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ADDING MUSCLE TO BHARATANATYAM

The oldest Indian classical dance form is embracing strength training, and artistes are pushing the bar with enhanced performances and quick recovery time

Akhila Krishnamurthy

For nearly a year leading up to her performance at The Music Academy's Dance Festival last month, Medha Hari split her time between the dance studio, learning with her guru, and strength training with Adarsh Gopalakrishnan. All the practice – footwork, *abhinaya* (art of expression), and building muscle, flexibility and control – helped her win the Outstanding Dancer of the Year award in the junior category. "I consciously remind myself about the importance of the process, and the need to stick with it," says the Bharatanatyam dancer, who incorporated squats and quadriceps work to perfect a deeper *araimandi* (half-sitting position) that she could hold for longer, and more powerful *muzhumundi* (full squat) jumps. Her recovery time was faster, too.

Hari, 32, found Gopalakrishnan's gym, Movement Inc, in Chennai's Valmiki Nagar four years ago, soon after the birth of her twin daughters. She was battling injuries, especially related to her back, because of the long hours spent in her studio – Bharatanatyam comprises a complex set of movements that often puts a load on the back, knees, and feet. Her current bespoke training plan, however, keeps her dance and injury circumstances in mind, and ensures she builds strength progressively. "When you move regularly, your body feels well-tuned; my physical strength has a direct impact on how I feel and dance," she says.

Changing up the routine

Bharatanatyam is one of the oldest dance forms of India. Originating in Tamil Nadu in the 19th century as Sadirattam, it moved to the proscenium in the 1940s. As a visual performance art form, it has grown in size and strength across the globe. According to recent data from ABHAI (Association of Bharatanatyam Artistes of India), there are nearly 2,500 dance schools across Tamil Nadu, Bengaluru, Puducherry, Mumbai, Kerala and Delhi.

From an endurance point of view, performing a full Bharatanatyam *margam* (repertoire) is equivalent to running a half-marathon. With complex full-body movements that range from half-sitting to full squat positions to jumps, and bursts of intense footwork, it is intense and demanding. "For a Bharatanatyam dancer, the body is an instrument to tell a story," says veteran artiste Malavika Sarukkai, 64. "It is crucial for dancers to keep honing it, fine-tuning it." But even a decade or so ago, it was uncommon, she admits, for dancers to do anything beyond daily practice to improve their form. "The word 'fitness' didn't feature in our scheme of things, neither did the word 'hydration'," she says, recounting stories of aching ankles, knees and back after performances. It is only recently that she's taken a leaf from the younger generation and incorporated strength training into her dance lifestyle, recognising how it can can hone the body and improve joint health.

Sarukkai's peer, Alarmel Valli, whose Bharatanatyam career traverses nearly six decades, shares that her training years belonged to another era: pre-information technology, pre-social media, and pre-gyms and fitness trainers. "My energy was born from focused and relentless *sadhana* and willpower," she says, adding that she wasn't spared her share of dance-related injuries, from sprains and strained ligaments, to bursitis and cervical spondylolysis. "Even after I heard about strength training in my 50s, I didn't think it was important enough. Regrettably so."

In the case of the few veterans who adopted cross-training, it was often a case of happenstance. "When I was a student [of dance], the concept of a warm-up didn't exist," states Anita Ratnam, 69, Chennai-based Bharatanatyam and contemporary dancer, and founder of dance portal Narthaki. "It helped that I had an active sporting life." She recalls evenings spent playing tennis, swimming or going for a jog, which she later realised helped her with her dance. Ratnam incorporated strength training over 25 years ago thanks to taking up Kalaripayittu. "My times were different; the expectations from a dancer were different. Audiences were gentler, had more time to allow the performance to unveil slowly, for the dancer to inhabit their dance. Now, programme durations have decreased, and dancers have to grab the audience's attention quickly, with a wow factor." Strong, honed bodies help give performers that edge.

Why strength is crucial

In the last few years, dancers – who practise and teach the art form – have incorporated strength training as a consistent routine, some as early as age 15. It complements their performance, making them more agile, building lung capacity and endurance. Most importantly, it reinforces joints, and improves bone and muscle health, thus helping keep injuries at bay.

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>
> **ANITA RATNAM**
> Bharatanatyam dancer and activist

More power (Clockwise from above) Madhumanti Banerjee-Varun training her students; Medha Hari working out with Adarsh Gopalakrishnan; and Hari performing at The Music Academy. (S.R. RAGHUNATHAN, RAVINDRAN R., AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

IN CONVERSATION

FROM THE BORDERLANDS OF MEMORY

In his novel that begins in a small village in Assam, author Somnath Batabyal tries to tell everyday stories of the marginalised

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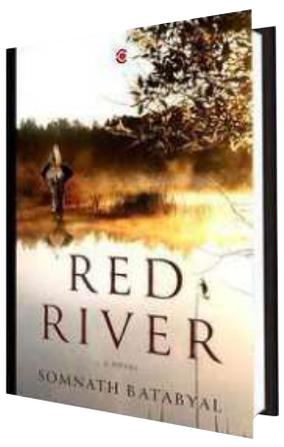
For his third book, Somnath Batabyal, an anthropologist and ethnographer by training, wanted to document the life of a small village in Assam between two election cycles. But as he began talking to people, he realised he wanted to tell a larger story about migration, displacement, exile, home, separatism and the nation state, and turned to fiction. On the sidelines of the Jaipur Literature Festival 2024, where his new novel *Red River* was launched, Batabyal talks about his roots and why it's important to tell stories. Edited excerpts:



Q: *How did an anthropological study become a work of fiction?*
Answer: I moved from non-fiction to fiction to tell a larger story. That story was about the nation state, about who belongs, who doesn't, who isn't allowed to – and I couldn't do that within the constraints of facts. The novel is rooted in ethnographic detail, but raises larger questions about identity, migration, nationalism, separatism, etc. The first draft was 2,60,000 words, and over the past four years, I edited it to bring it down to a manageable 1,00,000 words.

Q: *You tell the story of three families, whose lives are torn apart by history and violence.*
A: Yes, I tell the story through three friends and their families; one is born to refugees, the second boy's father is in the army, and there's another boy whose family sympathises with the separatist group, ULFA. I write about their childhood, adolescence and adult life, trace their joys and sorrows, the upheavals they go through, all playing out under a sceptre of violence which rules their lives. The nation state often rules by terror as we know.

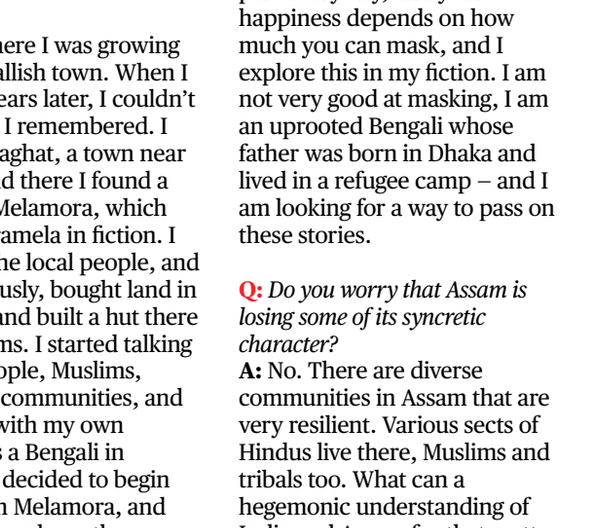
Q: *Why is the story set in several places in Assam?*
A: I left Assam in 1991, when four-year-old brother in tow. For the first few years, he could not stop himself from asking his mother almost every day, "*Ma, Dhaka kobe jam?* (When do we return to Dhaka?)"

As for me, I am a chameleon, I can speak Assamese like the Assamese. I lived through the whole '*Bongal kheda*' (Bengalis go away) movement. A migrant lives in all these spaces, in the fractured borderlands of memory, nostalgia, wanting to belong and fit in. All this play a part every day, and your happiness depends on how much you can mask, and I explore this in my fiction. I am not very good at masking, I am an uprooted Bengali whose father was born in Dhaka and lived in a refugee camp – and I am looking for a way to pass on these stories.

Q: *Do you worry that Assam is losing some of its syncretic character?*
A: No. There are diverse communities in Assam that are very resilient. Various sects of Hindus live there, Muslims and tribals too. What can a hegemonic understanding of India and Assam for that matter do to these diverse communities? What is important though is to tell stories to each other, of each other, because stories are the way we can understand the world. The Northeast is a treasure trove of stories, and only the surface has been scratched. The borderlands alone are immense and so fractured, we haven't fully tapped into them yet.

Guwahati, where I was growing up, was a smallish town. When I returned 15 years later, I couldn't find the town I remembered. I moved to Golaghat, a town near Kaziranga, and there I found a little village, Melamora, which becomes Moramela in fiction. I got to know the local people, and very impetuously, bought land in a tea garden and built a hut there with two rooms. I started talking to various people, Muslims, tribals, other communities, and this collided with my own experience as a Bengali in Assam. And I decided to begin the story from Melamora, and write about people on the margins, from different communities.

Q: *Your father came from Bangladesh, and so you were always an outsider in Assam. How does this experience tell on your fiction?*
A: When my father passed away, his stories – he was a refugee, settled in Kolkata, and worked for years in Assam – got lodged in my head. My father always felt he had never left Bangladesh. He came as a six-year-old from Dhaka holding his pregnant mother's hand, and with a



Slice of life Somnath Batabyal wants to share the stories he heard from his father, a refugee from Bangladesh; (top) an ULFA training camp from the 90s in Assam. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND GETTY IMAGES)

Breaking the family curse

Author Etaf Rum's second novel tells the story of Palestine even as it grapples with themes of patriarchy and generational trauma

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At the outset, *Evil Eye* is a meditation on the quest for self. A narrative delicately woven around marital discord and passive aggression, it comes with all the familiar tropes. But as you delve deeper, Palestinian-American author Etaf Rum's second novel becomes a nuanced exploration of exile filled with the sharp poignancy of immigrant experience. It evokes a sense of gloom and qualm while posing some difficult questions.

The protagonist of *Evil Eye* is a woman in conflict with her environs, even herself, as she navigates an incompatible relationship. It takes the reader to the realm of displaced lives who grapple with cultural codes and borderlines.

