THE HINDU
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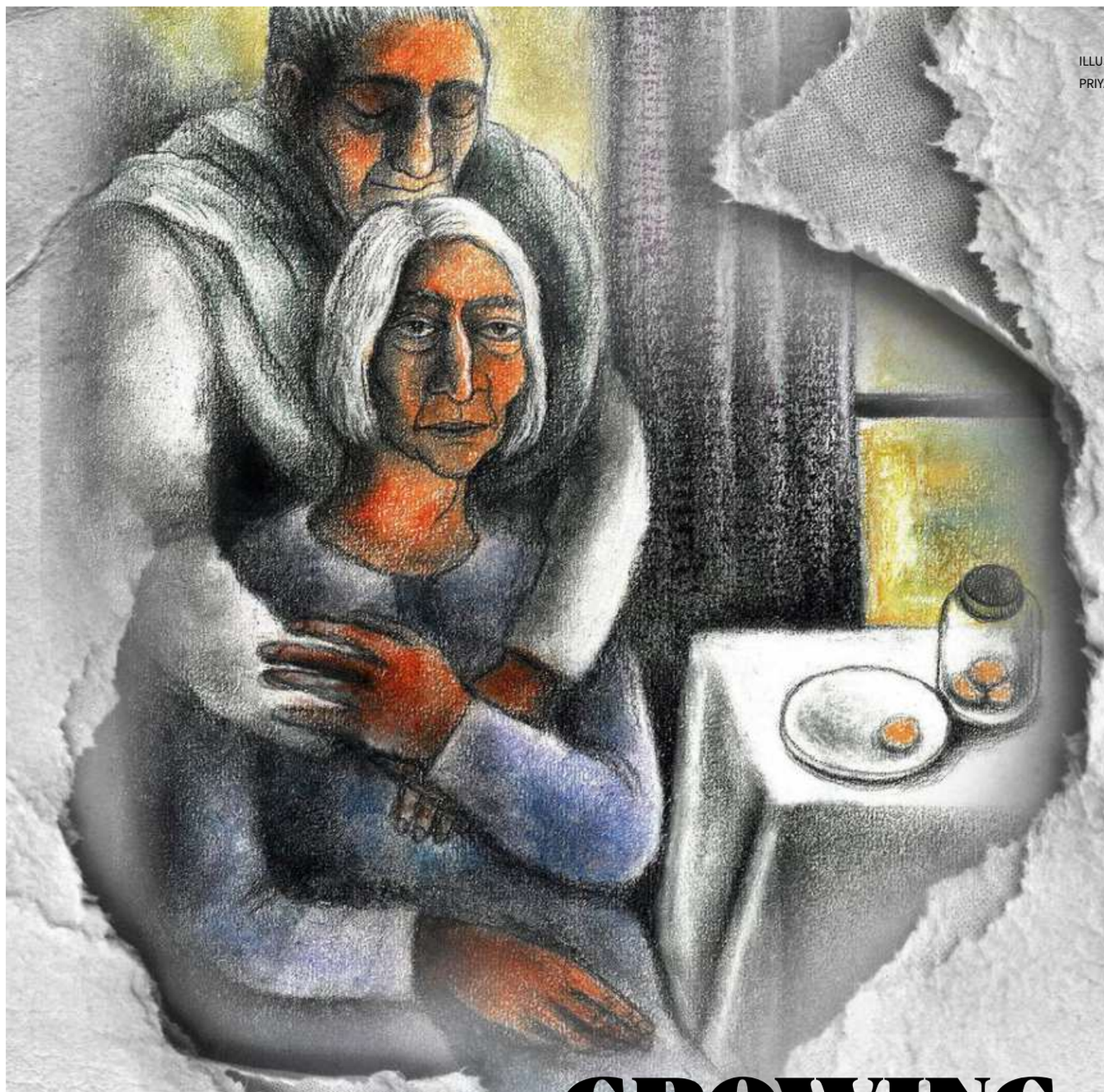


ILLUSTRATION: PRIYA SEBASTIAN

GROWING OLDER AS A QUEER PERSON IN INDIA

Older gay couples talk about the challenges of routine decisions around parenting, financial security or healthcare access in the absence of an inclusive legal framework in the country. And the constant need for *jugaad*

Reshmi Chakraborty

The first time I meet Archana Trasy and her partner Pooja Chaudhri is via a beautiful pride advocacy short film on Instagram. "I always say this to Archu, you really brought colour into my life," Chaudhri, a media consultant, says in the film, walking into an open windy terrace overlooking the Arabian Sea, perhaps hinting at the openness of their own identities. "We are in a same-sex relationship and we wear this love with a lot of pride," says Trasy.

"I feel privileged to have a partner," she tells me later. "We've been together for five years." Trasy, 53, founder of an entertainment design company in Mumbai, came out at 18. Her parents were supportive though many others were not.

Down south in Tamil Nadu, Gita, 67, has recently moved into a senior living community with her 77-year-old partner. "Everyone thinks we are cousins and it's best kept that way," she says over a video call. Gita looks visibly exhausted from caring for her ailing partner. Moving here took up much of her savings, she says. "I have no support from my family because I choose to live with her. Keeping our identity hidden works best." Gita and her partner initially lived in an apartment in a different South Indian city but the latter's failing health made a senior living set-up with medical assistance on hand a practical choice.

Gita's decision to hide her truth, unlike the openness celebrated by Trasy and Chaudhri, is the lived experience of many older queer persons in India, who grew up in the shadow of Section 377. Despite long battles for equal rights, they struggle to carve out a secure life without legal or institutional support.

In a landmark judgment in 2018, the Supreme Court of India decriminalised consensual same-sex relations by striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. While that opened a big door for the LGBTQIA+ community, which constitutes roughly 10% of the population, another one was shut a few years down the line when the court rejected the community's plea for marriage equality in October 2023. Same-sex couples in India also do not have the legal right to jointly adopt children as they are not recognised as eligible adoptive parents.

Marriage as a framework provides legal security in inheritance, housing and medical decisions, apart from social recognition and acceptance, the key factors behind the push for marriage equality. But it remains a contested demand among some queer activists who believe the focus should instead be on implementing existing directives and fighting to remove discrimination.

Archana Trasy and Pooja Chaudhri

Some rights exist – such as opening a joint bank account or adding a queer partner's name in the family ration card – but enforcement remains a challenge, say activists. The denial of these basic rights often has repercussions as people grow older or start planning their future in their late 40s and 50s. It impacts decisions around parenting, financial security, healthcare access, social inclusion, caregiving and dignity in death. Growing older as a queer person in India is fraught with problems that many take for granted in a heteronormative framework.

Finding data on the number of older queer persons in India is difficult. Surveys are hard to come by. "An online survey of more than a million queer participants in India showed that almost 40% of the participants were aged 45 years or older, with almost 30% of this group married to women and 20% hiding their gay/bisexual identities from their spouses," notes 'Psychological well-being of middle-aged and older queer men in India: A mixed-methods approach', a rare study on the group by Sharma A.J. and Subramanyam M.A., published in *PLOS One* (2020), a peer-reviewed journal.

A fragile revelation

Girish, 58, a doctor's assistant from Chennai, speaks to me on a WhatsApp audio call from a friend's office because at home his conservative brother still doesn't accept his sexuality. He doesn't want to switch to video though he shares his first name. For years, his family took him to "counsellors" to cure his sexual orientation. "Now they don't ask as long as I stay quiet; I also don't force them to accept anything, as long as I have a place in their house," he says. Girish would like to live independently but cannot afford it. "I no longer have a partner or the resources to be active in gay circles. I've accepted my life and live quietly," he says.

For many older members of the LGBTQIA+ community, coming out remains the biggest issue. Says filmmaker Sridhar Rangayan, "Our generation has always lived under the cloud of criminality... Even now, when greater freedom is there in the cities, and the youth feel liberated, most elderly gay men live in the shadows. Hardly a few are partnered and even in these partnerships, they have to tread with caution, since there is so much pulling them apart. Rangayan, 62, a marriage equality petitioner with his partner Saagar Gupta, 56, is co-founder of The Humsafar Trust and the annual Kashish Pride Film Festival in Mumbai.

The Seenagers, a Mumbai-based group of gay men over the age of 55, has many closeted married members. The group introduces itself as an initiative that gives "elderly gay men a safe space to connect over cups of chai". Founder Ashok Row Kavi, among the first to openly talk about homosexuality and gay rights in India back in the 80s, says, "Many use pseudonyms at first. Once they feel safer, they share their true identities." He warns that secrecy can lead to risky behaviours and even blackmail. "Older gay men in India often find themselves vulnerable," says the 78-year-old.

Mental health concerns are also prevalent among the older group. "Anxiety, depression, and stress are significantly higher in the LGBTQIA+ population," says Delhi-based psychologist and marriage equality petitioner Ankita Khanna. "For those in their 50s and 60s, these struggles are chronic, shaped by decades of secrecy. Mental health stigma intersects with the taboo around sexuality and gender, making it even harder for older individuals to seek help."

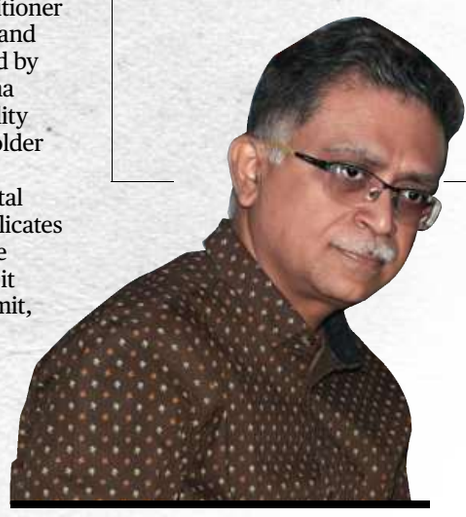
The dearth of queer affirmative mental health specialists in India further complicates care. "When you think in terms of those catering to the ageing population, then it becomes even more of a rarity," says Amit, 47, an LGBTQIA+ rights activist in Kolkata. He has seen a recent disturbing trend that may increase chances of elder abuse, he says.

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4

Safe spaces and emerging networks

The concerns of older queer individuals were not part of the LGBTQIA+ agenda, likely because most queer activists back then weren't older. Until one personally experiences ageing-related vulnerabilities, they may not act on them. Research on these issues is increasing, and the Varta Trust is planning a year-long qualitative study on the concerns of elderly trans and queer persons. In Varta's mental health peer counsellor support group, for instance, efforts are being made to ensure at least 30%–40% of counsellors are over 40 or 50. For ageing queer people seeking safe spaces to live, there are the metro cities, but emerging queer networks in places like Kerala, Odisha, and Assam provide alternative options. These are places where the queer networks are young, active and thriving. However, much remains to be done to ensure that older LGBTQIA+ individuals are not forgotten, both in community initiatives and policy frameworks.

