



IN CONVERSATION

‘MY WOMEN ARE NOT PLEASING’

Booker-nominated author Charlotte Wood on penning characters that are multi-dimensional and true to her feminist ideals

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Award-winning Australian author Charlotte Wood speaks almost meditatively about the fundamental structure of narratives that dictate the plot of her novel *Stone Yard Devotional*, shortlisted for last year’s Booker Prize.

It traces the journey of a woman (an unnamed narrator) who escapes to a monastery of Catholic nuns in the face of personal adversities. “The book has been written in tiny little fragments or some longer ones, in different rhythms. I wanted something a bit more jagged because my book is about stillness and silence; I needed movement on the page. Otherwise, it’s too boring,” she says, in a conversation on the sidelines of the just-concluded Jaipur Literature Festival.

Set in the sparse Monaro plains of southern New South Wales, *Stone Yard Devotional* is Wood’s seventh novel. Much like her 2015 book, *The Natural Way of Things*, which won the Stella Prize in 2016, the location sets the tone for the storyline in *Stone Yard*, too. “That’s helpful because people [characters]

have to respond to the place. It is what filmmakers sometimes call a single arena. So, by starting with a place – like a convent where all my characters choose a life, but don’t necessarily get along with each other – I create a contained environment, which is very useful for creating friction.”

Wood expands on this idea of friction in context to another character – Helen Parry, a radical environmentalist nun – in *Stone Yard Devotional*. “The narrator, with other women in the convent, is living a very rhythmic, ordered, quiet life, but when Helen comes into this place, there’s a culture clash. They don’t want her there. She doesn’t want to be there too, but she kind of gets stuck there,” says Wood.

Inspired by rogue nuns
Interestingly, there are several instances of nuns who have tread the path of activism, like Australian Catholic nun Brigid Arthur who, along with eight teenagers, took Australia’s environment minister Sussan Ley to court and won; and American nun and rainforest activist Dorothy Stang, who campaigned for 30 years to save the Amazon from the interests of wealthy landlords

and was shot dead in 2005.

“I call them the rogue nuns. You know, they’re almost acting alone, but doing very serious work with the poorest of the poor, and speaking truth to power by going to court. So, I find that very inspiring and to have someone like that as a character in the book is helpful narrative-wise, to cause this friction and clash,” she says.

That said, Wood explores powerful feminine identities in her stories. She acknowledges Helen Parry as a very difficult person. She’s blunt, demanding and critical, she says. “I think it’s part of my feminism – to show women as complicated, flawed, powerful, cowardly, annoying, loving, all the range



After my mother’s demise, I realised that writing is very important to me. It was a place where I could take all my confused emotions and turn them into a book. And I don’t mean that writing is therapy because it’s art, but that doesn’t mean that it also doesn’t have therapeutic effects

Author Charlotte Wood
(GETTY IMAGES)



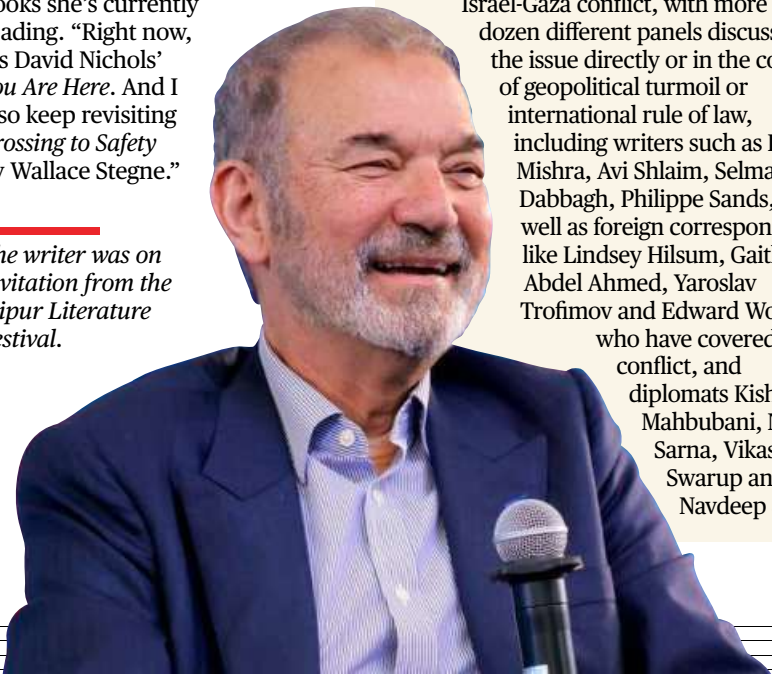
of personalities and emotions that we have always allowed men to have. But women in my culture, and probably, in your culture, have been taught that they can only be a certain number of things – you have to be nice, obedient, pretty, pleasing. And I’m not interested in women being pleasing. My characters are not pleasing,” she adds.

Wood, 60, took to writing at the age of 29 when her mother passed away, but she does not necessarily view writing as a cathartic escape. She chooses to call it art, instead. “As a child, I was an obsessive reader. I did some writing classes at university, too. My father died when I was younger, but after my mother’s demise, I suddenly realised that writing is very important to me. It was a place where I could take all my confused emotions and turn them into a book. And I don’t mean that writing is therapy because it’s art, but that doesn’t mean that it also doesn’t have therapeutic effects,” she says.

Good editors and freedom
Though *Stone Yard Devotional* marks a defining moment in Wood’s writing career, catapulting her to esteemed global stages in the literary arena, she is particular about mounting her book on a trusted publishing house. “I like having a conventional publisher because I like the editing, publishing and marketing support, all of which I would hate to do if I were self-publishing. I’ve been very lucky that I don’t have any strictures or expectations placed upon me about what to write, how to write. I value having good editors. I now have trusted relationships with editors who will save me if I go off balance or something’s not working, but they also allow me this freedom to try,” she says.

Wood now finds herself in the embryonic stage of penning her new book. Though she hasn’t started writing it yet, she has certainly finalised the place where it will be set in. “It’s going to be based in a retail workplace,” she shares. Dashing off to her session at the festival, she leaves us with the titles of books she’s currently reading. “Right now, it’s David Nichols’ *You Are Here*. And I also keep revisiting *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegna.”

The writer was on invitation from the Jaipur Literature Festival.



Notes from the Jaipur Literature Festival

Where major themes ranged from AI in publishing to the Israel-Palestine conflict, and stardom arrived with the Murthy-Sunak quartet



Former U.K. prime minister Rishi Sunak (centre); and author Stephen Greenblatt (bottom) at the Jaipur Literature Festival. (PTI, JLF)

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Every literature festival in India has its own flavour, culture and identity, but few rival the sheer size of the Jaipur Literature Festival or JLF, first held in 2006, and in that sense, the OG.

The Hindu’s Lit for Life in Chennai is awe-inspiring for how well-read and intellectual its audience is, and I am always intimidated to moderate a session with an author, knowing that most people in the audience have read the book we will discuss. The Bangalore Literature Festival is quintessential Bengaluru – civil citizenry at the fore, conversations that are chilled but candid all the same. The Khushwant Singh Literature Festival in Kasauli feels like a warm drawing room with a fire roaring nearby, where the audience knows one another, where the debate can get raucous but always ends on friendly terms.

But JLF is JLF – built on a massive scale with crowds so large that it is referred to as the “Mahakumbh of literature”, multiple stages and parties across the city, and celebrities so internationally renowned that it is both exhilarating and exhausting to navigate. According to JLF organisers, led by authors William Dalrymple and Namita Gokhale, as well as Sanjoy Roy, who runs one of India’s biggest production and event management companies, more than five million people and about 8,000 speakers have attended the festival in nearly 20 years.

One of the major themes this year is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in publishing. While AI can replace some of the functions of writers and editors, it can’t replicate the sheer energy and chemistry of this sort of literary gathering, where authors and readers meet face-to-face. Controversy is a constant theme at the festival, although it is clear the organisers have considerably reduced the presence of politicians and ideologues at the event, given past experiences.

Palestine’s corner
For a foreign policy buff, JLF always has a special corner of programming that brings together a range of diplomats based in India, former Indian diplomats as well as international journalists. This year, the overarching issue is Palestine and the Israel-Gaza conflict, with more than a dozen different panels discussing the issue directly or in the context of geopolitical turmoil or international rule of law, including writers such as Pankaj Mishra, Avi Shlaim, Selma Dabbagh, Philippe Sands, as well as foreign correspondents like Lindsey Hilsum, Gaith Abdel Ahmed, Yaroslav Trofimov and Edward Wong who have covered the conflict, and diplomats Kishore Mahbubani, Navtej Sarna, Vikas Swarup and Navdeep Suri

who worked on policy around it. Even serving diplomats like the U.K. High Commissioner Lindy Cameron and Irish Ambassador Kevin Kelly speak about the issue, defending their government’s contrasting positions.

