THE HINDU
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magazine

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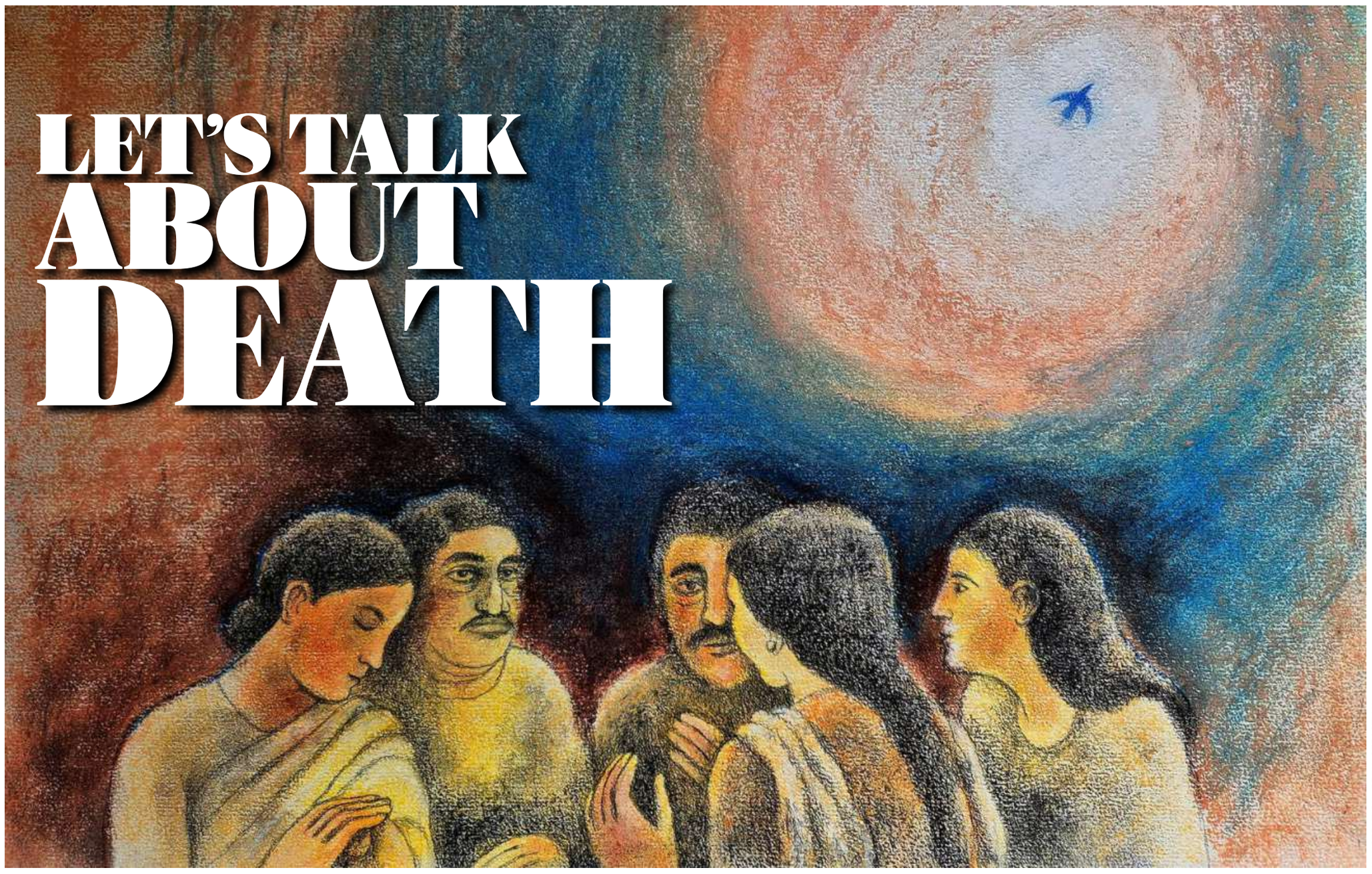

LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH

ILLUSTRATION: PRIYA SEBASTIAN

India is a death-avoidant society, but initiatives that foster a culture of understanding around the subject — from death cafes to death meditation — are helping change mindsets

Reshmi Chakraborty

As primary caregiver to ageing and ailing seniors at home, death is always on my mind these days. I see it inching its way forward, slowly and certainly, as limbs fail and memory fades. How would you like to go, how would you like to be remembered, I want to ask. But like most Indian families, our conversations around death are limited to the medical and pragmatic aspects of it – medication, wills, division of assets... Its emotional aspect remains unaddressed.

That is why Manisha Sheth's story strikes a chord with me. A Pune-based environmentalist who runs the social enterprise eCoexist, Sheth grew up watching her mother, Dr. Madhuri Sheth, care for sick and dying relatives at home. She watched as they passed on, removing the unfamiliarity around death. "I grew up in a family where death was a very common topic of conversation. My mother wanted to normalise death and familiarise us with it. It was not a taboo topic," she says.

When Dr. Madhuri was diagnosed with a tumour at 86 and chose not to get any invasive treatment for it, Sheth had had a lifetime of preparation. Her mother eventually passed away at home, in her arms. "Even on her last day, she didn't want a doctor. She had brief panic attacks, just once or twice. I could only stand and watch without getting carried away by my own emotions or fear, because all my life she had prepared me for it. In her final moments, I was telling her '*ma*, let it go now, please, don't hold on anymore', and she nodded and left. So, we walked through it together. This was all only possible because we were death literate," Sheth says. She calls her mother's passing the most powerful experience of her life.

Inspired by how talking about death with her mother enhanced her caregiving journey, Sheth now supports others to do the same through a close-knit online study group of 50 members, called Dying To Learn. Few of us grow up with the exposure to death that Sheth received. On the contrary, many in India consider death inauspicious to talk about, making us a death-avoidant society. This cultural reluctance to talk about death results in people avoiding important decisions such as end-of-life care, organ donation, and even funeral preferences. To add to that, information about options such as Advanced Care Planning, Advanced Directives (AD) and eco-friendly funerary practices is inaccessible and scattered. In the 2015 Quality of Death Index, which ranks end-of-life care globally, India was 67th out of 85 countries. In another ranking, the 2021 Outcomes of Quality of Death Index, India was at no. 59.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have brought death into focus, forcing many of us to face our mortality. But did it make us more death literate? Perhaps from a practical point of view of organising assets, but a lot still remains to be done. This is where the growing number of death literacy initiatives can help.

Memory as a tool

In 2020, researcher Krittika Sharma who works in behavioural design launched Maajhi, a death literacy platform, to spread awareness of the concept. "Death literacy is the development of knowledge, skills and language that individuals need to understand, access, and make informed choices about their end of life and to support their loved ones," she says. Maajhi means 'ferryman' in Hindi. "Many cultures believe that the ferryman takes the soul across after death," explains Sharma, whose father, Retd. Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, the first Indian citizen in space, suggested the name.

Maajhi offers people a chance to write their obituary and conducts death meditation sessions, among other resources. There is also a toolkit called 'Last Dialogue' to help the bereaved navigate their loss. The 21 prompts of Last Dialogue were inspired by conversations at the Bengaluru hospice, Karunashraya, and developed in assistance with individuals in design, psychology, medicine and academia. Sharma's favourite prompt is 'What was the one thing that your loved one never took credit for?' It gently nudges participants to remember a loved one, not with a heavy heart but with a fond memory.

When Benna Fathima, 25, a research scholar at Ashoka University, lost her friend Muhammed Fasil to muscular dystrophy in 2019, it came as a complete shock. Fathima was a high-schooler when she met and became friends with Fasil. Though she knew his days were numbered, she pushed that thought to the back of her mind as the two went about town, spending time at the beach and with other friends. When Fasil passed away, Fathima was studying in Delhi. "I could not take one last photo with my friend. That's when I first realised the suddenness of death." Despite their deep friendship, Fathima and Fasil had never spoken about his imminent death. She now wonders how Fasil would have liked to be remembered and wishes they had spoken about it.

Memories can help us process grief. And talking about grief and death, while helping us face our own mortality, can also provide the tools to support others in their loss.

It is with this intention that Kozhikode-based Institute of Palliative Medicine (IPM) started a two-day workshop in Bereavement Companionship, in collaboration with Death Literacy Institute, Australia, in 2021. The programme runs every month, with online and in-person sessions, and offers training modules around different stages of grief. Saif Mohammed, academic consultant at IPM, says that despite its famed palliative care system and strong community support for families of the dying, the state of Kerala is not death literate. "When someone dies, food is cooked for the family by friends and neighbours, and children are cared for. The wrong notion was that this was bereavement support."

Even support systems that take care of basic necessities can miss out on the emotions that the demise of a loved one can evoke in their near and dear ones. "People are not aware of how to address grief beyond practical help," says Mohammed, who also facilitates workshops and 'death cafes' – the latter is a gathering of strangers talking about death over tea and cake, a concept first introduced in London in 2011, inspired by Switzerland's Café Mortel movement.

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The Kerala model

Kerala is the only state to develop a globally acclaimed community-led palliative care model. The first initiative was set up in 1993 with the establishment of the Pain and Palliative Care Society, spearheaded by Dr. Suresh Kumar of the Institute of Palliative Medicine and Dr. M.R. Rajagopal of Pallium India. A Neighbourhood Network for Palliative Care was set up for community support, home care, and volunteering. It aims to enhance the lives of the terminally ill and their caregivers through pain management and the asocial and emotional welfare of patients. The palliative care system comprises local authorities, non-profits, community-based groups, and over 4,000 volunteers. A large network of doctors and nurses supervises over 5,000 patients — possibly the world's most extensive community-run palliative care network, say experts.

On the bookshelf

● ***Preparing for Death*** (Penguin Random House): "Death is certain; its time, place, manner completely uncertain," writes Arun Shourie in his book, adding that one way to prepare for the inevitable is to get to know it — to look upon death, as has been said, not as a destination that we will one day reach, but as a companion that is always walking arm-in-arm with us. The politician-economist picks five persons from history and discusses their last few months and days in detail to provide a perspective on death: Gautama Buddha, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ramana Maharshi, Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave.

● ***The Final Farewell*** (HarperCollins): Meenakshi Dewan writes about the difficult questions she confronted when performing her father's last rites, especially about being "particularly inquisitive about their relationship with the environment" in her book. Recalling the nightmare during COVID-19, a worker in a South Delhi crematorium tells her: "We fought the war against Corona just like the Army. It is our *dharam* to serve people."

● ***Fire on the Ganges*** (HarperCollins): In her deeply researched book, Radhika Iyengar documents the lives of the Doms of Banaras who have been performing a specialised funerary practice for generations, but have yet to see upliftment in their lives, and continue to be regarded as untouchables. She bears witness to the non-stop fires burning at Manikarnika Ghat, one of the most important Hindu cremation sites in the world. Her story is about the everyday existence of Doms, a Dalit sub-caste that remains "isolated and unseen".

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRUTH BE TOLD

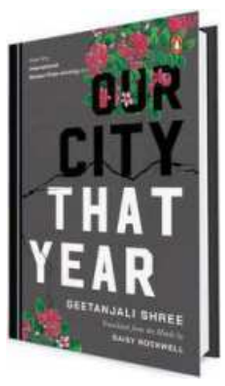
Meenakshi Shivram

International Booker-winning duo Geetanjali Shree and Daisy Rockwell strike gold again with their new book *Our City That Year*. The translation is of an outstanding quality. Yet another writer-translator team that understands each other so well is good news for literature.

