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CORPORATE INCLUSION, INDIA STYLE

As the Trump administration dismantles DEI policies in the U.S., experts say that the diversity and inclusion agenda in India is alive with potential to grow as it makes good business sense

Supriya Nair

Over the last three months, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) specialists across corporate India have found themselves confronting a low-level obstacle course. Subjects from global technology companies have ghosted or regretfully withdrawn participation in ongoing research studies. DEI teams, particularly in companies headquartered in the U.S., have suddenly begun to describe themselves as working on culture, or accessibility. Journalists are asking: "Is meritocracy back?"

The shift comes in the wake of several large American companies, including Walmart, Meta, Amazon, Ford, Boeing and others, publicly scaling back their DEI programmes, following newly-elected U.S. president Donald Trump's Executive Order in January to put a stop to all "illegal and immoral discrimination programs" and "public waste" in the name of DEI efforts. U.S. government departments have ordered probes into organisations, including hospitals, universities, federal contractors, and media companies, that practice DEI. Experts fear that legal rulings, such as the June 2024 ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court that ended race-conscious affirmative action in higher education, will jeopardise efforts meant to address social bias in the workplace.

But DEI in India, even in multinational corporations, and despite its own set of challenges, is poised to grow. In many major firms, efforts to advance inclusion for historically excluded groups -- specifically women, LGBTQIA+ people, and persons with disabilities -- goes back years, and in some cases, decades. This has made it complicated to roll back or shut down ongoing efforts related to the Indian context.

In addition, while these global firms are seen as beacons of DEI movements, some of India's biggest corporations have taken up the cause. Over the last five years, some have set entirely new aspirational benchmarks, creating what HR experts call "islands of diversity" – in 2022, Hindustan Unilever inaugurated the first gender-balanced manufacturing unit in Sumerpur, Uttar Pradesh; and at Tata Steel, last year, the company announced it was recruiting and formally training transgender workers for frontline roles in mining and other heavy industry functions typically dominated by cisgender men.

Recruiters say that Indian businesses are in such critical need of talent that they must necessarily act to expand their talent pools – something borne out by an uncoordinated but widespread focus on DEI even among smaller businesses. The Indian context outside the technology and finance sectors demands investment in inclusive recruiting. "We're still at the stage where we're building women's toilets in factories that never had them," a business leader says. "That's what DEI is in India. You can't roll back from that."

Take construction and real estate, a high-growth sector with almost no women on the leadership track. "We have 37% representation of women, but most of our hiring is at early-career levels," my colleague Megha Goel, Chief People Officer at Godrej Properties, says. "Look at the pipeline in operations roles for the industry. In college, girls aren't motivated to pick specialisations like civil engineering. When they do, they don't stick it out in line roles because most seniors tell young women, 'Why don't you get into billing or procurement?'. So tomorrow, if you're looking for a woman COO, the market isn't there." In a sector like this, companies committing to DEI must essentially commit to longitudinal work, beginning with entry-level pipelines and going on to work culture itself.

Women at work

- The percentage of women in senior leadership roles in Indian industries has only marginally increased from 16.6% in 2016 to 18.3% in 2024 (LinkedIn Economic Graph data)
- 16% of employed people in senior and middle management positions in India were female in 2022 (World Bank)
- Only 1.6% of MDs and CEOs in Fortune 500 companies in India are women (SP JIMR study)
- At the 135th position, India ranks below neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal, out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (2022).

Source: BasilTree's 'DEI In India Inc: 2025' report

Caste or religion may not fall under the purview of any formal DEI programme in the Indian private sector. But they do form the partial basis for what is almost certainly the largest bias-correcting effort in Indian workplaces in public sector jobs

Not a passing trend

Over dozens of conversations with DEI experts in the months since the rollbacks began in the U.S., I assumed I was hearing widespread enthusiasm for DEI because of confirmation bias, since I work for the Godrej DEI Lab, which works to advance inclusion within the Godrej Industries Group as well as across corporate India. I reached out to seven multinational corporations whose ongoing DEI efforts I'm aware of, to ask how they were responding to the changing environment. Six of these, headquartered in the United States, did not respond.

It was a different story with other global firms. "For us, DEI is not a passing trend – it's fundamental to who we are," says Taruna Suhasini Lohmror, Country Centres of Expertise manager at IKEA India.

Our culture doesn't allow our founders to fail, and the ones who consider these things [policies such as family leave or accessible infrastructure that make workplaces more equitable] important are called 'soft' founders

NANDINI VISHWANATH
Venture Capitalist, Antler

IKEA is publicly committed to achieving gender parity in representation and pay worldwide. "We see challenges as opportunities to reinforce our values and strengthen our efforts," adds Lohmror.

One HR leader at an Indian affiliate of a French company says that her own company continues to track its representation and has an annual calendar for its inclusion work, which includes 'breaking the bias' programming and efforts to create generational diversity in its workforce in addition to its women, queer and disabled cohorts. "We are not shying away from talking about inclusion in all its forms," she says. "It is integral to our customers and employees."

Time for a new model?

But even where teams may be going quiet, or finding funding challenging in the short term, there's no going back, says Bhawana Mishra, founder and managing director, BasilTree Consulting. Over 250 companies participated in BasilTree's 'DEI In India Inc: 2025' report, a complex and clear perspective on the maturity of DEI efforts in corporate India that shows, perhaps for the first time, how inclusion efforts across Indian industry aren't purely correlated to sectors, but also to the maturity that comes with age, and size. "Companies that are over 20 years old and employ more than 1,000 people are leading the charge," she explains. In smaller organisations, DEI is a more sporadic effort, even if there's enthusiasm for it. "The attitude, predominantly, is that HR gets it, but that the business case hasn't been established yet."

Tech and multinational firms were more reluctant to participate in the BasilTree study, and Mishra found there was "uncertainty, rather than fear", over the future of inclusion efforts in many international companies. The consultancy Ungender, which helps companies maintain compliance with workplace anti-discrimination laws and build inclusive culture, says that over 60% of the organisations they support have continued or expanded their inclusion efforts -- but over half are consciously renaming or repositioning their work.

"Indian companies – particularly with global stakeholders – are becoming more thoughtful in how they present and implement their DEI efforts," says Pallavi Pareek, CEO and founder of Ungender. In the short term, this may mean crucial setbacks to making representation data public, or limited media outreach around engagements during Pride Month, or Women's Day. But there's no evidence yet that it will halt efforts at hiring or retention, and all the recruiters I spoke to found it unlikely to slow down. Like Mishra, Pareek recalls one of her global tech clients saying: "We'll be doing the work, just not calling it DEI any more."

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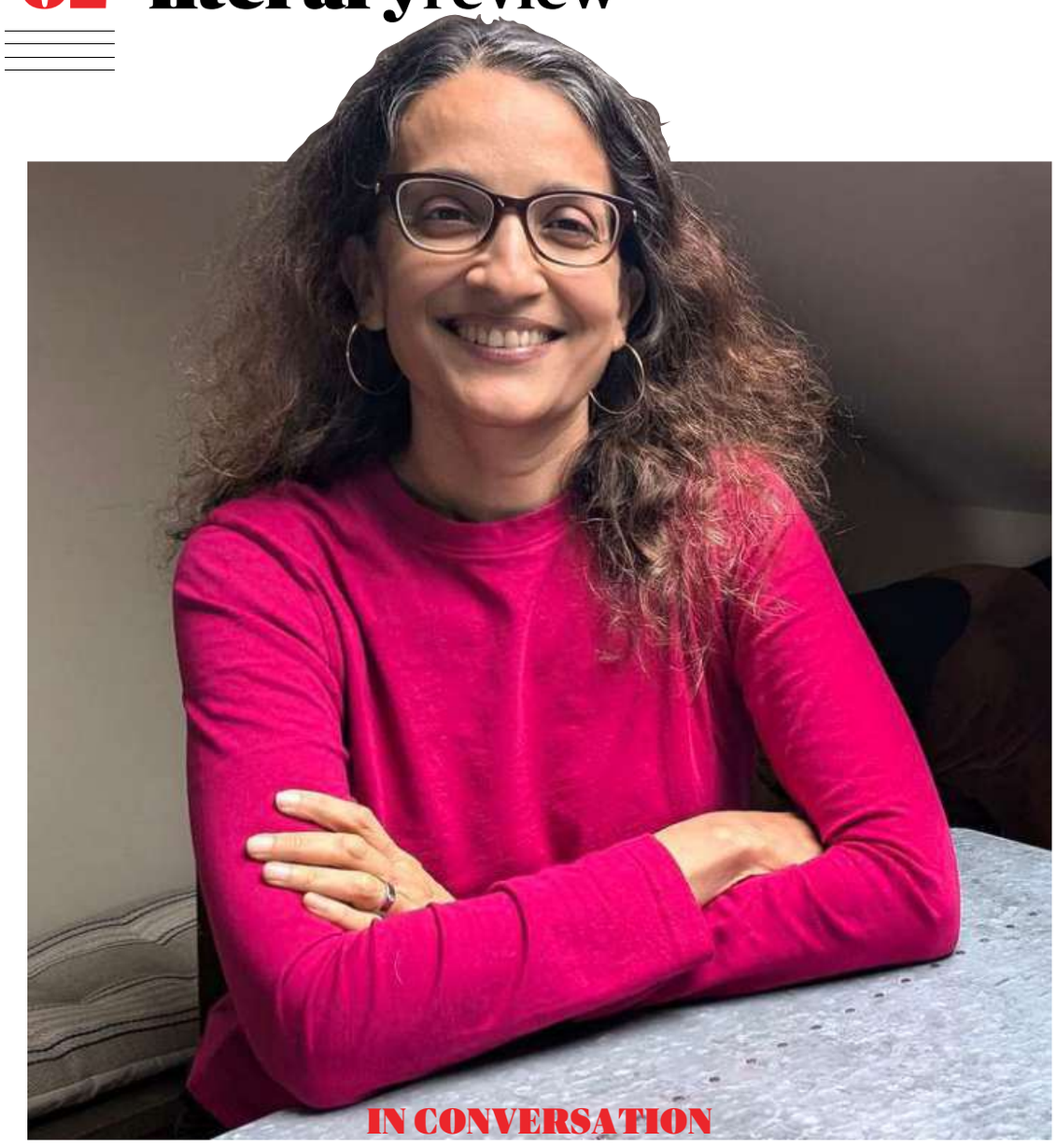


IN CONVERSATION

MYSTERY AND MYTH-MAKING IN MUGHAL INDIA

Shandana Minhas' unlikely female protagonist in her new novel is a tribute to the undocumented women chroniclers in history

Julie Merin Varughese
julie.m.v@thehindu.co.in

In 16th century Mughal India, four unlikely scouts set out on an imperial hunt through the length and breadth of the land, on the Great Moghul's orders. What they uncover, about their mission and indeed, each other, forms the crux of Shandana Minhas' new novel, *Ferdowsnama* (published by Penguin). Blending a tale of adventure with nuggets of history and wildlife, the Pakistani author, now based in London, paints a vivid picture of what it means to be a woman in medieval India. Edited excerpts from an interview:

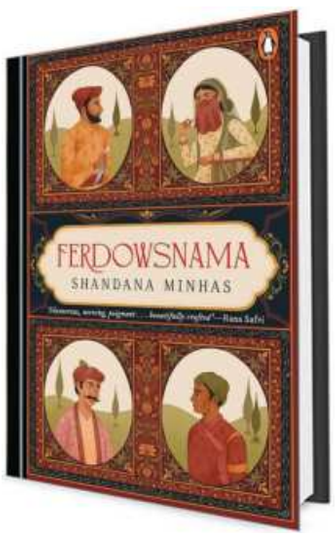
Question: *What inspired you to set this new book in medieval India when all your previous novels were set in contemporary times?*
Answer: I moved to a country where some people were more interested in where I came from than who I was. That got me thinking about it, too. Where are you really from? The nation state is a blink in time so I did an ancestry DNA test. Apart from the expected Punjab, the map of my body included Sindh, Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. I started reading ancient texts and books about regional history. I began looking at art. And it gripped me.

Q. *With* Ferdowsnama *and its themes of class oppression and feminism, is your intention to hold a mirror to society?*
A: I try to meet the page without intention, but I can't control what travels unseen. Yes, *Ferdowsnama* is fantastical rather than realist, but my thematic preoccupation remains life in an unequal world. The fantastical offers both writer and reader the chance to turn away from superficial reality and enter a space where you can see things in a way it might be unbearable to allow yourself to do outside a book. In 'real' life, it hurts to know someone is looking at you and thinking you are less worthy. In the imaginative realm, you can hold that knowledge without it burning you.

Q. *How did you go about the world-building of this novel? What did your research involve?*
A: Some of the texts I read before writing *Ferdowsnama* were, of course, the *Baburnama* and Abul Fazl's official records of Akbar's reign. I also read translations of Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*, the *Devi Mahatmya*, Ibn Battuta, and assorted collections and retellings of folklore, *qissas*, *dastaans*, etc. I should clarify that in the early stages I wasn't reading these as research, I was reading for pleasure, out of curiosity, one text leading to another.

My world-building was also informed by what I was watching, which included the Netflix shows *The Witcher* and *Tiger King*. The ligers in *Tiger King* inspired one of the chapters. And a news story about the decimation of pangolin populations, so their scales can be used in traditional medicines, inspired another one. Animal welfare has also been a lifelong preoccupation. I can be a dispassionate observer of human nature, but I've never managed to tune out non-human suffering.

Underpinning all of these were my quickening memories of the land I'd left. The Thar desert in



Ferdowsnama is author Shandana Minhas' fifth novel.

Sindh, where I spent two weeks shooting a film, and Sehwan Sharif, where I went for the annual *urs*... the imposing, otherworldly mountains and valleys in Pakistan's northern areas, and the lunar beauty of Balochistan's coastline and national park, through which I travelled for work and leisure. Vistas glimpsed through vehicle windows on long journeys – when I was a child, we also lived in Hyderabad [in Pakistan], and on holidays we would drive to Lahore. Every immigrant walks through their past while they walk towards their future.

Q. *How did the character of Ferdows, the novel's heroine, come about?*
A: I was in the British Library reading imperial memoirs. There were so many silences and spaces in the texts, where women's voices should have been. I wished I could hear one. Then I read the opening of the surviving text of Gulbadan Begum's *Humayunnama*: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate! There has been an order issued. Write down whatever you know of the doings of Firdaus-makani and Jannat-ashyani..." – and suddenly I could. I could hear Ferdows.

The pomp and splendour of the early Mughal era and other dynastic periods can be intoxicating. While I understand the lure of an aesthetically flattering light cast on our own pasts, how many women have been edited out of historical records, or made the supporting cast in their own stories? Babur's daughter Gulbadan Begum, for example, led an interesting life herself. Why does only a part of the account she wrote survive? Where are the stories of the women on Ranjit Singh's pyre? What was the woman on my Royal Collection tote bag doing when she was not gazing into the distance, in profile, holding a flower?

Q. *Tell us a little about your journey with Mongrel Books, the indie press you founded and ran from 2016 to 2020. Would you like to revive it one day?*
A: Mongrel Books, the small press my partner and I ran, only published three books but it got some attention, I think, because it said some things, about the dominance of entrenched interests in Pakistani publishing, that resonated. And because a microclimate for books outside the risk-averse mainstream is crucial to the growth of a healthy, living, culture.

I'm proud to have published the writers we published and made sparkling new friends [nobody really likes writers, everybody really likes publishers] but I currently have no plans to revive it. As long as Pakistan remains isolated from a wider literary ecosystem, it will remain a rigged market. Also, I no longer live there. Finally, Mongrel remains inextricably linked with memories of my father, my most ruthless adviser, and first and best fan [never read any of my books, bought all of them]. He died in the second COVID-19 wave.

The power of 'not'

It was the pivot on which this literary lecture series examined the genre of the essay, made famous by the likes of Virginia Woolf

Modern icon A bronze statue of Virginia Woolf in Richmond-upon-Thames, U.K., where the author set up her publishing house Hogarth Press, and lived for 10 years. (GETTY IMAGES)

Kinshuk Gupta

Prefixing any straitjacketed definition with a defiant "not" can produce startling results. Much like Kabir's '*ulatbansi*' (upside-down sayings) or the Advaita philosophy of '*neti neti*' (not this, not that), it is a stream of consciousness that moves beyond the blindspots of binary thought, resisting convenient categorisation.

Only fitting then that modernist writer Virginia Woolf was the toast of the 10th Symposium in the Literary Activism Series in New Delhi last week, centred on 'the non-peer reviewed essay', a work that is more spontaneous, imaginative, intellectual, "essayistic" and, more importantly, immune to slaughter at the conformist hands of "peer review".

Jon Cook, Emeritus Professor of Literature at the University of East Anglia, said that the essay stemmed from a festering "self-doubt" when imperialist forces started digging their feet in foreign lands. For it to develop dialogue between the "philosophical eye" and "conversable crowd", it needs the firm footedness of "experience". He further quoted from a Woolf essay to describe the "transition, the invention of self", that the form of the essay might facilitate.

Exchange of ideas
Interesting assumptions, each one intersecting with, and adding to, what an essay can(not) entail, emerged from the two-day event, helmed by scholar-writer Amit Chaudhari. One panellist compared the Hindi variant '*nibandh*' (one without any 'boundation' as he puts it) with its Bengali or Odia counterpart '*prabandh*' (one with form). Poet-professor Sumana Roy believed the essay to be a way of 'genre-defiance', genre being a very masculine, rigid entity, while Yale University's Cynthia Zarin thought it to be a container to hold discursive thoughts.

Dwelling on his decade-long engagement with the series, Chaudhari said the aim was to zoom in on intelligent, thoughtful, playful exchanges, to listen to them and learn from them. The extension of the symposium into a full-fledged online magazine, as well as a dedicated imprint which doesn't bow down to market forces, are his ways of engaging with and chronicling these ongoing conversations. In the coming years, Chaudhari wishes for the symposium to move to Kolkata and other parts of the country, to "democratise knowledge and rescue these conversations from the stranglehold of academia".

'Trust the tale, not the genre'
Is non-fiction only based on verifiable facts, and is fiction its made-up version? Is non-fiction (non) fiction, a dry and drab fact sheet sans narrative and storytelling, the two central tenets of creative writing? How do these forms interact and intersect with each other in a world dominated by free market capitalism? Chaudhari chose the cinematic equivalent of non-fiction – the documentary – to illustrate his point. In focus was Anand Patwardhan's "bold and perspicacious" *Ram Ke Naam* (*In the Name of God*), based on the 1992 demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

Chaudhari seemed least concerned with the historicity of the events; the quotidian shots of a milestone, an empty stretch of road, and two chatting farmers piquing his interest instead. These marginal people or objects, simultaneously in and out of the narrative, he said, offer a "looseness, unfinishedness, and distractedness to narrative" making the tale take a flight of its own, without the constrictions of genre, so that we, as viewers "trust the tale, and not the genre".

While the turnout at the symposium remained lower than one expected, it was exciting to see specialists from various fields in attendance. An AI engineer working on Natural Language Processing (NLP), with whom I talked over coffee, had come to listen to the recent developments in language and literature. Asked how AI would intersect with creativity, he said that the perceived dangers of AI are being blown out of proportion. "AI might churn out novels on the spur of the moment, but wouldn't we all be equally quick to spot the 'artificial' in them?" he quipped.

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

Hare-raising and other tales

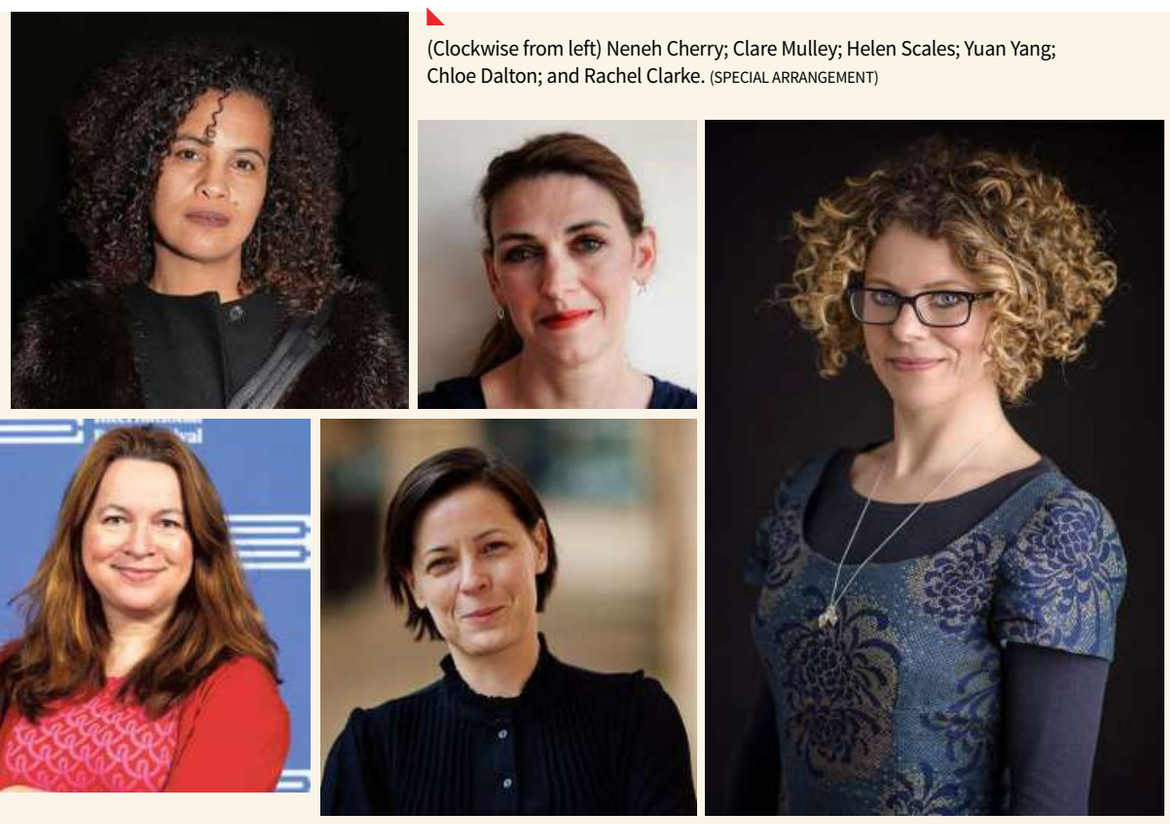
Six writers shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction 2025 tell stories that explain the past, present and future

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

In a desk drawer, Helen Scales has stored a small witness to the changing ocean – a thumb-sized piece of slate etched with lines on one edge and serrated on the other. The marks look like a long-lost script but are in fact fossils of animals that lived aeons ago. Scales' *What the Wild Sea Can be: The Future of the World's Ocean* is on the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction 2025 shortlist. It is as much a backstory of the ocean as it also provides clues for what's happening to oceans now. Will life in the ocean go on?

In just its second year, the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction has cast its net wide to first announce an incredible longlist of 16 books, and then a shortlist of six. It will not be easy for the jury, led by writer and broadcaster Kavita Puri, to pick the winner on June 12. They will have to choose from a marine biologist contemplating on ocean life, a leveret-human interaction for the ages, a music memoir, the moving story of a transplant, a coming-of-age tale from China, and the untold story of a World War II woman resistance fighter.

Some of the answers Scales is seeking are perhaps to be found in Chloe Dalton's *Raising Hare*, in which a chance encounter with a baby hare, a leveret, changes the jet-setting foreign policy adviser's perspective on life and the environment. During the pandemic, Dalton shifted to the family's home in the English countryside and there she encountered a leveret in the wild, struggling to survive. She brings it home, but desperate searches



(Clockwise from left) Neneh Cherry; Clare Mulley; Helen Scales; Yuan Yang; Chloe Dalton; and Rachel Clarke. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

(Left) A young tuberculosis patient receives medicines from a nurse at a TB hospital in Guwahati; and (below) John Green. (AP AND GETTY IMAGES)

WAR AGAINST TUBERCULOSIS

'FUNDING FOR TB IS IN CRISIS'

John Green on the difficult campaign to eradicate a deadly disease

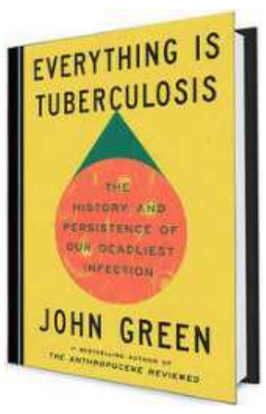
Maitri Porecha
porechamaitri.m@thehindu.co.in

John Green, author of bestselling books, including *The Fault In Our Stars*, is a passionate campaigner for eradicating tuberculosis. In his new book, *Everything is Tuberculosis*, he writes about the history of the disease, the role of the U.S., and why he decided to do something about it. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: *Your book is part poetic, part philosophical, capturing the story of a disease panning three centuries. What motivated you to write it?*
Answer: About 1.25 million people died from tuberculosis (TB) in 2023. It's overwhelming, and we don't know how to process these kinds of numbers. I wanted to write about one person and his personal experience with TB as a way of humanising the disease. I met Henry at a TB hospital in Sierra Leone in 2019 and he looked pretty healthy, but his TB wasn't responding well enough to antibiotics. I was in Sierra Leone to learn about maternal health, but when I came home from that trip, I learned that TB is still our deadliest infectious disease.

Q: *One in four TB patients who die belong to India. You are a strong advocate for availability of drugs. For drug-resistant TB, bedaquiline is now open to be manufactured by generic companies. How do we ensure access on the ground?*
A: The TB response in India has gotten much better over the last 10 years due to people like Shreya Tripathi who sued the government in order to get access to the newest and best antibiotic, bedaquiline. Unfortunately, by the time Shreya won the court case and got access to bedaquiline, it was too late for her. I also tell the story of the young survivors of TB who worked with the Indian court system to establish that the bedaquiline patent should not be extended forever.

India is the pharmacy of the world and that decision has made it possible for Indian manufacturers to develop bedaquiline that costs 60% less. Hopefully, that will mean fewer deaths from tuberculosis, but unfortunately, with the U.S. stepping back so much, funding to fight tuberculosis is in a real crisis now and it's not clear who is going to step up. Countries like India have to step up into the vacuum that the U.S. has created. Many people who need bedaquiline still aren't getting it due to complexities of distributing the medicine, especially to rural communities, and updating treatment guidelines.

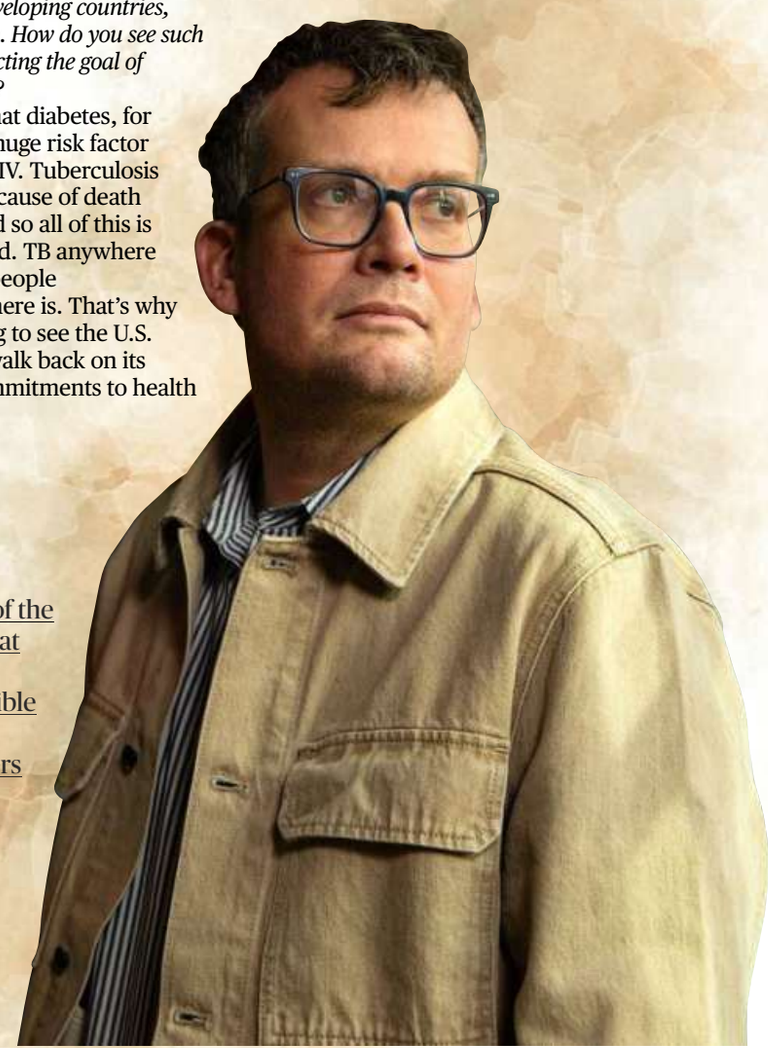


Everything is Tuberculosis
John Green
Penguin Random House
₹999

Q: *Actions of the U.S. government are being felt in developing countries, including India. How do you see such decisions impacting the goal of eliminating TB?*
A: We know that diabetes, for instance, is a huge risk factor for TB, so is HIV. Tuberculosis is the leading cause of death from AIDS and so all of this is interconnected. TB anywhere is a threat to people everywhere there is. That's why it's devastating to see the U.S. government walk back on its long-term commitments to health funding. Look at the progress India has made in the last 30 years on child mortality. That's one of the greatest successes in human history and to see us taking steps backwards is absolutely devastating.

Q: *You have been advocating for eradicating TB before the U.S. Congress.*
A: The U.S. should care about TB for the same reason that all rich countries should care about it, which is that we became rich largely through extractive colonialism. That has resulted in a wildly unjust and unfair global social order, where some people have access to the newest medications and treatments and other people don't. That's a failure of a human-built system. We should also care because there are 10,000 cases of TB every year in the U.S. We have a TB outbreak right now in Kansas. This is a prime example of what happens when we don't do a good job of distributing global resources we have, to address healthcare crises. I see this as a product of history. I see the current global TB crisis as a product of the long history of distributing resources unfairly and acting as if some lives matter more than others.

Q: *Have you won the cost battle yet with your advocacy?*
A: We've won the cost battle with bedaquiline but not the distribution battle. We have not won the cost battle with delamanid and that is essential to the future of fighting TB, because for fighting drug-resistant TB, delamanid is a very important drug. In countries like India, we need far more delamanid to be made available so that we don't have stockouts of that critically important drug, and cost is a major barrier there.



> **India is the pharmacy** of the world and that decision has made it possible for Indian manufacturers to develop bedaquiline that costs 60% less

(AP)

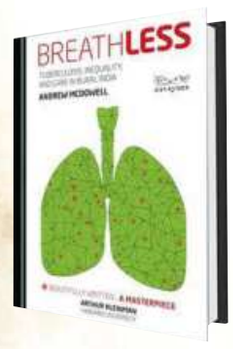
Coming up for air

A vantage view of how TB is upending lives in the villages of India

Ramya Kannan
ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in

The sheer wordsmithery and depth of knowledge, with an involvement both in the telling of the tale and its constituents, is almost immediately apparent when you open *Breathless*. This will not be just an ordinary story about tuberculosis (TB) in India – and the literature on that simply abounds. It is a tale that provides a vantage view of how TB impacts the lives of the rural people of India. Andrew McDowell shines a light on the way in which the disease melds with caste equations, poverty, access to healthcare and other inequalities, providing unique perspectives on the disease, as also the full complement of a life lived with TB, or, in the midst of it.

Ambavathi, the town McDowell chooses to set the story in, much like R.K. Narayan's Malgudi, is a microcosm, and of course, it's for real. Located midway between Delhi and Mumbai, Ambavathi is a village in Rajasthan where the dust irritates the lungs. It is also a village where the residents are mostly Dalits or Adivasis, and several inequalities coexist, and exacerbate, with rampant TB. Setting off on an engagement with "atmospheric entanglements", the author converts relevant elements of nature into chapters of his book: breath, dust, air, mud, clouds, forests, and in good measure, the afterlife.



Breathless: Tuberculosis, Inequality and Care in Rural India
Andrew McDowell
Navayana Publishing
₹599

Deep insights

The greatest strengths of the book are its craft of writing and its intense peering into the lives of the people of Ambavathi as they negotiate the extreme rollercoaster that life and TB have thrown them on to. The skill of McDowell makes sure we don't feel like voyeurs, in fact it seems like we are in the hospital with Mauz Harijan or walking along the cycle on the mud path with Daulat Singh, or watching the 14-year-old Khem Singh Rawat wave a cardboard in front of his father's face, fanning him.

In the chapter 'Dust', don't be surprised if you suddenly, and progressively, find yourself short of breath, and you feel the dust clogging your nostrils too. And nearly every personification of nature is more than what it is, for instance, dust is not merely dust, it is a metaphor for much more. Sample this: "Dust in Kesarlal's comment signified more than a fine layer of grit on his home's floor. It was a microecology of mind and matter that indicated the inconvenient ubiquity of failed development projects in the area." In fact, every chapter glistens with the sparkling wisdom of McDowell's deep observations that transcend the quotidian and grant more insight.

Together with the lives of the people living with TB, and their families, we also get a glimpse of how the community lives. He writes about the power structures arising out of caste and gender equations, and also, the impact of living at a distance from the cities. A combination of research, spiced with anthro-historical contexts, makes this blend of 200-odd pages a fine piece of work.

on the internet throw a blank on how to make it live. Dalton slowly learns the ropes of nurturing the leveret even as realisation dawns that hares are not to be tamed. In an eloquent summation, Dalton writes: "If it is possible, as William Blake would have it, 'to see a world in a grain of sand', then perhaps we can see all nature in a hare: its simplicity and intricacy, fragility and glory, transience and beauty... To domesticate is to alter the nature of an animal in order to fit it into our way of life as humans. For innately wild animals such as the hare, a better way is to coexist."

Web of human life

The complex web of human life is at the heart of singer Neneh Cherry's remarkable memoir, *A Thousand Threads*. She had three parents – Moki, Don, Ahmadu: givers of life but all rebels, all three bound in a long and painful history. Neneh is a rebel too and has been carried through life with the same "creative channels" she was brought up in.

Among the many treasures in the Sweden-born singer/songwriter's book is an extraordinary playlist starting with John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' and including some of her own like 'Buffalo Stance'. Neneh's mother Monika Marianne Karlsson, moved to Stockholm when she was 19 in the early 1960s when it was a hub of cultural innovation. She met Ahmadu Jah from Sierra Leone who had "brought with him all this extraordinary African music." But soon after Neneh was born, Moki and Ahmadu parted ways; and Moki fell in love with musician Don Cherry. They decided to find a way to share their lives with Neneh. Thus began an unconventional childhood, which also prepared the way for her musical journey, and its ebbs and highs, drugs and all.

A book that literally tugs at heartstrings is Rachel Clarke's *The Story of A Heart*. Calling organ donation an act of radical generosity, the doctor writes the story of Kiera and Max. When one nine-year-old tragically dies, the parents ensure another lives with the help of their child's heart.

The resilience of women is at the heart of Yuan Yang's *Private Revolutions*, the story of four women in China post the 1990s. Like Yuan, historian Clare Mulley ensures another woman will be remembered for posterity. *Agent Zo* is the story of a Polish World War II resistance fighter Elżbieta Zawacka, who stood up to both the Germans and Russians.

CORPORATE INCLUSION, INDIA STYLE

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Structural bias continues

Perhaps the most tangible impact of going quiet will be on queer communities. While governments and courts have spoken out in favour of social inclusion for trans people, the case for LGBTQIA+ inclusion is less well-understood than DEI favouring women. Queer people have been caught in the crossfire from the U.S.-led discourse since well before Trump came to power, notably when Ola founder Bhavish Aggarwal publicly attacked the growing use of non-traditional pronouns among transgender people last year.

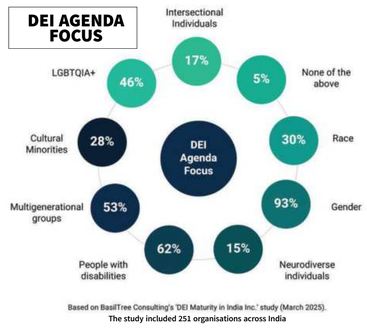
But even in sectors most open to the brash machismo that now characterises Silicon Valley conversations, I found no nostalgia for conservative ideas of merit, or old-school office hierarchy. "It [the anti-DEI stance] isn't filtering down," says Bengaluru-based Nandini Vishwanath of Antler, a venture capital firm. "Even those who're posting about the backlash on Twitter" – now X – "simply aren't thinking about it in a workplace context."

Venture-backed tech has its own problems. Small, high-earning teams with highly educated leaders may be less inclined to overt intolerance. But their size and capital constraints come into conflict with cultivating inclusivity. Structural bias is rampant: there are few women founders and leaders, and policies that make workplaces more equitable – such as family leave or accessible infrastructure – fall far behind in priority. "Our culture doesn't allow founders to fail, and the ones who consider these things important are called 'soft' founders," adds Vishwanath.

This is a variation of the problem of 'greedy jobs', the Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin's formulation of demanding and financially rewarding roles, typically structured in favour of privileged men. In sectors like private equity, where there are no more than 50 new jobs in India every year, advocates for gender diversity have to begin

We've learnt a lot from businesses in the U.S., but our ideas are rooted in our concepts of social justice, our legal environment, and our values. I think we should, in all humility, return to the idea that India can light the path for inclusion for others, and work towards it

PARMESH SHAHANI
Head, Godrej DEI Lab



Based on BasilTree Consulting's 'DEI Maturity in India Inc.' study (March 2025).
The study included 251 organisations across India

with encouraging the industry simply to reconsider their idea of what constitutes a good workplace -- in other words, not one that's necessarily full of other men who went to the same college as you. It's psychologically easier to accept that factories should have clean toilets for women on-site: the "Indian" stage of DEI.

Supportive Indian government

Every expert I spoke to emphasised that DEI in India is growing because the situation here is different from the U.S. I find this fundamentally true in the sense that Indian governments at the centre and in states are broadly in favour of expanding opportunities for women and people with disabilities, and there is some support for trans people, if not widely for the LGBTQIA+ community.

From announcing provisions for working women's housing in the national budget, to the Tamil Nadu government's public

DEI impact studies are still not a way of life in corporate India. Only 14% of companies assess business impact, the others remain at the level of assessing employee experience. As a result, while India Inc is firmly committed to the DEI agenda, on paper and in practice, they're not always able to make the transition from 'feel-good-thing' to 'right-thing'. That is the need of the hour

BHAWANA MISHRA
Founder and managing director, BasilTree Consulting

encouragement for companies hiring transgender people, the private sector can see itself in varying levels of partnership with the government in this agenda. (My boss Parmesh Shahani, head of Godrej DEI Lab and author of the 2020 book, *Queeristan: LGBTQ Inclusion in the Indian Workplace*, often meets with gruff old-school corporate honchos who ask him for recruitment advice: 'We also want to hire some LGBTQs,' I overheard a cement industry leader say to him last year.)

Most importantly, the backing from public institutions is a reminder that in India, any imagined contest between inclusion and meritocracy is pernicious, and overlooks our social and historical context. Indian governments have arguably led the way for DEI in a historically crucial way. Caste or religion, which constitutes major faultlines in Indian politics and society, do not fall under the purview of any formal DEI programme I know of in the Indian private sector. But they do form the partial basis for what is almost certainly the largest bias-correcting effort ever conducted in Indian workplaces, in the form of reservations for people from SC/ST communities in public sector jobs.

The legal protections for these reservations, and their basis in the values of the Constitution of India, are also fundamental to how some of the oldest and most successful corporations in the country, including the Tata Group, the Aditya Birla Group, and the Mahindra Group, publicly talk about their responsibility to their organisations and Indian society at large.

"We've learnt a lot from businesses in the U.S. that stepped up over the last decade to commit to racial justice, queer empowerment, and gender equity," says Shahani. "But our ideas are rooted in our concepts of social justice, our legal environment, and our values. I think we should, in all humility, return to the idea that India can light the path for inclusion for others, and work towards it."

The writer is head of research and media, Godrej DEI Lab.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

BINGE WATCH

Missing: India's comic sense

In the midst of FIRs and outrage, there must be debate about why comedy is still a fair way away from being a vehicle for social change

In 2021, I watched the comedian Varun Grover perform in New Delhi. As per usual, he had the audience in the palm of his hand. About 10 minutes in, Grover said (in Hindi), "Please understand the chronology. First, I tell the joke, then you laugh and finally, I go to jail." The laughter was muted, not because people didn't understand it, but because they understood it a little too well.

The tension in the room was because back then, comedian Munawar Faruqui's legal troubles were hogging the headlines. Across January and February, he ended up spending over a month in jail for allegedly making offensive jokes about Hindu deities, a charge for which not a shred of evidence was ever produced.

Four years down the line, it's more of the same with Indian comedy. At the time of writing this column, Kunal Kamra had just been slapped with the second, third and fourth FIRs against him, after the comedian's allegedly derogatory comments about Maharashtra Deputy CM Eknath Shinde, cabinet minister Nirmala Sitharaman, et al. The comments happened in the context of Kamra's 45-minute stand-up special *Naya Bharat* on YouTube, which has received over 11 million views since it was released on March 23. Kamra's Mumbai studio was also vandalised last week by supporters of Shinde's faction of the Shiv Sena.

Comedians in the crosshairs

In India, comedy is still a fair way away from being a vehicle for social change. And one of the main reasons is that successive Indian governments – both at the state and central levels – have been trigger-happy when it comes to persecuting comedians. A decade ago, in 2015, All India Bakchod (AIB) uploaded a video where they, in conjunction with Bollywood celebrities such as Karan Johar, 'roasted' the actors Arjun Kapoor and Ranveer Singh.

The entire political ecosystem cried obscenity and multiple FIRs were filed against the comedians. AIB finally removed the video from their YouTube page. Since then, through the late 2010s and early 2020s, comedians such as Sanjay Rajoura have faced legal action on the flimsiest of charges. Like in 2016, when actor and comedian Kiku Sharda was arrested after he did an impression of the religious leader and convicted rapist Gurmeet Ram Rahim, on the TV show *Comedy Nights With Kapil*.

After Vir Das performed his *Two Indias* set at Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Centre in 2021, he faced a total of seven police complaints against him in various parts of the country – in Delhi, the complainant was a vice-president of the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (named, sadly, Aditya Jha). Kamra himself has a previous contempt case against him in the Supreme Court, running since 2020.

Most recently, of course, comedian Samay Raina and podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia (aka BeerBiceps) were the subjects of an FIR filed after allegedly objectionable jokes made during Raina's paywalled YouTube series *India's Got Latent*.

Personally, I see this largely as a cultural issue where the standards are very different for India vs. the rest of the world. We are an obedience-based culture focused on the needs of the collective, not a dissent-based culture where individual rights are paramount. And because of this, I don't see individual outlier comedians affecting vital conversations in India anytime soon – the kind that lead to real change.

Triggering change

Recently, I was watching former English cricketer Steve Harmison answer a question about cultural differences between Asian and non-Asian cricketers. He replied that it was tough for young players to be mavericks and rule-breakers in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh et al because they come through a system designed to reward compliance and punish dissent.

In my view, Harmison had hit upon something crucial to the discourse, and his point can be extrapolated to the comedic sphere as well. Why would a young, up-and-coming Indian stand-up comedian try to critique, say, caste and religion-based discrimination, or the gender wage-gap, or any of the zillion other problems in our society? If anything, they would be incentivised to swing to the other extreme, to cater to the bigotries and insecurities of the majority.

Which isn't to say that actual change cannot be triggered by comedians. In America, basically the entire legal framework for mass-media censorship happened because of one legal case: FCC (Federal Communications Commission) vs. Pacifica Foundation, 1978, ending in a 5-4 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that upheld the right of the federal government to regulate content over the broadcast airwaves. The case itself only happened because of comedian George Carlin's *Seven dirty words* monologue, wherein he listed certain swear words that could not be uttered on TV or radio, regardless of context.

Carlin was riffing off his predecessor Lenny Bruce's monologue in 1966, where Bruce reeled off the words he had been arrested for in the past. A conservative activist filed the case against Radio Pacifica for airing the Carlin segment, which brought about this outstanding ruling.

You may or may not agree with the U.S. Supreme Court's judgment, but you cannot deny the the intellectual heft of the exercise. I would urge Indian comedians and politicians to read not only the judgment, but the arguments that preceded it. These are conversations we should be having right now. Alas, we would rather file FIRs than actually do the reading and construct informed arguments.

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

Akila Kannadasan
akila.k@thehindu.co.in

TAMIL NADU'S WELLS RECLAIMED

Through their initiatives, the Public Well Revival Movement wants people to reconnect with the ancient sustainable source of drinking water

We trek up a trail, on a hillock composed of damp, loose rock that cuts into finger millet fields, to reach Giri's tile-roofed home. It is within the many folds of Erode district's Bargur hills of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu. He is not home, but his goats are. "Women walk up this stretch with a pot of water balanced on their hips up to 10 times a day," points out Madhu Manjari Selvaraj when we pause to catch our breaths near the goat shed. The world over, it is women who take it upon themselves to fetch water. It is no different in the mountain village of Solakanai.

Here, women walk to a mountain stream for water every day. A few metres from the stream is their village well that, until a few months ago, was covered with boulders and sediment. It now brims with water and the promise of a new beginning after Manjari and her team from the Public Well Revival Movement took it into their fold. A handful of men used rocks sourced from the nearby hills to build a wall against the flow of the stream, after which the well was dredged, with a wall constructed around it. It was opened last month.

The initiative, an off-shoot of the Tamil Nadu-based Cuckoo Movement for Children, which strives to make childhood meaningful, has revived 15 defunct wells across the state over the past four years with crowd-funding. It is helmed by Manjari and her team that includes M. Mari Muthu, K. Rahuraman, V. Muthu, C. Bala Gurunathan, A. Arun Kumar and S. Mohan. Manjari, an architect, recently won the Doshi We Know Fellowship 2024-25 for her work.

With a little help from the locals

"Wells become unusable for various reasons," says Manjari. "They may be closed due to conflicts arising out of caste tensions; due to sand or rock filling them up over the years or simply because people have forgotten their existence owing to piped water connections."

But the earth remembers. Despite being forgotten, water continues to spring forth from a well. The Public Well Revival Movement identifies such wells, reminding people in the village or town of its existence. After necessary permissions from local authorities, citizen's collectives, and the Forest Department are sought, it sets out to revive them with help from the locals themselves.

Wells, says Manjari, are sustainable sources of water. While waterbodies such as ponds and lakes provide surface water, wells store groundwater and are hence able to keep regenerating. "A well connects four to five aquifers," she points out.

The first well the group dredged was in Puliyanur village near Tiruvannamalai. The team that usually camps in local government schools or temples spent almost three months in Puliyanur. At the end of the first month, they saw the first traces of clear water. The sun's reflection gleamed gold in it: it was a moment that filled the team with immense faith in their movement. It soon filled up and the villagers came to it in droves, pots in hand, unable to believe their dilapidated well was alive.

The team then took up a well in Dhuruvam village in Kallakurichi district. "Women there were walking up to seven kilometres to reach a quarry to fetch water," says Manjari. The team later headed to Naickanoor village in Krishnagiri district, where they spent four months dredging a 28-feet-deep well. "A 90-year-old resident of the village would sit on his haunches by the side to observe us at work every day," she recalls. "When we got to the 27th feet, he said we would reach water after exactly one more foot. He then told us his father had contributed to digging the well 40 years ago."

Connecting people and nature

Solakanai's is the movement's fifth well located in a mountain village. The terrain – there are no proper roads from Bargur to the village – makes it almost impossible to transport construction material. "It took us six days to bring a truck load of M-sand to the site," says Manjari.

At Agnibaavi in Kongadai, Erode district, the team dredged a well that the people wanted to share with cattle and elephants from the surrounding forests. "We constructed an outer wall with room for elephants to dip their trunks inside to drink," says Manjari. The night before the well's opening, a herd of elephants stopped for a drink, declaring it open long before people could use it.

Watching wells come alive has left the team with fascinating insights into the interaction between people and nature. "The tribal community of Bejility mountain village in Erode calls water 'Gangai'," says Manjari. She recalls how once a little boy told her that children from their village do not hurl stones into wells. "They are being raised on the belief that wells are akin to a mother's breast."

On a mission Architect Madhu Manjari Selvaraj of the Public Well Revival Movement; and the revived wells in Solakanai and Agnibaavi in Erode district. (M. SARANRAJ & BALAJI MAHESHWAR)

Hope in a drop
No. of groundwater schemes/structures

INDIA
2,19,32,799

UTTAR PRADESH
39,44,102

MAHARASHTRA
32,33,965

TAMIL NADU
20,70,818

Source: Sixth Minor Irrigation Census

RECHARGE AND REPLENISH

The Shallow Aquifer Management programme aims to deliver a scientific understanding of groundwater management to cities across the country

Bringing up water (Clockwise from left) The 35-feet-deep well and renovated water treatment plant that are a part of the new shallow aquifer near the Devanahalli lake in Bengaluru; and Shivanand, project manager at Biome Environmental Trust, which has coordinated the makeover. (COURTESY BIOME ENVIRONMENTAL TRUST)

Holly Wise and Sarah Patnaik

The women of Jharia Circle in Dhanbad, Jharkhand were desperate for water. They gathered in a local temple to figure out a solution and then decided to dig a well.

"Without any scientific background, they just knew that [if they] 'dig a well here, we'll get some sort of water'," narrates Anirudh Soni, a research associate at the National Institute for Urban Affairs.

Initially, with the help of men, but later by themselves, the women dug a basic well. It was 25-feet deep, but not fully developed and hence dangerous, says Soni. The women stood on a bamboo mesh spread atop the hole to manually pull just one bucket of water at a time from the pit. One woman even fell into the hole and was seriously injured. Then the women heard about Eklavya Prasad's team.

Prasad, from the public charitable trust Megh Pyne Abhiyan, was scouting sites in Dhanbad for the Shallow Aquifer Management pilot programme – a 10-city initiative overseen by Soni and his team. The programme, a part of the national Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) 2.0, was designed to bring a scientific understanding of groundwater management to cities across the country.

Prasad recalls that when the women learnt his team was in the same locality, they approached them and asked for help to improve the structure and safety of their basic well. It soon became one of the five sites in the city's pilot efforts to recharge the region's shallow aquifer – a groundwater resource that's important for water supply, irrigation, and maintaining ecosystems. Dhanbad is the smallest city in the Shallow Aquifer Management programme (the other cities are Chennai, Hyderabad, Rajkot, Bengaluru, Gwalior, Jaipur, Kolkata, Pune and Thane). Construction of the recharge sites was completed in June 2024.

The local communities are seeing early evidence of their groundwater supply replenishing. The water level in one of the wells in Dhanbad rose 30 feet in just a month. "It's remarkable, and it reminds us to have confidence in our own observations. It's truly reassuring," says Prasad.

During last year's monsoon, the water level increased in three wells where shallow aquifer recharge projects were implemented. A further test will come during the dry season when the wells usually go dry. Prasad explains that by monitoring the water levels, they are gathering evidence and data on the efficacy of the Shallow Aquifer Management pilot in Dhanbad.

From practice to policy

Nearly 2,000 kilometres south of Dhanbad, and just 37 kilometres from the centre of Bengaluru, a small cluster of buildings, six filter borewells and one 35-feet-deep well are all part of the programme.

The project on the edge of the once-empty but now-rippling Devanahalli Lake had its second phase inaugurated on August 30 last year. It included drilling additional filter borewells, installing 1.5 horsepower pumps, renovating the previously unused sump to store raw water, and upgrading the water treatment plant to handle a capacity of 320 kilolitres of water per day from the six filter borewells. The treated water, after meeting quality standards, is now integrated into the water supply of Devanahalli, where the Kempegowda International Airport is located.

"The project is designed to show what is possible when governments and agencies work together to manage groundwater supply," says Shivanand, project manager at Biome Environmental Trust, which has coordinated the project. "We cannot execute a project to meet the entire water demand of [Devanahalli]. What we can do is demonstrate what the government can replicate on a bigger scale."

Vishwanath Srikantaiah, a co-founder of Biome and a leading water expert, says the government's recent focus on establishing policy around groundwater management is morale-boosting. "Urban shallow aquifers have now become a focus point and cities are being encouraged to develop groundwater management and aquifer recharge systems. We're able to take practice to policy, thereby influencing large-scale funding, and build knowledge across India," he says.

Enriching lakes and tanks

Bengaluru is the only city in India to use treated wastewater for agricultural re-use in neighbouring districts and for filling lakes, says Srikantaiah. Until 2018, the city reused just 8% of its treated wastewater. Now, the number stands at 42%, with plans to reach 100% in the next five years, according to a research published last year by the Indian Institute of Science.

Today, the Devanahalli Lake holds rainwater and treated wastewater – part of the Hebbal-Nagawara Valley Project to pipe treated wastewater from Bengaluru to 65 surface tanks in drought-prone areas of Chikkaballapur district. The treated wastewater's singular function is to seep into the earth beneath the surface of the tank bed, and recharge groundwater supply. Groundwater then enters the aquifer – a body of porous rock or sediment – and can fill up wells and springs.

A 35-foot-deep open well next to Devanahalli Lake has undergone such a makeover. Members of the traditional well-digging community have cleaned the once empty well, disinfected it, repaired loose stones, built a wall around it, and installed a safety grate on top. Within 48 hours, water in the well rose 12 feet and four inches.

With partner organisations in each of the 10 cities part of the Shallow Aquifer Management programme, Soni and his team have conducted workshops for civic authorities to help them understand the aquifer mapping process. Six cities have completed the project so far. Srikantaiah says it takes a full year to understand how the projects perform during the monsoon and summer months, based on which, they can work on maximising the aquifer's potential.

Soni hopes the outcomes of these projects in some of the cities, including Bengaluru and Dhanbad, will help people see the physical effect of implementing the project. "There is a notion that groundwater is invisible," he says. "These cities actually make the invisible visible."

Holly is a Fulbright-Nehru teaching scholar at Christ (Deemed to be University). Sarah is pursuing her Master's at the same university.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 9

CHAMPIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Who, you ask? None other than the Indian politician who will say two completely contradictory things at the same time

Dear reader, I hope this fortnight's column finds you well. Can you believe it? It is already the month of April as you are reading my latest missive.

April is my birth month. And if you are planning to send your favourite weekend columnist any gift items, please feel free to do so. Gifts of all sizes and shapes are welcome. But cash is best, for mutual convenience.

But back to the main programming. Once again, your writer was partaking of some civil aviation recently and found himself marvelling at the relentless wonder that is the human being. A very patient member of the cabin crew approached a gentleman sitting nearby and asked him: "Sir, what would you like for breakfast?"

He said: "Yes."

Then she smiled and explained: "Sir, you have Indian vegetarian option, continental vegetarian option and continental non-vegetarian option. What would you like?"

Again, he said a single word: "Yes."

Once again the cabin crew, her smile now slightly strained, explained to the man that there were several options for breakfast. And he was to choose one.

After several minutes of repartee, it became clear that the man was basically saying that he wanted one of every option. And, dear reader, for the next 45 minutes, he sat and ate three separate breakfasts one after the other.

This incident reminded me of the subject of this week's rumination: the Indian politician's unique ability to say two completely contradictory things when you ask them about something. (I am not talking about your favourite politician. He would never do such a thing. I am talking about that other politician.)

Let me illustrate with an entirely fake scenario that I just made up for the sake of this column. It has no relationship whatsoever with the real world. Let's say that a comedian goes to some sort of entertainment venue and decides to make a joke about a politician. (Again, not your favourite politician. The other one.) A few days later, supporters of the politician who was the subject of the joke arrive at the venue and destroy it into tiny little pieces for the benefit of the nation.

The next day, some journalist will approach the politician or one of his/her allies and ask if they support such thuggish behaviours.

It is at that moment that he or she will unleash a masterpiece of Indian political rhetoric. They will say: "Freedom of speech is paramount to Indian society. Every Indian has the right to speech. Speech should be free everywhere. Speech should be like curry leaf in vegetable shop... *But*, in the case of this comedian rascal, I am going to separate his face from his head."

Dear reader, Indian politicians pull this trick all the time. They will say that something is very important in theory, but if you try and put it into practise, they will cover you in biryani and throw you into the zoo.

"Yes, artistic freedom is there in India. More artistic freedom is there in India than anywhere else in the world. Just yesterday, we exported 100 tonnes of artistic freedom to Pakistan. However, next time if you make a painting like this again, we will immediately set you on fire."

Or.

"Education is important. The future of India depends on education. In fact, it was the great John Dewey who said that education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. *Waah waah*. But next time, if you teach about Aurangzeb in school, you start preparation for death."

Dear readers, how is it 2025, and we still don't have a word for this total and utter shenanigans?

Which is why today onwards, you will use the word 'hypocracy'. The perfect communion of hypocrisy in a democracy.

Example sentence: "The home minister made a rousing hypocratic speech in which he said that freedom of the press is the cornerstone of a vibrant democracy such as India. However, this particular journalist should be thrown into the nearest volcano."

But most importantly, I want you to remember one thing: I am not at all talking about your politician. I am talking about the other one.

Hypocracy
/hɪˈpɒkrəsi/
noun
Definition: The political art of making a grand, principled statement followed immediately by a contradictory position that completely undermines the initial statement.
Related forms
Hypocratic (adjective): Relating to or characterised by hypocracy; describing statements that affirm a principle only to immediately contradict it.

***Sidin Vadukut** is head of talent at Clarisights. He lives in London and is currently working on a new novel.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Choices

North-South vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a World Championship team event some years ago. It was a two-team match, but all teams in the event were playing the same deals.

West was Renee Secrete, from London, where a one no trump opening usually shows 12-14 points. She chose to lead the king of spades. The sight of dummy gave her much to think about. Partner could have at most three spades for his one no trump response. South, therefore, had a six-card spade suit. Why had South passed as dealer instead of opening a weak two-bid? Obviously South had a very poor suit, but still, he chose to bid at the two level.

NORTH
♠ Q 10
♡ Q 10 6 3
◇ 9 6 4 2
♣ K J 9

WEST
♠ A K
♡ K J 5 4
◇ A Q 10 8
♣ 6 5 4

EAST
♠ 9 6 5
♡ 9 7
◇ K J 7 3
♣ Q 8 7 2

SOUTH
♠ J 8 7 4 3 2
♡ A 8 2
◇ 5
♣ A 10 3

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
Pass	1◇	Pass	1NT
2♠	Dbl*	Pass	3◇
Pass	Pass	3♠	All pass

*Takeout

Opening lead: King of ♠

He must have something. Secrete decided that the likely reason for South's initial pass was that he had too much defence, outside of his spade suit, for a weak two-bid. It was quite likely, reasoned Secrete, that South held both missing aces.

Secrete found the inspired shift to the eight of diamonds at trick two. East won with the king and shifted to a heart, and there was nothing declarer could do to avoid losing a heart ruff later in the play. Down one after a lovely defence. We are told that no other declarer in this event, who was playing in a spade contract, was held to eight tricks.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has April 6 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1648, the construction of this iconic building was completed. It was built as the emperor decided to shift the capital from Agra to Delhi. He had the same architect, who worked on an iconic tomb for his wife design this. Which building is this, known for its distinctive colour?

2 This day in 1808, businessman John Jacob Astor incorporated the American Fur Company, with which he established a monopoly on the trade. This led him to become the first businessman to earn a certain title as his worth crossed a significant amount. What was he the very first of?

3 On April 6, 1843, this gentleman was appointed British Poet Laureate by Queen Victoria. His works that celebrate nature, emotion, and the human experience are taught till date in schools. Who was this poet, who had a very fitting name?

4 On this day in 1889, George Eastman began selling a flexible rolled film for the first time. His company soon became globally renowned in photography. Which company was this that supposedly got its name from the sound the shutter made when taking a picture?

5 Same day in 1896, 241 male athletes from 14 nations got together in Athens. They re-started an ancient practice, which had stopped 1,500 years earlier because of a ban by Roman emperor Theodosius I. What did they begin, of which 37 editions have happened so far?

Who is this famous romantic poet, who was appointed British Poet Laureate by Queen Victoria, on April 6, 1843? (GETTY IMAGES)

6 On this day in 1930, Mahatma Gandhi came to the end of a 24-day journey. He picked up something in his hand and declared: "With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire." What historic event had just happened?

7 On this day in 1938, American chemist Roy J. Plunkett presented his invention at his company DuPont. It was an inert chemical called 'Polytetrafluoroethylene', which could not be wet by water. By what common name would one know this compound now found in almost all kitchens?

8 On April 6, 1965, Intelsat I was launched into geosynchronous orbit. Its nickname was 'Early Bird', a reference to the proverb about catching worms. It was the first to be available internationally for commercial use. What was 'Early Bird'?

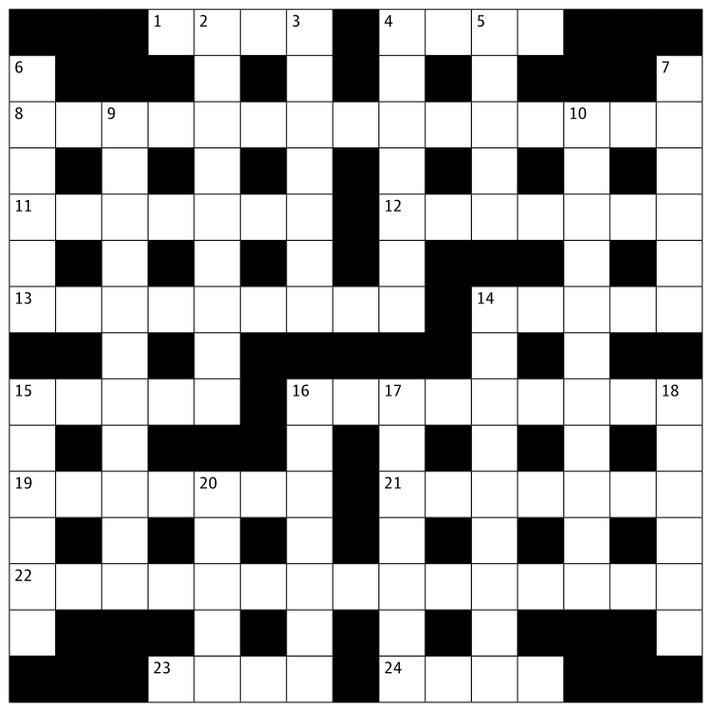
9 On this day in 1974, a band of four Swedish artists won the 1974 edition of the Eurovision Song Contest. In 2021, it was again voted as the best song in the event's 50-year history. The song uses a historically important battle as a metaphor for a breakup. Which band and what song?

10 On April 6, 1980, a small piece of paper with re-adherable glue on its back was introduced to the market. This temporary marker was accidentally discovered by a scientist, who was trying to make super-glue. What stationery item, first produced in an iconic yellow colour is this?

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

Answers
1. The Red Fort
2. A millionaire
3. William Wordsworth
4. Kodak
5. The modern Olympic Games
6. The Salt Satyagraha/ Dandi March
7. Teflon
8. Communications satellite
9. ABBA — Waterloo
10. Post it notes

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3352



Across
1 Perhaps selfie after selfie, ultimately overblown (4)
4 Also one of Disney+'s characters (4)
8 Spooner's to cycle past Royal Courts of Justice? Let's hear some music (6,2,3,4)
11 Principally, facecloth (literally); alternatively, nicey nicey eulogising laudation? (7)
12 Result of rogue régimes? (7)
13 Duke wearing beam following frothy coffee: how modern! (6-3)
14 Depicted as haggard (5)
15 Thieved a gown (5)
16 Describing silvery metal, irritated Marie Curie twice cut off by lecturer (9)
19 Head of Anatomy to regret tartan cap — flipping unprofessional (7)
21 Namby-pamby takes money from old prince (7)
22 Loud *coo* and *cluck* up here? (5-6-4)
23 Quick — cut French cheese (4)
24 In hearing, is conscious of sensory organ (4)

Down
2 Pink geese, barking dog (9)
3 Joined overthrow of government — then governed (7)
4 Like young wizard's bowls and plates? (7)
5 Taking slices of charcuterie — we've all been there (5)
6 American-European union welcomed by Florida as advantageous (6)
7 Inventor facing the wrong way: side on (6)
9 Criticise King Edward for one having beef with this? (5,6)
10 Acid satire represented a part of the Med (8,3)
14 Old Spanish coins criminally unsold? Boo (9)
15 Formality that's found in toast (6)
16 Grammar queen ignored to some extent in exhibition venue (7)
17 Mike ran madly to get little baking dish (7)
18 They're fatty muscular flaps: Everyman had tucked in (6)
20 Tree you might turn to for advice (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3351

O	V	E	R	S	L	E	E	P	S	■	C	H	A	I
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M	A	Y	O	■	T	R	A	C	E	Y	E	M	I	N

Women's power of deterrence

Tiny Nair
tinynair@gmail.com

I watched the Republic Day parade on television on January 26, showcasing India's firepower and hair-raising aerobatics with great pride. The demonstration of such military might is aimed at deterring any attack on India's sovereignty. The message of the power of deterrence is subtle but strong.

Watching the unending flow of pilgrims for Pongala, a women-only ritual at the Attukal temple in Thiruvanantha-puram on March 13, left me with a similar feeling, the women's power of deterrence.

Men and women react to stress differently. In men, stress activates the rostral prefrontal cortex, which deals with strategy planning, and inhibits the left orbitofrontal area, which deals with reward and punishment.

As a result, men either get angry and fight or decide on a strategy to withdraw. This "fight or flight" is the hallmark of the male stress response. In contrast, women respond to stress by activating the limbic system and invoking the "tend and defend" strategy – a nicer, kinder, maternal way to deal with it.

Attukal Pongala is celebrated every year with women cooking sweet porridge for the goddess and sharing it. Women from all over the world celebrate it, praying to the incarnation of Goddess Parvathy who fought injustice.

Legend has it that Kannaki was a devoted wife married to a wealthy businessman, Kovalan, who lived in the Kaveripattanam area of Tamil Nadu. Her husband's infatuation with a dancer did not go unnoticed by her, but she believed it would pass, which it eventually did. However, by then, all her husband's wealth was gone. She was quick to forgive her repentant husband and start their life anew. They decided to go to Madurai and sell their last possession, a gem-studded anklet, to raise money to start a business. Unbeknownst to them, the Queen of Madurai had lost a lookalike anklet, and the royal security staff was frantically searching for it, frisking everyone. Kovalan was promptly apprehended on an alleged charge of theft, arrested, and sentenced. Kannaki rushed to the royal court to point out the mistake. The queen acknowledged the mix-up, but by then, Kovalan had been executed.

The irate Kannaki could not take it any more. An ardent devotee of Agni, the god of fire, Kannaki invoked him and requested him to burn down the evil empire, which he promptly did, reducing the city to ashes.

The mythological story bolsters the belief that the mother goddess does not tolerate injustice to women.

To the neurobiologists, it proves that given the circumstances, a woman can shift her stress response from her instinctive maternal "tend and defend" and upgrade it to the destructive "fight mode". The circumstances that flip the switch, however, are still unclear.

Women in space

The return of Sunita Williams to earth after a gruelling nine-month stay in the ISS is an apt time to take stock of the gender balance on the final frontier

Y. Mercy Famila
mercyfamila@gmail.com

Triumphant return NASA astronaut Sunita Williams in Florida after returning to earth from the International Space Station. (ANI)

Space, the ultimate frontier, has fascinated humankind for centuries. Yet, for decades, it remained an arena dominated by men. However, that is changing, and women have been steadily carving their rightful place in the cosmos. The return of veteran NASA astronaut Sunita Williams from a challenging 286-day extended stay aboard the International Space Station has once again highlighted the courage and intelligence of women in space exploration.

Ms. Williams has spent over 608 days in space across multiple missions, making her one of the most experienced astronauts in the world, second only to another NASA astronaut, Peggy Whitson, who, with 675 days, holds the record for the longest stay by a woman in space. Ms. Williams's achievements are inspiring, given that decades ago, women were barred from space programmes. The first astronauts were all men chosen from military aviation, a domain basically dominated by men. Valentina Tereshkova of the then U.S.S.R became the first woman in space in 1963. Sally Ride became the first U.S. women to venture into space in 1983.

Today, space exploration is no longer a male-dominated domain, thanks to the trailblazing efforts of women such as Ms. Williams. The increasing representation of women in space agencies signals a shift in perception, demonstrating that the qualities required for space travel are not gender-exclusive.

Ms. Williams's journey is not just about an astronaut returning home; it is a powerful testament to the perseverance of women who have broken barriers in a field that was once considered beyond their reach. Her mission reaffirms that gender is no limitation when it comes to science, technology, and exploration. As we celebrate her return, it is imperative to reflect on the evolving role of women in space programmes, compare the representation of women in NASA, the U.S. space agency, and the Indian Space Research Organisation, and contemplate the future of space exploration.

Brave astronauts

Over the years, NASA has built an impressive roster of woman astronauts, engineers, and scientists. Women such as Ms. Whitson and Christina Koch, who conducted the first all-woman spacewalk with Jessica Meir in 2019, have proved that women are not just participants in space missions but are also leaders. NASA's Artemis programme, which aims to return humans to the moon and establish a sustainable presence, has explicitly emphasised gender diversity.

The Artemis team includes several women astronauts, with the goal of landing the first woman on the moon in the coming years. This represents a significant shift from the Apollo era, when all 12 astronauts who walked on the moon were men.

The U.S. has made deliberate efforts to include women in NASA leadership, resulting in women astronauts playing significant roles in space exploration over the years. On the other hand, India has faced structural barriers that have slowed progress. The challenges are not only institutional but also cultural – fewer women in STEM fields, traditional gender roles, and limited opportunities for women to pursue careers in aerospace have all played a part. While the ISRO is making strides in bridging this gap, more needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities for women in spaceflight.

NASA has a long history of women's representation, and India's space agency has made laudable progress in integrating women into its mission. The exceptional examples are the Chandrayaan-2 and Mangalyaan (Mars Orbiter Mission) projects launched in 2013, which had a significant number of women scientists, including Nandini Harinath and Ritu Karidhal, playing significant roles.

Human flight

While NASA has sent multiple women to space, India has yet to send its first man or woman astronaut on an indigenous mission. Kalpana Chawla, an Indian-born astronaut, made history by flying with NASA, but a woman astronaut trained by the ISRO is still awaited. The inclusion of women in the ISRO's future missions will be vital in setting an example for aspiring young girls in India who dream of reaching the stars.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the names of four astronauts for India's first manned space flight mission, Gaganyaan, which is planned to launch this year. However, to much dismay, no women have been included in this inaugural mission.

More inclusive

The future of space exploration is set to be more inclusive than ever before. Private space companies such as SpaceX and Blue Origin are increasingly hiring woman astronauts.

The thrust for a Mars mission in the coming decades may very well see a woman stepping on the Red Planet.

Therefore, it is time for India to make history by selecting and training its first woman astronaut. Ms. Williams's return from space is more than just a homecoming; it is a moment of reflection on how far women have come in space exploration and how much further they have yet to go.

The next giant leap for humankind will not be taken by men alone – it will be taken together, as equals, pushing the boundaries of what is possible.

Travails of a guest at a big, fat wedding

For those navigating the urban landscape of Chennai, attending weddings is an adventure fraught with challenges

Jayanthi Rangarajan
rjayanthi363@gmail.com

As a Chennaiite who has been to numerous weddings, I can't help but notice the stark difference in the celebration now and back then. In my childhood, weddings were intimate affairs, the focus being on the ceremony and the joy of the union rather than on extravagant display of wealth and grandeur that is seen now.

This shift reflects not only changing tastes but also the evolving societal pressures that accompany such celebrations.

For those of us navigating the urban landscape of Chennai, attending weddings has become an adventure fraught with challenges, starting with the commute.

Traffic nightmare

With many weddings taking place on any auspicious *muhurtham* day, the city's traffic turns into a maze with impatient drivers touching off traffic jams and a cacophony of horns.

Despite my best efforts to plan ahead and arrive early, I frequently find myself stuck in traffic for longer than the time I spend at the wedding itself. The journey feels like a test of patience.

The preparation involves the dreaded task of choosing what to wear. For many, this is a time-consuming affair involving mental gymnastics through their wardrobe.

"This sari isn't new, I wore it last season," and "Is this designer blouse still in vogue?" are common thoughts. The struggle leads many to the shops, hoping for something that feels fresh and exciting – another chore or is it an excuse, amid the whirlwind of wedding preparations?

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Selecting a gift is another area fraught with anxiety. What do you give the couple that has everything? After debating various options, the task often gets pushed to the last minute, leading to hurried decisions in stores. By the time I am *en route* to greeting the couple on stage, I am frantically attempting to pen down my heartfelt wishes, hoping to find a suitable envelope and a "working pen" to borrow while navigating the long queues.

Greeting lines

Upon arrival, the anticipation transitions to the reality of greeting lines. The couple often takes time to emerge, leading to that inevitable feeling of awkwardness as guests stand around, waiting. Once the greetings are done, the loud music drowns out any attempt at personal conversation with friends or relatives and before I know it, it's time to strike a pose for group photos that will inevitably end up all over social media. Every time you feel that whoever posted them could have been kinder to you in choosing the frames.

Finally, the dining experience is a mixed bag of joy and guilt. I often feel fortunate to snag a seat before the tables fill up, and if the food is both tasty and healthy, it's a double win. However, there is always that nagging feeling post-meal about whether I overindulged or failed to finish what was on my plate, contributing to the guilt of food waste.

Reflecting on this, I can't help but reminisce about the simplicity of weddings from our childhood. Back then, the joy of connection and the sacredness of togetherness overshadowed the burdensome pressures of societal expectations. While today's weddings may be grander, they are often accompanied by challenges that can turn what should be a joyous occasion into a stressful event.

Back to basics

Weddings, while still celebrations of love, require just as much effort from guests as they do from the hosts. Here's to hoping that amid the chaos and grandeur, the essence of love and unity remains the focus, making the travails of attending weddings a little lighter and more enjoyable.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

We, the not-queer ones, see queer people as different from us. ('Growing older as a queer person in India'; Mar. 30) The government and the laws feed on these majority sentiments, thus isolating a whole community. Do laws exist to help people or to make matters more complicated? It is time we built a community where all are respected.
Sohini Mahapatra

The stigma associated with the queer community is enormous. We are moving forward in terms of technology and artificial intelligence. So, this group's silenced voice should be heard too, and we must learn to to respect queer people as individuals with diverse perspectives on life.
Sajna Hameed

Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India, many queer people remain hesitant to come out of the closet as society still frowns on them. As they grow older, they might reconcile themselves to the way providence has dealt with them, yearning for social acceptance that might never come.
C.V. Aravind

Measure of greatness

That a gigantic statue of Mahatma Gandhi was installed in front of the British Parliament in 2015 should serve as food for thought for fanatics in this part of the world. ('Gandhi in India's soul'; Mar. 30) What is more difficult to digest is the fact that there are people in India who want a statue of Gandhi's assassin to be erected here.
S. Ramakrishnasayee

Blast from the past

When I was a teenager in the early 1950s, my Arabic teacher taught me Arabi-Tamil from a book from Sri Lanka. ('When South India spoke Arabic'; Mar. 30) Mostly Arabi-Tamil words of Sri Lankan origin, such as *koffee* for coffee, *kocchika* for chilli powder, are still prevalent in my village in Eruvadi in Tirunelveli district.
A. Kaja Nazimudeen

Skilled work

The artisans may not be well educated but they excel by virtue of their hard work and craftsmanship. ('Silver for the goddess'; Mar. 30) The government should help these artisans blend their traditional skills with technology, for only those who evolve with the times will be able to thrive and flourish.
S. Raghavan

Join the queue

The qualifications, attitude and aptitude prescribed by G. Sampath for someone to be branded and treated as VVIP in India are apt. ('VVIP culture is Indian culture'; Mar. 30) Moreover, the reasons quoted by the satirist as to why Indians long to become VVIPs are exemplary.
Tharcius S. Fernando

Helping hands

The initiative of Vivek Sharma and Sweta, in the face of their agony, must be appreciated. ('Vivek Sharma and the human condition'; Mar. 30) There are many such people serving the needy in our society but they remain unrecognised. The government must encourage and support them.
N.R. Ramachandran

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Scene shifts to biopics
They shape an understanding of the past, but can also distort it, perpetuating harmful myths and biases
Darsheel Erish Nair

What a surprise!
The essence of a surprise is the degree of delectation, disbelief, dismay or depression it brings in its wake
George Netto

Swinging in the moonlight
Even adults like to have a go at the swing, as playfulness is not reserved for children alone
J. Clement Selvaraj

Debilitating rage
Anger is natural, but frequent anger is unhealthy
Sivamani Vasudevan

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Growing stronger (Clockwise from left) *Kaavad; Landscape with Flying Figure* from *Worlds Within Worlds*; Kiran Nadar; *sarangi* maestro Murad Ali Khan at KNMA's *Legacy* series; Aditi Jaitly; and Roobina Karode. (KNMA, INNEE SINGH)

KNMA AT 15: A MUSEUM IN MOTION

Despite the absence of a building, the private museum has gone from 500 works to over 15,000, expanded its scope beyond just exhibitions to theatre and more

Nidhi Gupta

Weeks before she set a new record for Indian art by buying a lost M.F. Husain painting called *Gram Yatra* in a Christie's sale for ₹119 crore, Kiran Nadar was sitting in the conference room of her museum's Saket outpost, musing about how her art collecting style had grown. "When I'm collecting an artist, I try to make it in-depth," she said with a smile. "Be it Husain or Souza or Raza, if I had 10 works then, I have 50-100 works now."

It was the opening day of the major retrospective on the poet-painter-critic Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh, and the museum was abuzz with activity – getting louder as the artist himself stepped in. Of the over 100 works being shown as part of *Worlds Within Worlds*, several are borrowed but a significant chunk come from Nadar's personal collection, including *Sleepless City*, which was the first work she acquired, and *Kaavad*, the most prominent of his works.

"The way he draws intimacy in rooms, the way he brings out the colours of nature always takes me by surprise," she had said earlier with a smile, herself resplendent in a sapphire blue suit. Now she added: "I had no art background, so this is all self-learnt. My interests have become more varied. For someone who started with 500 works and has grown that into over 15,000 in the last 10-12 years, this is a huge leap."

It's a busy season of big moves for the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, now in its 15th year. Just days earlier, the second edition of their *Legacy* series – a series dedicated to honouring enduring Indian families in the performing arts – took off at the Triveni Kala Sangam in Delhi with acclaimed *sarangi* maestro Murad Ali Khan from the Moradabad Gharana in concert and conversation with author-composer Anish Pradhan. This was preceded by the first ever KNMA Theatre Festival at Sunder Nursery, where 13 plays explored the idea of the "power of vulnerability", including folk ritualistic performances such as *Beesu Kamsale* and a contemporary reimagination of *The Arabian Nights*. And not too far away now is the launch of the piece de resistance in KNMA's long storied journey – the new museum designed by Ghanaian-British architect Sir David Adjaye – finally a physical home to call their own.

Fluidity and social capital

"We started in Noida in 2010, with a show called *Open Doors*," recalled Nadar. "My collection wasn't especially huge but I knew I wanted to open a museum. We quickly realised that Noida was the wrong place for footfalls. In 2011, we opened KNMA in Saket in a mall, because we thought we'd get the footfalls that came to the mall, but unfortunately this mall never got populated the way it was expected. We had to work to build that up."

A fledgling team including Nadar, museum curator Roobina Karode and a few others did this through a rigorous educational programme featuring walks, talks and interactive workshops to create an appreciation and love for art, in its consumption and creation. Even as they courted school administrators (who initially were not interested and are now on a three-month waiting list), they were putting up major solo shows and retrospectives on key but under represented Indian and South Asian artists, often also showing them at prestigious international galleries and museums – Nasreen Mohamedi at the Met Breuer New York, Jayashree Chakravarty at Musee Guimet Paris, and Bhupen Khakhar at Tate Modern London.

The social capital that KNMA has gathered in these 15 years is despite, or perhaps because of, the absence of a building – and thus the absence of a definition or mould in which to function. "We wanted to build the collection, build the team, build the audience, all at the same time," Karode said. "We looked at themes, time, groups, movements. We looked at art history as it unfolded in this country and beyond. We were interested in our neighbours, the shared histories with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. So I think that became extremely important to understanding this vision and defining it."

Competing with malls, embracing tech

India's art landscape is flourishing, no doubt, with a bevy of new fairs and biennales, galleries and artists working with diverse media, and art acquisition being seen as a top passion asset. And while a museum's goal is not the same as any of these, there are frequent worrying reports that show that footfall in museums the world over is declining, leading to them shutting down.

"There's so much that is vying for people's attention," said Aditi Jaitly, senior curator of performing arts. "We compete with malls, with the phones in people's hands. That's the reality of the world; that's the challenge set to us. And this idea of museums as dusty places with long corridors and dimly lit works where you're supposed to read some long wall of text and be 'educated' – it doesn't have to be like that." How, then, can a 21st century museum stay relevant and be the fulcrum of culture that it wants to be?

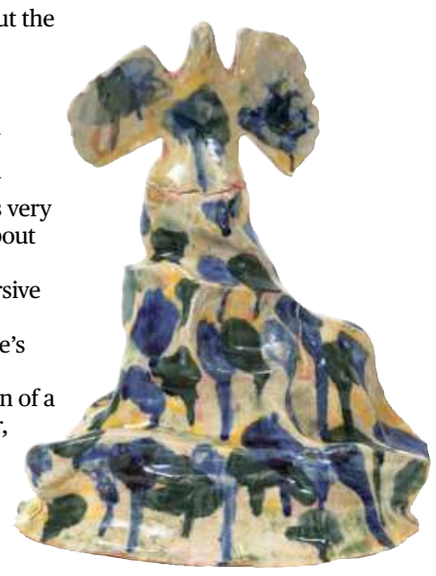
Embracing technology is one answer, according to Jaitly, who was particularly taken with an installation of oil pipes at the National Museum of Qatar at Doha on a recent visit. "If I have a performance going on, I can project something on a screen, which is about an instrument, with an incredible story of how it's made or how somebody learns to play it, and somebody can touch a screen and look at that. or use a QR code, or pick up headphones and hear two minutes of the artist talking about the challenges of that particular production or piece of music."

Karode also finds the rise of theme-based museums – from a partition museum to a museum dedicated to automobiles – very interesting. "Art and creativity is very elastic," she said, when asked about delving into emerging genres of Indian art such as digital, immersive and I-pop. "There is a need for divergence and sometimes, there's also a need to be deviant."

All the same, the core function of a museum, and the role of curator, does stay the same. "I felt that there is a huge backlog in our own country where we have not given enough recognition to our artists," she added. "We have to write our history. We have to write about our artists' journeys. We have to bring that into the consciousness of people, of the public, and we have to work harder and harder on this because this is a terrain that has not been explored so well."

In this background, the new KNMA will emerge, with galleries for the permanent collection, and a cultural centre featuring two auditoriums, one large, one black box-like. "Our miniature collection has more than 1,000 works now, and we'll have two shows of miniatures at the opening," said Nadar. "But really, the task at hand is too large and more private enterprise is required. What Sunil Kant Munjal has started with Serendipity in Goa is enormous and we are looking forward to the Brij. What they are doing is a little different. They don't have a very large art collection but he is a very devoted person. I think we will be an example; we will answer a lot of people on what Indian art is."

The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, writing on culture, lifestyle and technology.



Jenjum Gadi's pichwai moment

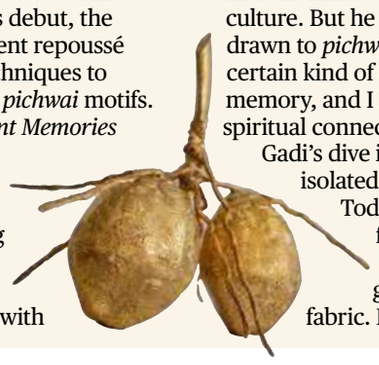
14 brass sculptures blending personal memories with spiritual symbols make up the fashion designer's newest art exploration

Arunima Mazumdar

Sculptures from *Transcended Memories*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Last September, fashion designer Jenjum Gadi briefly stepped away from clothes. He dipped into an alternate creative outlet instead – that of sculpture. He took inspiration from his mother's garden back home in Arunachal Pradesh for *Apase*, an exhibition featuring brass fruits and vegetables. With its resounding success, Gadi secured a space for himself in the world of art. And now, he's building his reputation with another exhibit, titled *Transcended Memories*. An extension of his debut, the show uses ancient repoussé and chasing techniques to create intricate *pichwai* motifs.

"*Transcendent Memories* continues to reflect on my childhood," he says, explaining how they are expressions of his connection with nature. When he came to Delhi to study, he was exposed to different kinds of art and culture. But he was most drawn to *pichwai*. "It evoked a certain kind of emotion and memory, and I had an instant spiritual connection."



Gadi's dive into art isn't an isolated happenstance. Today, several fashion designers are going beyond fabric. Earlier this year, Tarun Tahiliani showed *The Tree of Life* – a series of eight painted tapestries at the India Art Fair. Last October, David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore lent the walls of their flagship store to exhibit 18 canvases by Mangala Bai Marawi's Baiga body art.

Read the full story on magazine.thehindu.com

The independent writer is Delhi-based.