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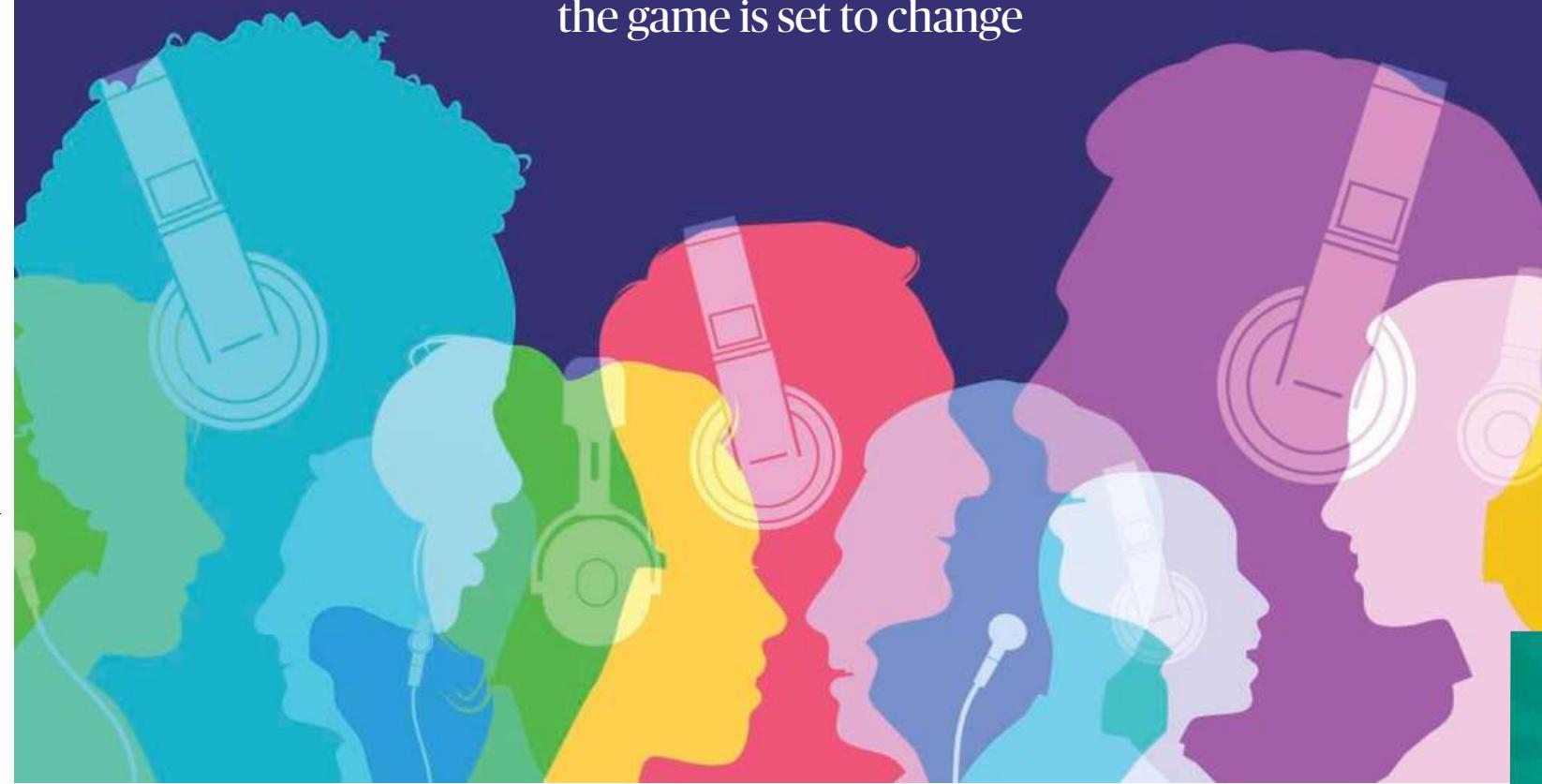
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INSIDE INDIA'S PODCAST GENERATION

The market is growing with over 100 million listeners. And with vodcasts on the scene, the game is set to change



Aditya Mani Jha

Earlier this month, while chatting with Vir Das about his new memoir, *The Outsider*, he told me his agents had nudged him to write the book. In part, because it “felt like a natural career progression” for a mainstream stand-up comic. Most publicists today would concur that celebrities would benefit from a diverse range of offerings, from books to streaming shows. Now, you can add podcasts to that list.

Chances are that every celebrity you follow has made podcast appearances, or have their own shows. Such as Bollywood actor Ananya Panday with her *So Positive* podcast, or entrepreneur Nikhil Kamath, or chef Ranveer Brar, or indeed Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who made his podcasting debut earlier this year. The recent Bihar election saw Prashant Kishore, Tejaswi Yadav and Chirag Paswan doing a round of podcast appearances in the lead-up to the polls.

With its relaxed, casual vibe and freewheeling conversations, podcasts are still a relatively young medium; they have been around for just over two decades. In India, it took off in a big way during the pandemic, when the movie and live concert businesses pressed pause. Folks stuck indoors became devoted listeners to whatever took their fancy: history, self-improvement, true crime, pop psychology, politics, or good old-fashioned comedy. Genres that are still extremely popular with Indian listeners.

An industry in flux
India ranks third globally in podcast consumption (after China and the U.S., according to PwC's 2020-24 report). In 2020, the country had over 57 million monthly listeners, while current estimates place that number above 100 million – with the industry's total worth being projected

to reach \$2.6 billion by 2030.

The money people have, of course, taken notice – upscaling their investment, and carving out a new space almost, especially in terms of promotions and marketing. Though precise advertising revenue figures are hard to come by, the increasing number of ads in podcasts are a clear indicator of their success. Sponsorships and other routes of revenue are also opening up. “While new creators will take time to make money, for those with the right mix of content and reach, there is money to be made,” says Aditya Kuber, Vice President of Dentsu Podcast Network. “Host fees can start anywhere from ₹30,000 an episode and go up to ₹2 lakh or more. Even independent podcasters, if they control their costs, have a better opportunity to monetise their shows now. There are a lot of folks who are making meaningful money, ranging from ₹50,000 onwards.”

An abundance of free content and low subscription prices are significant factors behind India's podcast boom, as is the recent upswing in Indian-language podcasts. A visually-forward young demographic is also driving the biggest shift of 2025: podcasts giving

way to vodcasts.

No longer just for the ears, podcasters now come with film crews in tow. In February, YouTube announced that it had 1 billion monthly users watching its podcast content. (The platform has upped features for podcasters too, from having them sign up for their ads service to providing more robust analytics, and using the algorithm to recommend podcasts to users.) Since then, Spotify, ousted from its first place, is aggressively trying to catch up. Top podcasts such as *The Joe Rogan Experience* and *The Mel Robbins Podcast* are now publishing on video.

“Vodcasts are the norm,” says Kuber. “India is a video-heavy country. YouTube is so deeply embedded in the consumption pattern that if I said there's a new podcast, people will ask what's your YouTube channel?” The video platform's reach makes discovery easier too, and their monetisation model is well established.