The novel is about three close friends. Sharad and Hanif are academics. Shruti, a writer, is married to Hanif. There is a 'neutered mosque-temple' and a bridge that divides this side from that side. There are 'these' people on this side of the bridge and 'those' people on the other, and there is the third category – the 'us' – neither this nor that, both this and that. There is Sharad's father, Daddu, who joins this threesome to form the 'liberal us' in the story.

Such stories need to be told – again and again. It is that same question: how can individual friendships between Hindus and Muslims withstand the pressures of a society divided deeply by community belief systems? It is *Topi Shukla* in a new avatar, on a broader canvas.

If the first hundred pages look repetitive – be patient. The novel, following postmodernist narrative techniques, is patterned like a slowly gathering sandstorm. The storm begins 'there'. It moves slowly in small circles. It takes its time to come towards you – so you think you are safe, you have hope. The circle does not grow larger; it only keeps moving, menacingly slow, till you do not even realise that you are at the epicentre of that storm and that it has engulfed you. As you see the main characters intellectualise, rationalise, philosophise and resist the brewing of the storm, you see also their ineffective intellectualism being reduced to mere 'sentimental idealism'.



Our City That Year
Geetanjali Shree, trs Daisy Rockwell
Penguin Hamish Hamilton
₹699

Fear and terror

The other postmodernist feature is that there is no linear storytelling. So, do not look for a plot where there is a climax and then a denouement. A disjointed narrative style indicates that the 'truth' – if there be one – cannot be capsuled into a neat symmetry of universal acceptance. This fragmentary style works well for this novel. You will go back to the first few pages after you have finished reading the novel. As you read on and on about Hindus and Muslims and mosques and temples and terrorists, threats, the media, the police and endless riots and their aftermath – you start to feel the palpable claustrophobia that devours the characters in their gated community, their university and their city.

Although the novel does not explicitly mention the demolition of the Babri Masjid (one wonders why – considering that Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray has been pointedly mentioned), it does appear to read like a response to that event in particular but is not limited to the one single "neutered masjid-temple" conundrum that consumes our contemporary cultural enquiries. Twenty-six years after it was first published in Hindi, this story is not just about 'our city'; it is 'every city'. It is not just 'that year'; it is 'now'.

In an otherwise well-crafted text, there is something missing. While the political message is clear, the human angle is missing. This novel questions labels such as intellectual, nationalism, fanaticism, liberalism, history, victimhood, memory, secularism and fiction. But does not say a word about Hanif's parents or Shruti's family. Daddu does not bring in hope, either. As someone who hankers after an idealist vision of the past promoted by a Nazrul Islam, Nazir Akbarabadi, Sadarang (Naimat Khan) and Amir Khusro, his view on India's Partition is missing. Postmodernist readers will look for what is said and for what is left unsaid. Multivocality is missing. For the over 25 times that 'Jai Jagadambe' has been raised as a war cry in the novel, an equivalent response from 'the other side' is stridently missing.

In its honest attempt to be fair to all sides, the novel loses balance and leans. If you look at all sides of a problem, you can never have anything to fight for. This novel, valuable as it is for our times, loses an opportunity to reach the heights of that masterpiece of a similar theme – *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

The reviewer is a Sahitya Akademi translation award winner.

Translator Daisy Rockwell and (right) author Geetanjali Shree. (GETTY IMAGES)

2024 BOOKER PRIZE-LONGLISTED

Of greatest loves and regrets

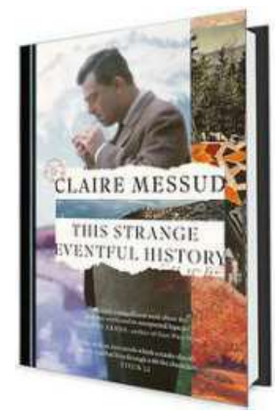
Inspired by her own family history, Claire Messud's novel portrays both the traumas and private joys of her characters

Saurabh Sharma

The intergenerational project of American novelist and creative writing professor Claire Messud is complete with her latest novel *This Strange Eventful History*, longlisted for both the Booker and Giller Prize 2024. Spanning continents and decades – it begins in Salonica (now Thessaloniki, in Greece), 1940, and ends in Connecticut, 2010 – the book tells a story of war, displacement, and colonisation through the experiences of the Cassars, who are modelled on the author's family members. The intricate details Messud supplies in this mesmerising work of fiction are "based in part on her aunt's diaries and an unpublished 1,500-page memoir handwritten by her grandfather".

The patriarch, a *pied-noir* (people of French descent born in colonial Algeria) – Gaston Cassar, a naval attaché in Salonica (now Thessaloniki) – is forced to bid farewell to his family, which includes his wife Lucienne, son François, and daughter Denise. He doesn't know that they've safely reached Algiers and are staying at his brother Charles' home. As he gets overwhelmed by larger political forces – it's World War II; France has fallen – and a sense of duty towards his motherland, he reminiscences about the most personal moments he shared with his wife.

"Lucienne was his anchor, but now he had to rely on himself." This grief, as a result of separation, a forced displacement, is one of the central themes of the book. Sample its inevitability from a Jewish merchant Hernandez's reflection in the novel: "But our people have always understood uncertainty, and have lived with it. We expect it. We live always as though we might have to leave at a moment's notice."



This Strange Eventful History
Claire Messud
Fleet
₹899

A Shakespearean touch

Several such occasions present themselves in the book, and the characters are forced to make decisions. During these deliberations, readers get an insight into moral dilemmas. For instance, as a child, François wonders whether it would be "dishonest, like a lie, to draw something that wasn't there" while writing to his father. And as an adult, he is seen contemplating whether he should stay by the side of his dying father-in-law at his wife's home. Not to be dismissed is the sense of voyeurism one experiences reading this story because we know this family saga has a kernel of truth in it. However, it doesn't read like a memoir despite the painful recollections, minor details, desires, joys, and afflictions.

There are obvious influences of the classics in the sense that Messud's writing defamiliarises the familiar and vice versa, rendering her novel with a quality that allows readers to live "through with the characters" as the masterful Chinese writer Yiyun Li notes. The biggest, however, appears to be Shakespeare. For example, the title of the book is borrowed from the monologue – 'All the World's a Stage', one of the most famous speeches in theatre – by Jaques in *As You Like It*.

The eventfulness or eventless-ness of the stories in this novel may be up for deliberation but not the strangeness it employs in portraying familial relationships, signalling the author's commitment towards storytelling. "A story is not a line; it is a richer thing, one that circles and eddies, rises and falls, repeats upon itself," she writes in the Prologue. However, any story is always "partial", as Messud notes, and her novel is a grand example of this belief.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and freelance journalist. Instagram/X: @writerly_life

GETTY IMAGES

Back to Jimbocho's books and coffee

Vivid descriptions bring alive the charming Tokyo neighbourhood in Yagisawa's sequel

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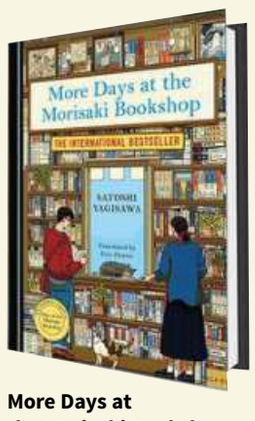
Jimbocho is full of charm and excitement. There's no other place like it in the world," says young Takako in Satoshi Yagisawa's *More Days at the Morisaki Bookshop*, translated from the Japanese by Eric Ozawa. The tiny neighbourhood in Tokyo is known for its bookstores and cosy cafes, and is popular with tourists and residents alike.

If the first book, *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop*, took us along on Takako's journey, discovering her love for reading as she builds a relationship with her uncle who runs the family's beloved Morisaki bookshop, the much-hyped sequel delves deeper into familial roots and ties, while navigating grief.

Three years have passed since Takako worked at the bookshop and she is now a designer in the city. But, she keeps coming back to Jimbocho – to visit the bookshop, to spend time with her uncle and aunt, grab a cup of coffee at her favourite cafe, Saveur, and to catch up with her boyfriend, Wada.

She also bonds with Sabu, a frequent customer, forms a stronger friendship with Tomo, who used to work at Saveur, and even helps Takano, another employee, in his quest for love. Takako is now more receptive to all that Jimbocho has to offer, including the bookshop's many visitors and her uncle's favourite cushion named Roy.



More Days at the Morisaki Bookshop
Satoshi Yagisawa, trs Eric Ozawa
HarperCollins
₹399

Joy of reading

The strength of a book such as this lies in its descriptiveness, its ability to transport the reader to the world between its pages. Yagisawa's words bring alive large stacks of second-hand books, the sunlight streaming into the cramped yet charming bookshop, the perfume of the olive blossoms on Sakura Street.

They also capture the unbridled joy of finding and reading the perfect book. Everyone in this world eats, breathes and sleeps books; must-reads are constantly traded between characters, and we see how important a place the bookshop occupies in their lives. And when the Morisaki family grapples with the passing away of a family member, they too turn to books and the bookshop eventually, to honour their beloved's memory.

Stepping into the world of the Morisaki bookshop yet again feels like comfort with a dose of perspective.

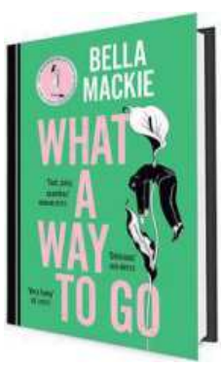
JCB Prize longlist announced

The JCB Prize longlist for 2024 is out, and the 10 novels include five translations, two each from Bengali and Marathi, and one from Malayalam. Mapping east, west, north and south, the longlist covers all corners of India, from the foothills of the Western Ghats (*Chronicle of an Hour and a Half* by Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari/ Westland Books), to the hills of Meghalaya (*The Distaste of the Earth* by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih/ Penguin); from a village in Maharashtra (*Hurda* by Atharva Pandit/ Bloomsbury) to another in West Bengal (*Talashnama* by Ismail Darbesh, translated by V. Ramaswamy/ HarperCollins), reflecting a diverse range of themes and emotions. The other titles on the longlist are Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Lorenzo Searches for the Meaning of Life* (Speaking Tiger), Radhika Oberoi's *Of Mothers and Other Perishables* (Simon&Schuster), Sandhya Ramesh's *Maria, Just Maria* (HarperCollins), translated by Jayasree Kalathil, Sharankumar Limbale's *Sanatan* (Penguin), a story of the Mahars, translated by Paromita Sengupta, Avadhoot Dongare's *Leaf, Water and Flow* (Ratna Books), translated by Nadeem Khan, and Sakyajit Bhattacharya's *The One Legged* (The Antonym Collections), translated by Rituparna Mukherjee. The shortlist will be announced on October 23 and the winner on November 23. The jury is led by writer and translator Jerry Pinto.

BROWSER

Manohar Kahani
Raghu Srinivasan
Hachette India
₹399
The book follows the Mehtas' disfunctional lives at their quaint little homestay by the sea that Bobby Chander, a billionaire NRI, wants to buy at any cost. When Kalyani Mehta reaches out to her sister Maya for help, more nefarious characters enter the plot.