At the start of the festival, the organisers shut down an interview given by the Palestinian Charge d’affaires Abed El Razeg Abu Jazer at the JLF media centre, saying he is not an invited speaker, but a guest at the festival. Right-wingers rage on social media about the platforming of “woke” sentiments, but the crowds at the event seem clearly sympathetic of the Palestinian cause.

The showstopper is Gideon Levy, *Haaretz* columnist who doesn’t mince his words about Israel’s actions, the illegal occupation by settlers and bombardment of Gaza. If the future is not a two-State solution for Israel and Palestine, then there are only two options, he says: for Israel to be an ‘apartheid’ Zionist or discriminatory single state, with one population oppressing the other, or for it to be a single democratic state, which would bring its own strife. While we rightly celebrate journalists who put on their bulletproof vests to go cover conflicts around the world, there’s a special kind of courage that Israeli journalists like Levy demonstrate, by staying in their country and not censoring criticism of their government’s actions despite pressures and threats.

A different kind of stardom hangs around another gutsy journalist – Tina Brown, former editor of *Tatler*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and now *The Daily Beast*. She shocks the audience by questioning the U.K.’s King Charles’ longevity.

Lunch with the Murthys
But the big buzz at JLF is around the Murthy-Sunak quartet, including the former prime minister of the U.K., Rishi Sunak, his wife, investor and educationist Akshata Murty, and her parents – Infosys chief Narayana Murthy and author and Member of Parliament Sudha Murty; each an international celebrity in their own right. Murthy and Sunak say they are there only in “supportive” roles for Sudha and Akshata, who speak at a packed morning session about their relationship. Walking into the author’s lounge, they carry their own bags, eat at the lunch buffet with the other speakers, and chat with those who come up to them, cheerfully agreeing to selfies.

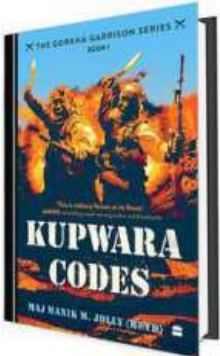
There is, however, no escaping the debate around Murthy’s contentious remark on the need to “work 70-hour weeks”, and so I begin my panel discussion with former Tata Group directors R. Gopalakrishnan and Harish Bhat with the question, “How many hours did you work?”, to many laughs from the audience. Both directors are clear that the Tata Group, already more than 150 years old, will defeat the “shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations” jinx, and emphasise that the secret to the Tatas’ longevity is the familial work culture, with focus on public service and philanthropy rather than a more “Western” corporate work ethos.

BROWSER

Vaadivaasal: The Arena
C.S. Chellappa, Perumal Murugan and Appupen
Simon & Schuster
₹699
This Independence-era novella about *jallikattu* (bull taming), set to be made into a film with Tamil star Suriya, gets a fresh literary lease of life with International Booker-nominated Perumal Murugan’s script and illustrator Appupen’s sketches.



Kupwara Codes
Maj. Manik M. Jolly (retd.)
Harper
₹299
Stories inspired by the Indian Army continue to feed the imagination of writers and fascinate readers alike. This thriller penned by a retired Army Major draws on real stories from the battlefield and is set in Kashmir.



Deviants
Santanu Bhattacharya
Tranquebar
₹799
After his debut novel on growing up in a politically charged contemporary India, author Bhattacharya returns with the story of three generations of gay men. It’s important to put yourself out there, he says, talking about the need to increase visibility of the queer community in India.



We Do Not Part
Han Kang, trs e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris
Hamish Hamilton
₹999
Her works are often called “extreme” and “bizarre” but the South Korean Nobel laureate author says her books based on Korea’s history and society are an attempt to bridge the gap between human savagery and dignity.



Erik Solheim

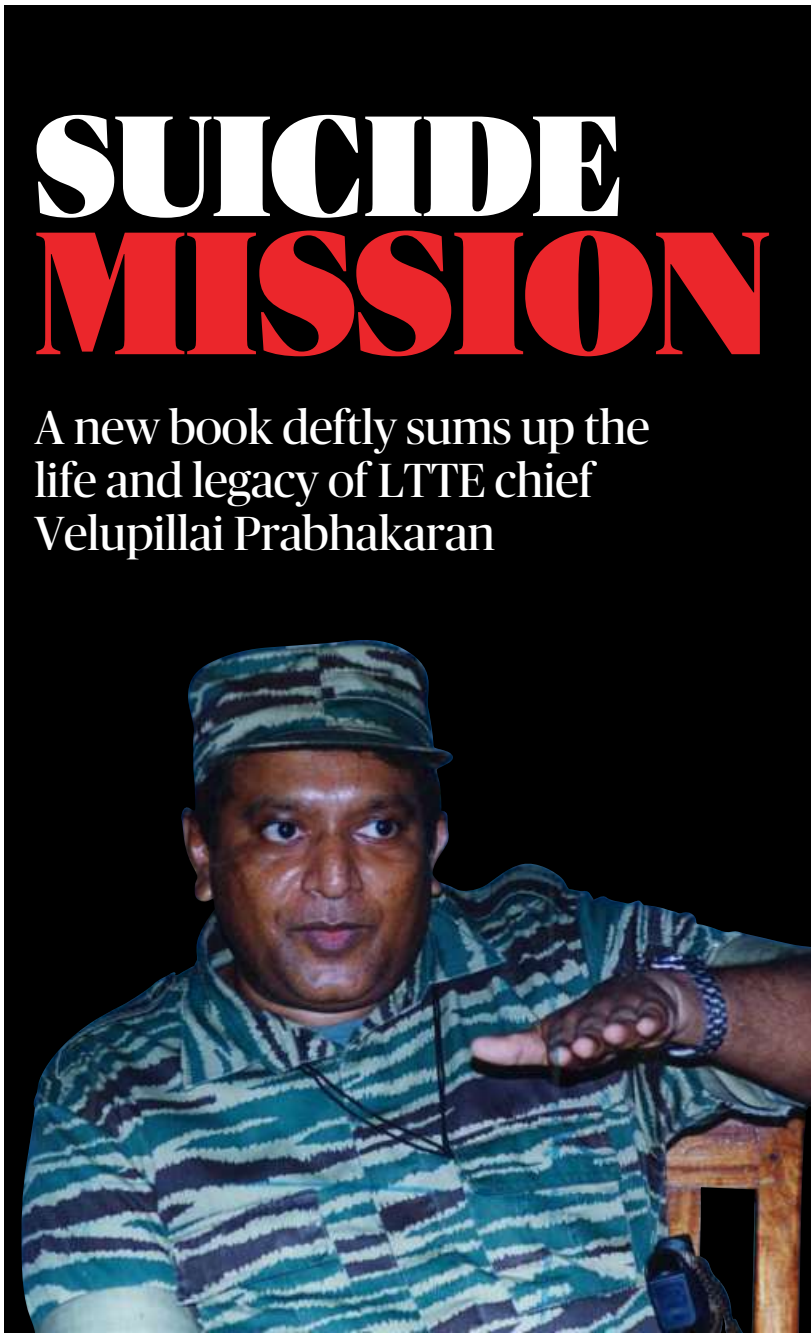
What turns a young man, who leaves home to fight legitimate grievances in his community and nurtures big dreams on behalf of his people, into a dedicated killer who sees violence as the answer to every problem? The Indian journalist, M.R. Narayan Swamy, who has followed the story of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), sets out to answer this question in his timely and well-researched book *The Rout of Prabhakaran*.

As the chief negotiator in the Sri Lankan peace process, I asked myself the same question numerous times: How, as Swamy puts it, did “guns become the answer to overcome each and every obstacle in the chessboard of Tamil Eelam” in Velupillai Prabhakaran’s mind?

Prabhakaran was the main strength, as well as the principal weakness, of the LTTE. He created one of the most effective guerrilla forces in the world and turned the somewhat sleepy and unsexy Tamil struggle into one of the epic wars at the turn of the 20th century. No movement in human history has mobilised the suicide weapon in such a deadly fashion – killing a former prime minister of India, and numerous Sri Lankan leaders.

It all ended in an orgy of violence orchestrated by the Sri Lankan army in May 2009, with the death of every LTTE leader who had not defected to the army years earlier. Prabhakaran and his entire family was killed. His 12-year-old son Balachandran was murdered in a blatant war crime even after being taken into custody by the army.