Evil Eye is the memoir of Yara, a young mother and Palestinian-American woman raised in Brooklyn. She lives in North Carolina with her husband and two daughters, works at the local college and aspires to become a full-time art lecturer. Despite her conservative upbringing, Yara is not happy with her seemingly privileged life. Her Arab identity is often equated with oppression and when a colleague makes a racist comment at a faculty meeting, it touches a raw nerve, forcing Yara to react. Following the incident she is put on probation and asked to undergo counselling by the college authorities.

Bloodshed A demonstration by aid and rescue workers against Israeli attacks, in West Bank, February 2024. (GETTY IMAGES)

Evil Eye
Etaf Rum
HQ
₹499

At home, she faces consistent gaslighting which traps her in the throes of guilt, shame and anguish. As her therapy progresses, Yara comes face-to-face with intergenerational trauma, a cycle she must break. A common superstition in Arab culture, 'evil eye' refers to misfortune caused by jealousy. Yara's mother Meriem attributes her suffering to a curse, and even the blue-eyed hamsa charm she wears can't remove its negative aura. The curse manifests itself in many ways, drowning the women in loneliness and a sense of loss.

Counting Arab motifs

Yara aches for belonging and carries the burden of unresolved trauma from another generation as she belongs to Palestine, a home that is no longer theirs. As her grandmother recalls the 'nakba', the mass exodus of Palestinians during the 1948 war, the bombing of their olive orchards and the dismal refugee camp life, it paints a picture of another curse. It's the curse of the Palestinian people who are forced to endure a never-ending ordeal.

For Yara, Palestine is the only place where she could watch her mother come alive 'like a bright campfire in a darkened field'. *Evil Eye* is interspersed with umpteen Arab motifs, sights, sounds and smells. At times, it takes the form of an elaborate dinner spread, the sound of the oud or the verses of Mahmoud Darwish. In a dreamy sequence, it captures Palestinian women slipping off their headscarves to dance, "their bodies radiant with freedom".

It also maps the resilience – people ready to suffer harsh winters and scorching summers hoping to return some day, men and women clutching rusted wrought iron keys of their homes and dreaming about the sparkle of the Dead Sea. While *Evil Eye* chronicles Yara's interior and intimate worlds, it also becomes the tale of Palestine and its homeless, nameless people.

Retelling Yashodhara's story

Shyam Selvadurai trains his lens on the wife of Prince Siddhartha before he became the Buddha

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As is usual with legends, the story of the Buddha revolves entirely around him. Whether it is the *Jataka Tales*, his birth and sheltered upbringing and finally breaking free to find his path. All others are bystanders.

But Shyam Selvadurai's *Mansions of the Moon* offers a different perspective. Selvadurai's protagonist is not the isolated prince brought up in a cocoon surrounded by luxury. Instead, he is subject to abuse – both physical and emotional – from his father, who resents him for causing the death of his wife. His stepmother Prajapati has no love to spare. She is humiliated by her husband's concubines and his constant reminders that it was her sister he loved.

What Siddhartha is surrounded by is not luxury but sheer unhappiness of various people. Or as Selvadurai puts it, "people writhing in their suffering like snakes in a pit". This is what triggers Siddhartha's search for the cause of unhappiness, not suddenly coming face-to-face with the four signs – sorrow, old age, illness and death.

Selvadurai also puts Siddhartha's marriage to his cousin, Yashodhara, under the same lens. This is a marriage that is already breaking up. When Yashodhara leaves to visit her mother on her deathbed, she sees it as an escape from her husband and her marriage. Selvadurai's words, "The world rasps at a marriage, like a knife at a rope", offer a vision of the slow and painful unravelling.

Tug of power

Apart from familiar characters like Devadatta and Ananda, Selvadurai also paints in the society of those times, the constant tug of power between the various kingdoms, how the poor bear the brunt of natural disasters like drought, and the ways in which forest-dwelling tribes are viewed.

Once Siddhartha renounces the world, Yashodhara believes him to be dead and focuses on bringing up their son. But her world is flung off its axis again, when Siddhartha returns as the Buddha, the 'Enlightened One'. In Selvadurai's telling, the story of Kisagotami and the mustard seeds is narrated by the Buddha in Yashodhara's presence. She sees it as some kind of message for her.

Mansions of the Moon
Shyam Selvadurai
Penguin Random House
₹599

Coming to terms

Finally, when Yashodhara and the other women leave Kapilavastu and ask the Buddha to ordain them as 'bhikkunis', he refuses. But Ananda's persuasion leads to a grudging and misogynistic acceptance of women in the Buddhist order. In Selvadurai's nuanced words, the reader is witness to Yashodhara's growth from a 16-year-old bride to a wife who cannot understand her husband's growing fascination with "the truth of truths", to a deserted wife and mother. Finally, we see a Yashodhara who makes her peace with life and is even able to gently tell her son that he has no place in it.

This is an absorbing story told with empathy that offers a reader much to think about – both in terms of the past and the present.

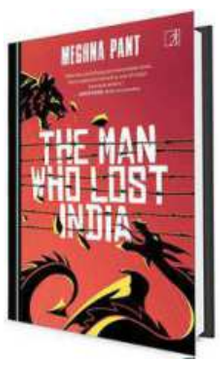
BROWSER

Three Women in a Single-Room House

K. Srilata
Sahitya Akademi
₹100
Chennai-based poet and writer K. Srilata's latest book of poems is part of a larger conversation about difference. It also emphasises the difficult yet joyous work of care and nurture, and about the richness of female lineage.

The Man Who Lost India

Meghna Pant
Simon & Schuster India
₹499
The year is 2032 and China has declared war on India. But the conflict comes to an abrupt halt due to a supernatural event that saves the town of Lalbag from annihilation. A dystopian tale of love, strife and family, this is an ambitious novel.



Your Utopia

Bora Chung, trs Anton Hur
Hachette
₹599
This collection translated from Korean includes stories on a wide range of topics, from an employee blamed for a crime she didn't commit, to an AI elevator that develops 'profound affection' for a resident. All have one thing in common: wry humour.

The Tattoo Trail

Gurucharan Singh Gandhi
Leadstart
₹299
When a top defence honcho is murdered a week before an international summit, Keshav Kumar, an uncouth investigator from Bihar, and Sumitra Devi, an ex wrestler from Haryana, are tasked with solving the crime. What emerges is a hopelessly tangled case.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Message from China

A book for the Indian strategic community as it ponders over how to deal with China in 2024

Vijay Gokhale

One of the most relevant recent books on China, from India's perspective, has been authored by Ketian Zhang, an Assistant Professor at the Schar School of Policy & Government at George Mason University in the U.S. *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* examines when, why and how China attempts to coerce other states over perceived threats to its national security.

The book's merit lies in Zhang's efforts at crafting a theory about China's coercion decisions by using case studies relating to the South China Sea, Taiwan, Japan and Tibet. A glaring omission is the India-China case although Zhang recognises that China uses coercion against India. Notwithstanding this omission, Zhang's book makes an important and valuable contribution to theorising as to why China is selective in its timing, target and tools for coercing other states. It is relevant for Indians who are grappling with the question of what made China undertake its misadventure in Galwan in 2020.

Selective targeting

Zhang's basic argument is that China acts coercively not just when its national security is physically threatened, but also when it anticipates a threat and feels the need to establish its reputation for firm resolve. It acts in order to both deter the potential threat-maker as well as to message other states not to mess with it. Her core argument is that China is more likely to militarily coerce when the need to establish resolve is high and when the economic and geo-political costs are low. If the latter is also high, then China likely resorts to military coercion only on matters of the highest importance, Taiwan for instance. In other cases, it prefers non-military coercion. The author gives the example of the South China Sea where China has, thus far, preferred to use non-military means of coercion because of the high geo-political risk of American military involvement.

Zhang's chapter on the South China Sea contains a wealth of information, and uses three different case-studies over a 20-year period to demonstrate how China engages in selective targeting. Although three of the claimant states are ASEAN members, namely, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, China has used military coercion only against the Philippines because of the low economic cost and the high need to establish resolve. In the case of the other two countries, it has used non-coercive means (including grey-zone coercion but not force or threat of use of force) because of the high economic cost and the low need to establish resolve. Zhang also places the use of force by China in the broader context, namely that it is not merely the actions of one player (the Philippines) but the surge in the activities of several players in the South China Sea at the same time, both in the mid-1990s and post-2010, that triggers the selective use of military coercion against the target. The target it selects is the one from which China perceives it will derive the greatest benefit.

The case of Taiwan

On the other hand, in the case of Taiwan, where the need to establish reputation for resolve is very high and the potential economic and geo-political costs are also high, China still uses military coercion because this is a 'core' interest for China. Three issues, per Zhang's book, call for potential use of military coercion even if the other costs are high – Taiwan, Tibet and territorial disputes.

This puts India in the list of states to which China is likely to apply military coercive measures. Although India's case is not dealt with in greater detail, it is implicit that the geo-political costs of militarily coercing India are manageable because the U.S. is less likely to intervene. Zhang makes a distinction between 'alliance' and 'partnership', and postulates that where a state (Japan) is 'allied' to the U.S. the geo-political cost is higher, and therefore China needs to be more careful in application of force, than is the case when a state (India) is only a partner. This distinction does not provide for any nuance in the latter case on the size, abilities or intentions of the state involved or the extent of the 'partnership'.

China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion
Ketian Ziang
Cambridge University Press
₹2,615 (Kindle price)

One debatable distinction Zhang makes is the definition of grey-zone coercion. From India's perspective this constitutes any sort of quasi-military activity along the Line of Actual Control. Zhang tries to draw a line between grey-zone coercion which, according to her, is action by civilian authorities, and military coercion done by the PLA. Since Chinese civil-military fusion is well advanced, and China's fishing fleets and border settlements are military or quasi-military means in civilian garb, such distinction is questionable. To be fair, the author calls for more studies on the concept of grey-zone coercion. If there is one book that the Indian strategic community needs to ponder over as we grapple with how to deal with China in 2024, I would say that it is this book.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and Ambassador to China.

