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INDIA'S DOCUMENTARY WAVE

As Nisha Pahuja's *To Kill a Tiger* gets ready for the Oscars tomorrow, fellow directors and producers discuss the Indian documentary scene and why visual non-fiction narratives are gaining popularity

This hard-hitting piece of art really hits home on so many levels. I was born in the state of Jharkhand [where the survivor and her father are from], and as the daughter of a father that was my forever champion... I was moved to pieces. I cannot wait for audiences around the world to discover this moving story

PRIYANKA CHOPRA, on Instagram after she joined the *To Kill a Tiger* team

Sanjukta Sharma

Sarvnik Kaur's documentary *Against the Tide*, a deep dive into the stormy, resilient ebbs of a Koli fishing community in Mumbai, has the cinematic heft of a visually wilful feature film. Cinematographer Ashok Meena captures the minutiae of the lives of two fishermen with remarkable perspectival beauty. Nothing is an accident; nothing is staged.

The community it captures thrives by the unpredictable Arabian Sea. The camera looks up when a matriarch performs the community's neo-natal rituals; it tilts gently down when boats venture into ferocious high tides; becomes invisible inside homes of the film's two lead characters; and zooms in on difficult conversations. The camera is unintrusive. It scans the sea's various moods, underwater plastic and flotsam. The larger issues Kaur is tackling – climate change, tradition impinging on modernity, technology, commerce, urban decay – emerge organically from the narrative.

Against the Tide, made with European collaboration, is representative of a genre that has been peaking in the visual non-fiction narrative universe. We have been seeing it emerging from the West for about a decade now, and in India, in the past few years, with films such as *Writing with Fire* (2021), *A Night of Knowing Nothing* (2021), *All That Breathes* (2022), and now Nisha Pahuja's *To Kill a Tiger*, which is competing tomorrow for the Best Documentary Feature at this year's Oscars.

Pahuja is Canadian Indian, but like her earlier films *To Kill a Tiger* is an India story, harrowing and uplifting at the same time. She spent eight years on the film, which follows a farmer in a Jharkhand village who is up against entrenched patriarchal systems to get justice for his daughter who was raped when she was 13.

Winning international support

These documentaries have a few things in common: they are immersive, they co-opt their subjects into participating in world-building, and they are filmed over several years. They are also almost always made with funds from Europe or the U.S. Crafted with the luxury of telling a story inside out, without losing sight of a writer-director's personal vision of the subject, they are about details and small incidents, moments building up to a larger reality. In other words, the new long-form journalism.

Kaur says it took her many months of hanging out with her two protagonists Rajesh and Ganpat – childhood friends who have contrary views about success, happiness and traditions – drinking whiskey with them and becoming a part of their lives, until the camera became just a prop and not a meddling recorder. "When I started out, I had a story but I didn't know how it was going to pan out. The few years that I worked on it required me to have faith in the process, and remain attentive to moments and gestures," she says. "I wanted to show climate change, financial and corporate greed, the exclusion of many traditional systems of life. These are big ideas, and the way I could get there without sounding preachy was to let the details bring them out."

Against the Tide received the Golden Gateway Award at the 2023 MAMI Mumbai Film Festival, won awards at several fests, including

The long-form storytellers (Clockwise from left) Nisha Pahuja at a special screening of *To Kill A Tiger*; Vinay Shukla (centre) with his team from *While We Watched*; Shaunak Sen; Nishtha Jain; and Sarvnik Kaur. (GETTY IMAGES, AP)

Sundance and the Sydney Film Festival, and has had theatrical releases in the U.K., Australia, Japan and other countries. "I still don't have an Indian OTT or distributor interested in acquiring it. It is an absolute tragedy that in India films like mine have not got proper releases."

This could be slowly changing, though. HBO bought Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* after its Oscar run. Pahuja's *To Kill a Tiger* now has Dev Patel, Mindy Kaling and Priyanka Chopra Jonas as executive producers, and Netflix has acquired its global OTT rights. London-based Taskovski Films Sales has acquired the sales rights to *Until I Fly*, a coming-of-age story by directors Kanishka Sonthalia and Siddesh Shetty, ahead of its March 10 world premiere at the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival in Egypt. The film tells the story of Veeru, a resilient boy of Indo-Nepalese lineage, who has to face the daily challenge of cultural rejection in a Himalayan village.

Meenakshi Shedde, independent curator with film festivals such as Berlin and Toronto, who watched *To Kill a Tiger*, says, "The film's strength is its everyday heroic feminism. Its male protagonist, Ranjit, is not a savvy, educated city man, but a quiet Jharkhand farmer, who determinedly pursues justice for his daughter, who was gang-raped in 2017. India has deep-rooted misogyny at every level, and not many Indian men would publicly fight for justice."

While Shedde says its chances are hard to predict, she is convinced that Oscar-tipped documentaries from the country are pulling more and more weight, with celeb endorsements and related strategies. Pahuja's documentary has already won the Amplify Voices Award for Best Canadian Feature Film at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2022, and best documentary at Palm Springs International Film Festival 2023. It was also re-released in theatres in North America this February. "That's a lot in its favour," Shedde adds.

OTTs embrace non-fiction

Today, the Indian narrative documentary is getting more foreign funding, festival appearances and awards. Director Vinay Shukla, who made *An Insignificant Man* (2017) on politician-activist Arvind Kejriwal, and *While We Watched* (2022) on the attempts to silence Hindi journalist Ravish Kumar, likens the moment to another one in the 1990s. "Remember when Aishwarya Rai, Sushmita Sen, Priyanka Chopra and others became Miss World and Miss Universe? The pageants had become an annual fixture; we watched them, talked about them."

And if Big Bollywood is not interested in the narrative documentary, Indian OTTs are embracing non-fiction projects cautiously. Aparna Purohit, head of originals, India and Southeast Asia, Amazon Prime Video, says, "In 2023, we released a series of impactful docu-series on diverse and relevant subjects, all of which have connected deeply with our viewers. *First Act* has received widespread acclaim for its gripping narrative and thought-provoking subject." Purohit says they are now committed equally to scripted and unscripted content.

First Act, a rigorous documentation of the pressures that child actors and their families face in Mumbai's entertainment industry, is director-editor Deepa Bhatia's first docu-series. As with all good narrative documentaries, she took years to shoot it. "It became obvious as we went along that this was a story not just about exploitation. The parents are victims, too. My challenge was to attempt a helicopter view of children in entertainment," Bhatia says. Like Kaur, the job required her to be present with her camera in the lives of her subjects so often and with such sensitivity that the subjects forgot the filmmaker was around with a camera.

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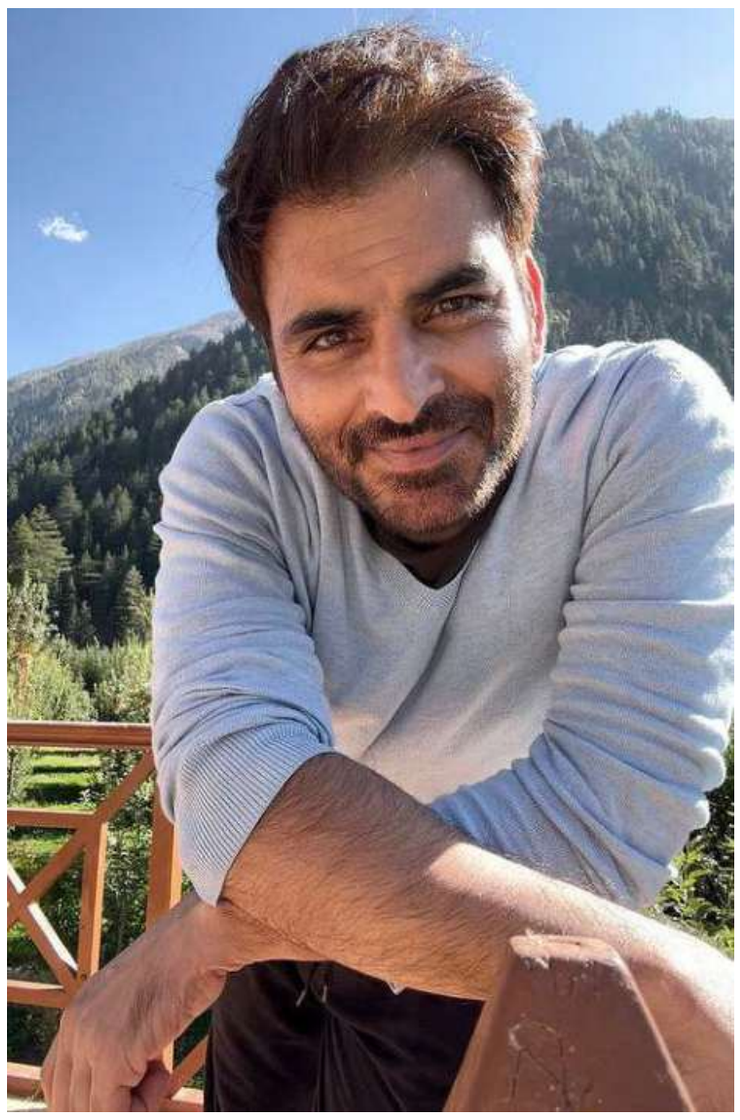
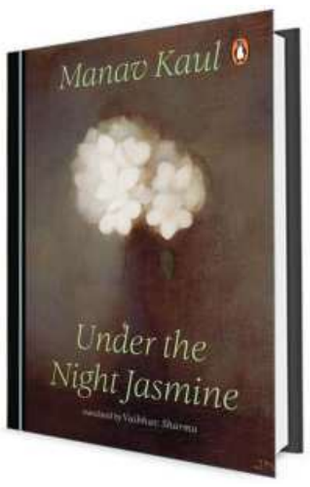


Stories of life The book is a translation of Manav Kaul's Hindi novel, *Antima*.



Actor-author Manav Kaul, who has a new book, says his stories drawn from reality are filtered through the lens of fiction

IN CONVERSATION

'I AM MORE ROMANTIC IN MY WRITING THAN IN REAL LIFE'

Takshi Mehta

In his new book *Under The Night Jasmine*, actor-author Manav Kaul weaves a story within a story, centred on Rohit, a struggling writer. Translated by Vaibhav Sharma from the Hindi original *Antima*, the story unfolds against the backdrop of the pandemic, as Rohit navigates the challenges of completing his short story collection. His personal experiences in love and the creative process intertwine, shaping the very story he endeavours to tell. In a Zoom interview, Kaul says his stories are drawn from reality yet filtered through the lens of fiction. Edited excerpts:

Question: *In the novel, Rohit suggests that writing is painful, echoing the belief that pain fuels creativity. Do you agree?*
Answer: I used to believe this, but later I realised every art form is an extension of your life, so the life you're living is important. I started writing a lot because I was living peacefully, so all these people have lied. It's happiness that stimulates amazing work. I wrote a story about death, 'Titli', when I was the happiest.