A paradox
Though he was fighting for Tamils, paradoxically, Prabhakaran also became the big killer of Tamils. He annihilated all competing Tamil militant groups. He hunted down Sri Sabaratnam of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation in Jaffna. His comrade-in-arms Mahattaya was shot as an Indian spy in the Vanni. The historic Tamil leader Amirthalingam was murdered in



A new book deftly sums up the life and legacy of LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran

Colombo. My friend Neelan Thiruchelvam was blown up by a suicide cadre in Colombo, even as he was headed for Harvard. The LTTE later told me it was because he had refused to abandon the process of proposed changes to the constitution. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was shot in 2005 in what today can best be seen as the beginning of the end for Prabhakaran.

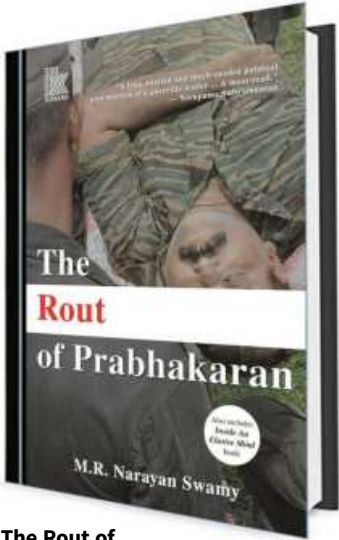
How does one explain this turn in Prabhakaran? Two explanations stand out in Swamy’s telling. Prabhakaran had a very narrow horizon; he did not understand

geopolitics or the workings of the big neighbour, India. He hardly ventured to the south of Sri Lanka and had interacted very little with Sinhalese or Muslims. His perspective was that of the village. How else can you explain the stupidity of killing Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, who was India’s prime minister from 1984 to 1989, at a time when India was the main source of support for his struggle? Would a successful rebel movement in Mexico attempt to murder President Trump?

The LTTE was also primarily a military movement. It did not mainly involve itself in mass work, political



Myriad faces
(Clockwise from left) Prabhakaran with close friend Anton Balasingham; an undated picture of him with wife Mathivathani, son Balachandran and daughter Duwaraka; and briefing his team prior to the attack on Elephant Pass in Sri Lanka. (REUTERS AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES)



The Rout of Prabhakaran
M.R. Narayan Swamy
Konark Publishers
₹895

mobilisation or humanitarian efforts. Did the early spectacular military success against the Indian army, later over-running the Elephant Pass, nearly wiping off the Palaly air base and attacking Colombo airport in an extraordinary raid with devastating effects on the Sri Lankan economy create a certain arrogance?

There is a history of guerrilla fighters turning themselves into successful political leaders, particularly when they understood the need for a broad front, and, even more importantly, that the gun was only a supplementary vehicle to the political struggle. Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists won military triumphs against all odds, but at the end their victories were political. Michael Collins, the founding father of Ireland, was an

extraordinary assassin of the British, but he knew that the British empire could not be brought down with guns alone.

An end foretold
Was the end preordained then for Prabhakaran? Swamy thinks so. But he doesn’t try to explain why the LTTE entered into the peace process, not out of weakness, but at the peak of its power in 2002. Why negotiate when you are strong?

I met Prabhakaran many times and saw softer aspects to the man. He was a film enthusiast and a dedicated cook. He adored his children and sent me to Ireland to secure a place at Dublin University for his beloved daughter Duwaraka. She was accepted, only to be caught up in her father’s renewed war and perish with her family in 2009.

Prabhakaran’s friend and partner Anton Balasingham was the good influence on him, always offering sound and critical advice. It was after Bala died in 2006, that Thambi or younger brother as Bala called him, started making many mistakes. He strongly advised against the Tamil boycott of the 2005 election which brought Mahinda Rajapaksa to power. The Sri Lankan government also made a mistake by restricting access of foreigners to Prabhakaran. International diplomats like me had tried to guide him towards peace.

At the end, it all led to his last apocalyptic decision to fight to the last day – and the last Tamil. Through Kumaran Pathmanathan, KP, the LTTE ‘foreign minister’, we offered to bring out all the combatants and civilians from the war zone. When KP went to finalise the deal, Prabhakaran refused. The rest is history.

Swamy does not explain all aspects of the Sri Lankan crisis. The Sinhala war crimes are not centrestage; nor the catastrophic decisions of so many Colombo leaders who created a divided rather than united land. But Swamy sums up the extraordinary life and legacy of Prabhakaran in masterly fashion.

The reviewer was chief peace negotiator between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government.



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Pest to plate (Clockwise from below) Cooking with carpenter worms; Papa's Bugs Bunny; weaver ant chutney; and chocolate-dipped black soldier fly larvae. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

She points to how SDG 2 (Sustainable Development Goal 2), a branch of the United Nations that focuses on eradicating global hunger, is today seriously looking into edible insects as an answer to rising malnutrition, and its Food and Agriculture Organization has already started advocating edible insects for future food security.

The focus is not only on insects, but the entire traditional food system – to achieve food security, improved nutrition, and sustainability. “So, we all need to come out of the disgust factor and focus on what is healthy,” says Mozhi.

The politics of food Unfortunately, the reality is that food in India is heavily entwined with a person's socio-economic and political standing, and selling insects as a form of protein in a country where being vegetarian is equated with purity seems difficult. Mumbai-based Gitika

Saikia, an Assamese home cook, has been a long-time advocate of edible insects. Belonging to the Kachari community, she has fond memories as a child of collecting water beetles from nearby ponds and silkworm pupae from mulberry trees to take home.

“During Bihu, we have a food ritual to prepare a dish with 101 green vegetables. But it's often impossible to collect so many different varieties. So, we eat weaver ants, with the belief that it has ingested all these vegetables,” she shares.

Saikia has worked with chefs such as Manu Chandra and Prateek Sadhu and restaurants like The Bombay Canteen, collaborating for Assamese food pop-ups and sharing her knowledge of insects.

She's even appeared on the Netflix show *Menu Please* in 2020. Unfortunately, she faced backlash after the show was streamed, with trolls asking her to remove videos of edible silkworm pupae from her Facebook page and telling her “to go back to China to eat these insects”.

BUG APPÉTIT



But she didn't give in to pressure. “I am proud of the food of my community and I did not bring a single post down,” she says, adding that from next month, she is planning to source water beetles, silkworm pupae and weaver ants from Assam (which she had to stop during the pandemic) and spread the word on entomophagy. “This is a tradition I really want to revive.”

Elsewhere in Maharashtra, Shahu Patole, author of *Dalit Kitchens of Marathi Wada*, can empathise with Saikia. “There is constant social humiliation of some people because of what they eat. It is the right of each human to freely choose what they want to consume, but if the food is linked to religion or politics, there

will always be backlash,” he says. While insects do not play a large role in Patole's community's diet, honey bee larvae is much coveted. They are carefully collected during summer, when the colony is at peak production, and are eaten tossed with red chilli powder and onions.

However, what Patole truly opened my eyes to is a problem more covert than the obvious judgement that the “brahmanisation” of India's food has resulted in. It is the issue of when Dalits (and others) start internalising this dialogue and feel ashamed of the food traditions they grew up with. “The shame Dalits feel about their food is largely dependent on the region they live in, making it clear it is society that creates the problem.”



Inside traditional kitchens

There is little to be ashamed of, especially when eating insects has long been an integral part of culinary heritage among many communities across India. From Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Jharkhand, to Tamil Nadu and the Andaman Islands, over 500 varieties are eaten, according to Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). While winged termites and weaver ants are the most common, adult bees and bee

larvae, wasps, crickets, silkworm pupae and larvae, beetles, grasshoppers, locusts, snails and giant water bugs are all eaten.

The methods of identifying, gathering, and preparing insects are part of tribal custom, and often, they are cooked in similar ways – mostly fried or roasted with spices, or made into a chutney. For instance, in Nagaland, bee larvae are roasted and eaten like a snack, in Tamil Nadu winged termites are fried and eaten as a side dish, in Chhattisgarh, ant chutney is a delicacy, and in Manipur and Mizoram, silkworm larvae and pupae are eaten raw with salt and chilli.

Ati Ater from Kohima started Oyas Umami, a catering company in Goa in 2019, where she serves up a modern take on her native Naga cuisine. She grew up with her grandparents who were farmers from Mopungchuket village. “Every time we went out to the fields, we would catch insects to bring back to eat. We ate big bellied spiders and cicadas during the onset of summer. I loved collecting water beetles that swam in the ponds for dinner,” she says, adding how they often grew what the larvae like to eat – like mulberry for silkworm larvae.

On the menu

● **Jharkhand:** Weaver ants are a delicacy in the Panch Pargana area, while the villagers of Pithra in Simdega district eat the ants' eggs.

● **Tamil Nadu:** The six inhabitant tribes of the Nilgiris – Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Iruulas, Paniyas and Kattunayakans – eat around eight species of insects, including Asiatic honey bees, vulture bees, weaver ants, lesser banded hornets, and termites. Winged termites are also eaten by many ethnic groups in the state.

