THE HINDU
Sunday, June 1, 2025

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WHAT DID YOU DO THIS WEEKEND?

The question is a loaded one today, with young professionals across India attempting to shape their downtime and leisure becoming a soft performance review

ILLUSTRATION: SRISHTI RAMAKRISHNAN

Olimita Roy

Every Monday morning, in the liminal space between work and routine, a familiar question drifts through India's cities. It's heard in the offices of Bengaluru, on the terraces of Bandra, in the awkward silence before Zoom calls begin:

"So... what did you do this weekend?" It sounds innocent enough – small talk, a social placeholder. But like all good rituals, it's loaded. For many young urban Indians, it's less about plans than projection, and more about who you were while doing it.

This is the hidden psychology of modern leisure. In the language of Erving Goffman, the 20th-century Canadian-American sociologist who likened life to a stage, we've moved our weekend from the backstage of anonymity to the frontstage of performance. The weekend used to be a breath. Now it's a brand.

I first noticed it in Mumbai, walking past a sunlit studio in Bandra where a dozen 20- and 30-somethings were shaping clay into mugs. They worked in silence, brows furrowed in concentration. Later, I'd hear from a participant who said, "It just feels good to use my hands for something." She didn't say she liked pottery. She said she liked using her hands. That's the language of intentionality, of meaning-seeking – a telling linguistic tic of a generation that wants its free time to say something about its inner life.

And this isn't unique. From sourdough starters to film cameras, salsa classes to stargazing meetups, young Indians are filling their weekends with activities that are, consciously or not, acts of self-curation. Psychologists might call this *narrative identity*: the stories we tell ourselves (and others) about who we are and why we matter.

Access and instant gratification

To understand how we got here, it helps to look at the numbers. India is now home to over 600 million people under the age of 35, according to an S&P Global Market Intelligence study. In cities such as Bengaluru, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Hyderabad, a new class of young professionals – many unmarried, many living away from their families – have both the income and the autonomy to shape their downtime.

This demographic shift is seismic. A generation ago, weekends in India were not individual experiences; they were communal and obligation-heavy. Visiting relatives. Catching a movie with cousins. Running errands for the household. The idea that you would "do something for yourself" on a weekend was, if not selfish, then certainly rare.

But today's urban Indian is surrounded by different signals. Time has become a currency, and weekends are seen as investments: of energy, of identity, of social capital. The stakes are high because the time is short. And into this temporal vacuum has stepped an entire industry.

Sometimes, in pretending to be curious, you actually become curious. I want to be the guy who picks up odd, cool hobbies — and who knows, maybe I'll actually like one of them

AKASH BISWAS, 29
A consultant in Gurugram

To really understand the psychology of today's curated weekend, you have to travel back – not to the last decade, but to the 1950s and 60s, when India's middle-class was forged in the quiet discipline of scarcity. As Surinder S. Jodhka, a sociology professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, points out, "Consumer goods then weren't just hard to afford, they were often impossible to find." Desire wasn't about acquisition. It was about patience. The good life was deferred, not displayed.

Urban India, even then, set the tone – what was aspirational in Delhi eventually became meaningful everywhere else. But the post-liberalisation shift cracked that model open. The Nehruvian ethic of restraint gave way to a new moral order: one that celebrated access, aspiration, and immediate gratification. Today's weekend, in many ways, is a symptom of that transformation. The people shaping their Saturdays around calligraphy classes and handmade pasta aren't just spending – they're rewriting the script of middle-class aspiration.

The good life is no longer about waiting. It's about choosing.

The value of variety

This growing demand for meaningful, shareable moments has sparked a surge in curated experiences. The idea once captured by the iconic Tata Safari ad – 'Reclaim your life' – no longer calls for a road trip or an SUV. It's happening in two-hour workshops and weekend retreats, micro-escapes designed to restore a sense of control, creativity, and self. According to Prof. Anirban Chakraborty of IIM Lucknow, "This is part of a broader shift among young professionals: the urge to close the gap between the real self and the ideal self through curated, meaningful experiences."

He calls it an "experience-seeking economy" – where value isn't just about relaxation, but variety, novelty, and narrative. The more diverse the activity, the richer the self-story. And in this context, even leisure becomes a kind of emotional labour. Borrowing from American sociologist Arlie Hochschild, we could say we're toggling between shallow acting (performing interest) and deep acting (genuinely feeling it). Pottery isn't just about clay – it's about who you are while shaping it.

As Akash Biswas, a 29-year-old consultant in Gurugram, explains, there's a constant pressure to appear interesting – to have hobbies that spark conversation or shine on social media. "Sometimes, in pretending to be curious, you actually become curious," he says. He once tried a sushi-making class, signed up for improv comedy, and even joined a weekend hiking group. "Improv really stuck with me," he admits. "It felt freeing to just respond in the moment, without overthinking – kind of like a break from the polished version of myself I usually present [to everyone]." And he's still exploring. "I want to be the guy who picks up odd, cool hobbies – and who knows, maybe I'll actually like one of them."

We measure rest. We track joy. We optimise the weekend. In resisting the 9-to-5, we've built a 5-to-9 that looks eerily similar. The harder we try to escape productivity's grip, the more we reinvent it.

Economic impact of curated leisure

You can trace much of how Indians spend their weekends today back to the pandemic – a moment that forced millions indoors, nudging them towards slower, more tactile experiences. Suddenly, the kitchen wasn't just where you ate; it was where you created. Across cities like Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Pune, boutique studios began to crop up, offering everything from ceramics classes in Koramangala to calligraphy workshops tucked into Mumbai's Kala Ghoda Festival.

Last month saw a series of pop-ups inviting people to try their hand at cyanotype photography or even brew their own kombucha – a strange, artisanal rebellion against the instant and disposable. Meanwhile, micro-retreats promising "peace in 48 hours", complete with sound baths and journaling, have taken hold in places like Goa and Auroville.

Behind this burst of activity lies a bigger truth: where identity lives, economy follows. India's "experience economy" in Tier 1 cities is growing 30% year-on-year, fuelled by millennials and Gen Z, according to a joint study by Boston Consulting Group and the Retailers Association of India. This isn't just consumption; it's participation in a narrative economy – where your weekend is a chapter in the story of who you want to be.

But it's more than just business, it's psychology. The modern urban professional never truly clocks out. Work seeps into phones, chats, even dreams. So free time becomes sacred. And it can't just be empty – it must be meaningful. A hike is wellness. A photo walk isn't just about light; it's about taste and style. Even "doing nothing" comes with hashtags such as #DigitalDetox or #SlowLiving. Leisure has become a soft performance review – not of skills, but of sensibility.

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GULZAR, UNIQUE AND A PARADOX

Why the poet-lyricist, who was awarded the Jnanpith recently, prizes literature far above films

Harish Trivedi

What can you give a man who already has 22 Filmfare awards, a Grammy, an Oscar, and the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for Lifetime Achievement in Indian cinema? The answer: a Jnanpith award, which is similarly a lifetime achievement award in Indian literature. It was given to Gulzar a few days ago. No person has come even close to winning both these awards before, and that represents both the uniqueness and the paradox of being Gulzar.

Known primarily for his film lyrics, Gulzar has become a part of the emotional landscape of several generations of Indians. But cinema in India is still considered common and low-brow and carries a taint. Gulzar's cinematic celebrity has thus served to obscure his literary achievement as an Urdu poet of the highest order. His *naghme* (lyrics) have eclipsed his *nazmen* (poems), rather as Rahu eclipses the moon. Gulzar himself prizes literature far above cinema. As he once put it, films are like clouds that come and rain and then roll away while literature has a permanent presence, like the blue sky above.

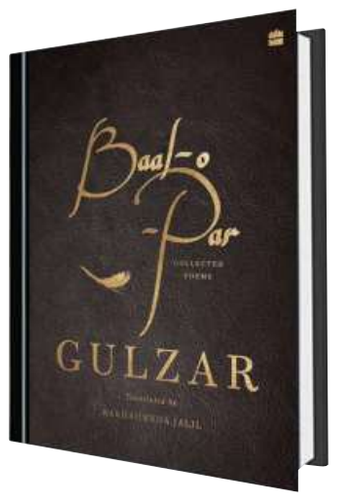
Gulzar's daring originality as a poet begins with the fact that his staple form of composition is not the *ghazal* but the *nazm*. The more popular *ghazal* is a series of stand-alone couplets linked together only by the clackety-clack rhyme-word, which is a sure-fire applause-catcher. A *nazm*, in contrast, is a poem on a single theme, which the poet explores at some length. It is often quietly contemplative in tone.

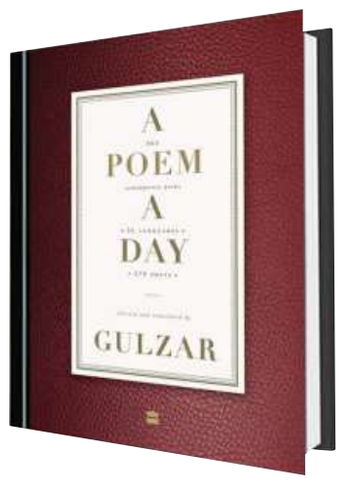
Gulzar has gone further by often renouncing rhyme, which even Faiz and Firaq relied on in their *nazms*. Crossing another boundary, his unrhymed verse often turns into free verse, as he discards metre too in favour of lines of uneven length. Another feature that makes his poetry cosmopolitan and modern is his penchant for short imagist poems, where the vividly evoked image speaks for itself.

Love and burning cars

In terms of his themes too, Gulzar has liberated Urdu poetry from its high-rhetorical Indo-Persian conventions and time-worn collocations. His subjects range from the dehumanising mundanity of metropolitan life to cosmic speculations. Each morning, he says in a *nazm*, he is granted an allowance of a day but by the evening, it has slipped from his pocket or been snatched by someone; the day ends up like a shorn and bleating lamb heading to slaughter.

But nature heals. Gulzar offers us a glimpse of boats with sails fully puffed up, as if holding their breath. We see mountains with their peaks floating among clouds, their feet planted firmly in icy water, and a lofty air about them of solemn stillness. And even higher above are the cosmic bodies. *This sun is a dwarf/ It can't light up each cranny of my being.*





Gulzar's love-poems too are refreshingly different. His lovers are not half-mad adolescents yearning for they know not what; rather, they are adults who have already experienced bittersweet love with multiple unions and separations. *I broke off a couple of dry branches from my past/ ...You too produced some old and crumpled letters/ With them we lit a fire and warmed our bodies/Stoking up dying embers through the night.*

In the wide world beyond, cars burn on streets and rioters go rampaging in gangs. *Why don't you show this too*, the poet asks, *in a Republic Day tableau?*

The whole spectrum

Besides poems, Gulzar has also written over a hundred short stories, a novel, books for children, and screenplays for biopics on Mira and Ghalib. He made a tele-series on Premchand's short stories, and has translated two volumes of Tagore's poems into Urdu.

He has edited a 954-page anthology – titled *A Poem a Day* – of 365 poems by 279 modern poets from 34 different languages, with both Hindi and English translations. It took him nine years to complete. He is a writer soaked in literature and devoted to all forms of it.

The lyrics and the poems of Gulzar are rather like twins born of the same womb but then separated, to follow widely different life-trajectories – as in many old Bollywood films like *Ram Aur Shyam*. Last year, in a fortuitous but even-handed development, over 650 of Gulzar's *nazms*/ poems were published in a bilingual Urdu/Hindi-English edition titled *Baal-o Par/ Fur and Feathers* (with English translations by Rakhshanda Jalil), while 500 film songs of his were collected under the title *Gungunaiye* (Hum Along).

