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Jewish-origin architecture in the country appears to advocate a community-led way of life. What's unique is that the restoration and adaptive reuse of synagogues, hospitals and houses is often funded by people of other faiths

WHAT INDIA'S JEWISH BUILDINGS HAVE TO SAY

Nidhi Gupta

In 2017, Jose Dominic was invited to dinner with the Salem family in Kochi's Jew Town. Kenny Salem, an "old friend", had migrated to Canada and was back to visit his ancestral home. Dominic was expecting his hosts' famous dishes that evening, perhaps Jewish-style *chuttulli* fish fry and egg pastels. But there was more in store. "My friend, the grandson of A.B. Salem, a Gandhian who'd fought in the Independence struggle, wanted to sell the house," recalls the co-founder of CGH Earth, a renowned hotel and resort chain in Kerala. "With his sister, he made a list of five people, and I was the first

person he called. He said he was hoping that whoever bought it would somehow try to keep the place in its original character." A year later, it was mostly restored and members of the Salem family and the wider Jewish community, who had arrived for the 450th year anniversary of the Paradesi Synagogue, stayed there.

The 350-year-old house is the first of a cluster of Jewish heritage bungalows to be restored in the neighbourhood. Others include Mandalay Hall, now a Postcard hotel, and Ezekiel House, also a project initiated by Dominic – all in a bid to revive Synagogue Lane in Kochi's Jew Town. "The first wave of Jewish refugees, known as the Malabar Jews, came to this coast

before Rome was built," he says. "The second wave, the Sephardic Jews, migrated here in the 15th-16th centuries to escape persecution in Spain."

Synagogue Lane used to be a residential district up until the 1950s, when the Koders, Cohens, Salems, Robys and many others lived there with large families and staff. The lane, as Dominic told *The Hindu* last year, was the front yard for these homes "as parties, weddings, rituals flowed out onto the street. Tables laden with food and chairs were brought out in the evenings and the community gathered together".

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WINNERS' ANNOUNCEMENT ON THE LAST PAGE.

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ECHOES FROM THE MIZO HILLS

Media entrepreneur Nikhil Alva's debut novel brings alive the raging Mizoram insurgency of the 1960s

Stanley Carvalho

March 5, 1966. Screaming fighter jets of the Indian Air Force (IAF) – Dassault Ouragan ('Toofanis') and British Hunters – strafed Aizawl, now Mizoram's capital, using machine guns to fire at the densely populated town, dropping scores of incendiary bombs. Shocked and terrified civilians fled to the hills; rebels escaped to the jungles of Myanmar and East Pakistan. Till date, it remains the only instance of the IAF carrying out bombings within the country's civilian territory, on orders from the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi. New Delhi denied the bombings.

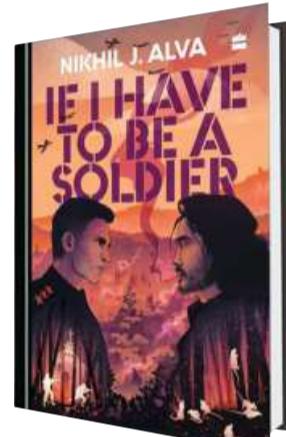
Soon after, the military, again on government orders, regrouped villages, clustering residents into the so-called Protected and Progressive Villages (PPVs) and forcing them at gunpoint to give up their land, crops and homes to live behind barbed wire under armed guard. A newspaper reported that no Russian gulag or German concentration camp had hosted such a large chunk of the local population.

The bombing was to quell the Mizoram uprising after Mizo National Front (MNF) leader Pu Laadeng declared independence from India. The military action left deep scars on the collective memory of Mizoram, leading to an insurgency that lasted two decades until Mizoram became a State of the Indian union.

Demons of the past
The Mizo uprising and the secretive war is at the core of Nikhil Alva's debut novel *If I Have To Be A Soldier*. Equally, the story is about friendship and love, identity and survival as Alva deftly weaves fact with fiction.

It is a significant piece of work with contemporary relevance and a poignant reminder of the horrors and fallout of conflicts, and the lasting impact it leaves on the masses. Coincidentally, the book was released just days before the 58th anniversary of the Aizawl bombing.

The story revolves around two



If I Have To Be A Soldier
Nikhil Alva
HarperCollins
₹499

boyhood friends – Samuel Rego (Sammy), the son of a Baptist pastor, who goes on to become an Indian Army Captain, and Sena, the rebel son of a teacher who runs away from home to enlist with the MNF, soon becoming a guerilla leader.

Sammy, who was packed off to a distant place after false accusations of rape, returns years later in uniform to the land of his birth to interrogate Sena who is under arrest. The story takes a curious turn with the two boyhood friends now on opposite sides of the law.

As the son of politician and former minister Margaret Alva, the author has had the good fortune of knowing the Northeast region and interacting with its people during his numerous travels accompanying his mother. "These memories, emotions and experiences have helped shape the characters in this novel," acknowledges Alva. With his deep research and lucid writing, Alva has documented a dark but significant chapter of India's post-Independence history for people to read, learn and not forget.

Finally, one can't help feeling that this moving Mizo insurgency story would make a good candidate for film adaptation. After all, Alva is an award-winning television filmmaker and social media "maven" who was instrumental in the makeover of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. I only wish this debut novel had a catchier title given its many layers and sweep.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist and writer.



Blast of history Folk performers from Mizoram at an event in Mumbai, 2016; and (top) file photo of a counter-insurgency training camp in Vairengte, Mizoram. (VIVEK BENDRE & RITU RAJ KONWAR)

BROWSER

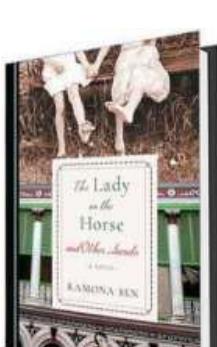
The Lady on the Horse and Other Secrets

Ramona Sen

Speaking Tiger

₹499

This novel tells the story of five generations of a family in Calcutta, unfolding over the course of the freedom struggle, Bengal famine and Partition. Each generation has its own share of secrets and contested legacies full of injustice, betrayal and pain.



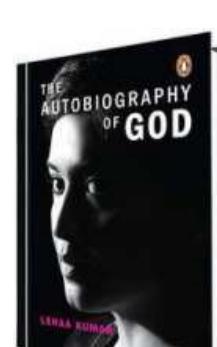
The Autobiography of God

Lenaa Kumar

Ebury Press

₹299

This book takes you on a journey of self-discovery spanning 18 years, in an attempt to answer questions such as: what am I; who am I; where am I; why am I. If you can't answer any of these questions to your satisfaction, pick up this book and look for the answer.



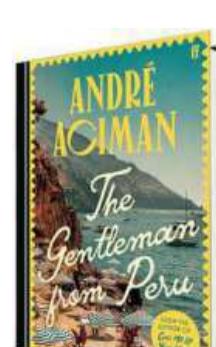
The Gentleman from Peru

André Aciman

Faber & Faber

₹599

When a group of college friends gets marooned at a luxurious hotel in Italy, they happen to observe a mysterious fellow guest: a white-bearded stranger who sits on the veranda each night and smokes. The story this stranger tells them ends up changing the friends' lives.



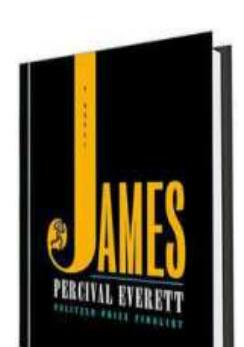
James

Percival Everett

Mantle

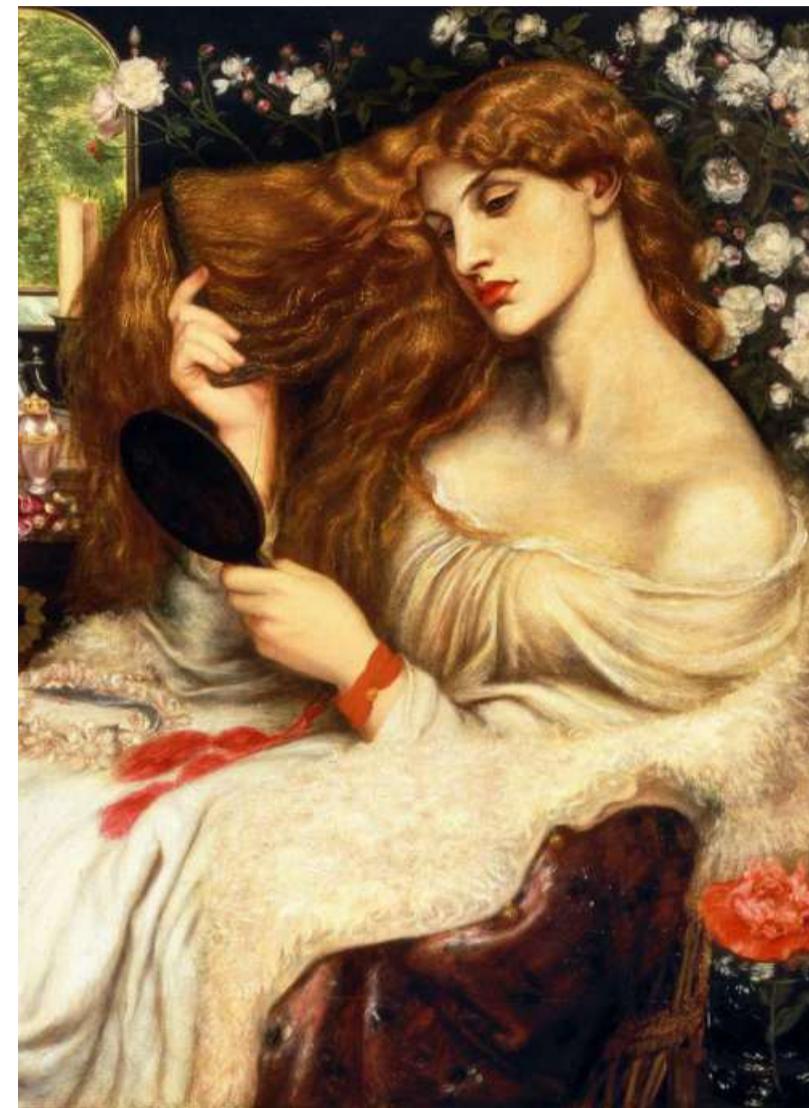
₹750

From the author of the book that inspired the recent Oscar-winning movie *American Fiction*, comes this reimagining of the classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Told with the enslaved Jim at its centre, the novel retains a lot of the original's plot points, but is narrated with electrifying humour.