The story today

“When we started in 2018, it was a nascent scene,” remembers film critic Aditya Shrikrishna, who co-hosts *The Other Banana* podcast, a venue for in-depth conversations about Indian cinema, especially Tamil films. “Podcasting was niche not just in terms of who was doing it, as the big guys hadn't yet caught on to the medium, but also the listeners. Also, podcasting was still very audio-focused in those days. Nowadays most of the big podcasters will have videos, by default.”

In the last few years, “podcasts have grown and diversified”, says Dhruvank Vaidya, Head of Music and Podcasts at Spotify India. “While it's true that Bollywood celebrities like Ananya Panday, Sonali Bendre and Soha Ali Khan have all started podcasting, creators from across fields have grown in popularity, too. Raj Shamani (*Figuring Out*), and Aishwarya Singh and Aryaan Misra (*Desi Crime*), for instance, have

Who is listening?

While listenership cuts across demographics, it skews more towards the young. “Gen Z is a large audience. I'd say up to 35 years of age is a larger cohort,” says Kuber. “Then there's a secondary cohort, from 35 to 45-50 years of age. And a much smaller one beyond that who seek out very specific information, whether it is wellness or finance.”

gained a steady and loyal base on Spotify. The beauty of long-form conversations is that there is space to build a loyal base of followers in different areas of interest.”

That last line by Vaidya is significant since it speaks to two key ways in which the podcasting industry has matured in India: long-form content and devoted fan followings. People have shown their appetite for longer, detailed conversations. Ranveer Allahbadia's interview with former cricketer Yuvraj Singh a couple of years ago was over 150 minutes long. Episodes of Nikhil Kamath's *WTF Is* podcast are often over 100 minutes.

Tripwire of recency bias

Compared to a few years ago, podcasters like Shrikrishna are finding a more clearly-defined market now, thanks to a mixture of online metrics that help them keep track of which episodes and issues are garnering more eyeballs, and the increased social media presence of Indian consumers. *The Other Banana* has an ongoing series on the filmmaker Bala's filmography,

A selection of popular podcasts (below).
(GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

for example – the focus on individual directors was validated after Shrikrishna and his co-hosts found that the series had returning, steady audiences.

But, with a greater market comes recency bias (prioritising new information) and a certain amount of emphasis on “trending” topics. “I think the strategy has changed, for multiple reasons. When we started doing podcasts, we didn't really have an idea of who the target audience was, what worked, et cetera. We could have really left-field topics for our episodes,” says Shrikrishna. “Now, there is a definite market for podcasts, so we try to discuss more recent films. At the same time, widespread access to streaming means more audiences can easily view the movies we are talking about on the podcast, new or old.”

A new form of celebrity

This new digital era has spawned a new class of celebrity – the ‘Internet famous’ person, a demographic that includes podcasters and YouTubers. “Today, the definition of ‘celebrity’ has undergone a transformation,” said Vaidya. “Raj Shamani is India's biggest podcaster and Bollywood stars across the board feature on his podcast, especially when they have films to promote. *Desi Crime* is not



What irks me is the pressure to follow trends. When Kiran [Manral] and I started *Not My Aunty*, it was very conversation based. As much as our audience enjoys our chatter, there is a demand for interview-based podcasts because that's what is getting consumed more. But this ranking gives us confidence that what we're doing is working

SHUNALI SHROFF
Podcaster, whose show was ranked #73 on Goodpods' global ranking

only a world-class podcast, but when they [the hosts] published their book based on the podcast, it went straight to No.1 [on Amazon]. Another hugely popular one is the Tamil podcast, *Schumy Vanna Kavyangal Bodcast* [a fun take on a variety of topics], which is one of the biggest in the country, by consumption.”

Vaidya points to the professionalism of these creators as the defining factor for their success, which speaks to the overall professionalisation of the podcasting space as well.

Consistency and quality are the key. “All the three podcasts I mentioned have been churning out episodes every week, sometimes multiple times a week, for four to five years. That's no accident. Their episodes are also well researched, they pay attention to detail and don't take their audience for granted. This shows in the quality of the episodes. As a result, audiences don't just stick, they become fans.”

Looking at 2026

After the initial explosion of podcasts post the pandemic, the Indian podcasting industry has quietly recalibrated. As we enter 2026, expect podcasts to continue their cautious expansion, and for podcasting conversations to become even more ‘mainstream’.

According to Shailesh Sawlani, Country Manager (India), Audible, “The early wave of podcasting in India was marked by an explosion of creative experimentation, a time when new voices and ideas were finding their place in a fresh and exciting medium. What we're seeing now is a natural evolution of that phase. There's been a move towards more purposeful, quality-driven storytelling. Listeners today are seeking depth, authenticity, immersion, and craft in the stories they choose to listen to. That shift has encouraged creators and services alike to focus on thoughtful curation and formats rather than volume alone.”

And, of course, expect more vodcasts. Despite audiophiles being sceptical about this new form, it's here to stay. And with even streaming platforms getting set to make the change – Netflix is joining the bandwagon, developing exclusive shows and licensing existing hits in 2026, according to Bloomberg – we can stay tuned for so much more in the new year.

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

MORE ON
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Hope snarled

The story examines how people act in times of desperation, shining a light on morality and human nature



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New York-based Megha Majumdar sets her second novel, *A Guardian and a Thief*, a National Book Award finalist and an Oprah Book Club pick, in Kolkata of the future. But the city's present-day denizens, battling uncharacteristic heat, frequent storms and catastrophic rains brought on by global warming, may feel that they are already living through it.

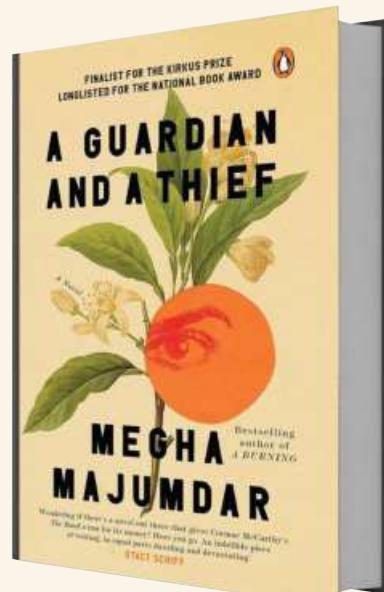
Writers like Amitav Ghosh have chronicled "monsters" in the garb of extreme events in their books. In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the concluding pages describe a cyclone which sends a great wall of water surging through the mangrove forests in the Sundarbans. Climate disasters have upended lives, resulting in waves of migration.

Majumdar imagines the physical horror of living through such acute discomfort, "the sun a pistol against one's head", and the consequences thereof, like drought, floods and hunger. As the city, rife with corruption, weeps for a "handful of something to eat", Majumdar introduces readers to her two sets of protagonists, on either side of the class divide, one with resources, one without.

Dadu, his daughter Ma and granddaughter Mishti are leaving the city in seven days to join the child's father in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he has accepted a research position on mosquito-borne diseases at a laboratory. After rounds of exhausting paperwork, convincing bureaucrats of his usefulness to America, he finally manages to get climate visas for his family. But when we are told, "All Ma needed to do was survive these seven days", it ominously portends the happenings that will unfold over a week.