Travelling together with Gulzar once, I overheard at the Goa airport a sophisticated-looking lady of a certain age whisper to her companion in a tremulous tone: "Can't believe I'm standing just 10 feet away from Gulzar *saheb*!" One hopes she could not only hum some songs by Gulzar but had also read some of his *nazms*, the real stuff.

The writer taught English at Delhi University.

GETTY IMAGES

IN CONVERSATION

Long story short

With the modern short story in a regional language in the spotlight, the translators of three recent anthologies discuss challenges and technique

Meenakshi Shivram

In 2022, Hindi writer Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* won the International Booker Prize. And last week, Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, translated from the original Kannada by Deepa Bhasthi, won the prestigious prize. It is the first short story collection to do so.

Recently, there have been several conversations about the modern short story tradition in a regional language and the function of translations. There has also been a perceptible shift from translations as re-possessions to translations for dissemination. A fine specimen of the same is The Early Classic Stories Series (published by HarperCollins), devotedly edited by that gritty champion of translations, Mini Krishnan. It takes us only a few decades back in time but what we confront here is a strange world of complex simplicities and guilelessness.

The first three collections in this series comprise stories translated from Odia (by Leelawati Mohapatra, Paul St-Pierre and K.K. Mohapatra), Malayalam (Venugopal Menon) and Kannada (Susheela Punitha) – covering a century, mostly from the 1890s onwards.

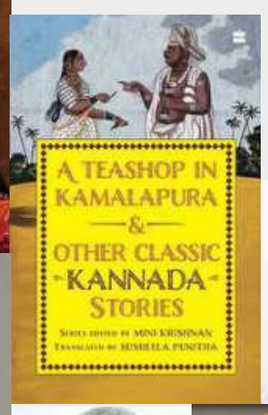
These books share, with deep sensitivity, a flavour of our own lives as we lived then. The translators of all three collections showcase their own empathy as they perceptively mirror our past to us. In an interview with *Magazine*, they share their thoughts on the key themes in the books and the unique challenges posed by each work. Edited excerpts:

An earlier world and its value systems

Malayalam translator Venugopal Menon says he could relate to the old value systems through his forebears. "There was a subtle dignity and pride they thrived on despite the inevitable urge to sustain social status. Nevertheless, honour was at a premium. And they seemed to think crime is evil," he says.

Kannada translator Susheela Punitha, 87, has seen this world first-hand. "It is the world of my grand children that seems stranger," she quips.

Odia translator K.K. Mohapatra talks of an emotional connect. "What struck us repeatedly was the quiet dignity of many of these protagonists, the ethical depth of their struggles, and the understated but profound critique that some stories offered of their own milieu," he says. "There is also a tenderness in the telling, that allows us to connect, even across time."



(Clockwise from below) Translators Leelawati Mohapatra, K.K. Mohapatra, Paul St-Pierre, Venugopal Menon and Susheela Punitha; editor Mini Krishnan; and the books in the Early Classic Stories Series.

Different translation techniques

This series, with its many eminent translators, opens up space for discussion around translation techniques. Unusual, but the three translators of *Maguni's Bullock Cart And Other Classic Odia Stories* work as a team. "Working as a trio in translation has, quite surprisingly, been a seamless and fruitful collaboration for us for over 25 years now. We begin with a literal first draft – essentially a line-by-line rendering of the original, where grammar, syntax, and stylistic grace are temporarily set aside. What follows is an intense phase of interrogation and discussion: words are tested, meanings challenged, interpretations debated. Each story typically goes through at least six drafts, often more," says Mohapatra.

Menon, who began translating the 20 pieces in *The Second Marriage Of Kunju Namboodiri And Other Classic Malayalam Stories* in March 2023, also went through several drafts and even read aloud the translations to an audience to check if the cadence worked. Interestingly, he "contacted several personages renowned in the field of Malayalam writing to understand and translate many passages which were written in the Malayalam of the period, many of which were actually in Manipravalam, a combination of Sanskrit and Malayalam – metaphorically, pearls and corals (*mani-pravalam*)".

Punitha, on the other hand, says she translates "directly from her heart", her ears focused on the Kannada sounds. In the end, the "spirit of the story in Kannada has to be kept alive in English", says the translator of *A Teashop In Kamalapura And Other Classic Kannada Stories*.

Stay true to the original or embellish?

The Odia translators maintain that their "guiding principle is to remain as faithful to the original as possible – close to the bone – without sounding awkward or anachronistic in English". Says Mohapatra, "We take care not to embellish, interpret, or dilute the author's intent. We aim to preserve both the texture and tone of the original, even as we move it into another language."

On the other hand, Punitha says that both embellishing and interpreting are sometimes required. This can be done with the author's permission. "It was indeed a tightrope walk to find a balance between being faithful to the flavour of each story and being concerned with its intelligibility to the reader,' she says in her Translator's Note. Menon too always keeps "the non-Malayali reader topmost in mind".

Technicalities and theories aside, the stories in these three collections are to be read the way we once read *Malgudi Days*. Our immediate past is an unknown space to most of us. Child marriages and widowhood, witchcraft and suicide, marrying a loved one by sheer chance – these and several other themes make us look forward to the next collections in the Early Classic Stories Series.

The writer is a Sahitya Akademi translation award winner.

The life and times of a general

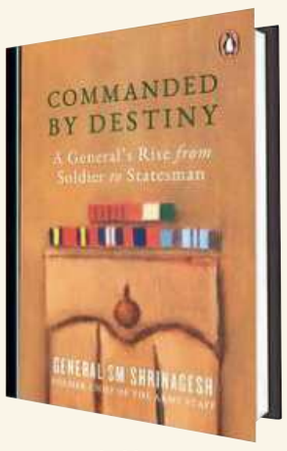
In his memoir, S.M. Shrinagesh recalls his time as Corps Commander in charge of divisions that saw all the action in the first India-Pakistan War of 1947-48

Arjun Subramaniam

Commanded by Destiny is a breezy anecdotal memoir of the Indian Army's fourth Indian chief between 1955 and 1957. The USP of the narrative lies in its sweeping landscape and accurate recollection of military and political events during the fledgling years of India's evolution as a nation-state. Adding value is General Shrinagesh's prescient views on several important issues such as civil-military relations, the necessity for an integrated national security architecture and federalism.

The book begins with an interesting peek into General Shrinagesh's privileged childhood and education followed by his entry into the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. Navigating the public school environment in England with ease and choosing a military career over a confirmed entry into Cambridge, Shrinagesh's early military career commenced in the mid-1920s as one of the early Kings Commissioned Officers (KCIOs).

After a relatively peaceful but interesting five years in Upper Burma with a Pioneer Regiment (the precursor to engineer regiments), he transferred to the Infantry and moved to the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) where his operational baptism took place in fighting and maintaining the peace in the restive tribal areas of what is now called the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.



Commanded by Destiny: A General's Rise from Soldier to Statesman
S.M. Shrinagesh
Penguin Veer
₹699

Facing a dilemma

Missing out on most of the action during the Burma Campaign in World War II, Shrinagesh does not hesitate to offer his views on the dilemma that faced the Indian Army on the status of the Subhas Chandra Bose-led Indian National Army and how mutiny was unacceptable in a military. One of the most detailed parts of the book is reserved for his role as the Corps Commander in charge of the two divisions that saw all the action in the first India-Pakistan War of 1947-48. The narrative around the sieges of Leh and Poonch is riveting and his recollections of specific actions and operational plans are excellent.

An unabashed admirer of Jawaharlal Nehru, there is little mention in the book of Nehru when the author discusses some of the post-Independence instances of politico-military dissonance such as the creation of a 'citizen army' rather than a professional army, or the downsizing of the Indian Army in the face of a growing Chinese threat.

General Shrinagesh took over the Indian Army in 1955 at a time when peace-time hubris had set in into India's armed forces. Though he spent much time in ensuring that organisational restructuring and training was not neglected, there is little to suggest that there was any serious evaluation of national security threats in the face of a government that was unwilling to be realistic in its approach to regional geopolitics.

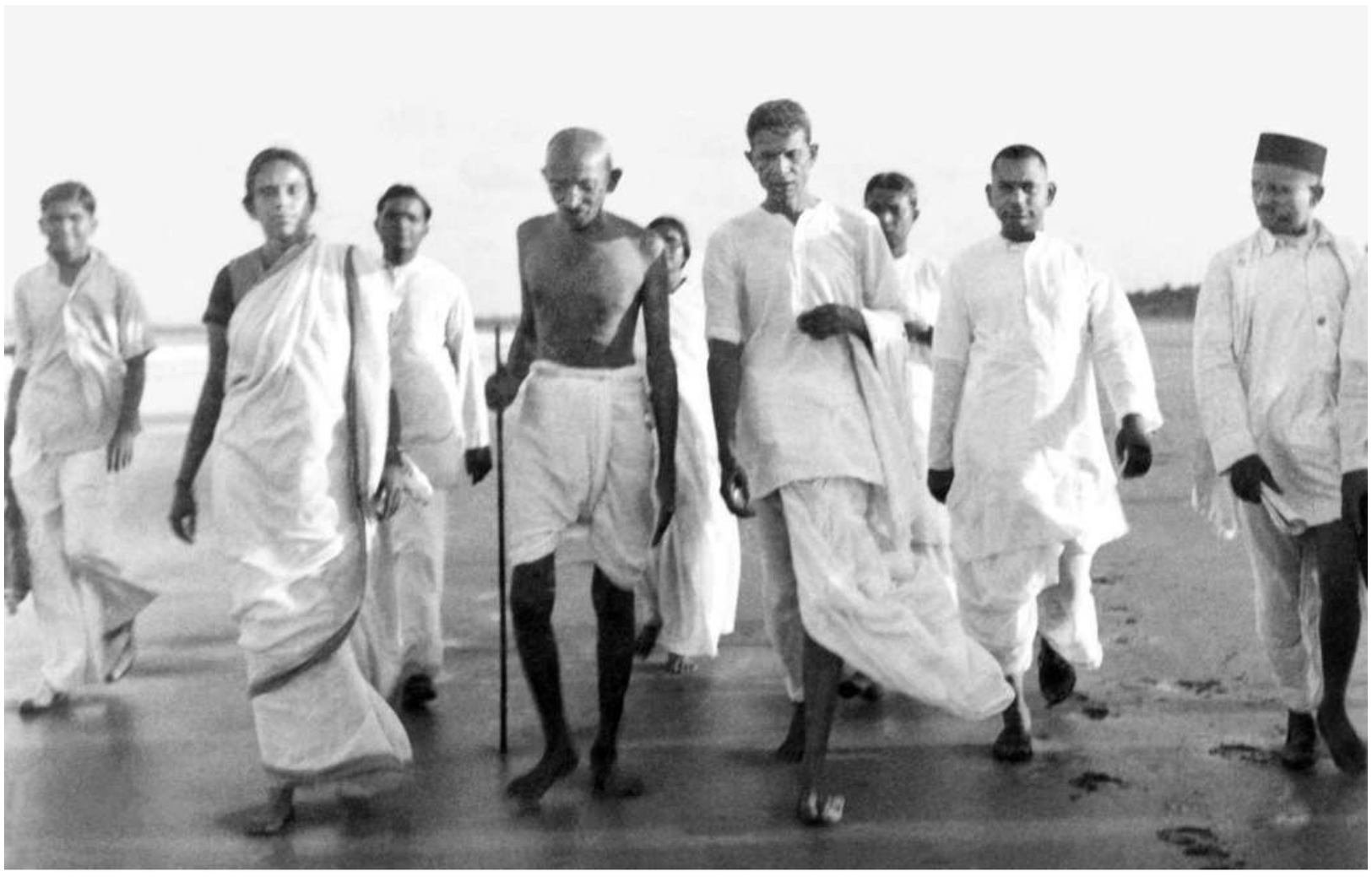
The China angle

With respect to the China debacle too, Shrinagesh is cagey in his memoir to assign accountability to both the political and military leaderships, possibly because of his deep respect for Nehru and not wanting to criticise his peers with whom he had shaped the trajectory of the post-independence army.