First woman scorned

This short novel about Lilith, the first wife of Adam from the Bible, is one mad roar but it reflects our imperfect world and reality



Paradise lost A 19th century painting of Lilith by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (WIKI COMMONS)

scorns him and she rages, but she also weeps for what she has lost. Because she must embrace something, she embraces the world of demons, and her life of resistance and subversion begins. Suddenly, she's everywhere.

Antony's writing matches the chaos that claws at the edges of humankind's hard-won order, if we can call it order. Reading the book, one often has the feeling of cringing under a swarm of bats, infected with the horror that lurks just out of our field of vision. It may be incongruous to point out that there are imperfections in the language, when what we are hearing is one mad roar that lasts 13 chapters, incidentally numbered in reverse. But imperfections there are.

As for our imperfect reality, Lilith revels in the inbreeding and infighting of Adam's world. We are left to ponder whether the disasters of our world are the work of Lilith and the demons. Or have they always come directly from God?

The reviewer is the author of Three Seasons: Notes from a Country Year.



Eden Abandoned: The Story of Lilith
Shinie Antony
Hachette
₹499

Latha Anantharaman

Possibly every woman who remembers when she first heard of her. And her immediate response likely was, "Why wasn't I told?" Briefly, the apocryphal story of Lilith runs thus: God created Adam and Lilith out of clay, but Lilith was not submissive enough to Adam. So she left Eden, and a more compliant woman, Eve, was created out of Adam's rib. Lilith went on to wreak havoc.

Though the scriptures teem with demons and screech owls that prey on infants and frighten young men

in their sleep, Lilith is not mentioned by name in the King James translation of the *Bible*, at least. But this irresistible character, the first draft of womankind, the first first wife, features extensively in fiction, fantasy, television, video games, and heavy metal. Naturally, she is a favourite of feminists.

Life of resistance
In Shinie Antony's *Eden Abandoned*, Lilith tells her own story, beginning with her short-lived passion in paradise. Even in the heat of her love for Adam, she is impatient with his fear of her ideas, his subservience to God, and his reluctance to think for himself. When she leaves him, she

Chronicle of a failing marriage

Kusum Lata Sawhney's latest examines a relationship that comes asunder during the pandemic

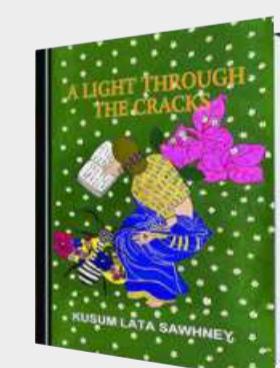
Preeti Zachariah

preeti.zachariah@thehindu.co.in

There is a wealth of scholarly literature that shows COVID-19 took a toll not just on people's health but on their relationships too. The uncertainties caused by rolling lockdowns, the forlorn demands of social distancing, and the iron necessity of remote working were a serious strain on Love in the Time of Coronavirus.

Kusum Lata Sawhney's latest novel, *A Light Through the Cracks*, examines a sclerotic marriage that almost inevitably comes asunder during the pandemic. The novel opens in an art-plastered lawyer's office where protagonist Alyra Dhanrajir, weighed down by the tedious monotony of her marriage, is attempting to divorce her husband of 23 years.

While their relationship began with no more than an easy and shared interest in casual sex, the question of marriage forced itself after Alyra found herself pregnant.



A Light Through the Cracks
Kusum Lata Sawhney
Har-Anand Publications
₹795

"What we had, what we have is an in-between. An insubstantial complacency that has seen us through twenty-three years of a life that was deadening and lacks any passion," she tells Rahul, her husband. Even so, she knows the exact moment when her marriage weariness set in – a chance meeting with a handsome younger man, Rajiv, in a bar.

From there, the reader is taken on a rollercoaster journey through the minds of the various characters. Divided into short, pithy chapters, some only a page, the novel lingers on the cause and course of this flagging marriage, meditations around sex and desire, that tired trope of rivalry with the mother-in-law, ruminations on identity and belonging, the value of female friendships, and a somewhat prosaic account of a changing India.

None of these themes is particularly original, and while the novel is structurally interesting, it could do with more show and less tell. A little more character building would have helped the novel go further – for instance, Alyra's mother-in-law Promilla is decidedly a caricature.

Given the novel's genre, however, credit to Sawhney for attempting to capture the life of a woman closer to middle age than girlhood, in a society that links youth to female desirability and tends to invisibilise older women.

Madhumita Murgia's debut book, shortlisted for the inaugural Women's Prize in Non-Fiction, maps the growth of Artificial Intelligence through the lens of human actors

BEING HUMAN IN AN AI WORLD



John Xavier
john.xavier@thehindu.co.in

If you have ever asked Alexa to play a song, Siri to make a call, or Google to map a route, then you have engaged with an artificial intelligence (AI) system. These are just a small subset of everyday activities people do with their AI-powered products.

Madhumita Murgia's *Code Dependent* lifts the veil hanging over humans that are building the base for AI's super structure to stand on. Most of them are unaware that the very system they are building would soon gobble up their very livelihood.

Her book offers a cross-section view of tech's bedrock – labelled data, humans building it, and the influence of automated systems on people. She throws light on the real AI stack, which has humans right at the bottom of the pyramid, without whose inputs, the current crop of AI tech wouldn't stand.

Over the past decade, tech devices and software have become more intuitive, creative and powerful. Underpinning their advance is a confluence of four major forces: Big Data, algorithmic recommendation systems, innovation in chip design, and cash-rich Big Tech firms.

This potent mix is redefining the way people interact with technology and is bringing humans much closer to machines than they were ever before in recorded history. Of these four powerful forces, Big Data is the most crucial ingredient in concocting a powerful AI system.

Lumps of data mean

nothing unless someone slices and dices them down to manageable parts. And that act of cutting datasets down to specific parts can be done only after categorising and labelling content.

If a self-driving car adjusts its steering wheel after noticing a sign post, that means it was trained on a dataset that contained labelled information on roads and signposts. This labelling makes the car's advanced driver-assistance system (ADAS) adept at manoeuvring diverse terrains. The process of labelling parts in a dataset is called data annotation.

In some ways, this job is like the data-entry operator's job of outsourcing and the offshoring era that began in the early 2000s that enriched corporations in the developed world by exploiting cheap labour in the Global South.

Two decades later, large tech firms in the developed world are exploiting cheap human labour in lower-income countries to enrich themselves and build massive AI models. They are outsourcing the data labelling task to firms based in developing nations. ChatGPT-maker OpenAI is a client of one such firm based in Nigeria.

The Microsoft-backed company hired Sama, a digital outsourcing firm, for labelling support. OpenAI's chatbots are fast. They hammer out replies to prompts within seconds after a user hits send. That's because its transformer efficiently arranges tokenised words and phrases to put together a meaningful and coherent response.

But, if those responses do not include toxic or graphic text snippets, then that's because the Nigeria-based

company's employees labelled such terms to ensure OpenAI's algorithm doesn't pick them up in its responses.

While most people may be aware of the number of parameters large language models (LLMs) are trained on, very few people know how such training happens and what sorts of inputs these models receive. A large proportion of people, including those developing such systems, see AI's decision-making ability as a black-box.

Over the past decade, tech devices and software have become more intuitive, creative and powerful. Underpinning their advance is a confluence of four major forces: Big Data, algorithmic recommendation systems, innovation in chip design, and cash-rich Big Tech firms



For example, when a group of researchers began developing COVID-19 diagnostic software, they used pneumonia chest X-ray data in the control group, which included data of children aged 1 to 5. The machine learning model, instead of differentiating pneumonia from COVID-19 based on the X-rays, wrongly distinguished children from adults.

The AI black-box
This is just one of many instances of AI exposing its black-box nature, confounding scientists, and researchers. Take the case of algorithmic profiling, a machine learning-based system that helps law enforcement agencies quantify a citizen's inclination to commit a crime.