What A Way To Go
Bella Mackie
HarperCollins U.K.
₹499
In this murderously twisty novel, an inheritance-obsessed family comes under the scanner after the murder of its patriarch, the wealthy Anthony Wistern, who had a French chateau, a Cotswold manor and several mistresses. Is the family guilty? Or was it an outsider job?



M. Karunanidhi (left) with C.N. Annadurai.
(THE HINDU ARCHIVES)

IN THE DRAVIDIAN AGE

Taking stock of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, in its 75th year, warts and all

B Kolappan
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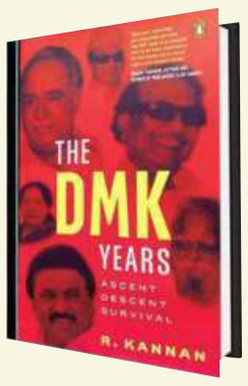
The DMK Years could not have come at a better time as September 17, 2024, marks the 75th anniversary of the launch of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The year is important to the DMK for another reason too – the party is observing the centenary celebrations of its leader M. Karunanidhi, known as Kalaignar (1924-2024).

The author, R. Kannan, had already penned biographies of Dravidian icons C.N. Annadurai, the founder of the DMK, and M.G. Ramachandran, founder of the AIADMK, the split away group from the DMK, which continues to pose a challenge. In writing this book, Kannan has made up for the absence of a detailed volume in English about the DMK and how it drew sustenance from the leadership of Karunanidhi. The book also serves as a ready reference to anyone interested in Tamil Nadu politics.

"The attempt here is to tell the story of the last seventy-five years of Tamil Nadu with an emphasis on the DMK. In the process, the colossuses are discussed, and their major moves and decisions are interpreted," Kannan writes. **In the beginning, the DMK was known as the Dravidian Progressive Federation (DPF). Only in 1953, *The Hindu* coined the acronym DMK, which stuck.**

Though the book begins with Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's eulogy for his father and leader Karunanidhi, Kannan does not seem to suffer from any ambivalence towards his subject. He minces no words while pointing out the failures of the DMK and Karunanidhi, even as he highlights the strength and achievements of the party and its leader. He discusses threadbare the failures of the DMK, its political expediency rather than principles in choosing allies, nepotism in the party organisation and government in the wake of the emergence of Udhayanidhi Stalin, and how Senthil Balaji's quitting the AIADMK to join the DMK and being made a minister "epitomises the fall in public life."



The DMK Years
R. Kannan
Viking
₹1,299

Welfare politics

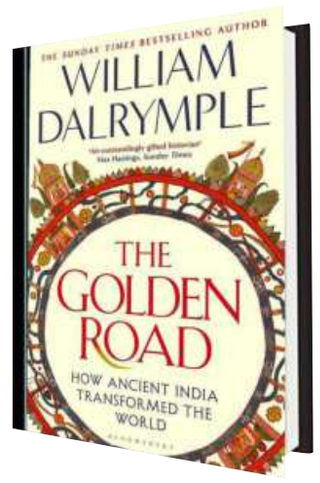
The DMK regime under Karunanidhi laid the foundation for social revolution, pursuing a left-of-centre policy. It nationalised bus services, expanded the public distribution system, increased food subsidies and promoted industries, and its re-election with a brute majority in 1971 helped Karunanidhi emerge out of Anna's shadow. His followers compared him to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh.

"However, his worst nightmare also began in October 1972, when ally-turned-rival MGR broke away, levelling charges of nepotism and corruption that dogged his political career until his death. Similarly, he lived through the charge of introducing a whole new generation to alcohol when he lifted prohibition in 1972, citing financial reasons," says Kannan.

Kannan has dealt in detail with the Sri Lankan Tamil issue which always remained a thorn in the DMK's flesh. Even though the DMK was in power and Karunanidhi was Chief Minister, he could not do much and remained a mute spectator during the last phase of the civil war in Sri Lanka, which claimed the lives of thousands of Tamils. "We will never know if his resignation as Chief Minister over the issue would have brought a ceasefire and saved the deaths of thousands. But Karunanidhi would have lived up to his self-declared title as 'Thamizhinath Thalaivar'. He threw away a historic opportunity," writes Kannan. This happened despite the fact the DMK was a powerful partner of the Congress-led UPA government at the Centre.

The DMK led by Stalin now is the most vociferous opponent of the BJP and its communal ideology. But one should not forget the fact that the DMK gave a chance to the NDA to complete a term at the Centre between 1999 and 2004. When Jayalalithaa withdrew her party's support to A.B. Vajpayee's government, Murasoli Maran, the conscience keeper of Karunanidhi, shed his party's inhibitions towards the BJP and declared that no party is untouchable. As Kannan has written, Karunanidhi famously justified the stand, saying, "Jayalalithaa's corruption is more dangerous than communalism." He has been proved wrong.

The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World
William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury
₹999



THE LONG REACH OF INDIA

In his new book, William Dalrymple says ancient India had a much larger footprint in the world, exploring its philosophical, religious and scientific influence on Eurasia

Mukund Padmanabhan

Having written four successful books about the ascent of the East India Company on the back of a weakening Mughal Empire, William Dalrymple turns his attention to ancient and early medieval India to produce a powerful and sweeping account of a land that was once an economic powerhouse, a civilisational cradle and an exporter of merchandise and ideas – philosophical, religious and scientific. To read *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World* is like opening a magic box – packed with strange and absorbing characters, quirky and almost-forgotten narratives, startling and uncommon facts. Once again, Dalrymple demonstrates that rare ability to use primary historical sources to make places and people come persuasively alive and show that it is possible to write about the past in a way that is at once consequential and extremely engaging. Excerpts from his first interview to an Indian publication:

Question: *Authors write about subjects that interest them. But were you also driven, in a way, by the urge to spread your wings, to be known as more than a historian of the East India Company period?*
Answer: No, not at all. When I was growing up, I was very much focused on prehistory. My first ever trip to London was to go to the Tutankhamen exhibition. When I first came to India in 1984, I was going around sites like Sanchi and Ajanta. So my teenage self would be very surprised that I ended up focussing most of my professional life on the 18th century, which is way later than anything I was interested in as a kid.

This came back to me very strongly just after I had begun writing *The Anarchy*. I spent a weekend exploring Ajanta. There in caves 9 and 10 were these extraordinary pictures, which I had never seen before. The ASI had cleaned up these two caves which have the earliest Buddhist paintings in existence. Most of Ajanta is about 650 CE. These are 150 BCE. What happened was the Nizam of Hyderabad, who then controlled Ajanta, had brought in Italian conservators who cleaned them but then put on shellac varnish, which almost immediately attracted batshit. And within ten years, the paintings had become completely obscured and were not included in any of the books.

The ASI, about 2014-15, cleaned these up without any fanfare. So I took six months off from *The Anarchy* to write a series of articles about them. Not only were they the oldest Buddhist paintings in the world, but the oldest art since Bhimbetka. They are also the first portrait pictures of Indians. These early pictures are the seed from which wider Buddhist art rose as far away as Japan and eastern China.

Q: *But surely you must have realised you were doing more than repositioning India as a cultural and civilisational hub; that you were also repositioning yourself as a historian.*
A: It was not a conscious decision. I was just pursuing stuff that interested me. My books take about five years. You have to be madly in love with the subject. And this was a subject that not only provided wonderful reading all the way through COVID, but also spectacular trips in Southeast Asia as well as all the early Buddhist sites in India.

Q: *Some of the characters in 'The Golden Road' are not generally well known in India. Was there a sense that you were writing a history that many Indians have forgotten?*
A: It isn't only that the characters are not well known. Many Indians don't realise that Angkor Wat was a Vishnu temple. You find Indian tourists astonished to find Kurukshetra and the battle of Lanka depicted on the walls. There's a great deal of very fine Indian scholarship on this. But beyond academic history departments, there's very little in this book that will be familiar to many Indian readers beyond basic starting points like the Buddha and Ashoka.

Hardly anyone has heard of Wu Zetian in India. The same is true of the Barmakids [Buddhist priestly family of Iranian origin] taking Indian Gupta mathematics to Baghdad. I don't think people know that Al-Khwarzimi wrote a book on Hindu mathematics that gets into the hands of Fibonacci.

Q: *Is it fair to say that your book is made up of two somewhat separate but interconnected stories? There is the dissemination of Indian philosophical and religious ideas to China and Southeast Asia, and mathematics to West Asia. Then there is this other story, a trading relationship with Rome. Tell us how the two are interconnected.*
A: I think it's very much one story. This book is about how India had a much larger footprint in the world than even Indians realise. Yes, Indians are aware that there is this world of Indian science and maths that has not received due recognition. Westerners are simply unaware of this; they think Arabic numbers came from Arabia, full stop.

This is a story of how Indian trade led Indian ideas to spread around the world.

There are two separate concepts in the book. One is the Golden Road (which is the maritime trade network based on the monsoon) and the other is the Indosphere (which is the wider world of Indian ideas and art).

I don't think of them as two distinct bits of the book at all. The whole idea is that this was integrated. Ideas which have often been separated from each other such as the spread of Buddhism and the spread of Sanskrit and the spread of Indian science are all one process. They are part of one extraordinary diffusion of Indian culture which has meant that India is the base of so much of Asian but also world civilisation.

Q: *What next?*
A: I've got a whole series of ideas. One that I would love to do is a fifth East India Company book around the opium wars. I have discovered a stash of family letters about this. My great grandfather, not on my Dalrymple side, but my maternal one, was an opium trader. I've got a trunk of his letters dealing in China, which will be a very strong new element of the book. And it's a shocking story – the extent to which opium trade enriched not only the East India Company, but many Indians.

I also want to do a family history, particularly of my Franco-Bengali great grandmother Sophia who became a great muse to the pre-Raphaelites. She was the aunt of Virginia Woolf and was part of this whole world of early pre-Raphaelites.

The thing we haven't talked about, the big change in my life, is the podcast. As you know, for a writer to sell 100,000 copies of the book is a major achievement. But the reach of the podcasts that people listen to – when walking the dog, jogging or stuck in traffic jams – is massive. It creates a type of history that didn't exist before.

It's a whole new world, and it shows up this huge appetite for history, which people can access in a much more accessible way.

The interviewer teaches philosophy at Krea University and is the author of 'The Great Flap of 1942'.

Historic trail
(Clockwise from right) William Dalrymple; a mural in Ajanta; Buddhist monks at Angkor Wat, Cambodia; and a sketch of Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang in India.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, AP, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

CONTINUED FROM
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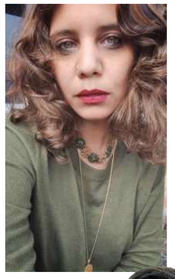
LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH

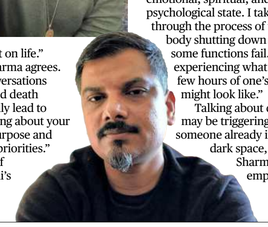
Ritual books and death cafes

Every time Minakshi Dewan does a talk around her meticulously researched book *The Final Farewell* (2023), she has a packed house. The book explores rites and rituals associated with death across India, and it has generated curiosity across age groups, she says. "I get questions around theological concepts, body donation, why Hindus prefer cremation, why Parsis are not open about cremation and burial, and so on. This is because avenues to talk about death are limited."

Dewan became interested in the subject after she performed her father's last rites. She recalls feeling a little lost because there was no accessible information or conversation. "I wasn't even aware of the alternative, environment-friendly funeral options back then. Since we don't know, we can't make informed choices. We need to start creating that awareness and initiate those discussions," says the writer-researcher, a Ph.D in Social Medicine and Community Health.

Ravi Nandan Singh, author of *Dead in Banaras* (2022) and professor at Delhi's Shiv Nadar University, says that much of his research has been around funerary practices in Europe, where people are more open about discussing death. "They decide whether to be buried or cremated and even choose the font of inscriptions on their tombstones!" He attributes it to the fact that in the western world, there are agencies that enable such conversations – societies hold regular meetings and museum spaces conduct discussions on death. "In India, there is now a small space for conversations around death but often that does not get connected to a larger one within the community," says Singh, who organised an International Death and Grief Conference at his university in January this year.





(Clockwise from left) Krittika Sharma of Maajhi; Manisha Sheth with her mother, Dr. Madhuri; Benna Fathima; a self-obituary themed art installation at Maajhi; and author Ravi Nandan Singh.

Forums where one can share and discuss mortality, death and dying are emerging in India, nonetheless. Death cafes are organised in some states, with regular sessions being held in Kerala. "These are two-hour-long gatherings with no more than 20 people," says Mohammed. With a facilitator to guide the conversation, everyone in the group is encouraged to share their thoughts and worries. Mohammed says the death cafes he has hosted have seen a mix of young and older participants. "They reflect on personal topics such as their legacy, how they wish to die, and the importance of discussing these matters with family members. There may be hesitation at first, but eventually participants realise that discussing death is not a bad thing and go home and talk about it. It is a chance to reflect on life."

Sharma agrees. "Conversations around death actually lead to thinking about your life purpose and your priorities." One of Maajhi's popular offerings is the death meditation, which Sharma describes as an extension of the *savasana* (corpse pose) in yoga. "I walk the person through what it would feel like to die from a physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and psychological state. I take them through the process of the body shutting down as some functions fail. It's experiencing what the last few hours of one's life might look like."

Talking about death may be triggering for someone already in a dark space, so Sharma emphasises mental health awareness and support in facilitating a safe and meaningful death meditation experience. She sends clients a questionnaire co-developed with a psychologist to establish boundaries and ensure that participants are adequately supported after the session if needed.

Common queries heard at Minakshi Dewan's book talks

- Can a Hindu opt for burial, or a Muslim for cremation?
- How does one price various funeral services?
- What are sky burials and why do some communities such as the Parsis or Tibetans opt for them?
- What happens to the soul if some rituals are not followed? Do these practices stem from superstition?
- What is body repatriation?

Starting early

Mumbai chef Gaurika (name changed on request) went to a death cafe as a student in London because she was curious. "I had fears it would be morbid but it was like a bobby club meeting in a cafe, except that some people came with objects their late loved ones had left behind, and some came because they were curious like me." Gaurika says she came away from it with a new appreciation for life.

Getting comfortable with the concept of death may thus be an essential life lesson for young people. In nuclear families of today, children rarely see death, making it both alien and fearsome. In his book, *Walk With The Weary: Life-Changing Lessons in Healthcare* (2022), M.R. Rajagopal, a palliative care pioneer and Padma Shri awardee, writes how "modern families shield children from inconveniences such as death". He talks about witnessing an uncle's death as a child and being involved in the mourning process that taught him a valuable lesson – accepting death as a natural part of life.

This is the idea behind IPM's Students in Palliative Care Programme that has volunteers from colleges across Kerala. They organise a cultural festival, help facilitate death cafes and encourage conversations around death and dying. Such initiatives, says Mohammed, help in fostering a culture of understanding around death and dying, and every age group needs to have these conversations. He recalls a death cafe in Amritsar, attended by senior professors from a medical college. "Some of them started crying and said it was the first time they were having such a discussion. These are people who teach daily about diseases and cures, but they were unaware of the need to talk about death."

Sheth, who is now a caregiver to her 90-year-old father after her mother's demise, says she continues talking to him about dying as she did with her mother. She sends me short videos of his views on death and living a rich, fulfilling life, even as they joke about "going *upar*". She believes that discussing death openly can demystify it and help others cope with their fears too. "Healing can come from very unexpected sources if you stay open."

The writer is a freelance journalist and the co-author of Rethink Ageing *(2022).*

YOUNG HUNTERS TURN PROTECTORS

Catapults to Cameras is not just a wildlife documentary. It's also an experiment to encourage youngsters in rural Bengal to move away from ritual hunting

Shailaja Tripathi

It's a sultry afternoon. Five children are idling on a bridge amidst lush green fields in an obscure village in Jhargram district, West Bengal. They are playing with a catapult, trying to improve their aim to strike their target – a bird.

This scene comes early on in Ashwika Kapur's film *Catapults to Cameras*. Cut to the end: one of the children, Ajay, hands his catapult to Ashwika, who is heading back home to Kolkata after an adventurous week with the young boys. Ajay now holds a camera in his hand.

Catapults to Cameras is a poignant story of transformation. The five boys – Raja Khisku, Ajay Mandi, Surajit Tudu, Tarash Mandi and Lalu Soren – go from being future hunters to conservators. Produced by RoundGlass Sustain, it is directed by Ashwika Kapur. The short film was shortlisted in the 'Impact Campaign' category in the prestigious Jackson Wild Media Awards 2024.

Ending the killing spree

It's difficult to fathom that in our country, where hunting is illegal, there are ritual hunting festivals. In several villages in southern West Bengal, hundreds of men and young boys participate in an annual bloodbath. Carrying traditional weapons such as axes, spears, catapults and bows and arrows, they arrive in trucks, cars and on motorcycles, and kill everything that moves – birds, wild cats, boars, snakes, reptiles and even tigers, if they can find them.

Kapur was disturbed when she learned of them while volunteering with HEAL (Human & Environment Alliance League), an NGO that works in the field of wildlife conservation. She and a few members of HEAL discreetly recorded one of the festivals, and some of the footage has found its way into the film. It's gory, to say the least.

But that's not what Kapur wanted to focus on. "It was never a film; it was an experiment," says Samreen Farooqui, executive producer. "Working with five children for a week and making it into a film was not fair. We had to stay on. *Catapults to Cameras* had to have an impact." The boys had already accompanied their fathers on hunts, and one day, would have participated in the festivals. Kapur and RoundGlass Sustain believed that by impacting the children's conscience, they could break the chain.

Teaching empathy (Clockwise from far left) A still from *Catapults to Cameras*; Ashwika Kapur with the boys during a workshop; and a photo of butterflies clicked by Raja. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Merely a sport

HEAL has been documenting, monitoring and investigating ritual hunting in West Bengal's southern region. According to Meghna Banerjee, lawyer, environmental activist and CEO of HEAL, human-animal conflict in the area is enormous. It will require many such interventions to change the mindset. While the hunts are mistakenly assumed to be rooted in traditional tribal culture, Banerjee states that "there is no cultural significance. If you ask them why they kill, they don't have an answer". Moreover, some who participate do not belong to any of the tribes. "These men come in cars from different areas. It happens on 50 separate dates throughout the year, so you can imagine the scale. They are drunk and kill everything, including jackals and wolves. So it's not just for meat," she adds.

Influencing change

Early last year, accompanied by Kapur and HEAL's co-founder Suvrajyoti Chatterjee, the young boys were taken on field trips where they took photos of animals, birds and reptiles. The pictures were then exhibited in the village. "Some of the photographs were amazing. Our approach was that under no circumstances were we going to preach. We were not there to chastise them," says Kapur, who won the Wildscreen Panda Award in 2014 for her documentary, *Sirocco: How a Dud Became a Stud*, on a kakapo, a critically endangered parrot native to New Zealand.

During the week, the children encountered a snake rescue mission and even witnessed a dangerous face-off between elephants and villagers. "I didn't realise the empathy the project evoked in them until Ajay came to me and handed over his catapult. When we exhibited the pictures, the entire community felt a sense of pride."

Kapur feels that as "more children go through these workshops, they will become something like local influencers. They will start redefining what is cool, because the scale of this hunt is being driven by the youth". For now, the five boys have turned mentors for another batch of children – becoming a classic example of the butterfly effect.

The Bengaluru-based journalist writes on art, culture, health and social welfare.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

SRI LANKA'S NEW LITERARY VOICES

The island nation's young crop of writers is winning international awards and starting conversations on their post-war society and its unique challenges

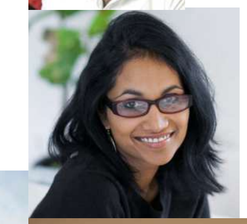
Adilah Ismail

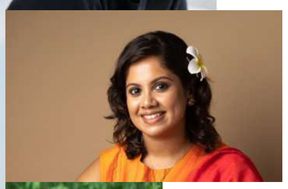
The past years have seen numerous Sri Lankan writers and those of Sri Lankan origin make their mark on the literary awards circuit. Recently, V.V. Ganeshananthan won the 2024 Carol Shields Prize for Fiction and 2024 Women's Prize for Fiction for her novel *Brotherless Night*, which took 18 years to write. Australian-Tamil author of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage, Shankari Chandran, won the 2023 Miles Franklin Literary Award for her third novel, *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens*, which is set in contemporary Australia and 1980s Sri Lanka; her first book *Song of the Sun God* is being adapted for television, starring Bridgerton's Charithra Chandran.

Shehan Karunatilaka's *Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* won the 2022 Booker Prize while his debut novel *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the 2012 Commonwealth Book Prize. Vajra Chandrasekera's debut novel *The Saint of Bright Doors* was recently awarded the Nebula award for best novel, Locus first novel award and 2024 Crawford award, and was shortlisted for a Hugo award. In 2021, Sri Lankan Tamil author Anuk Arudpragasam was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for his second novel *A Passage North*; previously, his first novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016) won the DSC Prize for South Asian fiction.

Sri Lankans – both resident in the island and in the diaspora – have been telling their stories for decades, but when literature is shaped by the marketplace and writing is ascribed value by literary gatekeepers of the western world, perhaps the world hasn't been ready to hear these stories.

"The idea that Sri Lankan creative writing in English has come into the spotlight only recently is possible only when we focus on the international awards Sri Lankan writers have been winning of late. But writers living in Sri Lanka, as well as diasporic authors have been writing for a long time," says Neloufer de Mel, Senior Professor of English (Chair) at the University of Colombo. "What has happened now is that a generation of Sri Lankan writers, who are between 30 and 50 years of age, are writing on the Sri Lankan war, its society and its politics in new ways and voices. They also belong to a more global generation with international links and so, have been successful in getting their work internationally published and in circulation. It is this generational shift that I think is important to mark, and what is exciting is their new voices, figurative imaginations, use of language, and the stories they tell."





Island stories (Clockwise from left) People walk past the Galle Lighthouse in Sri Lanka; and authors Yudhanjaya Wijeratne; Anuk Arudpragasam; Shehan Karunatilaka; Shankari Chandran; Thushanthi Ponweera; and V.V. Ganeshananthan. (GETTY IMAGES)

Writing as a team sport

In the 90s and early 2000s, writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunesekera, Shyam Selvadurai, Carl Muller and Michelle de Kretser were also successful in publishing internationally and reaching wider audiences. Currently, Yudhanjaya Wijeratne, Amanda Jayatissa, Nizrana Farook, Thushanthi Ponweera and Shyala Smith are among the new crop of writers making their mark in science fiction, thriller, and children's writing, internationally. Their books display inventiveness in form and explore a variety of themes drawing from Buddhist mythology, Sri Lanka's socio-political history, its civil war and more.

"I think it is always nice when writing – which can be very solitary – becomes more of a team sport where you are able to cheer for other people who are interested in the themes, ideas, people and communities that you are, and who have their own approaches and language and energy that they're bringing. It just makes the conversation so much more interesting and exciting and less lonely. I think it's the beginning of great things, hopefully, to come for writing connected to Sri Lanka and I hope that it will expand so that those who are working in Sinhala and Tamil also get more of the spotlight because I know remarkable work has been taking place in these languages for a really long time," says novelist Ganeshananthan, who is based in the U.S.

While writing and publishing in English remains a niche market in Sri Lanka, the country has a long literary tradition of Sinhala and Tamil writing. Although there has been little overlap in recent years, there are ongoing efforts to encourage translations and cross-pollination between the three languages. "Translations are very important because this is the way you get to read each other's work, particularly in monolingual societies as in Sri Lanka. There are very few people who work in literary translation here and this is a great setback. The Gratiaen Trust has offered the H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize for translation of creative writing from Sinhala and Tamil into English since 2003 to encourage such translations," says de Mel, former chair of the Gratiaen Trust. "University departments of English and Sinhala have also added translation, either as a course or module, into their curricula in Sri Lanka. These are good initiatives, but we need a concerted effort to encourage and train more literary translators because this is a special field in its own right."

Long road to publishing

While there is a welcome spotlight on stories about Sri Lanka, the road to publication remains long. In interviews, author Karunatilaka has spoken of the struggle to get *Seven Moons* published. It was seen as a 'difficult' book by many – the only publisher willing to take it on was an independent firm, Sort Of Books, based in the U.K.

In 2022, Sri Lanka faced its worst economic crisis since independence, and is currently rebuilding from the aftershock. In a bid to increase government revenue, the state has imposed taxes on previously exempt industries such as publishing. For writers based in Sri Lanka, this is yet another challenge to overcome. "The price of books [fiction] is exorbitant, so writers find it hard to access contemporary fiction. Writers need to read and when a country levies high taxes on books, it dampens critical thinking and creativity," says Ramya Jirasinghe, who recently won the 2023 Gratiaen prize for her unpublished novel, *Father Cabraal's Recipe for Love Cake*.

But for many Sri Lankan writers, the recent spotlight on Sri Lankan stories is encouraging. "If you accept how small this country is, how small our reading/writing population in English is, and how hard it is for local writers to access resources, what is happening now is groundbreaking. Shehan and Ashok [Ferrey] have broken into global markets becoming trailblazers for others and have shown that it can be done from Sri Lanka," says Jirasinghe. "Sri Lanka is very unique even within South Asia, which means that our stories really must leave these shores and encounter readers from around the world."

The writer is based in Colombo

Rich history (Clockwise from left) The Good Maharaja Square in Warsaw; Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Kolhapur Memorial last month; and the Maharaja of Nawanagar, Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji Jadeja. (WIKI COMMONS & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

How a citizen-led initiative resulted in the naming of a Warsaw square after the ruler of Gujarat's Nawanagar

Poland's link to an Indian maharaja

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For many years, the story of the Maharaja of Nawanagar, Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji Jadeja, who sheltered around a thousand Polish children in Gujarat during World War II, was a lesser known chapter in the shared history of Poland and India. It was only after political changes in Poland in 1989 that this remarkable act of kindness could be talked about, and deservedly recognised, according to Sebastian Domżalski, chargé d'affaires of Poland in India.

Last month, on an official visit to Poland, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid wreaths at three memorials in Warsaw – one dedicated to the erstwhile ruler of Nawanagar, known as the Good Maharaja, another called the Kolhapur memorial, and lastly, the Monument to the Battle of Monte Cassino.

The first two, dedicated to India, would not be there if not for citizens' initiatives that sought to recognise a good deed on an international level, said Warsaw-based Indologist Krzysztof Iwanek. The Kolhapur memorial honours the erstwhile royal family of Maharashtra that gave refuge to 5,000 Polish families in the village of Valivade during World War II.

These monuments weren't originally an idea of the Warsaw government. While the Polish people, as a nation, remained grateful to India, "not a single Polish government, regardless of which party formed it, cared to commemorate the Indian maharajas. Gradually, some of the Polish citizens took matters into their hands to fill this gap," said Iwanek, Asia coordinator at the Warsaw-based Foundation Institute for Eastern Studies, in a conversation with this writer on his visit to the Polish capital.

Remembering Jam Sahib

In the 90s, a high school in Warsaw was named after Nawanagar's ruler – popularly known as Jam Sahib – at the behest of Indologist and former ambassador to India (1993-96), Maria Krzysztof Byrski. The latter was conferred the Padma Shri in March 2022 and was among those Modi met during his visit.

Jam Sahib had wished for a street in Warsaw to be named after him for his role in sheltering Polish children, according to Iwanek. In 2010, a group of Asia watchers, including Iwanek, from the think tank Poland-Asia Research Centre, commenced a public initiative to commemorate the maharaja. "It had two objectives: to petition the President of Poland to bestow a posthumous award on the maharaja, and to name a place in Warsaw after him," said Iwanek.

Childhood ties

The initiative was also supported by some of those who had lived in India as children during World War II. The group included Wiesław Stypuła, who played a large role in popularising the story of Poles in India by publishing books and articles on the subjects. Stypuła passed away this May, three months before Modi's visit.

The rise of social media took the story of the maharaja far and wide, and soon a Facebook page and a website were created, and thousands of signatures were collected through an online petition to the Polish government. Eventually, in 2012, President Bronisław Komorowski bestowed a high-ranking award on Jam Sahib, while Warsaw authorities voted to name a square in the city after him. Thus, the Skwer Dobrego Maharadzy or the Good Maharaja Square came to be. "Recognising the Maharaja's compassion not only honours a forgotten chapter of our shared history, but also highlights the shared humanitarian values between Poland and India," said Domżalski.

Some of the Poles who had lived in India felt this wasn't enough since most of them grew up in Valivade in the princely state of Kolhapur. "Thus, to complete the commemorating initiatives, they convinced the Warsaw authorities to establish the Monument of Gratitude towards the Kingdom of Kolhapur, and it was unveiled in 2017," said Iwanek.

PERSON OF INTEREST

BHANUPRIYA RAO AND THE INNER LIVES OF WOMEN

The founder of Behen Box has a perennial source of inspiration

Agent of change Bhanupriya Rao. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

These days Bhanupriya Rao, 48, is obsessed with how women utilise their time. Thanks to the sporadic Time Use Survey released by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), we know that women devote three times the amount of time that men do to unpaid domestic work. But that's not enough for the founder of Behen Box, an independent news organisation founded after the 2019 general election that spotlights how policies and laws affect women and gender diverse people. She wants to know how much time women spend on leisure.

"An ASHA worker's time use looks completely different to my time use. A contractual worker spends her time differently from a farmer, a rural woman from an urban woman, a woman who has a full-time job and also takes care of a disabled child vs. one who takes care of a non-disabled child," she says. "So how do we document these differences – and then make it into a data set?"

When one of her reporters chanced upon a woman, positioned on the edge of her kitchen counter, watching a Marathi TV series as she prepared a meal, it prompted Rao and her team to ask, "How is she negotiating leisure?"

Raising hard questions

Whether it's exploring beauty parlours in Jharkhand or weighing the freedom of gig work against its inherently exploitative structure, the stories on Behen Box offer great insight into the inner lives of women. What happens when women have cancer? How do Adivasi survivors of sexual violence access justice? Why are fertility practices killing women?

It is questions like these, with which we don't usually engage, that led Rao to a deep examination of ASHA workers, the volunteer army of female health workers who were on the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Behen Box collected qualitative data from 52 health workers across 16 states in 2020. Their research found heroes who were abused, invisibilised, and desperately underpaid. Many had huge debts. "It's still the only data available about ASHA workers," she says. Rao's past association with the Right To Food and Right to Information movements has been key to her understanding that information is crucial to live as equal citizens.

Behen Box looks at women as agents of change, and closely tracks the battles they navigate. "There's a lot more awareness of women not wanting to live with the status quo, and that gives us hope," says Rao, adding that all the Adivasi protests, for example, are led by women. "That is why we document all the resistance movements, they tell us what women want."

Women provide perennial inspiration for Rao, the daughter of a geologist and a teacher. Thanks to her father's job, she grew up in mining towns in states such as Bihar, Orissa and Chattisgarh. "Women's lives are not singular," she says. "We live so many different lives." She catches glimpses of her life in that of her subjects and, in turn, draws from them. "Writing and learning about the lives of these women made me more sure of myself. In my own eyes I started to exist. They helped show me who I really am," she says.

Similarly, when a doctor told her that she could no longer cycle and that she should swim instead, the journey of conquering her fear of water helped her confidence as a solo founder. The once-aspiring historian had no experience running a newsroom. "I realised how I could apply swimming to my work life. If I could swim, I could run Behen Box. If I could get over the fear of deep water, I could float through the financial issues I was facing."

A space to belong

Rao knows that women are aspirational, their lives are not static. "You can't imagine them the way they were even a decade ago," she says. "That's a very wrong representation." She would disagree – or at least add a caveat – with those who say that families don't support women.

In Haryana, for example, while regressive attitudes may prevail and the end goal continues to be marriage, there is support for working women. "It's when you've turned 25 and you haven't found a job that there is pressure on women to marry unless they are doing something economically viable," she says. "That's where the state providing jobs for women comes into play." So why not hold the state accountable before blaming family?

Behen Box started off by telling us what the lives of Indian women look like but somewhere along the way, the women took over. "Now they own it," says Rao. "The attitude is, we will come to you because we trust you and you will represent us properly. This space belongs to us." Many women in the informal economy, whose issues are glaringly absent from the mainstream and from public policy, have thanked Rao for visibilising them.

Indian women, as they are wont to, keep providing insights. "There is a lot of assertion from women from marginalised groups, which we are not paying attention to," says Rao. "It's positive but it shouldn't be their burden. The structures supporting our democracy need to make the system easier so that these women are able to lead fuller lives, to love, to work."

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Counting is the key

East-West vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a major tournament in Chicago a few months ago. South was Chip Martel, from California, long considered one of the world's best players. He opened a very heavy weak two-bid in third position and then bid again after his suit was raised. This was an unusual decision, but he had an unusual hand.

Martel ruffed the opening heart lead and led a spade to dummy's king and East's ace. East shifted to the 10 of clubs and the defense played three straight rounds of clubs, Martel ruffing the third round with the 10 of spades in dummy. Martel drew the remaining trumps and then needed to play the diamond suit for no losers. He knew that West started with six clubs from the play and presumably four hearts from the auction. West had followed to two spades, so he had to be short in diamonds. Martel led the 10 of diamonds from his hand, pleased to see the jack from West. He won with dummy's king and ran the eight of diamonds, picking up East's queen and making his doubled contract. Nicely done!

An opening diamond lead might have defeated the contract. East can win the first round of spades and give West a diamond ruff. West could exit safely with a high heart and declarer would still have lost two club tricks later in the play.

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

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
Pass	Pass	2♠	3♣
3♠	Dbl	Pass	4♡
Pass	Pass	4♠	Dbl
All pass			

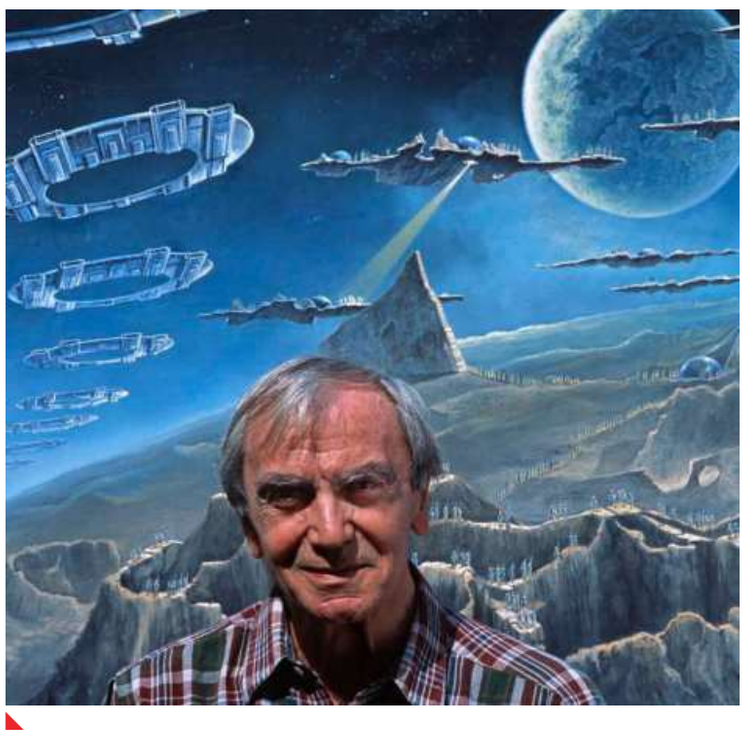
Opening lead: Ace of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Happy birthdays!

Berty Ashley



Special effects Carlo Rambaldi's work was heavily influenced by Spanish painter Pablo Picasso and Italian artist Renato Guttuso. (GETTY IMAGES)

1 This Italian merchant, born this day in 1254, is a celebrated explorer in history. He was one of the first to journal his travels through the Eastern world, including about the wealth and size of the Mongol Empire. Who was this explorer, whose name lives on as a children's game?

2 Regarded as the first major American novelist, James Fenimore Cooper, was born this day in 1789. Other than his historical novels of the frontier period, his masterpiece was about the battles between the French allies and the Iroquois, who were Native American settlers. Which book is this whose title represents the sole survivor of a noble race?

3 Sir Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya was the Dewan of Mysore from 1912 to 1918 and was born this day in 1861. He started his career as an assistant engineer in public works and went on to design an irrigation system in the Deccan Plateau. He was also responsible for designing the gates of the Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) dam. How is his birthday celebrated in India?

4 One of the most successful authors of all time, this lady was born on September 15, 1890. Her 66 detective novels and 14 short stories have been translated into the most languages and a stage play she wrote had the longest run. Who was this author whose books are found in almost every library?

5 Renowned as the 'scream queen' for her work in multiple horror films, the Canadian American actress Fay Wray was born this day in 1907. Her biggest hit was as the love interest of an unusual title character. Which movie was this that has an iconic scene of her and the title character on top of the Empire State Building?

6 Born this date in 1909, this gentleman, known as '*Perarignar*' (the scholar), was the last chief minister of Madras state and subsequently the first chief minister of Tamil Nadu. He was also the founder of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. Who was this?

7 English Olympic fencer Bob Anderson, who became famous in his later life for choreographing sword-fight sequences, was born this day in 1922. Known for his work on *Guns of Navarone* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, his most famous work interestingly is not involving swords but a fictional weapon. What weapons, usually either blue or red in colour, did he choreograph?

8 Carlo Rambaldi, an Italian special effects artist who won three Oscars, was born this day in 1925. His most famous creation was the title character of a 1982 Steven Spielberg movie. He based the character's face on Albert Einstein and Ernest Hemmingway and it was controlled by a team of puppeteers. Which character did Rambaldi create?

9 September 15, 1946, is the birthdate of acclaimed American director Oliver Stone, and award-winning actor Tommy Lee Jones. They have worked together in many movies, such as *Heaven & Earth* and *Natural Born Killers*. In 1991, Stone made an epic political thriller film about arguably the most infamous assassination in history, in which Jones plays the only person who was brought to trial in the case. What is the title of the film, which is the three-letter acronym by which the victim was better known?

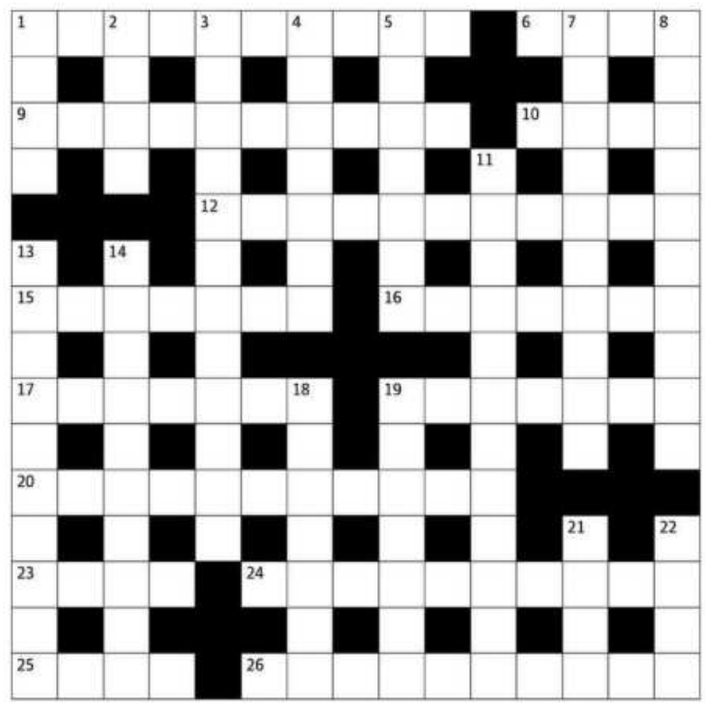
10 Born this day in 1970, this lady is one of the most acclaimed actresses in Indian cinema. A classically trained dancer, she is also known for her grace and expressive acting. Having played multiple memorable roles onscreen, her most famous character is the iconic role of the female antagonist to Rajinikanth in *Padayappa*. Who is this exemplary actor?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Marco Polo
2. *The Last of the Mohicans*
3. Engineer's day
4. Agatha Christie
5. *King Kong*
6. C.N. Annadurai
7. Lightsabers in *Star Wars*
8. *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*
9. *JFK*
10. Ramya Krishnan

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3323



Across

1 Crazy long tale about saloon, perhaps, somewhere in Indian Ocean … (10)
6 … eastern image in long tale (4)
9 Sterilise (milk perhaps) that's in and out of sight, they say (10)
10 File's one showing fellows by university (4)
12 Freak's metal bananas in secondhand stalls (4,7)
15 Primarily Spanish in etymology: ranges, rising apexes serrated? (7)
16 Cold – wearing summer footwear – disgrace! (7)
17 Dope and rye – wasted – this'll help you see straight (3-4)
19 Some confront a rioter in Canadian province (7)
20 Bug … bear … cricket, perhaps (5,6)
23 Flipping prison sentence to throw out (4)
24 Everyman is unable to express 'dunno' (1,6,3)
25 Care for a round number? 500? (4)
26 Concerning school to escape being reviewed: make a new plan (10)

Down

1 Before start of evening, clean the floor that's pine (4)
2 Soupçon of fly (4)
3 Attacks poor and gambles the lot (4,3,5)
4 Presents – or hides from view? (7)
5 Believes in counterfeits (7)
7 President concealing 'legal' cash for those seeking power (10)
8 In conversation, parish representative's advisor (10)
11 Robert skates erratically: it's a way of crossing the water (12)
13 Fools' son intended to lose heart in test (10)
14 Echoing intemperate petitioner (10)
18 Criticise a revolutionary style (7)
19 Incredibly wide, rustling up cocaine (7)
21 Old Testament figure seen in chocolate sauce (4)
22 Use a keyboard, and strain (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3322

C	O	L	U	M	B	U	S		E	N	A	B	L	E
A		E		O		N			I		U			V
P	O	O	L	S	I	D	E		G	A	U	C	H	E
U				E		E			G		K		N	
L	I	B	E	L		R	I	N	G	A	B	E	L	L
E		A		L		C	O		R		T			Y
T	A	B	L	E	F	O	O	T	B	A	L	L		
S		E				A		G			O		I	
		M	O	U	N	T	A	I	N	C	H	A	I	N
E		A		G		E		V		O		D		C
D	O	G	P	A	D	D	L	E		N	A	S	A	L
I		N		N				A		C				U
T	W	E	E	D	Y		A	F	F	E	C	T	E	D
O		T		A				I		R		V		E
R	E	S	E	N	T		A	G	O	N	I	S	E	S

A shrinking Himalayan passage

A visit to Nagmithong Nala near Kargil, where the threat of a glacial lake outburst flood looms large, and Botkol Pass is set to become inaccessible

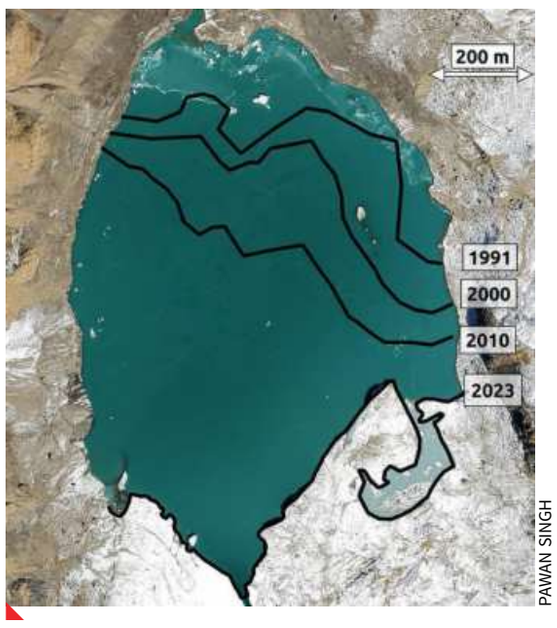
Argha Banerjee | Krishnanand J. | Saurabh Vijay

It was yet another Himalayan expedition for a team of 10 earth scientists, including the three authors. On August 20, we arrived at the Kalapari camp in Nagmithong Nala, some 12,800 feet above sea level. With us were porters, their ponies, and a playful foal from nearby Khichoor village in Kargil.

Over the next few days, we measured air temperature and stream flow and flew a drone to study the local climate of the high-altitude arid glacier valley. We also set up an automatic time-lapse camera system to observe changes in the Lamo glacier and a glacial lake at its terminus.

The lake, formed as the glacier retreated, has grown more than 25 times in size over the past three decades. Today, it spans 5 lakh sq. m and stores about 500 crore litres of water – greater than Ladakh's water consumption in six months. The possibility of a devastating glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) in the valley is high, with the National Disaster Management Authority identifying this lake as one of the riskiest glacial lakes in the Indian Himalayas. Recent GLOF events in Sikkim (2023), Nepal (2024), and other parts of the Himalayas have caught the attention of government agencies and the people at large. Scientists have predicted that glacial lakes will proliferate and the risk of GLOFs in the Himalayas will grow in the coming decades because of global warming. The scientific community is working to enhance the understanding of GLOFs and to assess the associated risks.

While setting up the equipment and monitoring the lake, we met and interacted with groups of nomadic shepherds with hundreds of cattle, as well as adventurous hikers. They were travelling between the Chalong and Warwan valleys, via the Botkol Pass, a few hundred metres uphill from the lake. The trail involved a treacherous traverse over the Lamo glacier. For centuries, shepherds, travellers and invading armies frequently used this pass to travel between Kashmir and Ladakh. We realised that the traverse would become more dangerous as the lake expanded. Satellite data clearly indicate the pass is set to become inaccessible in the coming years.



PAWAN SINGH

The glacial lake at the head of Nagmithong Nala, with floating icebergs that have broken off the retreating glacier. The map charts its expansion. SAURABH VIJAY

"*Aage to rasta achcha ho jayega na*? (The pass will become better, won't it?)," one elderly shepherd asked. He could not imagine the trail becoming impassable. "When are you going to publish your reports about the changes in the valley? We can plan better for future hikes here," a young guide and an entrepreneur with a mountain-trekking company said. He emphasised that finding an alternative route is not easy and comes with a great economic burden for the company and loss of jobs for the local community.

At the end of our expedition, we were trekking back towards Khichoor. There, we were confronted by the cold water of the braided Chalong Nala, but fortunately a friendly shepherd dog came to our rescue, guiding us to spots where we could easily ford the streams.

By this time the conversation among us had turned to the kindness of the people and the animals for all of whom the Botkol Pass has been a way of life for centuries. Even as we realised the lived experiences of these people often go unnoticed in the world, we were sure there was still time left to learn from remote Himalayan communities about the grave but hidden challenges that climate change poses. A local approach to scientific research and mitigation policies will preserve these communities and their ways of life.

(Argha Banerjee is Associate Professor and Krishnanand J. is research scholar at IISER-Pune; Saurabh Vijay is Assistant Professor at IIT-Roorkee)
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The yearly tussle with white shoes

Sudhaker Narayanan
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At the time of the reopening of school after the summer holidays, it was an annual ritual to purchase a new pair of white shoes as part of the school uniform. White canvas shoes were not as sturdy as the black leather ones. The wear and tear was faster and much quicker for me and my brother. We ran in the dusty playgrounds and slid on the mosaic floors of the verandah of the classrooms. By the time we returned home, the colour of the shoes will turn brown and most important, they won't be on our feet. We would be carrying them in our hands because we did not know how to tie the shoelaces. At the morning school prayer, the school leader's job was to observe sharply if the shoes of each student were well polished or not.

There is a lot to learn from the minds of young children for "mature" adults. The piece of chalk in the classroom comes to the rescue. Rubbing it on the shoes would give a cleaner look. The leader would see and say, "Okay, go" (I long suspected he himself must have been doing so).

Poor white shoes, the rough handling would be too much for them. The sole would go loose and make a flapping sound with each step, drawing pathetic looks from friends and scorn from teachers.

My priority next morning was to rush to the nearest cobbler. He did not work from a shop, but sat by the roadside with tools of the trade, working in full public view. It was great to watch him attending to shoes with involvement. The best part was after completing the work, he would ask us to wear the shoes and check the comfort level.

If it were okay, I need not pay him immediately. He knew my father well and would collect the fee from him. I never saw my father bargaining with him. He would give whatever amount is asked.

At the fag end of the year, the shoes would look like they had run several marathons and symbolically pleading with me, "Please leave us, we can't plod further."

SREEJITH R. KUMAR

When influencers call the shots

They act as symbols of beauty, success, and happiness, and their posts, stories, and videos are vehicles of meaning for the audiences

Nimra Ahmad
ahmad.nimra12112@gmail.com

Over the past couple of years, influencer culture has been among the defining features of the digital age, responsible for the formation of aspirations, consumer behaviour and social norms. It is through platforms such as Instagram and YouTube that new celebrities have been able to emerge.

With creatively doctored content and brand collaborations, anyone can amass huge followings and enormous cultural and economic influence. But beneath that glossy surface lies a truly complex, and at times, unnerving landscape of the pressure to maintain relevance, authenticity, and engagement.

Understanding the dynamics of influencer culture, symbolic interactionism offers an appropriate framework. Drawing on sociologist George Herbert Mead's work, this theory postulates that through symbolic interactions with others, human beings create and, in a way, interpret social realities. Through their content, influencers are constantly talking to their audience and trying to shape their identities and sense of self through likes, comments, shares, and brand deals. What comes out of this micro-level in interaction piles into larger trends within society, thus providing an ongoing cycle of negotiation by both the influencer and the followers regarding what meanings and values certain lifestyles, products, and behaviours hold.

Influencers function in this system as such symbols – beauty, success, and happiness. Through them, the posts, stories, and videos are vehicles of meaning for their audiences, where they project personal desires and aspirations onto contrived personas. This exerts a huge pressure on the influencers to keep up the image, since their livelihoods and social capital depend on their ability to hold up the symbolic value they represent.

Technology, or more precisely, artificial intelligence, is among the big drivers of influence culture today. It controls the visibility of content on social media through algorithms, thereby influencing who becomes a popular influencer and who goes into oblivion. Algorithms are designed to maximise engagement and often tend toward sensational or photo-worthy or emotionally charged content. As such, this continuously pressures one to come up with content that the algorithms want, probably at the cost of authenticity.

It is also influencing how brands collaborate with influencers in an age where machine learning tools can analyse huge amounts of data to identify influencers whose audience demographics reflect a brand's target market. The data-driven approach has turned influencer marketing into a very strategic, calculated initiative where success often seems to be measured by metrics such as engagement rate, follower growth, and conversion rates. It is then that this focus on quantifiable outcomes may further increase the pressure on influencers to fit into some trends or lines of behaviour that are in demand.

This, coupled with the pressure to meet algorithmic expectations, is what investors have projected will have deep effects on the mental health of social media influencers. Burnout, anxiety, and depression are regular problems for most influencers, who feel entrapped in a cycle of producing content just to be validated. A fear of becoming irrelevant, or even losing followers, could then spiral an influencer into obsessive behaviour: religiously monitoring their analytics and tweaking their content to maintain engagement.

The dynamics of influence culture are going to change with the evolution of AI. One of the emerging technologies bound to raise new ethical questions regarding digital spaces, authenticity, and manipulation is deep fake influencers. Such is influencer culture, a highly charged social phenomenon inextricably intertwined with the technologies that feed it.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Artists are aesthetic individuals who can transcend barriers during the time of conflicts between two countries or races or ethnic groups. ('Art from rubble and despair'; Sept. 1) They are a whiff of fresh air in a tense atmosphere. Their artistic works can soothe many souls fallen into despair and desolation due to unending strife in their homelands.
Cijo Joseph

Art is the most powerful medium of expression. Creativity shines in adversity and conflict, no war or atrocity can kill it, instead it rises again and again with zeal and goes beyond boundaries. War cannot kill the soul and mind of an artist. Exchange of songs between Kuki and Meitei children spreads a clear message of love, hope and trust. Art is silent but it says a lot.
Navin Katyal

The cover story has highlighted the importance of art in building an emotional narrative in times of war and conflict. There is a need to forging public opinion against this violence. The emotional expressive art works in the media space depicting this undesirable war offshoot will certainly exert pressure on the warring nations. Further, photo journalists can highlight destructions mostly resulting from the man made interventions.
G. Ramasubramanyam

Heading towards disaster

Increase in wealth creation by the corporate world is inversely proportional to environmental protection successes universally. ('Green Humour'; Sept. 1) We are fast heading towards a world disaster as stock markets across nations break their lifetime high indices at regular intervals. Well conveyed by Rohan Chakravarty.
M.N. Saraswathi Devi

Artistic legacies

The article is a rich tribute to acclaimed painter and professor K.G. Subramanyam whose centenary is being observed by art aficionados all over the country and overseas as well. ('Artist KGS's idea of India'; Sept. 1) His paintings have graced exhibitions across the globe and he has played a part in taking Indian art to the far corners of the world. KGS has often been spoken of in the same breath as luminaries such as M.F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta, V.S. Gaitonde and S.H. Raza. It is a testimony to the fact that he excelled in his craft and honed his skills to perfection.
C.V. Aravind

Safety for all

Boys should be taught from the primary schooling stage itself to respect girls and women and treat them as equals. ('What are we teaching our children'; Sept. 1) Mothers play an important role in ensuring the right kind of upbringing of children. They should first treat all their children, both male and female, equally. Also, girls should be taught both at home and in schools to be assertive, bold, self-dependent, proud to be a girl, and that they are not inferior in any way to boys.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Confessions of an impractical person
How one ignored the imperfection of life by finding solace in the perfection of art
Anandi Ukil

Shedding light on local history
It's the lifeblood of community identities and is vital for preserving cultural heritage
Ved Badoniya

Man-dog ties
Pets are living beings requiring consistent care and attention
Phowltha Seltun

Mode of transport
Bus lovers love their comfort zones, while those taking the train are more daring
Sathyakama Sharma K.

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RETURNING TO AMBALA CANTT

Joya Mukerjee Logue's roles as memoirist and archivist take centrestage in her India debut, as she studies the people and spaces of her paternal home

Georgina Maddox

On a Tuesday afternoon, we settle down for lunch with artist Joya Mukerjee Logue, after a guided tour of her solo exhibition, *Those Who Walk Before Me*, at Vadehra Art Gallery. Many of us present – writers and editors – have brought along pieces that hold value of "ancestral memory". For me, it's an album with photographs of my mother performing on stage as a singer in the 1960s. My mother is young, and in one photo accompanied by British-Italian pianist Charlie Mariano, Portuguese-Goan saxophonist Pobreno Dias, and a bassist who is hidden by shadows. My father had taken it. "I love the fact that you brought us these beautiful black-and-white photographs. The handwriting under each image is such a lovely touch, in the age of emails and typed fonts," she tells me, recalling her days of writing letters to family across her diasporic existence. "I also love the dress your mother is wearing," she adds, with a laugh.

Mukerjee-Logue engages with themes such as memory, nostalgia, identity, and home in her works. For her latest series, she looks back at her ancestors – her family, relatives and their friends who once lived in and around her ancestral home, Rajo Villa, in Ambala, Haryana. "I grew up in Ohio, but I have always liked the idea of timelessness that India possesses for me – it gives me a rich sense of my history," she says. "My forefathers migrated from Behala in what is now suburban Kolkata, and then to Ambala nearly two centuries ago, in 1845, to help build a cantonment town for India's colonial rulers." She became familiar with her roots through regular trips to the country during her childhood and as an adult.

Behind a family archive

Mukerjee-Logue likes to call herself a bit of an archivist, memoirist and chronicler. She is also someone who is trying to document her family stories, either visually through her work or through collecting images from the family archive. So, *Those who walk before me* was like "a homecoming for me", she says.

The exhibition marks her debut in India, and features 30 oil and watercolour paintings from the Cincinnati-based artist's decade-long practice, alongside her recent body of work exploring her mixed cultural heritage and personal identity. While her mixed heritage (Mukerjee-Logue, 48, is born to an Indian father and American mother) may play a role in her choice of medium – oil on canvas is essentially a western art practice – her preoccupations are Indian.

Her loose brushstrokes in shades of white, burnt sienna, ochre and red oxide give her work the feel of a photograph with traces of time-wear. Having said that, her creations are very painterly and not photo-realistic. It calls to mind the works of Amrita Sher-Gil, without being derivative in any way. It clearly has the stamp of her inner musings.

On linen canvases, she captures memories of women sweeping through the house, of swishing saris, and the palatial two-storied Rajo Villa with its pillars, arches, courtyards and terraces. *Procession*, a painting from the perspective of a child looking up at adults, captures four women in white saris mid-stride. *Night at Sadar Bazaar, Ambala Cantt* records a lively night market scene with the streetlamps lit, overloaded carts and people milling about.

Another work, titled *Portrait of the Arch*, has a woman standing alone clad in a shawl and sari against a dark night sky. I cannot help but imagine that this character is a self portrait imbued with the memories of the past, but rooted in a present reality of her own making. "My personal history of Ambala is drawn from collective memory, including conversations with my 82-year-old father, an amateur documentarian who constantly recorded glimpses of his daily life through photographs and super-8 films," she says, highlighting the multigenerational underpinnings of her works.

A grandmother's influence

Mukerjee-Logue's practice also comprises her ongoing research into her cultural identity. Women are a big focus of her works. Her Bengali matrilineal family left a very strong impression on her as a child. "My grandmother was strong and centred, and I think our family derived much of its cultural richness from her. She played the *sitar* and the violin, and appreciated art as well as spirituality," says the artist. We get a glimpse of this in a series of intimate works titled *Our Shared Sari* rendered in watercolour with dry acrylic sweeps on brown paper that Mukerjee-Logue has displayed in the inner room of the gallery.

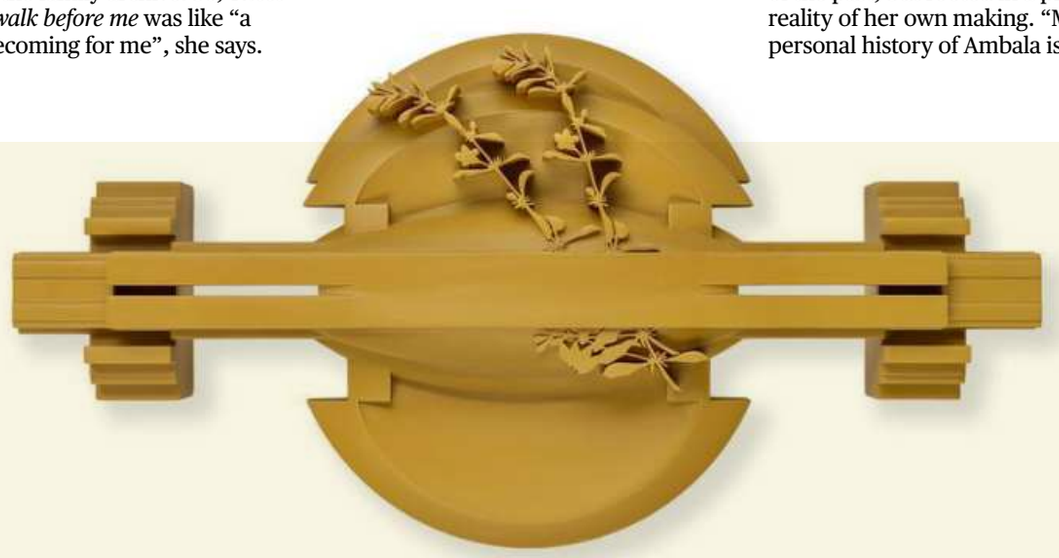
Linen canvases and white saris
(Clockwise from far left) *What Remains*; *Procession*; *Portrait at the Arch*; and Joya Mukerjee Logue. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Unlike her large canvases that have a busy air to them, these works are quieter and evocative of emotions that are soft and tender. "To refresh my memories, I have referenced my family album of photographs. However, the paintings are not replications. The men, women and children that appear in them are specific and yet generic because they sweep across generations: from my grandmother and mother to my three sons."

As lunch and our conversations draw to a close, she reminisces about her father's super-8 films. "In one, my father is asking me what I am doing, and I say very seriously, 'I'm hanging my painting up, can't you see?'" Perhaps it was an indication that even a young Mukerjee-Logue knew where her path lay, and how important family and memory would be to it.

Till September 17 at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.

The writer is a critic-curator by day, and a visual artist by night.



Of Rani Baug and stolen rubber seeds

Amba Sayal-Bennett's first solo exhibition in India deconstructs Mumbai's botanical garden as a colonial archive and site of resistance

Ela Das

When Victoria Gardens (now Rani Baug) was constructed as a botanical garden in the 1860s, in then Bombay, it was a significant colonial project. The aim: to import plants from Asia, Africa and the Americas for cataloguing. "Its role [was to serve] as a laboratory for the Empire, and a Victorian English garden structure was imposed on the Indian landscape to reflect a Eurocentric view," says Amba Sayal-Bennett.

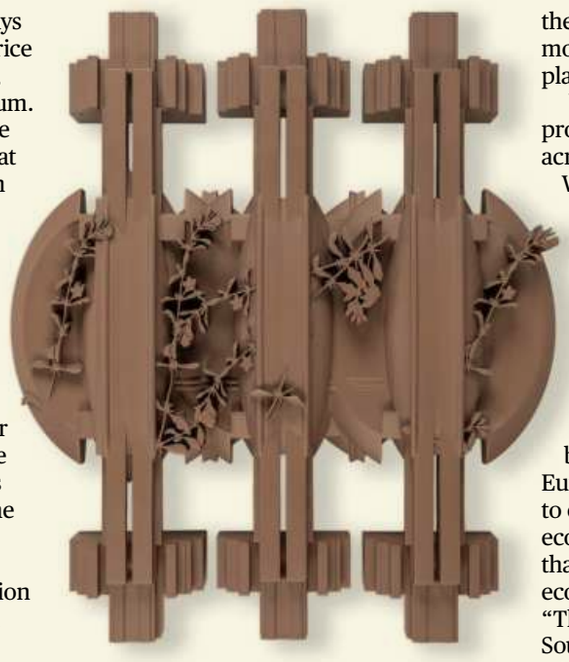
But colonial botany also involved rigorous processes of extraction, transfer and erasure – in this case extraction of plants and labour, transfer of specimens across the globe, and erasure of local knowledge. For the London-based British-Indian artist's first solo show in India, titled *Dispersive Acts* at TARQ, she created a series of sculptures and drawings "thinking about this botanical garden as a colonial archive, a witness, and a site of resistance".

The show is part of a larger body of work exhibited across Mumbai, London and New York that is informed by her research into imperial gardens and colonial botany. At the same time as *Dispersive Acts*, in London, Sayal-Bennett is part of a group show, *Between Hands and Metal*, at the Palmer Gallery, and an exhibition called *Seeded Futures, Arboreal Drifts* at Diana in New York. She was interested in the various threads that connected "this body of work across the three cities".

A microcosm of the empire

Rani Baug, Sayal-Bennett says, has architectural elements that connect it to Kew Gardens in London, and "the Palmer space has historical links to the India Rubber Company". In New York, she explores "the movement of stolen rubber seeds" from South America to India, via Kew Gardens.

"Rubber's usefulness led to its transfer and proliferation," says Sayal-Bennett. "By 1873, its price had outstripped that of silver, and supplies were at a premium. A report commissioned by the India office recommended that Britain generate and maintain its own stocks by taking the high-yielding species Hevea Brasiliensis from South America to grow as a crop in plantations in India. Commissioned by the British government, in 1876, [British explorer] Henry Wickham stole 70,000 rubber seeds from Brazil, which were brought back to Kew Gardens before their deployment to the colonies, including India. In these contexts, I have been thinking about how colonisation and cultivation are entangled through the imposition of certain crops or plants." The botanical garden in Rani Baug, she believes, can be seen as a kind of microcosm of the empire with plants from around the world, and in the case of rubber production, the imposition of a monoculture, erasing local plants and landscapes.



Botany meets resin and steel
(Clockwise from above) *Tiller*; *Axil*; *Seed Coat*; and Amba Sayal-Bennett. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

While researching the project, Sayal-Bennett came across writings by Judy Willcocks and Kieran Mahon on botanical drawings, which highlighted how illustrations were a key component in monetising plants. "In these drawings, plants were often shown in isolation from any wider habitat on a blank background, encouraging the European scientific community to observe them for potential economic exploitation rather than as part of a symbiotic ecosystem," she says, adding, "The rubber seeds taken from South America to India did not take root. The environment rendered the seeds useless. Here, the Indian climate and soil formed an insurgent infrastructure, a non-human agency that refused to comply, refused to be used, refused to support this imposed crop."

Art Deco and resistance

At TARQ, art deco-style elements find a place across several of Sayal-Bennett's works. "Mumbai is a city with the second largest collection of art deco buildings in the world. I was interested in how this style can be seen as a statement of independence; a style chosen by Indian architects that was distinct from colonial influences, symbolising a move towards a self-determined future," she states.

A work titled *Ziggurat*, for instance, reimagines the triumphal arch at Rani Baug's entrance – installed in 1868 to signal a gateway to an arboreal paradise – in an art deco style. It also features a porcupine flower from the Royal Albert Memorial Museum's collection, another element that is visible across different works. "The drawing is by an unknown Indian artist and was commissioned by the East India company somewhere between the late 18th and mid-19th century. Keen to exploit and export valuable natural commodities, the company set out to record the flora and fauna of India," she notes. "Indian artists were commissioned to create detailed illustrations, but their names were rarely recorded. These artists developed their own style of painting, mixing Indian and European traditions, which came to be known as the Company School style. I have been drawn to this hybrid style, which involved a departure from the lines of conventional European practice."

Till September 21 at TARQ, Mumbai.

The writer and creative consultant is based in Mumbai.

Leaning into her diasporic roots

The theme of "displacement and its inherited memories and traumas" — as reflected in the practices of colonial botany, where plants are extracted from their indigenous context and relocated to new environments — has yet another component. That of Sayal-Bennett's late grandmother who was displaced from Punjab to the U.K. during the Partition. The artist shares that her identity as a British-Indian and being part of the South Asian diaspora in London has sensitised her to the genealogies of dispersion. "I always like hearing the associations people have to this work, with many feelings both familiar yet difficult to place," she says. "There's always a simultaneous condition of connection and estrangement that is distinctly inherent to a diasporic experience."