Transiting with ease and finesse to post-retirement assignments in the academic and gubernatorial domains, his understanding of what it would take to train good administrators at the Administrative Staff College and the responsibilities of a governor in a federal structure and troubled regions such as Nagaland is striking.

A slightly jarring aspect of the book for discerning readers emerges in the editorial segment. There is no indication of sources and references or when and how the memoir was written, or why it has emerged only now, nearly five decades after the general's demise. Some appendices comprising the notes left behind by the general would have added value and authenticity. However, in the final analysis, this is an eminently readable book.

The reviewer is a retired Air Vice Marshal from the IAF and a military historian



MAHATMA'S PAIN

An exploration of the inner world of Gandhi in the last phase of his life, and the India of the time

Rajmohan Gandhi

Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee's profound history of Gandhi's final 15 months is unlikely to be bettered anytime soon. While *Gandhi: The End of Nonviolence*'s accomplished author is a poet as well, this study reveals another gift of his: phrasing an original epigram to sum up a discussion. Thus, after reminding us of Jinnah's Muslim nationalism and Savarkar's Hindu nationalism, Bhattacharjee writes that under the religious nationalism embraced by these political foes of Gandhi, "identity no longer remains a fluid thing to explore but a hard thing to protect and flaunt." (p. xcviii)

Again, analysing Gandhi's departure in October 1946 from New Delhi, the centre of decision-making, for Noakhali in eastern Bengal, where the old man planted courage in bereaved women, Bhattacharjee concludes: "To withdraw in order to express, to express by withdrawing, is the paradoxical mode of Gandhi's ethical politics." (p. 7) Here's a third example. "Freedom," he writes, referring to India's struggle for liberation from European imperialism, "is not a predominantly rational gift or a gift of rationality alone. Reason is not a dependable guide to relationality (my emphasis), to how we make, unmake and understand relations in the world." (p. 5)

Manu Gandhi's testimony

What gives this book its strength, however, is not the author's talent as a thinker or his skill with phrases, but the quality of his research, plus his grasp of the forces at play inside Gandhi's mind and spirit in the last phase of his life, and in the India of that time. Readers will close the book feeling they've farewelled three compelling individuals. The book's subject and its author are two of them. The third is Mridula Gandhi, better known as Manu Gandhi (1927-69), great-granddaughter of Tulsidas Gandhi (brother of Mohandas' father Karamchand), and therefore, in Indian parlance, Mahatma Gandhi's grandniece.

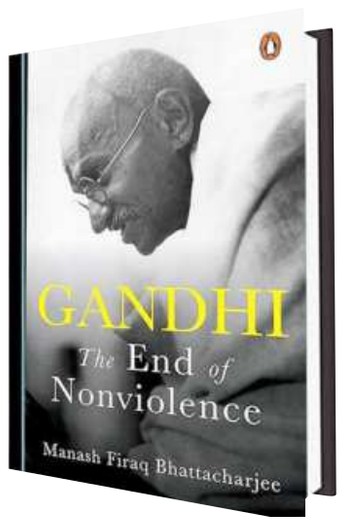
Imprisoned in 1943 (at age 15) as a

M.K. Gandhi giving a book to a young boy at the opening of a school for refugee children in Noakhali, West Bengal; and (top) Gandhi walking on Juhu Beach, Mumbai. (GETTY IMAGES, THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES)

Quit India *satyagrahi*, Manu was permitted to serve her term in Pune's Aga Khan Palace, where, along with others, Gandhi and Kasturba were being detained. Apart from nursing Kasturba (who died behind bars in 1944), Manu also started writing a daily diary.

Translated from Gujarati by Tridip Suhrud, the jottings and descriptions in Manu's diary from December 1946, when she joined Gandhi in Noakhali, until January 30, 1948, when he was assassinated, supply graphic material for Bhattacharjee's book. Manu's well-known role at this time in Gandhi's unusual chastity trial – or *yagna*, the term used by Gandhi and preferred by Suhrud – is fully discussed by Bhattacharjee, who writes: "Manu's growing into maturity and India's descent into chaos happened together. This incomparable contrast, and that Manu lives it with bewilderment and resilience, remains the hallmark of her testament... [T]he nature of her work as a peace worker and her witness-account of Gandhi's life and movement [is] her most significant contribution to history." (pp. 85-6)

Anyone reading the diary portions that Bhattacharjee



Gandhi: The End of Nonviolence
Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee
Penguin Random House India
₹699

reproduces would agree that Manu captures for posterity the texture of Partition's numbing pains, and of Gandhi's extraordinary response to those pains, with a steadiness and fairness not usually expected in one growing from 19 to 21.

Manu's diary is only one of Bhattacharjee's multiple sources. He has benefited also from the two "Last Phase" volumes about Gandhi written in the 1950s by Gandhi's personal secretary, Pyarelal Nayyar (1899-1982), who never left Gandhi after joining him in 1919 and was present in Noakhali and Delhi, and from the priceless notes written in 1946-47 by the anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose (1901-72), who lived close to Gandhi and Manu in Noakhali and Bihar, giving Gandhi Bengali lessons and facilitating Gandhi's conversations with the Bengali-speaking population he'd gone to assist. Later works by others, including the Bangladeshi journalist, Syed Abul Maksud, have also aided Bhattacharjee's study.

Healing Noakhali and Bihar

Gandhi walked, listened, observed, and spoke in Noakhali and in Bihar because people had been killed and raped, Hindus in Noakhali and Muslims in Bihar. Bhattacharjee seems troubled that Gandhi spoke of the courage of women who preferred death to dishonour without articulating the right of raped women "to live with their humiliation freely, from within the depths of their horrifying experience." (pp. 9-10) We know, however, that Gandhi sternly rebuked families that were reluctant to take back women forcibly married to someone in an attacking group.

"With Gandhi, walking becomes a force in India's political history," says Bhattacharjee. (pp. 100-01) The quotable sentence is also a historical truth. Adds the author: "It was only after Gandhi reached Noakhali that people – his own associates, the people of Bengal and Noakhali, the political leaders, the administrators, even the police – realised that this was real, someone had indeed arrived to be with the people in their darkest moment." In the author's view, "It is not an exaggeration to say that Gandhi's peace mission in Noakhali, Bihar and Calcutta has no parallel in the history of the violent twentieth century." (p. 112)

The subtitle, "The End of Nonviolence", conveys the undeniable reality that our freedom struggle ended with a carnage. Another reality, however, is that thanks perhaps to the norms of that struggle, India demonstrated both democracy and fraternity for several decades after independence.

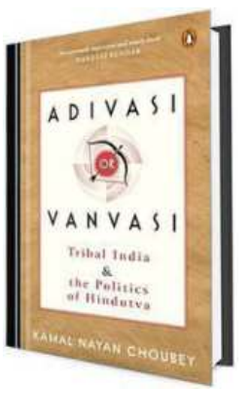
The reviewer is editor, www.weareonehumanity.org

BROWSER

Adivasi or Vanvasi: Tribal India & the Politics of Hindutva

Kamal Nayan Choubey
Vintage
₹799

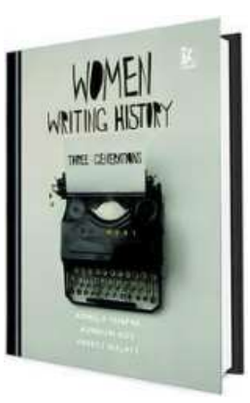
A writer traces the journey and functions of the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram or VKA, the tribal wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The VKA has been expanding its footprint in tribal areas, trying to bring about changes.



Women Writing History: Three Generations

Romila Thapar, Kumkum Roy, Preeti Gulati
Zubaan Books
₹595

Three historians from three generations reflect on their lives and why they decided to engage with a demanding discipline. They explain the different ways in which women do history.



Blueprints: How Mathematics Shapes Creativity

Marcus du Sautoy
HarperCollins India
₹599

The writer takes readers from stone circles to Bach to Shakespeare to explain why art and a creative mindset are crucial to finding new mathematics. He argues how a fundamental connection to the natural world links arts and science.

The Ghadar Movement: A Forgotten Struggle

Rana Preet Gill
Penguin/Viking
₹799

The Ghadar Movement was conceived in 1913 in the U.S. by Indian immigrants, led by Lala Har Dayal and others. The group planned to smuggle arms to India and incite a mutiny in the British-Indian army. Gill documents the movement.

WHAT DID YOU DO THIS WEEKEND?

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

It isn't all performance

Still, for some, the appeal isn't performance at all. It's access. "Growing up, most of these things were either unavailable or unaffordable," says Priya Yadav, a 31-year-old graphic designer in Bengaluru. "Now I can try a pottery class on a whim. It feels like having a cultural buffet right in my neighbourhood."

That sense of possibility is echoed by Arjun Mehra, a finance professional in Mumbai. "Growing up, eating out was reserved for special occasions – a treat, not a routine. Now, with food clubs and casual meetups, it's become a part of everyday life. I get to explore new cuisines and spots every weekend." And it's not just about eating out; it's about being experimental, about tasting the world – from Korean BBQ pop-ups to Ethiopian *injera* dinners – and reconnecting with regional traditions.

There is something undeniably hopeful here. After years of screen saturation, the return to analogue – the handmade, the slow – is more than a trend. It's cultural therapy. The people shaping clay or writing poems aren't posing; they're recovering something lost. "The return to analogue is an intentional choice for many. There is something quiet about it. You have to zone in; you cannot be lost in your devices," shares Varun Gupta, co-founder of the Chennai Photo Biennale (CPB), whose workshops, from cyanotype photography and darkroom techniques to Van Dyke Brown printing, are always sold out. He doesn't feel that the people CPB attracts are there to merely check boxes or share posts on social media. "It's about tactility. People want to work with their hands; they are tired of typing and scrolling. Just being able to paint chemicals on paper is such a unique feeling that it kicks off a separate set of endorphins in your brain. It helps you rescript your day to day, and heal your soul," adds Gupta.

Building a new yet similar 5-to-9

And yet the paradox remains. The harder we try to escape productivity's grip, the more we reinvent it. We measure rest. We track joy. We optimise the weekend. In resisting the 9-to-5, we've built a 5-to-9 that looks eerily similar.

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls this search for "resonance", our deep craving to feel connected and alive. When leisure hits the mark, it does just that. But when every moment must resonate, it stops feeling real. It becomes performance.

So, where does it go from here? If curated leisure is a response to burnout and alienation, its next phase may not be about more options, but a quieter kind of honesty. In the West, signs of this shift are already visible. 'Nothing clubs' in London gather people simply to be, while movements such as 'bare minimum Mondays' in the U.S. push back against hyper-efficiency. India isn't far behind. The same generation that gamified rest is now bumping up against the fatigue of constant optimisation. The next iteration of leisure may hinge less on what we do and more on how we feel doing it. Less proof, more presence. Because maybe the ultimate luxury isn't a kombucha workshop or a calligraphy kit. It's being boring – and being okay with it.

So the next time someone asks, "What did you do this weekend?", perhaps the most honest – and subversive – answer is: "Nothing much." And let that be enough.

The writer explores culture, business, and modern life.

THE LAST *MIRASINS* OF AWADH

With more people opting for film music at weddings, these women singers are struggling to keep their musical heritage alive

Laraib Fatima Warsi

Umrana Niyazi hunkers down in her small verandah with her *paan daan* (betel leaf box) and sings *Chhap tilak sab cheeni… mohse naina milaike* (You have taken away my identity, my beauty, and everything that was mine… just by locking eyes with me), written and composed by Sufi poet and mystic Hazrat Amir Khusrau in *braj bhasha*, a western Hindi dialect. Her husky voice floats out into the lanes of old Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, where she lives.