The world under that rock

The first part of herpetologist and wildlife champion Romulus Whitaker's autobiography is a delightful read, cheeky and candid at all times

Sunil Rajagopal

What is the nature of memory? Especially, remembrances from our earliest childhood days? It is like a hazy sea of vagueness with most of what we think we 'remember' being anecdotes told and retold fondly by mothers, aunts and sisters. Fathers seem to contribute little here. In their midst, a handful of random, almost meaningless moments stand out with startling clarity and joy. For Romulus Whitaker, in a portent of things to come, one occurs when he turns over a rock and finds a shed snakeskin. He looks at it, and rather than be repulsed or mortally afraid as most of us primates would be, realises that snakes shed their skins like we take our socks off, inside out!

Being colour-blind

One theme that runs strongly throughout the candid and delightful first part of his autobiography, *Snakes, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: My Early Years*, is how unconventional his early life was. From a single parent childhood in rural America to the maniacal churn of a family in India, to the freedom he has to explore the world around him. His ability to not allow his education, first regimented and later religious, to change his inner calling. His keen exploration of the lush wilderness of the Nilgiris. The odd friends he has. The rolling stone nature of jobs he tries his hands at – everything from snake catcher and sparrow killer to the military and sailing. How a handicap, colour-blindness, turns into a strength – spotting creatures in the wild by becoming better at recognising shapes. Perhaps that explains his fascination for reptiles, creatures that are "not like us".

Beneath the hood
Romulus Whitaker
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

We have seen in so many cases that unconventional upbringing and freedom of thought leads to remarkable lives. And yet, our world is bent on teaching and imposing homogeneity; like a batch of perfumed soap being sealed and packed on a conveyor belt. Romulus warns us explicitly too when he calls out a disciplinarian, violence prone teacher, who in later life would go on to establish a fancy school in Chennai. Makes me think, do enough children turn over rocks anymore? More importantly, do we let them?

Romulus mentions and describes his extended family, including a pair of separated and famous Indian grandparents, in detail. It is clear that he is fascinated by people and animals both, but also that those people are at arm's length. It is the people who he sometimes does not even name that he seems to have the greatest emotional connect to. Fishermen on Juhu beach, a man who teaches him to fish, an aunt who used to carry snakes in her pocket, a friend's parents who feed him on weekends....

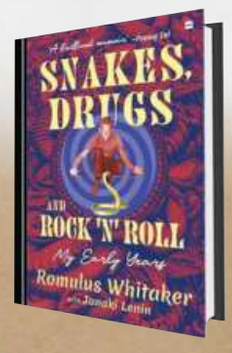
Hiking in the Nilgiris

Another passage from the book that stayed with me is about hiking in the Nilgiris with classmates. About how those hikes were about getting from one place to another in the shortest time to accumulate house points, an achievement. And how little interest anyone had in exploring one of the most biodiverse mountains on earth. His observation that plantations of imported trees were empty of life and boring. It was only later when he started hiking alone that Whitaker could explore the verdant sholas and native grasslands.

There is also startling honesty here of his own nature. His need to hunt; to capture and kill, and the sense of pride that came with it. The grief would come only later. How many of his adventures were plain daft and that he is lucky to have lived through them. But unlike Corbett or Anderson, he dwells on it in a matter of fact way and not as a means to build his own legend. He never says it but there is enough to suggest that he is grateful to his mother, not for just letting him be as he is but to be a moral compass as well.

Cobra's gaze

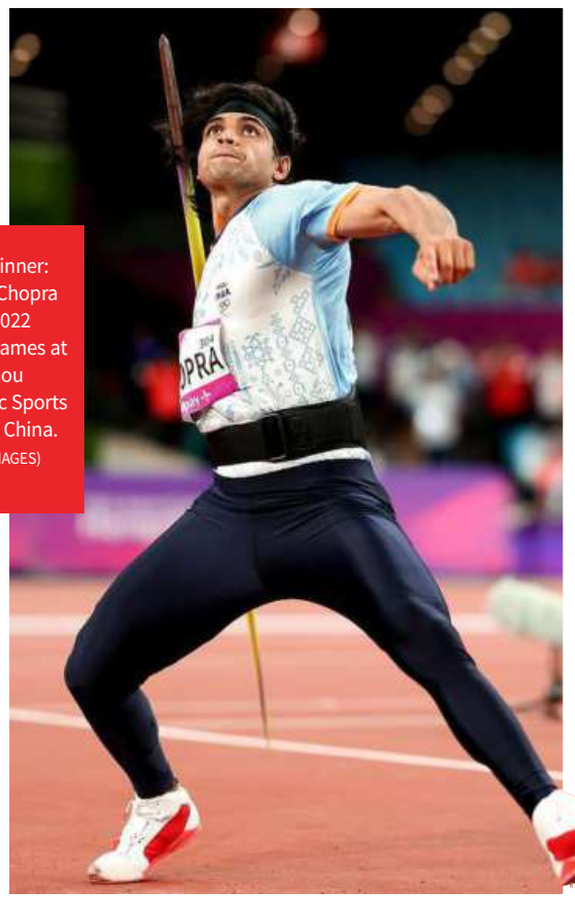
I once considered taking up a role at the crocodile bank. Life took me elsewhere but this book has allowed me a way back in some way. This is a book about Romulus, so



Snakes, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: My Early Years
Romulus Whitaker with Janaki Lenin
HarperCollins
₹699

obviously there are plenty of snakes in it. But this is not about snakes. This first volume of a rambling, rough and tumble autobiography (and not a memoir as is spelt out clearly in the introduction) attempts to find the building blocks of how he became the man he is. And for a man who has lived a life as extraordinary as him, it is only understandable that his life spills over in to more than one book! Janaki Lenin is in fine form here; her clear, matter of fact voice and humour are evident throughout. As are her skills at editing out the fluff which could have weighed this book down. I associate Romulus most with the Madras Snake Park and his work with King Cobras in Agumbe. There is plenty to look forward to in the next.

The reviewer is an amateur birder and writer based in Chennai.



Clear winner: Neeraj Chopra at the 2022 Asian Games at Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre, China.
(GETTY IMAGES)

Champion on track

Norris Pritam on the spirit of Neeraj Chopra's stupendous achievements on the world stage

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It's always challenging to write about a person who is famous because every aspect of his life would have been discussed threadbare. But *The Neeraj Chopra Story* by veteran sports journalist and former athlete Norris Pritam draws you in with its honest and straight-from-the-heart approach.

Embellished with a befitting foreword by six-time world champion and London Olympics bronze medallist boxer M.C. Mary Kom, the book, with simple prose and easy pace, tracks the iconic javelin thrower's life of a boy from the Haryana hinterland to a history-making global star.

Norris may have missed covering the COVID-marred Tokyo Olympics in 2021, but he has made up for his absence in the Japanese capital by making some hard work to serve readers a Neeraj Chopra story as fresh as he could. His narrative includes everyone who played an important role in making Chopra what he is today – an Olympic and world champion.

Tribute to other greats

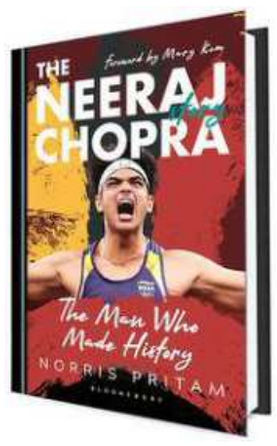
Norris revisits Indian athletics' past to put Chopra's achievements into perspective. Right from Milkha Singh, Gurbachan Singh Randhawa, Sriram Singh to P.T. Usha and Anju Bobby George, the author has discussed several great athletes to bring us some heartbreaking instances of Indian athletes missing an Olympic medal narrowly.

Some gripping real life examples, which were exclusive to the author because of his days as an athlete, and an elaborate description about the lack of facilities and poor conditions for yesteryear athletes make one understand that it was not the dearth of talent but other factors which dented Indian athletes' medal hopes at the biggest stage.

Switching his storytelling from being an observer to being a character, Norris tells Chopra's story with spontaneity and passion. His description of his first meeting with Chopra, which came as a surprise to him, is interesting.

More about 'Nirju'

Interactions with Chopra's family members, friends, mentors, coaches and colleagues give us an idea about 'Nirju' the person and Chopra the dedicated sportsperson, who became the first Indian to win an athletics gold medal in the Olympics. Also, views of his rivals and some legends, including 1972 Munich Olympics champion Klaus Wolfermann, add value to the biography.



The Neeraj Chopra Story
Norris Pritam
Bloomsbury
₹399

A chapter on South Asian javelin throwers, especially the details about Chopra's friendly rival Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem, fits well. It clears doubts about the unwanted controversy during the Tokyo Olympics related to use of javelins.

Projecting Chopra as the leader of a javelin revolution in India – with several talented throwers including Kishore Jena, D.P. Manu, Rohit Yadav and Shivpal Singh around – is quite apt.

The attempt to look at the future of Indian athletics following the impetus given to it by Chopra is also welcome. Overall, it's a good and timely effort by Norris and should win the hearts of sports lovers in an Olympic year.

Building flexibility and strength (Clockwise from below) Rukmini Vijayakumar; Madhumanti Banerjee-Varun with a student; and Gautam Marathe's training session. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

ADDING MUSCLE TO BHARATANATYAM

What a dancer needs

Bengaluru-based dancer and choreographer Rukmini Vijayakumar, 42, who has a large following on Instagram, remembers her teenage years, practising *araimandi* for prolonged periods and the onset of knee and ankle pain. It was while doing yoga and learning ballet that she began to recognise the lack of anatomical awareness in the training of Bharatanatyam. After spending years attempting to fill this gap, and shift her training from a skill-based progression as is often taught in a regular class, Vijayakumar has evolved a pedagogy called Raadha Kalpa that places the body at the epicentre. "I began asking important questions like what does the body need before it performs a movement. Do the hamstrings need to be warmed up, does the core need to be engaged?" Through the week, she follows her pedagogy, doing yoga for flexibility, running to improve cardiovascular health, and lifting weights to build strength, in addition to carving out time for her practice of dance and choreography, and for leisure — all of which one needs to be able to dance.