In the book, Murgia documents how ProKid, an algorithmic profiling software, was used by the Dutch police to predict a youth's propensity to commit crime simply based on data from their "previous contacts with the police, their addresses, their relationships and their roles as a witness or victim."

Such use of AI shows an individual's quality of agency is shrinking, disempowering them and making them lose their sense of free will and ability to change themselves.

Murgia's book is an essential read, particularly at a time when lawmakers around the world are drafting legislations around AI. While the book does not offer solutions to the problems manifest in the system, it offers a new perspective to visualise the AI stack through the lens of human actors. And the most important part to start with is 'data'.

Six singular voices

With an introspective approach, the titles in the inaugural Women's Prize for Non-Fiction shortlist cover subjects like online polarisation and enslavement

Sanjay Sipahimalani

In a *Slate* magazine essay over a decade ago, Katy Waldman described non-fiction as "the patriarch of literary genres". While the literary landscape has shifted since then, much non-fiction still carries a whiff of authoritative objectivity and dominance, whether earned or not.

In this scenario, the inaugural Women's Prize for Non-Fiction is a welcome development. The six titles on the shortlist are distinguished by an intimate, introspective approach that in no way minimises the treatment of their subjects. They offer original perspectives on subjects like online polarisation, Artificial Intelligence, enslavement, and the lingering shadows of family ties.

Many of the books are memoiristic, some more than others. For instance, Noreen Masud's *A Flat Place* is woven around walks through Britain's flatlands, during which she recounts childhood experiences in Lahore and her experience of complex post-traumatic stress disorder. "Flat landscapes," she writes, "had always given meaning to a world that made no sense to me".

Masud's prose unpacks a conflicted relationship with an overbearing father and comes to terms with landscapes within and without.

'River of memories'

A tumultuous childhood and domineering father are also at the heart of Safiya Sinclair's *How to Say Babylon*, an account of her Rastafarian upbringing in Jamaica. Sinclair plunges into a river of memories, following the people, places, and events that shaped her life. Context is crucial: she examines Jamaica's colonial relationship to Britain, and Rastafarianism's form of political resistance. These currents shaped her circumstances until one night when, "under a borrowed moon, I discovered that a poem was order. It was certainty. And, for the first time, it seemed possible for me to write my way out."

Memories of a father also play a role in Laura Cumming's *Thunderclap*, a singular perspective on art and how we react to it. The title refers to a gunpowder explosion in October 1654 that devastated the Dutch city of Delft and killed, among others, the 32-year-old painter Carel Fabritius.

Cumming uses this incident as a launchpad to explore the lives and works of artists of the Dutch Golden Age as well as her Scottish father, a painter, who also died young. The

chapters are akin to a series of postcards "about what these painters made of the mysteries of life and art, how and what they taught me to see".

Looking closely at human artefacts and examining their impact over decades also informs Tiya Miles's *All That She Carried*. The primary object here is Ashley's Sack, a cotton bag made in 19th century America by a Black woman as a parting gift for her nine-year-old daughter about to be sold into slavery. Years later, Ashley's granddaughter embroidered a message onto the sack about the story of their separation.

In Miles's hands, the sack symbolises the strength of Black women and the power of everyday objects to tell the stories of those who have been ignored. Her book is a survival tale that uses fabric as a metaphor for "tying, weaving, knotting and binding people together".

Survival tales

Moving from the 19th and 20th centuries to the 21st, Naomi Klein's *Doppelganger* deals with the predicament that arose when she began to be mistaken for Naomi Wolf. Klein becomes obsessed with reading about Wolf and her deluded theories, which develops into a consideration of alter egos in film, TV and books, and then to the current climate of competing worldviews and shadow selves online.

"It began to feel as if the forces that have destabilised my world are part of an expansive web of forces that are destabilising our larger world," Klein writes. "Understanding these forces could hold a key to getting to firmer ground".

Finally, Madhumita Murgia's cleverly-titled *Code Dependent* examines another force shaping our lives, that of Artificial Intelligence. Murgia ventures beyond Silicon Valley to show how scalable systems like machine learning benefit large groups, but tend to work at the expense of individuals and communities "floating in society's blurry edges, fighting to be seen and heard".

Her subjects include a doctor in a Maharashtra village, a food delivery worker in Pittsburgh, an African American engineer, an Iraqi refugee in Sofia, a single mother in Amsterdam, a Chinese activist, and a priest in Rome.

In *All that She Carried*, Miles writes that we need to escape from frames of mind "that elevate mastery over compassion, division over connection, and greed over care, separating us one from another and locking us in". In their own ways, that is what all these shortlisted books urge us to do.

The winner of the prize will be announced on June 13.

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based writer.

Age of 'cloud fiefs'

G. Sampath
sampath.g@thehindu.co.in

Capitalism's death has been foretold many times over. For some, it is the destiny of the proletariat to finish off capitalism. For others, like Raghuram Rajan, the capitalists themselves are shoving the knife in. And for the economist who, as Greece's finance minister, battled Europe's financial establishment (and lost), capitalism has been killed off by 'cloud capitalists', or 'cloudalists', a mutant of the old capitalist class that has liberated itself from the twin imperatives of capitalism – market competition and profit. In *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*, Varoufakis argues that capitalism has been supplanted by a new tech-enabled system whose animating logic is not competition, wage labour, and profit-seeking but market monopoly, unpaid labour, and rent-seeking – reminiscent of a state of affairs that preceded capitalism, which we know as feudalism.

The thesis that digital technology has transformed capitalism into a

Economist and former Greece finance minister argues that capitalism has been supplanted by a new tech-enabled system whose animating logic is not profits but rent-seeking



GETTY IMAGES/STOCK

version of feudalism is not new. Way back in 2014, when the Internet of Things and Big Data occupied positions in the hype-index currently held by AI and the Metaverse, science fiction author Bruce Sterling wrote that "a materialised network society" marked by relentless data capture is ushering in an era of digital feudalism where people "are like the woolly livestock of a feudal demesne, grazing under the watchful eye of barons in their hilltop Cloud castles."

Since then, several writers have advanced similar theses. For Varoufakis, three phenomena – the privatisation of the Internet, the sustained quantitative easing in the decade after the 2008 financial crisis, and the rise of China as an economic powerhouse – were instrumental in the emergence of an ecosystem where profits took a backseat. Instead, they incentivised burning cash to build market dominance, or "cloud fiefs" – a fair description of what digital overlords such as Facebook, Amazon, and Uber have done.

However, Varoufakis' conceptual framework rests on equating platforms freely appropriating users'

data/content-creation with medieval barons freely appropriating the peasants' produce, a problematic leap. Contemporary capitalism certainly displays feudal characteristics. But are they due to algorithms, or are they intrinsic to a particularly virulent strain of capitalism that has become globally dominant – the neoliberal strain?

Let's take Varoufakis's primary argument that cloudalists accumulate wealth from rent, not profit. As he notes, rent, unlike profit, is not vulnerable to market competition, because it "flows from privileged access to things in fixed

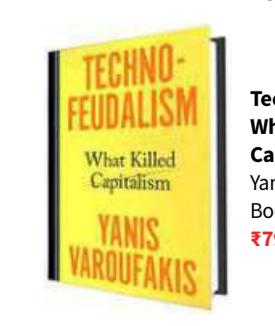
supply, like fertile soil or land containing fossil fuels." Profit, on the other hand, flows to those who produce things that otherwise would not have existed, such as a car or phone, and since someone else can make a better car or a phone, profits are vulnerable to competition.

The arch cloudalist Amazon, for instance, has privileged access to consumers' attention. So it charges manufacturers – Varoufakis calls them 'vassal capitalists' – rent for selling their wares on its 'market place', and likewise Google gets a cut from every sale on its Playstore. Are the likes of Google and Amazon

therefore comparable to medieval barons who made no investments in capital goods but lazied around all year only to seize the fruits of their serfs' labour? Not really, because both these cloudalists have huge R&D budgets and they keep releasing new products. While the rent they charge may be insulated from market pressure, their other businesses – advertising in the case of Google and Facebook – do remain vulnerable to competition.