Q: *Does your intimate storytelling blur the lines between you and your characters, especially when your protagonist is an author? Do you weave parts of yourself into your stories?*
A: My stories undoubtedly reflect aspects of myself, drawn from reality yet filtered through the lens of fiction. Labelling the work as strictly autobiographical undermines the craft of writing. My ability to create 14 books that feel personal stems from my skill as a writer rather than the colourful nature of my own life.

Q: *In the book, you express a sense of helplessness at changing a broken world, particularly amid the pandemic. Do you still feel pressured to enact change with the ongoing influx of bad news?*
A: I am doing enough through my art. I live in the fictional world, because the real world is too much for me. Moreover, I tell this to people, that we're very fragile, that these things we're fighting for – space or religion – are very insignificant because 50 years from now, we won't even be here. I am just a lazy writer, all I can do is make people smile, and hope that they pass it on.

Q: *Do the three female characters (Verma Madam, Antima and Aru), all vying for Rohit's attention, reflect your non-linear perspective on love, contrasting with Bollywood's "love happens only once" trope?*
A: I am the wrong person to ask this, because I don't understand love. I am more inclined towards having fruitful friendships all around me. I am married to my work, to my writing, so it's unfair to say that I love someone. I can't give them the time I give my reading or travelling.

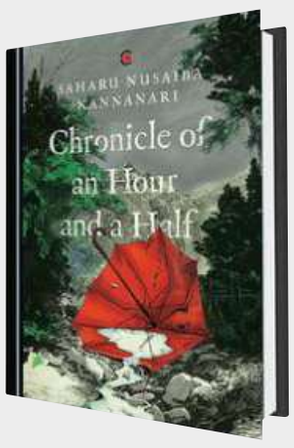
Q: *You claim not to understand love, yet your portrayal suggests otherwise.*
A: I create worlds, and do things that I don't have the capacity to do in real life. In life, I live in my head, so I go places with my stories, and I've been told that I am more romantic in my writing, than in real life. I like to miss love in my life, so that I can achieve it in my writing.

The interviewer is a culture and entertainment journalist.

Scan the QR code to watch the interview with Manav Kaul on **magazine.thehindu.com**

Murder on WhatsApp

A novel set in rural Kerala makes for wonderful reading despite the grim theme



Chronicle of an Hour and a Half
Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari
Context
₹599

Sharmistha Jha

It has been raining heavily for six days in Vaiga, Kerala. But another storm is brewing in the villagers' WhatsApp groups where a dangerous mob is taking birth. The news of an illicit affair is making the rounds. Public opinion is that the man, Burhan, must be punished. Not only is he sleeping with another man's wife, the woman in question, Reyhana, is at least 15 years older than him. But things are not as simple as they seem, and author Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari peels the layers of a society ruled by the banality of man's evil nature. *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half* is a lesson in how in a matter of hours, lives can be altered forever, and your phone can become an active crime scene.

Kannanari explores all the paradoxes associated with a mob – the human and the inhuman. Like a collective of ordinary men, the mob is driven by lust, misogyny and jealousy. Some get carried away by the communal pull of the mob, some are there to defend their masculinity that Burhan's sexual activities have hurt. The mob of men secretly desires the beautiful Reyhana. Possessed by a fever dream, they seek revenge as if it is their wife that Burhan has had an affair with.

The novel almost reminds one of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Kannanari's storytelling shares many similarities with Roy's work. Both books, based in rural Kerala, deal with the themes of forbidden love and the loneliness of women. *The God of Small Things* deals with an inter-caste couple, therefore the state is complicit in the violence, while in Kannanari's case, the love affair involves individuals from the same community, and hence the police try to protect Burhan. Society viewed the affairs in both stories as an immoral extension of lust. This begets violence for men and sexual harassment for women. Like with *The God of Small Things*, *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half* is a novel filled with dread that makes for wonderful reading due to its luminous writing.

The independent reviewer and editor is based in New Delhi.

The fantastical world of *Mr. Pratchett*

The author and satirist continued to work on his Discworld series of comic fantasy novels till the day he died, nine years ago this month

P.N. Nishan

"I'll be writing until I die. It's my passion," wrote Terry Pratchett in 2008. True to his word, the British author did not allow the Alzheimer's he was afflicted with to prevent him from doing what he loved. When he finally succumbed to the illness, nine years ago this month, he was working on his last book *The Shepherd's Crown*.

Despite having sold millions of books across the globe, Pratchett spent the majority of his career in relative anonymity with a very niche audience. Over the years, book by book, he had slowly amassed a sizeable following of dedicated readers. Often, already largely immersed in the fantasy world, these were people who had recognised the genius of Pratchett's perspicaciously subversive style, and gotten hooked.

Pratchett himself was a devoted fan and consumer of anything fantasy. In *A Slip of the Keyboard*, a collection of his non-fiction pieces, he speaks of how he used to haunt public libraries, scouring the shelves for any book with the slightest hint of a dragon or an elf. Like many of the other fantasy authors of his time, it was Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) that kicked off this obsession. After getting his first taste of fantasy from *LOTR*, Pratchett became enamoured with everything fantasy and, as he put it, "if you read enough books, you overflow" – he became a writer.

Creating Discworld

Pratchett had a slow start; his first few books saw little traction. It was only around his fourth and fifth books, the first of the 41 novels of the Discworld series, that his work really begin to take off. Part of the reason Pratchett stands out is because unlike many of his contemporaries, he was able to continue putting out interesting content for several decades. His popular Discworld series only saw an end due to his death.

While part of the credit for this achievement does go to Pratchett's unique writing style and dedication, his world building was what really allowed for this accomplishment. The Discworld, the world within which the series is set, is not defined in any one book. The reader is only given the information necessary for the ongoing storyline. This refusal of Pratchett's to set the limits of the Discworld allowed him to continue weaving new stories into its fabric. It also allows a reader to pick up almost any book from the series and begin reading without worrying about having adequate context. Each book serves both as a standalone novel as well as a piece of a larger puzzle.

While the new reader does not have to worry about the backstory of the Discworld when they begin reading, Pratchett does assume some knowledge of popular fantasy tropes from his audience. The Discworld began as a kind of reaction to a lot of the mediocre fantasy that was coming out during the 1980s fantasy boom. A time when every other person had read Tolkien and wanted to write the next *LOTR*. The market was flooded with stuff on dark lords, brave heroes and noble elves. So, when Pratchett wrote his fantasy, he wrote of a protagonist whose primary concern was saving his own skin.

He wrote dragons that blew themselves up, elves that were cruel bastards, female wizards and vampire teetotallers. This ability to twist the popular conceptions of fantasy of the time soon became an essential element of Pratchett's brand. As he said in *A Slip of the Keyboard*, "If you are in the market for easy laughs you learn that two well-tried ways are either to trip up a cliché or take things absolutely literally."

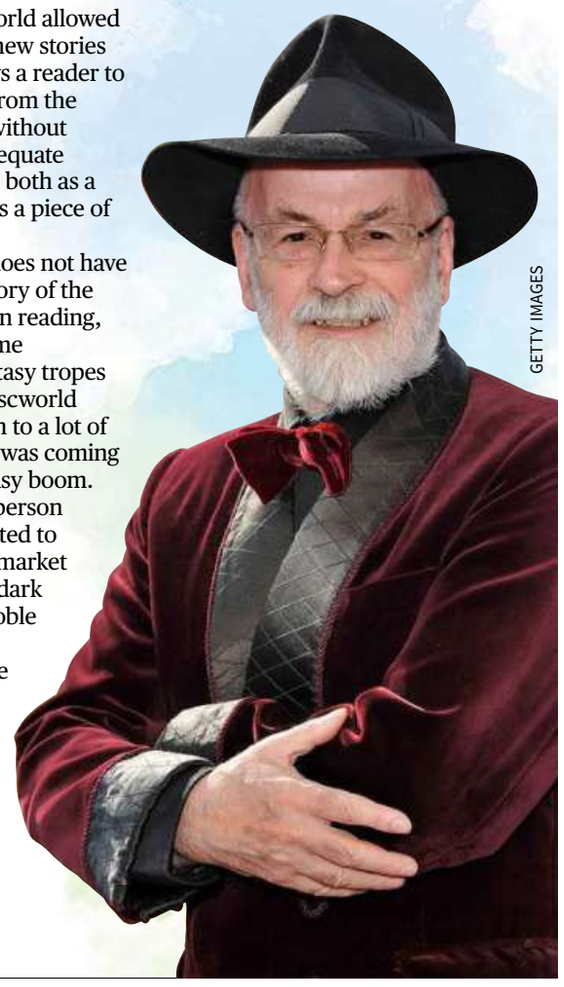
Not written for the screen

Interestingly, while there have been several attempts at adapting Pratchett's works for the silver screen, only the adaptation of the book he co-wrote with Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens*, has seen any real success. Perhaps this is because Gaiman himself participated as a showrunner for the series. Otherwise, Pratchett's writing does not lend itself to film adaptation. While he does have interesting plot structures within his stories, an essential part of his appeal also comes from the wit of his writing, from the insights he gives into the characters' thought processes and the snippets of extra detail from the footnotes. All things that make him an especially hard author to translate to the screen.

Pratchett passed away March 12, 2015. In the end, he chose to die of his disease rather than through the assisted dying that he was a strong advocate of. Every year on the day, his fans continue to post remembrances of the author who enchanted them for so many pages, often accompanied by the image of a man swathed in white hair, topped off with a black hat, giving the camera a cheeky grin. This is their way of showing their respect through the dictum he brought them in his book *Going Postal*: "A man is not dead while his name is still spoken."

