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Three years ago, a video of a little girl – frock flying, helmet locked in to control unruly locks, knee guards and protective gear in place – went viral. Five-year-old Janaki Anand, on a skateboard as big as her, wouldn't know; she was busy shredding the stairs and doing other tricks, watched on by curious onlookers and her proud parents.

It wasn't just her skill that was noticed back then. Skateboarding, a sport so alien in India that most people think of it as a public nuisance, has been having a moment ever since its debut as a competitive sport at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. It made many Indians sit up and take note of the newest medal possibility, and since then, an increasing number of youngsters have picked up the board-on-wheels, aided by a developing infrastructure and growing recognition for the sport. Anand, meanwhile, has gone from girl wonder to multiple-times national champion, and is finding more skate-buddies her age.

"Janaki has known about skating ever since she was little. We were in Dubai back then and I used to go around on a skateboard; it is a very common thing to do there. My elder son Rehan too does it, so Janaki has always seen a board at our home. It was two years ago, when we decided to return, that she became known as the youngest skateboarder in India," says her father Anand Thampi from Kollam, Kerala.

A different lifestyle
Skateboarding, for a lot of people, is a quintessential American sport.



ROAD TO SKATEBOARDING GLORY

It has changed lives, empowered young girls, been the subject of a Netflix film, and is now drawing attention thanks to the Olympics. But for Indian skateboarders nursing medal hopes, the dearth of government support is the biggest stumbling block

Time to play (Clockwise from below) Gautham Kamath (extreme left) with youngsters at The Cave skatepark in Bengaluru; the Skateboarding In Chennai crew; a young skateboarder in Bengaluru; Shashwat Sunil of Mandi Monkeys in Delhi; and National Games gold medallist Shraddha Gaikwad in Pune.
(ANKIT KOTIAN, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, JOHAN SATHYADAS & SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)



Top skateparks in India

● **Play Arena, Bengaluru:** India's first commercial skatepark set up way back in 2012, it is the Mecca of Indian skateboarding. Hosts a wide array of obstacles, deep skating bowls, mini ramps and requires mandatory protection. Entry: ₹300 per hour

● **Baba Saheb Ambedkar Skate Park, Pune:** A massive bowl in the middle of the city, this is one of the few skateparks built and maintained by the municipal corporation. Fewer varieties of obstacles, but a large space to cater to crowds. Entry: ₹20 per day

● **Miramar Youth Hostel, Panjim:** Developed by SkateLife Goa and funded by VANS India. Has a flatground, several quarter pipes, ledges and movable obstacles. Free, and often crowded with locals on boards sharing space with rollerskaters.

● **Delhi Skateboarding Academy (DSA) and Backyard Skatepark, Delhi:** The two venues are a kilometre apart, providing the option of training indoors or outdoors. DSA is Delhi's first indoor skating park, built in 2016 by Surjeet Kumar — complete with ramps, accessories and splashes of graffiti, qualified instructors and wooden training areas. Backyard Skatepark was built by Anil Dhankar in 2021 and is the only concrete skatepark in the city, with rails, ramps, bowl and ledges.

● **Holystoked's The Cave, Bengaluru:** Developed as a collaboration between Holystoked skate shop and adidas in 2016, this is one of the biggest skateparks in India. It's an open cultural arena and has skateboarders sharing space with musicians, break dancers, slackliners and graffiti artists. Has a fully stocked pro shop and training sessions every day. Entry: ₹100



CATCH THE ACTION AT THE PARIS OLYMPICS ON JULY 27, 28 AND AUGUST 6, 7 VENUE: PLACE DE LA CONCORDE

More than a sport, it is a lifestyle, with its own vocabulary for the various tricks performed.

Shredding, for instance, is the act of skating down surfaces like stairs, using parts of the board other than the wheels, and requires tremendous skill.

Mumbai-based Urmila Pabale, who began skateboarding about three-and-a-half years ago, only knew of it as something Peter Parker did. It was very Hollywood. "I have been roller-skating since I was five and have always been into sports and the outdoors, but even for me it was a surreal experience to see people on skateboards in India for the first time. It was just after the lockdown, I was 16, and had heard of a newly-built skate park in Navi Mumbai, near my home. I went there and just stared – this was something I had only seen in

the *Spiderman* movies," says the final-year communications student of Khalsa College.

There is no denying the cool quotient of the activity that attracts most children to it in the first place. Sareena Coutinho, also from Mumbai, and at 20 a veteran of the women's skateboarding community, admits she started out for a lark. Pune's Shraddha Gaikwad, 18, who won gold at the 2022 National Games held in Gujarat – the only time skateboarding featured in the competition; it was dropped in the Goa edition last year and its fate remains uncertain this year – picked it up by chance, getting on a spare board while delivering lunch to her security guard father who worked at a sporting goods store. They all agree that once boarded, it is difficult to get off the wooden plank.

Meet the OGs

Most skaters in India are students – either in school or college, with the average age being 20-22 years – and while it is not easy to manage studies with skateboarding, the thrill of it makes it all worthwhile. And then there is Bengaluru-based Gautham Kamath, who, at 36, is the grand old man of Indian skateboarding but more importantly, the founder of Jugaad, the first and biggest open skateboarding competition in the country, founded in 2016.

Beginning with just a handful of newbies, the event has grown to feature more than 500 entries from places as far off as Nepal and the Maldives. For most skateboarders in the country, this

is often their first 'skate jam' with like-minded individuals. From Gaikwad to Coutinho to Pabale, nearly every Indian skateboarder has cut their teeth at Jugaad.

"To become a skateboarder, you need a certain calibre – you basically need to have a rebellious streak. You must choose to do it, you cannot be pushed or talked into it. I have been teaching for almost 10 years now, to all types and ages of people. It is relatively new; it is still more of a lifestyle thing than a serious sport and not everyone's cup of tea. It is not easy to make a living from it. I am a rarity in that sense," says Kamath, who quit his job with a smartphone company to get into

boarding full-time.

Kamath has seen the sport come up from ground zero, having grown with it himself – from his first board being a gift from German skater Arne Hillers in 2012 to becoming the first-ever official Indian entry at an international event, the Chuncheon World Leisure Extreme Sports Championship in 2016, to organising Jugaad, now in its ninth edition, all on his own. "It is difficult – it takes a toll, you get injured a lot, you fall, but have to get up and keep trying. You need to be stubborn. But it also helps develop your overall personality – it gives you the confidence to approach life, and never give up," he says.

In Delhi, Surjeet Kumar had his own lofty ambitions – to make the city a skateboarding hub.