Shifting rights and wrongs
Ma and Dadu take their guardianship of Mishti very seriously. Ma has routinely pilfered from donations made to the shelter where she used to work before quitting for the impending journey to America; Dadu cannot believe his granddaughter is going hungry in his beloved city, and doesn't think twice before snatching an orange from a boy. After all, the pain of others is never as "acute or compelling as one's own pain". But someone knows about Ma's secret, and thereby hangs a tale of moral ambiguity, fate, exile, home, love and loss.

Boomba had moved into the shelter after he landed in the city from his village in search of work. Feeling responsible for his poor family, and a brother, Robi, whom he adores, he is looking for ways to find a home for them, when he witnesses Ma squirrelling away nuts, raisins, rice and lentils. Majumdar, like in her debut



A Guardian and a Thief
Megha Majumdar
Hamish Hamilton
₹699

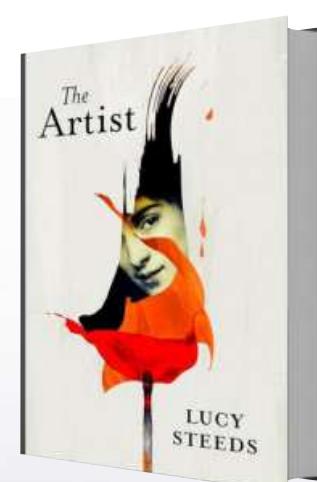
novel, *A Burning*, examines human nature in its extremity. How do people behave under pressure, in times of desperation and acute hunger? Where is their moral centre? Do ideas of right and wrong shift? What does love or hope look like? Aren't Ma and Boomba both guardians and thieves? Like Ma, Boomba's moral compass points toward the north of his own family – he is "no monster".

Of leaving home

It is Ma's duty, as a guardian, "to put into action the beautiful ideal of hope". But where is hope? Ma thinks harshly, perhaps echoing struggling, hungry mothers around the world. "Hope for the future was no shy bloom but a blood-maddened creature, fanged and toothed, with its own knowledge of history's hostilities and the cages of the present. Hope wasn't soft or tender. It was mean. It snarled. It fought. It deceived."

In a city full of contradictions, the crisis is a leveller of sorts, but there's no comparison between what the rich suffer and what the poor endure. Majumdar's descriptions of Ma's life and home are pitch perfect, but she comes up a tad short while writing about Boomba and his family, particularly their village experiences. That's a minor quibble in a book that puts moral dilemmas under the scanner in such terrifying fashion.

It's perhaps not amiss to wish that Majumdar, who was born in Kolkata and moved to the U.S. for her studies, writes about the immigrant experience someday in the future. In this book, she devotes a brilliant, tiny chapter on Mishti's father's America. For Babu, the pride of having immigrated is also, in truth, the wound. And he wants every opportunity to examine the wound, always looking for an opportunity to speak about the home he has left behind.



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Lucy Steeds always knew that she wanted to write a novel. "I would write on my phone during my commute," says the British writer. Then, in September 2022, she decided to just do it. She saved up and applied for a novel writing course at the U.K.'s Faber Academy, giving herself a year to finish the book. "I really stuck to that deadline. I am an inveterate polisher of commas, and could have tinkered with every metaphor and detail of my book forever. But having a deadline meant I had to propel myself onwards."

Thus was born her debut novel *The Artist* (published by John Murray), which won the Waterstones Debut Fiction Prize 2025. This deeply immersive read set in France catapults you into a "low, rambling farmhouse" in post-World War I Provence, where it is primarily set, and revolves around the lives of three characters – a reclusive "great" artist, Edouard Tartuffe, his niece, Ette, and Joseph, an aspiring journalist. Steeds says that her ability to perceive the world in images turned out to be a superpower while writing the book, helping her create a world filled with fictional artwork. "I was imagining these works of art which did not exist, trying to translate them into words in a way a reader could then picture the same thing as in my head," she says. In a Zoom interview, Steeds talks about the genesis of her novel, some of the key themes it addresses and how she tried to make *The Artist* both authentic and accessible. Edited excerpts:

Question: Ideas about the artistic process, authorship, value creation, and the art market are central to your novel. And yet your reader gets to experience the world of art without necessarily having to be a connoisseur.

Answer: I was aware that a book about art could very easily feel



IN CONVERSATION

HOUSE OF SECRETS

Debut author Lucy Steeds on her prize-winning novel about a famous painter and the debate around 'art monsters'

quite exclusionary, and I never wanted people to feel excluded by this book. So, I'm really glad you say that the book feels accessible, because I very deliberately never used academic language in this book.

Art always has to feel like something that pulls you in and never holds you at arm's length. I had to find a way of describing paintings without weighing them down with academic terms; just because I've done my research and gone into an archive doesn't mean that the reader has to follow me. So I was very conscious, for example, to never use words like Surrealist, Cubist or Post-Impressionist to describe a painting, because if a reader doesn't know what a Cubist painting looks like, it is a wasted

word. I never wanted anyone to have to put the book down and Google something.

Q: Can you talk about the closed setting, limited characters and dual perspectives of Ette and Joseph, and how that ends up making the reader physically feel the claustrophobia, the rot, the slow unravelling of its central characters?

A: This feeling of entrapment comes from the fact that you know every texture in that house... those plaster walls, how the light comes in through the kitchen window. The reader enters this house like Joseph at the beginning, excited to be in this new place in the beautiful South of France, the home of this famous painter.

Then, the more time you

spend in this very tense house, the more repellent it becomes. By the end of the book, hopefully, you, as a reader, want to break out of this house; like the characters, you need to escape from it. There is this over-ripeness, this accumulation, this building up until things reach a tipping point, and everything becomes too much and too horrible.