"Now people rarely call us to sing at *mehfils* [gatherings]. Times are changing but I hope our songs will continue to resonate with people. Otherwise, how will we survive?" asks the 51-year-old, who hails from the Mirasi community, a group of traditional singers and dancers commonly found in northern India and Pakistan.

The word '*mirasi*' comes from the Arabic word, '*miras*', meaning heritage. In Awadh, the Mirasins, or female singers, are traditionally invited to sing at auspicious events such as births, Aqeeqah (where a newborn's hair is shaved for the first time), Bismillah (when the child reads the *Quran* for the first time) and weddings.

Flagbearers of a dying tradition

Umrana and her sister Farzana, 45, are perhaps the last custodians of the musical heritage of the Mirasins, who enjoyed great popularity in the 19th century, when there was a surge in cultural nationalism. In response to the colonial rulers' disdain for Indian culture, *talukdars*, landowning Indian aristocratic families, began supporting artists, including the Mirasins, who became linked with their patron families.

"Though considered socially inferior to women from 'respectable' families, they received the patronage of nobles and royals," says Rana Safvi, historian, translator and author of *The Forgotten Cities of Delhi* and *Shahjahanabad: The Living City of Old Delhi*.

Mirasins played a special role during weddings as they were invited to sing at every function. It would begin at the bride's home with Milad recitations in praise of the Prophet, followed by the *haldi* ceremony. There were songs to welcome the *baraat* (groom's party) and, after the *nikaah* (wedding), songs were sung to bid farewell to the bride.

Mirasins also sang at the bridegroom's home – while he tied the headdress or *sehra*, and when family members applied *surma* to his eyes. During the wedding, when families and friends gathered to bless the newlyweds, the Mirasins sang a Persian composition by Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed Shahana Mubarakbaad. "Mirasins play a crucial role in preserving our cultural heritage. Their songs are a repository of our history," says Safvi.

Umrana and Farzana are part of the third generation of their family keeping the tradition alive. Umrana remembers a time when Mirasins were paid generously. "We travelled to Aligarh for a wedding in 1996 and received ₹81,000. It was a golden time for us," says Umrana, who has been singing for almost 30 years without any formal training.

Her grandmother and mother were invited to sing at functions in Hindu homes, too. "We sang Dadra, Thumri, and songs about Sawan, Basant, and Holi for wealthy Hindu families. But we are not invited any more," she says.

Custodians Umrana Niyazi and her sister Farzana are part of the third generation of their family keeping the tradition alive. (LARAIB FATIMA WARSI)

Traditionally, women in the Mirasin community were not allowed to play any musical instruments other than the *dholak*, which they learned informally. "One person plays the *dholak* while the rest of us sing. If we had access to more musical instruments, we could enhance our songs and performances," says Farzana.

As people migrated to cities, film music began gaining popularity. "Many prefer to play film songs at their functions rather than traditional ones. I fear the Mirasins will eventually fade away from our society," says Riyaz Ahmed, a 45-year-old Qawwal, who has been singing since the age of 20.

An heirless heritage

The next generation is not interested in carrying on the tradition. "My children don't want to sing at people's homes like we do. My son says that the little fame and name I have earned is not enough to fill our stomachs," says Farzana. "I feel sad but understand why they are reluctant to take up a profession that is in danger of disappearing altogether."

Umrana, who is unmarried, supports her three sisters and brother, and struggles to make ends meet. But she can't imagine doing any other work. "Singing has been my entire life. However, when I meet good people through my work, I try my hand at matchmaking. If I am lucky, I earn generous amounts from both parties," she says.

The writer is an independent journalist based out of Lucknow.

TINTIN-STYLE MAKEOVER FOR ACTION HERO

With an eye on young readers and audiences, actor Anshuman Jha turns his 2023 indie film *Lakadbaggha* into a comic book

Shilajit Mitra
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In 2023, actor Anshuman Jha, an unlikely candidate to shoulder a superhero franchise, snuck behind a hoodie to play the role of Arjun Bakshi, an animal trainer-turned-vigilante who saves a striped hyena from poachers in the indie action film *Lakadbaggha* (directed by Victor Mukherjee).

The film had a muted theatrical release, but proved a better draw on streaming. Its themes of environmentalism, animal welfare, and citizen activism stayed with Jha, who has now extended the film into a multi-media franchise, starting with a comic book but extending into sequels, merchandise and video games. The makers are calling it the Animal Lover Vigilante Universe.

Recently launched in Mumbai by actor John Abraham, honorary director of PETA India, the *Lakadbaggha* comic book amalgamates diverse influences, from *Tintin* to Bruce Lee. The creators see this as an opportunity to instil values of animal welfare in young minds through an action franchise. "When you see someone harm an animal, you really want to beat them up. This fulfils that fantasy," says Abraham, who has two rescued dogs – Bailey and Sia – at home.

Hergé's influence

Jha, 40, spent his childhood and early teens immersed in *Tintin*, *Nagraj* and *Chacha Chaudhary*. In the winter of 2022, he was touring with the *Lakadbaggha* movie in the U.S. when he met Britain Peck, an illustrator and visual artist, who shared his enthusiasm for *Tintin*. "We spent seven months ideating and arguing to crack the art style," says Jha.

Titled *Lakadbaggha: The Prologue*, the 30-page mini-comic dramatises a drug bust at Kolkata's Khidirpir docks by Arjun and his trusty canine Shonku (named, you guessed it, for the Satyajit Ray character). The art style echoes the unobtrusive 'ligne claire' approach pioneered by Belgian cartoonist and Tintin creator Hergé. In the opening panel, a ship named 'Kaliyuga' stands moored at the docks, an homage to 'Aurora' that whisked away Tintin, Snowy and Captain Haddock to the Arctic Ocean in *The Shooting Star* (1942).

"I grew up with Marvel comics and often found them busy and intimidating," confides Peck, who went to art school at the University of North Carolina. "By contrast, any *Tintin* comic has three main colours and a simplicity of panelling and storytelling that draws you in." Peck was delighted to discover the enduring fandom of *Tintin* in India, a legacy that has survived postcolonial readings of the ginger-haired adventurer.

Screen to book Anshuman Jha in a poster from his 2023 film (below); and some panels from the *Lakadbaggha* comic book. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

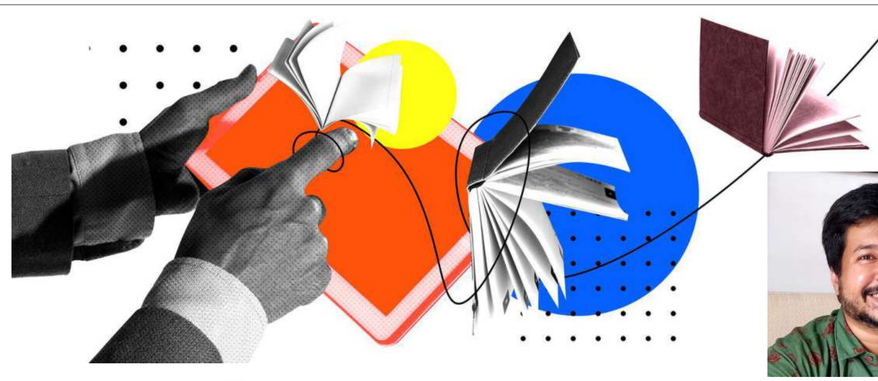
Wildlife awareness

The *Lakadbaggha* comic book ends with two factoids about hyenas: that they have the strongest bite force among carnivore mammals, and that a mother hyena's milk is exceedingly rich in fat and proteins. "Every comic book in the series will have these," says Jha, who hopes to educate young readers about the animal world.

A second book is currently in development and will be launched at the New York Comic-Con in October.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



AI VS. THE HUMAN CREATIVE SPIRIT

As generative AI reshapes work and art, experts weigh in on books, originality, and why the art of writing will not suffer

Avantika Shankar

Imagine you're a homemaker who makes the best hummus in your housing society. Neighbours call you when they host an event, you receive rave reviews, and have perfected the recipe, so you can scale without compromising quality. So, what stops you from growing your brand? You don't know how to design a logo, craft a catchy tagline, manage online orders, or create an Instagram post that gains traction.

Enter Generative AI. With its help, you can design a logo, draft press releases, create blog posts, improve your website's SEO, and build your own app. Suddenly, you are not just a gig worker, you are a business.

This is the optimistic vision of artificial intelligence: a tool of empowerment that allows anyone to triple their potential, and become a job-creating, GDP-boosting entrepreneur. The reality that's playing out is far less rosy.

Reality check

OpenAI recently faced backlash when a feature that lets users generate images of themselves in the style of Japanese animation company, Studio Ghibli, came under fire. Critics felt it was plagiarism and disrespected the studio's legacy of meticulously drawing each frame by hand. Then Meta became the subject of a copyright infringement lawsuit after the company was revealed to have trained Llama, its large language model (LLM), on pirated e-books.

"It's clearly theft, so it'll be interesting to see whether multi-billion-dollar corporations can get away with blatant piracy. I suspect they can," says sci-fi novelist Samit Basu, who has previously shared his concerns about the systemic inequities that AI threatens to exacerbate – the benefits of AI will be enjoyed by a privileged few, while the majority loses jobs to automation. "It was funny when a big western AI company, which had stolen huge amounts of work to train its LLMs, was outraged because a Chinese AI company [DeepSeek] used their data to train its own AI. Belief in copyright exists only when convenient," he adds.

Meanwhile, author and climate activist Bijal Vachharajani says she's been struggling with the environmental cost of AI, especially the huge amount of energy LLMs consume. The Association of Data Scientists reports that training GPT-3 consumed the same amount of energy a typical American household would use in 120 years. "It terrifies me that regenerative activities like writing and illustrating are now being manufactured," says Vachharajani.

Constantly shifting stance

While lawsuits stir up debate on legal technicalities, for some, AI has become an irreplaceable tool for productivity, research, and the occasional thesaurus check. Priya Kapoor, editorial director, Roli Books, admits to being "excited" about the possibilities. "And I mean market research, writing proposals, grammatical and spell checks, amongst other laborious tasks that don't require critical thinking," she specifies. "But I am concerned about how it will impact creativity."

(Clockwise from below) Samit Basu; Jerry Pinto; Priya Kapoor; and Bijal Vachharajani. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, ISTOCK/ GETTY IMAGES)

Literary agent Mita Kapur has received manuscripts from a few writers who admitted to using AI for parts of the process, but she wasn't impressed. "I want to see writing that comes straight from the gut. I want that raw honesty, whether it's fiction, nonfiction, or anything else," she says. "The moment I feel that plastic feel, I mentally take 10 steps back."

She admits that AI could be here to stay, though. "It's being used in varied ways by people across the board, so it will impact the way writing evolves. But there will be writers across genres who will stick to their own imagination, vocabulary, and research methods. They'll exist like parallel universes," says Kapur.

Overall, the sentiment about AI is ambivalent, and constantly shifting. Jibu Elias, who headed content and research at the Government of India's INDIAai initiative (which aims to build an ecosystem that fosters AI innovation), has been trying to write a book about AI. "It's tricky to write one that stays relevant because AI's evolving faster than expected," says Elias, country lead for Mozilla Foundation Responsible Computing Challenge.

While he's optimistic about its role in healthcare and infrastructure, generative AI is a different story. "Every job I had after college can now be done more efficiently by AI, but those were great learning experiences," he says.

I'm willing to bet that AI is just the new boy game. All the people in AI at the top are men of a certain kind who have, I think, problems with emotional complexity and much prefer the binary of the computer. They want to take up writers' produce, our product, and turn it into something that will simply do their command and without any human attachment. They're wishing us all out of existence. But we're not going anywhere

JERRY PINTO
Writer

A disruptor like Photoshop?