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

The inclusion of strength training has not only shifted the very nature of the dance – lending it power, athleticism, and physicality of movement that was unheard of earlier – but it has also enabled a whole host of practitioners to evolve structured methodologies that promise dancers a keener awareness of their bodies, and quality and longevity of dancing life.

Indira Kadambi, 54, was Gopalakrishnan's first student who was a dancer. In 2017, the Bharatanatyam artiste, who now lives in Bengaluru, had sought him out after a knee injury, which stayed dormant for a decade, returned. "Adarsh worked on helping me strengthen my knees and build my overall endurance," she recalls. Within eight months, she was able to perform a *poorna margam* for four hours.

Today, Gopalakrishnan's clientele comprises more than 30 dancers from across India and the globe, who train in-person at his gym, or virtually. "Our approach is holistic," he says. Since dancers deal with issues such as ankle instability, knee pain, and poor range of movement of the arms, he helps bring a sense of body self-awareness to their training. "Once I make sure all their joints are functioning well, the intent is to ensure the right exercise for each," he says. How can they, for instance, leap more smoothly on stage, or add more power to a jump, or learn to stop with control after an intense burst of movement.

For many dancers who also double up as trainers, the story is personal. New York-based Madhumanti Banerjee-Varun, 29, battled with a recurring injury in her upper and lower back. "That was in 2014," she says, "and my friend, a physical therapist, showed me the importance of understanding one's body to prevent injuries." Varun took the advice seriously and went on to study and certify as a coach from the National Academy of Sports Medicine. Her focus is to better understand the body and its biomechanics to help the dancer community; she will soon be offering her online programmes as in-person sessions in NYC.

Mumbai-based Gautam Marathe – who signed up to study Bharatanatyam under the watchful eyes of Vaibhav Arekar and the Sankhya Dance Company in 2015 – recalls being shocked at how little time dancers spent on warming up. "I was fresh off a year-long training in ballet with [choreographer] Ashley Lobo, where the emphasis on strengthening, flexibility, movement-based exercises and isometric holds occupied a large part of my schedule," he says. "We danced only after preparing the body for it."

Following a series of conversations with his teacher, he embarked on a project while on tour in Poland in 2019. He broke down specific *adavus* (movements) in the Bharatanatyam vocabulary to address muscles that dancers used, and over time, constructed a module that helped them strengthen specific and collective muscle groups. In March 2020, just as the world went into lockdown, the curtains went up on Aangika, a cross-training holistic module for dancers. The virtual entity, now with in-person sessions, has grown in size and sign-ups, becoming the go-to class for Indian classical dancers across genres. "I have worked with over 1,000 dancers from across dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and even Mohiniyattam, over the last four years," he says.

Mavin Khoo believes that strength training in Bharatanatyam is a response to a shifting global culture that has increasingly "become body-focused, which has nothing to do with dance"

Aesthetics and body image

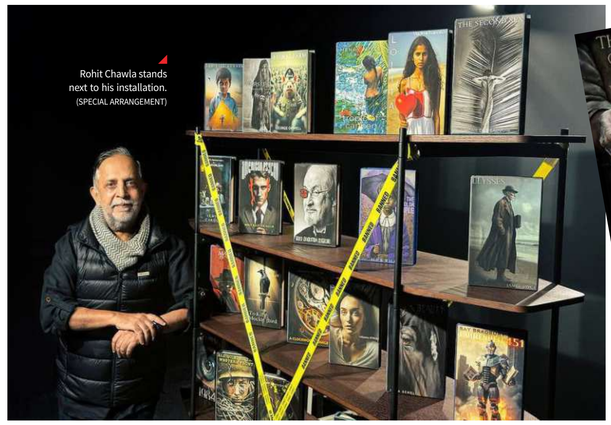
Strength training, Pilates and yoga have always been part of training for dance forms such as ballet. "As an art form, ballet has a specific athletic aspect to it, but it has no elements such as storytelling that rely on *abhinaya* like in Bharatanatyam," says Mavin Khoo, 47, an exponent of Bharatanatyam and ballet, who trains and mentors artistes in both forms as creative associate of the Akram Khan Company in London. "So, the reliance of a ballet dancer on their body to communicate either a story or a sense of abstraction, is almost primal."

But the same can't be said about most classical dance forms in India. As of now, Bharatanatyam, with its larger pool of practitioners, is taking to strength training most intensely. Khoo believes this trend is also a response to a shifting global culture that has increasingly "become body-focused, which has nothing to do with dance". Ratnam agrees. "Alongside the increased athleticism that classical dance demands, the aesthetics surrounding the form have also changed. It's a new world now of Reels and Instagram, where the attention span is only for 30 seconds. A lot of dancers are staking their social media as reputation for gigs. So, I think this kind of fitness and athleticism is in demand."

However, she brings in a note of caution – of body-shaming. "What are we saying about the dance body and our visual aesthetics? Even though we recognise that we should not body-shame, somehow the first impression often has to do with whether the dancer is in shape or not," she says. "So, are we demanding a certain kind of body type or are we looking for a kind of natural fluidity and performance energy that transcends strong legs, biceps and muscles?"

The independent journalist is the founder of arts management company Aalaap.

Watch | Strength training and Bharatanatyam on magazine.thehindu.com



Rohit Chawla stands next to his installation. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

BOOKS THEY SILENCED

Rohit Chawla questions censorship and authority in this thought-provoking exhibition

Ritika Kochhar

Ever since the written word has existed, so has censorship. Some of the most recognisable classics, including the *Bible* and works by Shakespeare, were once considered controversial and were banned," says Alka Pande, curator of the recent The Art of India exhibition, where Rohit Chawla debuted *Banned*. The Goa-based photographer's installation reimagines the covers of 30 books that have been or are currently banned in various countries around the world, including the *Satanic Verses*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Alice in Wonderland*.

"We live in a time of self-censorship where most creative people are mindful of what they say in a public forum," says Chawla. "So, I've taken some of the greatest literary works and highlighted how they were censored and forbidden. It's an oblique way of focusing attention on the prevailing ban and cancel culture."

Holding the world accountable

Chawla has always been fascinated by covers. "I've done about 400 – of mostly mainline news magazines and glossies. So, the idea of reimagining some of these book covers seemed like an interesting thing," says the visual artist whose campaign, *Untangling the Politics of Hair* – about Mahsa Amini's custodial death in Iran – won the first Industry Craft Gold Lion for India (and integrated marketing communications company FCB) at last year's Cannes Lions.

It's interesting to see what books were prohibited in which countries. *Persepolis*, with its description of the Iranian Revolution, is banned in Iran. But it was briefly disallowed in Chicago as well, in 2013. When its proposed proscription became a high-profile story, the authorities claimed that the word "censorship" was inappropriate, as teachers could still assign the book as long as they were willing to sit through a class on how to teach such 'sensitive material'. "They think kids are stupid," Marjane Satrapi, the French-Iranian author, noted in an interview on the ban. "Children are not dumb."

Some books on Chawla's list offer curiosity value, like D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. "But the idea that children will not read *To Kill A Mockingbird* [Harper Lee] and *Catcher In The Rye* [J.D. Salinger] feels personal because they are books that have given me the courage to stand up for my ideals – something I would wish for every child," he says.

The only book banned in India that Chawla has reimagined is Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. "I particularly like my take on that cover because Salman Rushdie is perhaps the most vilified author of my generation and, in a way, has become a poster boy of banned books," he shares. "I took a portrait of Rushdie, which I had shot some years ago, and put an eye patch on it with his name. It reminds us of the price he paid for his literary freedom."

Banned *is on exhibit at Stir Gallery in New Delhi till March 10.*

The writer is an expert on South Asian art and culture.

Behind the tape

The exhibition is presented like a crime scene, with the 30 items placed on a black shelf wrapped in yellow tape stamped with the word *Banned*. Each 'book' is made of wood and mixed media — from Chawla's archival images to woodcuts and illustrations — and includes a short write-up on its theme and its publishing and censorship history. Chawla's insight and eye for detail are reflected in the covers: be it the teenage Indian girl carrying a heart-shaped balloon on a beach in Goa for *Lolita*, the huge blue eye overpowering the cover for *1984*, the young girl of colour posing as Alice, or the Gauguin-like cover for *Tropic of Cancer*.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Wild ride Stills from *Laapataa Ladies*; and (below) Kiran Rao.

INTERVIEW

'COMEDY CAN CHANGE YOUR MIND'

Ahead of the release of her film *Laapataa Ladies*, filmmaker Kiran Rao discusses why she chose humour to convey the message in her "sweet satire"

Aswathy Gopalakrishnan

In Kiran Rao's latest directorial venture *Laapataa Ladies*, a slip-up sets many things right. Two newly-wed brides accidentally get separated from their respective families during a train journey to their husbands' homes.

Over the next few days, as everybody goes berserk looking for them, one bride discovers a world that had been cordoned off from her, while the other challenges and shakes the patriarchy around her. It is a compulsive comedy that deftly finds humour in the direst situations, even as it addresses weighty social issues.

Releasing on March 1, *Laapataa Ladies*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023, is Rao's second feature film, after 2010's *Dhobi Ghat*. The film is based on Biplab Goswami's prize-winning screenplay, *Two Brides*, and was brought to her attention by her former husband, actor-producer Aamir Khan. While the screenplay is darker in tone, Rao and her writing partners, Sneha Desai and Divyanidhi Sharma, have infused humour and hope.

In fact, Rao, whose personal favourites when it comes to comedies are *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* and the *Monty Python* series, went ahead and created her own state, Nirmal Pradesh, to aid the proceedings in *Laapataa Ladies*. Nitanshi Goel, Pratibha Ranta, Ravi Kishan and Chhaya Kadam play the protagonists in the film, which was shot in rural Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: *You are supposedly "back" in the film industry although you were always around, active in other important roles.*

Answer: The label might be because I have not helmed any film in the last 10-12 years. Maybe, it is also symptomatic of how women's work is often overlooked because it is not always in the foreground.

Being a mother took up a major chunk of my creative mind in the last decade. I tried very hard to have a child, and when Azad came into my life, I knew I wanted to spend much of my time with him. Having said that, I have also been a part of a lot of projects. We, at Aamir Khan Productions, produced five or six films, and I was also a part of the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival. But, indeed, now I am returning to the industry as a filmmaker, and I am excited to have something of my own to show people.

Scan the QR to watch Kiran Rao in conversation on **magazine.thehindu.com**

Q: Dhobi Ghat *was a city film while* Laapataa Ladies *takes the viewer to the heart of rural India. Was there the risk of an outsider gaze creeping in?*

A: I have lived all my life in a city, and I veer towards films set in that milieu. But I think all of us in India must have had an experience of either passing through or living in a village, or might at least have extended family in the countryside. When Aamir narrated *Two Brides* to me, my first thought was that while the story is set in a village, it has very universal issues at its core.

While working with the Paani Foundation, which we founded in 2016 for watershed management education and agriculture in rural Maharashtra, I had the opportunity to visit and live amongst people in very far-flung villages. So, I felt quite confident that I would get the setting, its people, and the authenticity of a village right. I also took the liberty of making my own state 'Nirmal Pradesh', so I could make my own rules and do things my own way. (Laughs)

Q: *Why did you set the film in 2001?*

A: To make it believable that two girls could go missing for days and no one has any idea where they are. Now, the Internet and technology have made it difficult for anyone to "get lost" in the traditional sense. It was also a period when mobile phones made their entry into India and were deemed precious enough to be gifted as dowry.

Q: *Why did you develop Biplab Goswami's grey-shaded screenplay into a comedy?*

A: I feel comedy has the potential to change your mind, to kind of charm you into changing your opinion, and draw you into a conversation. It disarms you. Humour can say things that we never could say otherwise. Comedy can be a weapon. I knew that was what I wanted to bring to the film. A lot of these issues that we discuss in the film are not anything new. There might not be anybody who does not know about them or has not experienced them in cinema before. Humour gives the narrative a freshness. *Laapataa Ladies* is a sweet satire.

Q: *Between* Dhobi Ghat *and* Laapataa Ladies, *how has the filmmaking landscape changed?*

A: Back then, we managed to release *Dhobi Ghat* in 200 cinemas. I doubt if it would be possible for a small film to get such a wide release these days. A lot of changes have happened since then – multiplexes, digital transition and technology, the coming of streaming platforms. As a filmmaker, I am forced to be on my toes because I feel audiences today have a great variety of content to choose from. Besides, there is the problem of attention deficit that we feel has perhaps crept in because of content proliferation.

Q: *As chairperson of MAMI once, and having seen India's independent film scene up close, would you say that digital advances have made production and distribution easier?*

A: Distribution and exhibition continue to be a struggle, not just for independent art films but also for those that do not have well-known names attached to them. We thought multiplexes would solve the issue by adding more screens, but that didn't happen. Today, streaming platforms have made it relatively easier to find screening space. However, if you have made a small film or something that is formally different, reaching your target audience continues to be difficult. This is why film festivals are important. We are being pushed to produce better work, which is the best outcome of these changes.

Q: *While you now have your own production company – Kindling Pictures – you are still seen as a part of Aamir Khan Productions (AKP). How do you perceive this lingering association?*

A: I feel I am basking in the sunlight of AKP. I am very much a part of its growth, and I have worked on every single AKP film to date, including *Lagaan*, in which I was one of the many assistant directors. I have Kindling Pictures, where I will develop the projects I have been working on, but my association with AKP will always be exceedingly dear to me. I will continue to be connected to it emotionally, spiritually, and even professionally.

The writer is a film critic currently residing in London.

POP-A-RAZZI

Gobi and the food war

The recent brouhaha in Goa proves why we must take authenticity debates with a hefty pinch of salt

I went to Badami in Karnataka to see 6th century cave temples. The sculptures were exquisite – a Vishnu, kicking his leg high like a ballet dancer, a bull and an elephant sharing a head, carved from red sandstone.

But the real surprise in Badami were all the carts selling *gobi manchurian*, each one misspelled more imaginatively than the previous. I researched local food bloggers and found that for some reason *gobi manchurian* is one of the "iconic dishes" of the area.

Now, *gobi manchurian* is in the crosshairs of food evangelists in Goa. The Goan town of Mapusa has banned the batter-fried cauliflower smothered in vaguely Chinese sauces. Some of the zeal is apparently because all kinds of synthetic colours and dubious additives were going into the dish. But nobody is sure why the authorities are throwing out the *gobi* with the bathwater instead of just cracking down on the additives.

It also feeds into a larger authenticity debate cooking around the country. Not long ago, Goa decreed that beach shacks needed to serve fish curry and rice. They feared Goan cuisine was disappearing because the shacks were catering to North Indian palates.

Butter chicken debate continues

Meanwhile, in North India, there's a court case raging as two families duke it out over who owns the authentic butter chicken. The owners of Moti Mahal and Daryaganj each claim their forefather was the one who invented butter chicken.

One side insists their forefather Kundan Lal Gujral, worried about what to do with leftover tandoori chicken, decided to turn it into a curry with chopped tomatoes, cream and butter. The other side says Kundan Lal Jaggi came up with the dish when a large group came to the restaurant and he had just some tandoori chicken on hand. The irony is the two Kundans were partners. Both had fled to Delhi from Peshawar during Partition and started Moti Mahal to serve food from the Punjab they had left behind. Butter chicken was born in tragedy though it is now being cooked in farce.

Oddly, this story sounds not too unlike the origin story of chicken tikka masala, where one Ali Ahmed Aslam of Glasgow claimed he rustled up the sweetish gravy on the spot when a customer complained the chicken tikka was too dry and spicy.

All this to say we should probably take origin stories of popular dishes with a hefty pinch of salt. The question is, does it matter to anyone other than Moti Mahal and Daryaganj who "invented" butter chicken? Or whether *gobi manchurian* is authentically Indian or not?

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

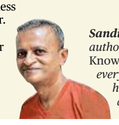
What's in your *sambar*?

Gobi/chicken *manchurian* also comes with its own "authentic" origin story. This one involves Nelson Wang, a Chinese chef from Kolkata, who supposedly dredged chicken cubes in cornflour and tossed them in a garlic-soy-vinegar sauce at his restaurant in Mumbai and created the dish. No one has contested this yet, but the quest for authenticity when it comes to food is futile. Each home has its own "authentic" way of preparing beloved local dishes. The fish curry my mother was used to at her maternal home tasted different from the fish curry she had at her in-laws' place. But one was not less authentic than the other.

"Only completely fraudulent people swear by authenticity when it comes to food," writes Krish Ashok in his book *Masala Lab*. Or food bloggers on Instagram who claim to know the one and only authentic hole-in-the-wall joint for everything. Ashok points out that the carrots and cauliflowers that are always part of *sambar* were once called "English vegetables". His grandmother grew up with *sambar* that had neither but happily incorporated both into her *sambar* when she moved to Chennai from rural Tamil Nadu without worrying about authenticity. The point about Indian food, says Ashok, is that we can Indianise everything from pastas to sushi. It's the flavour profile that matters more than specific ingredients, which is why a bit of soy and chilli sauce turns batter-fried cauliflower into something "authentically" Manchurian though no one from Manchuria would recognise it.

This is not to say we should not encourage those Goan shacks to serve fish and rice. Or that food heritage does not matter. It's just that food heritage, like much of the rest of Indian history, is a glorious celebration of inauthenticity and impurity. Many feel threatened by that now and search for an authentic, pure, unsullied past forgetting that inauthenticity has its own strength. That's what gave someone the confidence to 'invent' *gobi machurian*. The dish might be "Manchurian" but the *jugaad* that went into it is fully Indian.

Though I am no fan of its goopy taste, there's no need to turn it into some 'Manchurian Candidate'.



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

The lotus-bearing one
The1,000-armed Chenrezig, the cosmic form of Avalokiteshvara, as portrayed on gold on cloth in Tibet.
(WIKI COMMONS)

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

Saviour of the sea merchant

The multi-headed Avalokiteshvara comes in many forms, including female deities such as Guanyin from China, and marks a time when Buddhism was the religion of tradespeople

From Ajanta Cave 1 in Aurangabad district, Maharashtra, comes the famous mural of a rather delicate-looking Avalokiteshvara Padmapani, a bodhisattva who holds a lotus flower in his hand and tilts his head to the side, as if trying to hear the cries of people in distress. More elaborate stone images of the lotus-bearing deity are in nearby Ellora Cave 7, or in Cave 90 of the Kanheri Caves in the western suburbs of Mumbai. At both these locations, he is surrounded by images of distress: fire, theft, demons, elephants, lions, snakes, monkeys and shipwreck. These are the eight great perils (*ashta-maha-bhaya*) that Avalokiteshvara rescued merchants from, making him a popular deity from around the 6th century CE, in almost all denominations of Buddhism.

The idea of the bodhisattva, the one who delays his liberation until he rescues all the afflicted people of the world, probably originated in Gandhara, around the 3rd century CE. The lotus-bearing Padmapani was often paired with the more fierce looking, weapon-bearing Vajrapani, guardian of the Buddha. If Padmapani granted prosperity to end suffering, Vajrapani granted security. This way of thinking was very different from the original tenets of Buddhism. Originally, Buddha emphasised outgrowing desire itself to end suffering. This bodhisattva, however, indulged that desire, until people were ready to take the tougher path. Inasmuch as this, he showed more compassion than contemplation.

By the 6th century CE, the image of the lotus-bearing one spread to South India, and from there to Southeast Asia, where he became renowned as the saviour god of Buddhist merchants. Strictly speaking, Avalokiteshvara is a deity of the later Mahayana school of Buddhism. However, he was popular across all schools of Buddhism owing to his compassionate and helpful nature. With his multiple heads and arms, it was easy to identify this formidable being.

Through the tempest

The story goes that Avalokiteshvara was so pained by the sorrow of people that his head burst into 11 pieces. The Buddha turned each piece into a head in itself. Thus Avalokiteshvara came to have 11 heads. The oldest stone expression of this is found in the Kanheri Caves. This happened 1,400 years ago indicating shifts in Buddhism, mirroring shifts in trading patterns.

Buddhism has mainly been a religion of merchants, who travelled across vast networks of trade routes in South Asia and beyond. That is why Buddhist sites are located at spots where merchants would halt to rest, to pray and even to strike business deals. The earliest Buddhist sites in Bharhut, Sanchi, even Mathura and Gandhara, are along trade routes stretching from the Ganga river valley to the north, i.e., the Himalayas (Uttara-patha), and to the south, i.e., the Vindhyas (Dakshin-patha).

Before the 5th century, India had trade relations with Rome: Roman coins and artefacts have been found on the western coast. After the 5th century, trade expanded to Southeast Asia. Ships from West Asia, taking advantage of the monsoon winds, sailed to ports such as Sopara near Mumbai and Muziris in Kerala. From here, goods were transported over the Western Ghats through the Naneghat pass, and then along the Godavari river to the Godavari delta on the eastern coast. Once here, ships would travel to Java, and from there to Cambodia and finally, China. They would avoid going around the southern tip of India due to the barrier of the Rama Setu. It was safer to travel over land across peninsular India using bullock carts and elephants. But this journey too was fraught with dangers and obstacles, and hence, the need for a saviour god.

Female manifestations

Older Buddhist sites show stories of Buddha and his previous lives on panels in stupas. Buddha is either aniconic or shown seated, with arms on his lap. Later images show bodhisattvas with many heads and many arms, that hear and help an infinite number of beings. Sometimes, Avalokiteshvara carries the image of Buddha on his head. This is not Gautama Buddha of the older Buddhism, but Amitabha Buddha of the newer Mahayana Buddhism that spoke of many Buddhas existing in different heavens, surrounded by their own bodhisattvas.

In Kanheri and Ellora, Avalokiteshvara sometimes has a female deity called Tara by his side, who also holds a lotus flower. This is the first time a female form is acknowledged as divine in the Buddhist realm. This inclusion happens over a 1,000 years after the Buddha's time. Some say Tara is the consort of Avalokiteshvara. But in many places, she becomes his female form.

To the east, in Odisha, at the Ratnagiri monastery on the banks of the Mahanadi, there is an 8th century image of Tara standing alone surrounded by the eight great perils, saving those who call out to her. Her cult would eventually spread from Odisha to Tibet, via Bengal. In China, Avalokiteshvara is worshipped as a goddess called Guanyin. Even today, the Chinese write letters asking her to help them solve problems.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

X-ray vision?

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a recent tournament in Norway. South was Norwegian expert Lasse Aaseng, who perhaps should have passed North's weak raise. Finding himself in a very poor contract, Aaseng played it like he could see through the backs of the cards.

The defense started with two high diamonds, Aaseng ruffing the second. South cashed the ace and king of clubs, no doubt intending to play a third round of the suit. That was a good plan. Should the clubs split 3-3, the opponents might have to do something to help him, especially if West won the third club. Something about the way the opponents followed to the first two clubs made Aaseng feel that the clubs were splitting 4-2, so he abandoned clubs and made the inspired play of a low spade from his hand!

West won with the ace, perforce, and had an uncomfortable play. West led a heart, won with dummy's queen, and Aaseng took the marked spade finesse. He cashed the king of spades to draw the last trump, then led the ace and another heart. West won with his king, but had to lead a diamond, giving South a ruff-sluff. Dummy's club loser was discarded as South, ruffed. Aaseng then ruffed a club in dummy and discarded his last club on dummy's jack of hearts. Making four!

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

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♠	2◇	3♠*	Pass
4♠	All pass		

*Pre-emptive, at least 4 spades

Opening lead: Ace of ◇

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has February 18 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 Born this day in 1745, Alessandro ___ was an Italian scientist who discovered methane gas and invented the electric battery. His invention was a revolution as it proved that electricity could be generated chemically, and debunked the prevalent theory that it was generated solely by humans. What is the SI unit of electric potential named in his honour?

2 Born this day in 1838, Ernst Mach was an Austrian physicist who was the first to describe how the movement of a bullet over a particular speed created a compression of air in front of it. His work eventually led to his name being used to describe a ratio of speed. If something is travelling at Mach 1, what is it considered to be faster than?

3 On this day in 1879, the sculptor Frédéric Bartholdi was finally awarded a patent for his design. He had come up with the idea for a massive statue as a gift from the French to the Americans, in honour of the centennial of American Independence. A huge crowdsourcing initiative was started, and 1 million francs raised. This finally led to which design of his getting built in New York Harbor?

4 On this day in 1885, this book was published in the United States. Although it is a sequel to another book, it was written entirely in vernacular English as it is narrated by the titular character. Set along the Mississippi river, it follows a young boy who runs away from an abusive father, befriends an escaped slave, and has a slew of adventures. What great American novel is this?

Hallowed words Author Sir Terry Pratchett holds his medal after being knighted by Britain's Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.
(AP)

5 On this day in 1911, Henri Pequet, a 23-year-old French pilot who was in India for an air show, was offered an opportunity. He was asked to fly a Humber-Sommer biplane for 10 km, from Allahabad to Naini. The journey lasted just 13 minutes, and was historical as the plane contained 6,500 letters all marked 'First __ __, UP Exhibition 1911'. What was this the first instance of?

6 On this day in 1930, American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh was studying some photographs taken by the Lowell Observatory. He was systematically examining pairs of photographs of the night sky over time, to determine whether any objects had shifted position. What heavenly body did he discover, which was part of an exclusive group for a brief period of time?

7 On this day in 1954, the first church of this particular religious movement was established in Los Angeles. Conceived by the science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard, it was built around a set of therapeutic ideas he called 'Dianetics'. He subsequently reframed his ideas as a religious belief, probably with the intention of getting tax advantages. What controversial 'church' is this?

8 Born this day in 1954, this American actor was nominated for an Oscar for his roles in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Pulp Fiction*. Known for playing varied roles, he is particularly famous for his action and thriller films. A licensed pilot, he even has a Boeing 707 parked outside his Florida home. Who is this actor?

9 On this day in 1978, this particular race was held for the first time on the island of O'ahu in Hawaii. The organisers decided to clump together three events that had been contested separately: a 3.86 km rough water swim, a 185 km bicycle race, and the Honolulu Marathon. What is the name of this physically demanding event?

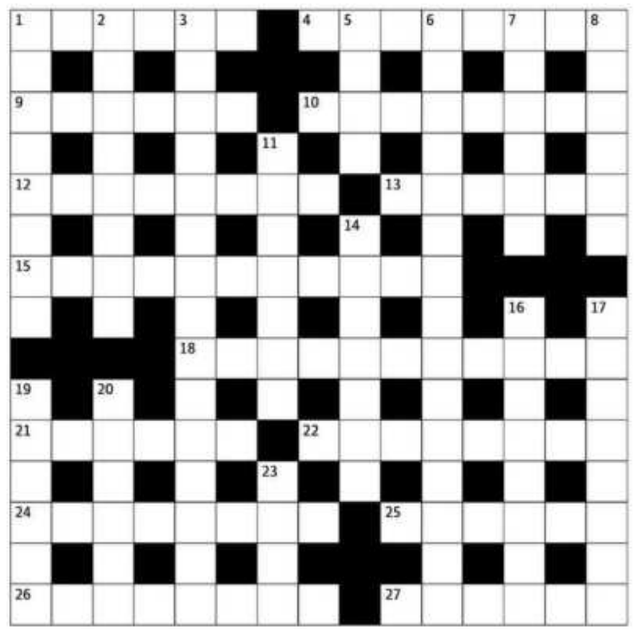
10 On this day in 2009, English fantasy author Terry Pratchett received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II. When he was told he could bring his own sword for the event, he smelted one in a kiln he built in his backyard. As a prolific writer of stories of magic and wizardry, he gave the sword his own twist by adding something he called 'thunderbolt iron'. What was this 'magical' unearthly item he added?

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. Volt
2. The speed of sound
3. The Statue of Liberty
4. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
5. Aerial post (airmail)
6. Pluto (at that time classified as a planet)
7. Scientology
8. John Travolta
9. Ironman Triathlon
10. A meteorite from outer space

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3294



Across

1 Highest in command initially skirts the issues (6)
4 Set point – fantastic – let's pick up the pace (4,2,2)
9 Clergyman rejected nonsense by idiot(6)
10 Taunt accepted by Dad in France, English being distinguished (8)
12 No, I engendered flipping contempt (8)
13 Sleep with partners in largish numbers (6)
15 Refuse to camp: hope for resort and welcoming spa at the outset (7,4)
18 Delivering while almost asleep (8,3)
21 More painful part of stomach, i.e. reticulum (6)
22 When irritated, interfere after rector's left one of the Canaries (8)
24 Something African National Congress tabled in opposing Nationalists, primarily? (8)
25 Punctilious Detective Inspector leaves area (6)
26 Fantastic Island that can be seen in comics (8)
27 In the East End, he got up and wiped out? (6)

Down

1 Audio kit packeted ham-fistedly (4,4)
2 Kind of tense, drive over island for meat (8)
3 Everyman, perhaps mad, drew otters dancing (9,6)
5 Even movement of the ocean reported (4)
6 Carton half open, reptiles scurrying: nasty thing to receive in the mail (6-3,6)
7 Drinks slowly in harbours (6)
8 The Ivy's serving tripe – but only starters, I believe (6)
11 Loading area in which you might go bust (7)
14 Parts of beans that are used for worship (7)
16 Institute enshrined in the law finally validates insurance documents (8)
17 Got to camp (8)
19 Cowboys use these in Dallas so sparingly (6)
20 Exercise in the gym? Don't look so sad (4-2)
23 Up to now, Romeo not seen in comfy spot (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3293

ILLUSTRATION: SOUMYADIP SINHA

It gives an opportunity to catch up on things missed earlier

At peace with retirement

V. Gopinath
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The thought of retirement after decades of dedicated service is certainly a daunting reality for most people. It is impossible to visualise the situation of staying at home with nothing much to do, not being on your toes with the continuous phone calls, problems, and endless meetings while at work and during work-related travel and conferences at different locations.

Months into retirement, I realised that I did not adequately balance my work and life priorities, missing out on being part of my children's lives as they were growing up. I failed to attend the parent-teacher meetings and also their sporting activities. I also skipped marriages and functions of family members. There was also the realisation that now I had all the time in the world but nothing much to do.

The other day, I noticed a thick layer of dust on the furniture as the domestic help left after cleaning the house. The first instinct was to complain to the lady of the house, but wiser counsel prevailed lest this chore also be passed on to me along with many others already assigned like picking up the milk packets from the doorstep, responding several times in a day to the courier delivery person that the parcel is for the flat in the adjacent apartment, and returning to the store the vegetables and provisions picked up earlier in the day (I still have not figured out the various greens and dals). All these chores have been assigned to me with the honourable intention of making me "more useful around the house".

Later that day, I decided to explore my locality and trudged to the adjacent road where I stopped to admire a bungalow with a lovely garden. The stray dogs did not seem to take kindly to my unshaven look, baggy T-shirt, and shorts. With the canines in hot pursuit, I possibly ran the fastest race of my life that day to reach the safety of my house. Later, watching the anchors and the panellists on a TV show shouting themselves hoarse did nothing to bring down my soaring blood pressure.

I have since made peace with retirement and have started using the ample time at my disposal. I have become part of several groups of friends. I regularly meet my batchmates from college, frequently travel with the family, and also attend every social event, including the birthdays of grandchildren of cousins thrice removed. I am also catching up on reading books and writing which had taken a back seat.

The sheer luxury of going to a pub with friends on a working day when the whole world is busy is a high in itself. All days appear the same now and there is no need to wait for the weekend.

The news of passing of a former colleague or a classmate reinforces the stark uncertainty of life and strengthens the resolve to live with a greater sense of purpose. The retirement phase is probably the last opportunity afforded to us for making it count, for making a positive difference.

As I sit down peacefully in my balcony with a hot cup of coffee and the newspaper and stare at the blue expanse of the sky, I offer my gratitude to the universe for all the blessings and good health. Retirement opens up a window of opportunities and it is up to us how we choose to use it.

Pachai, the evergreen school peon

The old bell was replaced, but the 'bell man' was still around

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

M.R. Anand
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The other day I paid a visit to the school I studied back in the 60s. As I stood there, lost in the thought of my bygone schooldays, someone placed his hand on my shoulder. There stood Pachai. Was I seeing a person in flesh and bones or a gaseous ghost? I wondered. He should be not less than 100. Pachai was our school's peon. He was around 50 when I left school in 1971.

He had his own way of ringing the bell. The first bell in the morning was a drawn-out affair – the strikes were equally spaced. The tongue would strike the sides of the bell rhythmically. The last three hits were harder and well-accentuated. In the evening, it used to be short, hurried, and loud, reflecting the impatience of the children waiting to burst out of their classrooms. By just hearing the way the bell was rung, we could tell if it was Pachai or any one of the other peons who was pulling the bell ropes.

Pachai took me to the same old hut that was allotted to him by the school. We spoke of the good old days. Pachai recalled the day former Chief Minister Kamaraj, during a visit to the school, called him aside and spoke a few words to him. "The words still ring in my ears," Pachai said with pride.

As I was talking to him, something under his cot caught my eyes. It was the school bell that Pachai rang for 40 years. When the school installed buzzers in the classrooms, the bell was removed. Pachai's heart broke when he saw the bell lying in the school godown with its clapper missing. He brought it home and kept it.

"What is your actual age?" I asked. "*Nooti onnu* (101)," he replied.

As I stood up to leave, a small girl came running and sat on Pachai's lap. "This is Peela (yellow). I am Pachai (green), my son is Neela (blue), my grandson is Sikappan (red fellow), and my grandson's daughter is Kamala (orange). Kamala's daughter is this child Peela. Thanks to our Hindi teacher for suggesting this name for her in line with our family tradition," said Pachai smilingly, showing his intact teeth.

"You are not just green you are evergreen," I told Pachai as I bid him goodbye.

Footpath walking in style

Are you the dreamer who hums and hops, or the one wedded to the phone, or the exercise enthusiast who leaves little room for others?

Shankar Gopalkrishnan
shankar.ccpp@gmail.com.

When you think of a walker, imagine Dilip Kumar strolling past the woods and glades singing "*Suhaanaa Safar Aur Ye Mausam Haseen*".

The "dreamer" is a footpath walker exactly like him; happiness is writ large on the face. He is a rare species alright, but you cannot miss him. There is a song on his lips and a spring in his steps. Clearly, he is in his own dream world – a free spirit, sauntering down the footpath for no apparent rhyme or reason!

This is the age of multitasking. The "multi-tasker" does a lot simultaneously, as though he is an *ashtavadhaani* (ability to demonstrate eightfold concentration) of sorts.

As he walks on the footpath, he carries on a conversation on the mobile phone and watches memes, all at the same time. With his head lowered and glued to the phone, he is oblivious to his surroundings. The onus is entirely on you to get out of harm's way. And if you have two such absent-minded "multi-taskers" walking in opposite directions, well, it is a perfect recipe for imminent disaster!

The speed of the walk must be carefully calibrated on the footpath. You are walking at a certain pace, singing "*Suhaanaa Safar*", only to find the song and step abruptly come to a halt. In front is a person walking at a snail's pace. Our footpaths are mostly single-lane paths, not wide enough for you to overtake and move on. You are stuck to the same track, with little choice but to follow.

If the person is from the opposite gender, the mind goes into a tailspin. Is it right to follow? Are you following too close? However, it is not easy to slow down your pace, especially if you have a long foot span.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

In slowing down, you must walk with your knees bent, much like a burglar on the prowl. That would bring the police behind you even faster!

Sometimes, you are on a sticky wicket. You encounter another walker coming from the opposite direction. You swerve to the left. He follows you. You swerve to the right. He follows you. It is as if his limbs are tied to yours, and try as you might, you cannot avoid him. Both feel equally sheepish, helplessly trying to dodge past the other. You screech to a halt, inches away from a full, frontal collision!

Some walkers cover the entire width of the footpath. You can't blame this walker; he is built that way.

Years of pumping iron at the gymnasium has given him a chiselled body. Frequent gym-goers have an anatomical problem – their arms don't hang down like the rest of us. They are stretched out, as though they are stricken with a boil under their armpits. Our friend walks with a swagger, with his arms spread out, like Ghatotkacha doing the rounds. In the process, he covers the entire breadth of the footpath. How are you going to pass him? The only solution is to shrink into a foetus posture, squeeze yourself between his arm and body, and bolt ahead.

Once past him, the relief is immense, and you can continue with your favourite song – "*Suhaanaa Safar*..."

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

It is heartwarming that in the age of social media, reading is on the rise, and so are literature festivals. ('Lit fest nation'; Feb. 11) With AI poised to further revolutionise digital media, lit fests will have to keep reinventing themselves for the changing times.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Community participation in literature festivals speaks volumes about the growing interest in reading and the arts. There are many social ills plaguing society today, and many of them can be addressed by spreading awareness among people at lit fests.
G. Ramasubramanyam

Literature festivals enable us to unite the past with our contemporary lives, the real with the imagined and the spoken with the written. These festivals have become a great hub for all literature aficionados and aspiring writers with a passion for books and love of writing.
Ranganathan Sivakumar

Iconic authors

There is no doubt that an iconic book like *English, August* will be starkly different 36 years later. ('If I wrote *English, August* today, it would be different'; Feb. 11) I've been a fan of Chatterjee, and am a proud owner of an autographed copy of his latest book too. In person, Chatterjee comes off as authentic as his characters.
Saurabh Sinha

Holy cow

The problem with society today is the increasing commercialisation of any activity, whether it is food or spirituality. ('The cow's status doesn't protect her'; Feb. 11) The divine position given to cows and the Ganges is part of a broader historical and cultural reason. But the over-exploitation of both is proof of the selfish nature of human beings who engage in commercial activities. The shift needed at present is more to do with the general outlook of humans.
Arun B. Asok

Island of knowledge

Like individuals, nations too have to endure very hard times every once in a while. ('Books, selfies and gelato in Galle'; Feb. 11) The pandemic brought the Sri Lankan economy to a grinding halt, thanks to its over-dependence on tourism. However, tough times never last, and it's interesting to note that economic activities are picking up in Sri Lanka. That the Galle Literary Festival drew many visitors reveals that the island nation is back on its feet.
S. Ramakrishnasayee

National pivot

The author seems extremely optimistic about the transformation of the Saudi Arabian economy from an oil-based to a culture-based one. ('Reopening the incense road'; Feb. 11) While one should laud all endeavours of the government in funding such novel and innovative projects, it is far-fetched to forecast a radical change in the nature of Saudi Arabia's economy in the near future.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Holy cow

The problem with society today is the increasing

MORE ON THE WEB

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Winters in Delhi
An outsider's take on the cold and pollution in the national capital
Nitya Muralidharan

Assessing 'Women Cost'
Is there a word that completely embraces all that women forgo
Rajani Balaji

The role of an invigilator
Invigilation is one of the most unappreciated tasks of a faculty member
Kirti Wadhawan

What I learn from Peppa Pig
It transcends social divides and promotes a society based on values of love, friendship, and respect
Mansi Gupta

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A glorious reign (Clockwise from left) Dakshinakali by an unidentified artist (Early Bengal School); *The Procession of Goddess Kali* by Russian artist Prince Alexis Soltykoff; M.F. Husain's rendition; and a sculpture by an unidentified artist.

TRACKING KALI

Curated by Gayatri Sinha, this group show at DAG showcases the many avatars of the goddess — from fearsome *asura* slayer to a symbol of rebellion

Arunima Majumdar

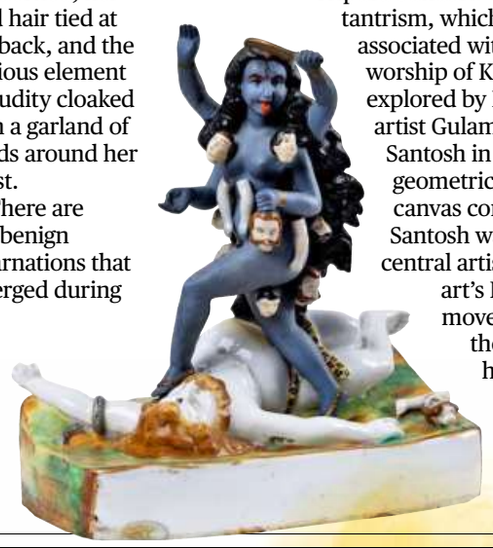
One of the oldest stories about Kali that's told in Bengali households harks back to when the male gods failed to control the mayhem unleashed by rampant *asuras*. The formidable goddess, in her rage-infused avatar, appeared to put a stop to the pandemonium. Her glorious arrival – wearing a garland of human heads, holding a blood-stained sickle in one hand and a freshly-severed demon head dripping with blood in another, surrounded by a cloud of loose black hair, her right foot resting atop the chest of a pacific Shiva – is an indelible one.

This Dakshinakali avatar is also one of the earliest representations of Kali in a painting, as described in the 5th century Puranic text, *Devi Mahatmyam*. And it is this image that sets the tone for DAG's *Kali: Reverence & Rebellion* – her dark blue form, ornamented with gold, depicted with a protruding bloody tongue and a halo that accentuates her divine status.

The group show spans about 300 years of imagemaking. "The principal challenge was to draw out a continuous history of the evolution of Kali's image, and to relate it with social phenomena. I was keen to look at how the goddess has been appropriated by different groups of disenfranchised communities, and how her image – distorted as monstrous in colonial times – has been accommodative of all the different demands," says curator Gayatri Sinha. "In this sense, Kali is not to be seen merely as a symbol of death, but as a beacon of hope because she has empowered groups demanding inclusion and authority."

Through the centuries

On a Saturday morning, I join a group of 40 on the second floor of DAG's Delhi gallery, which is flooded with natural light, for a walkthrough with Sinha. Divided into sections, the exhibition traces Kali's influence across the subcontinent, through miniatures, paintings by Indian and foreign artists, sculptures, breastplates and more. I spot a 19th century European rendition of the goddess that has a subdued colour palette, inspired by classical paintings from the continent. Kali is left unadorned, her wild hair tied at the back, and the obvious element of nudity cloaked with a garland of heads around her waist.



There are her benign incarnations that emerged during the 16th and 17th centuries – the generous mothers of the universe, Jagaddhatri and Tripura Sundari. The aspect of tantrism, which is often associated with the worship of Kali, is explored by Kashmiri artist Gulam Rasool Santosh in his geometrical acrylic on canvas compositions. Santosh was one of the central artists of Indian art's Neo-Tantra movement, and the *chakras* in his work resemble the goddess's tantric body, with an emphasis on her breasts.

A significant shift in the narrative appears when Kali is seen as a figure of rebellion. Right through the 20th century, the goddess is appropriated by different groups. In National Press Cawnpore's version, one sees Subhash Chandra Bose – rendered in Chhinnamasta's iconography – presenting his own head in one hand while wielding a sword in the other to urge people to participate in the fight for independence. In another image (a frontispiece of James Campbell Kerr's 1917 report, *Political Trouble in India*), a bare-breasted Kali is seen wearing a garland of severed heads of Englishmen, a portrait intended to evoke revolutionary fervour and brand her as the leader of the Indian rebellion.

The goddess of protest

"Kali's reverence extends into manifold Shakti *peethas* [seat of Shakti], as well as groups and communities," says Sinha. The goddess identifies with the subaltern and protest movements strongly, and it's a mutually progressive relationship. One of the best examples of this social dynamism is the Theyyam performance of Kerala's Malabar coast – represented at DAG through a breastplate. The art form celebrates Bhadrakali as one who restores justice, who advocates for women's dignity and the oppressed. Performed by Dalit men, it makes the deity a social equaliser.

When it comes to modern interpretations, many renowned artists are included. M.F. Husain's sketch of Kali as a voluptuous woman stands out. Resting on her bent knees, with one hand touching her hips and the other holding a flower, the figure evokes eroticism. Then there is Satish Gujral's artwork, a primitive-looking burnt wood sculpture (part of a series produced after the 1984 Sikh riots) adorned with cowrie shells and leather threads; Mukul Dey's expert dry point on rice paper illustration of the ritual worship during Durga Puja in West Bengal; and political artist Chittaprosad Bhattacharya's (best-known for his documentation of the 1943 Bengal Famine) print of the eight-armed goddess Durga from an engraved plate circa 1967.

"While it's impossible to quantify how many modernists have chosen to paint the deity, she has been a crucial subject for many notable Indian modernists," says Ashish Anand, CEO and managing director of DAG. "Tyeb Mehta's Kali is perhaps the best example. Nirode Mazumdar's paintings are characterised by abstract figural compositions. In a highly personalised form of worship, Mazumdar's paintings of Devi as Durga, Kali or Tripura Sundari defy the logic of conventional iconography."

Each representation has a purpose, whether reverence, stigmatisation, performance or modernism. And this is exemplified in the eponymous publication that accompanies the exhibition. "It traces the religious, historical, social, political and gendered journey of the fierce goddess across the Indian subcontinent," says Anand, adding that the show will travel to their Mumbai and Kolkata galleries next.

Kali: Reverence & Rebellion is on display at DAG, New Delhi, until the end of March.

The independent writer is Delhi-based.

Watch | A walkthrough of *Kali* at DAG on magazine.thehindu.com

For the love of paper

Paper as an art form isn't very recognised in India. Filling this gap is *On Paper Of Paper* (O.P.O.P.) curated by sculptor and architect Ankon Mitra in collaboration with Apparao Galleries, at the ongoing India Design ID in Delhi. Featuring 75artists, designers and architects from across the country and the globe, it is a significant exposition of paper art, design and architecture. "I've always loved paper, and when I met Ankon, we kept talking about the possibilities of what can be done with the medium. When you see this exhibition, you'll realise how many people are working with paper, and how many different techniques [from folding and origami to papier-mâché, paper clay, cutting and more] are being used," says gallerist Sharan Apparao. Themed on Dashavatār, the exhibition draws inspiration from Lord Vishnu's metamorphoses in Vedic lore. "Here, the idea starts with a simple piece of paper, which then develops through folding, layering, pulping, cutting into something complex [much like Vishnu's transformation from a fish to a turtle to a half-lion-half-man and upwards]," says Mitra. "We hope the evolution will eventually become a revolution."

O.P.O.P. ends today at NSIC Grounds, Okhla, New Delhi.

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

A LITTLE LIFE

Gulkhand and a clouded mind

Not all 'curses' should be ignored, as Phuphee proves — this time with medical help and a bowl of ice cream

A young woman named Haneefa lived in Phuphee's village. She was a gentle-mannered girl who excelled at everything she did. After she started working as a teacher in the local school, a marriage was organised. The groom, too, was a teacher and lived in the same village.

Her marriage took place on a beautiful day in June. Everyone talked about how pretty the bride looked, how dashing the groom was, and how delicious the wedding feast had been, but a week later all hell broke loose.

Word around the village was that one morning, a few days after her marriage, Haneefa had left her in-laws' house without telling anyone, gone into town and bought all manner of things they didn't need – utensils, clothes, jewellery, new bedding. She had spent an exorbitant amount of money. And she hadn't stopped there. It had carried on the next day and the next.

In between, she had gotten angry when confronted by her husband and proceeded to trash the whole house and tried to beat him with a copper pot she had just bought. The whole family was in a state of shock, and had sent her back to her parents.

Her parents were beside themselves with worry because Haneefa had always been gentle and well-behaved. It was concluded that someone had put a curse on her and she had been possessed by an evil spirit. She was labelled as being mad. Haneefa's parents took her to the local medicine man and all the famous *peers* (faith healers), but she remained as she was. When everything else failed, they brought her to Phuphee.

Phuphee had known Haneefa for a long time. She took the girl into her room and closed the door. Every once in a while, I would go and stand outside but all I could hear were sobs. On the second day, Dr. Hameed arrived. I didn't know what his speciality was, but I knew Phuphee relied on him a great deal. He stayed an hour or so and then left. Haneefa was confined to the room for nearly two weeks. One day after school, I saw Haneefa watering the plants in the kitchen garden. She didn't speak but she seemed more like the person we had all known.

A few days later, Phuphee asked Haneefa's parents to come and see her. They were happy that their daughter seemed to be doing well, but they were heartbroken too because Haneefa's husband had asked for a divorce. Her in-laws had accused the family of hiding the curse on their daughter. Phuphee told them not to worry and to let Haneefa stay with her a few more days.

The next day, early in the morning, I saw Phuphee making a *gulkand* (rose petal jam) lavender ice cream. She had secured some ice from the local ice cream *wala*. When she was done, she let me lick the spoon and the bowl and said, 'Remember, *gulkand* sweetens even a bitter soul and lavender clears the clouded mind.'

Later that day, I saw Haneefa's husband at the house. When Phuphee went to greet him, she took some of the ice cream with her and shut the door behind her. The next day, Haneefa returned to her in-laws' home. I asked Phuphee what magic words she had used. She replied with silence. I was nearly 13 at the time. I asked her repeatedly over the years about what she had done because once Haneefa went back, we never heard of anything going wrong again.

It wasn't till I was nearly 22 and in medical school that Phuphee told me about what she had really done. I was talking to her on the phone when I remembered Haneefa and her temporary madness. I heard Phuphee take a couple of deep drags of her cigarette and then she said, 'Haneefa didn't have a spiritual problem, she had a medical one. She had a condition called bipolar. Do you know what that is?'

'Of course I know what that is. But how did you know that was what it was?'

'Because I have it, too. I have had it for a very long time. It reared its head just after I got married, but my friend *maetonji* [the English missionary nurse in the village] helped me. Dr. Hameed treated me and I got better. Sometimes, I still become unwell, but Dr. Hameed always helps me get through it along with your uncle,' she replied.

I was too stunned to speak. I had known Phuphee all my life, but never once had I suspected that something was not right.

'Does Haneefa's husband know?' I asked.

'Yes, I told him. I told him about my condition and how I manage it. How I take medication everyday and that Haneefa would have to do the same. He took it very well. In fact, he seemed relieved that it was medical rather than spiritual,' she said. I could hear her smile as she said the last sentence.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' I asked.

'You were too young.'

Neither of us spoke. I felt both privileged and relieved, a weird sort of mix, much like the *gulkand* lavender ice cream she used to make. Privileged because she finally felt she could trust me with something so deep and personal, and relieved that she had chosen not to tell me back then.

Saba Mahjoor, *a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life's vagaries.*