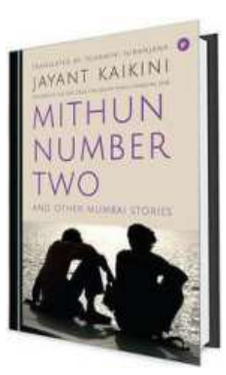
The writer works as a Language Consultant at the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

The Discworld, the world within which the series is set, is not defined in any one book. The reader is only given the information necessary for the ongoing storyline. This refusal of Pratchett's to set the limits of the Discworld allowed him to continue weaving new stories into its fabric


GETTY IMAGES

BROWSER

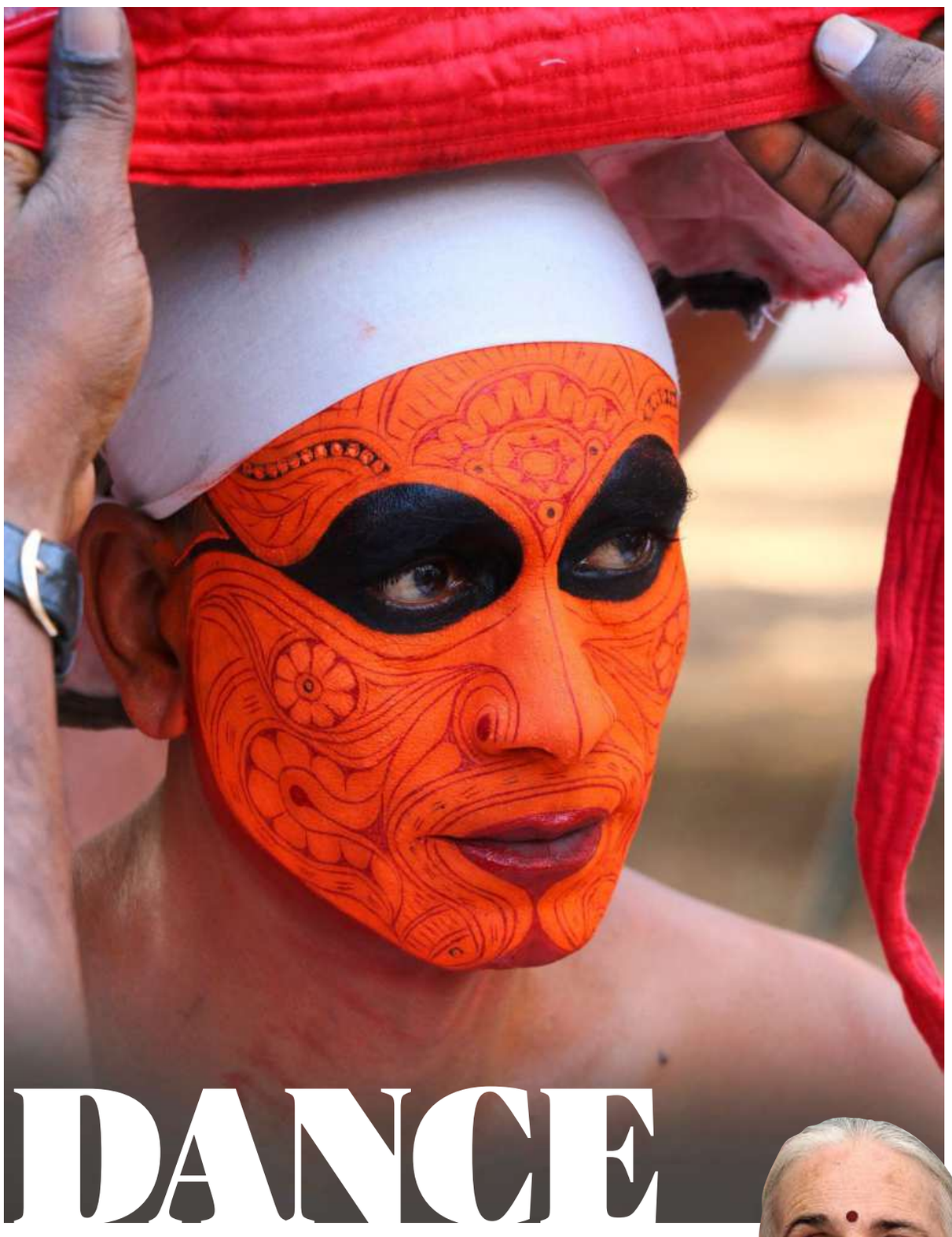
Mithun Number Two and Other Mumbai Stories
Jayant Kaikini, trs Tejaswini Niranjana
Eka
₹599
Originally in Konkani, these short stories feature people who have come to Mumbai for different reasons: to find work, look for excitement or to dream.



Zin
Haritha Savithri
Penguin
₹599
When Seetha, an Indian national, arrives in Turkey in search of her Kurdish lover, she is in for a shock. Before long, she finds herself caught in the midst of a battle between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan movement. This is a story of lovers amid conflict.

Varaha's Vengeance: The Battle of Vathapi Book 2
Arun Krishnan
HarperCollins
₹499
The second book in *The Battle of Vathapi* series, it delves into the fierce battle between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas. Will the Chalukyas triumph over the Pallavas in this slice of Indian history?

She and I
Imayam, trs D. Venkataramanan
Speaking Tiger
₹350
In this book translated from Tamil, the narrator becomes obsessed with a widow who has recently moved to the village with her daughters. A jobless drifter low on self esteem, he drags Kamala down in a ploy that might destroy them both.



DANCE LIKE A GOD

Pepita Seth offers a wide range of perspectives and photographs about the world of Theyyam

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
vijayakumar.kc@thehindu.co.in

Inside Malabar, rich in history, tropical jungles, old tharavads and modern homes, there are these little clearings dotted with temples. Often, a human dallies here with divinity and manifests a spiritual art called Theyyam. Those used to tourism brochures from Kerala are aware in a general sense of this ancient devotional endeavour.

However, for those living in this land of ballads and 'kalaripayattu', the traditional martial art, Theyyam serves as an unrestrained belief in having a holy communion with the gods from the Hindu pantheon. This is all about colour, often bright reds and yellow, fire-torches made with palm leaves, the music of 'chenda', Kerala's unique drums, and the synergy between the devotee and the man, who plays god. Holding a believer's hand, the Theyyam artiste listens to woes and requests, watches tears flow, and offers hope and blessings. This is catharsis and comfort, and for those who have seen a Theyyam, it offers a perspective on Hinduism's diverse strands.

Into this complex world, Pepita Seth wades in with a sense of wonder, extreme patience and a scholar's hunger for knowledge. The result is a stunning coffee table book, *In God's Mirror, The Theyyams of Malabar*. Coffee table books at times get dismissed as gloss, offering relief to the eyes and nothing more, but Seth begs to differ. Irrespective of whether you consider Theyyam as just an art form or an intensely spiritual pursuit, this book needs to be savoured.

Whispers of mystery

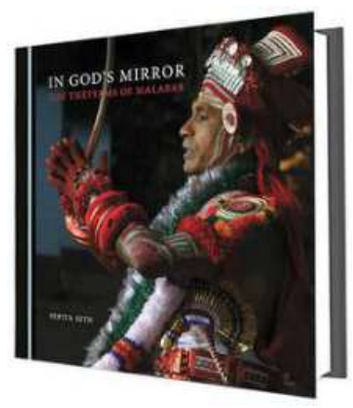
British writer Seth, who set out from London in 1970, in a bid to mine her memories of an ancestor, who once lived in India, was also inexorably drawn towards Kerala. Her trips gradually moved northwards and then she discovered Malabar. The vast ocean of literature does have many stunning lines and we all have our favourites – it could be a passage about the monsoon from Allan Sealy's *The Everest Hotel* or any other excerpt that readers of this review may remember fondly. To that list please add these lines by Seth: "Malabar is a beautiful word, slipping off the tongue like a sighing whisper, murmuring of mystery and shadows, suggesting somewhere unknown and unreachable."

Armed with a camera, notebook and an insatiable desire to understand Theyyam in all its complexities, Seth throws light on this ancient form of worship. William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*, published in 2009, was perhaps the first to offer a glimpse into Theyyams in mainstream writing. His chapter, 'The Dancer of Kannur', is essential reading for those who want a quick grasp of Theyyam. What Seth does across 336 pages is to offer a breathtaking range of perspectives and photographs about the world of Theyyam.

The book can be read from end to end or it can be treated like an encyclopaedia on Theyyam. Want to know who Chamundi or Gulikan is? Or curious about Bhagavathi or Kuttichathan? They are basically manifestations of the Hindu pantheon, be it Shiva, Vishnu or Durga, but for more details, just dive into the relevant chapters and relish what is on offer. Seth's constant travels within Malabar, across Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasaragod districts, throw up a macro-level analysis of diverse Theyyams, including a rare one in which a woman dons the attire and invokes the divine spirit.

Pepita Seth (K. PICHUMANI)

Myriad nuances Pepita Seth's constant travels across Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasaragod districts throw up a macro-level analysis of diverse Theyyams. (PEPITA SETH)



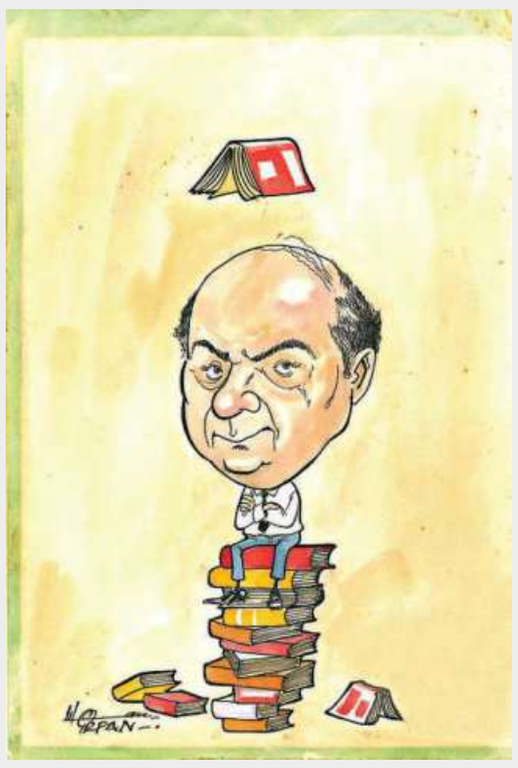
In God's Mirror: The Theyyams of Malabar
Pepita Seth
Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers Ltd.
₹5,001

Toppling caste hierarchies

The caste equations that underpin Theyyam is also dealt with as specific clans are associated with this old art form. For those in the know, in a welcome move, Theyyam also topples rigid caste hierarchies as a lower-caste man playing god offers his benediction to an upper-caste devotee. Seth writes about her interactions with Lakshmanan Peruvannan, who used to perform the Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam. The blurring of lines between man and god becomes evident in these lines: "Mahavishnu is his friend and therefore, when giving naivedyam, he may take a bite himself, have a taste and then give the rest to the god – simply because there is no difference between him and God, and it is only right that he does this."

Many Indians became aware of Theyyam thanks to the Kannada blockbuster *Kantara*, which dealt with Bhoota Kola, a variant practised in neighbouring Karnataka's coastal districts with a Tulu inflection. Seth looks at this too while moving around Kasaragod and this highlights an old truth: boundaries can never rein in the fluidity of cultural influences.

Be it the religious, artistically inclined or those invested in social anthropology, this book is essential reading about a unique landmass and its accompanying beliefs.



Illustrations portraying Rajen Mehra (below) and College Street in Kolkata with book kiosks and shops. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The making of Rupa

Rajen Mehra's memoir offers a ringside view of how a veteran publishing house finetuned the business of art

Aditya Mani Jha

Booksellers and publishers function at the intersection of art and commerce, a place rich with possibilities. Like any other business, you have to keep your eye on the bottomline. But the most successful and enduring publishers are those who never lose sight of the bigger picture – that the product is a work of art and cannot, therefore, be understood (and marketed) in terms of economic concepts widely applicable elsewhere. The art of business takes a backseat to the 'business of art'.

Rajen Mehra's memoir, *Never Out of Print*, offers readers a ringside view of the making of one of the country's longest-running publishing houses. And for the most part, it does so with a light touch and, especially in the second half, with the help of charming personal anecdotes.

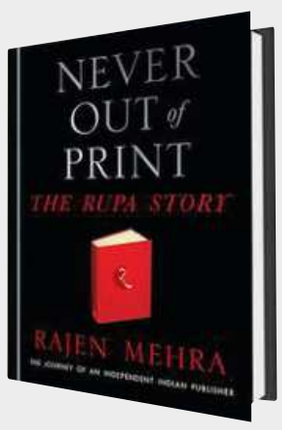
The story begins with Mehra's granduncle Daudayal Mehra impressing K. Jackson Marshall, a Scottish book sales representative, with his aggressive but scrupulously polite way of selling hosiery in Calcutta's New Market area. Marshall asked the young man if he would be interested in selling English-language books.

"But D. Mehra knew his limitations. He had dropped out of school because the family had been unable to pay for his education. He was a dhoti-kurta-clad hosiery seller who didn't speak English. Despite his restless energy and determination to experiment, Marshall's offer seemed like something that would be too much for him to pull off. His market – the bhadralok (gentlefolk) and babus of Calcutta, newly Westernised and English-speaking – tended to look down on other Indians, especially those who weren't fluent in English."

The paradoxes

This passage, intended as a way of communicating some of the paradoxes involved in selling English-language books in India, tells us how in India, reading and selling English literature is inextricably linked with class, caste and privilege-related issues. The acts of reading and writing are aspirational, yes, but that aspiration isn't in a single, easy-to-digest mode – the UPSC aspirant in Delhi is motivated to read and write in English for very different reasons than, say, a young TV journalist in Noida. Both individuals, however, are keenly aware of how speaking/writing good English is perceived in the country, and that perception is everything.

D. Mehra's journey, meanwhile, takes the company to its first big success and soon, the family consolidates the business by signing on a slew of big names – and securing the rights to publish/translate some internationally renowned authors as well. What's interesting in this section is the way we see old-school publishers going the extra mile to establish a personal relationship with authors. A far cry, indeed, from contemporary marketing gobbledygook and "outreach programs" built solely around transitory, sandcastle-like social media strategies.



Never Out of Print: The Rupa Story
Rajen Mehra
Rupa
₹500

Ray and other anecdotes

The company's entrepreneurial trajectory is covered in the first half of the book; the second half (200-odd pages) is filled with celebrity anecdotes, the kind of thing you'd be happy to read on the last page of a Sunday features publication. It's entertaining stuff, mostly, like the story of Satyajit Ray casually drawing a whole book cover over a cup of coffee and a few puffs of his signature cheroot. Or the story of how smuggled copies of *The Satanic Verses* found their way into a car boot. Some of the more impactful and consequential anecdotes, however, take place in the chapter about the author's own trip to Pakistan. It's a business trip and the Rupa team meets famous writers and some of their biggest clients (booksellers) in Pakistan. Interesting encounters abound, but the one I found most noteworthy was with Iqbal Hussain of Paramount Books, one of Rupa's bookseller-clients. Very kindly, Hussain asks his guests what they wanted to eat and upon hearing, "daal-roti" invites them to his house for lunch. There, Iqbal's wife has prepared a sumptuous vegetarian meal for them – but she refuses to come out of her room and greet them. As the author realises soon, this has something to do with the fact that this is early 1993, and just a few weeks ago, something horrible had happened to India's Muslims.

"His daughter had just served lunch, and mustering great courage, I asked Iqbal bhai why his wife hadn't joined us for lunch. 'Babri Masjid', whispered Iqbal bhai in my ears. The controversial mosque had just been demolished in Ayodhya, much to the hurt and anger of Muslims, Iqbal bhai's wife being one of them. She welcomed us with her warm, home-cooked food but her heart had gone cold."

Personally, I would have shaved about a hundred pages off this book at the editing table. After a while, all celebrity encounters begin to read alike – like a cocktail of performative humility and practised self-deprecation. But *Never Out of Print* is a fast and engaging read nevertheless, plus a valuable record of publishing history in India. If you're associated with the industry in any way, you should definitely read this. And even if you aren't you'll find plenty to keep you happy here.

Read an excerpt online.

The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.

INDIA'S DOCUMENTARY WAVE

Stills from recent documentaries; (far left) Aparna Purohit; and Girish Dwibhashyam.

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Indian OTTs are not vastly different from traditional TV networks. Reality shows that revolve around weddings or Bollywood tend to get green-lit easily (*Indian Matchmaking*, *The Big Day*, *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*). But, as Tanya Bami, series head, Netflix India, says, they've also made bets on shows, specials and documentaries for a wide-ranging local and global audience. "This has paid off with big wins for our non-fiction slate. We've seen this with the 2023 Academy Award winner *The Elephant Whisperers* and most recently, the International Emmy for Comedy for *Vir Das: Landing*."

Netflix has also been bullish about true crime documentaries, such as *Curry & Cyanide: The Jolly Joseph Case* and *The Hunt for Veerappan*. Their latest is *The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth*, one of its most stylishly produced true crime shows – with enough scepticism about the "truth", and a structure that makes this absurd and shocking case cogent.

Complicating the gaze

A filmmaker who has been a witness to the genre's evolution is Nishtha Jain, a pioneer in narrative documentary storytelling in India. She made *Gulabi Gang* in 2012 – on the lives of a Bundelkhand women's group that fights oppression, violence and caste dominance. Jain shares how she and her producers couldn't get Netflix to buy *Gulabi Gang*. "At best, OTTs want a modified reality that everyone can consume. In their defence, however, it's not easy to show bold content in India."

Narrative documentaries "complicate the gaze and celebrate the plurality and complexity of our existence". Her last film, *The Golden Thread* (2022), was set outside of Kolkata, and looks at the lives of jute workers. It is still doing the rounds of international film festivals. Her forthcoming film is on the farmer protests of 2020-2021.

Tanuja Chandra's docu-series *Wedding.con*, which dropped on Amazon Prime Video this year, borders on docu-fiction but stays unflinchingly with the voices and emotions of her subjects: Indian women who have undergone extreme distress because of matrimonial frauds. A director of feature films, BBC Studios approached Chandra to direct the series. "I feel funding should be much more generous. So many documentary producers work on abysmally low budgets. Having said that, I do know that OTT has made audiences at least become aware of the beauty of documentary films," she says. The responses to her first non-fiction project have been overwhelming. "Documentary is a thing of slow-burn, though. It'll be many months before we know the extent to which our show has touched people. And deep down, I know it'll be extensive."

An older generation would remember Doordarshan documentaries about social issues that ran like message films. There was something noble, and deathly boring, about them. Today, the best documentaries don't run on binaries. The nomination of *To Kill a Tiger* is another propeller to Indian narrative storytellers to "complicate the gaze".

The writer and critic is based in Mumbai.

Incubating stories

There's a global shift towards non-fiction storytelling, states Girish Dwibhashyam, COO of DocuBay, a relatively recent streamer and production company of documentaries. Millions of viewers across the world have signed up with it, and last year, it premiered three productions: *Plastic Fantastic*, *Water Mafia*, and *Going Poly*. "Not all OTT platforms prioritise documentaries, as this genre operates within its own unique economic dynamics. Amid fierce competition, most OTTs remain focused on retaining a mass audience. Therefore, platforms specialising in documentary films enjoy a competitive advantage," he says.

Last year, Anita Horam, a seasoned unscripted TV executive and former executive producer for Netflix, launched The Mighty Muse, a development and curation hub for non-fiction films and series. She is bullish on stories about emerging India. "Despite incredible source material, one of the key impediments for creators is a distinct lack of meaningful evangelists to help them find their audience without getting bogged down for want of resources, information or know-how. My venture is a concrete way to address this and fill the considerable gaps. Great content has no borders and hyperlocal can deeply impact the global zeitgeist if produced well and promoted strategically," she says.

> So many documentary producers work on abysmally low budgets. Having said that, I do know that OTT has made audiences at least become aware of the beauty of documentary films

TANUJA CHANDRA, whose docu-series *Wedding.con* dropped on Amazon Prime Video this year

Recent international nods

- *Writing with Fire* by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Bose was nominated for Best Documentary at the 2022 Oscars
- Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* won top prizes at the 2022 Cannes and Sundance festivals, and was nominated at the 2023 Oscars
- In 2023, Karthiki Gonsalves' *The Elephant Whisperers* won the Best Documentary Short at the Oscars
- This January, *Nocturnes* by Anirban Dutta and Anupama Srinivasan won the Special Jury Award for Craft at Sundance

Mystery most foul (Clockwise from left) Indrani Mukerjea in court in 2018; Sheena Bora, who was allegedly murdered by Indrani, her mother; directors Uraaz Bahl and Shaana Levy; and Indrani's third child, Vidhie Mukerjea, in a still from the series. (VIJAY BATE, PTI, GETTY IMAGES & NETFLIX)

CHASING THE INDRANI MUKERJEA STORY

The directors of a new documentary series on the sensational Sheena Bora murder case discuss what attracted them to the subject

Gayatri Rangachari Shah

Almost a decade ago, it was a story that riveted the country and dominated the news cycle. The disappearance and murder of 25-year-old Sheena Bora unveiled an internecine family drama that put to shame the wildest of masala potboilers.

To recap, Bora disappeared in April 2012; three years later, her sister, media maven Indrani Mukerjea (who turned out to be her mother), was arrested for the murder along with Indrani's driver and her ex-husband Sanjeev Khanna. A few months later, Bora's stepfather and Indrani's current husband, Peter Mukerjea, former CEO of Star TV, was also arrested. As details were made public, it turned out that Bora was dating Rahul, her stepfather's son from his previous marriage. Confused?

With its myriad twists, this head-spinning case had all the makings of a great cinematic tale. A new Netflix documentary series, titled *The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth*, now brings to life this stranger-than-fiction saga. It was delayed from airing on its original release date of February 23 by the Central Bureau of Investigation, which argued that the case was ongoing and the series could influence the outcome. The Bombay High Court later rejected the CBI petition.

Like peeling an onion

Directed by Uraaz Bahl and Shaana Levy, the husband-wife duo behind *Ladies First* (2017), the award-winning documentary on Olympic archer Deepika Kumari, the gripping four-part series features appearances by key players in the case, including Indrani herself and her third child, Vidhie. The documentary peels back the curtain on Indrani's life, including her early years in Assam and West Bengal, as well as her high society life amongst Mumbai's swish set.

"We all love a mystery and true crime allows you to pretend you are an investigative journalist, or detective," says Levy, explaining why the case continues to fascinate the public. "The fact that this is a real story told to you by real people has a level of authenticity," Bahl adds. "There is certainly a bit of voyeurism, you know, how the mighty have fallen, that kind of thing." Conspiracy theories abound on the involvement of top cops and politicians. "It was this onion you kept on peeling to find different parts of the story," Levy says.

Levy, 40, and Bahl, 47, spent five years working on the series. They had just finished a documentary short on Indian nanny Sandra Samuel, who saved two-year-old Moshe Holtzberg during the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, when they decided to tackle the sensational Indrani Mukerjea story. "It was a story all of us were obsessed with," says Bahl, a Mumbai-born and -bred self-described 'accidental' filmmaker whose day job involves real estate investing. He learnt the ropes of filmmaking by watching YouTube videos.

Meeting the half-Indian, half-Swiss Levy, a once-aspiring actor, in the late 2000s in Mumbai may have encouraged him to take the plunge. Their relationship was sparked by a mutual love of film. Levy, who grew up in London, had been cast in a Bollywood movie in 2007, which brought her to Mumbai and eventually the producing side of the business. "I started my career in theatre but filmmaking and telling stories, whether in front of or behind the camera, has been my passion," she says.

Access to key players

The couple has worked with teams – editors, cinematographers, and producers – in Los Angeles and around the world, and the documentary does a stellar job of reporting the story. Riveting scenes include one where Indrani asks for the camera to stop rolling when her lawyer is speaking and the lawyer responds by asking Indrani to "relax" and not interrupt his flow of thought. That's pure documentary gold.

In the intervening five years of the documentary's making, the couple managed to have two babies – Levy jokingly calls the series their third baby. Researching the case took time but so did gaining access to the key players, including Indrani, who was in jail till 2022. The series also includes interviews with lawyers and journalists to provide context.

According to the filmmakers, Indrani was "very professional on set, always arrived on time and came well prepared for the interview. She is extremely intelligent and knows every aspect of her case. We didn't know Indrani before making this documentary and had the opportunity to interview her twice a few months apart. This allowed us to start with her backstory and lead up to more difficult questions. Indrani rarely refused to answer any of our questions," says Levy.

These days, Indrani, who wrote a memoir last year, can be seen on Instagram (she has 1.2 million followers), travelling to the Andamans and posting her dance routines. She maintains her innocence.

"When we started this, we thought the case was going to get resolved," says Levy. The filmmakers disclose at the beginning of the series that their work is based on publicly available information. "We tried to give a balanced point-of-view and kept waiting for a verdict. But in a way, that made us work harder to make sure we did justice to the subject matter."

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Paridhi Badgotri

UNDER THE OLIVE TREES OF PALESTINE

Over the years, torn-apart lives and uprooted olive trees have both found place as markers of history in Palestinian poetry

Often the question of the role of art is raised when human lives are at stake. Artists, creatives, intellectuals, you and me, pour all our thoughts into the endless vessel of conversations when we ask ourselves: what significance does art hold in the presence of unfathomable atrocities inflicted upon humanity?

In his book *Memory of Forgetfulness*, which delves into the 88-day siege of Beirut in 1982, poet Mahmoud Darwish recounts a conversation with his friend, the renowned Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. It is regarding the role of art amidst the turmoil of the siege.

"Our great friend from Pakistan, Fayiz Ahmad Fayiz, is busy with another question: 'Where are the artists?'

'Which artists, Fayiz?' I ask.

'The artists of Beirut.'

'What do you want from them?'

'To draw this war on the walls of the city.'

'What's come over you?' I exclaim. 'Don't you see the walls tumbling?'"

When our surroundings lack physical barriers, the practice of art can become seemingly impractical – an aspect that may contribute to the scarcity of Palestinian poetry in the well of the Internet. What does art then mean for us at this time as we witness a genocide unfold from the comfort of our bedrooms? Art is used to amplify voices, honour narratives, and uphold the dignity of those whose stories demand to be heard, especially in the face of cultural erosion.

Piece of heritage

One such erosion is the uprooting of olive trees. Since 1967, Israel has uprooted around a million Palestinian olive trees alongside an unprecedented number of human lives. These revered trees not only form the backbone of the Palestinian economy but also hold deep cultural significance in Palestinian heritage. Olive trees serve as living chronicles of Palestine and are passed down through generations as family heritage.

Some of these ancient trees, from centuries ago, endure harsh conditions such as drought and poor soil, reflecting their inherent resilience. Rooted deeply in history and tradition, they are the testament of the Palestinian land.

Palestinian poetry intricately maps the multifaceted meaning of these trees. In her poem 'Different Ways to Pray', American-Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye invokes the pain of people who have died on the land of the olive trees:

Under the olive trees, they raised their arms –
Hear us! We have pain on earth!
We have so much pain there is no place to store it!
But the olives bobbed peacefully
in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.
At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,
and were happy in spite of the pain,
because there was also happiness.

Despite the pain, the olive trees persist, bearing fruit as a testament to resilience and fortitude in the face of occupation. The olives they yield serve as a symbol of hope and strength, offering a source of joy amidst the surrounding turmoil – a balm for wounded spirits, a healing potion in a landscape scarred by conflict.

Politician and poet Tawfiq Ziad also looks at olive trees as a monument that holds the collective memories and histories of his fellow Palestinians, as well as his own. In 'On The Trunk Of An Olive Tree', Ziad embraces the longevity of an olive tree:

I shall carve the number of each deed
Of our usurped land
The location of my village and its boundaries.
The demolished houses of its peoples,
My uprooted trees,
And to remember it all,
I shall continue to carve
All the chapters of my tragedy,
And all the stages of the disaster,
From the beginning
To end,
On the olive tree

While one poet relies on the eternity of olives, for another even the wish to nurture them becomes deadly. Poet Taha Muhammad Ali in his poem, 'The Fourth Quasida', imagines his estranged lover, Amira, coming back with a peaceful dove.

A dove whose feelings of cold are fatal,
whose sense of strangeness can kill,
whose longing for the olive grove is lethal.

Dangerous longing

Today, much of the olive groves are under Israeli control, making it perilous for Palestinians to access their land for harvesting. Ali tells us that something as commonplace as longing for the olive grove can be deadly.

When nurturing becomes dangerous, it is the blood of Palestinians that nurtures. In 'The Second Olive Tree', Darwish presents the portrait of the tree – one that is tender, peaceful and resilient – which gets uprooted and is reborn with the blood of Palestinian martyrs.

The portrait, for the olive tree is
neither green nor silver.
The olive tree is the color of
peace, if peace needed
A color. No one says to the olive
tree: How beautiful you are!
But: How noble and how
splendid! And she,
She who teaches soldiers to lay
down their rifles
And re-educates them in
tenderness and humility: Go
home
And light your lamps with my oil!

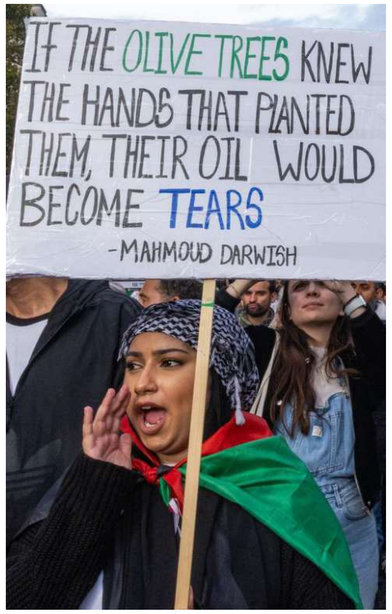
Later in the poem, a grandson, who stood up against the execution of the olive tree by the Israeli soldier, gets martyred. He is buried at the same place in the hope of growing and becoming one with the olive tree.

In another poem, 'The Earth is Closing on Us', Darwish pictures the olive tree as a continuity to humans.

We will die here, here in the last passage.
Here and here, our blood will plant its olive tree.

The relationship between Palestinians and olive trees is nothing less than a blood relation.

The writer is based in Delhi.



A cry for the land A Palestinian man collects olives at the start of the harvest season in Gaza City, September 2023; and (below) a protester holds a placard with poet Mahmoud Darwish's verses at a march in London last October. (GETTY IMAGES)

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

ALLEGEDLY

Flexi-airports a la Jamnagar

It's the least the government can do for billionaires who have done so much for India's inclusive growth

Nobody believed me when I said it, and I've been saying it for years. I said, "India is the only country in the world where a businessman – no matter how wealthy – can request the government to turn any airport into an international airport for 10 days, and the government will say, 'Yes, boss!'" And not just say it, but do it. Today the whole world knows this to be true.

Industrialist friends who laughed at me are now messaging me to ask how to go about it. I tell them to just read the papers. In fact, as I had myself reported aeons ago when working for the *Guruvayur Guardian*, it was the UPA government that framed the enabling legislation.

People with working memories might remember the infamous winter a decade or so ago, when thousands of farmers and workers from all over the country gathered at the Singhu border to protest against the government's anti-billionaire laws – laws such as MGNREGA, Food Security Act, and the Right to Education Act. After months of stand-off, the government had no choice but to bow down before the working classes' utter solidarity with the nation's tiniest and most endangered minority: its billionaires. To appease the protesters, and as a concrete gesture to assure them that they too loved oligarchs as much as any other government, it finally passed the Flexi-Airports to Please the Masters of the Universe Act, 2013 (FAPMUA).

Instant makeover

Like with other brilliant initiatives such as UAPA and GST, although the FAPMUA was hurriedly brought in by the Congress, it did precious little with it. It wasn't until the advent of Amrit Kaal that the legislation would take off, which it finally did at the Jamnagar airport recently. Anyway, for those interested, this is how it works.

Let's say you are Mr. Dhandapani, CMD of Dhandapani Industries, and you are planning your son's wedding celebrations at a pristine nature reserve near Tawang. Your guest list includes international luminaries like Harvey Weinstein, Tim Jong Un, first cousin of Kim Jong Un, Jane Epstein, sister of Jeffrey Epstein, and Harry Pot, great-grandson of Pol Pot. All busy people who move around with high security in their own luxury jets. You can't bundle them all into one bus like some assorted Bollywood Kapoors. To complicate matters, Tawang only has a defence airport, and it's a sensitive one, given the proximity to the China border. So what do you do?

It's simple. You pick up the phone and dial your contact in the regime – the guy who got you out of trouble every time you got a call from the ED or IT department, the guy who told you how many crores worth of electoral bonds you needed to buy. Let's say his name is Bhai. You tell Bhai your requirements.

"Hello Bhai, Dhandapani this side. I'm hearing GDP is growing at 8.4% and you guys are returning with 500-plus! Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Mr. Dhandapani. How can we help your *dhanda* today?"

"Listen, my son is getting married at Godzi-La in Arunachal. The nearest landing strip is at the military airport in Tawang. I've got global celebs flying down in their private jets and helicopters. Can you convert Tawang into an international airport for, say, 10 days?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Dhandapani. Billionaires like you have done so much for India's inclusive growth, it's the least we can do."

"You are very kind, Bhai. We could not have done it without your blessings."

"You mean the loan write-offs, tax breaks, and just-in-time policy changes?"

"Yes, but also the public lands and resources you sold to us at throwaway prices."

"You're welcome, Mr. Dhandapani. If there's nothing else, I'll ask my minions to get cracking on setting up a Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) facility at Tawang."

"Excellent. Is it also possible to, say, upgrade the toilets?"

"Absolutely, sir. Whether inside toilet or outside, ease of doing business is always top priority. We'll thoroughly upgrade and also install latest NFT paintings of Picasso and Monet in all the Ladies and Gents."

"One last thing, Bhai, if you won't take it the wrong way."

"Anything for you, Mr. Dhandapani."

"Mrs. Dhandapani – she is the one designing the whole event – has this crazy idea. She wants our exclusive high-profile guests to enjoy the privilege of being served by exclusive high-profile waiters. Can you depute...?"

"Of course! What are ministers for, if not to serve people?"

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, Bhai."

"Ditto, Mr. Dhandapani. It's a pleasure serving national interest with you."

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

Feminist icon "As a society, we need to collectively align behind a woman," says Nikhil Datar. (EMMANUAL YOGINI)

PERSON OF INTEREST

NIKHIL DATAR: PRO (A WOMAN'S) LIFE

This gynaecologist puts women first — and fights court battles alongside them too

Why are you whiling away your time doing all these things? Don't you have patients?' That's what people tell Nikhil Datar, 54, the gynaecologist who began the battle that eventually pushed India to update its abortion law in 2021. It took 14 years, many court cases and, along the way, he got a law degree too.

Datar, the son of a gynaecologist mother and an award-winning violinist father, says his activism can sometimes overshadow his day job, though he has a thriving practice in Mumbai's western suburbs. His contemporaries often don't understand his passion for justice, but he brushes off the detractors. "Legal activism is not my profession. It is my passion," he says.

I often wonder why the term 'pro life' is used exclusively to describe those who lobby against abortions. Datar is pro life too – he is an advocate of a woman's right to lead her life on her own terms and make decisions about her body. He believes that a woman must be in charge of her own womb. "As a society, we need to collectively align behind a woman." As the global debate around autonomy and reproductive health intensifies, it's a relief to meet a gynaecologist who is pro a woman's life.

A legal marathon

These days, Datar's pushing the State government to set up a mechanism to validate living wills, but he's mainly been a champion of women's reproductive rights in courtrooms. He fought his first case in the Bombay High Court in 2008 with a woman who wanted an abortion at 24 weeks because her foetus had multiple cardiac complications. The law, not updated since it was introduced in 1971, only allowed abortions until week 20. They lost the case, but Datar appealed and asked that the court consider 24 weeks as the upper limit for an abortion. That was the start of a legal marathon.

In 2016, he fought another case of a rape survivor on the same issue – this time in the Supreme Court – and won. After that there was no stopping a team of people led by the Human Rights Law Network from filing abortion cases in the top court. Datar played the role of cheerleader, advisor and medical expert. "At one point, we had so many cases on the board of the Supreme Court, it was a modern-day *satyagraha*," he says. "They had to take note."

Eventually, Justice A.K. Sikri instructed the high courts to hear the issue, despite that first defeat in 2008. In the years until the amendment, there were a total of 324 cases in the high courts and the Supreme Court, most of which women won. The government was under pressure to change the law.

In 2021, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act extended the upper gestational limit for abortion to 24 weeks from 20. Datar could have breathed easy, but he immediately filed another petition after reading the fine print.

Two of the many things that bothered him were the fact that the amendment ignored those who were single and in consensual relationships; and that it didn't provide an exception for minor rape survivors whose pregnancy might have gone beyond 24 weeks. "It's very clear that for a minor to carry a pregnancy to term is a health hazard, but we seem to be more interested in the life of the unborn rather than the girl's life that lies ahead of her," he says.

Datar feels relief when he encounters judges who understand the language of the U.K.-based bioethics think tank Nuffield Council on Bioethics that emphasises a woman's right to the final say about her body. Many judges just follow what a three-member medical board recommends and this is one reason why abortion judgments in our country differ wildly.

The recent overturning of western abortion gold standard Roe vs. Wade doesn't bother Datar as much as our understanding of the subject. "People feel the U.S. is regressive and we are progressive," Datar says, adding that in the west, the "pendulum has shifted from 100% pro choice. Individual states now have the power to decide about abortion but not individual women."

India, though, doesn't even get the language right, using the long-winded term 'medical termination of pregnancy' (which Datar says can also be interpreted as separating the foetus from the womb via an elective procedure) instead of abortion. "We were never pro choice, never pro life, we have always been in the middle and confused," he says. "Western countries are very clear about their understanding – they call a spade a spade." The 2021 amendment attempts to offer a definition, but Datar says it's flawed.

In his days working as a postgraduate teacher at the government-run Cooper Hospital in Mumbai, Datar helped set up a protocol to treat rape survivors and introduced a rape kit for doctors. "It made things easier for doctors who had studied sexual assault only as a tiny part of their five-year MBBS course, often as a four-mark short note," he says.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Good vision

Neither vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a tournament held in England, where the weak no trump is very popular. East was long-time English star Nicola Smith, who used her imagination in finding a way to defeat this contract. The use of Stayman enabled North-South to find their heart fit, and the normal contract was reached.

West started by cashing two high clubs. There was no attractive shift, so West continued with a third club to dummy's queen. West did not know how important this play would prove to be. It seems that the contract must succeed at this point due to the favorable trump position. South led the jack of hearts from dummy. Can you see how Smith defeated this contract?

She knew from the auction that partner would have no useful high cards remaining, perhaps a jack at most. Partner could, however, hold the seven of hearts! Smith rose with the ace of hearts and led a fourth round of clubs, intentionally yielding a ruff-sluff. West ruffed this with the seven of hearts and South over-ruffed with the nine in dummy. Smith now held the queen-eight of hearts sitting over dummy's 10, giving her another sure trump trick to defeat the contract. Beautifully done!

NORTH
♠ K 9
♡ J 10 9 6
◇ A K 8 7
♣ Q 10 6

WEST
♠ 10 6 5 2
♡ 7 3
◇ J 9 6 5
♣ A K 3

EAST
♠ 7 4 3
♡ A Q 8
◇ 10 2
♣ J 9 8 5 2

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

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1NT*	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♡	Pass	4♡	All pass

*12-14 points

Opening lead: Ace of ♣

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Necessity is the mother of invention

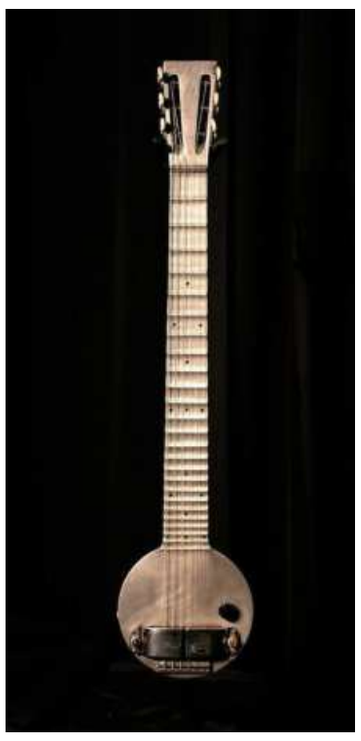
Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1891, Almon Strowger obtained a patent for the Strowger switch, which led to the automation of telephone circuit switching. He invented it after realising that he had lost a lot of business to a competitor because that person's wife was a telephone operator who was routing calls away from Strowger. His invention dug the grave for manual telephone operators, effectively burying that profession. Fittingly, what was Strowger's profession in his town?

2 Canadian physical education teacher James Naismith realised that his athletes lost their fitness during the winter months as all the grounds were frozen. To keep them fit, he invented an indoor sport using a ball and wicker buckets that the janitor used to gather peaches. After every point, they had to use a ladder to retrieve the ball. This was the birth of which global sport?

3 In 1902, Mary Anderson was in New York City on a snowy evening in a taxi. The ride was getting constantly delayed because the driver had to stop every few metres to manually do something in order to drive safely. She went back home, designed a simple device, applied for a patent and then offered it to companies, who all said it had 'no commercial value'. What was this invention, which is now mandatory for all cars?

4 Emperor Napoleon realised that large armies required regular supplies of quality food, so he offered a huge cash award to anyone who could help with this. Nicolas Appert, a confectioner, realised that food cooked inside a jar and sealed well did not spoil. His invention won him the prize, and was the start of what is now a billion-dollar industry. What did he invent, which was scientifically proven by Louis Pasteur 50 years later?



Making music In 1937, George Beauchamp secured a United States patent for his 'Frying Pan'. (WIKI COMMONS)

5 Margaret E. Knight was working at the Columbia Paper Bag company when she realised that the bags they produced were weak and could not withstand pressure on the base, making them unsuitable to carry bulky items. She had an idea, and built a prototype to make a better bag. What did she invent, that is now used by every food delivery company?

6 New Zealander Harold Gillies joined the Royal Army Medical Corps following the outbreak of World War I, where he helped a French dentist repair broken jaws. Seeing him experiment with skin graft techniques, Gillies convinced the English army's chief surgeon to establish a facial injury ward. While there, Gillies performed more than 11,000 operations, effectively establishing what branch of modern medicine that Sushruta was doing in ancient India?

7 In 1940, Candido ___ invented a hydrotherapy pump as a method of offering relief to his toddler son, who was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. Seeing that regular immersion in a bath of hot, aerated water helped him, Candido invented a pump that could be used in a normal tub. This invention soon became a popular addition to bathrooms and hotels worldwide. What was Candido's family name, which became associated with the invention?

8 Fritz Haber was a German chemist who, along with his assistant, invented the Haber-Bosch process, which is the catalytic formation of ammonia from hydrogen and nitrogen. Along with BASF (a German company), he was able to scale this reaction to produce commercial quantities of ammonia. This was for a particular use, which brought about a revolution that now helps more than half the world. What was Haber's invention used for?

9 Lyle Goodhue is credited with an invention that saved the lives of millions of soldiers from malaria during World War II. He developed an apparatus that allowed a fine spray of mosquito repellent to escape through a nozzle mounted on a container. What had he invented, that is now a billion-dollar industry by itself?

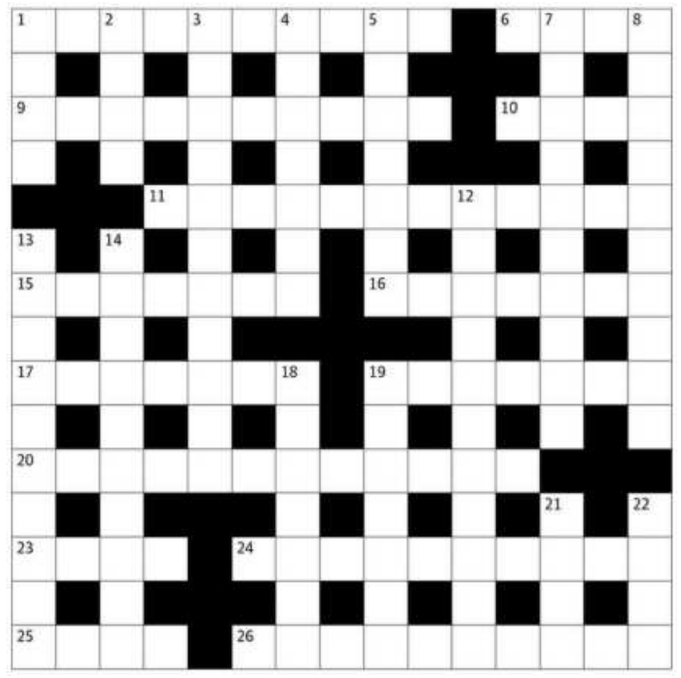
10 George Beauchamp was a guitarist who performed in bars and hotels. Hawaiian music became popular in the 1930s, and Beauchamp realised that listeners were not able to hear his slide guitar sound. He used a pair of horseshoe magnets to produce an electrical signal that could be amplified by a speaker. Known as the 'Frying Pan' because of its shape, what was this the very first example of?

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. An Undertaker
2. Basketball
3. Windshield wiper
4. Canned food (tin cans)
5. Flat-bottom paper bag
6. Modern plastic surgery
7. Jacuzzi
8. Industrial fertilizer
9. Aerosol spray
10. Electric guitar

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3297



Across

1 Brings in reductions – in confusion (10)
6 Characters in the picture Gladiator, for example (4)
9 They're accompanied by country music and silence, bizarrely (4,6)
10 Woman, one looking unchanged in the mirror (4)
11 Defend vessel in contest (12)
15 Brought together, in a church service, English and Dutch (7)
16 Looking vacant, initially giving affected wave, His Majesty (7)
17 Flies to Niagara, taking in country (7)
19 Lead putting energy into public relations? Give up! (7)
20 Side on border; America in charge; take the consequences (4,3,5)
23 Three learners maintaining university is quiet(4)
24 Sloshing space, Asian? (7,3)
25 Give life to Lord (4)
26 This makes a button do its work? That's sad (10)

Down

1 Everyman will start to specify afflictions (4)
2 Skipping intro, make-up of rock music's smallest section? (4)
3 A joke that's been told often? Told ten such, sadly (3,8)
4 Not identified, curiously mundane ... (7)
5 ... getting flat later in the day (7)
7 Comedian's necessity: drink on the job, son (5,5)
8 Reportedly fake aches? Here's some drinks! (10)
12 Six men we can corrupt; they're Americans (3,8)
13 Fats Waller altered natural features (10)
14 Choosy, wanting item (10)
18 Not especially impressive batting statistic (7)
19 One choosing to be more generously proportioned? (7)
21 Ace! It's flipping fizzy wine! (4)
22 Primarily, ferocious animal's nasty gnasher? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3296

Semiotics of crossing a road

Like the fictional chicken that wants to get to the other side, humans too have to puzzle over signs and codes to navigate life

Gouri Parvathy
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SATHEESH VELLINEZHI

Everyday life is an exercise in semiotics. This makes it easier, and yet infinitely more difficult.

Semiotics is a branch of knowledge that works with the study of signs. In semiotics, everything is a sign: from an overt sign like a signboard to the nuances of a fashion statement of a man wearing a skirt. Semiotics also rests on the premise that every sign is open to multiple interpretations.

Nevertheless, context provides valuable information as to what codes for what. Semiotics is invariably prevalent in all aspects of our life. A simple exercise of crossing a road becomes thus a thought-provoking application of the semiotic theory. A commute involves several aspects, and not all of us end up on the same side of the road (metaphorically and literally). For those of us who must cross roads, the reasons are clear unlike for the fictional chicken. This begs a different question, not of why, but of how the chicken crossed the road.

Assume that the chicken grows up in a small town; it is not expected to cross a lot of roads. The traffic is easy, everything it needs is near its fictional coop. But shifting to a large metro city shakes the chicken out of these assumptions. The city has three moods. The morning school rush, the mid-morning office rush, and the general largely dispersed evening rush.

An attempt to cross a road at any of these intervals leaves you very chicken-hearted. The very confused chicken now proceeds to concoct strategies for said road-crossing exercise. A school, being a no-speed zone, should allow for slower traffic, it assumes. But somehow the signs are to the contrary. The ruefully established speed bumps are helpful, but the semiotics are not pretty. The chicken establishes itself in front of the speed bumps. Very strategic, it pats itself on the back. The cars slow down, momentarily. The chicken cannot gather the courage to cross here. It tries to read car mechanics. The tyres flatten and rise, a cross-examination of the plausible friction of the uneven roads.

It tries a psychological analysis of the drivers towards chickens crossing the road. A deep dive into the mind. The chicken reels. But what does it behold but a few other beings crossing said streets with no dread of the oncoming vehicles! They are uncaring of the signs, there is no semiotic casing of the drivers, the streets, or the approaching vehicles. Amazed, the chicken follows said beings. The road is thus successfully crossed.

Semiotics is not always about a frantic reading of the everyday occurrences; only that which necessitate an analysis need be analysed. A school sign may indicate slower traffic, but also heavier traffic during the morning school hours. The contextual cues provide significant information here.

But the dilemma doesn't end there. Sometimes there are no other beings for the chicken to cross the road with. The chicken is dejected. But the chicken understands semiotics, perhaps a bit too much. When Derrida talked about signifiers floating in a sea of possible meanings, the chicken was fascinated and perhaps a little intimidated. In this infinitely floating entity what contextual possibilities can combine dichotomies? The chicken is evidently not good at contextual cues.

Imagine, the chicken is attempting to cross the road. The vehicles slow down at the speed bump, but then it spots the fanciness of slowing vehicles. What does a fancy car semiotically indicate? The chicken thinks of "fast cars". The chicken hesitates. The car passes by at a snail's pace. A semiotic exception, it thinks. A school bus passes, and the chicken is too polite to allow school education to be delayed. The bus passes. A food delivery service – they have strict time slots and someone might be hungry. Chicken nods, it has known hunger pangs. And the semiotic analysis continues until the chicken has stood beside the street for a full five minutes.

And lo, when the chicken has given up all hope, the crossing guard waves the vehicles to a stop; his elegant gestures indicating a pause. The sign is unambiguous, the code is similar, and the vehicles come to a halt. The chicken crosses the street.

Semiotics is often as complicated as the journey of a person with little or completely different understanding of contextual cues trying to cross the road.

A phenomenological understanding makes it certain that semiotics can also be intensely personal. Vis-a-vis crossing the road, what codes as "pass" for some may not code the same for another. A deeply personal and intersectional system, semiotics becomes a complex web of meanings.

Routing communication and interaction through the digital mode, we have as a population forgotten our understanding of social semiotics.

While older semantic models are replaced by newer technology-enabled ones, it is inadvisable that we forgo our basic origins, where semiotics has always helped us cross roads – both metaphoric and literal.

The ecstasy of silence

True wisdom lies in the journey of detaching from chaotic gossip

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One of my friends is often the butt of jokes for his quiet nature. He speaks very little and largely enjoys his own company.

But what's so bad about this? A person who speaks the least is often the one who thinks the most. Solutions to some of the most cumbersome problems come when we activate the frontal cortex (cognitive area of the brain) and not the Broca's area (speech area).

Victor Hugo, known for his intense writing marathons that sometimes lasted weeks, would lock himself in a small room on the top floor of his house, with a score of candles and a pile of paper.

In the end, it is not the number of words that matter, but the gravity they hold. The introduction to a research paper on the structure of DNA by Nobel Prize winners Watson and Crick was barely two-sentence long, compared with conventional two-page-long introductions!

Words take up energy; the more we speak, the less energy we have for other work. True wisdom lies in the journey of detaching from chaotic gossip and engaging with our deeper self. Silence too can convey meaning. Nelson Mandela, in his speech after years of imprisonment, paused for a long moment, a powerful gesture in front of his people.

Quietening the cacophony of inner thoughts is one of the core principles of meditation. Time spent being silent is the time we invest in ourselves, for our mental uplift and for embracing the beauty in small things.

Sowing seeds of compassion

Children can work through their pain with the support of a trusted family member, friend, teacher, or therapist

Vibha Krishnamurthy
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Many of the children I meet have experienced being left out, misunderstood, or bullied because they are different in some way. Some of them though emerge wiser from the experience.

In his early teens, Anant, who has ADHD, used to have enormous conflicts with his father. One day, when he was 17, he told me, "I really get my dad now, he is so much like me. We both mean well but we are impulsive and lose it, and then regret it later. It's not like we don't fight any more, but now I get that it's not about me."

My friend's 16-year-old told me about her incredibly boring history class. I was trying to commiserate with her by being critical of her teacher for not making the class more engaging, when she said, "It's hard for her you know. She has so many students and so much to finish in a couple of months. On days when she didn't have the time pressure, she could be fun."

I had expected frustration and eye-rolling from these teenagers and not compassion for the adults in their lives.

This isn't always the case. We have all met bitter and angry adults who rail against an unjust world. They seek vengeance because they have been wronged, and their anger seems justified. Yet, it makes me wonder about the children who don't end up that way. What is different about them? Temperament? Family and school environments? Nature or nurture?

There are no simple answers, but there are some things I have learnt through my own journey over the past year. I have had a mysterious painful illness over the past 18 months that defies medical explanation. After telling me that my tests were normal and that I should therefore not worry, the kindly medical professionals had nothing to offer. I found myself lurching between two extremes. I would either grit my teeth and soldier on with work and leisure, pretending I was okay and could do everything that I had done before, or I would become overwhelmed and devastated by what had become of me.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

But in the past few months, when I have had enough time to take care of myself, I find myself coping better. I pace my work, take naps, pause to notice what is happening in my body, and treat it with kindness. Then I find I can notice others. I look around the doctor's waiting room, and I see the tense bodies and anxious expressions. Everybody has something going on.

Children too need time and distance to make meaning of their own difficult experiences. When they have been cared for in their distress, they can then recognise it in others.

To offer pain as the grist to the mill of wisdom, you need one other thing. It is the presence of a caring person or community.

The wise young people I meet have in common that one person in their life – a trusted family member, friend, teacher, or therapist. In their book *What Happened to You*, Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey explain how the presence of one caring adult in the life of a child can mitigate the profound effect of trauma in childhood. We need that one person who will bear witness to our suffering and remind us that we are not alone in our pain.

I have learnt to listen and not offer solutions as my young patients observe their pain from a distance. The only thing I can teach them is the language to be kind to themselves instead of critical. Then I watch them opening themselves up to the possibility that they will not just get through, but perhaps grow from the pain.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Falling viewership of the Oscars in recent years is mainly because of the varying tastes of the younger generation. ('Is change in the air'; Mar. 3) The global entertainment industry is changing, at a faster pace now with the advent of revolutionary technology. Adapting to the times will save award ceremonies from being eclipsed in the long run.
Sri Vrinda Naineni

In the present scenario, cutting the coat to suit the body is a pragmatic strategy. Award shows need to adapt to changing times, but without sacrificing the glam and glitter which happen to be the alpha and omega of the Academy Awards et al.
A. Raveendranath

Power heroine

Bonnie Garmus created a marvellous story of a strong, independent, and resolute heroine whose life reflects the misogynistic travails faced by women of her time. ('A blast from the sexist 60s'; Mar. 3) Times have changed and women have moved forward, but not nearly enough. Garmus's heroine Elizabeth Zott will continue to inspire women.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Remote places

Thanks to Sudipta Datta, we discovered a travel writer of the likes of Colin Thubron: someone who is uninterested in writing about magnificent monuments and tourist spots. ('Travel writing in a closing world'; Mar. 3) He covers remote places and records the misfortune of unprotected forests, and uncared-for rivers. At the age of 84, he is still willing to take risks.
Satvik Venkat Madhavaram

Long fight

The life story of environmentalist Chandi Prasad Bhatt should inspire present-day youth. ('Witness to Chipko'; Mar. 3) In our pursuit of wealth and GDP, we should not ignore environmental protection. Women of the Garhwal hills have created history through the Chipko movement — worth emulating by grassroots environmentalists across the world.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Wild cities

The adaptability of gulls and terns in response to increasing urbanisation is astounding. ('Gulls for weather updates'; Mar. 3) Cattle egrets foraging for food in garbage dumps has become common sighting in recent years. Projects in urban areas should be reconsidered thoroughly before being given the final nod, as they are one of the main reasons for loss of habitat of aquatic birds.
Monita Sutherson

AI revolution

While there are opportunities associated with AI technology, there are also risks inherent in it. ('Real or realistic: what's your pick?'; Mar. 3) The inability to distinguish between the real and realistic is becoming more pronounced. There should be sufficient guardrails in place so that older people are not victimised by emergent AI technologies. Perhaps the only sustainable way is to not see development and inclusivity as a zero-sum game.
M.B. Zahir Abbas

MORE ON THE WEB

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The world of tent cinema
The whole town would wait for its arrival, and it was a celebration in its own right
Sujith Sandur

The magic of Gabo
Gabriel Garcia Marquez fractured our notion of reality with his stories
Soumalya Chatterjee

On human-wildlife conflict
Wayanad was once a place where there was a peaceful coexistence
Hari Arayammakul

Delicious Delhi
Every bite of street food can be an explosion of flavour if you know where to look
Abdullah Khan

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ART DUBAI: TAMING THE DIGITAL

One of the takeaways from the third edition of Art Dubai Digital is that AI is not evil. It is the intention behind it that matters

Nidhi Gupta

Tech showstoppers (Clockwise from left) Immersive exhibits at Arte Museum; curators Cramerotti and Scalera; VR art; and Krista Kim's *Heart Space* installation. (ART DUBAI)

The world became one in the smallest, darkest room at Madinat Jumeirah last week – and it happened because of AI. For four days at Art Dubai, Canadian-Korean digital artist Krista Kim stood inside *Heart Space*, an immersive installation within a mirror-panelled room with four podiums and a giant LED screen. Supported by the Zurich-based bank Julius Baer, this is where visitors could co-create an artwork.

Kim instructed visitors to place their thumbs on tiny capsule-shaped sensors that could read their heartbeats. The hardware would assess their mood and assign a colour. Within seconds, their heartbeats would join a sea of waves gently lapping against each other on the screen. "What we do is extract the algorithm and create colour, wave form and speed that is co-relating to your unique algorithm," she explained.

Heart Space is the latest invention born of Kim's "techism" philosophy, which espouses an urgent need for infusing "humanism" in the discourse around technology through art. "We've collaborated with a biometric technology company that creates an AI algorithm for your heartbeat," she said. "When I was listening to the CEO talk about creating these 'signature keys', I realised that this security mechanism can be used as a paint brush."

And because it's demonstrated like this, people can walk away thinking AI is not evil, she added. "They can realise that it's always the intention behind AI that matters; that it is possible to engage it in a way that is responsible, ethical, humane. That is something we can teach through art. The more artists that engage with AI, the better for humanity. It's crucial right now."

From 3D to NFTs

Anyone who's been to Dubai in the last decade could attest to the emirate's cosmopolitan techtopian ambitions. Art has rapidly gained importance as a marker of its cultural identity, beginning with the formation of Art Dubai in 2007 and now a burgeoning scene with independent galleries, collectors and artists from around the world. The city has also become the unlikely playground for art and technology to meet in unexpected ways.

"It's sort of an organic development," said Alfredo Cramerotti, co-curator of Art Dubai Digital, a section dedicated to exploring digital art in all its forms, now in its third year. "The ecosystem of advanced technology has made art production more accessible. It has allowed the world of artistic production to expand because, up to 50 years ago, if you didn't live in a major cultural centre, like New York, London or Paris, you could forget about being an artist."

For him and co-curator Auronda Scalera, the new capitals of digital art might be Hong Kong, Miami, Zurich. "The whole GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] region is open to technology to produce new cultural forms," he said. "It is really curious because the majority of these artists come from the Global South," added Scalera, which tied in neatly with the overarching theme of this year's edition of the art fair.

Inside Art Dubai Digital, curated with the theme of 'Expansion/Diffusion' inspired by American astronomer Edward Hubble's theory of expansion of the universe, Cramerotti and Scalera gathered artists, galleries, collectors, even "post-institutions" (that support and market art without a physical address) from Argentina to Panama and Seoul. All explore the ecosystem, from digital art creation and production to the marketplace.

At the entrance, we met London-based design studio Looty's Nigerian co-founders, who were displaying the loot of their "digital heist" from when they went into the British Museum – 3D-scanned "stolen" African artefacts reproduced in the form of 3D hologram presentations. In a maze of drawing robots, VR headsets and motion-sensitive frames, sat Italian video art pioneer Fabrizio Plessi's *Digital Gold* series – with screens as frames musing on the possibility of eternal life, through sharp AI-generated animation and real-time gaming. Entertaining for some, derivative for others, experiences like these perhaps indicate not just the future of digital art, but also the possibilities for a non-siloed, integrated cultural landscape.

Revolutionising art

If Kim's goal is to reframe our relationship with AI, contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani's might be to amplify her feminist visions to a decibel level that can no longer go unheard. At Alserkal Avenue, the vibrant hub of contemporary arts in Dubai, Malani's nine-channel video installation, *Can You Hear Me?*, took over the cavernous art space called The Concrete, while the 2023 video artwork *Ballad of a Woman*, was projected onto its facade. In these 88 animations made on her iPad, jarring, beautiful and disturbing, Malani responds to and reckons with the violent rape and death of an eight-year-old girl in 2018.

"The most fascinating thing about technology in art is its capacity to address issues that cannot be addressed in any other way," said Pablo del Val, artistic director of Art Dubai. For him, the use of technology in art has been key in the development of thought and creation. "Think of photography, especially video. Our perception of time was revolutionised. You could manipulate time, and storytelling came into the picture. It's the same thing with digital. Of course, now there is AI; we don't know where we are going."

But, medium and form no bar, all art and storytelling is about one thing in the end: being human. "It doesn't matter if we do it with a software or a paint brush," said del Val. "Artists have the capacity to produce with tools they never had before. But look around and you'll see it. Technology cannot get over the hand that has made it."

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

Watch | Art Dubai 2024 highlights on **magazine.thehindu.com**

Shakuntala's armoured Dior runway

The Mumbai-based multimedia artist's collaboration with the fashion house has once again brought the focus back to body politics

Aatish Nath

Show of strength (Clockwise from left) Cane armour on the Dior runway; Shakuntala Kulkarni; and the artist in her studio. (ADRIEN DIRAND, LAURA SCIACOVELLI, AND PRARTHNA SINGH)

On February 27, at Paris Fashion Week, Dior went back to the 60s. But instead of leaning on its 'swinging' tag, creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri had her models wend their way around life-size, cage-like cane forms. Crafted by Mumbai-based artist Shakuntala Kulkarni, the commanding pieces placed at the centre of the runway in Tuileries Garden brought to mind many things: ancient carapaces, imposing samurai *yoroi* (armour), but also a sense of strength.

While Chiuri's Fall/Winter 2024-2025 collection focused on the decade of liberated fashion – a transitional era that brought with it the duality of classic fashion and ready-to-wear – Kulkarni's sculptures offset it perfectly with its symbolised dichotomy of notions of protection and restricted movement. "We were speaking about women's empowerment and freedom," says the multimedia artist, 74. "Maria was looking at the new woman and so was I, or rather the possibility of who she could become. Strength and energy, grace and dignity. Maria used fabric and I used cane as fabric to protect."

As the world takes notice of Kulkarni's 12-year questioning of women's body politics, she tells the *Magazine* about the collaboration with the French fashion house and why the message of her cane armour is always important.

Question: *How did the collaboration with Dior come about?*
Answer: One of Dior's directors walked into Chemould Prescott Road in March or April last year, during my exhibition *Quieter than Silence - Compilation of Short Stories*. He saw my catalogues of *Juloos* [a four-screen video installation created in 2015] and *Of Bodies, Armour and Cages*, and gave it to Maria Grazia Chiuri. When I had a conversation with Maria, I realised that we were both speaking about women's empowerment and freedom. She was looking at the new woman and so was I – or rather the possibility of who she is, of who she could become. I love movement; I use body language in my films and installations. Hence, the models walking in choreographed movements appealed to me. It was a great experience working together and an opportunity to create an installation in a huge space.

Q: *Your series of armour protects the body but traps it too. Why the dichotomy?*
A: Once, when I was walking in a crowded place in Mumbai, drops of tar fell on me and burned parts of my body. It triggered the notion of protection in public spaces. I was also reading about the rapes in India, and I felt responsible to address it. Thus, the notion of protecting the body from atrocities and violence came up. I designed the armour in such a way that it was a metaphor for protection even as it trapped the body within its cage-like structure. Marriages are supposed to protect a girl, but sometimes atrocities are committed against her. There are honour killings, dowry deaths, consumption, objectification. These are just a few examples to clarify why the armour is used as both protection and as a cage that traps the female body within the patriarchal society.

Q: *Since you created the first armour in 2012, have your views on the threats faced by women changed?*
A: Threats to women continue. Though many are economically independent and confident today, and so are able to deal with threats, many others are still struggling. So, I will continue to address victimisation and power. The cane armour speaks about the vulnerability of the trapped body versus safety and protection from atrocities.

The writer is based in Mumbai.

Watch | Kulkarni and Chiuri on the Dior collaboration, on **magazine.thehindu.com**