None of these conversations are specific to AI, says digital anthropologist Payal Arora. Recently, *The New Yorker* published a piece comparing the current AI disruption to the U.K.'s industrial revolution, when mechanised looms replaced artisan weavers. The looms stayed, but so did the artisan, and now "handwoven" is seen as a luxury.

Arora says AI tools are democratic. "At the AI Film Festival in Amsterdam, many filmmakers were single mothers, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds. That's the democratisation of creativity. Filmmaking usually requires a lot of money, and is easier for men who can be on set for months."

Having the capacity to care about copyright infringement, however, is often a privilege, adds Arora. "The creatives who protest are those with a platform and power. They're part of unions backed by the state, and live within an institutional framework, which could work in their favour," she says.

Historically, new technologies have been met with scepticism, or fear, before being embraced. "AI has many similarities to Photoshop, which shook things up in the 1990s," says Kapoor. "At first people questioned its authenticity and integrity, then it became a valuable tool for photographers, and not a replacement for their work."

Writer and educator Jerry Pinto agrees. "Do I feel threatened by AI? No. If you are a systems manager who dislikes writing emails, ChatGPT can make your life easier," he says. "But I like writing, so I won't use it."

Pinto respects the applications of AI in fields such as medicine. For instance, AI tools could create a database of drugs, side-effects and contraindications. "But does that mean you're going to stop going to a doctor? I don't think so," he says, adding, "History is full of inventions that were doubted by people at first, but many have worked spectacularly, so I may be wrong."

The freelance writer and playwright is based in Mumbai.

BINGE WATCH

One-shot wonders

Seth Rogen's *The Studio* comes in a long line of shows that have employed the single take, and it takes care to use this device intelligently

Snapshots from *The Studio*, *Adolescence*, *Birdman*, and *Rope*.

In a promotional behind-the-scenes interview conducted on the sets of the Apple TV+ comedy series *The Studio* (co-developed by and starring Seth Rogen), actress Kathryn Hahn says, "Seth (Rogen) and Evan (Goldberg) had this really ambitious plan to shoot most of the show as 'oners', y'know, one-shots, long uninterrupted takes with no cuts. As an actor, it makes everything more challenging but also more beautiful because with every scene you feel like you're in a play."

Rogen plays the lead character Matt Remick, a perpetually hassled studio head. He is genuinely in love with the movies but tries to balance that impulse with the bottom line-driven demands of his corporate paymasters. The show has been universally acclaimed not only for its satire but also, as Hahn points out, the ambitious usage of 'oners'.

Essentially, Rogen and Co. have expanded the scope of the Aaron Sorkin-esque 'walk-and-talk' sequences popularised by 2000s TV mainstays such as *The West Wing*, *Scrubs* and *Boston Legal* (all 'workplace stories' like *The Studio*). The walk-and-talk typically takes place in a narrow corridor (at the hospital, law firm, etc.) and focuses on the lead characters. As they walk towards the camera, other characters flit in and out of the frame.

The Studio executes the same idea, only the camera isn't right in the leads' faces, like it would be in a classic 'walk-and-talk' 20 years ago. The camera is equally interested in showing us the world around Matt and whoever he is talking to in a scene, weaving and bobbing in and out of the characters' immediate vicinity. After all, a movie set is a more colourful workplace than a hospital or a law firm or, well, the White House.

The Studio's oners utilise this rather well, all the way through the show's 10 episodes. The second episode, in fact, is called 'The Oner', and follows Matt as he attempts to help Sarah Polley (playing herself) shoot a oner for her (fictional) film in the show.

In the here and now

The oner has, historically speaking, been a point of prestige for filmmakers and actors, a show of strength that underlines the technical skills of everybody involved. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is considered one of the first major films to deploy the oner. In those days, a single reel of film was only capable of carrying around 20 minutes of footage.

Four reels, four oners – Hitchcock used lighting and editing tricks to make it look like the film consisted of four long takes. The story follows two friends who kill a mutual acquaintance and then host a dinner party with the corpse hidden in the house. The oners elevate the sense of tension the audience feels, watching two murderers trying to get away with it, while the corpse rests right under their noses.

Orson Welles' *A Touch of Evil* (1958) famously begins with a oner, where we see an unidentified man placing a bomb inside a car. Martin Scorsese takes the audience on a oner-trip through the Copacabana nightclub in his mob classic *Goodfellas* (1990) (Scorsese, incidentally, plays a tragicomic version of himself in the first episode of *The Studio*). Robert Altman, John Woo, Alfonso Cuaron et al – in every era, major filmmakers have used the oner to emphasise the 'here and now' nature of specific scenes, or just as a showcase for technical virtuosity.

The last decade of oners, however, has been inspired by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's *Birdman* (2014) – the film has been shot and edited in such a way that all of it looks like one big oner, a 110-minute shot if you will.

Leading up to *Adolescence*

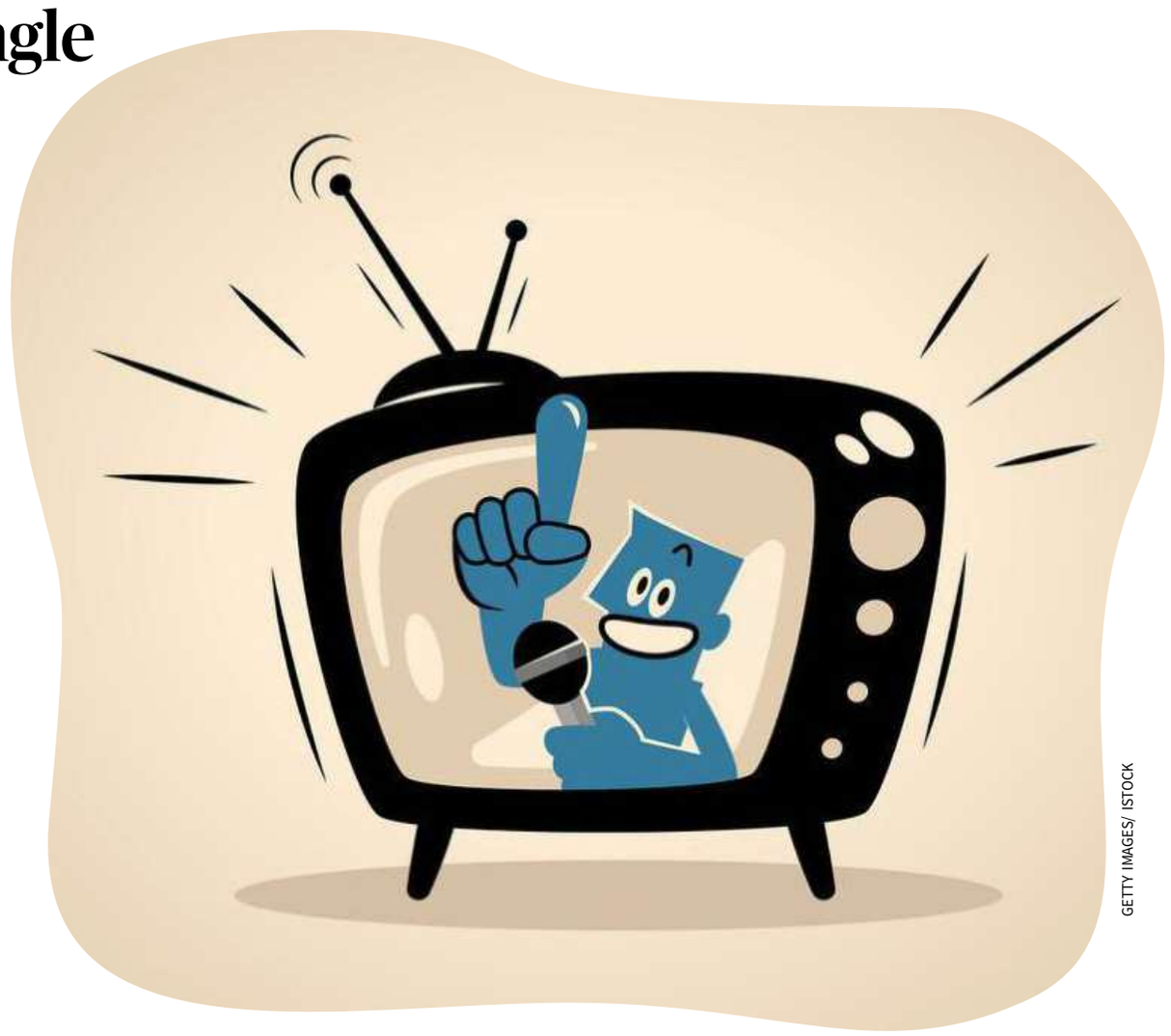
Other than *The Studio*, there have been two TV shows this decade that have used the oner in inventive, formally ambitious ways. The first is the Marvel TV show *Daredevil* (2015), where the first season features several hand-to-hand combat scenes shot as oners. The pick of the lot is a hallway fight scene where Daredevil/ Matt Murdoch rescues a kidnapped child after fighting his way through a corridor jampacked with goons – the lighting is inspired from a famous scene in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), where the protagonist beats up a corridor full of goons with a hammer.

The second TV innovator in this context is the recent, excellent British miniseries *Adolescence*, about a 13-year-old boy arrested following the murder of a girl from his school. Each of the four episodes of *Adolescence* is shot like a oner – no editing tricks this time, just a single uninterrupted take.

There's a *12 Angry Men*-like unreliable narrator edge to the drama in *Adolescence*, and at their best, the long takes amplify the audience's unease. I love the first and second episodes' usage of the one-shot but also feel that by the time the fourth episode winds down, the novelty value of the device wanes.

Oners are great when done expertly, but because of the technical task at hand, creators run the risk of focusing too much on shot-mechanics and too little on the narrative. Thankfully, *The Studio* understands this only too well and takes care not to use its signature device indiscriminately, or without a clear purpose.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 11

TO WATCH OR NOT TO WATCH

That is the ultimate dilemma, dear readers, when it comes to TV news in India

Hello readers. Are you consumers of TV news by any chance? If so, I have two questions.

First of all: why?

Second of all: I hope you are okay.

You see friends, when it comes to TV news, all Indians find themselves in a situation that is widely known as: between a rock and a hard place.

Let me explain this idiom with a real-life example.

Many years ago, I had to travel to Karaikudi from Tiruchi, by bus, in order to represent my college in an inter-college football tournament. I was the back-up goalkeeper. Our original goalkeeper injured himself in one of the preliminary matches, and was forced to retire. So they immediately summoned me.

So there I was. In the bus. And just shortly before reaching Karaikudi, the bus broke down. And I found myself in a rock-and-a-hard-place situation.

On one side, there was the hard place: the outskirts of Karaikudi. In the height of summer. At four in the morning. On a stretch of road. With not a single other bus in sight. Just apocalyptic heat.

And on the other side was the rock: a young man named Usman who was also on his way to Karaikudi to meet family or some such. We had become friends on the journey.

After at least 30 minutes of waiting, there was still no sign of the bus moving. I suggested to Usman that we perhaps get out of the bus and find alternative means of transport. He said no. What if we got out, found nothing, and then couldn't get back on to the bus? Also, it was pitch dark outside. What if, Usman said, there were bandits or dacoits?

Reader, the bus was absolutely heaving with people. A moist morass of humanity. If we stepped out, there was zero chance we would get our seats back. Some dastardly old man or villainous pregnant woman would immediately take it. And then we would have to stand.

So there I was. Unable to get out of the bus. But also barely able to stay on the bus. And so we sat there for another 30 minutes.

By this point, the bus was so hot, sweaty and sticky, that Usman was permanently fused to my right side. He has been living attached to me ever since. Usman, say hello to the readers.

Fraudcasting
/frɔːdˈkæstɪŋ/
noun
Definition: The phenomenon whereby news consumers find themselves trapped between domestic media's sensationalist manipulation and foreign media's uninformed oversimplification, leaving no reliable source of broadcast news.

Usman: Hello readers.

Thanks Usman, you can go back to work. (He is a Javascript developer.)

Readers, this is also the situation many of you find yourselves in when it comes to consuming TV news in India.

On the one hand, there is the rock: the Indian TV news industry.

I want to be very sensitive here when I refer to the work of fellow media professionals and journalists. So let me choose my words carefully. Indian TV news media is like smallpox for the brain. It is a relentless stream of factual nonsense and emotional manipulation directly poured into the minds of unsuspecting viewers by total charlatans. Thereby leaving viewers in a permanent state of mental siege: an unrelenting sense of dread and fear and loathing towards something or the other. The greatest enemy of Indian TV news is the content citizen.

So that, in essence, is the rock.

But what about the hard place? The hard place is foreign TV news.

Since Indian TV news is the absolute shenanigans, as mentioned above, you would expect to find some solace in the international TV news coverage of India.

See, the problem with international TV coverage of India is that while it usually proceeds with more calm and less brain damage, it has the other issue of not knowing anything about India.

So you will start seeing some coverage about some event in India, and then suddenly the foreign anchor will make references to the "President of Uttar Pradesh" or wonder, "How can a country with poor people afford things such as satellite, or moon landing, or chemistry?"

Recently, I was watching a news bulletin on the Papal Conclave with an overseas journalist friend. And he noticed the Indian flag amongst the people in St. Peter's Square. He said: 'So funny. There is an Indian flag.'

I said: 'What is funny? India has slightly more Christians than the U.K. does.' You should have seen his face, readers.

All of which is to say, it is time we coined a term to capture this dilemma that Indian news consumers find themselves in.

And that term is: fraudcasting.

Example sentence: "Unbearable fraudcasting about the Prime Minister's trip to London today. Indian channels have said that the U.K. is now property of India. Colonialism is avenged. American channel is discussing 'Ghandi'."

Friends, sometimes the best news is no news whatsoever. Switch it off.

__Sidin Vadukut__ is head of talent at Clarisights. He lives in London and is currently working on a new novel.

GOREN BRIDGE

Duplicate vs. rubber

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Many duplicate players would fail in three no trump on today's deal. The importance of overtricks at that form of scoring would induce them to start taking finesses. They would likely hold up on the opening spade lead, win the spade continuation, and run the 10 of hearts. East would win with the king and shift to a club.

Declarer would play the queen of clubs, losing to the king, and West would clear the spades. South would cash his heart tricks but he would still be a trick short. A diamond to the queen would lose and West would cash two spades to defeat the contract. Very unlucky to find three out of three finesses offside.

A rubber bridge player would be appalled to go down in this contract. He would also hold up on the first spade and win the second. Rather than take the heart finesse, however, he would lead the queen of diamonds from his hand. He would not care who won this trick, as his contract would be safe provided it was West who held the long spades. West would win and clear the spades, but South could now safely take the heart finesse. East would win and shift to a club, but South would rise with his ace and claim nine tricks - two spades, three hearts, three diamonds, and a club. No overtrick, but a game bonus securely in his column.

NORTH
♠ 6 5 2
♡ A Q J 3
◇ 10 6 4
♣ 8 7 5

WEST
♠ Q J 10 9 8
♡ 7 4
◇ K 9 7
♣ K 9 4

EAST
♠ 7 3
♡ K 6 5 2
◇ 8 3 2
♣ 10 6 3 2

SOUTH
♠ A K 4
♡ 10 9 8
◇ A Q J 5
♣ A Q J

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2NT	Pass	3NT	All pass

Opening lead: Queen of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about birthdays

Berty Ashley

1 Born this date in 1926, Norma Jeane Mortenson was an actress responsible for the 'blonde bombshell' character becoming a trope in Hollywood. Though she died at the age of 36, she still has an iconic presence in pop culture. How better do we know this actress for whom Elton John wrote 'Candle in the Wind'?

2 Born this date in 1929, Fatima Rashid went on to become one of the most sought-after actresses in Indian cinema. A versatile actor, she was known for her roles of strong independent women and also in comedies. Who was this actress who played the lead role in the first-ever Indian movie to be nominated for an Oscar award?

3 Born on June 1, 1937, Morgan Freeman is a multiple award-winning actor known for his extensive on-screen career. In 2009, he portrayed a famous politician so well in the movie *Invictus* that his picture was mistakenly used in the leader's obituaries. Who did he portray on screen?

4 Born on June 1, 1940, Kip Thorne is a theoretical physicist whose work on gravitational physics won him the 2017 Nobel Prize in Physics. As an expert on wormholes and time travel, he was the main consultant for a 2014 film that led to two scientific papers based on the screenplay. Which film was this?

Kip Thorne is a theoretical physicist who won the 2017 Nobel Prize in Physics. (GETTY IMAGES)

5 Born on this date in 1957, Jeffrey Hawkins is a neuroscientist who was interested in mobile computing. In 1992, he invented a new handheld device that could manage contacts, calendars and notes. By what name was this device known, which ultimately became the smartphone we all have now?

6 Born on June 1, 1959, Martin Brundle is one of the most popular commentators in a sport. Having already won titles in the sport, upon retirement, he joined ITV and is now with Sky Sports. He is most famous for doing a 'Grid Walk' where he, before the event starts, tries to meet the athletes or celebrities. In which fast-paced sport does he work?

7 Born on June 1, 1964, American swimmer Trischa Zorn is the most successful athlete at a particular event. She has won 55 medals (41 gold, 9 silver, and 5 bronze) at this global event that happens every four years. Visually-impaired since birth, at which event is she a record holder?

8 Born on June 1, 1985, this cricketer was a wicket-keeper-batter known for his aggressive batting style. He was the first Indian to win a T20 Player of the Match award in 2006. Who is this player who is currently the batting coach for Royal Challengers Bengaluru?

9 Born this date in 1996, Tom Holland is one of the highest-grossing film actors of all time. He made his debut as ballet dancer Billy Elliot onstage, and in 2017, he became the youngest actor to play a title role in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. What popular character has he played, which his dancing skill helped train him for?

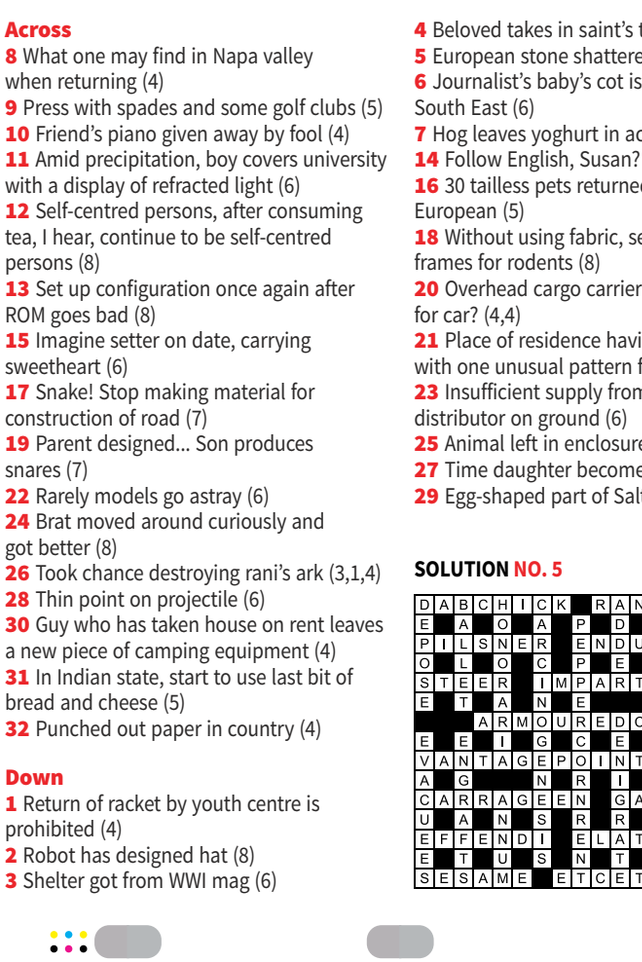
10 June 1 is celebrated by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations to recognise the importance of a liquid food item. It is believed that the first time humans learnt to consume this item was during the First Agricultural Revolution, 12,000 years ago, when they learnt to domesticate animals. What day does the FAO celebrate today?

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

Answers

1. Marilyn Monroe
2. Nargis
3. Nelson Mandela
4. *Interstellar*
5. PalmPilot
6. Formula 1
7. Paralympics
8. Dinesh Karthik
9. Spiderman
10. World Milk Day

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 6 (Set by Incognito)



Across

8 What one may find in Napa valley when returning (4)
9 Press with spades and some golf clubs (5)
10 Friend's piano given away by fool (4)
11 Amid precipitation, boy covers university with a display of refracted light (6)
12 Self-centred persons, after consuming tea, I hear, continue to be self-centred persons (8)
13 Set up configuration once again after ROM goes bad (8)
15 Imagine setter on date, carrying sweetheart (6)
17 Snake! Stop making material for construction of road (7)
19 Parent designed... Son produces snares (7)
22 Rarely models go astray (6)
24 Brat moved around curiously and got better (8)
26 Took chance destroying rani's ark (3,1,4)
28 Thin point on projectile (6)
30 Guy who has taken house on rent leaves a new piece of camping equipment (4)
31 In Indian state, start to use last bit of bread and cheese (5)
32 Punched out paper in country (4)

Down

1 Return of racket by youth centre is prohibited (4)
2 Robot has designed hat (8)
3 Shelter got from WWI mag (6)
4 Beloved takes in saint's truthfulness (7)
5 European stone shattered by Scotsman (8)
6 Journalist's baby's cot is in the South East (6)
7 Hog leaves yoghurt in accommodation (4)
14 Follow English, Susan? (5)
16 30 tailless pets returned by East European (5)
18 Without using fabric, setting up climbing frames for rodents (8)
20 Overhead cargo carrier is, perhaps, OK for car? (4,4)
21 Place of residence having candle part with one unusual pattern for starters (7)
23 Insufficient supply from leading distributor on ground (6)
25 Animal left in enclosure (6)
27 Time daughter becomes old (4)
29 Egg-shaped part of Saltoro valley (4)

SOLUTION NO. 5

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

In a music bubble, morning walkers fail to mingle

Pranati R. Narain
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The walkers' morning routine begin only after they firmly don their headphones or earphones. As soon as the gadgets are on, a virtual bubble is formed with the song defining its boundary. As they hit the road, they are consciously restricted to the bubble, and these invisible zones around them are countless as they pass by a dozen people just like them down the road, timing their footsteps to their songs and blissfully unaware that they are not alone in their sojourn.

On a typical morning walk, I myself find music to be an unobtrusive companion that pushes me to maintain my stride. The same song plays at the same time at the same place I walk through daily, and it isn't surprising that I inevitably meet the same people. Walkers and runners like myself are nothing but strangers to each other, content in their state of unfamiliarity and living in their personal musical bubbles.

The bubble often blocks out the outside world that seeks to engage with the individual in the form of greetings from friends or acquaintances. The beats of the song firmly reinforce the personal bubble, allowing no cracks to appear in the invisible dome as one runs down the same road, oblivious to the call from a friend they just passed by. What could have been a break in a mundane morning routine continues as a ritual that seems to demand a sacrifice – a chance to interact with a tangible world distinct from the melody-induced one.

However, music is only a catalyst to the creation of a personal space, and does not isolate the walker by itself. The main tool that the personal bubble is created with is the revered earpiece, and as a friend mentioned in passing, there need not be any music playing through it. The very appearance of the device points to a need for a personal sphere, which fellow walkers know better than to violate.

A personal space that transports the walker to another realm, either one of silent reflection, or one with virtual interactions with those not physically present with us on our walk, is what the earpiece creates.

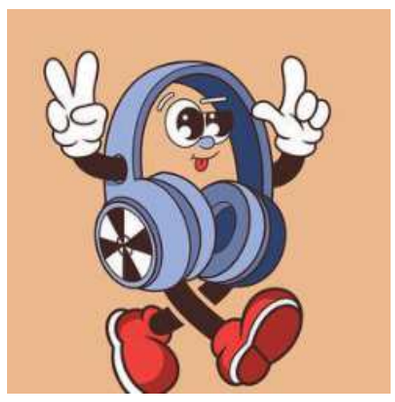
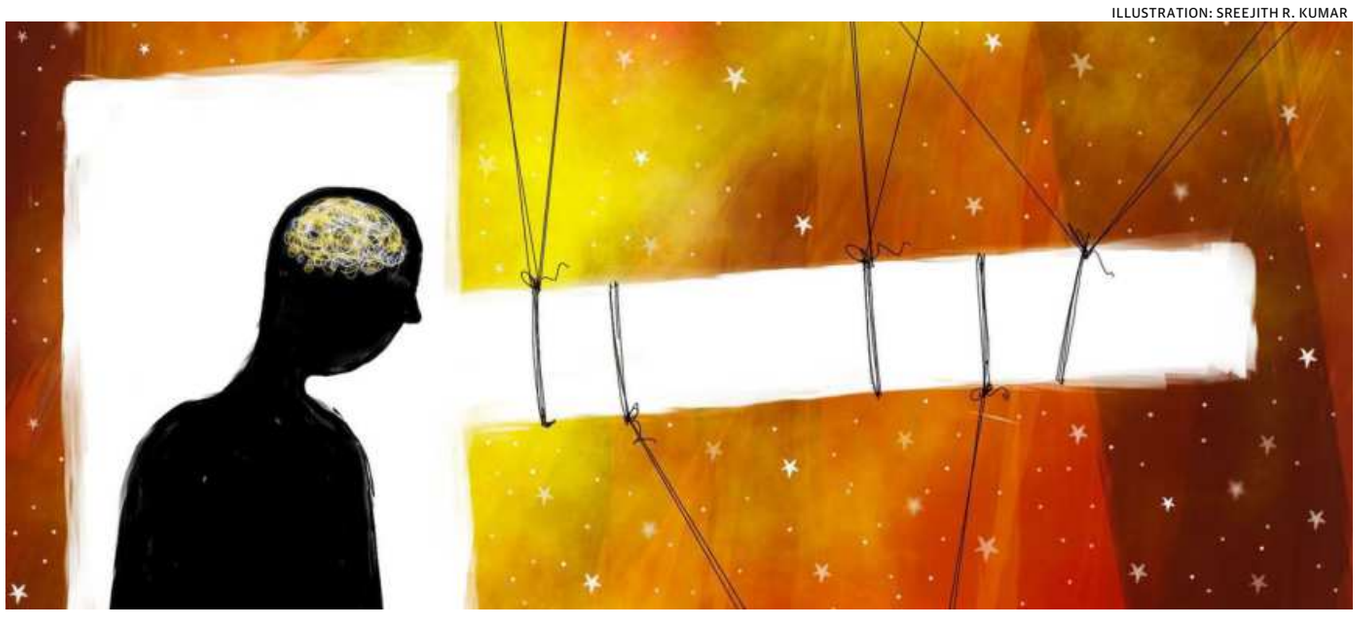


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



The loneliness of the judges

Power dynamics, isolation, and disconnection from the ground reality exacerbate it, creating a complex web of challenges that affect their mental health and professional effectiveness

N. Anand Venkatesh
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The life of a serving judge is often cloaked in an aura of dignity and authority, but beneath this exterior lies a profound solitude that few outside the judiciary understand. Judges, entrusted with the weighty responsibility of interpreting laws and delivering justice, often find themselves isolated socially and emotionally.

This isolation is not just a byproduct of their profession; it is a deeply ingrained aspect of their role, shaped by ethical codes, relentless workloads, and the inherent nature of judicial decision-making. The combination of power, isolation, and disconnection from ground reality exacerbates the loneliness experienced by judges, creating a complex web of challenges that affect their mental health and professional effectiveness.

Judges wield significant power, which can lead to a sense of detachment from the community they serve. This power dynamic often results in a heightened level of respect and deference from others, making it difficult for judges to form genuine, non-professional relationships. As noted by judges themselves, once they ascend to the Bench, their social circle shrinks, and they often lose their first name and will be known only by their title.

The isolation inherent in judicial roles is compounded by the need for impartiality and the ethical restrictions that limit their social interactions. This isolation can lead to a disconnection from the ground reality, as judges may not fully engage with the broader community outside their professional sphere. This disconnection can impair their ability to understand the social context of cases, potentially affecting their decision-making.

Judges face immense stress from handling high-profile cases, compounded by loneliness, leading to burnout and compassion fatigue. These challenges can harm their morale, health, and relationships, while impairing decision-making. Addressing this requires peer support networks, stress management strategies, and community engagement opportunities. Ultimately, systemic support is essential to protect their well-being and uphold judicial integrity.

Loneliness among judges is not a new phenomenon. Anecdotal accounts from judges reveal the gradual erosion of social connections as they ascend to the Bench. Many describe their transition into judicial office as akin to entering a "monastery" – a life marked by anonymity and detachment. The restrictions imposed by the Code of Judicial Conduct prevent judges from maintaining casual social relationships with lawyers or engaging freely in community activities. Over time, this professional isolation morphs into personal loneliness, leaving judges to grapple with feelings of invisibility and disconnection.

Psychological toll

The psychological toll of this loneliness is significant. Empirical research on judicial stress has shown that judges experience elevated levels of burnout, secondary trauma, and emotional exhaustion. While their rates of depression may be lower than those in the broader legal profession, the constant pressure to remain impartial and composed exacerbates their vulnerability to mental distress.

From a neuroscientific perspective, loneliness is far more than an emotional state – it has tangible effects on brain function and overall health. Chronic loneliness triggers stress responses in the brain, impairing cognitive functions such as memory and decision-making. Prolonged isolation has been linked to accelerated cognitive decline and increased risks for conditions such as heart disease and dementia. For judges who must process complex legal arguments and deliver decisions that impact lives, these neurological effects can compromise their ability to perform effectively.

Addressing judicial loneliness requires systemic interventions tailored to the unique challenges of this profession. Peer support networks can provide judges with safe spaces to share experiences and foster camaraderie. Mental health programmes designed for judicial officers can help mitigate stress and promote emotional well-being. Encouraging work-life balance through manageable caseloads and periodic breaks from emotionally taxing cases can reduce burnout. This difficulty is inherent to family court judges who deal only with emotionally draining cases such as divorce, custody, and guardianship daily.

The loneliness experienced by judges is not just a personal struggle but a societal issue with far-reaching consequences. By recognising this silent challenge and implementing meaningful solutions, we can safeguard the mental health of those who dedicate their lives to justice while preserving the integrity of our legal systems. In an era where loneliness afflicts millions globally, addressing its impact within the judiciary is timely and necessary.

Limiting screen time

Combining traditional teaching with controlled digital exposure is a solution

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GETTY IMAGES

In today's digital age, smartphones have become an integral part of life, transforming family communication, especially among adolescents. With India's adolescent population reaching 253 million, understanding how digital media influences their relationships is crucial for shaping societal dynamics.

Today's adolescents are the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technology. Data gleaned from my research sample reveal that 86% of Indian adolescents have smartphones, with over 30% spending more than six hours daily online. Platforms such as Instagram and social media dominate, with 72% of teens reportedly addicted to social media. While digital media enables connectivity, it presents challenges. Though 81% of adolescents use social media to stay connected with friends, only 61% communicate regularly with family members. This reliance on virtual interactions has led to a decline in face-to-face communication, weakening familial bonds and raising concerns about emotional disconnect.

Excessive screen time affects adolescents' physical and mental health. Sleep disruption is common, impairing focus, academic performance, and emotional stability. Sedentary lifestyles contribute to obesity and related health issues. Emotionally, social media's curated content fosters anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as teens compare themselves to idealised online personas. Family interactions diminish further as adolescents become engrossed in their digital worlds. Parents find it increasingly difficult to engage them meaningfully, leading to emotional gaps within families.

Parents are concerned about their children's dependence on screens, noting difficulty in maintaining eye contact and meaningful conversations. Family time is often sacrificed for digital entertainment, creating a divide between virtual and real-life relationships. Many adolescents find online interactions more engaging than face-to-face conversations, straining family bonds and complicating efforts to reconnect. Digital media is not inherently harmful.

Adolescents should practise self-regulation to control screen time, prioritise face-to-face interactions to develop social skills, and engage in offline hobbies

Incorporating digital literacy into curricula can educate students about the advantages and risks of technology. Combining traditional teaching with controlled digital exposure can prevent overuse. Awareness programmes for students and parents further bridge knowledge gaps. Encouraging offline activities such as sports, arts, and face-to-face communication helps balance digital engagement.

Implementing tech-free zones in classrooms and collaborating with mental health experts to address digital addiction are essential strategies.

India's National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 advocates hybrid learning, blending online and offline education. While this offers flexibility, it increases screen time, potentially intensifying issues such as eye strain, inactivity, and digital dependence.

To mitigate these effects, schools and families must work together, establishing routines that balance online learning with offline activities such as outdoor play, family time, and hands-on projects.

Addressing the influence of digital media on family communication requires coordinated efforts: Parents should set limits on screen time through digital curfews. They should engage in co-viewing and shared activities, and foster open conversations about responsible media use, and model healthy digital habits. Adolescents should practise self-regulation to control screen time, prioritise face-to-face interactions to develop social skills, engage in offline hobbies and extracurriculars, and educate themselves about digital media's benefits and risks.

Policymakers should enforce regulations on age-appropriate content, launch awareness campaigns on the psychological impacts of digital overuse,and encourage tech companies to incorporate features promoting healthier habits.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Despite the existence of several film industries in the country, the number of Indian movies at international film festivals is negligible. ('It's not an Indian summer in Cannes'; May 25) Filmmakers must pull up their socks and produce better quality films rich in both content and style, so our movies have an international appeal.
R.V. Baskaran

If Indian cinema has failed to make its presence felt at the Cannes Film Festival, there is a need to introspect. The number of movies made in India annually is huge, ranging from commercial films to critically acclaimed fare. Producers must identify talented directors and cine artists to produce quality films that can cater to audiences worldwide.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Hope shines bright

Banu Mushtaq winning the International Booker Prize for 2025 ('A thousand fireflies in the sky'; May 25) is a nod to India's idea of inclusion. A Muslim woman writing in a regional language, shedding light on the plight of marginalised women, and for which she had to often take risks, could not have been more apt in these troubled times.
Saurabh Sinha

It's a matter of great pride that *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq and translated by Deepa Bhasthi has won the prestigious International Booker Prize. One hopes this inspires more women to become writers.
Jayakumar A.V.

Tales untold

Reading about the memoirs of cricketers Mohinder Amarnath and Syed Kirmani was interesting. ('Not tell-alls'; May 25) Amarnath could have shed more light on the cavalier manner in which he was treated by the cricket administration at the time.
J. Anantha Padmanabhan

Hard work pays

I agree with Australian captain Pat Cummins' observation that all problems can be solved. ('The Cummins resolve', May 25) It is important to stay positive in life.
S. Ramakrishnasayee

It is not uncommon for celebrity cricketers to play a 'third' innings by penning books on their careers. But Pat Cummins' book is very different from that of other cricketers. It is a testimony of his tactful approach to life and cricket.
T.S. Sanath Kumar

Bleak future

It is distressing to see Viktor Orbán and others like him across the globe pursuing their ideological vision of an illiberal state, indifferent to the people affected by it. ('Dark side of Hungary's nationalism'; May 25) The situation in Hungary serves as a warning of what could unfold if such illiberal leaders come to power in more nations.
Rohith Varon S.S.