● **Odisha:** Tribes of the Kandhamal, Koraput, Sundergarh, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts eat roasted insects such as date palm weevils as snacks and the famous weaver ant chutney with rice.

● **Maharashtra:** Honey bee larvae are eaten among the Dalit community.

● **Kerala and Telangana:** Winged termites are a pre-monsoon delicacy. Indian honey bees, rock bees, dwarf honey bees, weaver ants, and locusts are also eaten.

● **Madhya Pradesh:** 10 insect species have been recorded among the tribal people of Satpura Plateau, including weaver ants, red paper wasps, rock bees, Indian honey bees, black mud-dauber wasps, silk moths, blister beetles, wheat termites, grasshoppers, and swallowtail butterflies. Additionally, since 1946, the state's Silk Federation has been producing canned silkworm pupae, encouraging people to use them in pickles and as a topping for pizza.

NORTHEAST

● **Manipur:** Over 41 species of insects are consumed, with aquatic insects – such as giant water bugs, water scorpions, water beetles, diving beetles, and scarlet skimmers – being a favoured group.

● **Arunachal Pradesh:** Members of the Nyishi and Galo tribes eat over 81 species of insects. Think bamboo caterpillars, silkworm larvae, honey bee broods, wasp broods, dragonflies and larvae, aquatic beetles and bugs, stink bugs, sand crickets, and brown Anomala spiders.

● **Nagaland:** The indigenous people widely consume carpenter worms and goat moths, whose larval stages are cooked during their festivals. The ethnic people of Phek, Dimapur and Kohima eat grasshoppers, crickets, red ants and larvae of mulberry silkworms.

● **Mizoram:** An edible stink bug is a delicacy for inhabitants of the Mizo Hills.

● **Assam:** The Bodos eat over 23 species, including paper wasps, weaver ants, water bugs, crickets, grasshoppers, praying mantis, termites and giant wood spiders. The ethnic tribes of Dimoria Development Block use 18 species for food, while those in Baksa district eat 30 species. The eggs and larvae of red fire ants and water beetles are consumed by members of the Karbi community.

Atier remembers catching weaver ants from mango trees, shaking their nests with a pole and collecting them when they fell. The best part is that insects are still a big part of their diet. “In the markets, we have grasshoppers, locusts, wood worms, rhino beetles, winged termites, and hornets. Silkworm larvae are served in restaurants. The youth still eat them,” she says. And with tourists interested in trying them, she hopes the interest will spread.

While there are currently no nutritionists in India seriously recommending insects as a form of protein, plenty of studies prove their nutritional supremacy. Especially following a 2013 paper published by the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization titled ‘Edible Insects: Future Prospects for Food and Nutritional Security’, which suggested that insects have the potential to become one of the staple foods of the future.

A study by life science consulting firm Halloran and others stated that “edible insects not only fulfil daily energy and nutrient requirements, but also contain essential amino acids, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, zinc, iron, and fibre. In addition... [they] also contain functional components like chitin, phenols, antioxidants, and antimicrobial peptides, which have potential benefits for immune support and disease prevention in humans”.

Ants on the dinner plate

Mumbai's latest ‘it’ restaurant, Papa's from Hunger Inc. Hospitality – a 12-seater led by chef Hussain Shahzad, where your fellow guest could be Dua Lipa (the British-Albanian singer dined there before her concert last November) – has red ants on their menu. ‘Bugs Bunny’ is a grilled rabbit marinated in sundried weaver ants from



A punchy bite

Protein bars, fortified with insect protein, offer a sustainable and nutrient-dense alternative. The rising awareness of the environmental benefits of edible insects, such as lower resource requirements and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, further fuels this trend. “Unlike whey protein and other plant-based protein powders, the processing time is much less,” says Vohra, adding that the flavour profile is so much better. “Crisper flour has a delicious nutty profile. Comparatively, other protein powders have to mask the taste. No one in India is doing it and there is huge potential for a market here.”

Jharkhand. “We source our red ants from a sweet potato farmer. He collects and dehydrates them for us. The dehydration process helps extend their shelf life,” Shahzad explains.

While he believes that insects are going to be a future food, he is more



Hungry for insects Tansha Vohra; and (left) ‘Ants on a Shrimp’ at Noma's Kyoto pop-up. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

They have documented the many species across the Northeast to preserve the traditional knowledge of their consumption, and are developing different ways, such as drying and grinding them into powder, to garner interest. Priyadarshan Dharma Rajan, a researcher and senior fellow who, along with three others, “discovered” three species of edible stink beetles last year, says, “Not only in Northeast India, but many indigenous and some mainstream communities in the rest of India eat insects. We have documented more than 500 species being consumed by people, almost all sourced from the wild. But a surge in demand from the outside market could lead to overharvesting from the wild, and could pose a threat to insect populations. So, it is crucial to develop rearing and agronomic methods for a wider range of species.”

He feels India needs to be prepared for the global edible insect market, even if they don't become mainstream here. “With its tropical climate, India has a favourable hot and rainy seasons, the country has good potential for insect farming. Moreover, the availability of organic waste can serve as a readily available and sustainable feed source for them. These factors contribute to India having a very high potential for developing insect farming.”

Most recently, red weaver ant chutney or *kai* chutney from Odisha's Mayurbhanj district was awarded a geographical indication (GI) tag. It feels like it is time to put squeamishness aside and dig in.

Combating diner aversion

ATREE has made it a priority to research edible insects for food

The writer is a permaculture farmer who believes eating right can save the planet.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



IN CONVERSATION

Writer and editor Bijal Vachharajani lightens up the serious subject of climate change for children in her new anthology

REWILDING IMAGINATION

Chintan Girish Modi

Bijal Vachharajani is an author who, in their practice, centre nature in some way or the other, and strongly believe in rewilding imaginations,” says Vachharajani, who has assembled an intergenerational cohort exploring nature writing in a variety of forms. For instance, Minwalla's story, “The Banyan Tree of B.D. Kelkar Road”, revolves around a group of children who hatch a plan to save their beloved banyan tree from being cut down to construct a fancy new residential tower. Kisan's story “Wise Old Fool on the Hill” takes us into the inner world of an owl called Buddhiram Ullu ji who is a seer and chronicler watching the world go by from his high perch.

“A Vulture's Story”, written by Roy, is about the unusual friendship between Sara – a woman who lives in the hills – and a vulture she calls Her



Sahgal, Harini Nagendra, Zai Whitaker, Ranjit Lal and Yuvan Aves, among others.

“I wanted to bring together authors who, in their practice, centre nature in some way or the other, and strongly believe in rewilding imaginations,” says Vachharajani, who has assembled an intergenerational cohort exploring nature writing in a variety of forms.

For instance, Minwalla's story, “The Banyan Tree of B.D. Kelkar Road”, revolves around a group of children who hatch a plan to save their beloved banyan tree from being cut down to construct a fancy new residential tower. Kisan's story “Wise Old Fool on the Hill” takes us into the inner world of an owl called Buddhiram Ullu ji who is a seer and chronicler watching the world go by from his high perch.

“A Vulture's Story”, written by Roy, is about the unusual friendship between Sara – a woman who lives in the hills – and a vulture she calls Her

Excellency Perveen Pestonji Peckerkwala. She feeds the bird, and also speaks in vulture language. “Similar to Aramaic, but with more *shs* and *hs*. I do wish it was taught in schools, but what can you expect these days?” she says.

With a dash of humour Vachharajani's curation reflects her sparkling sense of humour, which lightens up the serious subject of climate change for children, and also the expertise and networks built in the process of getting a Masters in Environment Security and Peace from the University for Peace established by the United Nations in Costa Rica, and her professional stints with organisations such as Sanctuary Asia and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

Images from *Go Wild: Stories, Essays and Comics that Celebrate the Earth*, and (bottom) Bijal Vachharajani. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

would bob all along the shores of the Valluvar Lake, whose edge it stood by,” His writing style combines scientific precision with a poet's affectionate gaze. “Palash flowers have five petals: one is like a placard held upright, calling out to others; two enclose its carpels, stamens and nectaries, and the fourth petal sticks out like a folded tongue, serving as the landing site for its large pollinator friends,” he adds.

Questions of access and mobility

One of the most thought-provoking contributions to this book is Chaturvedi's photo essay titled ‘Places My Wheelchair Likes to Go’, which places a wheelchair in fields and forests, and on hilltops and riverbanks, inviting readers to think about questions of mobility, access and inclusion that are often missing from narratives about escaping the urban concrete jungle.

Vachharajani, who is also a commissioning editor at Pratham Books, is a fierce advocate of the “own voices” movement championing narratives by people from marginalised communities about their lives, making room for Dalit, Adivasi, indigenous, disabled, queer and transgender protagonists and their life experiences. “Books need to celebrate every child through stories that reflect, resonate, and tell stories of the many Indias we inhabit,” she says.