PAWAN DHALL
Queer archivist, writer and founding member of Varta Trust



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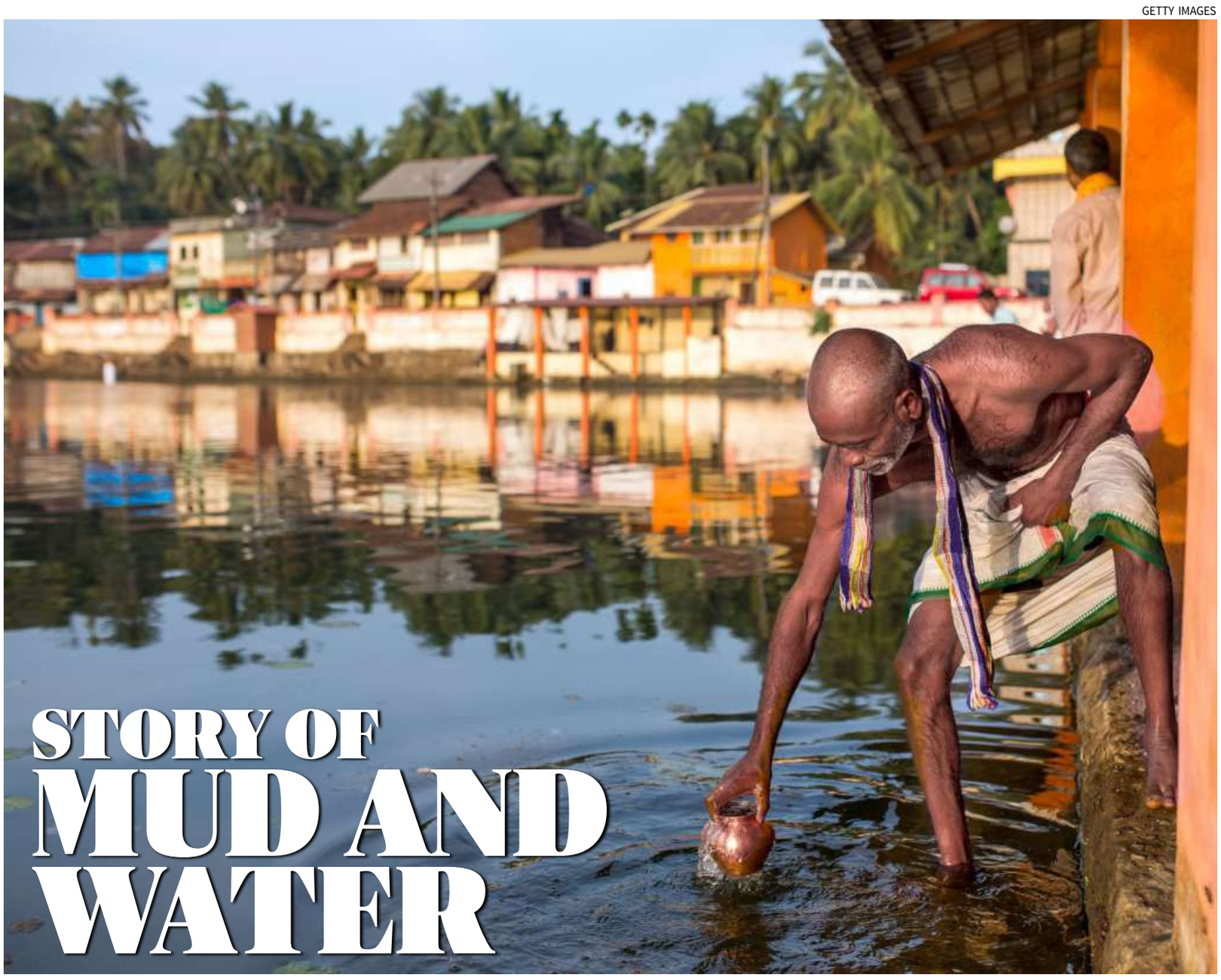


STORY OF MUD AND WATER

Set in a village in the years leading up to Independence, Kavery Nambisan's new novel is about family dynamics and deeply ingrained societal divisions

Latha Anantharaman

Kavery Nambisan's *Rising Sons* is an old-fashioned chunky family saga. The authoritarian Devaraya and his cautious wife Gowru bring up two sons and two daughters. Their story begins with a hint of a secret in a letter opened and read by Devaraya, and then hidden away from his wife. That secret will explode halfway into the book, seeming to end everything – but more of that in its place.

Like God, or John Steinbeck, Nambisan begins her act of creation with mud and water. The story, told in four parts, is set in the years before Independence, in the fictional Karnataka village of Kesarugattu, populated by 57 families who will eat for a year if the rains bless their dry lands. British masters are still caning brown-skinned students. Newspapers are reverently read out loud. "God save the King" is shouted against a background hum of revolt.

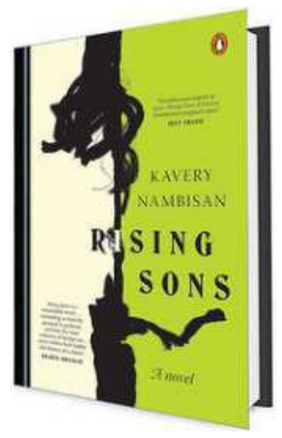
From the opening scene of the mysterious letter, the writer flashes back to the meeting of Gowru and Devaraya. Gowru's upbringing in an orphanage is fleshed out generously, so that we become invested not only in her life but also in the stories around her. The transactional marriage between Gowru and Devaraya is convincingly drawn, as are the village rivalries, caste tensions, family celebrations at which the main concern is to outdo every other family's celebration, and daughters who must be guarded till they are handed over, as ponderously as a full pot of water, to another family's control. Nambisan writes of "our village" and "our daily lives", as a narrator not actually introduced to the reader, but present, and not quite impartial. The result is a voice that is real, and lives played out against a spacious and richly detailed landscape.

Jumping caste

In schools, there are inside students and outside students. Class and caste structure are jolted, sometimes accidentally, as with the student suspended for wearing a *panche* or dhoti because he simply cannot afford the drill for his shorts. He sets off a sudden reaction of sartorial patriotism among many students, till the school is forced to rethink its rule.

Or with Sumana, the broad-shouldered "untouchable" labourer whom the women's eyes follow. At every event, he and his many fellows erect the shamiana, assemble the dais, place the benches, take the whole show down again the following day, and carry home the leftovers. They are present but not present at these celebrations. When Sumana is excessively punished for an unintended brush against a woman, the villagers experience what happens when the non-present actually absent themselves. In the face of unswept streets and uncleared drains, the upper castes are helpless.

The novel glides along episodically, at low-intensity, till it is rattled by the revelation that Devaraya had in his youth jumped caste. Driven by fear and hunger, he had fled his family and cholera-struck village. He had passed as a Brahmin orphan and risen to a position of responsibility. We finally hear in his own words about his impoverished childhood, as transactional as every other stage of his life. He was fed according to the chores he did for his parents. In one of the most poignant lines in the novel, he says to his elder son, "It did not occur to me that my life was wretched." The revelation of caste violation seems fatal, but a new age was dawning in the decades before Independence, and the novel resumes with the hopefully titled section 'Thrice Born'.



Rising Sons
Kavery Nambisan
Penguin
₹599

Where are the daughters?

Here, the story of Devaraya's younger son Anna begins to take shape. It is the time of ferment and yearning for self-rule, and every drop that falls races towards that surging river. For the methodical Anna, the excitement of the freedom struggle inevitably gives way to the mind-numbing routine of nation-building in the capital.

Nambisan's title itself points to casual exclusions, as if daughters are not rising. Devaraya's foster daughter Chinni, as politically and socially alive as Anna and far more appealing, fades undeservedly into the background, while the Delhi doings of Anna and his family are narrated in excessive detail. The writer is being true to the age in which her story is set, or possibly she is cleaving faithfully to an actual family history. But the reader of today longs to hear more from Chinni.

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

GETTY IMAGES

In the shadow of history

Sanam Mahloudji's debut novel about three generations of Iranian women is longlisted for this year's Women's Prize for Fiction

Pranavi Sharma

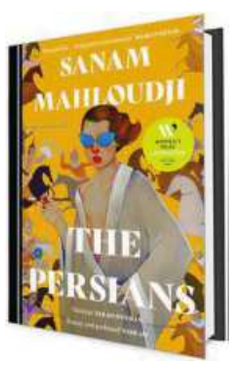
A dream can mean anything or nothing at all. It can portend the future, undo the past, contain a prophecy or a lie. The women in Tehran-born Sanam Mahloudji's debut novel *The Persians* – longlisted for this year's Women's Prize for Fiction – know this very intimately. In a dream, one of them is fascinated by the fact that a dead person could bleed. The past is never dead, and neither is it past.

The novel follows three generations of Iranian women from a wealthy family. Elizabeth, Shirin, Seema, Bita, and Niaz exist between Iran and America. Shirin and Seema, daughters of Elizabeth, fled Iran during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Seema does not survive the crossing into the 21st century, and her daughter, Bita, raised in the antiseptic privilege of American suburbia, never quite gets over her absence. Meanwhile, Niaz, Shirin's daughter, remains in Tehran with her grandmother Elizabeth, and learns what it means to stay behind.

The book opens not in Tehran or Los Angeles but in Aspen, where a family reunion takes a turn for the absurd. Shirin gets arrested for soliciting and it eventually takes the form of an American farce that sets off an Iranian tragedy. Mahloudji writes intimately, of a woman carrying grief in her body, and how exile sharpens the tongue.

The chapters on Elizabeth, the matriarch, are the only ones written in the third person and it lends some detachment to her presence. She is a woman made mythic and when she speaks, it is with the authority of someone who has witnessed history, though whether she has learned from it remains unclear.

Shirin, by contrast, is a creature of pure sensation and the kind of woman who can split a reader's feelings into love and loathing. Even in her extravagance, there is something tragic. She wants, above all, to be seen, which makes her, in many ways, the most American of them all.



The Persians
Sanam Mahloudji
Fourth Estate
₹499

Ready for revolution

History does not move forward so much as it circles back, revisiting old wounds with new names. These women are failed by women of the previous generation. Iran, once again, stands at the precipice of change. One of the novel's great strengths is its depiction of Niaz's life under the Islamic Republic. Mahloudji does not romanticise resistance, nor does she flatten Iran into a mere backdrop of oppression. Instead, she paints a picture of a country that is equal parts suffocating and dear, where women carve out agency in small, defiant acts.

Niaz, in particular, embodies this contradiction. She is the novel's most compelling figure, not because she is likeable, but because she is the only one who seems to understand that history does not care for individual suffering. "At some point there will be a new revolution and then I will be ready," she declares. "They cannot oppress us forever." But history, as *The Persians* reminds us, is never kind to women.

The book wants to be several things at once. What the novel does not quite do, however, is push its characters beyond their archetypes. The rebellious exile, the sorrowful grandmother, the privileged American daughter, all remain somewhat attached to their assigned roles. At times, it feels as if the book is afraid to let go of the past. But most importantly, Mahloudji's preoccupation remains with the fact that history ultimately makes strangers of us all.

The reviewer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.

Death's incomplete draft

M. Mukundan's story featuring a septuagenarian protagonist develops as a mystery but the ending feels unsatisfactory

Kinshuk Gupta

The U.K. and U.S. translated editions of Simone de Beauvoir's canonical text on ageing, *La Villesse* (1970), were titled *Old Age* and *The Coming of Age* (1972), respectively. To think of old age as coming-of-age is a riveting vantage point to understand decadence and dying.

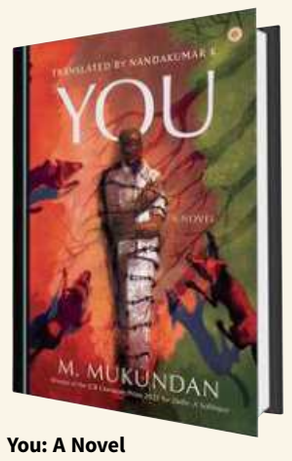
It is also a riff on the preferred plot of the 19th-century European novel, where the young, virile, and aspirational hero takes the new capitalist order in his stride. In recent times, however, there has been a gradual proliferation of novels about the grumpy and cantankerous senile protagonist who goes to all extremes to protect his sanity and sense of autonomy. While the odds for young heroes are mostly extrinsic, a life sans teeth, eyes, taste, sans everything, poses unique challenges that are as much intrinsic as they have to do with the world.

M. Mukundan's *You*, translated from the Malayalam by Nandakumar K., is a recent addition to this ever-expanding list. The author's earlier novel, *Delhi: A Soliloquy* (2020), examined the impact of tempestuous and tangible historical events on the personal, somewhat insignificant, minutiae of common lives. This time, his septuagenarian protagonist tries to point the middle finger at the condition inside him that has relegated him to the margins.

