dame Koonan* (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*). And that was the beginning of an experience I cherish to this day. In that dingy library, I read about the famed winters of St. Petersburg, the medieval cathedrals of Paris, and the cobbled streets of ancient

cities. I felt a deep sense of anemia – a word the dictionary describes as nostalgia for a place one has never been to. In a village with only harsh summers, brooding rains and a mere whiff of spring, I yearned for the alleyways of strange cities, their biting winters, and golden wheat fields.

### Leaning into the familiar

This January, on a particularly cold evening, while walking across a bridge over the Seine to the Notre-Dame de Paris, I felt a sense of familiarity – the memories of what I had read intertwining with real life.

It had only been weeks since the cathedral, which was shut for restoration following a fire in 2019, was reopened to the public. Overwhelmed, I felt an urge to shout

out to the tourists queuing to enter the cathedral that beneath the ground upon which they were standing, once upon a time, there had been 11 steps. I had read in *The Hunchback...* that the steps leading

up to the cathedral had been destroyed by the repeated flooding of the Seine. As I stepped inside Notre Dame through the triple-arched entryway, I was struck by how much I remembered from the book. Did I hear someone call out "refuge" from behind the altar? Did I hear a faint Spanish lullaby from some secret chamber above? Or did I spot a lamb running through the maze of the visitors' feet?

Though I knew I wouldn't find it, I kept looking for a word. On the floors speckled with sunlight filtering through the coloured glass windows, in the gloomy corners with giant sculptures, on the walls adorned with pictures – ANARH. Hugo, in his preface to the novel, says he chanced upon

this mysterious word, meaning fate in Greek, casually scribbled on one of Notre Dame's towers.

"... The man who wrote that word upon the wall disappeared from the midst of the generations of man many centuries ago; the word, in its turn, has been effaced from the wall of the church; the church will, perhaps, itself soon disappear from the face of the earth," he writes, also alluding to the state of disrepair the cathedral had fallen into in the early 19th century. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* helped renew interest in the building and led to the efforts in its restoration.

Over 860 years old, the cathedral, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, took 200 years and thousands of workers to build. Scores of artists and sculptors whose works it holds, the ordinary and the extraordinary people whose prayers and silences it has witnessed. Does this colossal monument know just how many lives have been linked to it in innumerable ways? Lives like mine?