She has been selected by Villa Swagatam, an Indo-French cultural programme geared towards promoting artistic and literary exchanges between France, India, and South Asia, to participate in a residency in May 2025 in La Clotat with the Institut Français and La Marelle. “I will be writing my nonfiction book on personal and planetary losses and grief. This is a set of long form essays that I have been working on for the last few years,” she says. Clearly, Vachharajani is not likely to run out of ideas to power her mission anytime soon.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and educator.



GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

Reject all time-pass relationships

Applications invited from eligible candidates to ensure full compliance with the newly introduced Uniform Civil Code of Uttarakhand

not simply living together to save money or for professional reasons such as joint content channel in the creator economy.

● Interviewing neighbours to confirm that the couple is not engaging in anti-national activities such as fact-checking or truth-speaking in WhatsApp groups and other public forums.

● Apprehending landlord who mistakes illegal live-in couple for legal live-in couple or holy matrimonial couple.

3 Awareness and surveillance programmes ● Organise training programmes for aspiring live-in couples on how to fill out the entire 16-page registration form in 14 days or less.

● Train RWA uncles on how to spot unregistered live-in couples and proceed directly to alerting law enforcement without attempting extortion or sexual harassment.

surveillance to proactively track non-compliant couples, and if they are between 18 and 21 years of age, inform their parents through automated calls.

4 Doling out punishment

● Ensuring that consenting adults living together without government permission are fined and jailed.

● Be lenient towards couples who undertake to immediately terminate their live-in relationship and revert to Indian culture.

● Taking care to impose the harshest penalty – sentencing a live-in couple to life-term of marriage – only in the rarest of rare cases (say, if a cauliflower was found living in with a broccoli).

Eligibility criteria ● Ph.D in moral policing.

● Minimum seven years non-working experience as a government bureaucrat.

● A keen eye for spotting telltale signs of affection between two people who might be posing as husband-wife when in truth they are actually living in.

● Ability to draft rules demanding tedious, ultra-complicated paperwork.

● Biological age: 45-65 years

● Mental age: Five (for common sense); 75 (for traditional values).

Mandatory supporting documents

Applicants must provide or upload the following documentation along with their application:

● Proof of age: school-leaving certificate, PAN card, and birth certificate, along with death certificate if dead.

● Proof of residence: domicile certificate, and for applicants claiming to be residents of Uttarakhand for one year or more, electricity/water bill or traffic challans issued over three consecutive weeks that are more than a year old.

● Proof of children (or lack thereof): birth certificate, adoption certificate, and a signed affidavit duly notarised by a notified notorious notary certifying that you have no proof that you have or do not have children, as applicable.

● Proof of previous history of relationships, if any: provisional certificate of live-in relationship, separated-but-can't-get-over-it certificate, death certificate of spouse (only if spouse is truly dead).

Applicants who furnish all of the above proofs will be given highest preference.

● Four copies of their Aadhaar-wala photographs: applicants who in real life look as hideous as they do in their Aadhaar ID would be given bonus points.

Last date of receipt of applications: Whenever the government declares ‘people in love’ as the biggest internal security threat facing the country.

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

Saurabh Bothra, 32, is everyone's favourite 'son'. Maybe that's because he has mastered the ability to get even the most inactive women to exercise and feel better about themselves. He lives by the 'yoga everyday' motto printed on his white tee, showing up for them every single day since he launched his self-funded online yoga startup Habuild, days before the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. "If you are expecting someone else to be consistent, you have to be the epitome of that," he says.

His marketing team isn't targeting that coveted 18-45 age group. Unlike most, he doesn't invisibilise the women who quietly manage households across the country, prioritising their family's needs over their health.

Instead, Bothra has figured out how to make them attend his online yoga classes regularly. For every *asana*, he offers an easy alternative for those suffering from the two common older women ailments of knee pain and back ache.

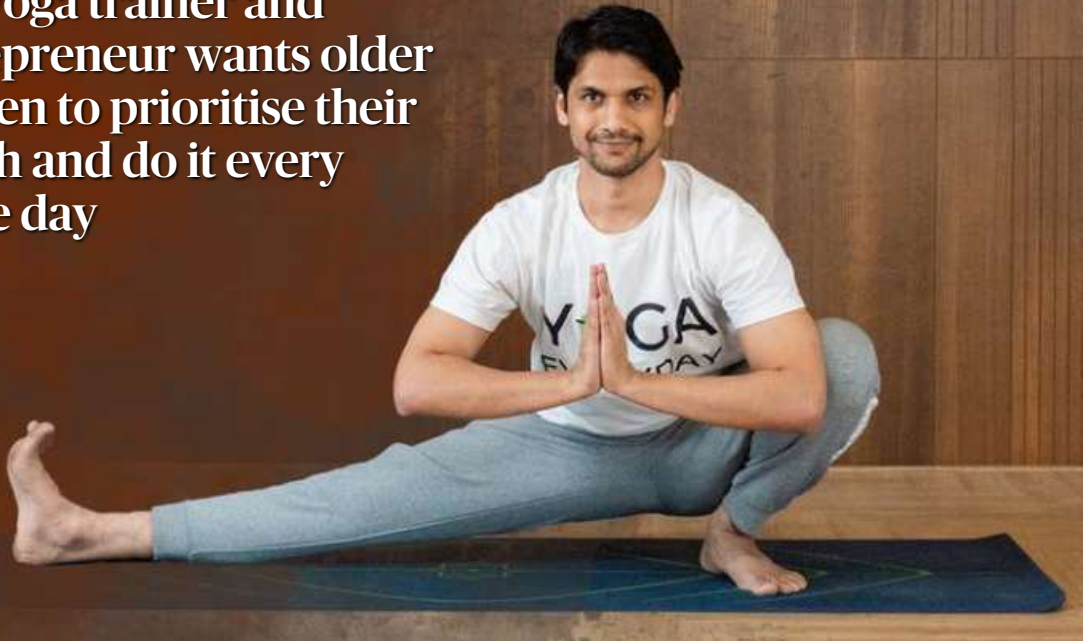
One participant described the classes as "me time". Some testimonials of those who attend his classes sound as chuffed as the successful followers of a 12-step programme – "360 days so far". Their gratitude and cheers fuel Bothra's journey.

With a 14-day free challenge for newcomers every Monday, a twice yearly 21-day free challenge and the regular online classes that cost a modest annual ₹3,999, Habuild has trained 80 lakh people, making it the world's largest online yoga community. It holds three Guinness World Records; some 4 lakh people log on every day, 70% of them women.

PERSON OF INTEREST

SAURABH BOTHRA: MUM'S THE WORD

The yoga trainer and entrepreneur wants older women to prioritise their health and do it every single day



Building a community
It began when Bothra, a mechanical engineer who has been teaching people yoga since his IIT-BHU days in Varanasi, realised that though most people were aware of yoga, they just didn't practise it regularly. Habit-building (hence Habuild) became the focus of his classes. Logging on every day is the one thing he wants from all who attend.

It wasn't easy. People didn't take free classes seriously. So he asked them to pay a monthly charge of ₹500, and returned it if they attended every day. You can imagine the accounting chaos. Next, he began deducting money from those who didn't attend and soon realised another basic truth: "Nobody likes to be punished." That's when he hit upon his hit formula: empathy and leading by

example. "There's no point scolding someone who already understands that exercise is important for them," he says. His own mother, a chartered accountant, was inspired to sign up and gave him valuable feedback. "If you understand one mother, you understand every mother's problem," he says. He's likely improving the Internet knowledge of a generation.

Asanas for all Saurabh Bothra says habit-building is the focus of his yoga classes.

His team is gentle with tech-illiterate participants who may get upset when they are unable to log on to the class, not understanding that it might be their Internet at fault. "If we cater to mothers, we should be prepared to be shouted at like we are their children," Bothra says.

That's probably why his first lesson of entrepreneurship is that he doesn't call Habuild a startup. "It's a community," he says, adding that his work philosophy is a mix of lessons he learnt from his businessman father and socialist grandfather, a rural doctor and *sarpanch* in the 1950s.

Daily motivation
Nearly five years into his journey, there are copycat classes but that doesn't bother Bothra. He's an open-source entrepreneur, happy to share details about how he did it with any competitor, even allowing them a peek into the way his technology is set up. In an India where WhatsApp is best known for its ability to spread misinformation and hate, Bothra has mastered the channel to positively motivate all

If we cater to mothers, we should be prepared to be shouted at like we are their children

his participants daily – and he wants others to do the same.

When he was living in the IIT coaching hub of Kota in Rajasthan, he realised that the education system and families didn't equip young people to handle failure and negotiate emotions such as jealousy and anger. "The manual passed on has been wrong," he says. "Communication is through hitting." So Bothra encourages guests such as Sudarshan, whose Tiny Mic stories help parents and children better converse with each other, to interact with his community. If you sign up, you're also likely to encounter experts who talk about alternative therapies such as *marma* (pressure) points and *mudras* (hand gestures).

While Bothra is not a believer of the 70-hour week for his team, he has dedicated the last five years to this work, even skipping bi-annual team retreats. He doesn't take time out, and is always smiling and gently encouraging in his classes.

His co-founders are his younger sister Trishala, whom he describes as "an upgraded version of myself" (she quit a consultancy job in London to join Bothra), and his IIT batchmate Anshul Agrawal, who has been a believer since the first time he attended an early online class.

Bothra is skipping the upcoming trip to Manali too and his team has labelled the clean-shaven yoga teacher as "boring".

In mom-speak, that's reliable and the mark of a good son.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Careful timing

North-South vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a tournament in India a few years ago. South was Anil Upadhyay, from Delhi. South might have tried to penalise the opponents' two-spade contract, but he chose to pursue a vulnerable game instead. South played low from dummy on the opening heart lead and captured East's jack with his ace. He knew that he could

force a spade trick for himself, so he went after that right away by leading a spade to dummy's king. East won with his ace and shifted to the four of diamonds.

South won with his ace and led a low club toward the dummy. West had to duck, or dummy would have two club tricks, and dummy's king won the trick. South now had seven tricks – four hearts, two diamonds, and a club. He cashed all his heart tricks before leading dummy's

NORTH
♠ K 2
♥ K Q 10 8
♦ 9 7 5
♣ K Q 6 4

WEST
♥ Void
♦ 9 4 3 2
♦ Q 10 8 6
♣ A J 9 7 2

EAST
♥ A Q 10 8 7 5
♥ J 5
♦ 4 3
♣ 10 8 3

SOUTH
♠ J 9 6 4 3
♥ A 7 6
♦ A K J 2
♣ 5

The bidding:
NORTH 1♣
EAST 2♠
SOUTH Dbl*
WEST Pass

Opening lead: Two of ♥

remaining spade toward his hand to build a trick in that suit and bring his total to eight.

East rose with his queen and led another diamond. This time, South played low from his hand and

allowed West's 10 to win the trick. West was none too happy about it, as he now had to give South his ninth trick with either the queen of clubs or the jack of diamonds. Very nicely played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about net and ball games!



A game of 'foot volleyball' in progress at a tournament in Vijayawada. (G.N. RAO)

Berty Ashley

On February 7, 1895, William Morgan, a YMCA physical education director created a game called Mintonette. His sport was meant for middle-aged businessmen, who found basketball too demanding. Originally, one could pass a ball around any number of times before hitting across the net. By what name do we know this sport now?

On February 7, 1900, this competition was established, in which 155 countries take part, making it the world's largest annual team sporting competition. The first different countries to win this 'World Cup' were the United States, Great Britain, France and Australia. Hence they are given special 'Open' status. What event is this?

This is a racket sport that originated in Mexico. It pretty much resembles tennis but the main difference is that the court has walls. Players can bounce the ball off them like squash but across a net. What is the name of the game, a reference to the solid stringless bat used?

This sport is supposed to have originated from Germany. The activity became popular onboard cruise ships as the thing the players throw around was not in danger of rolling off deck. What sport is this, which was originally known as 'Ring Tennis'?

This sport originated in Victorian England as an after-dinner parlour game. Players used to stack a row of books in the middle after clearing the plates, use two more books as rackets and hit a golf ball across. It was called by another name because of the sound the actions made. What sport is this?

This sport was invented in the United States in 1965 and uses a hard plastic ball that has less bounce than tennis balls. It's a very dynamic game and is now becoming very popular. It gets its name because it was created from leftover equipment from other games. What sport is this which has nothing to do with relishes?

This sport is technically 'Foot Volleyball', as it's a combination of both those sports. It is played with a ball made of rattan. Originating in Southeast Asia, it has become very popular in Manipur and even won bronze at the 2018 Asian Games. What sport is this whose name means 'kick ball'?

Teqball is a sport that combines table tennis with the sport from the

previous question. It is played with a football which is hit with any part of the body except arms and hands. The playing surface is unique as the 'table' is designed to keep rallies going at a fast pace. What is special about the table?

Headis is a sport that was invented in 2006. It came about because a football pitch in Germany was being used to store the playing surface for another sport. The name comes from the fact that the player 'heads' the ball. Which sports surface is used?

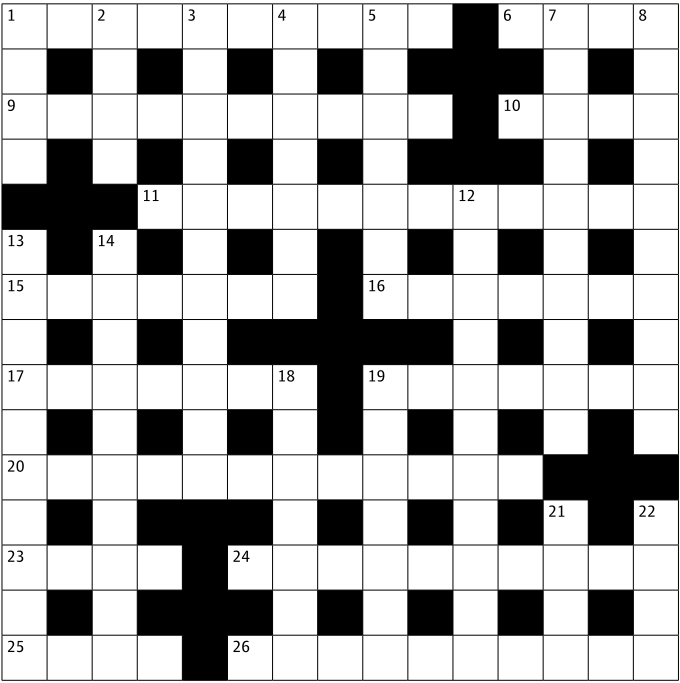
This sport is played with seven players per side and was first played in India as a women's sport in Chennai in the 1940s. Developed by the YMCA the name of the sport comes from the fact that the player doesn't use any racket and does not hit the ball. What sport is this?

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

1. Volleyball
2. Davis Cup in tennis
3. Padel
4. Tennislike
5. Ping Pong
6. Pickleball
7. Sepak Takraw
8. It's curved
9. Table tennis
10. Throwball

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3344



- Across**
- 1 Morph: OK, OK Mr Hart, here we have an artist (4,6)
- 6 An idiot yesterday, in a manner of speaking (1,1,1,1)
- 9 Those choosing prison for Spooner: might they be hampered? (10)
- 10 Storage unit for socks, nip of putrid atmosphere (4)
- 11 Used woolly thinking when lacking illumination? (7,5)
- 15 Walk out on salsa band onstage for using a sample (7)
- 16 Evidently clumsy type — and a loafer (7)
- 17 Swallowing duck, one checks for poison; I say 'Cheers!' (7)
- 19 Residents x workers? (7)
- 20 Sinful American peels back — and out (6,6)
- 23 I appreciate that German is curt, having unpleasant air (4)
- 24 Can *Guarani* get translated for C. American? (10)
- 25 It goes well with curry, whichever way you look at it (4)
- 26 'Hot location acceptable' — tiny oriental feline (5,5)

- 4 Admitted what the sights may be (5,2)
- 5 Cores — or, reportedly, senior members of what sounds the same? (7)
- 7 Southern facility by river restrained aquatic menace (3,7)
- 8 Present alternative rendering, albeit parallel — here represents a suitable example, primarily! (10)
- 12 Snack recipe concocted in experimental facilities (7,4)
- 13 Dinin' on chocolate eggs, you say, in Steinbeck novel (4,2,4)
- 14 Film in Almodóvar's language for the White House (10)
- 18 Appreciate fizzy ale, Sire? (7)
- 19 Newspaper exposé showing Archer and friend scratching bottom (4-3)
- 21 Relative somewhat daunted (4)
- 22 Jealousy picked up from leading characters in *Nouvelle Vague*? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3343



- Down**
- 1 Everyman, having taken on work, to look miserable (4)
- 2 Dicky and Fatty (4)
- 3 Calling for the French? (6,1'4)

When the locomotive of a special train failed

Railways had a contingency plan by deploying a spare engine to escort the ashes of Rajiv Gandhi

Shubhramshu
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For decades, this was perhaps one of the best kept secrets of Indian Railways. When the locomotive of a special train carrying the ashes of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi failed, the Railways had a contingency plan that worked flawlessly to keep the wheels rolling. No one knew of the failure and immediate success in operating one of the most important trains in history.

On the night of May 21, 1991, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a suicide bomber of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during an election campaign at Sriperumbudur, near Chennai. The mortal remains were flown to Delhi for cremation. The ashes were immersed in the Sangam at Allahabad (now Prayagraj).

The train was to traverse about 675 km with multiple stops where thousands of mourners were waiting to pay homage to the departed leader. We were told that Rajiv's wife, Sonia Gandhi, would be on board along with their children, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi. With reports of a large number of emotionally charged people gathering along the route to have a glimpse of the urn carrying the ashes, the Railways had to ensure a smooth travel. The whole country was in shock over the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

I was asked to provide a diesel locomotive for the special train. I was a young, rather inexperienced Divisional Mechanical Engineer in charge of the Mughalsarai Diesel Shed of Northern Railway. The



After the assassination Rahul Gandhi placing an urn containing the ashes of Rajiv Gandhi on a special train at the New Delhi railway station in 1991; and (left) Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi immersing the ashes of their father in the Sangam in Allahabad. (THE HINDU ARCHIVES)

shed had nearly 60 WDM4 locomotives that had become rather old. The Railways had imported 72 of these locomotives built by the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors, U.S. They were ageing and were not very reliable by the time I was put in charge of them. When called upon to provide a WDM4 for the special train, I was worried that the locomotive might fail *en route* and cause massive embarrassment to the Railways. Any failure could delay the train by several hours until a relieving loco was found. What would happen if the train got stranded in the middle of nowhere with Rajiv Gandhi's family and top Congress leaders on board? That would have been the biggest embarrassment for the Railways. The milling crowds at the stations *en route* could have created mayhem.

After many deliberations, I decided to deploy a spare locomotive to escort the special train. The idea was that it could be quickly brought in to continue the journey in case the first locomotive failed.

My operating colleague told me that he was not responsible for any failure and that I would be



answerable for it. I told him that it was not a matter of who was accountable but to ensure that the train journeyed through the land unimpeded.

And our worst fears came true. The locomotive failed halfway on its route. Though Murphy's Law prevailed, our Plan B worked flawlessly. Without anybody even noticing that the engine had developed a snag, the spare engine came to the rescue of the stranded special train and the wheels kept rolling. The journey continued as though nothing had happened. There was nothing to be embarrassed about and nothing to celebrate either. This story was never told.

Later, the Railways built thousands of more advanced versions of the same EMD locomotive in the Diesel Locomotive Works, Varanasi that transformed the rail traction of Indian Railways. We are no longer dependent on imports.

More recently, we built the much-celebrated Vande Bharat Express in the Integral Coach Factory, Chennai, which has the propulsion distributed along the train and failure of a unit is not a major challenge.

Going the retro way to listen to music

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Recently, the Official Charts of the U.K. published on its website the best sold audio cassettes of 2024. It reveals that the highest selling album of the previous year was Sabrina Carpenter's *Short n' Sweet* followed by Dua Lipa's *Radical Optimism* and Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department*.

For a majority of the Gen Z and Gen Alpha youngsters in India who have not seen an audio cassette, this analogue format was the dominant music-playing medium throughout the 1980s. People used to record voice and listen to music through the tapes. Currently, this format has seen a resurgence in the western countries and its sales have been increasing year by year since 2012.

In India, new cassettes are not produced and hence, only old stock is available to buy. The cassettes, which cost between ₹40 and ₹60 in the 2000s, are now priced in the range of ₹150-₹500 in physical music stores and ₹500-₹2,000 online.

Most Indians may have witnessed a comeback of vinyl records, which were the largest used music format in the 1950s and 1960s. New records are being produced by various companies in Hindi. They include re-issue of old film songs in vinyl record which was originally released in cassettes and CDs in the past. The examples include songs of films such as *Dilwale*, *Pukar*, *Saajan*, *Kasam*, *Paida Karne Wale Ki*, *Tum Se Achcha Kaun Hai* and *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya*. Nowadays, it is easier to get a sealed LP (long play) record than any other analog format. The price ranges from ₹1,999 to ₹3,499. These are sold at record stores and shopping apps.

The question is why are these vintage music formats becoming popular again. The cassettes come with decorative inlay cards and vinyl records come with great artwork. Similarly, both retro technologies foster a sense of ownership for the users. If there is poor network connectivity or shortage of data, the vinyl and cassettes become helpful for uninterrupted listening. The advertisements on cassettes are always about music or upcoming albums in contrast to online streaming which can give irrelevant advertisements on stock market or education unrelated to music.

Unforgettable guides

Striking a rapport with the go-to people in tourist destinations

Devina Albert
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The travel bug bit us late in life. We were not tech savvy backpackers ready to do walking tours or bike tours and discover new places on our own. Guides played a major role in our travel. They became as unforgettable as the places we visited.

The most unforgettable was our driver-guide in Portugal. Our original dream destination that year, Austria, was still freezing at the end of February. But very soon, unlike Vasco da Gama, we had confirmed air tickets, accommodation and googled information. Outside the airport, we found a nine-seater minivan which could take

our eight-member group to the hotel. Greeting us with a smile, the driver quickly hoisted our luggage onto the van's boot. During the 15-minute ride, he offered to take us sightseeing in Lisbon. He spoke English and we began with the sights of Lisbon that evening, stopping at a 150-year-old coffee shop for custard tarts and amazing coffee. It was cold and windy. His warmth and geniality were endearing. We asked him about travel to Porto where we had booked a service apartment for two days. "Well, you have the train, the bus and then you also have me," he grinned. His reasonable charges would be split among the eight of us. Sometimes he drove with a furrowed forehead, deep in thought. He said,



GETTY IMAGES/STOCK

"I am thinking what you should see the most." Six days later, he bid us adieu, with gifts for each of us. The next year when relatives visited Portugal, we recommended him and they were not disappointed.

Cruises provided us with trained guides to enjoy wonderful day trips at every port. Berlin, Athens, Venice, Rome, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Oslo, Paris, London, every place we visited came alive because of the guides. British tour guides get the top place in humour. Anna, our guide at Corfu, explained local

legends and family traditions including dowry. Spiro, our driver, negotiated sharp turns on narrow streets over steep cliffs. She said 65% of Corfu men were named Spiro after St. Spiridon, their patron saint.

During the Holy Land tour, we were told that every bus had a Jew and a Palestinian, one as the guide and the other as the driver. The 10-day tour included overnight stays in Amman, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Cairo. At Mount Sinai, the guide moved us to tears speaking about St. Catherine. He was puffing a hookah a little later. Some wanted to get baptised in the Jordan river but there were no priests. Our guide said he was licensed to conduct Christian baptism. Later, we learnt that he was a Jew and had fibbed to save time.

These tourist guides were engaging and enthusiastic and left us with lasting impressions and great memories.

Madhumita Sharma
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India, often hailed as one of the fastest growing economies, ironically comes across as one of the unhappiest countries, going by the World Happiness Report, 2024. The paradox raises alarming questions on how a country with so much potential and immense population is lagging behind in creating an environment for its citizens to thrive socially and emotionally. The report takes into account various factors such as GDP per capita, life expectancy, social support, freedom, perception of corruption and generosity.

Economic inequality and income disparity remain among the biggest issues in India, according to the Oxfam Inequality Report. The wealthy 1% of the population owns more

Caught in gloom

One of the fastest growing economies. India is also one of the unhappiest



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

than 40% of the country's wealth, whereas millions live below the poverty line.

The immense disparity stems from a sense of discontent, with a large segment of population finding it difficult to make ends meet every day, struggling for basic

necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare and educational facilities.

While India has achieved several significant milestones in technological and economic advancements, its low ranking has perhaps highlighted some grassroots-level structural issues which do not allow its citizens to live their lives to the fullest. The country has often struggled to provide an environment for its citizens where they can flourish in a complete social, mental and emotional manner. This raises multiple questions on the nation's priorities and ability to foster holistic well-being for its citizens.

One of the major components of happiness lies in social support, but even today despite various support groups and initiatives, India is still struggling in this arena. Mental health crisis is an alarming concern.

The suicide rate among youth due to unemployment and societal challenges is alarming, showing deep despair in society. COVID-19 has exacerbated the crisis, leaving people emotionally devastated after the loss of their loved ones and lack of social support. Stigma often compounds the crisis and discourages people from seeking professional help and support services.

Despite various community welfare programmes and initiatives, systemic inefficiencies have caused hurdles in the path of people, therefore leaving them in a perpetual state of melancholy.



FEEDBACK

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

▼
Cover story

That a cross-section of climate scientists has laid stress on the urgent need to use the latest science to inform policy deserves the immediate attention of the government. ('1.5 degrees of aberration'; Feb. 2) It is only by coordination and cooperation between the scientific and political communities that there can be improvement in policy for mitigating climate change and ensuring the welfare of the present and future generations.