The novel starts with 70-year-old Unnikrishnan – who made waves long ago with his first book before disappearing from the scene – making a bold statement at a press conference, where only a couple of journalists show up, that he will die later that month. How? Why? Neither is declared, nor is anybody interested in knowing. Until Paru, a cub reporter in a local newspaper, is assigned to investigate the reason. Since life is like a detective novel whose end can't be revealed in the beginning, as per our narrator, we're taken on a tortuous journey through winding roads of memory and a mofussil town.

Portrait of an ageing man

The coming-of-age story, told in second-person narrative through a variety of snippets of life, is absorbing: a young, self-effacing Unnikrishan's tryst with neglected people, forbidden things, an apathetic father, and his feverish fascination with reading ("if you could, you would have swallowed books like *puttu* and *kadala* curry and washed it down with hot tea").



You: A Novel
M. Mukundan; trs Nandakumar K.
Eka
₹499

The prime of youth contrasts with the pessimism of old age. The loneliness, ineptitude, and meaninglessness of old age grow, as Unnikrishnan's relationship with a bold and vivacious Paru matures, stirring desire in him. Buried secrets and subtle ironies are revealed at every turn, eliciting surprise and a hint of dismay in Unnikrishnan. "While there were women like Pankajakshi who rented out their bodies, no books were loaned out," the narrator says. One of the most gutting sequences is when a callous mother asks a jobless Unnikrishnan to prove useful and impregnate his sister-in-law.

The convoluted reality of existing in a country fractured along religious lines shows up, in a slightly tangential manner, via various comments ("my shirt stinks of Hitler's and Mussolini's uniforms"). It is further elaborated in Unnikrishnan's debut "secular" novel, *Digambaram* – the plot touching upon the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 – where a befuddled Kunjachchu Master, physically and mentally scorched by hate, takes a plunge in the village pond fully naked.

The writing is simple, rough-hewn, and has an abundance of quirky metaphors ("sweet as *kokum* smile"; "writing a novel as holding a tiger by the tail"), characteristic of most translated novels. But the one thing that really lifts this book despite a quotidian plotline is its ability to create mystery and keep it intact. Despite tremendous interest in Unnikrishnan's two-decade-long disappearance, the novel remains tight-lipped. One wonders if this is the story's way of offering autonomy to its protagonist on whom old age has descended like a "bad case of toothache". But in the last 20 or so pages, the big reveal – which reads like a last ditch effort to fit the sequences in a neat order – takes us by surprise, and that too, an unappetising one.

And thus, it is heartbreaking to see the novel, which sustained the mystery for so long, giving in to the seductive charm of over-explication in the fag end, leaving the reader dejected and dissatisfied.

The reviewer is the author of the Hindi short story collection Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chor Darwaja *(2023).*

In all their glory

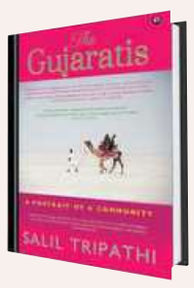
Salil Tripathi's biography is a magisterial summation of a community often accused of having only mercantile interests

Jerry Pinto

(Clockwise from left) Paromita Vohra; Mehul Devkala; Prabodh Parikh; Pratishtha Pandya; and Meghnad Desai. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Somewhere on the subcontinent – though it might well be somewhere in the world for are Indians not everywhere now? – someone is working on 'The Goans'. (It is likely to be a man. You figure out why.) I wonder if I am, as a person of Goan origin, the target audience for the book. I do not think I would buy it. If I had it given to me, as this book was, I wonder how I should read it. Probably with these dual thoughts: 'I would have done it differently' (for which read: I should have done this better with the codicil: I would have refused to do it) and 'Why do we always deal in stereotypes?'

Salil Tripathi deals with the Gujarati stereotype – that of the businessman, the relentless maker of profits, the focussed seeker of the greater good of the self – by simply taking them as given and then explaining his own life story in terms of those drivers. (This is called self-implication.) Then, with great good humour, he takes you across the world to show you the Gujarati in all his glory.



The Gujaratis: A Portrait of a Community
Salil Tripathi
Aleph
₹1,499

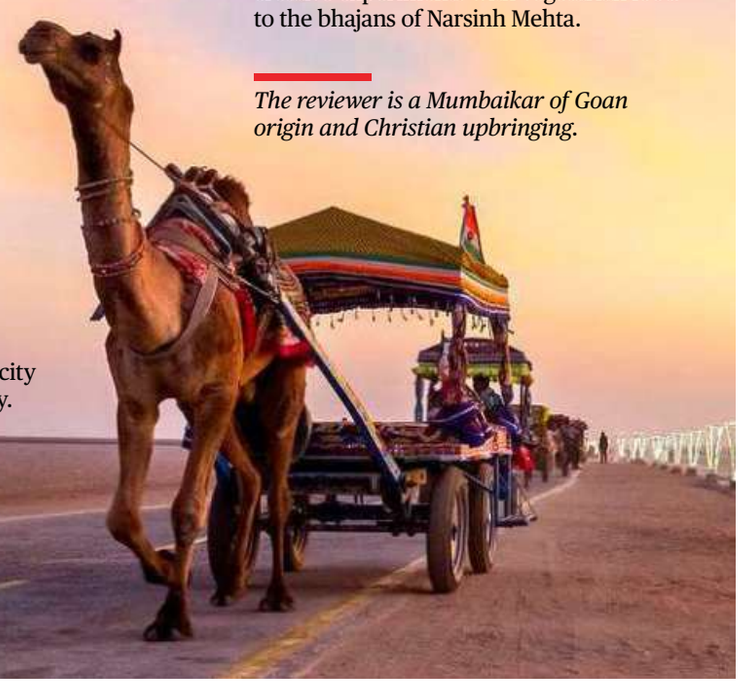
The Gujarati net

And let us be clear, it is his glory. We are now, we all know, in some way, entangled in the Gujarati net. There are four Gujarati men who in different ways have us where they want us. If you do not know who the Big Four are, well, put down this newspaper and go out and buy Tripathi's book, all will soon be made clear and you can retreat to the place under the rock that you have made your home.

I enjoyed reading *The Gujaratis* despite my misgivings. (See paragraph one.) You can actually dip into the book at random. On page 644, for instance you can take the first line after the asterisk as a title 'Perhaps Love Will Find A Way' and read through to the end of the chapter, sigh, shake your head, say a little prayer to whatever God you believe in, and then put the book down or else use it as to do your bicep curls.

For God is an important player with the Gujaratis. I have long believed that God's major function on the subcontinent is that of a dietician. He is deeply interested in what you eat and when you eat it. This is where the Gujarati Jain has played havoc with the syncretic fabric of Mumbai. They do not eat X because that is what their religion says and so no one should eat X in their vicinity. How do they describe their vicinity? That depends really on their paying power.

Now the Gujarati and the Marwari built the city of Bombay. They may even have built the State of Bombay. For a long time, I believe the division of labour was: the Gujarati and the Marwari would run the businesses; the Marathi would do the thinking and the warring. And the State of Bombay went from strength to strength. (I am now using Tripathi's definition of Gujarati, an inclusive one, in which he scoops up Parsis, who might well object to being so included.) The Gujarati and the Marwari made of the city a productive economy.



The major products were opium and cotton. Then they watched as the money shifted away from production and they moved on. The city of Bombay closed down its mills. The mill workers were broken, the Communist stranglehold on the city dismantled; they cried havoc and let slip the dogs of war.

People spotting

And yet, and yet. One of the many joys of reading *The Gujaratis* was people spotting. When I got the book, I thought to myself: Now let me see, who are the Gujaratis I know? I started with Tulsi Vatsal, and there she was in the index. I went on to Prabodh Parikh, and there he was too. I thought: Isn't Paromita Vohra half a Gujarati? She is and there she is, her film *Cosmopolis: Two Tales of a City* mentioned in the food wars the Gujaratis are waging on our diversity with complete disregard for the fact that this city once belonged to the Kolis, a farming and fishing community.

They're all here. Tripathi has done his job thoroughly as is his wont. The blurbs are from a Maharashtrian Brahmin (Shobhaa De), an Anglican white (Rachel Dwyer, author of *Teach Yourself Gujarati*), a French political scientist (Christophe Jaffrelot), a bitextual writer who specialises in maybeness (Suketu Mehta) and a Shashi Tharoor who has recently explained to us why he is a Hindu. No Muslims.

This is, at the end of it all, a magisterial summation of a community often accused of having only mercantile interests. But Tripathi reminds us of the many beautiful gifts Gujarat has brought us, from its creative experiments with vegetarian food to the bhajans of Narsinh Mehta.

The reviewer is a Mumbaikar of Goan origin and Christian upbringing.

(Clockwise from left) At an election campaign in Tamil Nadu; Philip Jackson's Gandhi statue in London; and voters at a Haryana polling booth. (GETTY IMAGES AND SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)

EXCERPT

GANDHI IN INDIA'S SOUL

A new book by Gopalkrishna Gandhi on what keeps the country alive and awake despite many missteps

Two questions are at the heart of this personal history of post-Independence India: "Is independent India impossibly fragmented or indissolubly united?" Taking a cue from Ruskin Bond who had written that "Religion did not make me an Indian. But history did. And in the long run, it's history that counts," the writer decided to chronicle some remarkable events and indelible moments from India's modern history, from the assassination of Gandhi, his grandfather, in 1948, to Narendra Modi's reign which began in 2014. An excerpt from Gopalkrishna Gandhi's The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India:

As in the first election to the Lok Sabha (1951-52), which saw less than half of India instal a Nehru-led Congress government in office, less than half of India installed the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance in office in 2014. Be the nation's guardian, I said to him through an 'open letter' in *The Hindu*. As much of that India which did not vote for you as the India that did. Be the Savarkar in your heart if you must be, I said to him, but be the Ambedkar in your mind that India needs you to be. I did not refer him to Gandhi. I should have. I should have said, 'Place Gandhi in your soul.'

Had the fast and regular clip of polls in India seen the process become cleaner, less manipulable by the old and new interests that abound in the country to short-change the voter and strike gold for themselves? No. Had the hold of money over elections abated? No way! Had the intimidation of voters been reduced, if not banished? Heavens, no. Had the distribution of liquor and cash as last-minute incentives been abandoned? Ayyo, far from it. Has slander, mud-slinging and character assassination in election campaign rhetoric ended? They had only increased in foulness and frequency. Had the insidious introduction of religious sentiment in campaigns been given up? On the contrary, leaflets appealing for votes had now come to be given with the images of gods and goddesses attached to them. Had all violence before, during, and after the polls ceased? It had only increased.

Electoral sleights

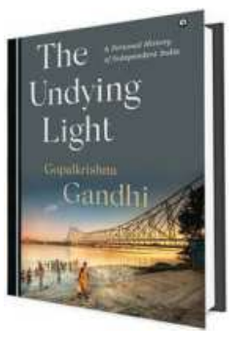
India's electoral democracy was moving higher and higher, not in the science of electoral finesse but in the art of electoral sleights of hand, a process that subverted the system without the system realising that it was being subverted.

So, was the Indian voter now beginning to take malpractice as standard practice?

The prime minister's announcement on Independence Day – his first from the turreted heights of Delhi's Red Fort – abolishing the Planning Commission seemed to me to defy reasoning. True, Yojana Bhavan had its 'passengers', and much paper had rolled in the idle ink of reports no one read, much less acted on, but still, who would doubt or deny that some of India's finest minds had given from that organisation, a sense of the nation's integrated progress towards set goals in poverty alleviation and self-reliance? The step was, for me, the lobotomy of a vital organ of the state.