Homage to an artist

The retrospective of artist Jyoti Bhatt's unforgettable works ('The art of civic memory'; May 25) curated by Rekha Rodwittiya is a gift to all art lovers.
M.N. Saraswathi Devi

MORE ON THE WEB
www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Always mobile
Essentially what was designed for better communication, mobile phones have changed our lifestyles totally
Balasubramaniam Pavani

The high of spontaneous moments
Quiet, fleeting, and waiting to be savoured
Pranitha Singareddy

Seasonal blessing
Aam panna, a water-rich mango beverage, offers a great choice in summer
Prarthana Sen

A generation at a crossroads
Those born in the 1950s and 1960s are perplexed by the rapid pace of transformation in the world
T.N. Venugopalan

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Fashion may be one of the most polluting industries globally, but material innovators working with algae and mycelium are stepping up with newer solutions

PRESS ALT FOR FASHION

Sohini Dey

Designer Roma Narsinghani's jewels are studded with beads – emerald greens, ruby reds, and pearly whites. What makes them unique is that they are crafted from algae, an innovation by the U.S.-based material researcher Aradhita Parasrampuria. "Their eco-friendly nature and organic appeal have made them a core part of our approach and provide a unique texture to our designs, mimicking precious stones," says the Delhi-based Narsinghani.

For decades, the fashion industry's trajectory has been marked by its over-reliance on synthetics and scarce or virgin natural resources. Global plastic production reportedly stood at over 450 million tonnes in 2023, of which fashion is said to consume a quarter or more. And varying reports suggest the industry is responsible for up to 10% of the world's greenhouse emissions.

While natural fibres such as cotton, wool, or linen are widely regarded as alternatives, climate change is disrupting their production now. Moreover, these traditional staples can't deliver the low-carbon future that fashion needs. So, a number of proprietary alternatives are positioning themselves as environmentally-conscious solutions.

Fashion's expanding material base

Material innovators are increasingly looking at bio materials to create new fibres. In April 2024, London-based material science company Fibe announced a textile fibre made from potato stems and leaves, while North Carolina-based startup Keel Labs has developed Kelsun, a fibre using biopolymer found in seaweed. There are alternatives for sequins and fur in development, too.

Bananatex is a plastic-free fabric made from Abacá banana fibre. Originally developed by Swiss bag brand Qwstion for its own products – in collaboration with a yarn specialist and a weaving partner in Taiwan – it is used by luxury labels such as Balenciaga and Stella McCartney. "We are constantly working on new developments, weights, constructions, finishes and ways of dyeing," says Hannes Schoenegger, co-founder and CEO of Bananatex. Last year, Qwstion developed a lightweight jersey using the fibre. "We [also] invest quite some energy into knits, and there is going to be a Bananatex denim we will present later this year."

Last November, environmental non-profit Canopy set up an India outpost, promoting next-gen fibres from agricultural roughage, waste textiles, microbial cellulose and food waste in textiles, as well as paper packaging. "Agricultural residue such as straw, or industrial food waste [like] tomato pulp or coconut water, discarded textiles – all these are currently treated as waste," says founder and executive director Nicole Rycroft. "We are completing a trial with large brands and a Scandinavian technology innovator to use Indian straw and turn it into a man-made cellulosic alternative."

Answers to leather

As common as leather remains in fashion's product repertoire, the animal-derived material is notorious for its high carbon footprint – spanning deforestation and loss of biodiversity, chemical- and water-intensive processes, and inadequate waste management. While brands and companies are moving to more conscious processes, leather remains contentious.

Recently, however, leather alternatives have received great attention with success stories such as Mirum, a material crafted from natural rubber by U.S.-based Natural Fiber Welding, which has 50-plus collaborators, including BMW, Pangaia, Allbirds, and Anita Dongre. Other examples include MycoWorks, which produces the mycelium-based Reishi; Desserto, crafted from cactus; and Piñatex, derived from pineapple. "The success of alternatives is determined by how well materials can replicate the look and finish of leather," says Arundhati Kumar, a sustainability consultant.

Banofi is an alt-leather crafted from banana crop waste. "Currently, it is best suited for fashion accessories," says founder Jinali Mody, adding that they are doing "further R&D to make a broad range of applications in footwear, automotives, interiors, and more".

Not all bio-materials mimic leather, though they get categorised in the segment. Take, for instance, Malai, a coconut water-derived bacterial cellulose, produced by a Kochi-based company of the same name and introduced back in 2018. Zuzana Gombosova, material scientist and co-founder, says, "We have been seeing demand for materials that would be more reminiscent [with the touch and feel] of animal leather." The brand, which won the Circular Design Challenge in 2020, works on catering to market demand, but its social media often clarifies: Malai isn't leather "and that's okay".

(Clockwise from left) Algae beads; a handbag from Malai; leather-like material made from coconut water; jewellery from Roma Narsinghani's collection; Mirum's shoes; and clothes from Canopy in Delhi. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The Indian landscape

"India is extraordinarily well-positioned to be an early global leader, as a low-carbon material production hub," says Rycroft of Canopy. The country's growth curve on both retail and manufacturing makes it a promising business ecosystem. But, at the moment, lack of collaboration with mass retailers and bigger brands is limiting growth opportunities, especially for local makers.

"I'd expect big companies looking into sustainability to give space and visibility to brands like ours," says Gombosova. "While we can't produce on a mass scale, we can make limited editions." Malai produces 200 sq. mt. of material per month. She adds that long periods of R&D can be contrary to investor expectations of ROI (returns on investment), which makes financial investments challenging to secure.

Mody highlights how it can also be difficult to educate people about the fact that "our material is made from plant-based ingredients" and assembled using a clean, sustainable process. Additionally, "balancing 100% sustainability with cost-effectiveness is challenging". Costs for such materials are higher, with base prices at around ₹2,000 or more; in comparison, synthetics start at a few hundred rupees.

Solving the scalability challenge

The challenge isn't limited to India though; material innovators everywhere have to cope with higher prices, time-consuming R&D, and greenwashing. Many plant-based materials also use synthetics to ensure durability and performance. Schoenegger considers such problems intrinsic to a transitional period. "The material world cannot change entirely in a few years, it will take some time."

The big goal for alternative materials is to move beyond the stages of prototype and small-scale production. Players such as Natural Fiber Welding, which produces a number of plastic-free materials besides Mirum, have managed to crack this code – a network of global partners, a 110,000 sq. ft. production facility, and working with existing supply chain and equipment sets in regional areas. If other materials can replicate such success, this goal may appear much closer.

The writer and editor is based in Delhi.

MUSIC FESTIVAL

Immersed in the sacred

When Marathi *abhangs* and Tamil musical compositions came together to signal hope and comfort in these divisive times

David Shulman

Performances from Prakriti Foundation's Festival of Sacred Music. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Prakriti Foundation's Festival of Sacred Music (Thiruvaiyaru on the Cauvery), the 12th in a remarkable series initiated by cultural catalyst Ranvir Shah, took place this February in Thanjavur and Thirupugalur in Tamil Nadu. Festivals of sacred music are now popping up all over: there is an impressive annual one in Fez, Morocco; another on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea; and an International Festival of Music and Art in Rome.

India has a few too, including the Sacred Spirit Festival that takes place in March in Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur; Bengaluru's Fireflies Festival of Sacred Music; and the Sacred River Festival in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh. Some of these have their own idiosyncratic definitions of what "sacred" means; some have unifying themes – ecological, social, meditative, mystical, and so on.

In this expanding and varied landscape, Prakriti's Thiruvaiyaru festival is unfailingly excellent. The performances are brilliant and wide-ranging, the artists superb; the musical texts come mainly (but by no means only) from the classical Carnatic repertoire.

Reliving past genius

Throughout the 2025 festival, day and night overlapped in a gentle symbiosis – evening performances balanced by daytime adventures. A trip to Darasuram and Swamimalai ended with a *veena* recital at the Siddhar *koyil* (temple) in Thirupugalur, across from the temple where the *Tevaram* poet Appar merged forever into Lord Shiva.

On day three, a morning walk on West Main Street in Thanjavur led us past the Bangaru Kamakshi temple, to whose goddess Shyama Shastri devoted many of his musical compositions. That same evening in Thiruvaiyaru, Sikkil Gurucharan sang for Bangaru Kamakshi. I was moved beyond words.

For a moment, I thought I saw both poet Muttusvami Dikshitar and Shastri walking together, singing, just ahead of us on the street where they once lived at the same time. Imagine the creative effervescence of those days in Thanjavur at the royal court, the temples, and in the musical salons. Clearly, these astonishing geniuses are still very much alive.

Intimate settings

On the first night of the performances, Shruthi Veena Vishwanath, whose work celebrates the intersection of classical and folk forms, sang a medley of intoxicating *abhangs* (devotional poems), accompanied by Shruteendra Katagade on *tabla* and Babui on *dotara*. Marathi *abhangs* – dramatic, highly personal, emotional, and sometimes antinomian – are by now intrinsic parts of the Carnatic concert canon, as is only right.

Vishwanath performed them, and also described them in words as fiery texts of resistance to oppression, prejudice, and self-righteous arrogance, thus in line with our current movements of feminism, post-colonialism, and the search for authentic subaltern voices. I could see her point, but soon I was simply carried away by the music with its bold, recurrent moments of delightful dissonance and unforeseen endings. Her English translations from the Marathi texts were a gift: *Like a puppet on a string/ You make me swing/ Tinted by your sense and form/ My senses come alive*, says Tuka, the 17th-century Marathi saint and poet.

On the second night, in Thiruppugalur, the versatile master of many instruments and musical forms, Thiruvetakkudy C. Saravanan, led his *veena* ensemble of nine in *padams* and other genres by various composers, including Purandara Dasa, Oothukkadu Venkata Subbaiyer, and my favourite, Muthu Thandavar. He is one of the most creative, and now largely forgotten, of the early 16th century composers of Tamil *padams* and *kirttanais*. I assume that Lord Agnisvara-Siva was listening in from across the great three-sided temple tank. Carnatic music was meant for that kind of intimate performance for a receptive, attuned audience, in just such a setting.

Experimenting with forms

The Diwanwada ruins of the Maratha palace at Thiruvaiyaru were illumined by oil lamps on every level of the still standing 18th-century dovecot when Gurucharan began his *katcheri* on night three. He wisely sang Tyagaraja's *Evar Unnaru*, in *Malavashri*, on Lord Pancanadeesa, the Lord of Five Rivers. The composer's *samadhi* was just a stone's throw away on the bank of the Cauvery. Before the performance began, we had the privilege of *darshan* at the Thiruvaiyaru temple in that early evening hour when pilgrims linger, singing *Tevaram* verses, the moon is still nearly full, and the drummers are playing. That haunting moment fit the "sacred". So did Gurucharan's thrilling rendition of the core composition that night, Shyama Shastri's *Talli ninnu namminanu*, in *Kalyani raga*.

We live in divisive times. Music at the highest level may offer hope and some sort of solace. People may complain about an alleged erosion of taste and the lost art of listening to classical music, but in my view Carnatic music is flourishing as never before. A new cohort of young, profoundly gifted musicians are already present in the *sabha katcheris*. Some are experimenting with forms and visions that deepen our awareness and enrich our experience. The sacred music festivals, such as the annual one by Prakriti, have a crucial role to play in this vibrant scene.

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