N. Rama Rao

▼
The U.S. exit from the Paris Agreement is a major blow to all the hard work on climate action thus far. If developing countries are refused financial and technological aid for mitigation and adaptation measures, all hope will be lost.

Kamal Laddha

▼
Prayer for the world
Liberal democracies all over the world have been turning authoritarian one after the other and the senseless killing of people in wars has been going on without any qualms. ('That whisper in the ear'; Feb. 2) Fiction writers like Paul Lynch have been trying to awaken the world with their powerful stories. One hopes these stories will stir the conscience of leaders and common sense will prevail in the world.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

▼
Climate and sport
Football inside a bubble — that's what struck me when I read Suresh Menon's review. ('Game over'; Feb. 2) I'm sure the

climate crisis will make us distant from the game, especially those who have grown up playing on dewy grass under the open skies. Neither the scorching Delhi heat nor the July monsoon could stop us from playing then. Times are changing and our next generation might not get to do this.

Divija Chhabra

▼
Painful picture
Cartoonist Rohan Chakravarty accurately describes the current state of olive ridley turtles in Chennai. ('Green Humour'; Feb. 2) The government must act in haste to save the species.

V. Gajendran

▼
Saddened to know about the death of olive ridley turtles off the Tamil Nadu coast. Why is there a deafening silence of the powers that be? How can mechanised fishing trawlers get away with this?

Satish Sundar

▼
Life as art
Jayeeta Chatterjee's embroidery is quite exemplary as it not only portrays art but also foregrounds the life and reality of common Indian women. ('Indian domesticity and feminine politics'; Feb. 2)

Aniket Mohapatra

▼
Sari love
Malvika Singh's novel initiatives blend poetry and pragmatism to create a compelling account of the sari as a living legacy of Indian heritage. ('My saris and I have conversations'; Feb. 2) Her concern and empathy for weavers shine through in her efforts to empower, and not patronise, them.

Anusha Pillay



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The power of the unfinished

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Krishna Khandelwal

When words fail

Overcoming stage fright is tough but is in the realm of possibility

Kannan Balasubramaniam

A happy coincidence

Similar looks, similar names, a wonderful encounter

C.V. Sukumaran

Sacred bonds, silent scars

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Jeslitha Mary J.

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Luxurious and futuristic (Clockwise from below) The making process at Iris van Herpen's atelier; creations from *Carte Blanche*; a design being put together; the Water Dress; van Herpen's team's attention to detail; the designer; and an outfit from the Meta Morphism collection. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



4D printing is van Herpen's next big step. The technology will take the dynamism of 3D printing further, where designs will be able to change shape over time, responding to the environment or wearer's movements. "The pieces will perform a kind of micro-dance around the body," she says. Imagine a dress that could change with your body, and accommodate all of life's changing cycles, from giving birth to growing old.



IRIS VAN HERPEN: INSIDE A HYBRID MIND

Meet the Dutch fashion designer who uses materials in ways never seen before, pushing boundaries with everything from art and technology to mycelium networks and kinetic energy

Akanksha Kamath

Nestled near the riverside in Amsterdam, Iris van Herpen's atelier is a reflection of her work in blending fashion with art, science, technology, and the natural world. We speak over a Zoom call in September, a few weeks after she wrapped up her couture show in Paris. The visionary Dutch couturier's eyes settle on the serene water body in front of her; it is those effervescent and transformative qualities of water that form her approach to design. Sometimes quite literally – as the 'Water Dress', created in collaboration with artist Daphne Guinness and photographer Nick Knight and currently held in The Museum at FIT, and at other times, as the backdrop for her fluid clothes, as seen in the *Sensory Seas* collection video that was shot underwater with French dancer and freediver Julie Gautier.

"When you look at everything that exists, it is all just energy," says van Herpen, 40, her voice an assuring monotone. Perhaps this is why her clothes are rarely just garments; they are rather, dynamic sculptures that appear almost alive. Case in point: the dresses in the 'Root of Rebirth' collection inspired by mycelium networks, the underground fungal systems that connect forests. It features intricate, root-like structures that seem to be alive, embodying her vision of nature's hidden connectivity. Or the 'Magnetic Dress' in collaboration with a Dutch artist, which uses resin mixed with iron filings manipulated by magnets to create organic, almost alien-like textures that grow from the fabric, resembling living organisms.

Visceral expression of motion

To really understand the essence of van Herpen's 16-year-long career, I reach out to veteran fashion critic and an ardent fan of the designer, Suzy Menkes. In her email, she succinctly captures what sets the designer apart in fashion today: "Iris invents everything, particularly the fabric, if that's what it could be called," she writes. "She uses materials – or did right at the beginning of her career – that had never been seen or used before. Her designer skill has been to take the extraordinary and make it wearable and usable."

Using technology, art and

philosophy to transform material into a visceral expression of motion and life is omnipresent in the work she creates today. As is her relationship with classical dance – being a ballet dancer, van Herpen has a deep connection to the physicality of the body. In 2023-2024, she celebrated 15 years of her brand with an exhibition at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The exhibition titled *Carte Blanche* featured over 100 pieces from her oeuvre, organised into nine themed rooms. Among them, the 'Water Dress', which simulates splashing water by employing moulded sheets of acrylic,



a technique pioneered by van Herpen to evoke the illusion of motion in a still form, stands alongside collaborations with artists and scientists, reflecting her fascination with nature and transformation. The retrospective took five years to curate, and for van Herpen, it was also a way to track her own change and growth over the years. "It was like looking at my own diary, of who I was at each moment," she explains. "So, choosing pieces wasn't about logic – it was pure intuition." As one meandered through the exhibition, another element of van Herpen's work became apparent – that her use of materials is "primal". From the tensile strength of plant stems, the delicate intricacy of spiderwebs, and the incredible world of mushrooms, her artistic expression spans the gamut of



I want futuristic design to mean natural, with an organic presence

IRIS VAN HERPEN

nature. Fashion, in many ways, is her way of visualising the interconnectedness of the natural world and human life. To that end, she has created couture with recycled plastic, digitally printed clothing, and harnessed kinetic energy in calf-length dresses.

Futuristic and cutting-edge, but natural

Sustainability, too, takes the steering wheel in the design process. According to van Herpen, the future of sustainable couture lies in balancing innovation with natural materials and developing biodegradable alternatives that retain a luxurious, futuristic feel. "Even 10 years ago, my work felt futuristic, but

Earth on your sleeve

The examples of van Herpen's wildly wearable creations are several: be it the avant-garde gown from the Spring/Summer 2021 collection that Sonam Kapoor Ahuja wore for a *Vogue* India feature, featuring a 3D-printed bodice and ethereal, floating layers; or the outfits from the 'Earthrise' collection. The pieces – inspired by the iconic photo of Earth taken from space during the Apollo 8 mission – were crafted from layers of fine silk and metallic threads, and evoked the colours and curvature of the planet as seen from 570 km away.



it relied on synthetic materials," she explains. Her first-ever outing as a designer was a dress made out of 150 hangers. The 'Hanger Dress', as it came to be known, demonstrated her meticulous approach to transforming everyday objects into high-fashion. "Now, I want futuristic design to mean natural, with an organic presence."

To make her vision come true, she is collaborating with universities and research institutions, in addition to the already existing laboratories she works with. "They're often cutting-edge, sometimes even two steps ahead of companies," she says, citing 4D printing as her next big step. The technology will take the

dynamism of 3D printing further, where designs will be able to change shape over time, responding to the environment or wearer's movements. "The pieces will perform a kind of micro-dance around the body," she says. Imagine a dress that could change with your body, and accommodate all of life's changing cycles, from giving birth to growing old.

"What sets Iris apart is her creative process and the way she thinks about fashion and its place in our contemporary world," says Melissa Marra-Alvarez, curator of education and research at The Museum at FIT, also home to the 'Water Dress'. "Beyond creating unique or beautiful dresses, she understands the interdisciplinary nature of fashion." And to reflect the high level of expert choreography required to create collections using techniques such as laser-cutting and custom 3D-printed fabrics, a synchronised dance of specialists, including scientists and architects, come together at the atelier.

Presentations of the collections, too, experiment and innovate. From museums to galleries, and runway shows, no space is out of context for van Herpen's couture creations. For her Paris Haute Couture Week show, she eschewed the runway entirely – choosing instead to show in an art gallery. Models came attached to canvases, balancing on a platform, their hair set into the canvas like an impasto portrait. For about an hour and a half, audiences walked around and took in the beauty of the moment and her collections up close. It was a rare occurrence where people were invited to step into her world. Future installations will likely follow this format, she says. "I want to open people's eyes and create a profound experience."

The next leg of Carte Blanche will open at Kunsthal Rotterdam in September.

The writer is an independent journalist based in London, writing on fashion, luxury and lifestyle.