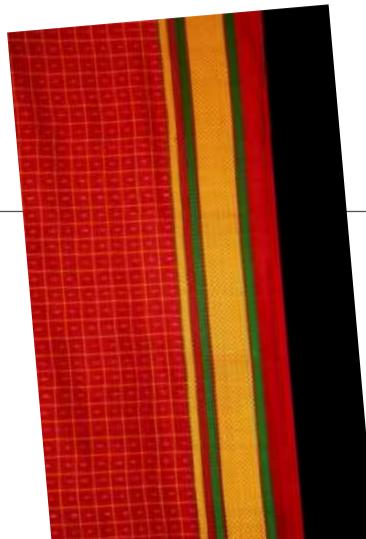


magazine

backpage

Patta-Bandha explores India's ikat traditions

GO TO » PAGE 8



INSIDE

Interview with director Raam Reddy at the Berlinale

GO TO » PAGE 5

LITERARY REVIEW

Colin Thubron on the role of the travel writer

GO TO » PAGE 2

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GOLDEN GLOBES TO OSCARS

IS CHANGE IN THE AIR?

As awards shows battle falling viewership, the strategies are plenty: from shorter show formats and going live on streaming platforms to engaging social media influencers to conduct celebrity interviews



Aditya Mani Jha

In March 2014, actor and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres hosted the 86th Academy Awards, or the Oscars, and clicked a selfie where she posed with some of the best-known actors on the planet: Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts, Meryl Streep, Jennifer Lawrence, Angelina Jolie et al. The photo became the most retweeted image in existence within an hour of posting on Twitter, eventually racking up over 3.4 million retweets. The telecast on ABC drew in an average of 43.7 million viewers over its duration, becoming the second most-watched Oscars show in the 21st century (behind the 2000 ceremony).

For all the history made over a single evening, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which presents the Oscars, and its contemporaries have had a difficult decade since. Questions of fairness, diversity and representation, not to mention falling viewership, have cast a shadow on the relevance of movie awards in the age of social media. TV ratings have continued to fall steadily, with the 2023 Oscars reaching only 18.7 million viewers, less than half of the 2014 high point. However, 2023 saw audiences returning to cinema halls in a big way. This was as much a reversal of pandemic-era shortfalls as it was a result of marketing campaigns such as 'Barbenheimer' that promoted the year's biggest blockbusters – *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* – as a double-bill.

This year's movie awards ceremonies, coming right after the two big Hollywood strikes last year, have had to rethink their broadcast strategy and stay up-to-date. The 30th Screen Actors Guild Awards, for instance, was the first to stream live on Netflix. From the Golden Globes to the Emmys, they are all shorter now. In both 2017 and 2018, the Oscars show was nearly four hours long. In recent years, this runtime has been trimmed by almost 30 minutes. One workaround that helps reduce runtime is the pre-ceremony red carpet show – the Oscars now have an hour-long

red carpet that diehard movie fans and celeb-watchers can tune into, while the more time-strapped viewers can join in when the main ceremony starts. The Oscars have also taken the somewhat controversial decision of excluding a bunch of technical awards from the main ceremony – the winners receive their awards privately before the televised show starts.

Changed audiences

The awards season in 2024 so far hasn't been without its share of drama. For instance, the Golden Globes underwent a churn unprecedented in its history. Basically, the old voting body, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, was dissolved, and a few of its new members threatened to withhold final-round votes because they were told they wouldn't be given tickets to the ceremony. A new Golden Globe for 'Cinematic and Box Office Achievement' was instated, with *Barbie* emerging as the first-ever winner.

"Viewing habits have changed significantly over the last decade or so. Earlier, people would time their day's routine to watch the live telecast of the film awards they followed. Now we're seeing on our platform a lot of people who watch the awards the same day, but not during American hours," explains Anushree Bhardwaj, Director (Marketing), Lionsgate Southeast Asia. Lionsgate Play holds exclusive live and streaming rights in India for the Emmys, Golden Globes, Critics' Choice Awards and BAFTAs. "Viewers watch when it's convenient for them, so I would say it is a combination of 'appointment viewing' and streaming-on-demand. The increased familiarity with American TV shows that streaming has brought about also helps."

While there are multiple factors behind the popularity of any awards show, Bhardwaj says the involvement of Indian celebrities is a big draw. "When we announced Deepika Padukone as one of the presenters at BAFTA this year, our engagement went through the roof," she continues. "If you want to make your show more relevant to, say, Gen Z, you will have to involve the right celebrities for that demographic. Young people will have that connect with Miley Cyrus or Justin Bieber, that folks from an earlier generation would have with Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts."

Newer award categories

The award categories themselves have also changed over the years. In 2001, the Oscars added the Best Animated Film category, which has proven to be a popular move in the years since.

CONTINUED ON

» PAGE 4



From Matrimony.com Group



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EliteMatrimony Presents: Featured profiles of the week

A successful Business Tycoon,
with a net worth of more than Rs 1000 crores, who runs a business abroad and in India, a Tamil-speaking family, is seeking an ideal match for their daughter, 24 years, who has studied CS.
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A successful Business Industrialist,
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A successful Business Tycoon,
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A successful Business Magnate,
with a net worth of more than Rs 1000 crores, who is into business in Chennai. A Tamil-speaking family is seeking an ideal match for his daughter, 24 years, who has studied BBA, "caste no bar". Looking for a groom preferably in Chennai.
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Songs of love and longing

This lyrical novel based in the 16th century serves as both a queer-affirmative and an engaging read

Saurabh Sharma

Madho Lal Hussain. That this name signifies the oneness of the “dervish king” Hazrat Shah Hussain – the famous 16th-century Punjabi Muslim Sufi poet known for his exceptional, soul-baring Kafis – and the beautiful Hindu boy Shaikh Madho Lal from Shabdara (Pakistan) was unknown to me until recently.

In *The Sufi's Nightingale*, writer, playwright and podcaster Sarbpreet Singh presents a fictionalised retelling of their love story. A heartwarming read, for peppered throughout this braided narrative told from the perspectives of Hussain and his “bulbul” (nightingale) and *mureed* (devotee), Maqbool, are Hussain's verses, translated into English by the author.

The deft use of Persian and Urdu words in select places adds charm to this lyrical novel. Further, through this book, one can trace back the history of queerness in South Asia to an age and time about which nothing, besides the fact that trans people used to be decorated members of the harem, has been established.

The book begins with Maqbool expressing his jealousy towards Hussain's love for Madho, who he sees in a pleasure house in the Bazaar-e-Husn mohalla. Not only does he feel “displaced”, he also finds that his melodious voice has stopped touching his master. Neither the rags he used to sing nor the ballad of Heer and Ranjha manages to move his *murshid* (guru), who is intoxicated in the love of this young boy and roams around just to catch a glimpse of his divine beauty.

Society's faultlines
Madho, however, doesn't reciprocate the saint's feelings initially. In fact, he rebukes him. Maqbool considers it shameful that despite this, his master relentlessly pursues Madho.

Uninterestingly, back in the day as well, everyone stood united against love. It's a tradition society continues



to observe to date. As it gets a whiff of the affair, it outcasts the saint and shames him for his deviant desire. While Maqbool curses Madho for the sad state of his master in chapter after chapter, Hussain tells an alternate version of falling head over heels in love with the boy and connects this desire to god.

This fabulous tale not only reads as if a work of magical realism, it also highlights the fault lines of caste, gender, and sexuality that have only been leveraged to propagate differences, never to spread love. *The Sufi's Nightingale* does the latter effortlessly, without being preachy, for an unpredictable narrative twist awaits its readers towards the end through which Singh deliberately or inadvertently manages to strike a conversation about transitioning (in the queer context).

A close reading may also signal how the initial refusal by Madho could be a result of the inevitable shame he would have attracted from his friends. And this eventually happens when they hurl homophobic slurs at him. However, all this is secondary to the book whose central theme perhaps happens to be managing one's *nafs* (ego), as noted in one of the poems of Bulleh Shah ('Aik Alif'), making *The Sufi's Nightingale* both a queer-affirmative and an engaging read.

The Delhi-based queer writer and freelance journalist was trained as an engineer.

IN CONVERSATION

A BLAST FROM THE SEXIST 60s

Debut novelist Bonnie Garmus on creating a powerhouse of a heroine in her bestselling book set in the last century

Swati Daftuar

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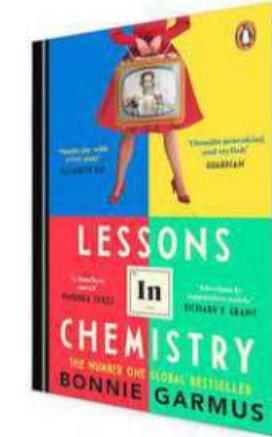
Levels in Chemistry by debut novelist Bonnie Garmus has certainly left an indelible mark – it's the kind of book that stays with you, fuelling ideas, and forcing certain conversations to the fore. It's impossible to read it without drawing parallels with your own reality and lived experiences. A novel of hope, resilience and ultimately, triumph, it has an interesting origin story too. Sharing her journey with her first book, Garmus, 66, expands on conversations around feminism, sexism and storytelling. Edited excerpts:

Question: How did you take a bad day at work and channel that experience into *Lessons in Chemistry*? Was there always a part

of you that wanted to write fiction?

Answer: Yes, I've always wanted to write fiction. I wrote my first book at the age of five (it was very short and very bad), a full book at 12, a big book (700 pages) in my 50s (which never went anywhere), and this book, which I also wrote mostly in my 50s. But the rest of the time, I was working full-time as a creative director and copywriter. I found it difficult to be employed as a writer and then find the urge to write again when I came home from work. So in order to finish my book I had to get up 4 a.m. or 5 a.m. and write before work. Novel writing doesn't pay well – 98% of novelists make less than minimum wage. So quitting my day job was out of the question.

As for the anger that drove the first chapter, I think anger is valuable, but in women, it is often described as rage. Men are assertive, women are aggressive



– a classic example of sexism. The meeting that fuelled the impetus for the book was another classic example of sexism. When I left the meeting, I was pretty angry. I began to wonder how many other women around the world were having the same day I was. Five minutes later, I started writing *Lessons in Chemistry*.

Q: How did you choose the voices in the book – the lenses through which we see Elizabeth Zott – and what guided those choices?

A: The other characters in the book made themselves known to me one by one. Each reflects on their experience with an opinion of Elizabeth Zott. Some hate her, some admire her, some can't figure her out, others are fully committed to her. Elizabeth Zott is a catalyst; she changes everyone she comes in contact with, so it was important to me that readers saw her from these other angles. That way we could watch their transformation without noticing that she, herself, changes very little.

Q: She's inspired so many people. What did you pick up from your own creation – did she surprise you? Are there lessons she taught you?

A: Elizabeth Zott continues to inspire me and surprise me. Because of her, I'm less likely to give up or give in. I'm also far more aware of the need for personal perseverance and endurance. Elizabeth Zott is not a victim. She doesn't whine; she doesn't pout. She acts. She stands up for what she believes is right and does not waver. Most of all, she's rational. She bases her decisions on actual evidence and events – not fake news, opinion, or societal constructs.

READ ONLINE



“Nostalgia is a warm and very human feeling. The problem comes when someone starts turning nostalgia into propaganda. Do not believe politicians who promise you a bright past.”

Interview with
2023 International Booker-winning author
Georgi Gospodinov
magazine.thehindu.com



Wordsmith Bonnie Garmus worked as a creative director and copywriter for many years before she became an author. (GETTY IMAGES)

INTERVIEW

Travel writing in a closing world

Colin Thubron on why travel books will endure and what draws him to remote places like Siberia

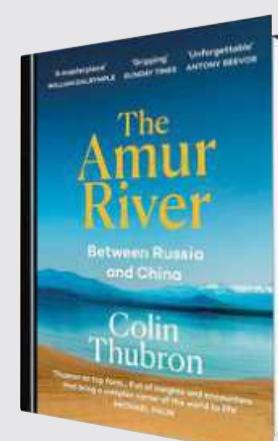
Sudipta Datta

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Colin Thubron, a sprightly 84, is forever trying to get away from a haunting ghost – that single white male should not be travelling to poor countries and write about it. But unwilling to be burdened by the legacy of colonialism, he has ventured out to places, the more remote the better, in Russia,

China, and also to West and East Asia, hoping it will be seen as an avenue of discovery. “Travel writing at its best is an act of empathy,” he says, at the Jaipur Literature Festival, while discussing his work, like *In Siberia*, *Shadow of the Silk Road*, and particularly his 2021 book, *The Amur River*. Edited excerpts.

Question: The death of the travel book has been predicted for long. Yet you journeyed along the Amur River



recently and wrote about it. Why has travel writing endured?

Answer: It's a wonderful literary form of humanism, and if you travel with a feeling that the country has something to teach you, it will always be an act of empathy. The important thing is the quest, and with the world constantly changing, priorities and sensibilities change too, and a travel writer is in a great position to chronicle the shifts.

Q: Is that why you went back to Russia and China again, and travelled along the Amur?

A: The world may have shrunk, but countries are closing down and it is becoming harder to move around like I used to in my younger days, and I am not talking about my age alone. I don't know if I will be able to travel to countries in West Asia or

Colin Thubron
(GETTY IMAGES)



Crossing lines

When faced with political extinction, Ram Vilas Paswan often used his ideological agnosticism to switch sides



Teaming up (From left) Then Bihar Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, Janata Dal leaders Ram Vilas Paswan and Sharad Yadav, during the party workers conference in Patna on October 2, 1994. (PTI)

Sobhana K. Nair

sobhanak.nair@thehindu.co.in

No one can quite recall how Ram Vilas Paswan came to be known as 'mausam vaigyanik' or the "weathervane of Indian politics". In the Introduction to her book, *Ram Vilas Paswan: The Weathervane of Indian Politics*, Sobhana K. Nair writes that political commentator Abhay Kumar credits Lalu Prasad Yadav for coming up with this descriptor for his political adversary from Bihar, who would become the face of Dalits. Paswan used his ideological agnosticism to cross many political lines, as this edited excerpt shows:

In the 1998 general elections, the Janata Dal was reduced to a shadow of its 1989 self. It contested 191 seats and managed to win only six. Its vote share now stood at a little over 3%, six times less than what it got in 1989. In Bihar, it was in a pitiable situation – of the 35 seats, it lost the deposit in 27 seats. Ram Vilas Paswan was the only candidate to win. Sharad Yadav lost to Lalu Prasad Yadav from Madhepura by a margin of 51,000 votes. Bihar was neatly divided into the RJD vs NDA camp, with no slot left for the Janata Dal.

Guided solely by their motivation to defeat Lalu, Sharad Yadav and Paswan were ready to sup with the devil if need be. So when George Fernandes called out to Sharad Yadav and Paswan, they were easily enticed. 'Paristhit hi kuch aisi thi' (the situation was such), Sharad Yadav said, giving himself a concession in hindsight. Realpolitik overwhelmed secular commitments.

Tacit understanding'

The Political Affairs Committee of the Janata Dal met on July 18 to discuss this tricky problem and the debate stretched over three days. The committee was unevenly divided with 11 of the 16 members opposing the move. "The idea of joining a BJP-led alliance hits at the very soul of the party," said Madhu Dandavate. But both Sharad Yadav and Paswan were convinced that they would perish if they didn't join the BJP-led NDA.

They smartly packaged the move as "reunification of the Janata Parivar (read Janata Dal)" and reviving the spirit of 1989. This was the sixth split for the Janata Dal in a decade. It is not as if the NDA welcomed them without any inhibitions. Many voiced reservations, the Janata Dal was after all the nuclear waste of Indian politics, forever simmering but without the necessary strength to detonate.

Paswan was of the view that the "corruption of the RJD and the threat to national security posed by a foreign prime ministerial candidate [Sonia Gandhi] is greater than the threat of communalism." The very man who used to hector the BJP standing from the pulpit of secularism, now claimed that the BJP had changed. It is no longer

pursuing contentious issues such as the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the enforcement of a uniform civil code and the abrogation of Article 370, he claimed. When pointed out that the leaders of the Sangh Parivar, which included the BJP, had made no statement to this effect, Paswan said that there was a tacit understanding with the BJP on these issues.

These assertions were deeply shocking in the backdrop of Paswan's vituperative speeches against the BJP from 1998. In the very first floor test that the Vajpayee government faced in Parliament after their victory in the February 1998 general elections, Paswan had voted against the BJP government. The government won the motion by a narrow margin of 15 votes setting the tone for an uncomfortable 13 months ahead.

During a debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address, Paswan delivered one of his sharpest attacks against the BJP, beginning with his exposition on the dangers of the BJP brand of Hindutva. He scoffed at the "good cop-bad cop" binary used for Vajpayee and Advani. "If Advani is poison then Vajpayee is sugar-coated poison," he declared.

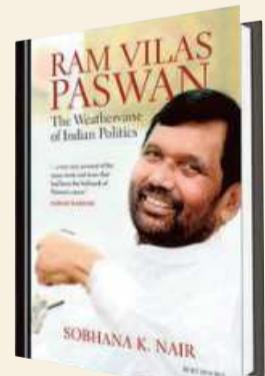
The religion debate

Paswan's argument was simple. A nation cannot and should not have a religion. A 'Hindu Nation' that the BJP has been projecting simply must not be allowed to be erected. "Fire and water do not have any religion. They cannot be either Hindu or Muslim. In the same way, the nation is neither Hindu nor Muslim. If we want a Hindu nation can we then deny Khalistan?"

But when faced with his own political extinction in Bihar, forced by Lalu Prasad Yadav's extended regime, the BJP's communal faults had disappeared overnight. For Paswan and Yadav, the split and joining the NDA turned out to be good.

In the September 1999 general elections, Sharad Yadav as a candidate of Janata Dal (United) defeated Lalu Prasad Yadav in Madhepura. Paswan cornering 56% of the vote share was back in Parliament from Hajipur.

Excerpted with permission from Roli Books.



Ram Vilas
Paswan: The
Weathervane
of Indian
Politics
Sobhana K. Nair
Roli Books
₹595



Modern environmentalist
Chandi Prasad Bhatt
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

WITNESS TO CHIPKO

Chandi Prasad Bhatt's memoir is both a chronicle of a life and a record of the long fight to protect forests in the Garhwal

Mahesh Rangarajan

Chandi Prasad Bhatt's memoir, *Gentle Resistance*, is a remarkable book, by a man no less unique. Bhatt came to public prominence in the wake of the Alaknanda floods of 1970. Over the next few years he concluded that the "self-reliance and self-respect" of hill communities in Garhwal and Kumaon were tied to the fate of the forests.

The Chipko protests of 1973-74 had a longer background in the loss of control of the forest in the late 19th century as timber became vital to British imperial interests. As he writes most movingly, it was the large-scale road construction after 1960 that changed things in epochal terms.

He writes of how the surroundings of Joshimath had "bears hidden by the foliage of oak trees. Tigers were known to stalk the various rivulets. By spring time, the hills were radiant with the red and pink of the rhododendron. All these beautiful trees were brutally hacked down."

Loss of forest cover

By 1970, for him, the loss of forest cover and the wrath of the rivers gave it urgency. The historic women's protest in Reni, Chamoli in March 1973 questioned not only a contract for a specific company but the very

approach to control and exploitation of the forest with industry and forest revenue as priority.

This is what makes for a fascinating read: it is both a chronicle of a life and the times of the author and a record of his long years of service in the Bhoodaan movement under Vinoba Bhave and subsequently in forest-related initiatives.

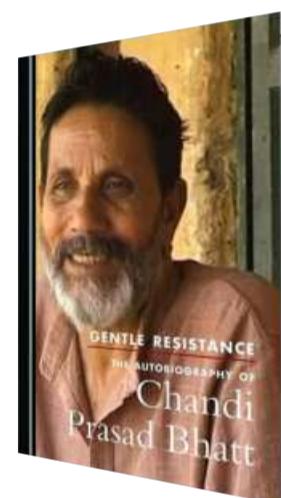
The English book follows close on the Hindi original published in 2021. It is shorter and rather than being a literal translation, a rewrite of the gist of the original. This has been a meticulously executed project for the translator, Samir Banerjee. The black and white photographs tell their own story.

Rejecting hierarchies

The experiences and events of the early years of his life and milieu are of much importance. Born in 1934 to a priestly family of Gopeshwar Brahmins, his was a world of both hard scrabble struggle, and an awareness and rejection of deep-set social hierarchies. 'Untouchability',

The troubling part of the narrative is when he reflects on his long journey.

The montane ecosystem is more fragile and construction is taking a heavy toll even as community bonds are vulnerable



Gentle Resistance,
The Autobiography of
Chandi Prasad Bhatt
Translated by Samir Banerjee
Permanent Black
₹895

a pernicious practice, was rife even as services of key Dalit groups, like iron smiths, carpenters and basket weavers, were integral to the wider village community.

But the austerity was real: when unable to deliver dues from customers for a well-off relative's business he returned to his village. But the family was unable to produce enough from their agricultural fields, and it was only when Bhatt got a job at the Motor Owners Union of Garhwal that they could eat arhar dal and rice.

It was in the late 1950s after a march with Acharya Vinoba Bhave that he turned to full-time social work. This also meant that when he ploughed the land, he ate with Dalit labourers, prompting the ire of many for violating caste boundaries.

The early phase that saw

the formation of the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Sangh in 1964 are critical to comprehend the roots and staying power of the later Chipko movement. The idea of village self-rule through voluntary organisation was an old Gandhian idea. The author's pen portraits of men, women, events, and episodes are priceless. There is a self-effacing tone and a deep sense of giving others their due.

In 1959, many ideas, such as primacy to local needs in forest use and workers cooperatives to ensure gains were locally and evenly spread out, were spelt out in a report under deputy minister Baldev Singh. Later, in the 1970s, stalwart Chief Ministers of UP like N.D. Tiwari and H.N. Bahuguna gave their assurances to implement these ideas but that made no difference on the ground.

Peaceful protests

As Bhatt shows in the Reni case, it was individuals like Gaura Devi and other women protesters who managed to stall, and chase away, those licensed to fell trees for a company. Well beyond that, the cooperatives gathering and processing herbs and other products and the voluntary raising of broad-leaved tree saplings became the main stay in Chamoli. The movement as much as its method of determined peaceful protest had widespread resonance. Specific demands like an end to forest auctions were hard won.

The troubling part of the narrative is when he reflects on his long journey. The montane ecosystem is more fragile and construction is taking a heavy toll even as community bonds are vulnerable. But Bhatt's book will stand both as an eye witness account and as inspiration.

The reviewer teaches History and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University, Haryana.

Afghanistan for that matter any more. I have extensively travelled in Russia and wrote about it, but I wanted to see what the situation was on the ground and how these two countries, Russia and China, reacted to each other. Also, very little is known about the Amur, which is the tenth largest river in the world; Russia had once dreamed that it would be the equivalent of America's Mississippi River, but it was not to be for various reasons.

Q: What did you find on the ground?
A: The situation is complicated. China feels treaties between the 17th and 19th centuries which gave lands near Amur to Russia were unequal and there's resentment about it. The two sides don't understand each other's language, there is no inter-marriage, and

Russians in Siberia, who feel abandoned by Moscow, are afraid of being swamped by Chinese money power. I felt a great sadness for the people, the forests (incessant logging is on) and the river, which has been ravaged by floods and seen a depletion in fish.

Q: You were thrown off a horse in marshy land near Mongolia, where the Amur originates. Why did you choose to continue with the journey?
A: I knew I would never be able to return to this place again if I went back. So, I did the next best thing, I ignored the pain from two broken ribs and a fractured ankle and travelled onward, hoping to make new discoveries, which I did.

Q: Of all the countries you have travelled to, which was the most difficult journey, and where would you

want to go back?
A: My most difficult journey was to Afghanistan in 2004, while tracing the Silk Road from China to the West. I entered from Uzbekistan, and the northern part of Afghanistan where I travelled was the terrain of warlords. The journey became more dangerous as I moved west until no driver would take me farther. Of the countries I wish to return to, I'd name Syria: probably a hopeless aspiration at my age! But when I briefly lived there in 1965, it was beautiful, rich in history, and people-friendly. I did return to Damascus briefly, at my peril, some six years ago. There was fighting in the orchards nearby (I was woken each morning by distant gunfire). All the buildings I'd loved were intact, but the people I'd known were gone.



French Literature Festival at Auroville, Puducherry

On the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo, Auroville in Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, is hosting a French Literature Festival, which concludes today. The festival is a celebration of the French language and sensibility through immersion in its literature and culture.

It also spotlights how Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (Frenchwoman Mirra Alfassa) viewed France and India in the context of the world. There will be discussions on topics from French literary greats Camus and Yourcenar to Aurobindo's thoughts on Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

The speakers include author and journalist Laurence de la Baume, JNU professor Mohan Daschanduri, French writer David Thomas, and others. The panels will be largely in French, with a fair bit of English translation for the larger audience.

The festival at the Unity Pavilion, Auroville, ends today.

For more than 20 years now, I have been an extremely online person. My first real engagement with the Internet was through the popular blogging site, livejournal, around 2002. It was an exhilarating experience, being able to explore who you are, find readers and connect with people. I am still friends with the people I encountered there, two decades later, despite the fact that I have never met most of them in real life.

The entire ethos of the Internet then was its authenticity. The people I came to follow on livejournal were from all over the world and had a wide variety of interests and expertise: a roller skater in Dallas, a dentist's associate in Kent, a young student struggling with loneliness and his acne in Toronto, a secretary who sometimes turned tricks to make some extra money. They were all being their real selves online, occasionally making use of the option of anonymity and talking about the things they found difficult to in their real lives. At the time, the Internet was where you could be yourself and where you encountered other truths.

In the years that followed, the use of the Internet expanded to include conveniences. We trusted it to deliver us all kinds of supplies, manage our money, apply for jobs, find partners. If you met a person in real life and began an argument about something, you settled it on the basis of what Google told us. We couldn't trust one another, but we believed the Internet.

Cut to 2024. On my screen is the video of a young man reading a book. Totally realistic. Except, he's sitting on a cloud. On clicking next, I encounter giant woolly mammoths



MODERN TIMES

Out and about Shoppers at a mall in Shenzhen, China; (and below) image from OpenAI's text-to-video model Sora. (BLOOMBERG, OPENAI)



Real or realistic, what's your pick?

As AI 'breaks' things, a counter-cultural moment is seeing people migrate from the digital to analogue

walking towards me, the snow they churn misting around them. It is so real that it feels like I am watching it on an iMax screen. These videos are the first public iteration of Sora, OpenAI's latest, an AI model that "can create realistic and imaginative scenes from text instructions". Meaning, you can just write basic

instructions in a tool bar and the software can give you a video that is entirely made up but looks real.

Real value of the Internet

In the last few months, such demonstrations of the capabilities of AI have been received with both alarm and admiration. The

adventurous and the evangelists have embraced these developments and immediately adapted to them and put them to use in making their lives more efficient. But vital concerns have been raised about its impact on jobs, privacy violations and automation of weapons. Some of us have been left quaking in fear.

To me, the primary question is, when everything is "realistic", what happens to reality itself? If I can't tell whether what I am seeing or hearing is real or fake, am I not going to just assume that nothing is authentic? And therefore, what then is the value of the Internet?

The first note that users of the Internet, as opposed to technophiles, express is fear of this technology. It is not just how incomprehensible such a future life is likely to be, but also the loss of safeguards that we had previously assumed. If our money in the banks is not safe, for instance, what is the point of the convenience of Internet banking. All of these concerns are seeding the birth of a counter-cultural moment of people migrating from the digital to the analogue; abandoning the simpler and easier way of doing things online and going back to the more

traditional means. The signs are already visible. After a dip in the years between 2009 and 2013, sales of printed books have shown a resurgence, while e-readers sales have stagnated. In India, some 94% of retail bank customers visit the branch at least once a year. Business papers report that not only are existing malls seeing larger footfalls, millions of square feet are getting added to mall space in India.

These trends are more likely than not to appear in other industries as well. Industries that have had its business model broken by the Internet are slowly making a comeback. I can't wait for the introduction of a well-produced magazine that is available only in print, an idea I have been touting to everyone and one that is being received with fewer eye rolls now.

It is inevitable that AI will break things first and fast. There will certainly be a new kind of life on the other side when things settle down. But for one am glad that it is not my generation that will be at the epicentre of this tornado. Imagine being an 18-year-old now stepping into a future where everything is uncertain, not finding a job because a computer does it better and losing whatever little money you've saved because of a deep fake scam. For once, being older seems like a blessing. Maybe that will be something to discuss with my new friends in the line at the bank or while waiting for the robot at the grocery store to reboot.

(Do the AI stories scare you or fascinate you? I'd love to know.)



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

GOREN BRIDGE

Sorcery in the air

Both vulnerable,
West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a tournament in Turkey. A competitive auction saw North-South bid reasonably to game in hearts. The contract seems doomed on this lie of the cards, but there was magic in the air.

The defense started with two high spades and a third spade, ruffed by

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

SOUTH

♠ J 9	♥ A Q 7 4 2	♦ A 10	♣ A 6 3 2
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The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1NT	2♦
2♣	3♦	Pass	4♦

All pass

Opening lead: Ace of ♠

East with the three of hearts and over-ruffed with the four. Ruffing out dummy's spade winner seemed like a good idea, but it proved to be an

error. South cashed the ace of hearts and the trump position was revealed. A heart to dummy's 10 was followed by the king of hearts. South came back to

his hand with the ace of diamonds, leaving this position:

South drew the last trump with the queen of hearts, shedding a diamond from dummy, and East could not defend the position. Should he discard a club, South would duck a club to East and set up his own clubs. East discarded a diamond, instead, so South led a diamond to the king and another diamond to East, who had to lead

away from his king of clubs. Making four after a beautifully played deal.

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

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Into the wild

Berty Ashley

1 The Binturong or bearcat is an endangered species of mammal found in Southeast Asia. Its urine releases a compound called 2-AP, which has the same smell as something you would encounter in a movie theatre. What movie theatre delectable has this smell, which usually foreshadows that entertainment is coming?

2 This particular species of shrimp is a most efficient hunter, thanks to its disproportionately large claws that resemble a weapon invented in the 16th century. It sports a 'hammer' that when released, creates an enormously powerful wave of bubbles that stuns its prey and even breaks aquariums. Named after this weapon, what is this powerful shrimp known as?

3 This family of monkeys is shown onscreen a lot, including the monkey Marcel from *Friends*. They get their name from the fact that their facial colours resemble an order of Catholic monks who wear brown robes with hoods. The same order is also responsible for the name of a type of coffee, which has equal amounts of espresso, steamed milk, and foam. What monkeys are these?

4 The scientific name for this popular animal is *camelopardalis*. It comes from its Ancient Greek name, which refers to its shape (a desert animal) and skin-pattern (a jungle animal).



Photogenic mammals In Central America, these white faced monkeys, also called carablanca, are ubiquitous. (GETTY IMAGES)

What animal is this, that a few years back was discovered to have four species?

5 In the 1950s and 60s, Russia and the United States were in competition to send things into space. Dogs, monkeys and even jellyfish were sent into sub-orbital space. In 1968, the Russians were the first to send two animals onboard the spacecraft Zond 5 to orbit the Moon, before safely bringing them back to Earth. What animals were these, that at one time were travelling at 25,000 kmph, whereas on Earth, they are historically known for doing the opposite?

6 In all animals, it's the female of the species who gives birth, except in one case: in this marine species, the male has a pouch-like uterus into which the

female inserts the eggs. For the next 24 days, the father incubates the eggs, provides them with nutrients and eventually, gives birth. Which animal is this, whose name *hippocampus* is Greek for 'bent horse'?

7 All animals evolved to eat the right way up, so that gravity could help push the food down. There is only one animal that has to eat with its head upside down. This is because it developed bristles on its top beak to filter out mud and water that gets sucked in with the food. If it ate the right way up, it wouldn't be able to use the filter. What animal is this, whose colour comes from what it eats?

8 A Grolar or Pizzly is a rare, unique-looking animal that has existed in North America

since 2006. It is genetically confirmed to be the hybrid of two species that split thousands of years ago. These two species rarely meet in the wild, and the occurrence of the hybrid has been attributed to a single female of their species. Which two species make up this hybrid?

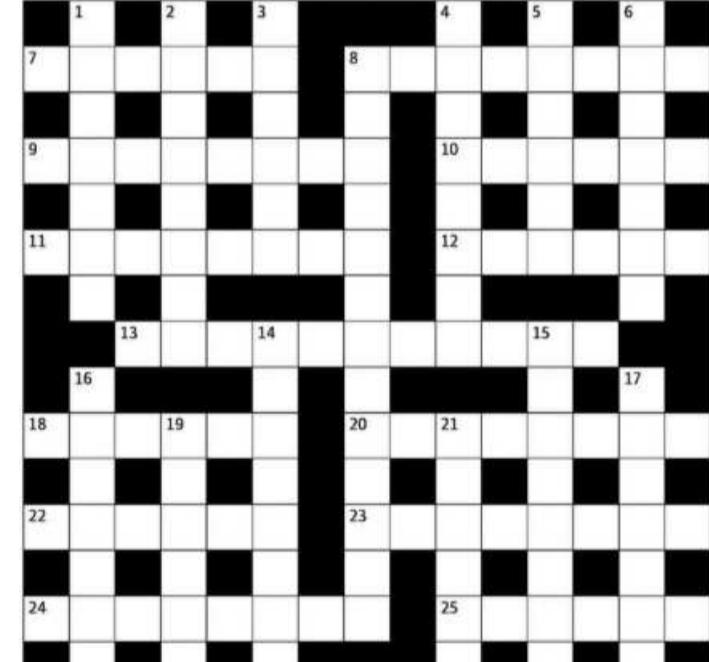
9 These animals are so weird that zoologists initially thought they were being pranked. They are mammals but have a gullet; they exude electrical impulses like fish, have venomous spurs like reptiles, webbed feet like amphibians, lay eggs like birds and glow under UV light like party goers. What wacky animal is this, that when wearing a hat is called 'Perry'?

10 *Turritopsis dohrnii* is a species of tiny jellyfish found in oceans all around the world. It has an extraordinary ability to revert to a larval stage after having become a free-swimming adult. This ability has led to scientists to give it what name, which almost sounds like a cartoon villain?

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

10. The immortal jellyfish
9. Duke Billie's jellyfish
8. Polar bear and Grizzly bear
7. Lemming
6. Seahorse
5. Totoro
4. Giraffe
3. Capuchin Monkey
2. Pistol Shrimp
1. Popcorn
Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3296



Across

- 7 Note you'll hear: warmer Mexican fare (6)
- 8 I'm persuasive. Like a milkshake? (8)
- 9 Cryptic clue for wolf - or pheasant, perhaps (8)
- 10 Meal measures up perfectly? To some extent (6)
- 11 In Korean capital, lacking energy, scoff seeing sweet potato pie, etc (4,4)
- 12 Singular hawker, we're told, dined - but not at home (3,3)
- 13 Old French president concealing origins of affaire involving starlet: sauce! (11)
- 18 With teetotaller absent, brunette prepared something with rye (6)
- 20 Clown to stagger back: source of clip-clop sounds? (8)
- 22 Put lid on whisky (6)
- 23 Everyman 'a hilarious person', did you say? That's ... sweet (3,5)
- 24 Good job that's how some like their steak (4,4)
- 25 Northern Europeans' roots (6)

Down

- 1 Some paratha, ricotta and a kind of bean (7)
- 2 Rice and this curry can be arranged for Leonardo da Vinci! (8)
- 3 Booze; aroma: roses - or latterly, oak, primarily? (6)
- 4 Mostly chocolatey dessert? In other

SOLUTION NO. 3295





ILLUSTRATION: SATHEESH VELLINEZHI

The travails of a woman officer

Fitting in is tough when one is considered a 'tyrant' by some or 'too confident' by others. Yet, facing challenges is all part of the day's work

Ekta Meemroth
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You are a young and influential officer in one of the prominent Ministries in the country. Every day, you are looked upon as a decision-maker or as someone who will redress grievances, which are just two roles of the many that you are expected to play.

Cudgelling your brains at any given time, placing signature after signature on never-ending stacks of paper, interacting with a complex mix of people, and partaking in a series of ghastly meetings – it's all in a day's work.

At meetings with those senior to you, if you talk confidently with your well-known ardour, you will notice perplexing expressions on most of the faces. A sign of "You aren't supposed to speak that much, young lady" or "At least not with that much confidence". You wonder if you should have

remained silent. Then come the field inspections where, literally, a small army follows you everywhere you go and four trolleywheels are with you all the time, making way for "madam". Anxious subordinate staff wait solicitously for the inspection to end. Some always carry a tote bag full of grievances while others appear quite content.

Quadrigenarian and quinquagenarian staff find it difficult to take orders from their young woman boss. This is partially attributed to your age, which is almost half theirs, and the rest to their patriarchal mindset and upbringing that clearly sets out the notion "a woman can't give orders to a man". Try imposing a modicum of discipline and you will be honoured with titles like "tyrant" forthwith.

On the other hand, those higher up tend to downplay some of the brilliant suggestions put forward by you. No amount of hard or smart work will let you enter the "inner circle". All of these challenges lead to situations where performing even the most basic of duties becomes a "task" for you.

As a woman officer in formal gatherings, you are rather conspicuous; nevertheless, you suddenly seem invisible to those around you or they are simply disinclined to strike up a conversation with you. At the time of enjoying dainty treats and bonne bouche, you will be given a chance to start first but then you were never famished in the first place.

Oh, they even cut a cake on Women's Day to commemorate the contribution of their women staff but you are neither asked to join in as an 'officer' nor as a 'contributor'.

Due to professional obligations, you have to attend several after-work casual bashes with officers and their families. Every such gathering has two groups of officers: those who drink and those who are teetotallers; but, no, neither group wants a lady officer in their space. There is also a third subgroup, "the wives in-crowd". This subgroup is often seen discussing only God-knows-what and giggling all the time in parties. This group doesn't want to talk to a woman officer and you can't join them either as it is an unwritten rule that "the wife is to be treated on a par with her husband's designation and with the same respect and decorum as what is associated with her husband's post". Any aberration from this rule will hurt big egos, and this certainly is the last thing you would want in a hierarchical set-up.

So, amid the tumult you grab a seat, sit alone in the throng, in dead silence, pondering how as a woman officer you just don't fit in. Suddenly you realise you have a saviour to rescue you from this unbearable ennui, your smartphone.

Then you go home, dump all thoughts in a mental bin and go to bed thinking about tomorrow. You wake up, pull yourself together, and pick up your armour again to face the new day.

Everyday management

How women in our lives teach lessons in effective use of resources

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Mummijit, called out Lali, our house-help. "We are hosting a *haldi* ceremony for my son. I would love for all of you to join us," she said. While it might sound like a typical wedding invitation, this event held a particular significance.

In South Indian households, there is a tradition of giving *vethalai paaku*, a plate consisting of betel leaves, *kumkum*, bangles, *supari*, flowers, and non-powdered *haldi* (turmeric), to married women during puja.

Lali had been accumulating the *haldi* that she received from my mother-in-law for over a year. Remarkably, she decided to use this collection to make the turmeric powder for her son's ceremony.

To me, she embodied the essence of an everyday entrepreneur, showcasing qualities that extend beyond the conventional understanding of the term. Many of us can relate to such women who, in their own ways, embody the spirit of everyday entrepreneurship.

My father-in-law often praised my maternal grandmother as a walking management book. She ensured there was always enough in the house through effective management of resources and situations. My mother is another case in point. During hard times, she would ensure that the little money available was used sensibly, another quality an entrepreneur must have – maintaining working capital to keep things going even in the absence of incoming finances.

My *paati* had a way of her own. My *thatha* used to buy milk in a small vessel. With that she made coffee, tea, curd, and even butter.

As I grew up, I realised that the magic was in management.

Today, as I run a small start-up, I try to incorporate the things I learnt from them.

A powerful tool for introspection

Research supports the benefits of journaling, and psychologists vouch for its mental health perks

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When I was a child, there was an old Godrej wardrobe in my house that would pique my curiosity about its contents. It was kept locked and opened only once a year during Deepavali cleaning when we would be in school. Did it hold some riches, I wondered.

As days passed, the curiosity grew. Sensing my restlessness, my father threw it open for us one day.

The mouldering diaries inside took me entirely by surprise. Why did my family hide this junk?

Interestingly, the ink on those yellow, moist sheets of paper was still legible,

and the diaries sang the tune of my family's bygone golden era. Written in neat handwriting with a fountain pen, the letters were a testament to various family affairs – struggles, friendships, and collective decisions taken.

Today, research supports the benefits of journaling, and psychologists vouch for its mental health perks.

In a book titled *Opening Up by Writing It Down*, Pennebaker and Smyth survey the scientific history of expressive writing, its benefits, and how to make it work for you. They say that in the moments of feeling stuck, this powerful writing practice can get you out of the vortex of confusion and initiate a process of healing.

Exploring the emotionally challenging



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

events in your life and writing about them continuously for 20 minutes can give you an authentic cathartic experience. This venting exercise can help connect the dots of myriad feelings and bring closure to an unpleasant experience.

Healing trauma
This is useful not only in expressive writing but also for a brilliant psychological exploration of our deepest thoughts, dreams, traumas, desires, and secrets. It also proves to be a great sleep inducer.

But unlike what many of us think, the beneficial aspect of journaling does not end here. Reading what you have put on

paper and tracing where your thoughts lead you to gives a peek into your personality – how confused, insecure, or solution-oriented you are. It helps you step back and create a distance between the chain of thoughts you have just unleashed on paper and a clear mind.

When this happens, the problem-solving appears more straightforward, and the targets seem more achievable.

Just like microplanning helps manage time better with an effective backup plan ready beforehand, tracing our thoughts and distancing them from us can help pluck out emotional weeds if we practise this process daily.



but at that time I wondered if I were the only one thinking this way.

Years later, I watched *Koi Mil Gaya* where Hrithik Roshan and a rival compete in a basketball match. They decide that whoever wins will get a kiss from Preity Zinta.

Again I thought, why don't they just ask her whom she wants to kiss?

Films have a long way to go in how they portray women. Movies such as *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* have a target audience. Some may say such films are only made for entertainment, but no one can deny the fan base the films have. These movies have protagonists who think it is okay to slap a woman. And some women are shown to consider this an expression of 'love'. Things need to change. This is not OK.

The right to choose

Let's ask women what they want instead of making decisions for them

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The first time I wondered about the autonomy of women was at a time when I did not know the meaning of the term.

It popped up in my head when I was watching

Tom and Jerry, a popular show in our early years.

In one of the episodes, Tom and another cat try to woo a female cat and start to compete. No one asked her about her choice and I thought, "Why aren't they asking her? That would solve all the problems."

Of course, the cartoon was made for fun viewing



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is truly a revolutionary feat of science, set to become a core component of all modern software in the coming years. ('AI at work: partner or rival?'; Feb. 25)

This presents a threat but also an opportunity.

Prudent governance at the global level will be essential to ensure that this technology will bring about broadly shared safety and prosperity.

K.M. Murthy

India should expose its youth to this emerging technology, and grab opportunities to lead the world on the AI front. We have already proved our IT credentials in the global market, and now should strive to be world leaders in AI too.

Atheerath Naineni

Contrary to the general perception of AI as a job killer, it is now

increasingly being seen as

a productivity enhancer in

organisations across the

spectrum. Particularly, AI

has opened up immense

possibilities for generating

creative content. It can be

useful in the tech domain

too, where human

intelligence has inherent

limitations. Shamefully,

we have also seen the

advent of deepfakes.

There should be a robust

regulatory policy

framework and

deployment of necessary

firewalls when it comes to

emerging technological

innovations.

G. Ramasubramanyam

Save mother tongue

Participation of people in

'Save our language'

campaigns, as in the case

of the Soliga tribe, is a

prerequisite in

conservation of languages

throughout the world.

('Learning the Soliga

alphabet'; Feb. 25) But



MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Grief the leveller

We live through memories of those we have loved.

Sudha Devi Nayak

Tea and coffee tango

Which beverage casts the longer lasting spell?

Nirmala Varma

The reality of being India's daughter

The struggle is constant and we plead for basic respect

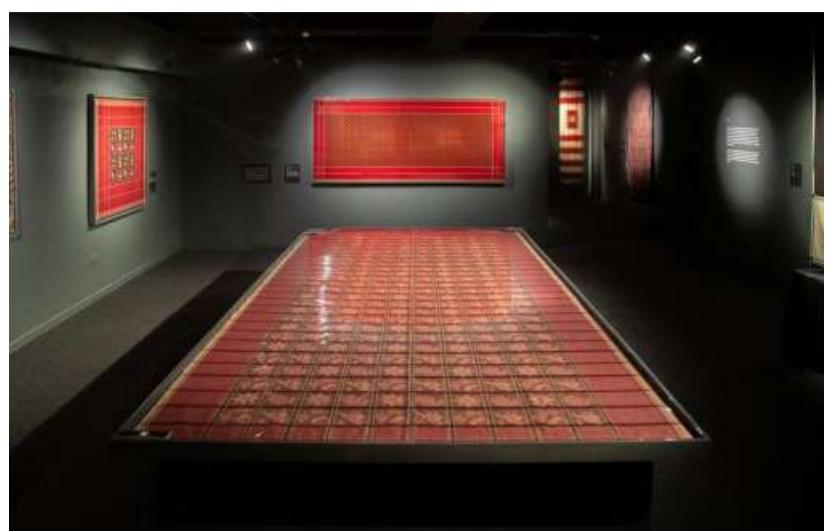
Ann Mary Devasia

The nature of faith

Its power must be used for good each and every time

Malini Seshadri

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Ina Puri

As a collector of *ikat* saris, I have a defining memory of the weave. An exquisite cotton *ikat* sari woven by Pitabas Meher, whose father Mohan Meher received the National Award for the design. In shades of deep red and indigo, it was inspired by a board game and replicated the motifs of the dice with script and numbers. I wore it to receive the Rajat Kamal from President Abdul Kalam in 2003 for producing the documentary *Meeting Manjit*.

Later, I had the occasion to acquire more beautiful weaves from Meher, before discovering newer designers such as Gunjan Jain, and institutions like Meera Mehta and Pavithra Muddaya who have been experimenting with *ikat*. So, it is with keen interest that I have been following the progress of *Patta-Bandha: The Art of Indian Ikat*. The third in a trio of exhibitions centred around the repertoire of Indian textiles, it is curated by Mayank Mansingh Kaul, in collaboration with the National Crafts Museum and Hastakala Academy and Devi Art Foundation.

On a cold winter morning, Kaul and collector Lekha Poddar walk a small group of us through *Patta-Bandha* (*patta* means thread and *bandha* in Sanskrit is to tie or bind) at the National Crafts Museum. We discover that the exhibition is not just a visually immersive experience, but a deeply researched study of *ikat*'s long tradition,

IKAT'S INDIAN JOURNEY

Featuring saris and ceremonial cloths, the ongoing exhibition at Delhi's National Crafts Museum is a compact study of the yarn tradition

contextualised through its geographical spread. "Ikat is a word of Malay-Indonesian origin that is now used to describe all kinds of tie and dye on yarn techniques around the world. The title of the exhibition is an attempt to give an identity to the genres of this tradition in India," says Kaul. "Through the trio of exhibitions, we are also trying to create an introduction to prominent Indian weaving traditions for a lay person."

He explains that the initiative had been in the works for a while, which gave him the time to sift through vast archives to ensure that the chosen pieces were justly representational. While most of the 34 pieces on display were sourced from Odisha, Gujarat, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh – the regions famous for their *ikat* tradition – some are from the Deccan and Maharashtra too.

Complementing the archetypal manifestations of Indian *ikat* is a group of works by contemporary



practitioners such as Sumakshi Singh, Akhila Krishnan and Bashobi Tewari. "Because of Devi Art Foundation's larger mandate of contemporary art, we have tried to mix the historical with the contemporary, and show that many



of the traditions are continuing," adds Kaul. "They suggest new possibilities for the tie and dye technique of yarns intrinsic to *ikat*."

Single, double and compound

Scenographer Reha Sodhi's sensitive lighting of the *ikats* on display, from the woven saris to ceremonial cloths, panels, calligraphic weaves, bed covers, *rumals*, and fragments, is dramatic. She manages to create a niche for each, be it a Telia Rumal (*ikat* handkerchief) or Krishnan's hanging chandelier of threads.

Among the many exhibits, a few stand out. Like the Mulberry Zari Saree, dating back to the late 19th or early 20th century – intricately patterned in single *ikat* along the warp in the border and tie and dye

Contemporary study

In a study in contrast to the conventional *ikats* at the show, Sumakshi Singh's *Spiral Staircase* (cotton and silk threads, hand tie and dye with machine stitching, 2023-24), a quiet palette of blue and white, explores the transformation of the imagery of solid architecture into tactile impressions. Another work that makes an arresting visual is Krishnan's *Naksha: Patterns in Space & Time* (cotton thread, paper tie & dye, in collaboration with Neha Puri Dhir and Govindbhai), and Rakesh Thakore's *Table Cover* – a textile designer's modernist intervention with *ikat* that highlights its mathematical precision.

Tied fast (Clockwise from far left) A cotton bedcover with single *ikat* from Andhra Pradesh/Telangana; panel by Sudam Guin, and a ceremonial cloth; Molkalmuru chukki sari; and a mulberry silk sari from West Odisha. (DEVI ART FOUNDATION)

in the *aanchal* – or the Molkalmuru Chukki Saree from Chitradurga district (1990s to 2000s), where weavers of Sokulasali, Pattasali and Padmasali communities weave an intricate pattern using contrasting colours between the border and the body.

A compound *ikat* panel in the Odisha tradition created by Sudam Guin, with a fish motif, catches the eye. Highlighting the Twenty Point Programme, which was introduced by the Indian government in 1975, it has woven English letters that list agriculture, housing, taxation, employment, and so on.

Each woven piece comes with its own narrative, such as the exquisite *patola* created by weaver Chotalal Salvi and designed by Rakesh Thakore (one half of fashion design label Abraham & Thakore), as part of the Vishwakarma series of exhibitions dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, where the triangular motifs placed along a horizontal band in the end panels make for a stunning effect. Or the *patola* with betel leaf motifs – to be used as a veil or a sari – that was the preferred garment of affluent Jain and Hindu women in central or northern Gujarat.

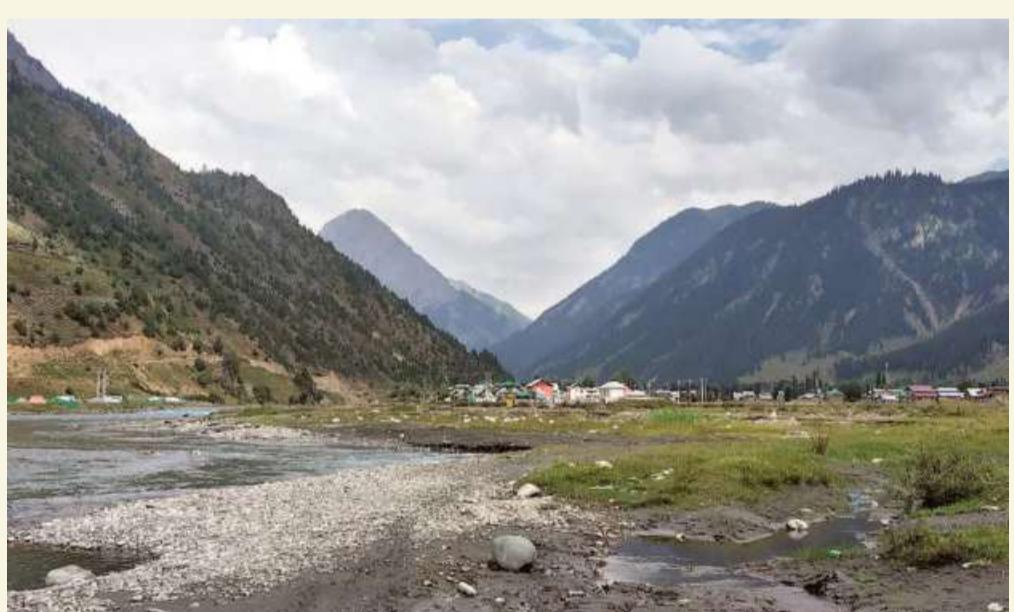
Unlike the earlier exhibitions from the trio, *Fine Count* and *Vayan*, dedicated to fine muslins and brocades respectively, the *ikat* exhibition becomes especially meaningful when you see that till date, this textile is worn by the affluent classes as much as the middle classes. A fact that is reflected in the elaborately patterned *ikats* at Telia Rumal with its bright red, brown and black checks, to the priest's *chadar* (shawl) with decorative devotional text.

The exhibition is on at the National Crafts Museum till March 11. A one-day symposium is on today, featuring a guided walkthrough and presentations by speakers including Gunjan Jain and Savan Salvi.

The writer is a Gurgaon-based curator, author and collector.

Day trips to Kashmir's border towns

As the army welcomes trekkers and tourists to Gurez and Keran, one can see local life play out and catch glimpses of the other side



Sohaila Kapur

Kashmir was once known for its spirituality – and not for Pakistani militants and infiltrators as in the 90s. It was fertile ground for spiritual movements, be it the Buddhist, Shaivite and Sufi Islamic traditions, during the medieval ages. They knitted the secular culture called Kashmireya that preached brotherhood and peace, and which was lost after Partition. So, when the army in northern Kashmir opened a few border towns close to the Line of Control to tourists last year, I made plans to visit. Before these hidden gems are invaded by the curious. From among the many – Machil and Tangdar, to Teetwal, Tulail, Uri and more – I picked Keran and Gurez: north-west and north-east respectively from Baramulla, the big city near the border with Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.



few kilometres on, it shrivels to a rocky, dusty trail. There is repair work going on. A stream runs alongside, in the gorge.

Keran is an underdeveloped village, which is just waking up to its newly declared status as a tourist spot. There are a few homestays and tourist bungalows; camping is popular here too. Makeshift wooden houses sell Maggie and packaged snacks for the few people who visit, possibly to gawk at the Pakistani side. The curiosity is the same on the other side, which looks far more developed. Sturdy buildings with gaily painted corrugated roofs dot emerald green fields. There is a promenade with a railing and a black signboard that declares it is Kashmir, Pakistan. People walk about, admiring the view and looking into India.

A giant *tiranga* flutters in lonely splendour on our side. A bunch of schoolgirls in burqas sit chatting under it. I spot an old man looking wistfully at the other side. The lack of building actually gives us an unfettered view of the river and the Pir Panjal peaks – two belonging to India and the third to Pakistan. Plastic chairs are provided for those who want to sit in quiet contemplation.

Two Kashmiri boys splash about in the waters where it narrows into a stream. One of them climbs onto a rock and flattens out to sun himself like a tortoise, with the waters raging below. People wash their faces in the stream and drink its water.

After about an hour, we decide to leave. The path back is narrow and the terrain rocky. We fear a puncture, but we reach home safe.



A sudden mist envelops us; it descends like a cloud and we stop to take photos.

Before we reach Gurez, we encounter the gushing Kishanganga, a tributary of the Jhelum river that is dammed outside the village. It is a unique, cloudy blue and is aptly called Neelum across the border, in Pakistan. The sight is stunning, and reminiscent of the fjords and lakes of Switzerland and Scandinavia. We turn a bend in the road and the village of Gurez appears, nestled in a valley between peaks that rise majestically. Gurez has a history of 2,000

years. It was part of the silk route between Kashmir, China and Central Asia. Today, it is a typical Kashmiri village with wooden houses. The army runs a canteen here where you can pick up burgers, chow mein and a watery cup of cappuccino. You can also ask for the staple Gurezi dish of steaming potatoes dipped in butter, which is delicious.

The only other sign of urbanisation is the sign reading 'I Love Gurez'... possibly an army installation. The bazaar running in the middle of the village sells vegetables, meat and some basic winter wear. Tourists are still rare, which is why there are practically no hotels, but homestays and camps are plenty. Trekkers regularly camp here. I am tempted to sit by the clear river and meditate, but we have time only for a quick lunch and photographs, before we leave for Baramulla. It is dangerous to drive on these mountain roads after dark.



Keran

62.9. km from Baramulla

Next, we head to Keran in Kupwara district. The village is surrounded by dense forests, which have been used by militants to infiltrate into India. Security is still a major concern, so the route is through a huge army camp with a helipad,

which issues passes to enter the area. As we make our way through, we see a large number of soldiers undergoing combat training. Most are from South India or Rajasthan; there are few Kashmiris in the army.

The route is breathtaking, through thickly forested deodar trees. The road is metalled, but a

The author is an actor, director and travel writer.