Intellectual property

Also, medieval serfs had to swear fealty to their overlords. They did not have the freedom to up and leave, like Varoufakis' 'cloud serfs' can, from say, Tik Tok to YouTube, or Uber to Ola. In fact, the supreme enabler of rent-seeking in the

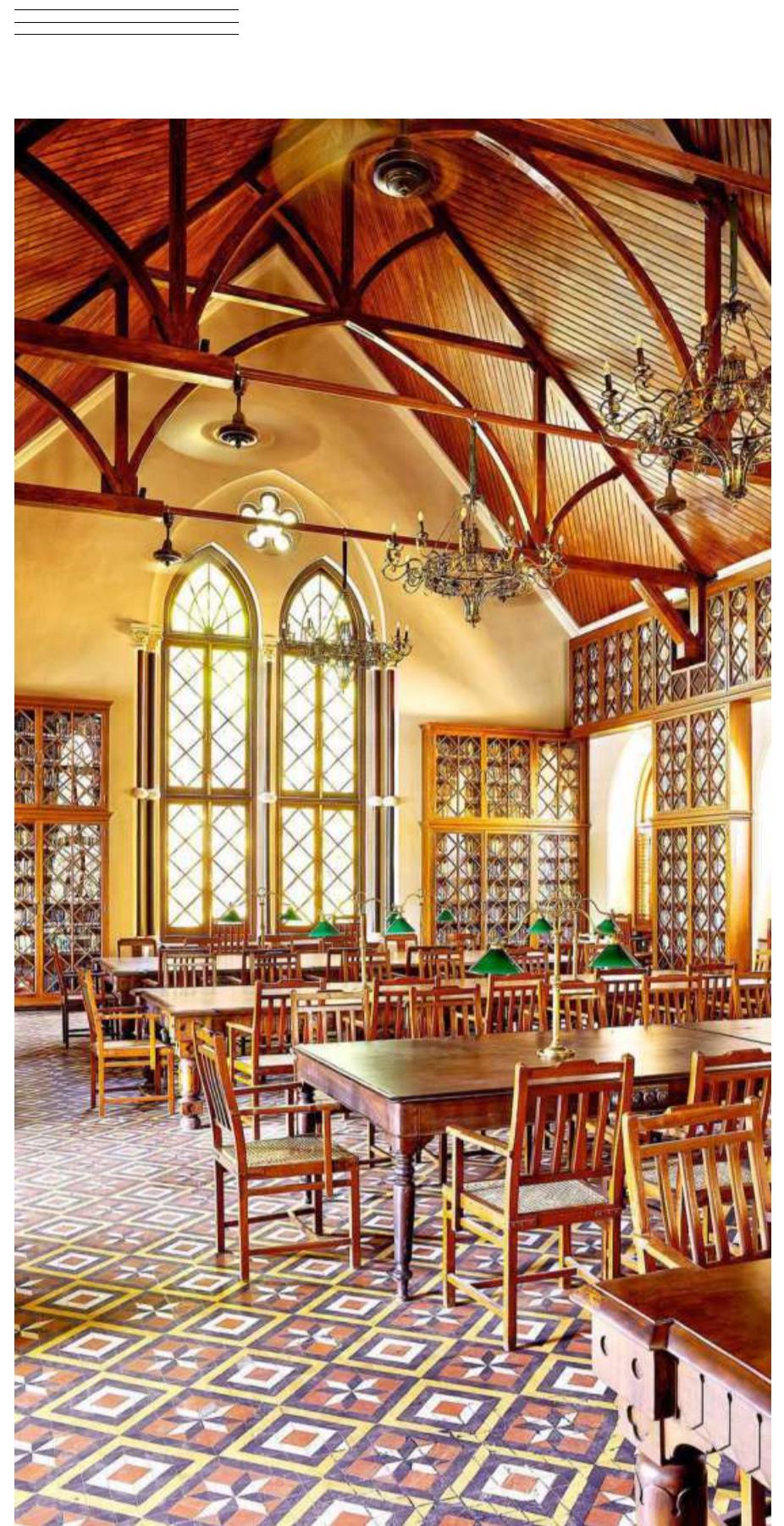


Technofeudalism:
What Killed Capitalism
Yanis Varoufakis
Bodley Head
₹799

algorithmic age is not so much digital tech as the expanding empire of intellectual property – a gift of neoliberalism that is gobbling up the commons just as the 'Enclosures' did at the birth of the market society.

A flawed understanding of capitalism in the age of AI risks flawed prescriptions for political action, and surely enough, Varoufakis ends up advocating an alliance between 'cloud serfs' and 'vassal capitalists', assuming a convergence of interests, if not solidarity, between them because both pay rent to parasitic cloudalists. Seriously, capitalists and users/workers combining to overthrow cloud capitalists? Even a libertarian Marxist, as Varoufakis likes to call himself, would rather prefer old school class politics.

Varoufakis is at his best explaining the history and mechanics of capitalism and how a broken financial system is perverting it in ways that inevitably produce upward redistribution of wealth, greater concentration of power, and sharpening inequality. He is less convincing in his attempts to formulate a launch pad for effective counter-politics.



Keeping memories alive (Clockwise from far left)
David Sassoon Library; restoration work at the Jacob Sassoon hospital in Pune; the restored Knesset Eliyahoo synagogue facade; craftsmen working on the stained glass windows of Knesset Eliyahoo; and inside the A.B. Salem House in Fort Kochi. (TAIB CHITALAWALA, H. VIBHU, AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



There are some beautiful temples

in Kashmir, such as Gangpatwar in Srinagar, and mosques across Uttar Pradesh that are worthy of conservation," says Deshmukh. Their usage, too, can evolve. "We decided to put the buildings into adaptive re-use, and are planning to turn them into libraries for PG and UG medical students." A room in which Mahatma Gandhi had an apartment in 1920 will become a museum.

►

ABHA NARAIN LAMBHAI
Conservation architect

acquire a spanking new modern look after restoration," says Deshmukh. Their usage, too, can evolve. "We decided to put the buildings into adaptive re-use, and are planning to turn them into libraries for PG and UG medical students." A room in which Mahatma Gandhi had an apartment in 1920 will become a museum.

►

Syncretic advantage

Beyond boosting tourism, creating cultural centres, or simply the altruistic purpose of heritage conservation, everyone we spoke with felt that India's Jewish-origin architecture appears to advocate a syncretic, community-wide way of life – which adaptive re-use could help continue in the 21st century. Deshmukh highlights the importance that "giving back" holds in Judaism. Lambhai points out that the Sassoon's philanthropy was integral to the creation of Bombay as we know it today.

Dominic narrates the story of Sarah Jacob Cohen, an embroiderer in Jew town who died at the age of 97, and her Muslim helper Thaha Ibrahim, who eventually set up the Sarah Museum in her memory. And Silliman underlines the "sacred geography" of Kolkata – the Armenian and Chinese churches, the Guru Nanak gurdwaras, the Kalighat temples – mapping a city that became a wellspring of many faiths, including the "Hare Krishna", the Sikhs and the Jews, from the 19th century onwards.

"More than religion, I feel conservation is for communities," concludes Lambhai. "I consider myself a part of the community that lives with the David Sassoon library; it doesn't matter if I'm Jewish or not. It is our collective responsibility that these landmarks of a past generation are transferred to the next."



The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, writing on culture, lifestyle and technology.

WHAT INDIA'S JEWISH BUILDINGS HAVE TO SAY

**CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1**

Since then, younger generations have left – all except two. Over the decades, the street was taken over by handicraft traders and Kashmiri souvenir shops, and would be dead by nightfall. But now, as Kochi's smart city project is underway, the street isn't only getting a facelift, a small group of stakeholders is seeing to it that they also re-engineer some of that "old-world charm" and transform the area into "living museum".

At Mumbai's Kala Ghoda
Of India's abundant heritage architecture, buildings of Jewish origin hold a special place. In the last few decades, these private bungalows and estates, as well as public places such as synagogues and hospitals, have become the subject of major restoration work – even as the number of Jews in India dwindled to below 5,000 according to the 2011 census. "Jewish heritage in India is one of those aspects that shines globally because this is one of a few countries where Jews have not been persecuted historically, even during the World War years," says conservation architect Abha Narain Lambhai. "And India is the only country where the restoration of Jewish heritage has been funded by people of other faiths, not necessarily only by Jewish organisations. That is truly unique."

The story of Kochi's Jewish heritage architecture is mirrored in Mumbai, Kolkata and Pune – the main cities where Baghdadi Jews settled during the 18th and

19th centuries. In Mumbai's Kala Ghoda district, Lambhai and team brought back to life the 150-year-old Knesset Eliyahoo synagogue in 2019, and the David Sassoon Library and Reading Room last year.

Both received financial support from the JSW Foundation, along with ICICI Bank, Hermès and others for the library. "The restoration of the synagogue and

library has set the stage for cultural activity," says Lambhai. "An all-faith, peace-music performance took place at the synagogue some years ago, and the library is now a venue for miscellaneous Kala Ghoda Festival events. That gives back to the city in terms of being a cultural melting pot."

Lambhai's next project is to restore the Masina Hospital in Byculla. "It's the

family home of [businessman and philanthropist] David Sassoon, an elegant classical-revival building that is true to its time," she says. "Our main challenge right now is to raise funds for this."

Once the funds come in, she intends to begin with the roof. "The building is stunning, there's a lot of old wood, but also a lot of leakage, seepage and structural issues, especially with the roof and the second floor. You build a building from the ground up, but you sometimes need to restore it from the top down."

The Sassoon hospitals of Pune
In Pune, on the initiative of the Public Works Department, architect Archana Deshmukh is working to restore two of Sassoon General Hospital's four historic buildings: the David Sassoon hospital, built in 1867 in the early Gothic style, and the Jacob Sassoon hospital, built in 1906 in the English Victorian Gothic style.

"One looks more like a fort, the other has high walls and tall, arched windows," she says. "It's very rare to see two distinct styles of architecture on one campus." Her work began in 2023, on a budget of ₹9 crore and ₹6 crore, respectively. The work includes structural refurbishment such as water-tightening and mould removal, as well as cosmetic changes, including removing false ceilings, restoring original Lancet windows and murals by a famous 19th-century British artist Margaret E. Thompson, who painted the paediatric ward's walls with illustrations based on children's rhymes.

"I always feel that heritage buildings must look like they've matured, not

like they've been restored. We're trying to understand the value of heritage. Increasingly, they understand that it is good for tourism. As we've become less multicultural, there's a nostalgia for the past which had communities of various ethnicities who lived and worked together to build Kolkata into the beautiful city that it is."

JAEEL SILLIMAN
Author and researcher

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acquire a spanking new modern look after restoration," says Deshmukh. Their usage, too, can evolve. "We decided to put the buildings into adaptive re-use, and are planning to turn them into libraries for PG and UG medical students." A room in which Mahatma Gandhi had an apartment in 1920 will become a museum.

►

Synagogues in Kolkata

In Kolkata, two of its three major synagogues, the Maghen David and the Beth El, were restored in 2017 with the help of Jewish trust funds. Skirmishes and allegations around misuse of funds and theft ensued; while others have also pointed out that no proper conservation architects were attached, and the consequences are beginning to show in leakages. Even as the police have brought charges of economic offences being battled out in court, these synagogues are increasingly important stops on sightseeing maps and walking tours.

Former police commissioner Soumen Mitra, who loves heritage buildings, is

►

ABHA NARAIN LAMBHAI
Conservation architect

responsible for restoring the Manasseh Meyer building," says city-based author and researcher Jael Silliman, who has put together an installation of Jewish history in India at the Neveh Shalom synagogue. "We have a gorgeous cemetery whose upkeep is being done as we speak. It might actually be the most active place in our community because everybody is old and dying," she adds dryly.

►

Not all restoration jobs hit the spot,

It's why they retained elements like the original facade, the main door, the terrazzo and terracotta floors, old wooden beams and doors, but cleaned up the flow of the place, so they could carve out four bedrooms and a courtyard. A space that was also reminiscent of a certain lifestyle, where neighbours walked through houses freely and much of the day was spent communing on streets. It's an atmosphere they hope to recreate as both business hotels are slated to open for business this October.

Tony Joseph, chief architect at Stapat, responsible for restoring the Manasseh Meyer building," says city-based author and researcher Jael Silliman, who has put together an installation of Jewish history in India at the Neveh Shalom synagogue. "We have a gorgeous cemetery whose upkeep is being done as we speak. It might actually be the most active place in our community because everybody is old and dying," she adds dryly.

►

Syncretic advantage

Beyond boosting tourism, creating cultural centres, or simply the altruistic purpose of heritage conservation, everyone we spoke with felt that India's Jewish-origin architecture appears to advocate a syncretic, community-wide way of life – which adaptive re-use could help continue in the 21st century. Deshmukh highlights the importance that "giving back" holds in Judaism. Lambhai points out that the Sassoon's philanthropy was integral to the creation of Bombay as we know it today.

had something similar in mind for Mandalay Hall. "I'd bought the 350-year-old building some time back," he says, "after I found that most buildings on Jew Street had been destroyed or mutilated, taken over by people with a different imagination of what tradition and heritage is." Mandalay Hall was built by the eponymous trader who operated in Burma.

After some issues with clearances from the Archaeological Department, Stapat's restoration work preserved the plaque, some of the original paintings, the lime plaster, and replicated their distressed look in the other rooms. It is now a five-room property, initially an "art hotel", now under the aegis of Postcard.

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Dominic narrates the story of Sarah Jacob Cohen, an embroiderer in Jew town who died at the age of 97, and her Muslim helper Thaha Ibrahim, who eventually set up the Sarah Museum in her memory. And Silliman underlines the "sacred geography" of Kolkata – the Armenian and Chinese churches, the Guru Nanak gurdwaras, the Kalighat temples – mapping a city that became a wellspring of many faiths, including the "Hare Krishna", the Sikhs and the Jews, from the 19th century onwards.

"More than religion, I feel conservation is for communities," concludes Lambhai. "I consider myself a part of the community that lives with the David Sassoon library; it doesn't matter if I'm Jewish or not. It is our collective responsibility that these landmarks of a past generation are transferred to the next."

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GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

IN ANDHRA'S PAPIKONDA NATIONAL PARK, THE INDIGENOUS KOYA TRIBE ONCE MADE TRADITIONAL FLUTES FROM THE HORNS OF THE GAUR.



NOW THE TRIBE HAS SUBSTITUTED GAUR HORNS WITH PALM LEAVES, TO HELP CONSERVE THE SPECIES.



AH, MUSIC TO MY EARS!



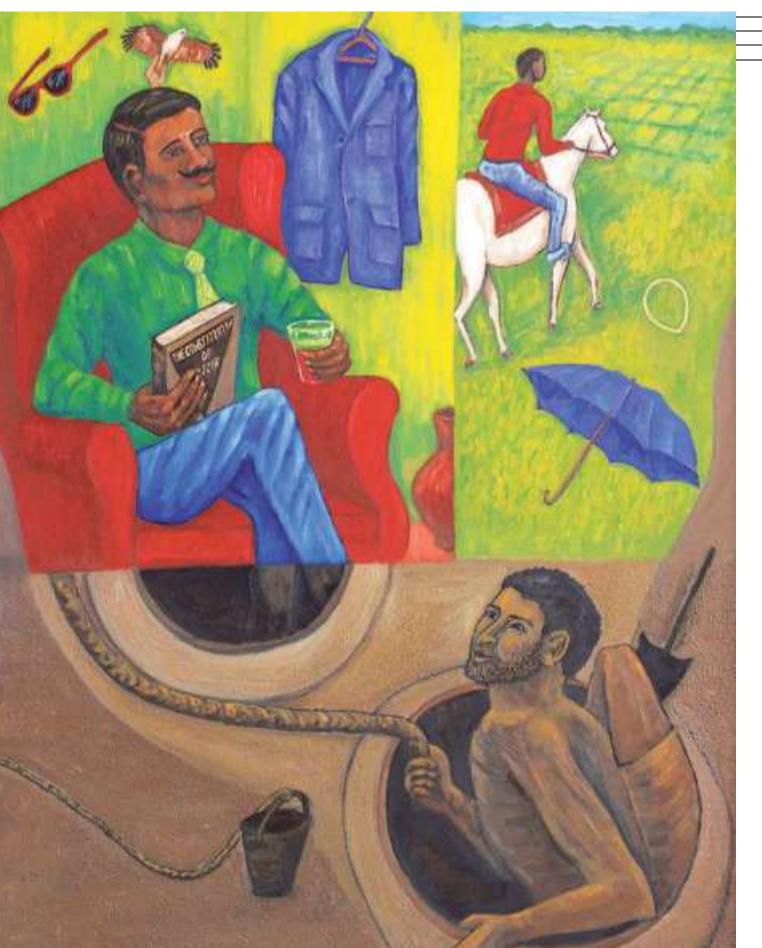
Aditya Mani Jha

Ranjan Kaul's 2023 painting *Phake Neuji* is a highly effective demonstration of the kind of 'suspended animation' great art leaves the viewer with. Here, a bespectacled senior citizen (the glasses are a psychological trick, to dupe the subject with 'trustworthiness') is reading a newspaper called 'Phake Neuji'. A friend of his is peeking into the paper curiously – signalling the inevitable spread of falsehoods. A third figure, of whom we can only see their legs, has put their feet up as they consume the latest IPL match, ignoring the 'breaking news' chyron at the bottom of the screen. There's so much going on here that works as a straightforward indictment of India's media ecosystem and yet, the overall effect is that of an urgent whisper in the dark. This rather striking work is indicative of the artist's ability to discuss serious issues with a light touch.

Phake Neuji is part of 'Within, Without', Kaul's fifth solo exhibition. Curated by art critic Georgina Maddox, the show brings together works from the last six years that reflect "the complexities of contemporary time". While the emphasis is on issues pertaining to Indian society, even the standalone works have a strong sense of narrative, crafting a story around an Indian socio-political theme.

"Hybrid identities have always fascinated me. I am born to a Kashmiri father and a Marathi mother, so I too have a hybrid identity of sorts," Kaul says, during a video interview. "I am primarily a figurative artist. So, if you see my paintings like Myrmidons and others, I have used human-animal hybrid figures to present my point of view." The painting he is referring to is a watercolor he made in 2018, that is also part of the exhibition.

In Homer's *Iliad*, the Myrmidons were the tribe of warriors commanded by Achilles. The charisma and god-like status of their leader meant that they are now



Infused with allegory and symbolism (Clockwise from left) *Daydreams*; *Hope Confronts Anarchy* from the 'Within, Without' exhibition; and artist Ranjan Kaul at work. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Another thematic sequence that stands out is *Daydreams*, a bifurcated oil-on-canvas from 2022, the two halves of which depict the dreams and reality of a Dalit man. The dream images are aspirational – he sees himself well-dressed, sitting on a comfortable chair, reading the Constitution of India. Whereas, in the reality part of the painting, he is cleaning a manhole – shamefully, manual scavenging is still prevalent in India and it's mostly Dalit men that are saddled with it.

India wouldn't be the first non-western country to develop its own democracy index. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea already has one. As per the 2024 report released last week by Supreme Leader Always Very Excellent (SLAVE), a Pyongyang-based independent think tank, North Korea is the most democratic country in the world with 100 points, followed by China (99 points), while Russia and India are ranked joint third with 95 points each. The U.S., with 5 points, was ranked 180th out of 180 countries, making it the least democratic country on the planet. Isn't it refreshing to finally see a democracy index that doesn't recycle old western prejudices?

Dissecting society
Now in his late 60s, Kaul has led a full life. An engineer by education, he graduated from IIT Kanpur in the 70s, before completing a master's in English literature from Delhi University and postgraduate studies in product design from IIT Bombay. He was also managing director of Oxford University Press India before he quit to pursue art full-time.

This diversity of life experiences lends itself to his moving depictions of some of Indian society's most pressing issues. "It's not always the things that are in front of our eyes that deserve our full attention," Kaul says. "This show is also about issues that escape the public eye, that are invisible for many reasons. That's where art comes in, and that's what I am trying to do with my work – make people feel strongly about things that might have otherwise passed them by."

Immediately told him he should copy the North Korean template. "We are certainly inspired by it," he admitted, taking a thoughtful puff on his cigar. "But we'll use our own methodologies."

"As in?" "It all boils down to how much

GETTY IMAGES

weightage you give to what," he said. "Right to life, for example, is the most important element in a democracy."

"Absolutely," I said. "Hence the biggest metric in our index would be the safety of citizens from gun violence. As it happens, Indian democracy has the world's lowest deaths per capita from gun violence."

"Brilliant." "Also, what is democracy without women's empowerment, eh? So the second highest weightage is for abortion rights, where India is again well ahead of the V-Dem topers."

"Super!" "The third aspect is immigration. Look at Europe's brutality towards migrants, and look at our CAA, a whole new law to give citizenship to immigrants."

"I never thought of that way," I said. "You've been brainwashed," he said.

"But these indices also reflect public opinion."

"Well, their sampling methodology is totally biased," Mr. Fellow said. "To protect our index's neutrality, we will

have survey respondents selected by a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, a Cabinet Minister, and a retired High Court judge with a passion for electoral politics."

"I see. And how big will the sample be?" "Much bigger than what the West's self-appointed custodians could manage. We will do a randomised, semi-controlled, double-stratified, poly-systemic, meta-prospective sampling that will draw on the vast database of the ITU."

"The ITU? Wouldn't their database be filled with supporters of one particular party?" "How is that relevant?" he snapped. "Any democracy has just one job to do: ensure that the people are ruled by the most popular leader. India deserves credit for ensuring this for the past 10 years, and so do North Korea, China and Russia."

"But then –" "Democracies," said Mr. Fellow, raising a finger to silence me, "are living, breathing organisms that are constantly evolving. India is evolving from a multi-party democracy to a single-party democracy. The West is not even one-party democracy. So they bandy about silly phrases like 'democratic backsliding'. Sadly, it's only a symptom of their own intellectual backsliding."

"Well said, Mr. Fellow. So, when do we see the home-grown rankings?" "Soon," he said. "Before India's last elections are over."

"Last elections?" "Sorry, did I say 'last elections'? I meant last phase of general elections."

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

RANJAN KAUL'S HYBRID IDENTITIES

The New Delhi-based artist thinks of his paintings as "self-sufficient short stories", and in 'Within, Without', he crafts a tale around an Indian socio-political theme

associated with the idea of 'blind following'. In Kaul's painting, we see a Pied Piper-like figure with an animal-head leading a group of sheep-like hybrids into violence,

It was while deep in the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories about the disappearance of Kate Middleton from public life that I came upon the phenomenon of "tradwives", a TikTok and Instagram trend racking up millions of views, of young women who play and promote very traditional gender roles. Their job is to cook, clean, and raise children, and pointedly play a subservient role to men.

Their husbands, whose household role is only to be the financial provider, have to approve of the money they are spending, even if it is for the house and not for themselves. The core aesthetic of tradwife fashion is frills and dresses, perfectly brushed hair and a fully made-up face. One video showed a tradwife waking up at 5 a.m. to apply make-up so that her husband would never see her plain face.

Middleton, of whom there isn't a single photograph in which you can, quite literally, find a hair out of place, is a brand ambassador of sorts for tradwives, she is their icon. It is unclear how much cooking and baking the Princess of Wales is engaging in, but it does not matter because we are bang in the middle of the era of the image, and her image is that of a person who has happily and contentedly taken the role of being by her husband's side.

Middleton's ethos ever since she got engaged to a future king has been one of appropriate perfection – her dress is just right, her hair is always spectacular, she has a wide smile when necessary and



MODERN TIMES

Perfect is boring

The rise of 'tradwives' on social media, and why the Princess of Wales is their icon

an air of gravitas at others. The most interesting thing she has done since her wedding 13 years ago, is disappearing from public view after a surgery. In fact, when she appeared in a video to end weeks of speculation about her whereabouts and well-being (with the perfect amount of radiance for someone dealing with a health issue), it was the first time most people heard her speak. A tradwife, presumably, should be seen and not heard.

Blending into sameness

For a moment, let's keep aside what this says about the

Style statement Kate Middleton, known for her fashion sense, is often featured on celebrity best-dressed lists. (GETTY IMAGES)

reversal of the strides that feminism has achieved, the long march for equality that took centuries. What I really don't understand about women choosing this lifestyle is how boring this kind of perfection seems to be. Look at Middleton herself, so obsessive her need to project absolute flawlessness that she (or whoever is in charge of her X account; those conspiracy theories are best left for another column) came out and confessed to Photoshopping the image she'd posted for Mother's Day.

What does she need, I wondered, for her smile to be brighter, her hair to be even more shiny, for her arms to be longer so that she can hold three growing children in her embrace? If all character is stripped, how will any image be indicative of anything? Can anyone remember any previous Mother's Day photos that she'd posted? They all blend into the sameness of happy, sunny perfection.

Middleton, and her tradwife followers, don't need to look far for lessons in authentic relevance. Her predecessor as the Princess of Wales, Diana, was the master of being a relatable person behind a beautiful photo. Her look was effortless but the burden was visible, and it was in the times that she slipped that she endeared herself. There are countless photos and videos of her various imperfections, as a young mother snapping at her husband, as a new divorcee dishing the dirt on her marriage, as a person drowning in the demands of the world, desperate to find love. Here was a woman who looked impossibly, unattainably beautiful, who seemed to be living a life as full of confusions and ugliness as the rest of us.

Diana's enduring legacy derives from the fact that she was a person, and not just an image. With Middleton, as we have now come to realise, it is nearly impossible to tell whether she is real or a creation of artificial intelligence. (The writer Hilary Mantel once famously wrote that Middleton looks like she was put together by a committee.)

And so it goes for the tradwives too. Beyond the aspiration and outrage of a social media post, these pie-baking, frill-wearing, flawlessly made-up women have very little to speak for themselves. They are all interchangeable and easily replaceable. There is, really, nothing more boring than this kind of perfection.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

No deception needed

East-West vulnerable,
South deals

Bob Jones

West cashed two high hearts before shifting to the queen of clubs. South's first thought was to win in dummy and lead a low diamond. Should the ace and king of diamonds be split between the two defenders, as was likely, East would be under some pressure, especially if East held the king of diamonds. East would have to rise with his honor on the first round of the

suit or be subjected to a ruffing finesse later. East, of course, could defeat the contract by rising with his honor.

South saw he didn't need to put East to the test. He could make his contract through normal play if the diamonds and spades split normally. He won the opening club lead in hand with the ace and led the 10 of diamonds to East's king. South won the club return with dummy's king and ruffed a diamond with the ace of spades. South led the eight of spades to

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

The bidding:

SOUTH 1♣
WEST Dbl
NORTH 2♣
EAST 3♦ All pass

Opening lead: King of ♦

dummy's 10 and ruffed a diamond with the king of spades. The five of spades went to dummy's nine, drawing the last trump, and another diamond was ruffed with the queen of spades. This felled

the ace from West. South now led his two of spades to dummy's four and discarded his low club on the established queen of diamonds. Nicely played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has April 7 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 Born this day in 1770, this English poet is regarded as one of the founding fathers of the Romantic movement. He and his sister Dorothy used to go for long walks in the beautiful Lake District, Dorothy's journal entry inspiring him to write poems about a host of golden flowers. Who was this poet, whose name aptly describes what he is famous for?

2 On this day in 1795, the French First Republic adopted the metric system, which led to the prevalence of two particular measuring units in the modern world. The first was thousand times the mass of 1cc of water, and the second was one ten-millionth of the distance from the North Pole to the equator. What are these two, which are also known as SI units?

3 On this day in 1827, English chemist John Walker started selling his invention in packs of 100. While trying to develop a combustible paste to be used in guns, he discovered that the stick used to mix the paste sparked when it brushed against a brick. What is his invention, which gets its name from the phenomenon that causes the spark?



Love is all you need
Three men at the 1969 Woodstock music festival in Bethel, NY. (GETTY IMAGES)

a dancer in his brother's troupe, picking up his signature musical instrument only at the age of 18. He became an icon after playing a midnight set at Woodstock that inspired the Beatles, and eventually went on to win four Grammy Awards. Who is this legendary musician, whose daughters are also winners of multiple awards?

7 On this day in 1948, the United Nations established a specialised agency that incorporated the work of the Office International d'Hygiène Publique, which maintained the 'International Classification of Diseases'. Over the years, it has been responsible for eradicating life-threatening diseases, and developing research for the benefit of all mankind. Which organisation is this, usually known by its acronym?

8 Born this day in 1954 in Hong Kong, Chan Kong-sang started off his career as a construction worker in Australia, where he got his now popular English name. He eventually became an actor, singer, producer, director and professor of tourism management. When he made it big in Hollywood, he

couldn't find a company to insure him as he always did his own stunts, even injuring his skull in one attempt. Who is this popular martial artist?

9 Born this day in 1946, Stan Winston was an American make-up and special effects artist who won four Oscars for his work. The movies you can see his work in include *Aliens*, *Predator*, *Terminator* and *Batman Returns*. His most famous contribution though was to a movie franchise, where he brought to life central characters from a Michael Crichton novel for Steven Spielberg. Which blockbuster movie series was this?

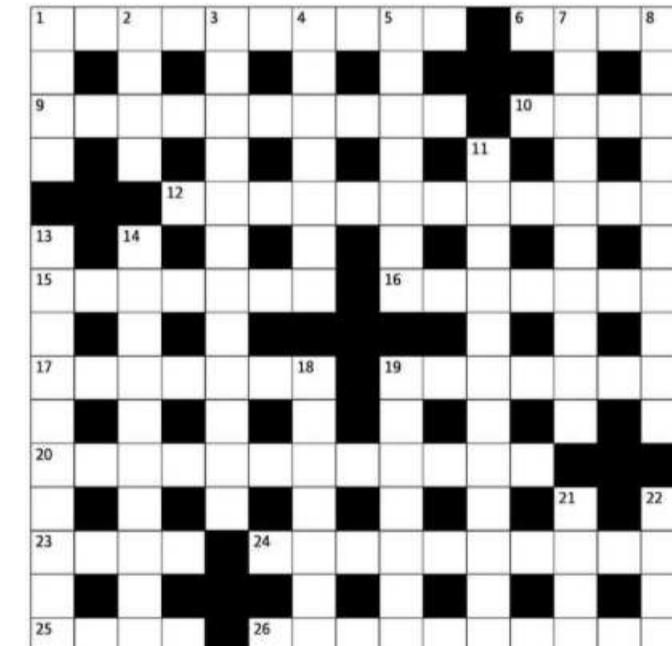
10 On this day, a particular beverage is celebrated in the United States, to commemorate President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the Cullen-Harrison Act into law. The law was to change the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, to raise ethanol percentage by weight, from 0.5% to 3.2%. If the original law concerned Prohibition, what day is this in the US?

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

10. National Beer Day
6. Jackie Chan
8. World Health Organization
6. Pandit Ravi Shankar
5. Kellogg
3. Prithviraj Mukherjee
2. Kilogram and Metre
1. William Wordsworth
Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3301



Across

- 1 One who went at 15mph at start of seaside rails (10)
- 2 In a gaudy way, like a gilet might be sported? (4-3-3)
- 3 Steals judge's clothes, wanting piece of ermine (4)
- 4 Gold coins ... heads! (10)
- 5 Look, Lord (4)
- 6 Dispatches pair of idiots in a trial that ends abruptly (12)
- 7 Carousing, drunk aeronaut stripped of uniform (2,1,4)
- 8 Here's a gift (7)
- 9 Larger kitchen implement, did you say? (7)
- 10 German acknowledges grim sort of humour? (7)
- 11 Shirking one's duties? (3,9)
- 12 Grimly obstinate, Everyman's after last bit of custard (4)
- 13 Composer, pious type, yellin' – by heavens! (10)
- 14 Writing may be done on this feature, with beginning and end discarded (4)
- 15 As *Revelation* mentions, apocalyptic gathering engendering devastating destruction of Nature, primarily? (10)

Down

- 1 Cobbler boy in front of tree (4)
- 2 In reflection of river, a bright star (4)
- 3 ... regardless of price (it veers wildly) (12)
- 4 Characteristic of balding Cockney – where it's all vanished! (4,3)

SOLUTION NO. 3300



Don't compare yourself with others

Focus on your potential and interests to find true happiness in life

Cheera Das
cheeraadas@gmail.com

As I was an average student, my parents were never shocked whenever I brought home my progress report card with "fail" written in bold red ink. Failing in subjects, especially mathematics, was routine for me.

Somehow, I managed to get to the fifth grade. A few days after our midterms, the mathematics teacher came to the class with a bundle of answer sheets. It caused immediate panic in the classroom, but I was relaxed. Zero expectations made my life much easier back then. As usual, I failed the test, but to my surprise, I was not the only one this time.

As always, I showed my father the test results as he was about to hit the bed. He checked my marks and without any comments, took his pen to sign it. Thinking that he might be happy to know that his daughter was not the only one who failed the test, I told him, "Dad, many of my classmates also failed the test."

I was expecting a smile from him, but instead, he looked at me and asked, "Dear, have I ever asked you the marks of your fellow mates?"

I answered, "No, you have not."

He continued, "Do you think that I would want to know the scores of your classmates?"

I was puzzled by his question as in our school, our teachers had the habit of reading out loud the names and marks of every student in the class while distributing the answer sheets.

As a child, I believed the whole purpose of this was to let us compare the marks with each other. So, why was my father questioning my beliefs and making me confused? I was lost.

After a pause, he sat me down next to him and said, "Do you think knowing that others scored less

than you will make you any better at the subject?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied with some doubt. "So never compare yourself with others. You are all individuals who are unique and so are the interests and potential of each of you. Comparing your scores with anyone else will never make you better or worse than them." With that, he signed the paper and bade me goodnight.

That whole night, I pondered over his words. The next morning while my mother was busy preparing our breakfast, I told her about the previous night. She handed me a glass of masala tea and, without taking her eyes off the stove, said, "Darling, he was trying to say that you would never be happy if you start comparing yourself with others." "But you know what, there is one person with whom you should compare yourself, and that is you."

Finally, when I understood their wise words, it was a life-changing moment for me. Thenceforth I stopped comparing my life with others, let alone the scores. Instead, I started working to my potential. I realised that everyone is different and has different talents. I started working on my studies and self-doubts and tried to thrive on my interests.

As I grew older, most of my friends took up jobs they liked, and I decided to go for research. While my friends were climbing the ladders of promotion, I was climbing the stairs of my research building. While they were dancing on the eve of their wedding, I was dancing in the laboratory with

fumes coming out of my head as the results I got for that day's experiment contradicted my expectations. While they were going to Singapore for their honeymoon, I was going to meet my supervisor with trembling hands holding the negative results I got in the lab. But at the end of the day, I was content and thoroughly enjoyed my work and life. I slept tight. At the other end of the world, my loved ones were living their lives as they wished, and I was thrilled for them.

The world will be in much chaos if we all wanted the same in our lives. Realising that we are different and want different things will help us stop comparing ourselves with others.

In a world ruled by social media, the word "comparison" has a bigger impact on us than we may imagine. If used appropriately, the Internet and social media can be a game-changer. They help us connect with the world beyond our imagination and embrace and enhance our creativity.

Sadly, many let social media dictate terms and end up comparing their lives and likes with that of total strangers on the screen. Studies show that this unhealthy comparison results in low self-esteem, insecurities, and self-doubts. So, is this comparison needed in our lives?

We all grow up and live in different circumstances. Comparing might destroy the real you and your true potential and happiness. We should start accepting ourselves as we are and work on our talents and potential. We will then thrive and become a better version of ourselves.

On a new journey

Smartphones have changed the social dynamics of school bus rides

Bhagavathi Ramakrishnan
bhagavathiramakrishnan@gmail.com

School bus rides have been the epicentre of my school life. This 15-minute ride from home to school and back has exposed me to an eclectic set of toddlers, tweens, and teens.

From forging friendships to spurring a sense of blind confidence to stand up to bullies and then getting beaten up, the bus ride has taught me many things. I could feel its absence immensely during the lockdown.

When schools started

reopening, what excited me most was the fact that I would be back on the school bus.

But to my surprise, the pandemonium had given way to eerie silence. Smartphones had become part of learning and most students, with earphones plugged in, brought them to school. This completely flipped the organised chaos of our bus! The usual games of notebook cricket and *antakshari* were replaced by Roblox, Free Fire, and Fortnite.

The back-seat "rappers" stared at their playlist. Older students did not engage in their daily gossip

but resorted to reels. It was as if all of them had forgotten to talk.

Among the few without phones, I was engulfed by the silence. I wondered if things would go back to how they were. This galvanised the reformative spirit in me.

To start with, I tried to initiate a conversation with a fellow traveller only to receive an eye-roll in response. But this did not deter me. I persuaded a few others to join a

conversation about what they were watching. Soon, the bus transformed into a hub for exchanging music playlists, reel trends, and gaming tips. I saw my peers engaging in the old hullabaloo, but in a new format. The bus had gone through a version update.

Students were listening to songs together, playing online games together, and making reels together. In the end, nothing can stop humans from socialising.



hesitate to climb up, though we suffered scratches and bruises in the process. Our gum hunt on about 10 trees would yield us sufficient glue for the year.

At times, if we could not find the lumps of gum, we would make two-inch incisions on the bark at the base of the tree. A gel-like substance would ooze out, and after a week, we would gather the lumps of gum. The dried gum was crushed and stored in bottles or coconut shells. When some water was added, it made for excellent glue.

There are fewer babul trees today. As our lifestyle is increasingly becoming artificial, the natural gum has no takers and synthetic ones reign.

Unbreakable bond
Procuring gum from babul trees to use as glue is a cherished memory

P. Sumadhur Rao
sumadhur99@gmail.com

The childhood bond that I developed with gum from the babul tree (gum arabic tree) is still intact and unbreakable.

Whenever I see a babul tree, I go down memory lane. In those days, we did not have the synthetic gum and adhesives that are widely available in the market today. The gum that we used was plant-based. It had to be

procured manually from trees and was not readily available in stores.

In my neighbourhood, neem, peepal, tamarind, banyan, and babul trees were quite common.

The gum of babul can be quite sticky, and it catered to all our needs, be it gluing together torn pages of textbooks or notebooks, pasting passport size photos on documents, or even putting up posters on walls.

During the summer holidays, my friends and I

would embark on a "gum hunt". When we spotted a babul tree, we would do a thorough scan, from the base of the trunk to the highest branch we could see.

At the very first sight of gum, we would vie with each other to get it first. When the lumps of gum were spotted on high branches, we did not



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

This is the year many major democracies are going to the polls. ('How far will AI go'; Mar. 31) Unlike in the past, there are all-round fears among governments, political parties and poll managers about the possible misuse of AI. In a digitised information ecosystem, political parties can confront their rivals with AI-generated deep fakes, with the potential to sway elections.

T.N. Venugopal

Indeed, it is difficult to fathom the impact of AI in the coming elections. The use of AI will really befuddle illiterate voters. Misinformation, which AI has the potential to generate, is a thorn in the flesh of Indian democracy.

S. Ramakrishnasayee

AI is a good technology in so far as it does not detract from the virtues of human life. Stephen Hawking once said that the primitive forms of AI we have, have proved very useful. "But the development of full AI could spell the end of the human race." AI is both a boon and a bane.

K.M.K. Murthy

AI is a good technology in so far as it does not detract from the virtues of human life. Stephen Hawking once said that the primitive forms of AI we have, have proved very useful. "But the development of full AI could spell the end of the human race." AI is both a boon and a bane.

N. Ramalakshmi

Living Marquez

The posthumous publication of Marquez's last novel *Until August* cannot be construed as an attempt at resurrecting the author, when his presence remains loud and clear in the literary firmament.

('Resurrecting Marquez'; Mar. 31)

The family publishing his work against his wishes cannot be seen as unethical either, since Marquez

would have destroyed the manuscript had he felt so.

A. Raveendranath

Politics and cinema

A number of filmmakers are busy making propaganda films, intended only for a select audience that backs the ruling establishment. ('Saffron on the big screen'; Mar. 31) A few of the auteurs also take liberties, not averse to twisting facts and portraying some communities in a bad light. These films often win awards, the makers are feted and State governments where the saffron party is in power are quick to grant tax exemption to the films.

C.V. Aravind



MORE ON THE WEB

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The 'pawsitive' philosopher

He was full of joy and mischief, but could also be a solemn listener.

H. Kalpana Rao

Get your name straight

The knotty problem of having the wrong spelling on official documents.

Vijay Shekhar

In the heat of the moment

Why we need to unlearn destructive practices that harm the Earth.

C.V. Sukumaran

Breaking the cycle

Menstrual cups are an eco-friendly and affordable alternative to sanitary napkins.

Gangotri Kashyap

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POWER TO THE FRAME

From the women who upset a 90-year-old dance tradition in Kerala to the people rendered homeless by the Yamuna in spate — the winners of the latest CPB Photo Awards tell stories of the times we live in

Team Magazine



Vishal Bhatnagar
Jaipur

Category: News and Current Affairs - Single Image
Cash prize: ₹50,000

Ahead of the Rajasthan Assembly Elections last November, Bhatnagar captured the Uttar Pradesh chief minister participating in a roadshow atop a bulldozer — in support of BJP candidate Rajavardhan Singh Rathore from the Jhotwara constituency. Yogi Adityanath may be credited as the 'creator' of the bulldozer as a tool for political messaging. "My main focus is editorial photography," says the self-taught independent photojournalist, who also frames nature and current affairs. "I have a keen interest in capturing moments and understanding the stories behind the photos."

The Chennai Photo Biennale Foundation's hunt for impactful images with meaningful stories is now in its fourth year. The latest edition of the CPB Photo Awards saw a significant increase in entries, with over 9,700 from 300 plus cities across India. The five-member jury — including names such as Daniella Zalcman, photojournalist and founder of Women Photograph, and Senthil Kumaran, photographer and Nat Geo explorer — had a challenge on their hands to choose only 10 winners.

The awards were established in 2019 to recognise and celebrate excellence in photography, but also to emphasise the under-recognised work of regional talent. "While the earlier editions had a greater focus on documentary photography and reportage, photographers from other genres were not able to participate," says Shuchi Kapoor, co-founder of CPB Foundation. "Inclusion is an important focus of ours and so the fourth edition introduced genres such as Daily Life, Culture and Street Photography, Portraiture. This has allowed photographers from different backgrounds to participate."

The winners were announced on Thursday at an awards ceremony hosted by The Leela Palace Chennai. We present some of their works here but for the complete list head to magazine.thehindu.com.



Surender Solanki
New Delhi

Category: Climate, Environment and Conservation - Single Image
Cash prize: ₹50,000

Last July, Solanki snapped this shot of Saini Nursery residents in Mayur Vihar bringing along their meagre possessions as they climb ladders onto an under construction overpass. Many villages and farmlands were submerged after the Yamuna flooded due to heavy rainfall, and nearly 35,000 people evacuated their homes. The freelance photographer, who won the National Media Fellowship Award in 2014 for his photo documentary 'River Yamuna and the Decay of its Culture', is doing a systematic study on the origins of the Yamuna and its changing face — with a sharp focus on how the development along its banks impact the relationship between the people and the river. His other ongoing project is on the illegal sand mining industry on the river's banks.

PHOTO STORY



The awards are supported by Sidhant Khanna, Emami Art, Nazar Foundation, Shared Ecologies, The Leela Palace (hospitality partner), Ashvita's Ashok Leyland, and The Hindu (media partner).



Scan the QR code to see all the winning entries.

Thulasi Kakkat

Kochi

Category: Danish Siddiqui Award for Socially Concerned Photography - Photo of the Year
Cash prize: ₹1 lakh

In this stark black-and-white capture, Kakkat — a photojournalist with *The Hindu* and winner of the Kerala Media Akademi Award in 2020 — focuses on Arya and Akshaya. Among the first batch of female students of Kathakali at Kerala Kalamandalam, an institution aimed at preserving the artistic heritage of the State, the two were shot in June practising *Kannusadhamkam* (eye exercises) during their 5 a.m. *sadhakam* (training) in Thrissur. Their entry in 2021 signalled the end of Kalamandalam's 90-year-old, male-only tradition.



Nitin Jain
Pune

Category: Nature and Wildlife - Single Image
Cash prize: ₹50,000

Jain, who loves to "shoot action in nature", got his Canon camera out just as a Brahminy kite attempted to snatch a frog from the beak of a Black-headed Ibis in Chilika Lake, Asia's largest brackish water lagoon in Odisha. "I captured the dramatic moment from a nearby boat," says the fine arts graduate, adding that the juvenile kite successfully stole the kill.



Akilan Thyagarajan
Chennai

Category: Portrait - Single Image
Cash prize: ₹50,000

The IT professional with a "keen interest in photographing people and pets" caught this heartwarming moment between a newly-wed Iruvar couple last February during the Masi Magam festival in Mahabalipuram. "I love to travel across India and meet [different] people," says Thyagarajan.



Joseph Rahul
Kochi

Category: Daily Life and Culture - Single Image
Cash prize: ₹50,000

Rahul's practice walks the fine line between documentary and street photography. Like this slice-of-life shot from last year, at the Ochira Parabrahma temple. The independent photographer caught devotees in an unguarded moment, resting during the temple festival. A pair of twins in their finery don sunnies as they relax against their sleeping parents. It's a short moment of silence before the chendas (drums) start again.



Anindito Mukherjee
Noida

Category: Photo Story of the Year
Cash prize: ₹1 lakh

Agriculture employs close to half of India's working population, yet it generates less than a fifth of the country's gross domestic product. The agricultural system that feeds India's 1.4 billion people still relies on ill-equipped smallholders. And ironically, farmers often lack enough food and access to financing sources to buffer against shocks. Most turn to credit to manage expenses during the sowing season, but their heavy reliance on rain for irrigation means yields are often volatile — a gamble that's only getting riskier as the planet warms. Farming can easily become a debt trap, and successive Indian governments have struggled to stem suicides among cultivators. Mukherjee's photo story captures vignettes from farmers' lives. "I specialise in capturing compelling narratives within the realms of health, politics, economics, and development," says the independent photojournalist and documentary photographer, who has worked with *The New York Times*, Getty Images, Bloomberg, and AFP. "Additionally, I undertake commissioned documentary projects that allow me to delve deep into diverse subjects."



1. A labourer burns peanuts in Badanpur, Jhansi
2. A worker checks his phone on a lean day, in Punjab's Mansa district
3. Nirmal Singh, who lost his father and son to suicide, in Sirsiwala, Punjab
4. Rekha Sain harvests peanut stalks in Badanpur