CONTINUED ON
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Radhika Santhanam

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Prayaag Akbar's slim new novel, *Mother India* (HarperCollins), is a worm's-eye view of contemporary India. Through the lives of his two protagonists – a right-wing content creator called Mayank and a salesgirl, Nisha – Akbar explores some of the prevailing concerns of our political and social landscape: fake news, misuse of technology, extreme weather events, and the dire consequences of them all. This is a story of fiction written against the backdrop of familiar facts. Akbar's previous award-winning novel, *Leila*, was converted into a Netflix series, directed by Deepa Mehta. The Goa-based writer, who is a visiting associate professor at Krea University, talks about the book, the changing aspirations of today's youth, and his own worries. Edited excerpts:

Question: What triggered this novel? Was it a specific event?
Answer: There wasn't a specific event. I was interested in writing about how two young people would negotiate this new world, this new economy that we live in. How does a young person who wants to make it big today, who has hopes and aspirations, as all young people do across economic backgrounds, negotiate the political, economic, and cultural landscape? I know technology plays a big part in this. Young people today, especially the age group that I write about, 21-22-year-olds, have grown up in the world of technology and social media. That was my starting point.

I also teach. I get to interact with youngsters who are very intelligent, well-educated, and hardworking. They are very well-tuned into the world of technology. But I also see how it has affected their mental health. They are more resilient in some ways and less so in some other ways. I am very impressed by how knowledgeable they are and I see that as a function of growing up in the age of the Internet. If you're really interested in something, you can go find out more about it. Many of my students have deep pockets of knowledge in something they are really interested in. We didn't have that in my growing up years.

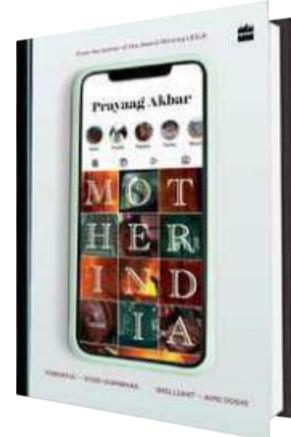
Q: The characters in the novel are aspirational in varying degrees. They can go to any lengths to taste success. Do you think the idea of aspiration has changed significantly in today's India?

A: That's an interesting question in the light of the public spectacle of the recent Ambani wedding. Would this have been possible about 15 years ago? Doesn't this signify a massive shift in our cultural values and what we consider acceptable? India is still a desperately poor country. They (Ambanis) spent about

IN CONVERSATION

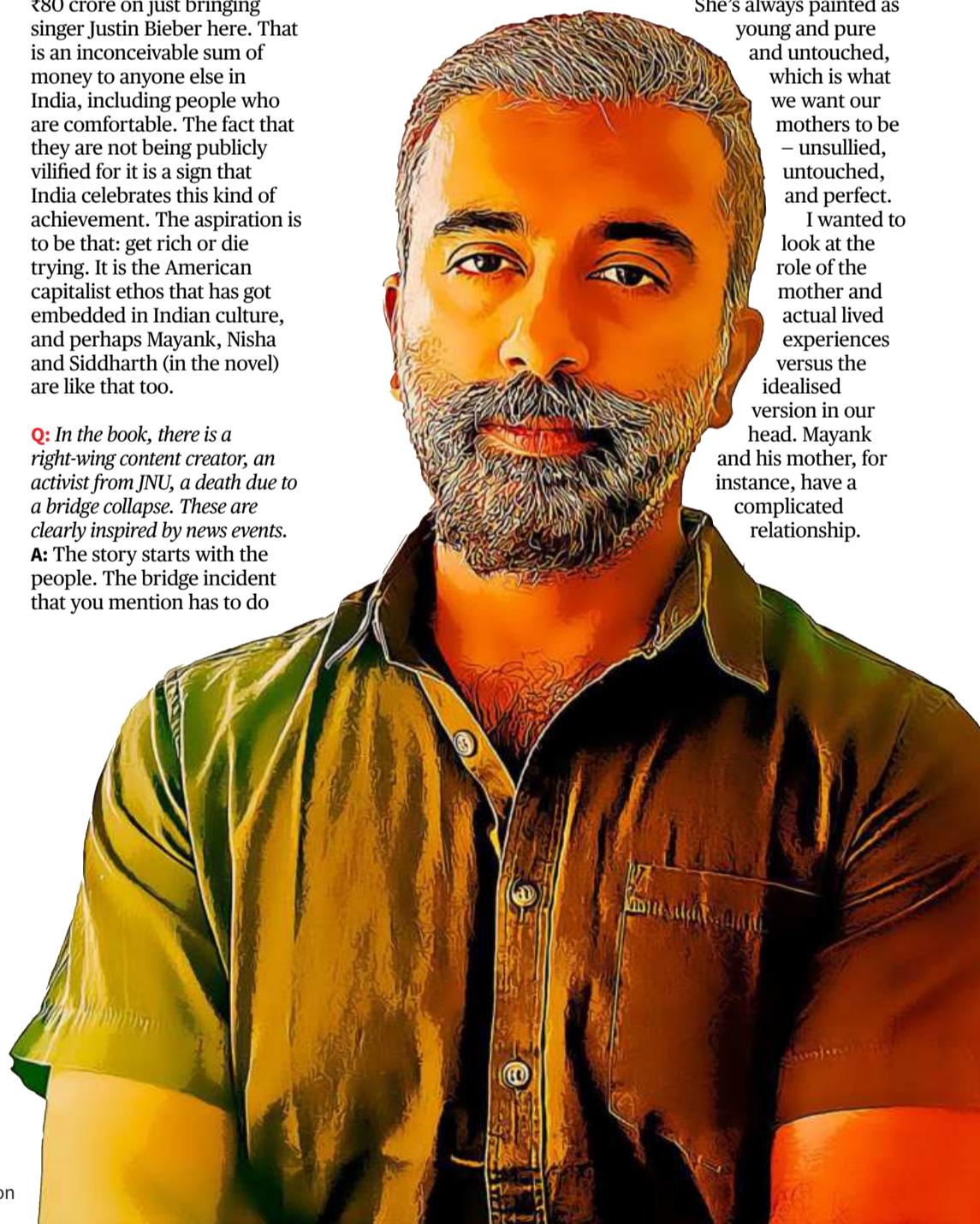
WHY PRAYAAG AKBAR IS LESS ANGRY AND MORE WORRIED NOW

The author on the rise of right wing-nationalism and the changing aspirations of contemporary India, both of which find place in his new book, *Mother India*



₹80 crore on just bringing singer Justin Bieber here. That is an inconceivable sum of money to anyone else in India, including people who are comfortable. The fact that they are not being publicly vilified for it is a sign that India celebrates this kind of achievement. The aspiration is to be that: get rich or die trying. It is the American capitalist ethos that has got embedded in Indian culture, and perhaps Mayank, Nisha and Siddharth (in the novel) are like that too.

Q: In the book, there is a right-wing content creator, an activist from JNU, a death due to a bridge collapse. These are clearly inspired by news events.
A: The story starts with the people. The bridge incident that you mention has to do



bridge incident into his story. But you can't just find news items and string them together. I focus on my characters and see what is happening to them.

Q: Soon after Leila, you had said in an interview that there were some things that really angered you over the years. Are you still angry about things around you?

A: I think I have matured. I don't feel as angry about the world as I did then. I have a son and that builds a level of contentment. Now, it's more worry about the future, about what my son who carries a Muslim name like me will face in the future if right wing-nationalism keeps going on...

Q: Tell us a little about the importance of mothers in the book and the symbol of Mother India.

A: In the book, there is Mother India, there is the activist's mother, Mayank's mother, even the dog's mother, which is a different kind of motherhood. There are different kinds of mothers in the world. There are no right and wrong approaches to motherhood. We place tremendous burdens on our mothers. They occupy an outsized role in our imagination: the giver of life, the benefactor, the personal protector of happiness, the provider of sustenance. And they never stop playing these roles. It is an idealisation.

I wanted to compare that with the idealisation of the Mother India symbol. Mother India is a very powerful and positive symbol of our nationalism even if it is sometimes utilised by political people as an agent of division. It is a powerful symbol that dates to our anti-colonial struggle. And even that symbol idealises the mother.

She's always painted as young and pure and untouched, which is what we want our mothers to be – unsullied, untouched, and perfect.

I wanted to look at the role of the mother and actual lived experiences versus the idealised version in our head. Mayank and his mother, for instance, have a complicated relationship.

In her continuing effort to investigate the female experience, the author creates an anti-novel that, sadly, seems stuck in the man-woman binary

The baffling case of Rachel Cusk

Pranavi Sharma

In a moving scene from the aboriginal chapter 'The Stuntman' in Rachel Cusk's recent book, *Parade*, the female narrator is 'hit forcibly in the head' by a strange woman (a semi-autobiographical element), which the narrator later interprets as an artistic gesture. She realises after the incident that she felt as though she had been killed but remained alive. This death-in-life was linked to her experiences as a woman, which she had assigned to an alternate self, a stuntman, who absorbed the risks. She goes on to add: 'but the violence and the unexpectedness of the incident in the street had caught my stuntman unawares'.

Parade, divided into four parts – 'The Stuntman', 'The Midwife', 'The Diver' and 'The Spy' – intertwines the lives of four distinct artists, all of them named G, with the life of the woman narrator and her husband. The predicament faced by the female artist calls to mind Margaret Atwood, who, in one of her poems, writes: *A child is not a poem, A poem is not a child*.

Women often find themselves constrained by their femininity, juggling roles as mother, wife, woman, artist – in that exact sequence, never reversed. Cusk proposes three potent (if not radical) ideas in the book: the transient nature of femininity, comparing it to the eternal recurrence of violence, motherhood, not just its thematic concerns but also scrutinising how we write about it, and questioning how women can be immortalised in stone when their existence is defined by repetition without permanence.

Defying convention

The renowned author's recent literary journey, transitioning from novel-writing to memoir (*Aftermath* and *A Life's Work*), and back to novels with the *Outline* trilogy, is particularly interesting as she tries to find her artistic language. Cusk faced the challenge of integrating her



Author Rachel Cusk
(GETTY IMAGES)

female experiences into her work and felt compelled to address them despite the limitations of traditional novel forms. *Parade* furthers her interrogation by depicting the struggles female artists face in balancing personal responsibilities and creative pursuits, in stark contrast to men who often prioritise art over family. The book achieves this through an examination of artistic biographies, traditionally dominated by male creators as the ultimate authorities. *Parade* obliquely introduces and emphasises the concept of the female creator who pushes against established norms.

In a review of *Parade* in the *New York Magazine*, journalist Andrea Long Chu accuses Cusk of being a



Parade
Rachel Cusk
Faber & Faber
₹650

gender fundamentalist and claims her works have 'characters who secretly want to be men'. She reduces Cusk's work to a case of penis envy. However, there is something more complex at play here.

Cusk, in a recent discussion of her book, shared how the process of writing *Parade* was particularly challenging, involving doubts about language and narrative structures. She became interested in the non-narrative aspects of artistic creation. Is *Parade*, then, a giving in to convention or working your way from the inside? It's a question that needs more deliberation.

I understand Cusk's case through two third-wave feminists – Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Cixous, in her essay 'The Laugh of the

Medusa', writes, 'Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.' Irigaray, warning against gender fundamentalism, writes in 'This Sex Which Is Not One': 'By speaking out the non-place of sexual difference, woman escapes from the prison-house where language, always in the singular, tries to enclose her.' Cusk seems to be caught between these two aphorisms and is painstakingly stuck in the man-woman binary.

The male perspective

The narrative voice continually shifts in the novel, with Cusk gradually losing belief in the 'I' and resorting to 'we', as if responding to an obligation to encompass all of human experience, which again, is counterproductive and aligns with Long Chu's criticism.

The novel, therefore, ultimately possesses a mythic quality, manifested in Cusk denying proper names to the artists. Similar to how in mythology or a biblical story, a figure like Job stands for all of mankind, Cusk's characters too are archetypal male and female.

Readers are confronted with the idea of how artistic creation – whether in visual arts or literature – is often shaped by male perspectives. At one point in the novel, a woman gazes at the male artist G's painting and declares, 'I want to write upside down.'

'...because she felt that this reality that G had so brilliantly elucidated, identical to its companion reality in every particular but for the complete inversion of its moral force, was the closest thing she knew to the mystery and tragedy of her own sex... G was not the first male artist to have described women better than women seemed able to describe themselves.'

The reviewer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.



Scan the QR code to listen to author Tim Walker discuss his historical novel, *The Prisoner of Bhopal*, based on the real events of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy.



Scan the QR code to watch Prayaag Akbar in conversation on magazine.thehindu.com

BROWSER

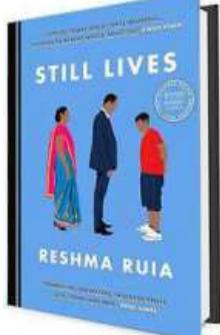
Still Lives

Reshma Ruia

Speaking Tiger

₹499

The novel follows the life of P.K. Malik as he leaves Bombay in search of business opportunities and a new life and settles in Manchester. Years later, he has fallen out of love with life and feels lost. At 55, can he start over, and is it worth the pain and trouble?



The Girl With The Seven Lives

Vikas Swarup

₹499

When a 25-year-old woman is kidnapped and held hostage, she is told the only way out is to reveal the truth about her own life and deceptions. The novel is a rollercoaster of emotions, secrets and survival against impossible odds.

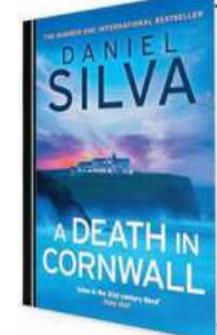


A Death in Cornwall

Daniel Silva

₹499

From a diabolical serial killer terrorising the Cornish countryside to a stolen Picasso painting, the book travels through counties and islands following art restorer and legendary spy Gabriel Allon. This wild mystery is a tale of murder and corrupt power.



Spotlight on translators

The NIF translation fellowships 2024-25 by the New India Foundation are aimed at encouraging translations from non-fiction works across 10 Indian languages. The second round of awardees are: in Gujarati, Prabhudas Gandhi's *The Dawn of Life*, translated by Hemang Ashwinkumar; in Hindi, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's *Sanskriti Ke Chaar Adhyaya*, translated by Achyut Chetan; in Tamil, Singaravelar's *Swaraj to Whom?*, translated by Vilasini Ramani; and in Urdu, Qazi Abdul Ghaffar's *Portrait of the West*, translated by Matthew Reecck. Each recipient gets a stipend of ₹6 lakh for a period of six months.



INTERVIEW



From past to present
(Clockwise from top) The Sudarshan Setu project in Gujarat; Muslim women light candles on the anniversary of the Godhra riots, in Ahmedabad; Prime Minister Narendra Modi with party leaders in Varanasi; Prof. Christophe Jaffrelot; and survivors look at photographs of the Godhra victims. (ANI, PTI, REUTERS, GETTY IMAGES AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Ziya Us Salam

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When Christophe Jaffrelot, French political scientist and Indologist, submitted the manuscript of his new book, *Gujarat Under Modi*, in 2013, he was asked to delete so many passages he decided not to go ahead with it. He had done intense ground research, and held on to the book, replete with insights into the rise of Narendra Modi from Gujarat to New Delhi, till it could reach readers in 2024. "Gujarat was the blueprint for post-2014 India," he says in an interview with *The Hindu*. Edited excerpts:

Question: You call '*Gujarat Under Modi*' a "political biography of an Indian state through the personality and actions of its most resilient ruler." Is resilience the word to describe Modi today?

Answer: I used this word to remain on a purely descriptive mode but the book makes it clear that 'resilience' is only one of his characteristics.

And it is not unique: Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi have been even more resilient! If we look for more qualities, we would use other adjectives, charismatic, communal, populist, authoritarian, etc.

Q: He came to power with the promise of bringing the Gujarat model to Delhi. How far has he succeeded? And what has India gained from it?

A: He did, but the Gujarat model is not what people think it is. Modi has been able to scale up the politics and policies he had initiated in Gujarat to the national level: this is what the book is about; hence the subtitle [in some editions], 'Laboratory of today's India'.

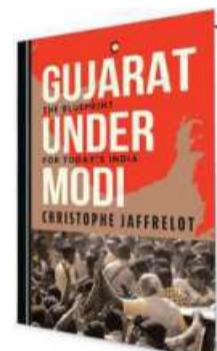
'GUJARAT WAS THE LABORATORY FOR TODAY'S INDIA'

Christophe Jaffrelot on how Narendra Modi scaled up the politics and policies he initiated in Gujarat to the national level

The four mainstays of his strategy in Gujarat have remained the same: communal polarisation, the capture of institutions (including the police and the judiciary), the making of a new kind of crony capitalism conducive to jobless growth as well as inequalities and, of course, Modivita, a specific kind of high-tech communication-based national populism. This is the Gujarat model that has been 'nationalised' after 2014.

Q: You talk of communal polarisation as Modi's primary weapon in Gujarat 2002. By 2024, hasn't polarisation given way to open hatred towards India's minorities?

A: Polarisation is a political strategy. Certainly, attacks on minorities rely on emotions – fear and hatred are key concepts here. But they are not an end in



Gujarat Under Modi: The Blueprint for Today's India
Christophe Jaffrelot
Westland Books
₹899



themselves: they are instrumentalised for creating a majoritarian Hindu vote bank. That was obvious in 2002 when communal violence was intended to prepare the ground for an electoral wave – this is why Modi dissolved the Assembly and insisted on holding elections in spite of the large number of people who had fled their

village or their neighbourhood. And it worked. Similarly, during the 2024 election campaign, what was the objective of the stigmatisation of the minorities? It was to exacerbate fear and anger for consolidating the Hindu vote. If the BJP leaders promote hatred, it is not only because they hate the minorities, it's also because disseminating hatred helps them to polarise the electorate. This pattern replicates those of the racists in the West.

Q: In the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the individual is secondary to the organisation. How was Modi able to turn it on its head while apparently imbibing the RSS emphasis on a hierarchy?

A: Modi, a pure product of the RSS, started to have an uneasy relation with the organisation soon after the 2002 elections. He tried to emancipate himself from the Sangh, and started to relate directly to the people, the populist way – hence his

use of the social media, PR firms, spin doctors like Prashant Kishor, etc.; he did not report to the Prant Pracharak but built a parallel power structure instead and, even more importantly, a personality cult. Yes, this modus operandi stood in contrast with the ethos of RSS, an organisation where personalities had to disappear, to merge in the organisation. But what could the RSS leaders do: Modi said aloud what they only dared to whisper, he was fully in tune with their agenda, he was very popular among the swayamsevaks and who else could win the elections in the BJP?

Q: Talking of his economic policies, how do you look at Modi's move away from say, health and education, to development of ports, roads and airports?

A: Two chapters deal with political economy issues precisely because his policies in this domain should not slip under the radar. The first one analyses the way he related to big business. While Gujarat was well known for its entrepreneurs, Modi promoted mega projects at the expense of small and medium enterprises. A new nexus took shape, formed by him and half a dozen of cronies, who got land at a low price, 0.1% interest rate loans and tax free as well as labour laws free-SEZs in exchange for the funding of expensive election campaigns. I demonstrate that the promotion of mega projects (including infrastructure like roads and energy production) was conducive to jobless growth because of their capital-intensive character. Despite its high per capita revenue, Gujarat under Modi (and since then) has not invested in education, health and anti-poverty schemes. Hence, inequalities deepened, fostered by pro-rich policies.



State of the nation

Two writers on the clear and present danger to the idea of India

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In recent weeks, two books throbbing with immediacy have caught the headlines. In their distinct ways, writers Siddhartha Deb and Radha Kumar paint with words the stark reality of the times, marked by intolerance, violence, bigotry, and glorified falsehoods. Both Deb, author of *Twilight Prisoners: The Rise of the Hindu Right and the Decline of India*, and Kumar, in *The Republic Relearnt*, alert readers to the

politics of one nation, one religion, one leader; and of the possibility of an elected autocracy. Their work travels from Kashmir to Assam, Gujarat to Odisha, with a reminder that the threat to the idea of India is persistent and present.

Broad sweep
Deb's is a stirring saga, a recounting of known challenges which needs reiteration. Whether he talks of Gujarat or Ayodhya; Assam and the National Register of Citizens; 1% Indians cornering over 50% of wealth; challenges of being

activist-journalist Gauri Lankesh – the picture he conveys is of a nation that has lost its moral compass, desperate to "arrive" on the global stage, by going to the extent of forgetting its own history. Deb writes how he discovered the erasure in progress. "... on Google Maps, I looked for the city of Allahabad, one of the oldest and most significant cities in Uttar Pradesh. It wasn't there. How was it possible that a city of 1.8 million people could have ceased to exist

Twilight Prisoners: The Rise of the Hindu Right and the Decline of India
Siddhartha Deb
Context/
Westland Books
₹599

without my hearing a word about it?" Allahabad, founded by the Mughal emperor Akbar, had been renamed Prayagraj, and Google made it official. Allahabad wasn't the only city to face such a fate. Mughalsarai and others too were lost as the BJP government adopted a delete-your-past policy on history.

Deb's writing conveys the impression of a river in spate sweeping away all that comes in its way. A New York-based writer, Deb goes wherever controversies

beckon. From the banks of the Sarayu, he writes of the Prime Minister of India carrying "out a ceremony inaugurating the construction of the (Ram) temple" even as coronavirus raged in August 2020. Then without a warning, he asks, "Had a great Hindu temple to Ram ever previously existed here?" His exploration leads him to the Supreme Court's words in its Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi verdict where the court admitted, "There is no specific finding that the underlying structure was a temple dedicated to Lord Ram." Yet, "on the basis of documentary and oral evidence", it ordered "the site to be handed over for the building of the temple." Deb's work is a cry of anguish for India.

Kumar, on the other hand, expresses her fears gently, letting facts do the talking, building her narrative layer upon layer. In the chapter, 'India's Weimar Moment', she writes that during Manmohan Singh's decade, 2004 to 2014, India's economy grew by "roughly 7.8% per year" and "275 million people were lifted out of poverty." She says that after a first-term of broadly jobless growth, over 17 million new formal-sector jobs were created in his second term.

Love jihad and other 'threats'
Of Modi's rise in 2014, Kumar analyses: "The Modi administration came to power when chauvinist administrations were emerging or had emerged across the world. Three perceived threats were

drummed up against Muslims. The first was the threat of Islamist terrorism, which Indians had grown to revile following a series of Pakistan-backed attacks from 1990. A key plank of Modi's campaign in both [the] 2014 and 2019 general elections was to associate Indian Muslims with Pakistan, labelling the Muslim community 'anti-national' by innuendo... The second perceived threat related to cow slaughter. Between 2015 and 2017, sixty-three incidents of cow-related lynchings were reported... The third perceived threat was 'love jihad', a term Hindu chauvinists applied to marriage between Muslim men and Hindu women. Coined in 2009, the term was assiduously promoted during the BJP campaign."

Kumar, however, believes all is not lost, and says the common Indian will call a halt to all totalitarian tendencies. "Though the conditions for totalitarianism are still incipient, considerable inroads have been made... Even totalitarians could not eradicate individual dissent. There lay hope," she concludes. Deb though alerts readers to the challenges ahead, writing, "The Ram temple in Ayodhya, built with stone from Rajasthan, designed by an architect from Gujarat, and funded by dollars from the diaspora in the West, is only the beginning of an effort to construct a past that never was, in the hope of devising a future from which India's Muslim inhabitants can be erased." Remember Allahabad?

Buddhist, Jain and even folk versions of the Ramayana reached Southeast Asia via sea-faring merchants over 1,500 years ago. This so inspired the local kings that they had them carved on the walls of the grand monuments they built

In Thailand, there is another Ayodhya, known locally as Ayutthaya. It is a ruin now, full of tall pagodas and temples made of brick and stucco, and hundreds of images of the Buddha, many headless. This was the capital of Thai kings for four centuries, before it was sacked by the Burmese in the 18th century.

The Ram of this Ayodhya was the king, addressed as Ramathibodi (Overlord Rama), as the royal name is not to be spoken. We realise the impact of the *Ramayana* in Thai society even today when we learn that there are strict laws preventing people from criticising the royal family. It was public gossip after all that forced Ram to abandon his wife Sita, in the Treta Yuga.

The word 'Thai' means free. Originally the Thai people were the 'Tai' people who migrated from Southern China to Southeast Asia, around a thousand years ago. Incidentally, another group of Tai people migrated to Assam, in India, and were the ancestors of the Ahom kings.

Tai saw their king as a semi-divine figure, like Chinese emperors, connecting heaven and earth. They introduced their very peculiar model of taxation – through labour, working on royal projects, such as building canals and temples and



FROM CULT TO CULTURE

THE OTHER AYODHYA

The story of Ram travelled across the seas, and Thailand's erstwhile capital Ayutthaya is proof of this

palaces. This is how the great temple cities of Southeast Asia were built, a physical manifestation of royal taxes, expressing royal glory.

Ramayana, Ramakien and more

Most kings of Southeast Asia followed the Mandala or the 'circle-of-king' model of governance. This is described in Chanakya's *Artha-shastra*, and Manu's *Dharma-shastra*. Here, a king's influence is not fixed; it expands and contracts depending on their charisma and capability. As he moves out of his capital there are lands where he collects rent from, lands he collects taxes from, lands he collects tribute from. Then come hostile lands of enemies, followed by lands of the enemies of his enemies,

A retelling Thai artists getting ready to take part in Khon, a dance performance that showcases the story of the *Ramayana*, at the Wat Chaiwatthanaram temple in Ayutthaya. (GETTY IMAGES)

and thus his friends – with whom he exchanges gifts, waiting for the right opportunity to plunder the city of their common enemy.

Most of these Mandala kingdoms were part of a trading network, located on the banks of rivers.

Merchant ships sailed up and down the river, along the coast, and across the seas connecting Southeast Asia to China in the east and India in the west. We find such river-bank Mandala kingdoms along Burma's Irrawaddy and Cambodia's Mekong, too. Ayutthaya was located at the confluence of three rivers, which contributed to its mercantile wealth.

These cities were famous for their irrigation systems, vast rice fields and grand temple complexes. They were initially influenced by Pashupata Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, and later, after the 10th century, by a rejuvenated Theravada Buddhism that radiated out of Sri Lanka. Also connecting these circular kingdoms was the epic of Ram, the *Ramayana*, retold by shadow puppeteers and court dancers.

Buddhist, Jain and even folk versions of the *Ramayana* reached Southeast Asia via sea-faring merchants over 1,500 years ago. This so inspired the local kings that they had them carved on the walls of the grand monuments they built, such as the 9th century Prambanan temple on the island of Java, Indonesia, and on the walls of the 12th century Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia.

The Thai version is known as the *Ramakien*. Anyone who watches this performance will notice that while the story is very familiar, it lacks *bhakti* – an emotion that shapes Hinduism today. *Bhakti* rose in South India much later, around the time of the Chola kings, whose imperial ambitions led them to war against the Srivijaya kings of Indonesia. In fact, as per one lore, the founder of Ayutthaya, Uthong, was a Chola soldier who married a Tai princess. Another insists he was Chinese.

The reach of Rama

The Tai kings were influenced by the Buddhism of Burmese kings and the Hinduism of Cambodian kings. So, the Thai polity is a mix of both ideas. Ram of Thailand, as in Cambodia, is a Bodhisattva. The Thai kings sought to be as regal as Ram and so built Ayutthaya to match his royal splendour. Royal court performances of the *Ramayana* reinforced their power, as did the Buddhist pagodas and temples, housing relics of royal family members and religious leaders.

But when this royal city was sacked, its treasures burnt, in 1765, it was history repeating itself. This had happened to their earlier capital of Sukhothai further north, prompting the shift to Ayutthaya. Now, it was time to move further south, where a new city would be established, on the banks of the Chao Phraya river that we now refer to as Bangkok. It is home to kings who continue to be referred to as Rama.

Devdutt Pattanaik
is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.

GOREN BRIDGE

Strange places

Both vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Bridge is played all over the world, and played well. South in today's deal was Hedin Mouritsen, from the Faroe Islands. An understandable slip by the defense gave him a chance and he took full advantage.

East could have defeated the contract by winning the ace of clubs at trick one and giving West a ruff. East's

club spots, however, convinced him that the defence would do at least as well by not winning the first club so he ducked the lead to Mouritsen's king. Mouritsen led the queen of spades, which West had to duck or two clubs would be discarded on dummy's high spades. West also ducked the king of diamonds, but he won the next diamond and shifted to a heart. Mouritsen rose with dummy's ace and led the

NORTH
♦ K J 5 3
♥ A Q J 2
◊ 5
♣ 10 7 6 4

WEST
♠ A 9 7 4 2
♥ 10 7 5
◊ A 8 6 3

EAST
♠ 10 8 6
♥ K 9 6 4 3
◊ J
♣ A J 9 3

SOUTH
♠ Q
♥ 8
◊ K 10 9 7 4 2
♣ K 8 5 2

The bidding:
NORTH EAST SOUTH WEST
1♣ Pass 1♦ Dbl Pass All pass

*Spade fit, shortness in diamonds

Opening lead: Queen of ♣

queen of hearts. East covered with the king and Mouritsen ruffed carefully with his four of diamonds, just to be sure that his plan

would work. Mouritsen cashed the 10 of diamonds and exited with his carefully preserved two of diamonds! West won

with his eight but was helpless to defeat the contract. A heart and dummy would win as South shed a club. South would discard another club on the king of spades and West would be in the same trouble. West led the ace of spades, instead, but South simply discarded a club instead of ruffing. West had to put dummy on lead and Mouritsen discarded two more clubs on dummy's winners. Very well played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Space and beyond!

Berty Ashley

1 Born this day in 1620, Jean Picard was a French astronomer who conducted an arc measurement survey in 1669 by measuring one degree of latitude along the Paris Meridian using triangulation along 13 triangles stretching from Paris to the clocktower of Sourdon. He became the first person to accurately measure what we now know is 51,00,72,000 km². What did he measure?

2 At 02:56 Coordinated Universal Time in 1969, Mare Tranquillitatis (The Sea of Tranquility) became an important part of human history. It is made up of mostly basalt and has a slight bluish tint due to higher metal content and was chosen because it is relatively level. What happened at this place 46 years ago?

3 On July 21, 2011, NASA's 32-year-long Space Shuttle program ended with the landing of Space Shuttle OV-104 on mission STS-135 at NASA's Kennedy Space Center. The 135th and final Space Shuttle mission was to deliver a payload to the International Space Station (ISS). The shuttle was named after a research ship, which itself was named after a mythical lost continent. What was the name of the shuttle?

4 This planet takes 165 Earth years to complete one full orbit around the sun and was discovered by a bunch of astronomers on the night of September 23-24 in 1846, based on



Pushing the boundaries A view of planet Earth from a window of the International Space Station. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

mathematical calculations. Which planet is this?

5 Soviet cosmologist Igor Novikov put forward the existence of a hypothetical object as part of a solution to one of Einstein's field equations. It is a region of spacetime and singularity that cannot be entered from the outside, although energy-matter, light and information can escape from it. A reference to a more famous object that does the exact opposite, by what name are these known?

6 Assembling of the International Space Station involved a lot of mechanical work, such as welding, which would be easy on Earth, but close to impossible in space. In the vacuum of space, it's difficult to control shielding gases or generate

heat using traditional welding methods. In reality, if two surfaces of the same metal are brought close to each other and pressed, there is an exchange of electrons and they get fused. What is the name of this method?

7 The region of space in which a mass' magnetic field dominates is known as its magnetosphere. Earth's field stretches 64,000 kilometres. The largest and strongest field belongs to a planet whose sphere is so big it could engulf the sun. If it was visible it would actually be larger than the moon in our sky. Which planet is this?

8 Lucy is a star in the constellation of Centaurus, which was first thought to be a dim white dwarf but it

subsequently turned out to be incredibly dense, with the mass of the Sun crammed into an object only a third the diameter of Earth. Astronomers were able to study the vibrations of the star and discovered the reason for its extremely dense core, hence naming it 'Lucy'. What had the star's carbon core crystallised into?

9 The time taken for this planet to revolve around the sun (on year on Earth) is only about 88 Earth days long. However, it has a very slow rotation around its own axis, hence each 'day' on this planet is 176 Earth days long. Which planet is this, where a day is twice as long as an year?

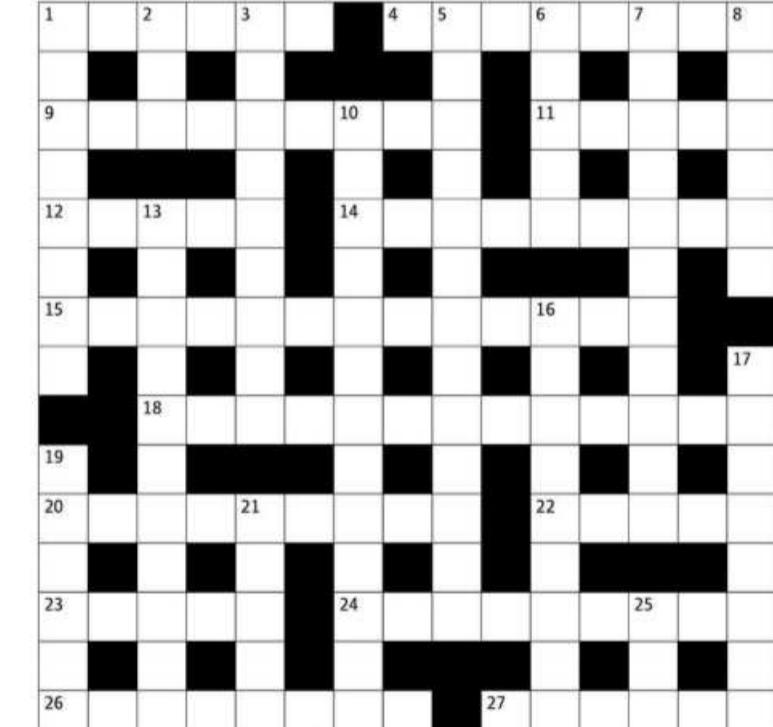
10 In 2009, astronomers were able to do a chemical analysis of the centre of the Milky Way and they discovered that there was a huge cloud of ethyl formate which slowly dispersed across the galaxy. This leads us to understand the prevalent smell and flavour of our solar system. What alliterative combination of a berry and a drink did astronomers use to describe the taste of the Milky Way?

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

@bertyashley

1. Rasberry and rum
2. Neil Armstrong (Lucy in the sky with diamonds)
3. Altria
4. Neptune
5. White holes
6. Cold welding
7. Jupiter
8. Diamond (Lucy in the sky with diamonds)
9. Mercury
10. Raspberry and rum

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3316



Across

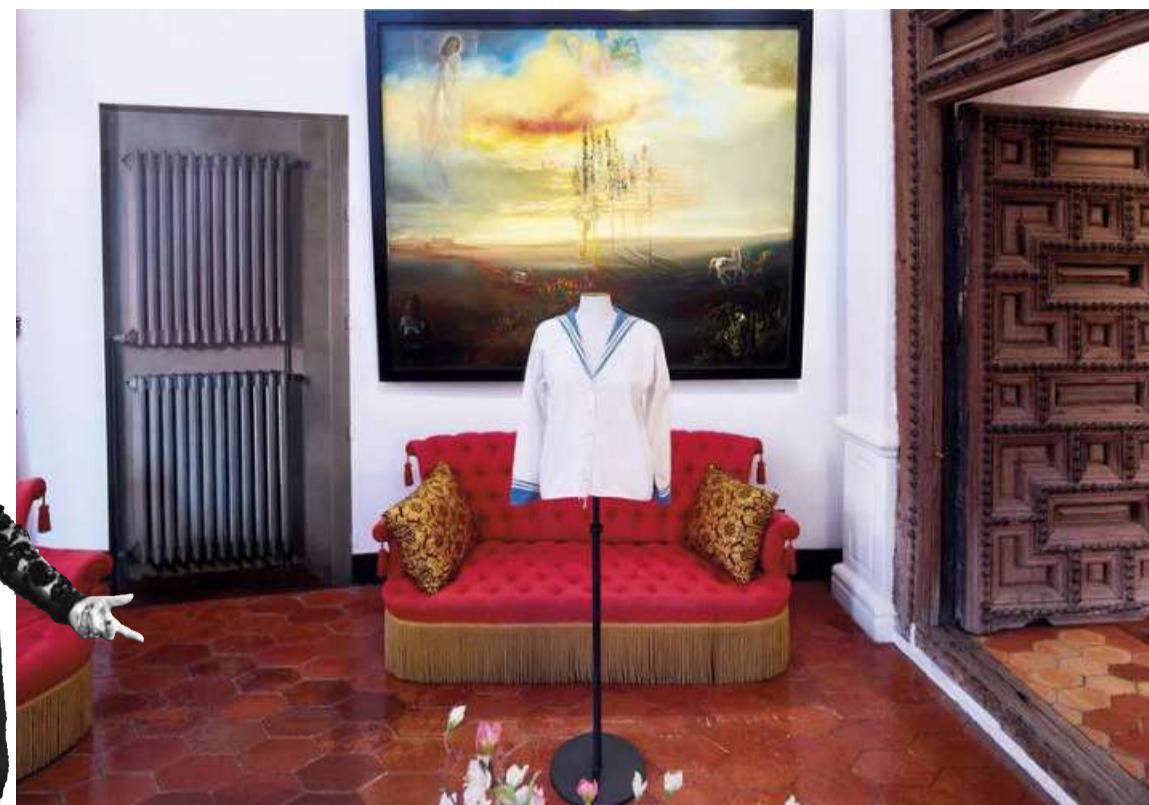
- 1 Pauses in Hamlet upsetting (3-3)
- 4 As these words are like most poetry (8)
- 9 Perhaps Sturgeon's gone east for pescatarian option (4,5)
- 11 Stray found in mountains (5)
- 12 Follow edges of footprint? (5)
- 14 Lovers tussling, having consumed liquor: high-risk actions (4,5)
- 15 Critical memos rewritten; they only cover small areas (13)
- 18 Greatly enjoy percussion overwhelming Sweden's rowdy music (8,5)
- 20 At home with insignificant type, idiot, nothing, no-name (9)
- 22 Send out one's children (5)
- 23 Cut - or pure, you say? (5)
- 24 Stalls accommodating greedyguts, prickly types (9)
- 26 Aversion: staidest upset (8)
- 27 Guides some of gurus herself (6)
- 6 Casts Cockney as gentry (5)
- 7 Young man with gloom lifting snogs wildly in erotic verse (4,2,5)
- 8 Primarily, decidedly ritzy / elegantly styled - suit yourself! (6)
- 10 Film rebooted: I Took The Limes (4,4,2,3)
- 13 Fancy lady revamping sad churches (11)
- 16 Delicious quality: after time, wine going to head (9)
- 17 Rates fools, storing jam with no lid (8)
- 19 Passed over - lamented (6)
- 21 Creep up on a policeman in Limerick (5)
- 25 Everyone? Joke (3)

SOLUTION NO. 3315



Down

- 1 One magazine, then another: you're here for it all! (8)
- 2 It's decrepit? (3)
- 3 Red / green / yellow ingredient topping Italy's pizza's ... topping! (9)
- 5 Article on public land leading to Parky's indisposition (3,6,4)



A worthy rewrite (Clockwise from far left) Gala Dalí; a sailor style shirt from the 1950s displayed at Púbol castle; installation view of *Helmets*; Yoko Ono's Fly; the multimedia artist with a glass hammer; Vivienne Westwood shoes that Naomi Campbell fell over wearing; the supermodel at the V&A; a 1935 Elsa Schiaparelli evening coat from Gala's archival collection; a 1949 Christian Dior outfit; and one of illustrator Carla Fuentes' paintings at La Roca Village. (HORST P. HORST, JORDI BERNADÓ, BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, YOKO ONO, MARCO BAHLER AND ALBA RICART)



GALA DALÍ IN THE COMPANY OF 'DIFFICULT' WOMEN

2024 seems to be the year museums are making room for the narratives of misunderstood women – from Yoko Ono and Naomi Campbell, to Salvador Dalí's wife and muse

Akanksha Kamath

In Púbol, north of Barcelona, a castle sits atop a hill. With vines sinuously wrapped around its brick walls and surreal architecture, it belongs to Gala Dalí, the wife of surrealist painter Salvador Dalí. It was bought as a gift in 1969 and she lived there undisturbed – rumour claims that even her husband was not allowed to enter without her written permission. She spent the latter part of her enigmatic life writing an unfinished book, probably about her own polarising perceptions. The woman, who was despised by French poet André Breton (he saw her as a rival), and loathed by Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel – who apparently once tried to strangle her, having had enough of her “insults” – was a victim of her times, vilified and condemned by exclusionary men gatekeeping the echelons of creativity and elite society.

Now, her home and archival outfits from her wardrobe, designed by the likes of Gabrielle Chanel, Givenchy, and Christian Dior, have been excavated to bring to light a lesser known aspect of her personality: the PR machinery she built around her surrealist artist husband. “She was a mastermind,” says Noelia Collado, co-curator of *The Awakening of the Myth: Gala Dalí* exhibition, which spreads across the castle and La Roca Village, one of Bicester Collection’s luxury retail hotspots, till January 2025. “She designed the image she wanted to portray of them to the world, down to what Dalí wore. They created fashion statements wherever they went.” A dress featuring a trompe-l’oeil print designed by couturier Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dalí in collaboration, was first worn and promoted by Gala; today it is part of the exhibition.

As I roamed the temperature-controlled top floor of the castle, wrapped in stories of how Gala was misunderstood in her time, another renegade woman with a murky past flickered to mind. Decades apart, artist Yoko Ono in England was a female figure flogged by the British public for breaking up the band, The Beatles. Deemed ‘dragon lady’ in the tabloid press, made fun of for her accent, called a ‘nip’, ‘Chink’ and ‘Jap’ by the public, and presciently anointed “the world’s most famous unknown artist” by her famous husband, John Lennon, years later, at the age of 91, her work is being venerated at the Tate Modern in London with the exhibition *Yoko Ono: Music of the Mind*.

Could 2024 then be the year we rewrite the redemption arc of misunderstood women of the past?

Museums' modus operandi

“I think museums have to respond to society,” states Isabella Coraça, a lecturer on fashion history and theory at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London) and former curator for the British Museum. “We are going through a big period of social change and, hopefully, social justice. And not



just in terms of feminism, but also in terms of sexual politics or identity politics. Museums are picking up on that and participating in those discourses through exhibitions.”

But it’s also a matter of making money. “At a time when public funding has diminished quite a lot in the last decade or so, museums rely on what we call blockbuster exhibitions,” explains Coraça.

“Exhibitions that touch a nerve in audiences, either because they’re responding to something that society is grappling with or that’s always caught people’s interest – usually celebrities.” Be it fashion designers Mary Quant and Gabrielle Chanel, or singer-songwriter Taylor Swift – the American performer’s in-concert wardrobe is going on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London this month – the bold female persona with a sensational storyline has become fodder for museums.

And it’s working. “It’s our fascination with these strong women that reels us in,” says Carrie Scott, art historian and founder of Seen.art, a broadcast channel and art consultancy that demystifies the world of art. “We’re all curious to see what the fuss was all about. So, it’s really smart of exhibitions to show women who are polarising or ‘difficult’ because it makes us show up.”

Flipping the script

Meanwhile, at the V&A, in the exhibition *Naomi: In Fashion*, a video of the supermodel’s fall during a 1993 Vivienne Westwood show is not a shy addition, but something that humanises Campbell beyond her Amazonian fashion image. She falls, she gets up, she smiles. The fallibility of being human once again simmers to the top when a video of the English model leaving community service at the New York City Sanitation Department plays. The punishment for misdeemeanour

(in a fit of anger in the early aughts, she had thrown a phone at an employee) was a low point, but ever the clever communicator, she used her entries and exits from the department as a catwalk, using clothes to send a larger message to the public and the industry.

“It was important to address the pressure that came with being in the limelight and how she chose to address that moment. She decided to use fashion as a tool,” says curator Sonnet Stanfill, who interviewed Campbell for 18 months in the lead-up to the exhibition (on till April 2025) that celebrates her creative collaborations, activism and cultural impact through the work of leading global designers and photographers. “On the last day of community service, she wore a Swarovski crystal-encrusted Dolce & Gabbana evening dress. The belt is a big metal corset that is fastened with a lock and key – a nod perhaps to her court experience.

It’s on display at the V&A.”

The exhibitions beg the question: what is the definition of a “difficult”, “infamous”, or in the words of a convicted former POTUS, “nasty” woman? “If you ask for what you want and you aren’t considered important enough, you are deemed ‘difficult’,” says Zahra Khan, founder of Art Divvy, a platform aiming to expand South Asian art’s global reach. “To get to the rooms or circles these women occupied, they would’ve had to be difficult.” Campbell was teaching make-up artists how to work with black skin tones; Yoko Ono didn’t break up the Beatles. “No one woman is that powerful. But these women get used as scapegoats time and time again. We all know Naomi’s reputation. Is it fair? I doubt it. Did she lose her temper once? Yes. Maybe even twice. How often is a man seen screaming in a boardroom or throwing a tantrum?” asks Scott.



A modern resonance

Through a re-examination using context, the lens of passing time, and a modern audience ready to get to know these women again, the finer details of their stories are coming to the fore. Plucking Gala out of the shadows and placing her in popular culture via a collaboration with illustrator Carla Fuentes is both clever and captivating. At La Roca Village, hand-drawn paintings cover the walls, portraying a 2024 iteration of Gala as a modern-day influencer. In one, she is sprawled on a deck chair, margarita in one hand and camera selfie-ready in the other.

Meanwhile, Jordi Bernadó’s photographs, also part of the exhibition, contextualise Gala in her space. A Christian Dior two-piece couture paillette outfit is cheekily brought into the castle’s kitchen. She wore it dancing with a key government aid in America. The image questions gender norms that existed in her time, ones that she certainly did not adhere to.

Similarly, in *Yoko Ono: Music of the Mind* (on till September), the artist’s work is separated from her relationship with Lennon. “Her activism for peace feels incredibly urgent in the state of the world right now,” says Catharine Wood, director of exhibitions and programmes at Tate Modern on why the exhibition is gaining momentum. The younger generation is seeing her as an artist in her own right. Through letter writing, instructive art, performance, and interactive pieces, she’s gaining popularity among a new generation.

Cogs in the wheel

Museums, however, for the cultural centres that they are, are also soft power for larger political systems. “Even if a curator has the ambition to do a feminist exhibition, usually there will be other forces playing in the background that might subdue those messages,” Coraça reminds me.

Would I have wanted to see a wall of shame dedicated to the tabloid press for the explicit misogyny and xenophobia they subjected Yoko Ono to in the ’70s? Yes. Would I have wanted to see more of Campbell’s personality shine through rather than a manufactured image of someone placed on a pedestal? Perhaps. Do I wish Gala’s story was more prolifically known and that the next Met Gala theme was dedicated to her legend? Hell, yes.

For now though, I’m just really trying to get to know these women, and god, they were great.

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



Scan the QR code to experience *The Awakening of the Myth: Gala Dalí* exhibition, on magazine.thehindu.com