And what was to take the place of planning by experts? Intuiting by a new elite?

Stray pieces of news kept coming around this time of moves to instal statues of Gandhi's assassin and, more disturbingly, of groups doing 'shooting practice' on pictures of Gandhi. Asked by the media to write on the subject, I chose to not react.



The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India
Gopalkrishna Gandhi
Aleph
₹999

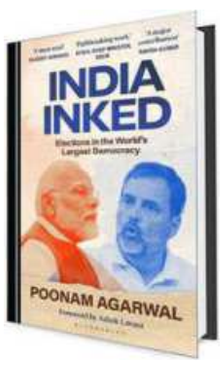
Honoured in London

In the March of 2015, however, London saw a truly beautiful thing happen. On its leafy Parliament Square, a statue was installed of Gandhi, sculpted by Philip Jackson, one of the most gifted sculptors of our time. The moving spirit behind this was Meghnad Desai, a Labour peer and economist, guided by India's high commissioner in London, Ranjan Mathai, who was keen that the statue should bear a true likeness. Doing the honours were Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron and India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley. Amitabh Bachchan was invited to speak at the event and so was I. It was, as I have said, a beautiful event because here was Gandhi, a dismantler of the British Raj, being honoured by a statue to him being placed in front of Britain's Parliament House, and unveiled by the country's prime minister, right beside the statues of two men who had opposed him – Winston Churchill and Field Marshal Smuts. That there also stood in the same square, statues of Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela, was a felicity I could not but notice and be glad of. I will not take the reader's time by repeating what I said at the event, but I must record that I did say that while London was having this Gandhi statue come up, there were those in India who wanted a statue of his assassin to be raised. After the event was over, Jaitley said to me, 'Gopal, be assured we will never let that happen.' I found that reassurance coming from one as responsible as him, most gratifying. Jaitley's premature death not long thereafter grieved me. His mind was committed to the Bharatiya Janata Party, but with its autonomy to think, intact. He was no bonded labourer.

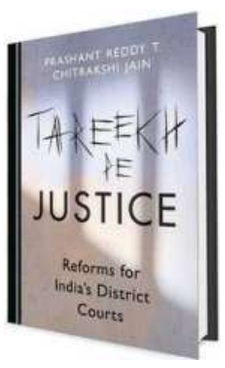
Excerpted with permission from Aleph.

BROWSER

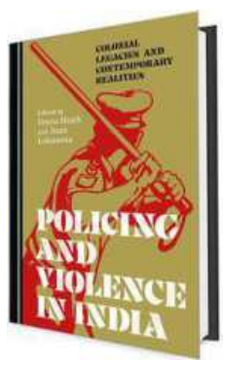
India Inked
Poonam Agarwal
Bloomsbury
₹799
How are elections conducted in India? Who funds it? An investigative journalist looks into the Indian electoral machinery, including the electoral bonds scheme, which has now been termed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, to find out about the inner workings of politics.



Tareekh Pe Justice: Reforms for India's District Courts
Prashant Reddy T., Chitrakshi Jain
Simon & Schuster
₹799
Two writers look into the dysfuntional working of the district judiciary. It's the first point of contact for most Indians seeking justice and the writers argue why a rethink is necessary so that people are served better.



Policing and Violence in India
Edited by Deana Heath and Jinee Lokaneeta
Speaking Tiger
₹799
Scholars write on the urgent need to address police violence in India, raising two questions. Why does India's police force still echo the priorities of Empire? Why has the institution, tasked with maintaining law and order, normalised violence?



Careless People: A Story of Where I Used to Work
Sarah Wynn-Williams
Pan Macmillan India
₹699
As Director of Global Public Policy at Facebook (now Meta), Wynn-Williams rubbed shoulders with founder-CEO Mark Zuckerberg and other top leaders, including Sheryl Sandberg. In her memoir, the diplomat from New Zealand writes about her seven years at the company.

(Clockwise) A still from the film *Kuch Sapney Apne*, directed by queer activists Sridhar Rangayan and Saagar Gupta; the filmmakers; and Mamta Saraf and Pracheta Sharma.

HOPE IN LEGISLATION

- Under the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, queer persons can make a living will/ an advanced directive to state who can make medical decisions on their behalf.
- The Devu G. Nair vs. State of Kerala case from March 2024 has extensive guidelines on how police protection and habeas corpus cases of queer couples should be dealt with.
- The Ministry of Home affairs has issued a series of advisories which gives queer couples joint ration cards and rights to joint bank accounts.
- The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India has encouraged insurance companies to offer inclusive health plans.

(Inputs from lawyer Rohin Bhatt, author of The Urban Elite v. Union of India*)*

GROWING OLDER AS A QUEER PERSON IN INDIA

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

"When the Supreme Court read down Section 377, it made it clear that only consensual acts were decriminalised, while non-consensual acts remained punishable. However, with the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita replacing the Indian Penal Code, the government has left out any direct mention of non-consensual same-sex acts, creating a legal vacuum," says Amit. In both online and offline spaces, he thinks this has contributed to an increase in abusive behaviour. The lack of prosecution makes the elderly more vulnerable.

Legal hurdles with death and adoption

Even for those in secure partnerships or families, love comes with roadblocks. Dignity in death often crosses Trasy's mind. "In medical situations, the lack of legal recognition scares me. I often worry that if I were to die, my partner wouldn't have the legal right to make decisions for me or to claim my body. I want to live and die with dignity, and I'd prefer my partner to have the authority to act on my wishes," she says.

Documentary filmmaker Pracheta Sharma, 44, is parent to a six-year-old girl she adopted in 2020, around the same time she met her partner Mamta Saraf. She talks about how India's adoption laws and the lack of marriage equality adversely impacts their family structure. "Within the adoption laws, you are not allowed to declare anybody else as a legal guardian if they're not from your family [blood relation]. One parent has to adopt and the other remains in the shadows. I think it's a highly discriminatory space in a setup that has decided to be progressive. If I was with a man in this equation and I wanted a family, a civil marriage is all it would take, and he would automatically become the other parent. But with a same-sex partner I can't do that," says Sharma.

Not being a legal guardian in the adoption papers translates into several problems for Saraf, 46, who has no rights beyond social acceptance. Travelling alone with the child can create issues and even making an investment or insurance in her name needs to be done through circuitous routes, setting up problems for the future. Saraf and Sharma are open about their relationship (it helps to live in cosmopolitan Mumbai) with their families, housing society, and their child's school. But challenges remain.

In the absence of marriage equality, some queer couples create a living will, or insurance nominations, or social contracts with family and friends to ensure their wishes are respected. "Making a will in your 40s isn't enough; you have to ensure your partner isn't sidelined later," says Saraf. There are couples who find protection through business partnerships. "Our production company, Solaris Pictures, ensures shared assets," says Rangayan.

There is a constant need for *jugaad* if you are a queer person, says Khanna, 41, who lives with her partner, psychiatrist Kavita Arora, 51. In their eight years of living together, the mental health practitioners have faced several "minor dents", be it in the process of opening a joint bank account or applying for a swimming pass in their apartment.

Maya Sharma, 70, says she and her older queer female friends often think of finding places to stay together instead of having to fit into heteronormative spaces. Unlike in western countries, where there is a push towards senior living communities catering to queer people or more acceptance within regular senior communities, India has a long way to go.

Sharma, who runs the Vadodara-based Vikalp, which works with marginalised queer women and transpersons, says she finds the senior living communities in Gujarat limiting. "The way we have been moulded because of our queer identities makes it hard for us to fit into the heteronormative environment of an old-age home. Secondly, many of these places are religion-oriented and many of us have friends and lovers from different religions and castes. So these religion-centric old-age homes are frightening to us," she says.

Finding chosen families

In the absence of formal support structures, many depend on chosen families. "I have a network of friends who have been with me since college. They are my family," says Iggy, 51, a production designer in Mumbai. Iggy recently moved from Goa with her partner of 12 years to give her dogs better medical care. She tells me how, while coming out in her 30s, she discovered a "whole new world" of queer individuals. There were groups such as Labia and Gay Bombay in the early 2000s; the queer-run store Azad Bazaar, where the balcony became a community hub, with free coffee; and Gulabi Adda, which held monthly meetup parties that brought a sense of belonging and lifelong friendships.

It helped to create a community that Iggy feels has shifted to online spaces for younger queer people today. Activists believe this may leave out the older lot that is not digitally savvy and unable to access information on resources such as support groups, therapists, sexual health services or simply finding spaces to hang out.

That said, Maya Sharma points to the strong support among female queer collectives that are different from the worlds gay men inhabit, perhaps because women's concerns are different when it comes to stigma and HIV-related issues. They often help trans-masculine and lesbian women from smaller towns who have fled to escape persecution or forced marriages. "We have created advocacy collectives such as Vikalp, Nazariya, or Sappho, and we help them out. But we can't always help in day-to-day living. That kind of acceptance requires institutional support, which is lacking," she says.

But many activists agree that the landscape is evolving. Khanna says that a number of people "came out to their families during the marriage equality fight" as it was being livestreamed on national television, resulting in these conversations coming into the mainstream. She admires how courts have provided support and protection to marginalised queer couples across India in the last couple of years. "People with privilege, and banks, organisations and authorities, need to come up with such explicit support to help those without privilege access it. Then, it can be truly empowering."

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

SILVER FOR THE GODDESS

March is when the Rupa Tarakasi craftsmen of Cuttack begin work for Durga Puja, but this 500-year-old art form is facing a precarious future

Aditya Ansh
Rishika Priyadarsi

In the old town of Cuttack, Raghunath Patra begins his day at work by placing silver balls on a wooden table and pressing them into wires or *tara*. The molten wires are then carved into patterns to create beautiful silver filigree work known as Rupa Tarakasi – an art form that has been a part of Odisha's cultural heritage for over five centuries.

As early as March, the city's artisans begin preparations for the Durga Puja season in October-November, when grand *chandi medhas* (silver filigree tableaux) adorn *puja* pandals. Last year, Cuttack's Rupa Tarakasi was granted a GI (Geographical Indication) tag, with the Odisha government pledging to make Odisha the 'Tarakasi hub' of India.

A year later, artisans say "none of the promises have materialised". Workers remain underfunded, and they also face challenges with fake Tarakasi products from Kolkata and elsewhere flooding the market. "Customers are often unaware of the difference and lean towards products that are cheaper. The Tarakasi work from Kolkata lacks intricacy and does not float on water, unlike authentic Odisha craftsmanship," says Patra. The price of Tarakasi from Cuttack ranges between ₹700 and ₹12,000 depending on the size and work involved in the design.

In one of the narrowest lanes of Cuttack's Mohammadia Bazaar is Jayant Sahu's shop. His family has been in the business for over 100 years. "My father had the licence to export Rupa Tarakasi artefacts to the U.S. and the U.K., but it was cancelled during the Emergency," says Sahu. He is joined by his son, who holds an MBA degree but works to keep the Tarakasi art form alive.

Sahu's workshop has four artisans who sit cross-legged on the floor as they work on the designs. The *medha* season brings a renewed sense of purpose for these artisans. "This is the only time of the year when we see stable income," says Sahu. Ventilation in the room is minimal and the dim lighting makes it more difficult for artisans to work.

In the 1970s and 80s, Sahu's father Iswar had 25 artisans working under him but now the number is down to a single digit. For generations, this art form and its know-how have been passed down in the family but things are changing. "The children of artisans have shifted to cities to take up jobs in the IT sector," says Patra.

Adapting to a younger audience

A certain type of Tarakasi involves women creating jewellery with the help of safety pins. This has become rare today and "traditional pieces like the Douma necklace have disappeared with time as the women stopped making them", adds Sahu.

Jewellery shops sell different varieties of Tarakasi necklaces, earrings and bangles, but the art form goes beyond just these. There are traditional designs such as the *Sindura Pharua* (container used by married women to store *sindoor* or vermillion powder) and *sindoor* sticks, which are not sold much in the market due to a lack of demand.

"There is no money in this art form. If we go to the jewellery shops and ask for better prices for our designs, they refuse outright," says Sahu. Evolving market trends have prompted artisans like Sahu to introduce newer designs – in minimalistic patterns and geometric shapes instead of the elaborate animal or flower motifs – to cater to younger audiences. "I have come up with cocktail rings, hairpins and so on; we must adapt," he explains.

Health concerns

Tarakasi artisans are prone to several occupational health risks as a result of sitting, standing and bending for long periods of time, leading to high risk of musculoskeletal disorders. According to a 2023 study by *The Pharma Innovation Journal*, over 95% of artisans report pain in various body parts, including lower and upper back, neck, shoulders, hands, knees, fingers and legs. These occur due to the involvement of repetitive and focused manual activities that demand static effort and precision, the study says.

The immediate need, as highlighted by artisans, is for incentives from the government. "Whenever the government of Odisha presents gifts to foreign delegates, they prefer the traditional craft of Tarakasi," says Prakash Dash, who has been in the occupation for decades. Artists like him ask for subsidising of silver prices, grants for workshops and creation of dedicated hubs.

Despite diminishing profits, Cuttack's Tarakasi craftsmen hope for a better future. Many have now taken to social media and other online platforms to showcase their creations. Will the wheel of fortune turn in their favour? Only time will tell.

The writers are independent journalists who focus on the environment, culture and human interest.

Fine art The traditional Rupa Tarakasi work that adorns Durga Puja pandals in Cuttack; and (below) artisans at work. (WIKI COMMONS, GETTY IMAGES)

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Hybrid languages such as Arwi and Arabi-Malayalam were prevalent in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Now, a U.K.-led digitisation project is bringing surviving literature back into the light

WHEN SOUTH INDIA SPOKE ARABIC

Nahla Nainar
nahla.nainar@thehindu.co.in

Languages have become a hot topic in India today, with a battle for linguistic supremacy raging across the country. But to constrain the nation's linguistic diversity into monolithic grids is an impossible, and ill-advised task. With what would you replace words such as *tahsildar*, *jama-bandi*, *asal*, *khaali*, *wasool*, or *jilla*?

Long before the English language imprinted itself on South Asia's collective consciousness, there were other tongues that held that position of high esteem. Arabic, Persian and Urdu co-existed and were assimilated into Indian languages in a more intimate way.

Interestingly, interactions with Arabs through trade and religious dissemination also led to the growth of hybrid languages such as 'Lisan ul-Arwi' or 'Arabi-Tamil' (also referred to as 'Arabu-Tamil') and 'Arabi-Malayalam' – with a canon of published literature and daily correspondence that supported a multicultural society up until the 19th century in southern India. Arabic-influenced vernacular can be seen in Sindhi, Gujarati, Arabu-Telugu and Arabu-Bengali too, to name just a few.

Maritime heritage and flower-shaped poems

Arwi consists of 40 letters, of which 28 are from Arabic, and 12 are devised by adding diacritical marks that allow Arabic letters to express sounds particular to Tamil. Similarly, the Arabi-Malayalam alphabet has 56 letters.

In its heyday, publications in Arwi covered a wide range of subjects, including architecture, arithmetic, astronomy, fiction, horticulture, medicine, sports, sexology, war manuals, yoga and general literature. *Madinattun-Nuhas* (Copper Town, 1858), a historical novel in Arwi by Imamul Aras, published in 1858, is credited as being the first work of fiction produced by the Tamil-speaking people. And as scholar Tayka Shu'ayb Alim – the first Tamil Muslim to receive the National Award for Outstanding Arabic Scholar – notes in his book *Arabic, Arwi and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu*, Arwi Muslims wrote poems in the shapes of flowers, leaves and geometric figures, known as '*Mushajjarah*' and '*Mudawwarah.*' They were inspired by the '*Nagabandanam*' and '*Ashtabandanam*' genres of Tamil poetry, which were written in the shape of serpents.

Over time, these languages became the lingua franca for many Muslim settlements, and as recently as the 1950s, Arabu-Tamil was taught at home to girls and in Arabic colleges as an allied subject. Arabi-Tamil and Arabi-Malayalam played a key role in educating women from conservative Muslim families, at a time when they lived in seclusion.

Retracing a layered past

Publications in these languages have become rare today, and can only be found in libraries, seminaries and family collections – where, sadly, many of the owners do not know how to read them. Now, scholars have begun to scientifically document and preserve surviving literature.

Most recent among these efforts is a project for the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) titled 'Mathematical Practices of the Indian Ocean World in Coastal Islamic Communities of the Coromandel and Malabar, South India'. It was executed by the Centre for Islamic Tamil Cultural Research (CITCR), affiliated to Jamal Mohamed College in Tiruchi, and in collaboration with Kerala's Mahatma Gandhi University.

Supported by a grant of £14,926 (approximately ₹16 lakh), the year-long project surveyed and digitised notes, theological texts, printed manuals, marriage registers, publications and textbooks from the 18th century. The documents – sourced from personal collections, religious and social institutions, and Arabic college libraries in the states' Coromandel and Malabar regions – focus on non-European learning and mathematical practices that are unique to the subcontinent. They are also a repository of ethnic medical knowledge, recorded in the form of songs for easy memorisation.

"You cannot write the history of a community with just stories," says J. Raja Mohamed, director of CITCR and co-principal researcher of the EAP project (along with professor M.H. Ilias of Mahatma Gandhi University's School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies). "You need facts too, because these documents show how our ancestors lived."

Minutiae of the everyday

At a time when there's a general lack of interest in record keeping and preservation in India, the project is a significant achievement.

Mohamed delved into the Coromandel region, while Ilias looked at Malabar, and their teams, with training from the French Institute of Pondicherry, the project's archival partner, fanned out along the coastal towns. They retraced 62 printed books, 25 manuscripts, seven notebooks, six documents and four booklets in Arabi-Tamil and Arabi-Malayalam. The digitised versions – EAP 1457 – are available now on the British Library's website.

"We found several texts detailing non-European ways of measuring and weighing. They were possibly brought to India by Arab travellers, scholars, and trade-based diaspora," says Ilias, explaining how the project helped them learn more about the way Muslim communities in these coastal areas lived and worked. "It is an eye-opener to realise that activities like boatbuilding and mosque construction relied on these measurements, and are still in use in certain regions." As examples, he cites '*kullam*', which is still used to calculate liquid measures, and *amshik*, the five-stroke method of counting, prevalent in local markets. In Malabar, boatbuilding continues to use the calculation system of *marakanakku* (measure of wood).

The widespread usage of Arabi-Tamil, especially among Muslim women, could be seen, too. "We found various guidance booklets, and a collection of poems and folk songs on Islamic themes, indicating that the language was being taught to and read by Muslim women," adds Raja.

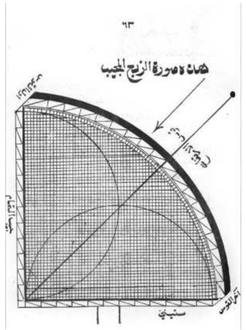
Ilias remembers his grandmother being a prolific writer of Arabi-Malayalam poems. "Whenever she prepared Ayurvedic home cures, she would sing the Arabi-Malayalam recipes. Literacy in the language was a mark of prestige for Muslim women in Kerala, just as Arwi was for Tamil Muslim women," he shares. "Sadly, when the Kerala government began its campaign for total literacy in 1990, my grandmother was assessed as 'illiterate' because she knew only Arabi-Malayalam."

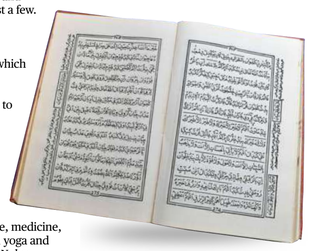
Hope for rare publications

Despite the wealth of documentation unearthed, the project also proved to be arduous. "Quite a few books, especially in the libraries of educational institutions, were disintegrating because they had been stored haphazardly in musty rooms," says Mohamed.

In the case of personal collections, lack of knowledge about their own antecedents proved to be problematic. "Myths of origin and hearsay cannot be treated as historical fact, but that is what most people recounted. This is one of the reasons why it has become difficult to write an accurate history of Tamil Muslims today," he adds. Some also developed cold feet, rescheduling viewing appointments umpteen times or flatly refusing to show their documents.

While similar problems were prevalent in the Malabar region too, Ilias is encouraged by initiatives to bring the outmoded Arabi-Malayalam into the modern era. "The University of Calicut's C.H. Mohammed Koya Chair for Studies on Developing Societies has recently introduced a Unicode for Arabi-Malayalam that could help us recover more documents through computerisation. It gives us hope that rare publications in other dialects like Hebrew-Malayalam and Syriac-Malayalam will also get preserved eventually," he concludes.





Lost and found (Clockwise from above) Raja Mohamed (left) and his assistant working on the digitisation of Arabi-Tamil manuscripts; measurements in Arabi-Malayalam; M.H. Ilias; a book in Arabi-Tamil; and text in Arabi-Malayalam. (MOORTHY M., SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

VVIP culture is Indian culture

If you can't escape from India, this privileged group can show you the best way to live

It was reported the other day that a 66-year-old former vice chancellor was arrested for impersonating a VVIP. Being a VVIP myself, the news made me very sad. Should we be penalising people for pursuing the second biggest achievement open to Indians? I don't need to spell out the biggest – escaping from India (and not getting deported). But for those stuck here, their best hope for a good life is to become a VVIP.

There is a rationale to this: if you can't get out but still want to escape, being a VVIP is the only way to keep India at bay. What is a VVIP? They are nothing but a humble person who, by erecting a high security cocoon, glides through life with minimal friction, at a safe distance from the pullulating swarms of fellow Indians.

Being a VVIP also enables me to do public service, such as having my security guards loitering outside a barber shop, intimidating passers-by, while I get a free head massage with sesame oil. As a VVIP, I get to meet other VVIPs in luxury resorts and exchange views on issues of mutual interest, such as hawala, real estate, and vandalism. Above all, nothing can beat the sense of safety I feel on the streets of Delhi when I realise that the police won't stop me if I break the speed limit, or break the red light, or someone's leg or head. If my bodyguards and I accidentally bash up someone from the wrong community, the cops will take one look at the blue beacon on my car and arrest the person we beat up.

Free-floating aristocrats

Contrary to popular myths, VVIPs are not an arrogant lot. Maybe at a superficial level, someone like me might seem unapproachable. But deep inside, I am a nice person. Deep inside my security cordon, to be precise, I think of myself as a nobody, just like you.

But I am a nobody who needs crowds to magically part for me wherever I go. I need traffic jams to melt when I travel by road. Whether it's the bank, the airport, the toll booth or the temple, queues must auto-dissolve when I approach. The word 'queue', nay, the letter 'Q' itself, is banned from my dictionary.

People often seek me out for tips on how to become a VVIP. It's simple. You need two qualities: an unshakeable conviction that you are the exception for whom the rules shall be broken, and a profound lack of shame. If you are shameless enough, rest assured you'll make a great VVIP one day.

Indian society is founded on a fixed hierarchy, aka the caste system. The higher rungs have always commanded an exclusive set of perks and privileges. VVIP culture is merely a modern iteration of this ancient set-up. If tomorrow all of India's VVIPs were to disappear, millions wouldn't know who to kowtow to, and who to lynch. VVIPs are a ritual class that performs the critical role of offering guidance to the primeval Indian reflexes of sycophancy and obedience. They are the free-floating aristocrats without whom Indian democracy would implode, and the justice system would flail about blindly, unable to distinguish those who're above the law from those who aren't.

India's USP

Some say India should have a system of annually auctioning a fixed number of VVIP 'tags' to a select pool of cronies, just like we do with public assets and government contracts. But this is a bad idea because India's billionaires are already accused – falsely, in my opinion – of owning India's politicians. So having them gallivanting around with personal bodyguards paid for by the tax-payers not only makes for poor optics, it could even lead to accusations of 'suit boot *ki sarkar*', etc. The greatest strength of India's unique VVIP system is that a VVIP doesn't need to contribute anything of value. All you need is alphabetic security of your choice: Y, Y+, Z, Z+, C, C+, along with a capacity to feel sadistic joy as thousands of commuters bake patiently in the sun for hours, waiting for your cavalcade to zip past.

Brazil produces dozens of soccer geniuses every year. China has an assembly line of Olympic-class table tennis players. India's USP is an unending pipeline of VVIPs. All those Soros-funded doomsayers who go on about India's stagnating per capita income never give us the full picture: we have the world's highest CAGR of VVIPs per capita. Why isn't that something to celebrate?

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

Helping hand Vivek Sharma is founder of Uhapo, a social enterprise that assists cancer patients and caregivers. (EMMANUAL YOGINI)

PERSON OF INTEREST

VIVEK SHARMA AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

How a tragedy changed the meaning and purpose of a young parent's life

Life can crash-land and go up in flames in six hours. Your only child, a healthy five-year-old sunbeam, your primary source of joy, can step off the school bus, devour his snack, head off for a nap – and never wake up. How does any parent find the strength to emerge from this?

Vivek Sharma, 41, once a marketing professional who wanted a family, car, house and job, has spent the last decade remaking himself after his son fell into a state of unconsciousness due to a bleeding oesophagus and passed away hours later. "If someone had asked me then, 'What is the purpose of your life?' my answer would have been very different," says Sharma, who was born in Delhi, brought up in Kanpur, and moved to Mumbai with a suitcase of standard issue dreams. "Now I don't value any material thing. I believe I have been chosen to do something that nature wanted me to do."

Like all of us, Sharma says on a podcast, he is a storehouse of memories from faraway times that can jostle their way back to centrestage, as if they were freshly minted. In our conversation, I'm guilty of making him relive some of his best and worst memories. "Very tasty, mumma," Amogh, a gentle, nature-loving boy, would tell his mother Sweta every time he ate her food.

Pain and a superpower

Amogh's sudden death in 2014 – at the same hospital where he was born – marked the starting point of a journey that led to a book and podcast (both titled *God Is Not Fair?*) and several cancer-related start-up ventures, in partnership with Sweta, all with a singular purpose.

"Transforming other people's lives is the only purpose of living," says Sharma. "*Pehle meri aukat nahi thi.*" Earlier, he believes, he wasn't ready. Sharma's suffering gave him a new superpower.

His podcast, which ran for five years, logged a million listeners. The first episode of his new podcast *Dil Ka Haal Sune Dilwala* is just out on YouTube where he discusses loneliness and solitude, and harnessing the power of storytelling to heal and inspire people.

The couple's decade-old social entrepreneurship venture Uhapo was set up after a series of smaller efforts, including a cancer awareness foundation – named after his son and his classmate's cousin who had cerebral palsy – and a matrimonial site for cancer survivors that has brought together 56 couples since 2018. The name is from the Hindi word *uhapoh* meaning a state of uncertainty or ambiguity. Sharma says that by removing the h, he is metaphorically clearing the doubts and offering clarity.

In his conversations with cancer survivors, Sharma realised there was a vacuum in their lives. He confirmed this when he surveyed around 700 patients and their caregivers. "Nobody knows why cancer happens. And everyone wants to know 'Why did it happen to me?'" It was a feeling Sharma could identify with, and one that likely made him plunge headlong into helping those who face this disease. For a small fee, Uhapo helps people navigate cancer, connecting them to psychological support, diagnostics, government schemes and other financial aid, among many other things. One study last year said India was on track to become the "cancer capital of the world", predicting that the country would see 1.57 million cases of cancer in 2025.

For three years Sharma has organised an annual Cancer Conclave in February that is always inaugurated by a cancer survivor or their caregiver. This year, representatives from the ministry of health also attended.

Finding survivors

After their son's death Sharma and his wife became depressed. "I tried to resume my work. I used to be happy-go-lucky, now I was changed," he says. "Colleagues tried to cheer me up. They said things like 'you can try again' but a friend understood. She knew I had attempted suicide and told me to try documenting my thoughts."

Sharma was convinced nobody would be interested in his story, and so he decided to write about others who had survived knockout punches and turned their grief into something big. Those who had fashioned new beginnings from the worst endings. He travelled across the country and found many such stories but most people didn't want the world to know they had attempted suicide or battled depression. The book was eventually published with five stories during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sharma has seen this same reluctance to share stories publicly in cancer survivors too, especially from those who are more privileged. "The taboo of being a cancer survivor among the upper classes is still very high," he says, pointing to the fact that when a Steve Jobs dies of pancreatic cancer it isn't hidden but when "big people" here die of cancer nobody knows.

Sharma and Sweta have three daughters now. The youngest, Amogha, is nine months old. Sharma says the couple only stopped crying together every morning eight years after their son died. "It became muscle memory," he says. "I can't tell you how good it feels that we don't cry now."

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on Tamil Nadu's health helpline 104 and Sneha's suicide prevention helpline 044-24640050)

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Elegant end position

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

This was a beautifully bid grand slam. South, with the help of Key Card Blackwood, knew every card in North's hand except, possibly, the jack of spades. That card would make 13 tricks a breeze, but even without it, 12 tricks would depend on nothing more than the expected 3-2 split in spades.

NORTH
♠ A 9 8 6 5
♡ K 10 9
◇ K 2
♣ 5 3 2

WEST
♠ J 10 7 4 2
♡ Void
◇ Q 6 5 3
♣ J 10 9 7

EAST
♠ Void
♡ 8 6 5 4 2
◇ J 9 8 7
♣ Q 8 6 4

SOUTH
♠ K Q 3
♡ A Q J 7 3
◇ A 10 4
♣ A K

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2♣	Pass	2♠	Pass
3♡	Pass	4♡	Pass
4NT	Pass	5♡*	Pass
5NT	Pass	6◇**	Pass
7NT	All pass		

***2 key cards, among the 4 aces and the king of hearts**
****Specifically the king of diamonds**

Opening lead: Jack of ♣

South won the opening club lead in hand and cashed the king of spades. The spade split was a disappointment, but South continued by cashing his other top club, the other two top spades, and then began to run his hearts. This was the position with one heart left to cash: (Grid 2)

The jack of hearts put West in a pickle. A spade discard would be instantly fatal. A club discard would see dummy shed its spade and leave East with no winning discard. West chose to part with the six of diamonds. A diamond to dummy's king felled the queen and a diamond to the 10 brought home the grand slam. Well played!

NORTH
♠ 9
♡ Void
◇ K 3
♣ 5

WEST
♠ J
♡ Void
◇ Q 6
♣ 10

EAST
♠ Void
♡ Void
◇ J 9 8
♣ Q

SOUTH
♠ Void
♡ J
◇ A 10 4
♣ Void

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Birthdays today!

Berty Ashley

1 Born this day in 1811, Robert ___ was a German chemist, who discovered the elements, Caesium and Rubidium. For his research on the emission spectra of heated elements, he developed a laboratory burner, which became known by his name. What equipment was this?

2 Born this day in 1820, Anna Sewell was an English author whose only published book became one of the top selling children's books of all time. Written as an autobiography of a horse, what book is this that teaches animal welfare?

3 This Dutch painter, who was born this day in 1853, used vibrant colours, expressive lines and thick paints, influencing post-impressionist art. In his lifetime, he sold only one painting, 'The Red Vineyard', for 400 francs. But, in 2022, his work 'Orchard with Cypresses' was sold for $117m. Who was this brilliant artist?

4 Born this day in 1913, Marc Davis was a renowned animator, who worked with Walt Disney. He was instrumental in the origin of the 'Disney Princess', as he was responsible for the look of the very first one. Which character did he give the world in 1937?

5 This day in 1926, Ingvar Kamprad was born in a farm called Elmtaryd near the village of Agunnaryd. He started as a boy selling matchsticks, but eventually founded a company that is the world's largest furniture seller. What Swedish company did he start which has the initials of all the proper nouns in the first line of this question?

'Top jazz artist' Norah Jones at the Crypto.com Arena, in Los Angeles, California. (GETTY IMAGES)

6 Born this day in 1945, Eric Clapton is one of the most influential guitarists of all time. In 1968, a musician of a very popular band wrote a song 'While my guitar gently weeps' and asked Clapton to record a guitar solo on it. This led to him becoming the only person to play a guest solo for which iconic band?

7 Eddie Jordan, born this day in 1948, was an Irish racing driver, who founded an F1 team in his name which signed on Narain Karthikeyan as the first Indian in the sport. At the 1991 Belgian Grand Prix, Jordan was also the F1 debut of another driver at the age of 22, who went on to win seven championship titles. Which driver?

8 Born this day in 1950, Robbie Coltrane was an award-winning Scottish actor known for his roles on British TV. In the 2000s he became popular the world over for playing a lovable giant gamekeeper in a series of hit movies. As what character would you have seen Coltrane?

9 This Canadian singer, born this day in 1968, has one of the most identifiable and powerful voices in pop music. Her most famous song, which was for a 1997 James Cameron movie was recorded in a single take. Who is this singer whose voice will go on?

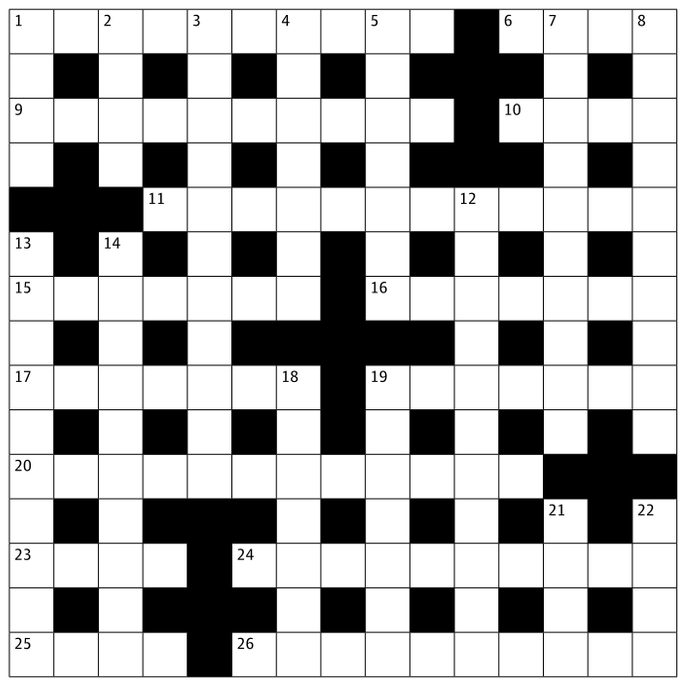
10 Norah Jones, born this day in 1979, is a singer and songwriter whose music is a fusion of jazz, country and blues. In 2002, she became the first artist of South Asian descent to win five Grammy awards. She is the daughter of a musician, who himself won four Grammy awards, and was nominated for an Oscar for scoring the movie *Gandhi*. Who was this musician?

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. Bunsen Burner
2. *Black Beauty*
3. Vincent van Gogh
4. Snow White
5. IKEA
6. The Beatles
7. Michael Schumacher
8. Hagrid
9. Celine Dion
10. Pandit Ravi Shankar

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3351



Across

1 Loose rope — vessel misses the alarm? (10)
6 Hot beverage, somewhat archaic (4)
9 In Paris, Peter embraces girlfriend in townhouse? (4-1-5)
10 City consultor regularly ignored (4)
11 Location for evening dress? (7,5)
15 Recovered from gangrene, wallaby's fresh start (7)
16 Location with unpleasant smell: its effect is psychological (7)
17 'I cry a river': first of stanza's lines showing who's under pressure (7)
19 Caribbean island offering halos, certificates of miracles, did you say? (2,5)
20 Emulate xylophonist: ring any bells (6,1,5)
23 Frank in tennis championship? (4)
24 In stomped University College head, now and again brought into use (10)
25 Everyman's eating spot of acrid duck sauce (4)
26 Artist to draw outline of the old mine? Almost (6,4)

Down

1 Supermarkets not opening? Oh dear! (4)
2 Earl to go for duelling sword (4)
3 As Spooner tells it, public school's meat is a bird of prey (11)
4 Seeing back half of salter, in lane, reversing — it's going on forever (7)
5 Rod's to knock up root vegetable (7)
7 Monarch, one surrounded by hams, cracked joke with dirty ending (3,7)
8 To odiously fudge announcement after the event (1,4,3,2)
12 Time for shopping — badly, if rack damaged (5,6)
13 Occasion hoping for bright ideas after British wet weather (10)
14 Tipsiness: so tiny crackers sandwiching French cheese (10)
18 Tool for bridge? (7)
19 Primarily solid — perhaps heavenly, endlessly rotating in circles? (7)
21 Apple computers lifted in con (4)
22 Last bit of wine — private room — paradise! (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3350

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The struggle for soul in algorithmic art

When creators prioritise quantity over quality to keep up with algorithms, the focus shifts to simply staying visible in an overcrowded marketplace

N. Anand Venkatesh
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The world has undergone a profound transformation in perceiving, creating, and consuming art, knowledge, and talent. In earlier times, quality was a revered rarity. A symphony by Mozart or a novel by Tolstoy stood as timeless masterpieces because they emerged from an era where scarcity defined value. The limited access to such works heightened their allure; they were cherished because they were rare. However, with the advent of digitisation and the Internet, this paradigm has shifted dramatically.

Today, we live in an age of abundance, where access to music, literature, and art is just a click away. But this democratisation of access has brought with it a paradox: while more people can create and consume than ever before, the lifespan of talent and the depth of appreciation for quality have diminished.

This abundance is both a blessing and a challenge. On the one hand, the barriers to entry in creative fields have been lowered. Anyone with a smartphone can record music, write poetry, or create digital art. Platforms such as YouTube have turned ordinary individuals into global sensations overnight. Yet, this very ease of creation has led to saturation. The sheer volume of content makes it difficult for any single work to stand out for long. What once took years to perfect can now be replicated or replaced within days. The fleeting nature of digital fame reflects this reality – today's viral sensation is tomorrow's forgotten name.

The abundance of creative output has also altered how we value it. The scarcity principle suggests that people value what is rare or difficult to obtain. In contrast, when something becomes overly accessible, its perceived worth diminishes. This phenomenon is evident in the way we consume art today – streaming platforms offer millions of songs and movies at our fingertips, yet we often skip through them without fully engaging. The ease of access fosters a culture of disposability; art becomes something to consume quickly rather than savour deeply.

Moreover, this abundance has encouraged superficial engagement with creative fields. The democratisation of tools such as music software or AI-powered writing assistants allows anyone to produce content without necessarily mastering the craft. While this inclusivity is commendable, it risks diluting the depth and originality that come from years of dedicated practice. In many cases, creators prioritise quantity over quality to keep up with algorithms that reward constant output. As a result, the focus shifts from creating meaningful work to simply staying visible in an overcrowded marketplace.

Existential questions

The rise of artificial intelligence adds another layer to this dynamic. AI tools are now capable of composing music, generating artwork, and even writing novels. While these technologies hold immense potential for innovation, they also raise existential questions about creativity itself. If machines can replicate human creativity effortlessly, what becomes of the artist? Will originality lose its significance when algorithms can mimic it? There is a danger that reliance on AI could erode creative instincts over time, as we outsource more and more of our thinking to machines.

AI-generated art has sparked debates about creativity's future, with tools such as DALL·E or ChatGPT producing works that mimic human ingenuity. While these tools empower creators, they also raise questions about originality and the dilution of artistic mastery. For instance, AI-generated novels or music may achieve technical perfection but often lack the emotional depth that defines human creativity.

In January 2024, controversy erupted when AI company MidJourney used 16,000 artists' works without permission to train its algorithms. This led to AI generating images mimicking famous styles (for instance, Van Gogh's), raising ethical concerns about copyright infringement and the dilution of artistic mastery in an oversaturated digital market. AI-generated track mimicked the voices of *Drake and The Weeknd*, sparking debates about authenticity and creativity in music. Its uncanny resemblance to human artistry highlighted how AI is reshaping the music industry while raising ethical concerns about originality and copyright. In 2023, an AI-generated poem won a regional poetry contest before judges realised it was machine-created. The incident sparked discussions about whether technical perfection can replace the soul and intent behind human literary expression.

A significant recent controversy in India involved A.R. Rahman, who used AI to recreate the voices of deceased singers Bamba Bakya and Shahul Hameed for a song in Rajinikanth's film *Lal Salaam*. Critics questioned whether such practices undermine the emotional authenticity and originality of music, while others saw it as a tribute to the late artists.

Yet, amid these challenges lies an opportunity for reflection. The abundance of content forces us to re-evaluate what truly matters in art and creativity. It compels us to seek depth over distraction and meaning over mere novelty. Perhaps the future lies not in resisting abundance but in learning how to navigate it wisely – curating what we consume and valuing works that resonate on a deeper level.

At its core, creativity is a human endeavour rooted in emotion, experience, and individuality – qualities that no machine can fully replicate. While AI might generate technically flawless outputs, it lacks the soul that defines great art. This distinction underscores why true mastery will always hold value: it represents not just skill but also the unique perspective of its creator.

As we move forward in this age of abundance, the challenge will be to balance accessibility with authenticity. We must find ways to celebrate quality without succumbing to superficiality and embrace technology without losing our humanity. The world may be moving toward greater convenience and efficiency, but creativity remains one domain where depth cannot be replaced by speed.

To escape the adverse effects of a content-saturated world, individuals can cultivate a deeper appreciation for art and beauty by engaging actively with creative works rather than passively consuming them. Prioritising quality over quantity is essential; savour a single piece of music or literature and explore its layers. In an age of abundance, the true connoisseur is not one who possesses the most, but one who cherishes the unique spark within the seemingly ordinary.

The writer is a judge of the Madras High Court.

Don't discount grandma's intelligence

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Every day, we are being bombarded with the latest from the world of artificial intelligence. While all the buzz is around AI, let us not forget the age-old GI, or grandma's intelligence.

Grandmothers come armed with a vast range of skills to tackle all sorts of issues. They are super-intelligent when it comes to dealing with fidgety grandchildren of all ages.

When school started teaching the writing of letters, grandma would make her granddaughter practise writing with a slate pencil on the terrace floor with some interesting and quirky singing and dancing with "hop, skip and jump" added with a traditional floor game. She knew it was difficult to hold attention for long with a book.

Children are fussy eaters and during lunch and dinner time she would come up with unheard-of tales and keep them guessing as to what would happen next as the tale progressed. The food which would otherwise take ages to eat would disappear soon.

When our house was raided by ants, grandma would drop a few peanuts in the nearby area. She knew that ants would arrive lured by the smell of peanuts and her keen eyes would spot the tiny hole it was coming from and she would plug it.

While we are all watching the onward march of AI, the next generation should realise GI has its relevance even today.

Control-shift from Madras to Chennai

The city will soar with confidence, with its 'Madrasi' roots entrenched

Nina John
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It's early morning (at least by my standards!), and I can hear the cries of "Puttu, Idiyappam, Puttu, Idiyappam" wafting into my consciousness. Simple breakfast dishes that were available long before they became fashionable and trendy. The great advantage is that these are home-made and delivered piping hot at 6.30 a.m. The prices are reasonable, a good bargain for saving the hours of toil, for the idiyappam at least. The puttu seller has a fixed route and specific timings, with select customers. He has graduated from his rusty bicycle to a scooter, but the rest of his paraphernalia is much the same – two large containers with lids. In a nod to modern Chennai, he uses a pair of gloves to pack the idiyappam or puttu into the casseroles or whatever the customer brings.

Market place

The puttu seller has not changed his main way of attracting customers: his voice. The average vegetable seller has done so, and at any time of the day one can hear the vendor's wares advertised over the loudspeaker, with some superb voice modulation and creative copy. There are now mini-trucks that arrive

with seasonal fruits and park in a street for some time, waiting for customers, blaring across the street. It was once so common to have all these sellers and we would step out of the gate and buy the vegetables or fruits, always with a little grumbling and bargaining as standard operating procedure. All that haggling stopped when "departmental" stores came in, and we started shopping in air-conditioned comfort; then we complained that the curry leaves were no longer free. After the shops arrived, it was *infra dig* to buy from the streets.

The next step in shopping was the e-commerce and quick commerce platforms. Again, a mixed blessing, since you cannot guarantee the quality of the vegetables or fruits delivered.

It's interesting to see how the traditional *maligaikadais*, or kirana stores, are battling competition.

The first is in the range of goods available. Where jam and sauce were the most you could get from these stores, now it's varieties of pasta, not just chapatis and bread, and nachos, tacos, traditional kadala mittai, and quinoa chips. The smaller stores still offer a personal touch, a recognition of the customer, whereas the larger stores are totally impersonal and delivery is "contactless".

Talking of deliveries, these have become an ubiquitous part of our lives – from goods and appliances to vegetables, groceries, medicines, diapers, and food – totally indispensable and an absolute blessing for the house-bound. While foodies can insist on labelling home delivery of dosas or parathas a food crime, they do provide a convenient option. But for those looking at Madras and Chennai, the night scene is totally different. Once lights were out at 8.30 p.m., till television started keeping people awake past midnight. The only "discos" of the 1970s were in the mornings (for the college-bunking crowd). Women were expected to be in the house before twilight and not expected to "loiter" in the streets.

Globalisation and the Internet have changed all that. Tech-savvy women get employed in high-end jobs and work international shifts overnight. Perceptions changed. Go to any IT park area or the eateries, posh or otherwise abutting the area and see how many mixed groups there are.

Music tradition

Some Madras traditions continue – the Marghazi music festival, with all the NRI snowbirds flocking into town, resplendent in their Kanjeevaram silks and the entire extended family in tow, the children with their American accents, the fathers in T-shirts, some flaunting *veshtis*, others Bermudas. The festival continues to grow in size and stature, genuinely attracting the best talent in music and dance.

Chennai will soar into the 21st century with grace and confidence, its 'Madrasi' roots deeply entrenched with its own customs, traditions and ethos.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Comics break gender, age and language barriers, spurring imagination and storytelling. ('Inking new narratives'; Mar. 23) They also promote tolerance, encourage abstract thought and critical thinking. It is rewarding and deserves patronage.
S. Raghavan

Promote sports

The father-son duo, authors of *Net Flicks*, deserve kudos for their book. ('Shuttle play'; Mar. 23) Such endeavours inspire children to opt for a sports career. But the lack of playing grounds in our schools and colleges is a glaring deficiency that needs to be addressed at the earliest. It not only helps us to produce sporting champions, but also contributes towards the physical fitness of youngsters.
Sri Vrinda N.

Celebrating silence

Pico Iyer's profound exploration of the void of calmness — spread across different phases and territories of his life — is cartographically palpable and celebrated in his textual landscape. ('Stillness that sings'; Mar. 23) Since it carries, with vehemence, the spirit of the time, it undoubtedly leaves us in a state of trans-rumination.
Vickey Prasad

The kind of silence, serenity and solitude that Pico Iyer is writing about is only accessible to the well-heeled travelling to places where the average person is excluded. This kind of silence and serenity is lost once you leave the place, and therefore, impermanent. Instead we should be aware that Indian tradition is replete with writings of saints advocating meditation and spiritual silence.
G. Parameswaran

To sir, with love

Good teachers can ignite curiosity, instill a love of learning, and inculcate the right values in children. ('When teachers become legends'; Mar. 23) Long after their academic lessons are forgotten, teachers live on in their students' hearts. This article evoked fond memories of my teachers over the years.
Anusha Pillay

Teachers give children the roots to grow and wings to fly. Some teachers are remembered for their patience and empathy, a few as taskmasters and many for their crisp, pithy remarks. No matter what, we owe them a lot.
Ratna Naidu

Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai once addressed the U.N, saying, "One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world." Teaching is less of a profession and more a passion by which the teacher can awaken growing minds.
B.M. Singh

Road to revival

The ritualistic and religious Theyyam of North Kerala is also an embodiment of the empowerment of the downtrodden over feudal hegemony of yesteryears. ('Dancing with fire and spirits'; Mar. 23) This vibrant folk art form is on a revival mode, getting wide acceptance throughout Kerala and beyond.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Missing sparrows
Urbanisation and depleting tree cover have hit the tiny birds hard
Pulluru Jagadishwar Rao

Medicine and God
Why doctors who work on scientific evidence believe in the divine?
Rishi Kanna

Silent scam, stolen soul
When education is pursued only for money, it becomes a gilded cage
Jeslitha Mary J.

Addressing the generation gap
The elderly should not insist on their wisdom
Vathsala Jayaraman

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Mumbai's new menus and the rediscovery of neighbourhood identity

THE TASTE OF PLACE

Inspired by communities (Clockwise from left) *Challah* bread with *saluna*-flavoured butter; Koli Echoes cocktail; Cirqa's façade; AliAkbar Baldiwala of Slink & Bardot; Pankaj Gupta of Cirqa; and Rollin Lasrado of Smoke House Deli. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Raul Dias

It's written in the wind." The saying holds significance to the Kolis. This ancient fishing community, endemic to Mumbai and its neighbouring coastal villages, calibrates the various characteristics of the sea breeze – its speed and direction to even its smell and salty taste – as harbingers. Crucial decisions are made based on it: when to head out into the Arabian sea in their colourful wooden boats; and when to return to shore, fishing nets laden with a bounty of lobsters, tiger prawns, squids, and, if lucky, iridescent silver pomfrets. The last one is the star of the Koli *mejwani* (feast).

With Kolis as their inspiration

You'll find Kolis around Worli Fort. Historical conjecture has always shrouded the origins of this central Mumbai landmark overlooking Mahim Bay. It is often erroneously assumed to be a vestige of the island city's Portuguese colonial past, but it was built around 1675 by the British. Today, the fort is flanked on either side by a sizeable hamlet made up mainly of fisherfolk.

Called Koliwada, it is also where one can find Slink & Bardot. The restobar sits cheek-by-jowl to every possible fishing accoutrement, from beached trawlers to yardages of nets. Inside, perfectly augmenting this seemingly incongruous, yet harmonious coexistence, is Koli Echoes, one of their signature cocktails. Made with sake, vodka and green botanicals, it is a refined riff on the Koli community's penchant for a tipple of toddy.

The cocktail menu serves as a corollary precursor to the restobar's seven-course tasting menu. It features a seafood heavy procession of dishes, including a Barramundi Ceviche with Solkadhi. Executive chef AliAkbar Baldiwala shares that it is an ode to the Koli community's fondness for the fish and the blushing pink *solkadhi* sauce with tart *kokum*. "*Nauvaris* [nine yard saris], fish and colourful boats – we took inspiration from it all, but mostly from the Koli fish *thali*," he adds. "There are courses inspired by traditional *rawa*-crusted fish fry, besides a curry [called an *akha mhawra kalvan*] where we use the whole fish, which is very intrinsic to Koli weddings." The close proximity to Koliwada home kitchens helped the team infuse some authenticity into the dishes.

Breaking bread in Bandra

Just like Slink & Bardot, there's a spurt in restaurants across Mumbai paying homage to everything from micro communities and local neighbourhoods to iconic street food. As one of Mumbai's newest sandwich shops, Santa Maria in Ranwar is a tribute to the village (one of nine original Bandra villages). The menu also pays homage to local athletes and residents. For instance, the Markie's Mortadella, a pesto-slathered focaccia bread sandwich with pistachio nut-studded pork mortadella, is named in honour of international para badminton player and local "Bandra boy' Mark Dharmai.

For more meat, there's Ranwar Square, with a bounty of sliced salami, mortadella, pepperoni, and bacon – and a tribute to the many Christian family-run cold cut stores that dot the area. The meat is used as part of the stuffing for typically East Indian dishes such as whole roast suckling pig, a celebratory dish in local Catholic homes.

Hat-tip to Baghdadi Jews

Bringing to the city plaited *challah* bread slathered in a butter flavoured with a Baghdadi Jewish-style *saluna* sauce is the Jazz & Sassoon pop-up menu at Smoke House Deli's Colaba branch. Inspired by the bustling Jewish community-established Sassoon Docks, it features several homage dishes. "Each dish boasts the day's catch, prepared to reflect Baghdadi and Jewish culinary traditions that have influenced Colaba's historic palate," says executive chef Rollin Lasrado.

He distilled this into his capsule menu by speaking with Jewish chefs both in and out of India, and sending his team to meet local Jewish people who still live in places like Kala Ghoda. "We were particularly intrigued by how they make the dough for traditional Jewish breads such as challah, which is only made for the Jewish New Year called Rosh Hashanah as it is a leavened bread. We adapted the recipe to make the loaf softer and more pliable to appeal to a larger diner base," he says. The nearby Baghdadi restaurant, too, was a source of inspiration, especially for getting the *saluna* sauce right, he adds.

Dadar's seafood market

Cirqa circles back to the Kolis. Housed in the repurposed Todi Mills – one of the many former working mills that once dotted Lower Parel – the menu features a number of seafood dishes. Each referencing, not just the Koli community, but also the nearby seafood market in Dadar. A warren of alleys that is transformed during the monsoon into a market selling dried fish.

"At Cirqa, we love to play around with flavours and cooking styles drawn from the city's various communities," says owner Pankaj Gupta. "For B.F.F. [Bombay Fried Fish], we primarily use *bombil*, which can be found at the market."

Interestingly, a non-seafood dish, Miya Bhai Bolognese is the perfect reflection of Mumbai's syncretic spirit. Influenced by the Muslim community dominated neighbourhood of Bhendi Bazaar, this one sees spaghetti topped with a local touch of the unctuous mutton *kheema* sauce. The dish is served with nigella seed-speckled *khamiri* bread, which is a staple at scores of bakeries in and around the Bhendi Bazaar area.

Imitation, they say, is the ultimate form of flattery and one that finds itself manifesting as inspiration for dishes and drinks that hope to recreate the magic of Mumbai's past. One sip or bite at a time.

The Mumbai-based writer is passionate about food, travel and luxury, not necessarily in that order.

Subha J Rao

In a world of reels and shorts, where edgy, dramatic recipes stand out, Julius Fiedler aka Hermann – a German who now calls the U.K. home – is an outlier. He makes a sincere attempt to pronounce the names of dishes correctly (the Tamil *paniyaaram*, for one) and cracks open a coconut expertly, much to the admiration of an audience far removed from where he lives.

Fiedler, a filmmaker-turned-food creator, who has 2.4 million followers on Instagram and 7.73 lakh subscribers on YouTube, has been popularising plant-based food for some years now. He speaks of the homes he has visited, makes *idli/dosa* batter from scratch ("the texture should be similar to coarse cornmeal, and when you pour it out, it should flow in thick ribbons"), and whips up a creamy hummus. When he cooks, everything seems simpler, like the calming art it ought to be.

In May, he's scheduled to release *Naturally Vegan*: *Delicious recipes from around the world that just happen to be plant-based*, a cookbook detailing his food journeys. On a phone call from London, he speaks about his inspirations and his learnings. Edited excerpts:

Pro-protein

Kao Fu is a Shanghainese dish made from wheat gluten, wood ear mushrooms, lilies and peanuts. It's pure protein, almost meat-like, and very nutritious. It's a traditional Chinese Buddhist dish and probably the original form of seitan.

A five-year-old sourdough starter and Julius Fiedler's passion for plant-based food is now culminating in a book

Feeding Hermann

Question: *What's the genesis of your social media handle, Hermann?*
Answer: It refers to a sourdough culture that's used to make a [Freundschaftskuchen] friendship cake. In Germany, we have many sourdough starters named Hermann. They have to be kept alive, and [the natural surplus] of the vibrant mix of bacteria is passed along to a friend to start their own culture, bake and pass it on. You're not only passing on food, you're helping them make a whole from a part. You're helping keep a tradition alive. This is what I aim to do with my videos too. Hence, Hermann. My Hermann is about five years old now, resting in my refrigerator, and I still feed it.

Q: *Why is the origin story of every ingredient important to you?*
A: This too began with sourdough. It has just three ingredients: flour, salt and water. If you don't focus on good quality wheat, your sourdough will reflect that. I apply that philosophy to everything I cook. Knowing where an ingredient comes from helps forge a connect with that world.

Q: *How do you view food?*
A: Food is cultural heritage. When I try to cook a dish authentically, I choose the best way to connect with a culture. There's always a reason for a lengthy step, or an ingredient that I might not understand. But, it eventually makes sense. For example, the health advantages you get from a fermented *idli* where lentils and carbs are broken down to an easily digestible form, you won't get from a *rava idli* that's made near instantly. Cooking a dish from another culture is like attending a masterclass. Some recipes date back centuries. When you start the authentic way, you learn about why a particular aspect of a culture has survived.

Q: *While you cook plant-based food, you rarely diss other food choices.*
A: My plant-based food journey began about two-and-a-half years ago, due to ethical reasons. When I switched my diet, I found that plant-based foods around me were modern, torn away from culture. They were manufactured in a factory, and placed on a shelf, without any history. I then heard of chickpea tofu made in Myanmar with chickpea flour, water and turmeric. It is pastier than regular tofu, can be sliced and fried, or shaved onto dishes. It opened my eyes to the fact that plant-based food does not mean soy-based food. Cultures have figured out ways. Italy and Greece have traditional dishes that are vegan. They use local knowledge passed down the ages, like consuming legumes with grains and vegetables. This is interesting for the palate, is nourishing, but is also texturally rich and enjoyable to consume.

Q: *You've compiled these recipes in a book now.*
A: The idea began with wanting to appreciate a dish and culture, but has evolved into an effort to tell you why these cultures are special. I visited Italy, Turkey and India [Bengaluru, Kochi, Alappuzha, Munnar, Goa and Mumbai] and documented many recipes. Each visit has been such a smorgasbord of culture – food and fine arts. In Italy, I'd stay in a trattoria and it was like being witness to another kind of life. There's so much culinary history to cover, I feel I am scratching the surface. This is a global project, and I want to show people India's diversity.

The Mangaluru-based independent journalist writes on films, food and sustainability.

(Clockwise from below) *Vada pav*; Julius Fiedler with a plate of *idlis*; *dal tadka*; and some *dhokla*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

FIEDLER'S TOP THREE

Partial to *pav*

Mumbai's *vada pav* was an eye opener for the complexity of flavours in vegan food, where chutneys lend flavour, mouth-feel and colour

Idli love

it is fascinating that a dish so traditional is so complex in terms of flavours. I had my first *idli* last April in Mumbai, a *ragi idli*. But my first proper *idli* was in Bengaluru at 6 a.m., when I was visiting to film.