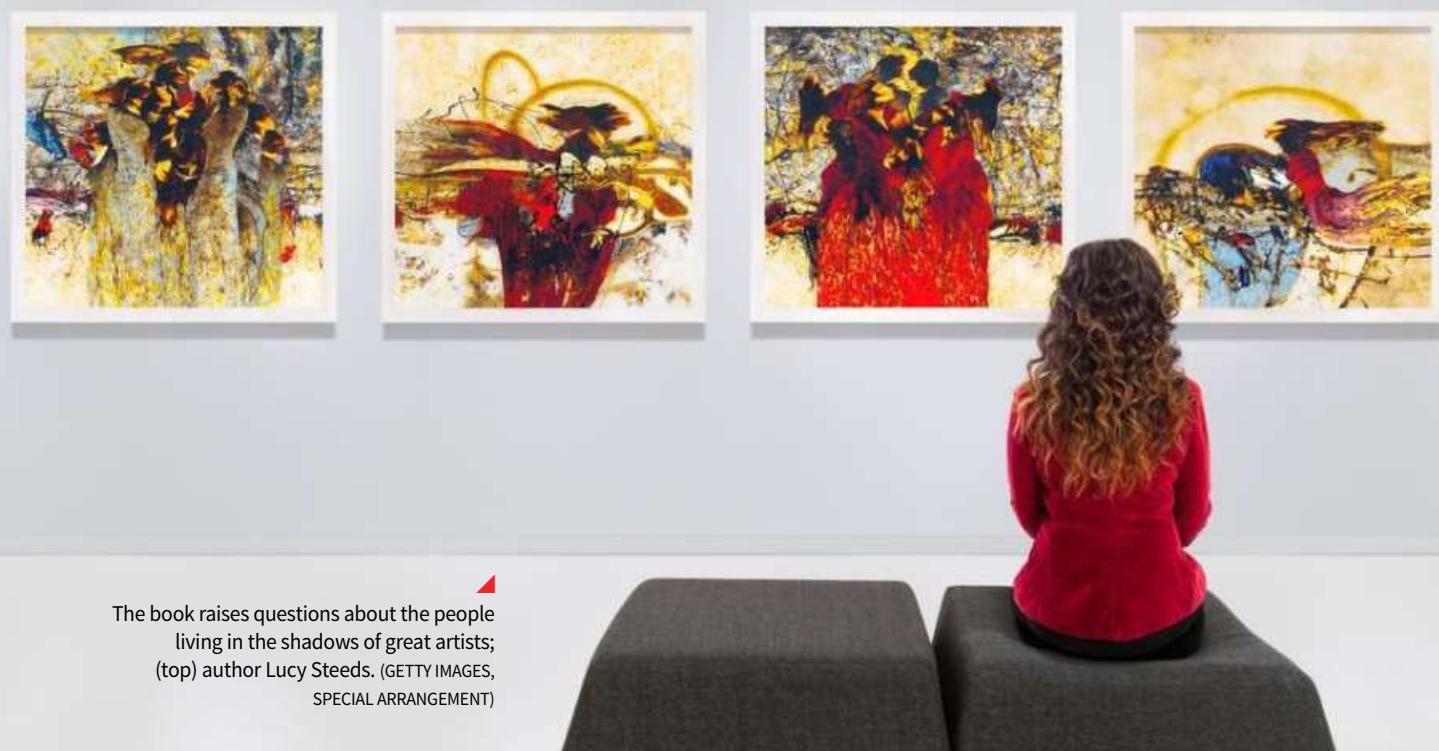
This is a story where you have one form of stasis: the house does not change. You have to generate energy from somewhere else. So, it all comes through these characters, three very different people, all of whom have secrets. I put them inside a house, locked the door and then I just turned the temperature up over the summer, so it became these three people circling each other and peeling away each other's secrets.

Q: The conversation about the art of monstrous men and how we should approach it has been a long-standing one. But your book's focus went beyond that to look at the people who lived in and were often drowned by the shadows of these men.

A: That was extremely deliberate and was at the forefront of my mind when I was writing because I was reading a lot about art monsters, these monstrous figures who treat people around them horribly, but create great art. The argument always made about art monsters is that they were terrible people, but we get great art, and maybe that's the price we have to pay.

But the more I read about this, the less I was interested in that argument of all the art we've gained. Instead, I was thinking of all the art we have lost. My thoughts were about what the people around these monsters could have created if they had not been cowed down and subservient, and had to hide themselves and fit themselves into these great monsters' shadows.

I was thinking a lot about (Vladimir) Nabokov, for instance, who wrote these beautiful works of literature, but used to boast that his wife, Véra, would lick his stamps and fold his umbrella for him. And you get this impression of this great man creating great works of literature because he knew there was someone to clean up after him, raise his children, prepare his meals, lick his stamps. And my thoughts when I read that weren't 'Thank god, we have *Lolita*'. It was about what Véra Nabokov could have created had she not been folding umbrellas.



The book raises questions about the people living in the shadows of great artists; (top) author Lucy Steeds. (GETTY IMAGES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

BROWSER

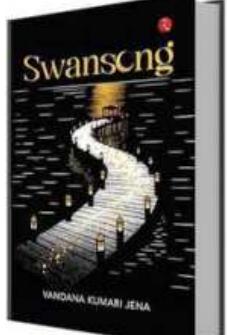
Swansong

Vandana Kumari Jena

Rupa

₹295

Through 24 stories that disturb, provoke and linger, the author paints a revelatory portrait of lives on the brink. Like old neighbours and friends, the characters may be familiar, but shadows lurk behind everyday occurrences. The author, a retired IAS officer, has also published two novels.



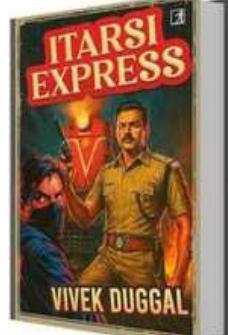
Itarsi Express

Vivek Duggal

Simon & Schuster

₹399

When a former Mumbai encounter cop picks up on a pattern in a string of disappearances on a train route, he is forced to give up his desk job, face his inner demons and dig deep into the city's murky underworld. A fast-paced thriller for the holiday season.



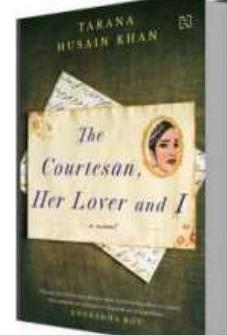
The Courtesan, Her Lover and I

Tarana Husain Khan

Hachette India

₹699

The food and culture historian's fourth novel traces the life of Munni Bai Hijab, a famous courtesan associated with the 19th century Urdu poet Dagh Dehlvi. Munni Bai is known to have been a poet herself but was she perhaps eclipsed by the immortal verses written in her honour by Daghvi?



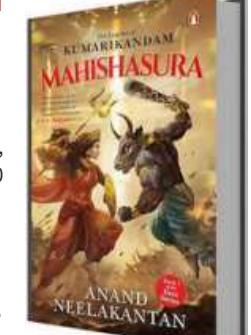
Mahishasura: The Legend of Kumarikandam

Anand Neelakantan

Penguin Random House

₹599

Renowned for his mythological fiction, Neelakantan sets his new novel 70,000 years ago, reimagining the Devi Purana for the modern-day reader. Blending science, technology, AI and ancient tales, this novel tells the story of an intergalactic war that will decide the fate of people on Earth.





GETTY IMAGES

A voting force

In her new book, Ruhi Tewari explains why women are turning out in large numbers to exercise their franchise but are still under-represented in politics

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The Lok Sabha poll of 2019 was a watershed moment for Indian women. This was the first election since independence that saw a parity in male and female voting percentages, and established in cold, hard numbers a trend that had been apparent for sometime, of women voters in India increasingly exercising their franchise.

Qualitative research also established that this higher voting pattern was accompanied, in many cases, with an independent voting stance vis-à-vis family and caste.

Ruhi Tewari's book, *What Women Want: Understanding the Female Voter in Modern India*, looks at this phenomenon at a time when the women's vote is deciding the election, at the national and State levels in India.

The book interperses larger themes with her reportage as a journalist across the country and is spread across many elections. She examines the factors that may explain this trend, providing a framework to read the phenomenon.

Four phases

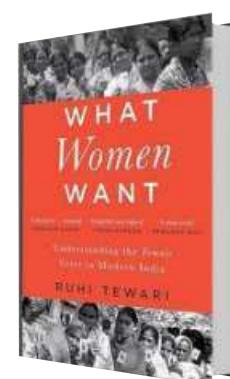
She looks at four distinct phases to study the evolution of women voters. The first phase is between 1951 and 1984, which she refers to as "the era of indifference", when the gender gap in voting was in double figures.

The second period she examines is between 1984-2004, when the assassination of former prime minister Indira Gandhi saw a large turnout of women in sympathy with her son Rajiv Gandhi, giving him the largest mandate ever in India's electoral history. This turnout sowed the seeds of viewing women voters as an important bloc. Then, the passage of the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution, reserving one-third seats for women in local bodies, led to a significant increase in women's participation in electoral politics. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act led to further empowerment of women. From 2004 to 2014, for the first time, many women could get some assurance of income in rural areas. Post 2014, and thanks to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's specific wooing of women voters at the national level via social welfare programmes like Ujjwala, Lakshmi Didi, et al, women voters are swinging elections, like we have

just witnessed in Bihar. Tewari explains welfare politics and how policies directed at women differ in architecture and intent from those of others. Women usually respond to welfare programmes that ease their everyday life, and keep the family and their children front and centre, and are less inclined compared to men to prioritise identity issues.

Having said that, the charisma of leaders, who also go out of their way to woo women voters, is also examined.

Importantly, Tewari highlights the entire premise of women emerging as a "casteless" category, divorced from the context of social identity of caste and religion. This ability to vote on gender rather than caste, she says, is an ease



What Women Want:
Understanding the Female Voter in Modern India
Ruhi Tewari
Juggernaut
₹599

granted to less caste oppressed or majority community women, while women of marginalised communities may still vote on communarian lines, due to the nature of oppression. These are important insights into the voting behaviour of women.

Low presence in politics

Peppered through the book is also the fact that while women as voters are emerging into their own, women's representation as legislators at the national and State level, where reservations have not been granted, remains abysmally low. Quite simply, women's presence at the hustings are even now largely as voters, not as candidates, and political parties have not shown any active inclination to field women candidates.

The passage of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023 that reserves 33% seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies means that political parties will have to look for women candidates once the Census and delimitation of seats for the Lok Sabha are over. Tewari's book is a reminder that the evolution of the women's vote is a complex phenomenon with its own contradictions, which she manages to capture well.

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When Anuradha Roy talks about the difference between writing fiction and non-fiction, she quotes journalist Janet Malcolm from *The Journalist and the Murderer*: "The writer of fiction is... the master of his own house and may do what he likes in it," whereas "the writer of non-fiction is only a renter, who must abide by the conditions of his lease...." One of the conditions of this "lease" is that the non-fiction writer "limit himself to events that actually occurred and to characters who have counterparts in real life".

This language around houses feels like an extension of the headspace Roy has lived in for the past year-and-a-half, as she wrote *Called by the Hills: A Home in the Himalaya* (John Murray/Hachette India). Whether she rents or owns the brick-and-mortar structure of "what must have been a cowshed once" the reader does not find out, but in the 'limitations' of writing of real people and places, she says she found "pleasure", even "relaxation".

With fiction, "I am completely drained by the time I finish a novel." This is her sixth book but her first non-fiction, which draws from magazine articles she had written and notes in diaries she had kept in her initial years in the mountains.

Produced with the same slowness in its attention to detail, the book paints word images of people who populate the author's world in Ranikhet, a town with a population of fewer than 20,000. Reproductions of Roy's watercolours of her surroundings – mostly mountainscapes and plants – help the reader fall into step with the unhurried cadence of her life.

Stories from memory

Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015 and won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2016. *All the Lives We Never Lived* was shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award and won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2022.

In *Called by the Hills*, Roy writes about her life since 2000, when she and her husband moved with their dog to Ranikhet in Uttarakhand. From a 19th century



IN CONVERSATION

THE CONSTANT GARDENER

Writer-designer-potter Anuradha Roy's new book recounts a slow adventure, the kind that takes 25 years to live through and then write about



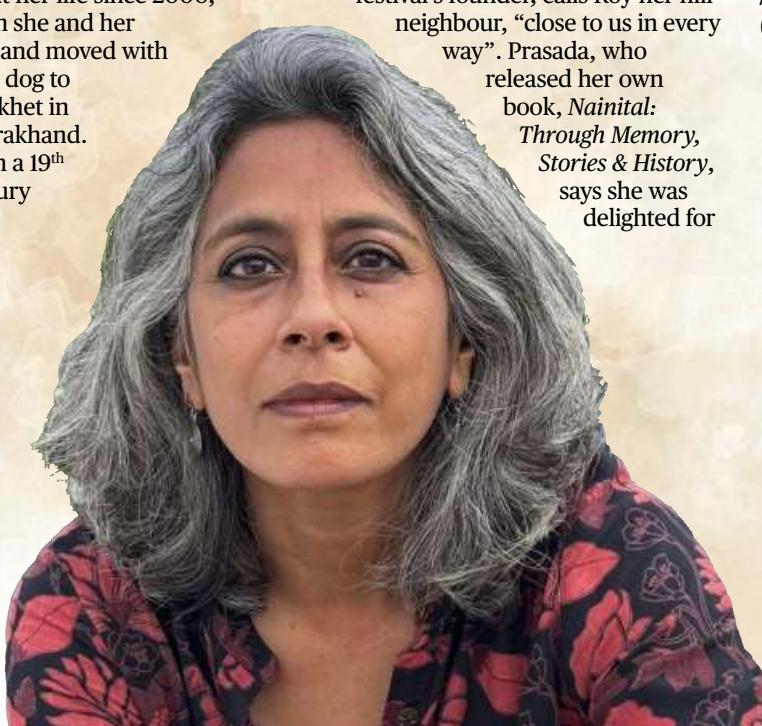
Artwork from Anuradha Roy's book; and (below) the author. (SHEELA ROY)

the book to be unveiled at Himalayan Echoes, because the "festival speaks for nature" and Roy's work is in synergy with the book fest's ethos of discussions around "living spaces".

Central to Roy's book is her garden – there are 107 references to it – and her struggle with first identifying plants, then learning about soil, and the more enjoyable pastime of tracking the barbet making off with apple halves. She calls it a "borrowed garden" with her "chief ally" in the initial years a rum-ravaged, grieving "frail, gentle alcoholic" neighbour. "Amit's wife had died of cancer not long before, and now he lived alone in a cottage called Trévone, a home they had shared." In time, he left Roy his day lilies and other plants.

Rooted like deodars

Called by the Hills can be



positioned as the opposite of Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* (2018), a series of sketches which flits through a life lived across borders. Roy's is rooted, like the deodars in the wilderness just beyond her garden, or even like the lemon tree she plants, which remains despite its refusal to fruit. The two books meet at the point at which they register alarming changes: Tokarczuk's borderless travel difficult to imagine in an increasingly suspicious world shutting down to 'outsiders'; Roy's experience with deforestation and 'development' leading to increasing human-animal conflict. In the last chapter, when she describes her dog lost to a leopard, she says, "Something broke with Jerry's killing, not just within us, but also in our relationship with the forest."

At Himalayan Echoes, one of the questions Roy is asked is around her prose leaving spaces for her reader to imagine things a character may think, feel, or do. In *Called by the Hills* too, if a reader were to imagine her home as a character, most of it is left undescribed. There are bits and pieces, so the reader can put it together in their mind. Like the part where she talks about the bookshelves being made "by a village carpenter who had slopes so ingrained in him that any furniture that came from his hands acquired a slope as well".

Portrait of a town

Roy refers to her partner as R (though not coyly in the way Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, refers to H).

"People who know us know it's Rukun (Advani) and there's a little doodle of him in the book, but he didn't want to be named, and I accepted that," she says. Roy and Advani started the publishing house Permanent Black during the time they were making the gradual move from Delhi to Ranikhet, 25 years ago. Now, he runs operations and does the acquisitioning and editing, and she the book design and publicity.

In any case, she says, the book is not about R, or even about her, or their relationship. "I think of it as a travelogue by someone who stopped travelling, and stayed in the place she was writing about. I really wanted it to be about the town, the people, and the way they react to two complete aliens coming and settling in their midst," she says, adding that it is also about two urban people going slowly rural.

To keep the focus on the Himalaya and people connected with it, Roy put in a chapter on writers with a connection to the mountains, but decided to leave out a chapter on writers not from the Himalaya who come to their home to finish books or to visit. She tells the story of launching Jean Drèze's 2017 book *Sense and Solidarity: Jholaawala Economics for Everyone in Ranikhet*.

"We organised a little book launch in our garden with just him, the two of us, the dogs. And there was a former student of his who happened to be around; she cut the ribbon around the book. The whole thing was just lovely, and I wrote a little blog post about it. That made the whole print run sell out very quickly," she remembers.

Roy is now in the process of working on her next novel. As one character says in the book, "Sophar-sogud".

The interviewer was invited to Himalayan Echoes, Kumaon's Festival of Literature & Arts.



Visvesvaraya biography wins NIF Prize

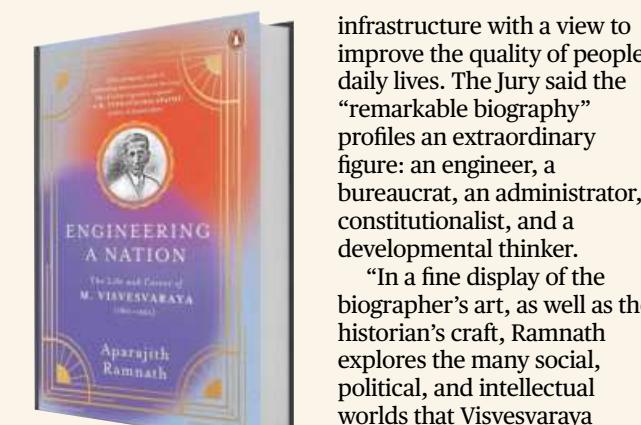
Aparajith Ramnath traces the life and work of one of India's most famous engineers of the 20th century

Team Magazine

Aparajith Ramnath's extensive biography of M. Visvesvaraya, one of the foremost builders of modern India, has been awarded the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Book Prize for 2025. *Engineering a Nation* (Penguin) traces the life of Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya who started out as a civil engineer and grew to become a skilled

administrator, as he took over as the 19th Dewan of Mysore from 1912 to 1918.

In her review for *The Hindu*, Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta said Visvesvaraya pushed strongly for industrial modernity in a colonial era that could not conceive of the idea of Indian self-reliance and made remarkable contributions across multiple dimensions of governance. Visvesvaraya was committed to modernising education, engineering, and



infrastructure with a view to improve the quality of people's daily lives. The Jury said the "remarkable biography" profiles an extraordinary figure: an engineer, a bureaucrat, an administrator, a constitutionalist, and a developmental thinker.

In a fine display of the biographer's art, as well as the historian's craft, Ramnath explores the many social, political, and intellectual worlds that Visvesvaraya traversed and the deep genetic

imprint that he left behind on the Indian nation-state and its technological aspirations."

His book was selected from a shortlist that included Janaki Balkhe's *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva*, Bela Bhattacharya's *India's Forgotten Country: A View from the Margins*, Avinash Paliwal's *India's Near East: A New History* and Manu S. Pillai's *Gods, Guns and Missionaries: The Making of the Modern Hindu Identity*, all published by Penguin.

Months after Dinshaw Pardiwala operated on Neeraj Chopra's elbow, the javelin champion qualified for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. One of the first things Chopra did after was make a trip to Mumbai to gift his orthopaedic surgeon the qualifying javelin. Pardiwala's workplace brims with such unique thank yous. Together, they are a museum of the country's modern-day sporting victories and a testament to the doctor's impact on Indian sport.

"This is actually a tradition that's gone on for the last 20-25 years. When they come back, they often want to see the memorabilia they gifted and take photographs," Pardiwala, 56, tells me.

Chopra's javelin is mounted on the wall just above Pardiwala's desk at the Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital & Medical Research Institute, where he is head of the Centre for Sports Medicine and director of arthroscopy and shoulder service. Under it is a series of photographs, a motion analysis of the throw that made Chopra the first Indian track-and-field athlete to win an Olympic gold. "The throw that lifted the worth of the nation," says Pardiwala.

Top athletes will tell you that Pardiwala has revolutionised the experience of playing sport seriously in this country. He has operated on five of the six Phogat sisters; on cricket's hall of fame, from Rahul Dravid and Sachin Tendulkar to Rishabh Pant; and on champions in every sport, from badminton to discus throw, rugby to kabaddi.

"A small little thing like an injury can derail your life and the life of the generations that are going to come after you," he says, referring to the



Dinshaw Pardiwala with the medals he recently won at a State-level swimming tournament.

many small-town sports stars who bet everything on their success. "If we can get these guys back, and they can live their dreams and fulfil their destiny, then I think that we've done our job. We've made a difference."

Once during a cricket match, someone pointed out to Pardiwala that he had operated on the bowler's shoulder, the batman's knee and the fielder's elbow. "And then you think that all these three have contributed to that moment in

history in sports which has given joy to millions of people, and that was possible because the surgeries went off well," he says.

Every patient matters
His simple rule – an injury doesn't mean the end of your career – has rewritten many sporting stories. No one is greater proof of this than cricketer Rishabh Pant, who in 2022, shattered his knee in a road accident. "There was no real precedent of an elite sportsman

PERSON OF INTEREST

DINSHAW PARDIWALA: DOCTOR TO INDIA'S CHAMPIONS

The orthopaedic surgeon who has treated sportspeople, from Tendulkar to Parupalli Kashyap, is all about giving athletes a second chance

who's had a high velocity knee dislocation and then undergoes surgery and gets back to sports," says Pardiwala. "More importantly, someone who needs to squat thousands of times for his wicket-keeping." Cricket observers couldn't believe it when Pant made a dramatic return to the game last year in the IPL and the T20 World Cup.

Among the recent T-shirts wallpapered on the walls of Pardiwala's consulting rooms are the ones signed by the men's cricket team (Pant included) that won the T20 World Cup (the Prime Minister has the other one) and one that badminton champion Prannoy H.S. got his teammates to sign in 2022 after India won the Thomas Cup for the first time ever. "It's like the 1983 World Cup win for cricket," he says. "An epic moment."

The courteous, attentive, ever-smiling Pardiwala is unlike any distracted, brusque, successful surgeon you may have encountered. From his late mother, a gynaecologist, he learnt a simple principle: "Every patient matters. Every good result makes a big difference." It's a rule by which he's always lived and worked. When we were in Class XII in the same school in Mumbai, he was the head boy.

During the week, he can end up working from 7 a.m. to midnight. Cricket fielding injuries and ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) tears pour in through the IPL season and that's peak work time. But nowadays, the flow is constant. "We've got the kabaddi league going on for almost four months. Then there are the football, rugby, and hockey leagues," he says.

Victories, big and small
Pardiwala is not on social media but he's among the first to know how someone he's operated on is doing. "Initially, at least, they call you every time they've done really well – 'I've hit my first century' or 'I got my first five-wicket haul'. They like to share that moment of happiness."

Badminton player Parupalli Kashyap once said in an interview that athletes like the fact that Pardiwala is direct and understands sports. In fact, he's always loved sports and has been actively involved in hockey, swimming, badminton, cricket and gymnastics from his school days. At 89, his father, a chartered accountant, still swims and walks every day. Pardiwala participated in state and national tournaments when he was a teenager though he never won any medals. When he opted for medicine, there was no time for sports except participating in the annual inter-medical swimming meet in Delhi. A couple of years ago, he decided to get back to swimming.

"I said, this is it. I have to take some time out for myself and do something that keeps me fit," he says. So now, Pardiwala swims for two hours every Sunday. He just participated in the State Masters' and won four medals – a gold, two silvers and a bronze. Next up is the Nationals in Hyderabad. One hopes he makes some space on his walls for these small victories, too.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Slight difference

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a recent team match that featured some of the best players in the world. Both tables reached four spades and the initial defense was the same at both tables: a heart to the nine and king. At one table, the declarer led a spade to the ace, a diamond back to his ace, and a spade to the king. There was no reason, at either table, to take the spade finesse. Declarer then led a

club to his king, losing to West's ace. West cashed the queen of spades and led a heart to East's ace. East led a low diamond and South went with the percentages and took the diamond finesse. Down one!

At the other table, South was French expert Cedric Lorenzini. After winning the king of hearts at trick one, he led a spade to the ace, cashed the king, and led a low heart from dummy. East rose with his ace and it was hard to see the importance of leading a club at this point. East made the

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

WEST
♠ Q 10 3
♥ 8 5 3
♦ Q 2
♣ A Q 10 9 6

EAST
♠ 5
♥ A 10 9 2
♦ 8 7 6 3
♣ 8 7 5 2

SOUTH
♠ 9 8 4 2
♥ K J 6
♦ A K 9
♣ K J 4

The bidding:
SOUTH INT 2♦
WEST Pass 3♦
NORTH 2♣ All pass
EAST Pass

*Transfer to spades

Opening lead: Five of ♥

reasonable play of a diamond. Lorenzini won with his ace, crossed to dummy with the queen of hearts, and led a spade to West's queen. West had to lead a minor suit and either one would give South his contract. West chose to cash the ace of clubs and lead another club. Lorenzini discarded two diamonds from dummy on his clubs and claimed his contract. Well done!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has November 23 ever given us?



Released in 2004, WoW is a multiplayer online role-playing video game, which soon became the world's most subscribed game.
(GETTY IMAGES)

3 On November 23, 1889, the Palais Royale Saloon in San Francisco installed a brand new machine. It was a coin-operated modified version of the Edison Electric phonograph. It had multiple wax cylinders and customers could choose a tune and listen to it. This was the first ever example of what machine?

4 On November 23, 1897, African-American inventor John Lee Love obtained a patent for a portable hand-cranked machine which made life easy for many writers and students. People had used knives, which were neither safe nor convenient, and machined tools bolted to the desk. What did he invent?

5 On November 23, 1924, Edwin _____ discovered that the Andromeda "nebula" is actually

another island galaxy far outside our own Milky Way. He used a 100-inch telescope at an observatory. Later, a 2.4-m space telescope was named after him. Who was this astronomer?

6 On November 23, 1963, 'An Unearthly Child', the first episode of a long-running science-fiction series was broadcast by the BBC. Airing the day after John F. Kennedy's assassination, it had poor views but was re-run to much acclaim. What show is this that follows the adventures of the title character in his time-travelling telephone box?

7 Born this date in 1967, this South African cricketer once batted 14 hours, 38 minutes to score 275 runs and was the first from his country to score a century against all other

Test-playing nations. Who was this, whose commitment to team dynamics helped India win the 2011 ICC World Cup?

8 Born on November 23, 1992, this singer and actress first came to prominence as an adolescent living a double life as a famous pop singer and a typical teenager. She eventually became a bona fide pop star, transitioning from TV to concert stages. Name the singer who had the best of both worlds.

9 On November 23, 1992, IBM launched the IBM Simon Personal Communicator at COMDEX in Las Vegas, Nevada. It had a modem for faxing and email, and was the first handheld device with the ability to make phone calls through a cellular network. What does this make the IBM Simon the first ever example of?

10 Released on November 23, 2004, WoW is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), which soon became the world's most subscribed game. Players could create an avatar and explore an open game world, fight monsters and interact with other players. What does WoW stand for?

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

10. Word of Warcraft

6. Smartphone

8. Melie Cyrus

7. Gayly Kristen

9. Dr. Who

5. Handie

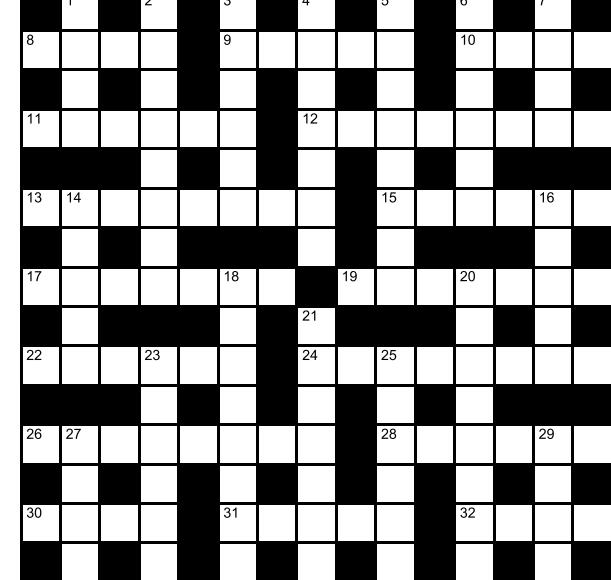
3. Unibox

2. Frankensteins' monster

1. T. Hespan

Answers

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 31 (Set by Incognito)



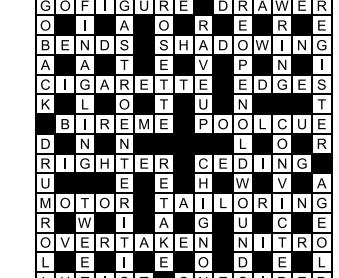
Across

- 8 Spy meets in the beginning with a Spanish cry (4)
- 9 Belts and socks (5)
- 10 Thought from guide accepted (4)
- 11 Make by fitting bearing in box (6)
- 12 Moving fast after individual leaves train to get harmful cooking ingredient (5,3)
- 13 God's with president and Russian monk (8)
- 15 One maiden grows old in pictures (6)
- 17 Arranging owl feathers gives esoteric information (3,4)
- 19 I am having throb in artery in sudden inclination (7)
- 22 To some extent, former manager's a fishy guy (6)
- 24 Take to court about some Europeans and Africans (8)
- 26 Twisted muscle around one at commencement of rodeo? That's more ungraceful (8)
- 28 Staff in ship providing means of propulsion (6)
- 30 Since artificial intelligence is rejected in the continent... (4)
- 31 Resign, leaving emergencies, in turmoil to become host at event (5)
- 32 Eats out in the Orient (4)

Down

- 1 Animal and snake get rights at first (4)
- 2 German representative went around California with editor and suddenly left (8)
- 3 Sailor transferred. Not present (6)
- 4 Secures guns after note (7)

SOLUTION NO. 30



Berty Ashley

1 On November 23, 534 BC, Thespis of Icaria became the first recorded actor to portray a character on stage instead of speaking as himself. This event was recorded by Aristotle and led to his name becoming a synonym for 'actor'. What word did his name bring to the English language?

2 Born on November 23, 1887, William Pratt was an English actor who became an icon on screen for the portrayal of horror characters. He took on the stage name 'Boris Karloff', which became synonymous with certain names. The most famous being the iconic character from *The Modern Prometheus* (1818) created by Mary Shelley. Which character?

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ANSWERS



Rewinding to a popular audio format

Aryan Sangeeth

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Did you know that October 13 to 19 is celebrated as World Cassette Week? The celebration, organised by the online store Tape Head City in the U.S., features exclusive tape releases.

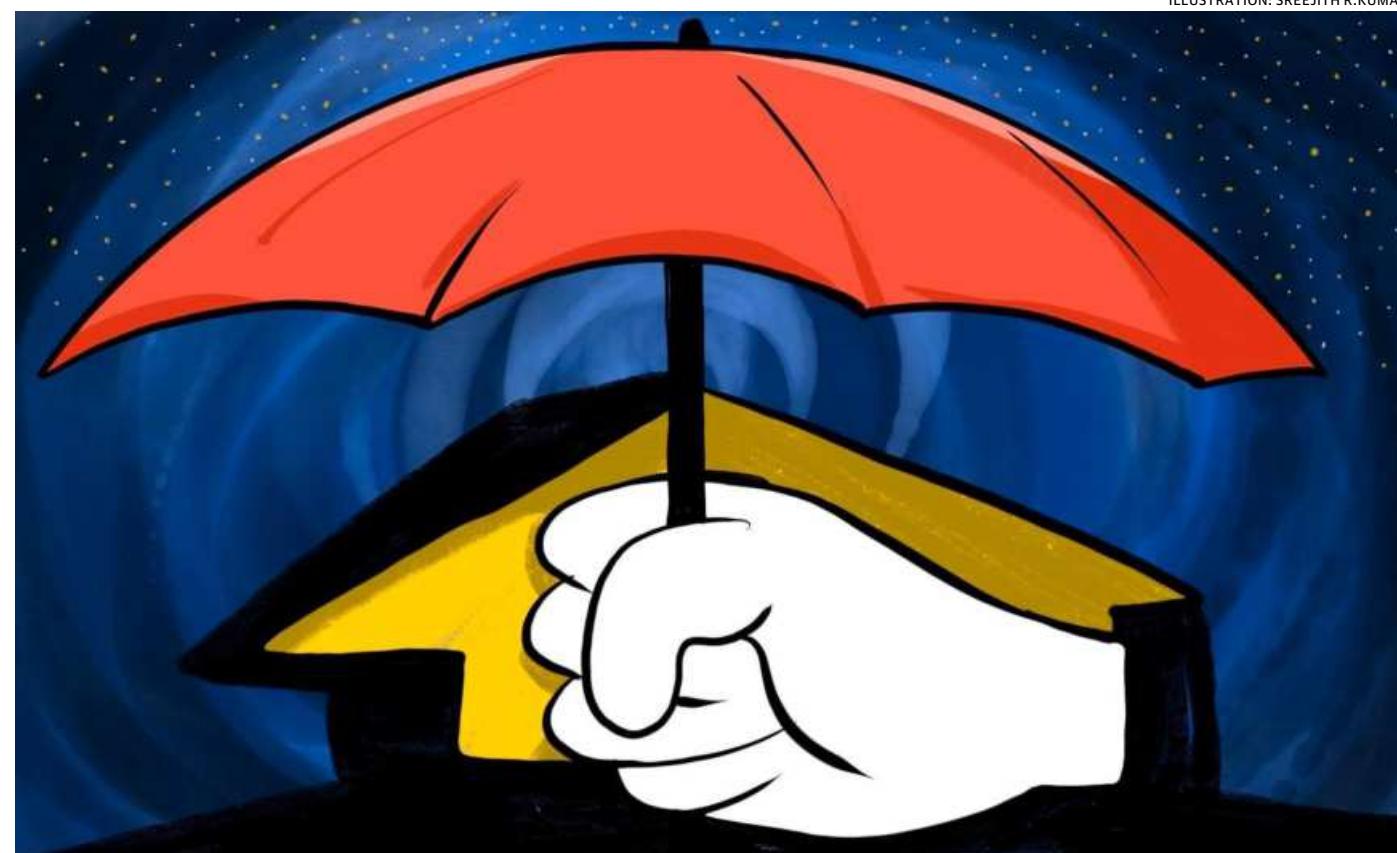
Most online streaming services provide compressed audio, typically ranging from 64 kbps to 320 kbps, with many platforms defaulting to 96 kbps or 128 kbps. In other words, streaming often discards subtle sonic details.

In contrast, cassette tapes were recorded on reels which provides analogue sound. Though cassettes may seem inferior owing to tape hiss, Dolby NR, a noise reduction technology, significantly reduces this, and a listener may not notice hiss at all when the tape head is clean and the volume is high. Cassettes are known for delivering rich, warm, and deep audio.

In the 1990s, cassette stereos were marketed as Hi-Fi systems, as high-end cassette decks were capable of excellent fidelity. Scientific measurement may reveal wow and flutter, but these imperfections are rarely noticeable to the average listener. Instead, cassettes offer a smooth, continuous listening experience, similar to continuous motion in film. There is also no risk of auto-skipping, which is a common issue with scratched CDs. Many cassettes produced in the 2000s were mastered from compact discs, providing the benefits of digital recording.

Additionally, while albums on streaming platforms can be removed when rights expire or popularity declines, cassettes protect music from third-party control once they are in the user's possession. The user alone is responsible for maintaining them. