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Nature's bounty (Clockwise from below) Members of the Forest Essentials team harvesting fresh herbs and flowers; Purearth's Wild Rose mist; Kama Ayurveda's new London outpost; and Diipa Büller-Khosla of indē wild.

(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



With big funding, a proliferation of homegrown and international brands, and growing global acceptance, the Ayurvedic skincare market is poised to hit \$21.1 billion in four years



ALTERNATIVE VIEW



Doctors of classical

Ayurveda do not approve of commercialising Ayurveda. This is a life science developed over 2,000 years ago to maintain positive health. You can't apply something topically and think your skin will improve. You have to correct your *doshas*, maintain optimum physical and mental levels, and take internal medicine. But what this trend is doing is help disseminate the concept of Ayurveda to more people, which will not happen through the prescription of traditional *kashayas* and *arishtas* [potions]. So, that is a benefit

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integrate centuries-old traditions with cutting-edge Swiss technology. Contemporary branding and fun social media marketing have made them more appealing and accessible, too. According to market intelligence agency Mintel, Indian brands account for half of global product launches for hair care and skincare today. "Far from diluting Ayurveda, these brands are pivotal in elevating its global stature by intertwining traditional ingredients with modern advancements," says Dr. Chatterjee. "However, it is crucial to recognise that amid this wave of enthusiasm, not all brands possess a deep understanding of Ayurvedic principles. This underscores the importance of discernment and education among consumers."

Blind faith is, of course, not encouraged. Wellness author and beauty expert Vasudha Rai uses A-beauty products for her hair, including Kama's *bringadi* hair oil and Anahata Organic's hair cleansing powder. But she avoids Ayurveda facial oils in the summer due to breakouts. "It's easy to say that our grandmothers used this so it must be good. But your grandmother didn't use a phone the way we do, or have this stress and pollution," she says. "There are variables in everything. Don't blindly believe in something just because it has a traditional tag, just like you wouldn't in something with a cosmeceutical tag."

Targeting western markets

A-beauty's popularity is also coming from brands founded in strong diaspora markets such as the U.K. and the U.S. Fable & Mane, founded in London in 2020, was the first South Asian-owned hair care brand to stock at Sephora. "Whenever I would go to the U.S., I would go to Sephora. And I would see brands from Japan, Korea, Brazil, but nothing from India," says Akash Mehta, the brand's CEO. Alongside his sister Nikita, he developed an Ayurveda-based hair care line. The siblings, both of whom have a background in fragrance and beauty, pitched the concept to the French multinational retailer of beauty products. Today, Fable & Mane products, which are manufactured in the U.S. with ingredients sourced from India, retail in 700 Sephora stores in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Europe, as well as Selfridges in London. "In the past four years, Ayurveda's popularity has grown dramatically," says Mehta. He notes that retailers in the West are getting pitched daily by Ayurveda brands, and that the press is increasingly covering the space. While he does not disclose numbers, he adds that the brand has expanded from a small base to double digit growth in just a few years.

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Gayatri Rangachari Shah

Over a half century ago, an Austrian American named Horst Rechelbacher visited India and was so bowled over by Ayurveda that he founded a hair care company based on the ancient practice – using minerals and herbs such as *kukui* (candlenut) and *ajwain* (caraway) to mango, *mogra* (Indian jasmine) and sea buckthorn, in formulations so potent 'as to be called prescriptions'. That company, Aveda, founded in 1978, generated sales of \$1.1 billion last year.

Yet, despite examples like Aveda and India's OG Forest Essentials, which launched in 2000, Ayurveda beauty never quite caught on globally. Unlike Korean beauty, aka K-beauty, which took the world by storm in the past decade and is today valued at \$100 billion worldwide, A-beauty is valued between \$8 and \$9 billion, according to research firm Verified Market Research (VMR).

Things are, however, changing. A recent proliferation of Ayurveda brands – at a time when western audiences are paying attention to prevention and wellness – suggests a growing popularity for traditional Indian beauty. Among them are Fable & Mane, Sahajan, Purearth, Subtle Energies, Ranavat, Aavrani, indē wild, Soma Ayurvedic, Ras Oils, and Sovi, to name a few. E-commerce company Nykaa recently forayed into the space with

the launch of Nyveda, an Ayurveda beauty and wellness brand. Pioneers Forest Essentials and Kama Ayurveda boast investments from beauty juggernauts such as Estée Lauder and Puig, respectively. And recently, The Ayurveda Experience, a skincare and nutrition brand founded in 2010 by Rishabh Chopra, raised \$27 million in a new round of funding backed by, among others, a Singapore-based venture capital firm.

VMR now estimates that Ayurveda's share of the current \$646 billion global beauty and personal care market will reach \$21.1 billion by 2028.

Potions to luxe formulations

Ayurveda isn't the easiest system of traditional medicine to practise. With treatments tailored to each individual – based on their unique body compositions or *doshas* (*vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*: energies governed by air, water, fire and earth) – it is often alienating to those unfamiliar with it. Its reputation for potions with unpalatable smells and poor shelf life also stands in its way, as does modern science's scepticism. That said, the 'lack of evidence' claims of Ayurveda's efficacy are being challenged by some, observes Dr. Ipsita Chatterjee, a Delhi-based Ayurveda beauty and wellness expert, adding "institutions like [Ministry of Ayush's] Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences have validated this through rigorous clinical trials".

Over the past five years, Indian

brands – which have taken traditional ingredients and repackaged them into easy-to-use formulations with modern skincare technologies – are helping update its wellness promises. "Pure Ayurveda is about medicinal oils; it's mostly used only for internal medicine," explains Rajshree Pathy, entrepreneur, art collector and one of Kama Ayurveda's co-founders, who has since exited the company. "But to keep Ayurveda relevant [for

today's time], it is important to experiment with traditional herbs and combine them with other botanicals to get the result we want. It is necessary to use established extractions and format them differently." Next month, Coimbatore-based Pathy is launching Qi Ayurveda, a new brand that claims to



K-beauty is based on perfect skin. Ayurveda, on the other hand, takes into account how you feel from within, holistically. It is a much more complete way of looking at oneself. In its true form, it is about fresh, untainted ingredients that give extraordinary results

MIRA KULKARNI
Founder, Forest Essentials



A comrade remembers 1975

Brinda Karat's memoir sets the Emergency in context, through the eyes of women, mill workers and others



Dynamic voice
Brinda Karat at a meeting in Kollam.
(C. SURESHKUMAR)

Ramya Kannan
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In some ways, in India, the Emergency hangs like a ghoulish background tapestry in modern day living rooms listening in to conversations, extending a cold, smoking arm sometimes, laying it on a shoulder until the chills run down the spine. India will never get over its Emergency days, clearly, despite more potent and real dangers that might be in our midst today.

How a memoir that spans only 10 years becomes infinitely more interesting is if it is set in August 1975, merely two months after Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency. Of course, it is also the 10 formative years of a tall leader of the Communist and feminist movements of the country. There are many reasons why Brinda Karat's memoir, *An Education for Rita*, is an eye opener: it sets chronology in place, couched in stories of the people, mill workers, in the slums of Delhi, in its crooked bylanes, at the factory gates, in conspiracies and union victories, small and big. As she herself says in an unusually-illuminating acknowledgements section: "Some people said to me that a memoir should be of a life, not merely of a decade. Several comrades felt that it was unusual for a memoir to be only about 10 years of the over 50 years of my public life. Well, frankly, that's all I could manage. I write about a different time."

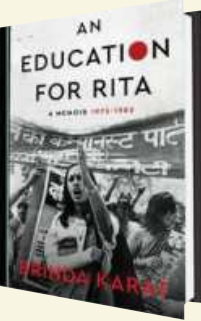
Mirror to the times
As Karat writes, the reader gets the sense of sitting by a roadside tea shop outside of a textile mill in Delhi, on a cold morning, sipping on a *badi chai*, as a hanger on, witnessing historic events unfold, ones that we had a mere inking of. And yet, as Karat pieces them together, the larger tapestry of

connections to modern day India become apparent.

Karat has a strange skill, she speaks of 1975 as if she were living in 1975, and the dramatic events unfold as if they were running on an old Solidaire black and white television set. Usually when people talk of the past in retrospect, they have the present sitting heavily in wisdom. But when Karat talks of her 19-year-old person, you hear an actual 19-year-old, fresh and refreshing, not someone on whom nearly five more decades of experience sits well. This is a unique skill and frames her book within the varying times she chronicles. Great leaders of both the Communist movement and the country enter and exit the stories like crucial punctuation marks, enhancing and emphasising the stories with their wisdom and with what they do.

An education for Rita, Karat's undercover name, is indeed an education for the reader. The experiences of a young woman working in a male dominated sector – the labour unions – offer an education if only one cares to listen. In the pages of this slim volume, we also have a rare window into the lives of the ordinary women with their simple living and high thinking, who have made it possible for the sorority to do what we can do today.

And for that, and everything else the book brings us, a *salaam* to comrade Rita.



An Education for Rita:
A memoir-1975-1985
Brinda Karat
LeftWord Books
₹350



RAJIV, IN ADMIRATION

Mani Shankar Aiyar shares the bond he had with his school friend whom fate enthroned as Prime Minister and Bofors de-throned

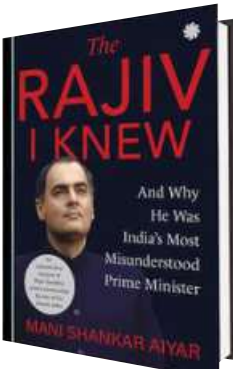
Gopalkrishna Gandhi

And Why He Was India's Most Misunderstood Prime Minister' is the nine-words-too-long subordinate title to Mani Shankar Aiyar's book *The Rajiv I Knew*. It makes the book sound like what it is not – a defence of the man Aiyar adores, misses, recalls to his and his reader's mind with a zest amounting to a passion.

From its opening to its concluding page, Aiyar's narration is about a bond between the author three years and four months older than his subject and who, by the play of an impish fate, was his school-time junior, later his friend, still later his boss, and then hero for ever after. So, is the book about unqualified admiration?

As one who regards 'unqualified admiration' as a spur for writing no less valid than 'unqualified dislike' let me say that, yes, absolutely, it is so. Aiyar's Rajiv is about a bond of sheer admiration. And good that it is so, for admiration has an emotion so bereft of authorial ego, so free of the bilious acids of scepticism passing for objectivity that it goes beyond the person being admired to the nature of admiration itself.

But as one who also has a spoonful of dispassion within the jar of his emotions, let me also say that Aiyar's admiration for Rajiv does not fall for the error of devotion. He adores (as I said) Rajiv, he does not worship him. Big deal? Again, yes, that is a big deal because the assassinated former



The Rajiv I Knew
Mani Shankar Aiyar
Juggernaut
₹799

Prime Minister does have his worshippers, and his worshippers have their own of the same. And Rajiv's wife and his children have their worshippers too, all joined together by politics and the science and art of survival in politics.

Pocket diary
The Rajiv I Knew has been written by a politician about a politician without being about politics. And without being also anti-politics or counter-politics. It is about a person as human in his vulnerabilities as he was strong in his determination as Prime Minister to not let those vulnerabilities get the better of him.

The book is about a closeness that never becomes that awful thing in such books – chummy. It is

about a bond that never morphs into that biographical horror – an 'insider's revelation'. It is also an account by a friend who does not cross the door of the subject's homestead. It has a word Vajpayee used to effect: *maryada* (honour). Being both autobiographical and a biography, the book's six chapters in a little under 350 pages, read like a pocket diary.

One may learn through this book what 'knowing' means. It is not what 'owning' means. Aiyar is not filing an affidavit for title. He is telling us that to 'know' means to understand, to appreciate and withal to admire in the intricate recesses of the empathetic mind. Rajiv Gandhi steps into and out of the pages of the book as lithely as he does into and from aircraft in good or foul weather. We glimpse his humour, his temper spikes, his calm, his rages. But more than these traits of personality, we see his thought-patterns as one descended from a great man, his grandfather Nehru who too Aiyar has 'known'. And never more vitally than in his commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons. Not as a concept but a working plan, a

Political reality 'Rajiv Gandhi was as human in his vulnerabilities as he was strong in his determination as Prime Minister to not let those vulnerabilities get the better of him.' (GETTY IMAGES)

step-by-step programme in practical idealism.

'Bofors: the gun does not fire'
Aiyar's knowing Rajiv is also about those who caused him trouble. Aiyar's portrayal of Arun Nehru in the diary's pages is written in a blend of all the inks that may make the chemical equivalent of disgust. The book has its share of missed expectations. As in the pages on Bofors, where Aiyar's distance from the scene of action befores the picture. His sum-up of Rajiv in the Bofors matter : (Rajiv was) 'consistently honest, straightforward, upright' comes not from Aiyar's acclaimed vocabulary but that of a Who's Who. Aiyar says Rajiv did no wrong. He does not explain how the perception of wrong-doing entangled him. Vishwanath Pratap Singh calls for more analysis than Aiyar spares for the man who dislodged Rajiv from power. The nearly 60-odd pages on 'the Bofors story', read like a strong 'counter' for M'Lord in a packed courtroom. And his account of Rajiv's withdrawal of support to the Chandra Shekhar government, after two men in uniform were spotted near his precincts, begs elucidation. Was pique good enough cause for going back on a word given to a Prime Minister? The book could have done with another hundred pages. Without those, its story asks '...and then....?'

I found the book instructive and engaging but above all, deeply moving. In our times when friendships are about transactions, loyalties skin-deep, *The Rajiv I Knew*, is, at the end of a plangent day, about loss. Like Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, it is about grief, over the loss of a man of honest intent not unmixd with honest mistakes. The escape for Aiyar from that grief is the faith – fragile, perhaps – in what Tennyson described with these words:

Forgive my grief for one removed,/ Thy creature, whom I found so fair./ I trust he lives in thee, and there/I find him worthier to be loved.

The reviewer is a former administrator, diplomat and Governor.



Janaki Lenin

Our ancestors wiggled through narrow spaces to enter subterranean chambers where they painted by firelight. What did they depict on the rough walls in such secrecy? Sure, there were the latest gizmos of centuries past, barbed spears and sharp arrows. They also illustrated animals and lots of them. No doubt they ate them, but they held them in spiritual honour and captured their essential likenesses.

Stephen Alter, who writes fiction and non-fiction with equal facility, sets the stage for the travelogue-adventure in his new book, *The Cobra's Gaze*, at Bhimbetka, where prehistoric Indians painted fauna such as barasingha, elephants, and sloth bears. He explores his own early influences, of growing up in

Locking eyes with a 'goral'

Stephen Alter pays homage to India's wildlife splendour by uncovering overlooked locations and underrated species

the plains of North India, and his interest in snakes and leggy wildlife.

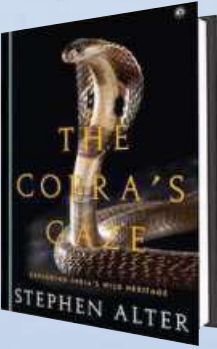
'Shared consciousness'
While out searching for a species of an insectivorous plant near his home in Landour, Uttarakhand, he chances upon a young goral. For a fleeting moment, they lock eyes, "arousing in me a startling sense of shared

consciousness." How did the antelope-like animal perceive him? Alter's description of that instant calls to mind artist and critic John Berger's influential essay *Why Look at Animals?* in which he talks of the element of surprise when humans and animals consider each other across the "abyss of non-comprehension." After tracing the historical relationship between humans and animals, Berger bemoans the physical and cultural marginalisation of animals in the modern era. Although he

doesn't specifically say so, Alter offers a way of looking at animals in the Anthropocene. In his encounters with a spectacled cobra and a dancing frog, he ruminates on how they sense him and perceive the world.

Using that springboard, he uncovers overlooked locations and underrated species, little known cultural and historical sites while also travelling to popular places in his quest to see charismatic animals. His vivid descriptions take readers to the cold heights of Ladakh, the arid plains of Tal Chhapar, and the murky swamps of Sunderbans, while exploring the broad theme of the book: what is our relationship with wild fauna and how do we engage with them.

Bookended by the cobra
The first and last chapters on Agumbe in Karnataka and the area's most celebrated denizen, the king cobra, form bookends. (I had a small influence in nudging Alter to visit the place.) In the second chapter on Vrindavan, he explores the myth of Kaliya Mardan. The reviewer could be forgiven for thinking that this book was all about snakes. But then the author veers sharply to Dudhwa and its most famous resident, Billy Arjan Singh and his controversial rehabilitation of



The Cobra's Gaze
Stephen Alter
Aleph
₹999

a hand-reared tiger.

The reintroduction of the cheetah in Kuno has been reported at length in the news. Transported by Alter, we get a sense of what the cheetahs and the people displaced to create the habitat are up against. When he cannot spot a large predator, he's disappointed but self-aware enough to realise he's falling into the same pitfall as the majority of tourists.

In another chapter, he analyses Jim Corbett's story of the Mukteshwar tigress and wonders why the area produced so many maneaters. He suggested the combination of felling the lowland Terai forests and unregulated hunting sent the predators

Untamed adventures The author explains the interesting relationship between humans and wild fauna. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

scrambling up into the hills, setting off a spree of tragedies for humans and tigers. He explores how the human imagination explains our encounters with wildlife by dipping into Radhika Govindarajan's book *Animal Intimacies*. The essay on sacred groves illustrates a different aspect of the human interaction with nature. Restoration of degraded habitats, ecotourism, and nature writing are among the diverse other topics the author investigates.

Protecting wildlife
Although Alter does not preach conservation, the urgency to protect wildlife is an undercurrent of his book. He upholds Emperor Ashoka's policies as "examples of benign authority, wisdom, and tolerance." While it is true

that the monarch bucked the trend of killing animals as a pleasurable pursuit, which was often wasteful, his ban on hunting and fishing left many forest dwelling and fishing communities without a livelihood. Those who disobeyed were expelled.

Two thousand years later, our current wildlife laws are hardly different. But the edification of Ashoka is a small quibble in an otherwise glorious tour de force which not only explores India's natural heritage but also investigates uncomfortable practices, such as the use of lorises for black magic.

Besides the graphic portrayal, Alter's delightful deployment of metaphor makes reading his book a pleasure. Sample this: 'palm trees sway like drunk toddy drinkers,' describing pit vipers as 'a quiver of poisoned arrows' and a snake 'studies us with her tongue.'

Readers don't have to shimmy down narrow tunnels to pay homage to India's wildlife splendour. They just have to crack open Alter's book to range widely across this land.

The reviewer is a co-author of Snakes, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll, the first volume of Romulus Whitaker's autobiography.



IS THIS THE YEAR OF A-BEAUTY?

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

Mehta's belief in the segment also led him to invest in indē wild, another A-beauty brand. Founded in 2021 by Diipa Büller-Khosla, an influencer based between Mumbai and Amsterdam – who cites her childhood experience with acne that her mother, an Ayurveda doctor and dermatologist, cured – indē wild's pitch is combining Ayurvedic principles with conscious chemistry. Khosla calls this "Ayurvedistry, for the consumer who loves ancient culture alongside science".

During her research, Khosla found a gap in the market. "Nobody was really catering to the young TikTok generation that wants to experience heritage but also feel like themselves," she says. Referring to brands such as Sol de Janeiro, inspired by Brazil, and Tata, she hopes indē wild will be that kind of hip A-beauty brand from India. Khosla's mother is involved in product formulation alongside a lead scientist who was formerly with Estée Lauder, as well as a team of other experts. Its recently-launched lip balm sold out on Tira, Reliance Retail's beauty platform, and across indē wild's website within two days.



'Exciting time for Ayurveda' Before Kavita Khosla, a lawyer-turned-yoga practitioner, founded Purearth, an Ayurveda beauty and wellness brand, in Hong Kong in 2012, she spent a lot of time travelling across North India to understand the region's biodiversity. Today, Purearth sources key

ingredients such as roship pods (*kufji*) from Himachal Pradesh – "handpicked from soil irrigated by glaciers" as the brand's literature boasts – to produce its award-winning Wild Roship Supercritical Oil. "This is an exciting time for Ayurveda," she says. "Post COVID-19, people want to hark back to tradition, and indigenous knowledge on health is what they value." Purearth, which is sold at Hong Kong's Lane Crawford, as well as in Germany, France and the U.K., does well

among the Chinese, despite the prevalence of traditional Chinese medicine and beauty. "The reception is amazing, even in Mainland China where there is interest and desire to learn about Ayurveda," Khosla adds. The brand is set to open its first retail space in India at the Dhan Mill compound in Delhi.

Meanwhile, four-year-old Los



Clean beauty (Clockwise from left) Preparing A-beauty products; Kama Ayurveda's Kumkumadi Thailam; wellness author Vasudha Rai; and Rajshree Pathy of Qi Ayurveda. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Today, both have a strong retail presence within India and in marquee overseas markets such as London. "People are now familiar with terms like *kumkumadi* and *ashwagandha*," says Vivek Sahni, Kama's co-founder and chairman, who launched the brand's first U.K. store last year at Notting Hill. "There is a huge amount of knowledge, especially among younger people across the world, as to what they are putting on their body, which is helping A-beauty."

Now, A-beauty's growing popularity is not only being driven by Birkenstock-wearing, nature-loving people but also the ultra high net worth consumers. Vasudha Kula, of the Essar family, says she gave up chemical-based beauty products in favour of vegan, natural. Ayurveda brands a few years ago. "I became aware of all the animal testing and decided to go for clean beauty. It is better for us and for the planet!"

Another big boost to the industry is coming from global hotel chains and spas, which are increasingly stocking such brands. Sahajan, a skincare brand combining Ayurveda with clinical science, is placed in luxury hotel rooms of the St. Regis, The Ritz, JW Marriott, and W hotels. Subtle Energies, the Australia-based Ayurveda wellness company, is at hotel spas within the Peninsula, Six Senses, Soneva, Mandarin Oriental, Raffles, Four Seasons and the Taj. It wouldn't be amiss to say 2024 could well be the year Ayurveda comes of age across world markets.



are followed to the letter; it isn't authentic Ayurveda. But everything evolves and adapts, and if the new formulations and technologies that Ayurveda is experimenting with are effective [with evidence-based research], what's wrong in it?" he asks.

Both Forest Essentials and Kama Ayurveda, which launched in the early aughts, deserve credit for spreading the gospel of A-beauty.

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It is a well-worn stereotype that because Singapore, with a population of a little over five million, is scarcely the demographic size of a municipality in India, it is easy to "get things done" in the city-state.

To an extent, it is true that "discontinuities" of scale – exacerbated by corruption and discrimination – in the subcontinental behemoth of a nation that is India make it harder for even well-intentioned government policies to work effectively. But there is something to be learned from the sheer focus and exceptional institutional design of social care policies in Singapore, especially when they serve as examples of creating sustainable social impact by harnessing the power of technological innovations.

On a recent visit to Singapore, I met with representatives of a range of social care institutions that seek to bring material, practical improvements to the lives of the most vulnerable communities there, including the differently abled; and organisations that think long and hard about how to adapt to the changes and challenges of the 21st century.

Some of these are backed by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), an institution supported by the government but with an independent mandate to manage projects in the arts, entrepreneurship, public health, and sustainability spaces across 28 countries and tapping into a support base of over 5,500 volunteers from Singapore across the public and private sectors.

Tech for inclusivity Consider, for example, the case of an incredible support community for the differently abled, situated in the heart of Singapore, called



Lessons from the city-state's thoughtfully designed and inclusive social care initiatives for the differently abled

HOW SINGAPORE TREATS ITS MOST VULNERABLE

Enabling Village. SG Enable, a focal agency for disability and inclusion in Singapore, works in this thoughtfully designed, technology-enabled setting to ensure that persons with disabilities can live, learn, work, and play in an inclusive society.

From wheelchairs that resemble miniature spacecrafts and offer a mind-boggling range of technological enhancements to sensitively curated ambiances for libraries, cafes and other common areas keeping in mind the needs of persons with neurodivergence, Enabling Village creates equitable opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Take the case of Edric Wong, a participant of SG Enable's Institutes of Higher Learning Internship Programme. To him, the agency was

among his university life's "biggest cheerleaders and mentors". "It has helped me unlock many opportunities in my career and upgrade. Gaining experience from three internships was the biggest testament to that," he says.

Confidence via art The campaign to give everyone, including the differently abled, a fair chance to experience a decent quality of life doesn't end with the basics of mobility and access in Singapore. Rather, the goal is to facilitate their enjoyment of the arts, leisure and sport.

This is where an organisation such as ART:DIS, formerly known as Very Special Arts Singapore, comes in. ART:DIS is a leading non-profit dedicated to creating learning and livelihood opportunities for persons

with disabilities in the arts, by organising art programmes, projects, collaborations, exhibitions and performances.

During a visit to the brightly-coloured and meticulously organised studios of ART:DIS, I witnessed the profound impact art can have on those with autism, for example. Engaging with art can help mitigate some of the more complex personal and emotional challenges that they face. A particularly inspiring moment was when a group of students from neurodivergent backgrounds taught some of us visitors special artistic techniques they had perfected even as they worked collaboratively and as a community supporting one another.

"I am given the opportunity to create pieces I never thought I

would make. The things taught during foundation class are being applied to open studio and vice versa," says Nurul Natasya, a ceramic artist at ART:DIS. It is that opportunity to be a member of the mainstream of Singapore's art community that is truly valued by ART:DIS students, including Annette Soh, who says it has helped her gain "recognition to be a trainable person [and] more confident as a potter".

Reimagining waste Innovation at an institutional level in Singapore focuses not just on improving the lives of people directly at the micro level but also includes macro environmental concerns – seen as critical to the very survival of an island nation, at risk of the deleterious effects of



The way forward A teacher at ART:DIS with a student; and (far left) a young artist with Down Syndrome assists with a hip-hop workshop for children. (COURTESY ART:DIS)

global warming and rising sea levels.

The guiding philosophy is that every action, no matter how small, matters to the big picture. Consider, for instance, the waste sector, particularly food waste. Singapore's cost of living is notoriously high in part because most retail food products are imported, though social enterprises such as City Sprouts work on rejuvenating urban communities by nurturing green oases amidst the glass-and-concrete jungle.

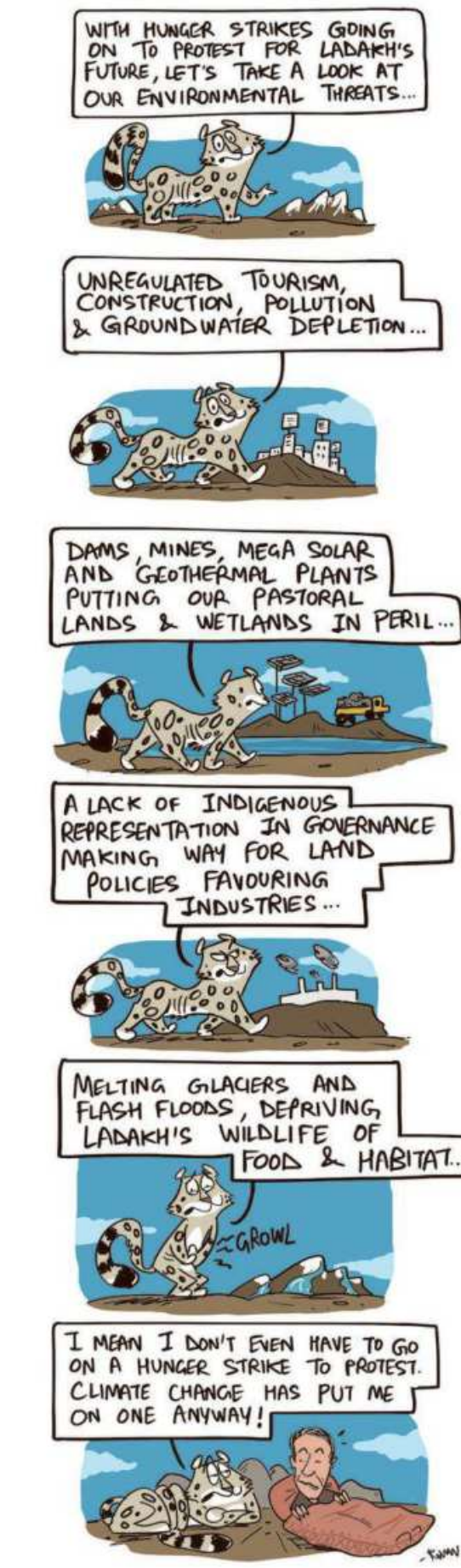
An organisation called MoNo seeks to bring about a fundamental change in consumer mindsets regarding foods past their best-before dates that are still safe for consumption. It does so by diverting food from the bin or incinerator and redistributing it to a community supporting the vulnerable, including migrant workers, students, the elderly, and lower-income families.

In India, where there is an unmeasured amount of food waste on a daily basis, such innovations could bring about a dramatic reduction in waste. I can vouch that neither the taste nor the quality of products such as the chocolate cookies from MoNo was any less than what would be available off a "normal" store rack.

There is much by way of institutional learning that Singapore's experience could offer to other countries. Already some of these learnings are being transmitted to partner organisations in India in joint projects with the SIF. After all, what counts most at the end of the day in assessing the global potential and prowess of a nation is the way it treats its most vulnerable.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



About literary geniuses and the price wives and husbands pay to inspire great art

SPOUSES AND MUSES

Suresh Menon

A muse, says the dictionary, "is an inspiring goddess", from the nine daughters of Zeus in Greek mythology who oversaw the arts and science. That meaning has been expanded to include being a model and financial support, as well as a partner who looks after the home, pays the electricity bills or, as in one case (George Orwell's), empties the cesspit outdoor.

There seems to be an unwritten rule that wives are meant to be muses in the latter sense, and if they are also creative, the ones expected to sacrifice their careers.

Many years ago, my wife alerted me to the imbalance inherent in Gandhi's vow of *brahmacharya* (Anna Funder) braked a lot of facts and some fiction (imaginary scenes, speculative dialogues) to highlight the story of Orwell's first wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy. *Lives of the Wives* (Carmela Ciuraru) discusses five couples where the wife played the secondary role. Katie McCabe's *More Than a Muse: Creative Partnerships That Sold Talented Women Short* is self-explanatory, as is Ruth Butler's *Hidden in the Shadow of the Master*. There's also

Jeffrey Meyers's earlier book, *Married to Genius*, about the conflict between life and art, muse and spouse.

"The problem with being a wife," writes Ciuraru, "is being a wife." She goes on to say, "With an ego the size of a small nation, the literary lion is powerful on the page, but a helpless kitten in daily life – dependent on his wife to fold an umbrella, answer the phone, or lick a stamp... Those towering mononymic geniuses of Western literature – Tolstoy, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Nabokov – where would they be without their wives?"

Gross imbalance When author Kingsley Amis married Elizabeth Jane Howard, he wanted to announce to the world they were "the most attractive, intelligent, funny, sophisticated and mutually suited pair since the Renaissance".

While Amis wrote and drank and then drank some more, his wife, an award-winning novelist, took on domestic duties, changed light bulbs, scheduled her husband's



I sit down at the piano, dying to play, but musical notation no longer means anything to me. My eyes have forgotten how to read it. I have been firmly taken by the arm and led away from myself

ALMA MAHLER
Wife of composer Gustav Mahler



medical appointments and worked out the household budget. She was also the family chauffeur.

Men of talent often have a way of putting things in perspective, or more correctly, justifying the imbalance between creative couples. Composer Gustav Mahler told his wife Alma there could be only one composer in the family, explaining: "The role of composer, the worker's role, falls to me, yours is that of a loving companion and understanding partner..."

Alma's resentment never really left her. On one occasion, she wrote: "I sit down at the piano, dying to play, but musical notation no longer means anything to me. My eyes have forgotten how to read it. I have been firmly taken by the arm and led away from myself. And I long to return to where I was."

As the wife (on different occasions) of Mahler, Walter Gropius, architect and father of the Bauhaus School, and Franz Werfel, Austrian playwright and novelist, Alma was the muse who operated serially. In her autobiography, she wrote of realising "my childhood dream of filling my garden with geniuses".

Josephine Hopper, the wife of Edward Hopper, was the more successful painter when they met. She had exhibited her works alongside those of Picasso and Modigliani. It was her recommendation that got her husband his first show. She kept his records, wrote his correspondence and remained his only model. "Of course," she wrote, "if there can be room for only one of us, it must undoubtedly be he. I can be glad and grateful for that."

Marketing the artist

In an essay, 'Lee Krasner: The Unacknowledged Equal', on Jackson Pollock and Krasner, the first couple of abstract expressionism, author Carter Ratcliff writes, "The ranks of first-generation Abstract Expressionist painters includes just one woman: Lee Krasner. If Krasner had not been so furiously

stubborn, there might have been none."

Ahead of a retrospective of her works in London four years ago, the curator said, "I'm not sure we should apply our own expectations to her career retrospectively. [It is] not very accurate. If there was a defence there, it was mutual. For instance, they would only visit one another's studios by invitation. I was determined not to put together a straightforwardly feminist, revisionist interpretation of her career."

Krasner had much to do with the marketing of her husband as an artist and a persona. And although the favour was never returned, Krasner felt that being overlooked gave her the freedom to do her own work.

Patriarchy and misogyny feed off each other. Yet, the creative spark can be sustained either by a wife-muse playing the role set out for her voluntarily or for pragmatic reasons (Orwell, James Joyce, Nabokov), or because the partnership is a rollercoaster of emotions (Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes).

Giving each other 'space', as we say today, saw the blossoming of Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf, who, according to Meyers was "sufficiently self-assured to surrender his masculine prerogatives and give first priority to Virginia's career". That still assumes Leonard had a masculine prerogative!

Is *The Old Man and the Sea* worth any number of broken women? Do we see Picasso's many muses, including the photographer Dora Marr and the artist Francois Gilot, merely as collateral damage en route to *Weeping Woman* and *Guernica*?

How we answer that question will tell us about ourselves, the times we live in, the fraught relationship between art and civility, and the price spouses and muses are willing to pay. Either to keep the peace or to inspire great works.

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

For the artist (Clockwise from left) Writers Kingsley Amis and Elizabeth Jane Howard; artists Edward and Josephine Hopper; painters Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner; authors Leonard and Virginia Woolf; and Eileen O'Shaughnessy and George Orwell. (GETTY IMAGES)

The electoral bond, like yoga and zero, is one of the great innovations of Indic genius – it's our gift to human civilisation. Sadly, the judiciary and the media have turned it into a joke.

The other day, for instance, we were driving through Lutyens' Delhi on our way to dropping a visiting friend at his hotel. As we turned into a tree-lined avenue with beautiful mansions on either side, Kattabomman piped up, "Papa, who lives in these houses?"

"Rich people with tonnes of money," I said. "You mean, people who buy electoral bonds?" "What?" I was zapped. "Who told you about electoral bonds?" He wouldn't answer. I looked at his mother, and found her diligently avoiding my eyes. My suspicion was confirmed soon enough.

Spreading disaffection As we approached Janpath, we saw barricades. I slowed down and asked one of the constables why they had blocked the road.

"*Koi foreign prime minister aa raha hai*," he said. "You are going to catch him?" Our friend wanted to know.

As the cop gaped at him, Wife quipped from the backseat, "Don't let him leave India until he buys electoral bonds." "Both of you stop it!" I said. "If this was America, the cop would have asked you to step out of the vehicle and lie flat on the ground before arresting you and putting you in cuffs."

"Really?" Wife said. "On what charges?"

"Spreading disaffection by mocking electoral bonds," I said. Seriously, it's appalling to find all kinds of busybodies – people with no idea of India's ancient traditions of extortion and bribery – pontificating on electoral bonds. What's galling is that none of them could even tell you the difference between bribery and extortion.

Subject of Vedic debates In fact, who has a right to bribe and extort, and who doesn't, was one of the hottest debates among Vedic jurists. According to *Jaitileyashashtra*, the canonical



ALLEGEDLY

Bias against electoral bonds

'When people with no idea of India's ancient traditions of extortion and bribery pontificate on the matter'

legal treatise dating back to 2017 BCE, it is prohibited for commoners to offer or receive bribes, and the punishments prescribed include freezing of their bank accounts to 27 degrees. But the king, however, has the right to seek bribes as well as extort donations. The *Chanda Purana* states categorically that it is part of a businessman's *dharma* to donate regularly to the king.

Any businessman or trader who fails to voluntarily make generous donations is subject to raids by the ED wing of the King's Guard.

It is, however, the 6,000-year-old *Hafta Samhita* that first distinguished between bribery and extortion – a distinction that is still followed in modern jurisprudence. Bribery, according to the *Hafta Samhita*, is when someone pays

a king's official for preferential or "better than fair" treatment. The giver and the taker are equal participants. Extortion is when a king's official seeks a donation using the threat of harm or unfair treatment. Here, the king's official is the active agent while the payer is a coerced respondent – classified as 'victim' in today's jurisprudence. Significantly, all the three – *Jaitileyashashtra*, *Chanda Purana* and *Hafta Samhita* – are clear that bribery and extortion are legal so long as they fall within the *dharma* morality of the parties involved. That's why they are immoral practices for ordinary people like you and me but kosher for our rulers – be they politicians or businessmen.

As the great Indic text on good governance, *The Bond Sutra*, puts it, "O Partha, happy are the businessmen for whom purchase of electoral bonds comes naturally, opening the doors to heavenly riches. If, however, thou doth not performeth thine religious duty of donating to the king, then wilt thou incur the wrath of the central agencies and people shall speaketh of thine infamy." (Vol 2, Chapter 4, verse 27, translated by Monika).

Given the weight of historical and textual evidence that points to extortion and bribery being a part of our *parampara*, it's astonishing how deeply – and uncritically – we have imbibed western prejudices about them. I still have fond memories of my school days in Kolkata when, around Durga Puja, gangs of hooligans from The Party would aggressively knock on our doors and demand *chanda* for Durga Ma. We would happily donate – who wouldn't, for their beloved deity?

Electoral bonds are nothing but an avenue – duly anonymised for the shy ones – to express one's love for the king, who is but an instrument of god on earth. Those who have money may buy electoral bonds; those who don't, vote. Sure, this means the king might listen more to the money-givers than the vote-givers, but who said the world is fair?

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

When the first list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) was released in Assam in 2018, it excluded 4 million residents. They had to reapply to be included and submit their biometrics. That day, lawyer Aman Wadud got a call from a 77-year-old Bengali Hindu retired professor seeking help.

Wadud, 38, defends those Indians with long family histories in this country, who struggle to prove their citizenship in Assam's quasi legal 'Foreigners Tribunals'.

It is largely thanks to people like Wadud that we first realised something deeply problematic was happening in the border state. When he helped release Moinal Molla after 2 years, 11 months and 29 days of detention, he posted an image of the frail book binder with the caption: 'Moinal Molla's Long Walk to Freedom'. "By then I had read Nelson Mandela, and the post went viral," he said.

He introduced a wider audience to a dystopian world where the most marginalised were labelled 'Bangladeshis' or 'D (doubtful) voters' for the tiniest discrepancies in their carefully preserved identity documents; and 'detention centres' where people were summarily taken after being declared 'illegal migrants', and where they stayed for years, estranged from families. In 2018, the Central government commissioned the country's largest 15.5 acre Matia 'transit camp' in Assam. It opened last year.

People's rights Now, after a decade of fighting hundreds of citizenship cases pro bono, Wadud wants to "play a bigger role" and fights all types of constitutional law cases. He has

PERSON OF INTEREST

AMAN WADUD: ASSAM'S ADVOCATE

This lawyer-turned-politician is fighting the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for people's right to live with dignity

joined the Indian National Congress and was recently appointed joint convenor of the party's leadership development mission in Assam.

It all has to do with a thought that struck him when the professor called. Wadud told the gent that the country's top court had ratified the NRC process and that, if he was on the list, he had no option but to submit his biometrics. "There was a pause, his voice choked, he broke down, saying 'it hurts my dignity, I cannot submit my biometrics'. He said this repeatedly and it made me think, in the 4-5 years I had been working for citizenship, no one had spoken about dignity."

Wadud asked clients who had been released from detention centres how the ordeal had made them feel. They listed anger, despair, resignation. Some viewed it as a test from god. "They didn't speak about the indignity they faced," Wadud said. "The professor had articulated

his thoughts in a way I hadn't heard before."

That's around the time he began talking to people about how the state was violating their dignity. "It's important to talk about constitutional rights to people, they are still very ignorant about their rights," he added.

Foray into politics

Looking back at his own life, Wadud saw many points where his dignity had been attacked. Like the time a classmate in Guwahati called his teenage self a Bangladeshi. "It was an expression of indignity, to show me I'm not equal, I don't have the same rights as other students in that class," he said. When he moved to Bengaluru in 2005 to study law, he spent a large chunk of his money in the city's bookstores, reading Nehru, Gandhi, Maulana Azad, Benjamin Franklin and Anne Frank.

At first, Wadud wanted to be a



▶ **Playing a 'bigger role'** Aman Wadud recently joined the Indian National Congress, and hopes to contest the 2026 State elections. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

"big shot lawyer like Kapil Sibal, Abhishek Manu Singhvi". But the guilt that he was not doing anything to help people back home gnawed at him. "I wanted to be the voice of my people, change the narrative." He did just that when he returned to Assam and put faces and stories to Indians who were being stripped of their citizenship.

When he switches on the TV, Wadud said, he watches the dignity of Assam's Muslims eroding. "The way elected functionaries address us is a perennial violation of our fundamental right to live with dignity. Not just detaining or accusing us as Bangladeshi, the entire discourse is very undignified," he said.

Politics is a different struggle, one that requires financial heft and influence. "In politics you need money and a godfather, both of which I don't have," he said. "But I'm trying to make my presence felt through my work." Wadud hopes to contest the 2026 State elections.

Every time he presents a case before the Foreigners Tribunal, a thought crosses his mind: "What if my classmate was a police officer? Then I would have been the one defending my citizenship."

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Analyse the lead

East-West vulnerable. South deals

Bob Jones

The auction is simpler than it looks. North's five-heart bid asked for the queen of trumps and South's six-club response promised the spade queen plus the king of clubs. The sixdiamond continuation was a grand slam try which South rejected.

South covered the jack of hearts lead with

dummy's queen, reasoning that he would make his slam if West started with either the king of hearts or the king of diamonds. When East proved to have both of those kings, the contract was defeated. South should have put some effort into analyzing the opening lead. Would West have led from a king after an auction where his opponents were looking for a grand slam? An auction like this calls for a

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

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♠	Pass	2NT*	Pass
4♠**	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♦	Pass	5♥***	Pass
6♣	Pass	6♦	Pass
6♠	All pass		
*Game-forcing spade raise			
**Balanced minimum			
***Asking for the queen of spades			

Opening lead: Jack of ♥

passive lead and West leading from a king was most unlikely.

A better play would be to play low from dummy at trick one, winning

immediately if East had a singleton king. Assuming no king of hearts appeared, South should draw trumps, eliminate the clubs from both hands, and exit with a heart to the queen. East would win but would have to lead a diamond or yield a ruff-sluff - 12 tricks either way. Should East have a third club to lead, South can still try the diamond finesse for his contract.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

'Believe in the impossible because no one else does'

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1921, the Women's Olympiad was declared open, becoming the first ever international women's sports event. It was organised as a response to the International Olympic Committee's decision to not include women's events in the 1924 Olympic Games. Over 100 participants took part in 10 events. In which tiny country did this path-breaking event take place, known more for its racing track and casinos?

2 Hélène de Pourtalès became the first woman to win an Olympic gold medal when her team, consisting of her husband and his nephew, won in the 1-2 tonne class. This was in one of the early events open to women, so she is arguably the first woman Olympian as well. What sport did she win the gold in, where she was the skipper and her husband, the helmsman?

3 Of the 32 Olympic sports, two are women-specific. In one event, the athlete performs on the floor with apparatus such as a hoop, ribbon or ball, and is



▶ **Triumphant victory** Russian athlete Yelena Isinbaeva, who is also a major in the Russian army, at the 2009 IAAF World Athletics Final in Greece. (GETTY IMAGES)

judged on her execution of moves in time to music. The other is an aquatic event where a group of athletes perform a choreographed routine, which from the 2024 Olympics will be open to men as well. What are these two events?

4 The 2012 London Olympics was the first in which women competed in all the sports. This was due to the addition of three classes to what was till then a

male-only event. The gold was won by Nicola Adams from England, but it was a memorable event for India too, as its athlete shared the bronze medal. She was eventually awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2020. Which sport is this?

5 Edurne Pasaban had a passion for her sport since a young age, and was only 28 when she pulled off the highest achievement in her field. Since then, she has become the first woman

and only the 21st human, to finish all of the 'eight-thousanders'. What sport is her achievement in?

6 Yelena Isinbaeva is a Russian athlete considered one of the greatest in her sport. She is one of a total of 10 athletes who have won the World Championship in Youth, Junior and Senior levels. She has broken the World Record in her sport 28 times, and set the current one at 5.06 metres in 2009, which is still standing. What sport is this?

7 Marta is regarded as the greatest woman footballer of all time. She was the first (of any gender) to score at five consecutive Olympic Games. She holds the record for being the top goal scorer for her country, with 115 goals. If the same country's highest scoring men are 'Ney' and 'Black Pearl' (with 79 and 77 goals respectively), which country does she play for?

8 Babe Didrikson Zaharias was an American athlete who set four world records at the 1932 LA Olympics at the age of 21. She became the first (and so far only) athlete to win Olympic medals in a running event, a jumping event and a throwing event. She subsequently took on basketball, baseball and billiards competitively, before going on to join a sport where she was the only woman to compete. She eventually started the now global organisation

'LPGA'. What sport did she revolutionise?

9 A Golden Slam in tennis is when a player wins each of the four Grand Slam tournaments (Australian, French and US Opens, and Wimbledon) as well as the Olympic gold medal. Only one player managed to do this in a single year (1988). Her husband won it over a period of five years. Who was this athlete, nicknamed Fräulein Forehand?

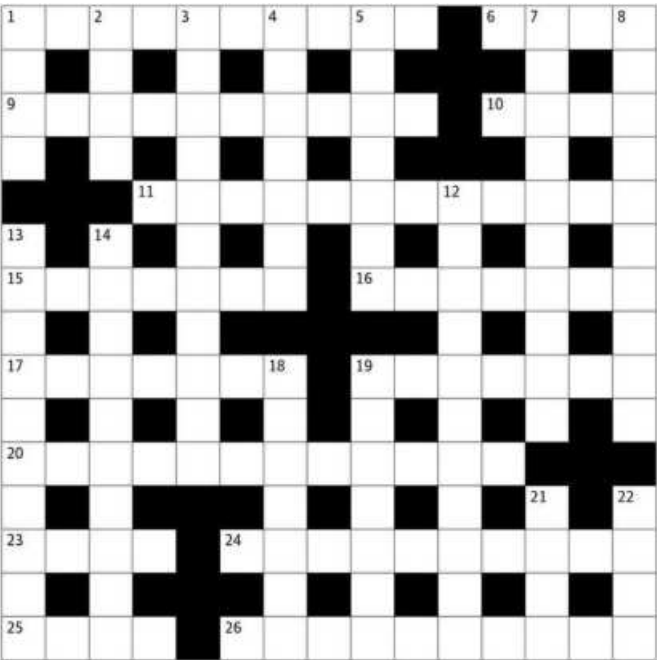
10 Ellen MacArthur achieved an endurance feat in 2005 and became the only woman in a total of four individuals to have done so. She took 71 days and 14 hours on a multi-hull sailboat, not stopping for assistance anywhere. What did MacArthur do, that Jeanne Baret did in 1769 while disguised as a man?

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.

- 1. Moana
- 2. Sailing
- 3. Rhythmic Gymnastics and Synchronised Swimming
- 4. Women's Boxing
- 5. Mountaineering (heights above 8000 metres)
- 6. Pole Vault
- 7. Brazil
- 8. Golf
- 9. Steffi Graf
- 10. Sail around the world

Answers:

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3299



Across

- 1 Clots ordered catalogues (10)
- 2 Dairy product moulded, recalled (4)
- 3 Fat old queen finally consoles those clearly upset (10)
- 4 Acronym soliciting alacrity, primarily (using initial letters)? (4)
- 5 Giving Hitchcock film a miss; it prompts you to jump (8,4)
- 6 Once again asks for some moments of peace? (7)
- 7 Coffee leftovers in the gardens and so on (7)
- 8 Gatherings seen in Instagram, Facebook, &c. (7)
- 9 Artist showing Royal Marines (instead of Navy) in façade (7)
- 10 Those in prang manage OK, we're told, in series of unpredictable events (12)
- 11 Small child's great power reported (4)
- 12 Love writes on Greek island - fifth of sonnets moving - don't we know it! (4,6)
- 13 Topple American in overtime (4)
- 14 ... poser prancing with style in artificial fabrics (10)

Down

- 1 Regularly clubbish, helpful youngsters (4)
- 2 Lie next to some comma butterflies (4)
- 3 C. Asian beatniks bizarrely getting into action-film staple (11)
- 4 Becoming upset: concession and alternative put before old man (7)

- 5 Heartlessly acquiring grasping Romeo's jewelry (7)
- 6 Ignored (like some consumer goods after Christmas) (10)
- 7 Everyman's enjoyment? Don't worry about it (2,8)
- 8 Gorge shape formed with river - studied by these? (11)
- 9 Bikram, so Amy mostly contorted with hands on hips (4,6)
- 10 Bets glasses will be filled with last of Cointreau after hours (10)
- 11 Stinger's tail's removed: it's a sign (7)
- 12 Empty-headedness in post (7)
- 13 In short, endless cheese (4)
- 14 Name of lad that's trapped in rotisserie (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3298



Vanishing street trades

Knife sharpeners, mattress makers, and re-tinners, who were once patronised by thrifty households for their skills and craft, are a rare sight these days

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Not long ago I had to dispose of a number of things which were somewhat outdated. These household articles, which were once the favourites of my forebears, stood testimony to the care with which they were maintained over the years. They made me recall across a gulf of seven decades the periodic visits to our house of Munusamy, the frail re-tinner of brass vessels, and Khadar, the burly cotton-mattress maker. They were among the traditional artisans who helped our household in maintaining things in good condition. Long before stainless steel vessels came into the market, it was brass, copper, bronze, and aluminium utensils that were used in our households. Brass and copper vessels, however, needed a tin coating (*kalai*) inside them, and it had to be done periodically. The re-tinning operation by Munusamy was a sight to behold. When a few brass vessels bereft of the shiny tin coating were given to him, he would set up a mini workshop in our courtyard. Digging a small pit in the ground he would create a temporary blast furnace, airing it with bellows. Taking up a vessel, he would heat it and sprinkle in it a powder (ammonium chloride). Holding the red hot vessel in one hand with the help of a pair of tongs, he would, in the manner of a juggler, quickly rub the inner surface of the vessel with a cotton cloth, giving rise to a sudden curl of white smoke. Finally, the vessel would be dipped



into a bucket of water. Humming a jaunty tune, he would take out the vessel, the inner surface of which would glisten with a silvery sheen. Even before he could complete re-tinning our vessels, Munusamy would get more clients from the neighbouring houses, each giving one or two vessels for re-tinning. We, the children of the locality, would watch with great admiration the whole operation. Re-tinning workers have almost vanished from the streets now due to a lack of demand for their services. As have the makers of cotton mattresses who would come door to door, offering their services. In those days, though people mostly slept on mats spread on the floor, each household had one or two mattresses stuffed with cotton that needed restuffing often. I vividly remember Rehman, one of the mattress makers. Strumming a veena-like instrument that was used for carding the cotton, Rehman would announce his arrival on the streets. In our house, he would carry out his work in an open space in the garden. He

used the carder to beat and fluff the cotton already in the mattresses and pillows. He would also add fresh cotton. He would finally hand-stitch the seams and return the mattresses in their new robust forms. The entire garden would reverberate with the “twang, twang” of the carder during the operation. Those of us who watched his work with interest did not mind the liberal cotton coating that we got. Rarely does one see these mattress makers on the streets now as people prefer to buy ready-made mattresses, made mostly with foam. I was surprised to hear a call of “*kathi saanna!*” on the street the other day. It was that of a knife sharpener with a portable contraption slung over his shoulders. He said that he had continued in the traditional profession in which he was trained by his late father. He, however, rued the fact that it was not quite paying, as most people discarded knives or scissors with blunted edges and bought new ones. Street vendors continue to be active in selling vegetables, fruits, and other food items. However, the sight of tradespeople offering unique household services may soon be a thing of the past.

Finding the way with ‘foodmarks’

Who knew that memories of tasty dishes could serve as a map?

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A few days ago, I was taking out my scooter to go to the fish market when a boy of 10 or 11 stopped me. He had a half-eaten guava in his hand and groundnuts were stuffed into his shirt pocket. “Aunty,” he said, “Do you know how I can reach my *chotomama*’s house?” Confused, I asked him how I could help him if he did not tell me the locality where his maternal uncle lived. A little embarrassed, he said it was Krishnaganj. I told him to take the main road and then follow a path on the left where the road bifurcated into two narrow lanes near a small Shiva temple. He should continue going straight until he reached a restaurant named “Silver Spoon”. No sooner did I mention the restaurant, the boy became amazingly sprightly. He said that he could now clearly remember the way. He informed me with gusto that he had once visited the restaurant with his parents and relished chilli mushroom with *tandoori rotis*. He said there was a crossing a little ahead. I nodded and was about to say that there stood a gorgeous jewellery showroom when the little boy, giving me no opportunity to speak, said that just before the crossing there was a sweetmeat shop from where his *chotomama* used to fetch *motichur laddoos* and jumbo-sized *langchas*, but that he preferred the hot *jilipis*. He added that just in front of his *chotomama*’s house, there was a *chola batura* stall. By now, I had given up the idea of mentioning some other prominent landmarks as I realised that his searching eyes might only spot food hubs. When I asked him why he was going to visit his uncle, he pointed with his eyes to a bag in his bicycle. “I have to fetch some oranges that *chotomama* has for me,” he said. Then the boy waved and sped off. He disappeared in no time.

Hashtag faith

In this religion, the smartphone is the temple and the influencer is god

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In the busy streets of Trendtown, where hashtags rule and selfies are like gold, something strange was happening. A new religion was emerging, centred around the worship of the almighty influencer. It all began innocently enough with a viral video of a particularly charismatic influencer making bread from scratch in her pristine pastel-coloured kitchen. Not only did she bake, but she also advised people on how to store their herbs in glass bottles. This was followed by her packing sandwiches in brown paper bags, which she kept

in a cute basket for a Sunday picnic with a red chequered tablecloth. Soon, followers flocked to her social media platforms, hanging onto every sponsored post and product recommendation as if they were divine decrees. As the following grew, so did the devotion. Hashtags became prayers, with worshippers fervently typing #Blessed, #ClosetoNature, and #PeacefulLife under each post. The influencer, basking in the adoration, starts posting photos of lavish lifestyles and sponsored vacations with “Feeling #blessed by your devotion” captions. In this new religion, the temple is the smartphone screen, and the holy text is



GETTYIMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

the Terms and Conditions. The clergy are the verified accounts, and the sacraments are the latest beauty products and fashion trends. As the influence continues to grow, so does the temptation to monetise status. The influencer begins selling branded merchandise and offering premium content for a subscription fee. The faithful eagerly open their wallets, eager for a taste of the divine. But like all empires built on social media, the influencer’s reign is not without its pitfalls. Scandals erupt as former

disciples come forward with tales of exploitation and manipulation. The influencer’s carefully crafted image begins to unravel, revealing a flawed human being behind the filters and hashtags. Not wanting to lose the title, the influencer releases an “apology video”. The followers see their god crying. It is ugly. The room is dark today. There are no rosy cheeks, and the hair is unkempt. The nails are not pedicured, and there is snot. The faithful realise it is just another human being and the number of followers comes down drastically. Critics tell them to take it as a cautionary tale about the dangers of placing too much faith in the fleeting world of social media. As the dust settles, the faithful are left to ponder their misplaced devotion. As they search for meaning in the glow of their screens, another charismatic person posts a video of storing detergent pods in mason jars.

Night of the fireflies

Rapid urbanisation has spelt doom for these insects that light up the darkness

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For the first time in many years, I spotted a solitary firefly glittering in the pitch-dark backyard. The sight was an enchanting one, and it took me back to my childhood days. I thought how beautiful was my village some five decades ago before it metamorphosed into the busy city it is today. In the eastern corner of my ancestral land, there was a large pond which gradually merged with a canal that meandered along the fringes of our

compound. The point where the pond and the canal met was a marshy patch surrounded by tall grass. During hot and humid summer evenings, we were delighted by the marvellous sight of swarms of fireflies imparting an ethereal setting to the night sky. We, the children, were particularly delighted by the magnificent nightscape as we were fed on innumerable stories about fireflies by our grandma. Whenever we saw fireflies, all those tales told by grandma came alive in our imagination. My friend Robert was



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

adept at catching those innocent bugs with cupped palms. He would transfer the helpless beings into a small glass bottle, closing it tightly with a rubber lid. Kept in a dark corner of the room, the flies would emit golden light intermittently, much to our joy. Amma, however, would scold us for our cruel deed. She would shout, “Let them free, otherwise they will die.” Later, we would release them, though reluctantly. My closest friend Obby

had his house by the side of a lake. A nearby swamp with mangroves was an ideal and safe haven for hundreds of fireflies. But time has brought many inevitable changes to our once beautiful landscape. The pond in my courtyard no longer exists, the canal which used to flow silently along our homestead is now a village road, and the marsh alongside Obby’s house has given way to encroachments. The village has grown into a city and electrification has robbed us of the velvet darkness that gave the best backdrop for fireflies to display their magical glow. Only very few of these glittering insects remain now. Though we are blessed with many amenities now, development has taken away many of the natural wonders.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The story has underscored the importance of wage employment opportunities to convicts and other prisoners. (‘Right to wages behind bars’; Mar 17) Along with skill development, educating the prisoners would also bring about a change in society. As such, there is an imperative need for institutionalising a holistic prisoner education ecosystem in jails across the country. **G. Ramasubramanyam**

The Prisons Act should be amended to incorporate a prisoner-friendly approach. The High Courts should also consider safeguards regarding payment of ‘fair wages for work undertaken’ by prisoners, along with periodic revision of wages. **K.M.K. Murthy**

Wages paid to prisoners may be less than the minimum. But they learn the concept of ‘dignity of labour’, which is important for reformation. One also cannot resist thinking about the thousands of educated and law-abiding youth who are jobless across the country. **S. Ramakrishnasayee**

History’s sisters

It was amazing to read about the sisters from Peshawar whose lives changed overnight due to Partition. (‘Lost and found’; Mar. 17) They faced life with fortitude, diligence and hard work, eventually rising to “comfort and luxury”. That Indira Varma has turned out to be a writer, immortalising her sisters, will surely be inspirational to many. **Kosaraju Chandramouli**

The story of the three sisters who braved Partition surely helps future generations of the subcontinent know the adverse impact the division of the country has had on millions of ordinary people. Writers should take initiative to interview the aged survivors of Partition. **Satvik Venkat Madhavaram**

How the indomitable sisters overcame the loss and grief of Partition is a one-of-a-kind saga that will inspire all. That they rebuilt their lives while holding on to one another is a phenomenal example of human perseverance. **A. Raveendranath**

The Partition was an earth-shattering event for many Indians and several writers have attempted to capture its pain and anguish. Despite its horrors, there were silver linings of compassion and empathy, which restored one’s faith in humankind. The line, “Life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forward”, sums up the two perspectives one needs, to manage both memories and the mundaneness of life. **Narendra Dani**

Creative pursuits

Art for Baby is an admirable initiative to stimulate infants’ cognition and expand the frontiers of developmental psychology. (‘Baby book at Christie’s’; Mar. 17) Exposure to art and culture is a far more rewarding way to engage infants than handing them mobile phones or tablets. Hats off to Rudritara Shroff’s zeal, drive and altruism at this tender age. **Anusha Pillay**



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Paddy days

The wonderful journey of rice from fields to cooking pots **J. Clement Selvaraj**

Dancing away doubts

A tale of self-acceptance through taking part in a ceilidh **Krishnendu Rajan Nair**

Let’s get the sparrows back

Small steps can stop the exodus of the birds from cities **Vijaya Bharat**

Too busy today?

Taking the time to build good relations is important **S.A. Thameemul Ansari**

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Deepti Sasidharan

Hanut Singh, 52, is just back from a trip to Fatehpur Sikri and Agra. “I can’t even begin to tell you how moved I was,” says the jewellery designer. “Even though I’ve been there many times, it feeds my soul. There’s such a strong feeling of déjà vu.” This resonance with the architecture of the period, its beauty and symmetry reflect in his designs.

I first met Hanut in 2005, before he became the darling of international and Indian elite, as a guest of his uncle Martand ‘Mapu’ Singh at the grand reopening of the Chowmahalla Palace in Hyderabad. The cultural icon and textile revivalist – whose aesthetic eye fuelled many of India’s important diplomatic heritage missions – had an incredibly deep knowledge of gems and jewellery. And he spoke often of his nephew, who shared his love of jewels and inherited his sense of refinement.

“I was obsessed with stones and jewellery since I was like four or five years old,” says Hanut, who hails from the famous first family of Kapurthala in Punjab. The jeweller in him was born early, with everyone from his great-grandfather Maharaja Jagatjit Singh to his beautiful grandmother Sita Devi and his mother, the vivacious Nina Singh, discussing and acquiring jewels from Cartier, Mainbocher, and Schiaparelli.

Enduring talismans

As a designer, Hanut draws inspiration from many sources: historic architecture, travel memories, his royal lineage, his love of nature, and an undeniable connection to the divine. By the time I met him at a royal Udaipur wedding nine years later, in 2014, his love of architecture had translated into crisp linear proportions in his jewels. I remember his sister Devaki wearing a pair of his diamond, emerald and white topaz drop earrings to an event and drawing admiring glances. Partial to the Art Deco and Mughal periods, his mobile earrings, pendants and rings can be spotted at the world’s most chic gatherings and fashion photoshoots. His talismans

already have a cult following. The dagger pendants, for example, are popular with every age group from Isha Ambani Piramal to Sharon Stone.

“There are so many levels to my process, but often I see a stone and I know what I am going to do with it. Exactly. And very quickly,” he says. “Then again, sometimes I love an idea or a motif and then I find stones to work with it in a manner, like the movement of a leaf.”

Perfecting his craft

Interestingly, he does not have a store. “I don’t want to be tied down to a shop,” he laughs, adding that he is lucky he has fantastic representatives – not just in India, but in cities such as New York (Fred Leighton) and Los Angeles (Roseark). In fact, he knows where every single piece goes and who owns it, remarkable in a career that spans two decades.

However, behind the self-taught designer’s confidence is a lot of hard work. Early in his career, for nearly 15 years, he travelled extensively to international fairs around the



Timeless (Clockwise from above) Indrani Dasgupta and Isha Ambani Piramal in Hanut’s desings; the jeweller at home with his dogs. (@HANUT101, SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP)



DAGGERS WITH A CULT FOLLOWING

Nature, architecture and the divine are important inspirations in Hanut Singh’s designs, imparting a talismanic quality to them

world, to learn and search for unique stones (incidentally, rock crystals, with its professed grounding properties, dot his home). He also painstakingly built his own network of associates that now support his business.

While he meticulously maintains an archive to share with the world one day, for now he feels he is too much of a “newbie”. Perhaps it is this conscious humility that makes him successful.

The writer is the founder-director of Eka Archiving Services.

Winged power

“Freedom is essential to my soul. It is vital for creativity, to move, live and soar. I have tattooed ‘Freedom of my soul’ on my forearm. This piece, with its soaring angel wings and triangular cusps topped with red rubies provide a perfect foil for two perfectly matched pendant pearls. It balances luxury, freedom and movement.”

Mind the curves

Singh’s signature dagger and sword pendants are perhaps the most iconic of his jewellery. Leaning into his royal lineage, he sees them as protective talismans. They are bejewelled and suffused with detail. He says, “They just sell. But I do realise that people like them because they represent chic, classy and cool. They are worn by women with spirit and personal style.”

Arched in perpetuity

“Marvelling at the architecture in Agra, where red sandstone complements intricate pierced *jaali* work and pietra dura in marble, I am transported. It’s such a symphony of Rajput and Persian styles.”

● A touch of whimsy in oval Italian shell cameos in delicate peach and a stunning two stone open ring reflect his love for the Art Deco period.

● A multifoil arch cocoons a spray of emerald flowers in this stunning pendant that pays homage to the beauty and symmetry of Mughal architecture.

Let’s not forget A Tiwa woman cooks vegetables in Assam’s Karbi Anglong district; and 19th century botanical artworks. (RITU RAJ KONWAR, SARMAVA ARTS FOUNDATION)



LIVING ARCHIVE

Thomas Zacharias

As a chef dedicated to unearthing the roots of our culinary heritage, my journey across India in the past decade has been humbling. The most cherished lessons have come not from bustling markets or home kitchens, but from interactions with various Adivasi communities and understanding their unique relationship with the land. From broiling wild crab on an open fire with the Angami tribe in Nagaland to tasting fermented fish chutney with the Mishing tribe in Majuli, each encounter has been a revelation. These experiences also went beyond the discovery of ingredients. I was learning to substitute salt with banana stem ash from the Apatani tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, or discovering the use of queen sago flour and *shatavari* among Kerala’s Kadar and Malayar tribes. They revealed the deep connection these communities have with their environment, something that’s often overlooked in mainstream culinary narratives.

Forest foods and its people

Are culinary enthusiasts forgetting the protectors of India’s traditional food knowledge, just as British-era botanical art ignored its Indian illustrators?

Tapping wild knowledge

This connection to nature and traditional knowledge was echoed during my visit to the archives of the Sarmaya Arts Foundation. Amidst the pages of rare 19th-century books, I encountered botanical artwork that illustrated a different aspect of India’s natural heritage. The British fascination, as captured in works such as Robert Wight’s *Indian Botany* and *Flowers of the Bombay*

Presidency, melded curiosity with conquest, meticulously documenting the country’s rich flora.

Yet, most of them overlooked the critical contributions of Indian illustrators. They were uncredited, except in rare cases such as Nathaniel Wallich’s *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, an 1830 compendium of plants from eastern India that credits three local artists: Vishnupersaud,

Gorachand and Rungaiah. This discovery resonated with me. As a chef, I have always valued the unseen hands behind our food – the farmers, foragers, and artisans. And seeing these artists acknowledged reminded me of the countless unnamed contributors in our culinary world.

The modern fascination with ‘wild foods’ among chefs and food enthusiasts mirrors this colonial

Art and folklore

At Sarmaya, each meticulously crafted British-era botanical illustration serves as a bridge across centuries. Their precision and artistry bring to life an era where exploration was entangled with exploitation, yet they now stand as invaluable assets in the preservation of India’s botanical treasures. The art, along with the rich tapestry of oral culture and folklore, forms a crucial link in documenting the diversity of Indian food cultures.



botanical quest in some ways. The current trend, for instance, often lacks depth as it doesn’t acknowledge the cultural and traditional knowledge associated with these ingredients. Tribal communities are relegated to the shadows.

During the monsoon of 2022, my platform The Locavore, which champions local food movements, along with OOO Farms and a team of 16 volunteers embarked on the Wild Food Project in Palghar, Maharashtra, to document the culinary wisdom of the Kokni tribe. *The Wild Food Zine*, published in late 2022, highlighted over 24 different wild ingredients offering a glimpse into the tribe’s traditional knowledge and culinary practices. Inspired by this project, we are now planning another zine to further explore these rich food cultures.

Empowering the community Working with forest communities has been eye-opening. They have co-evolved with the flora in their

landscapes and possess extensive knowledge: on which plants are edible or medicinal, and how to detoxify them for consumption. Our appreciation and awareness of diverse wild foods can help empower these communities and ensure the conservation of wild plants. But it requires prioritising their well-being.

Through my travels, I’ve seen how external influences can lead to the overharvesting of resources, like wild honey in the Himalayan belt and wild mushrooms in Goa. In these regions, the communities’ voices and concerns are often overshadowed by external commercial interests. This imbalance has led to a worrying trend where the sustainable practices are ignored in favour of more lucrative harvesting methods. Yet, it is within these same communities that sustainable harvesting continues to thrive. This situation highlights a crucial point: that the insights and solutions we need today are often hidden in plain sight, deeply embedded within indigenous food cultures. As culinary professionals, we must create narratives that go beyond the ingredient and tell the stories of the Angami, the Mishing, the Apatani, and the countless other Indian tribes. Our duty extends beyond mere creation.

The writer and chef is founder of The Locavore.

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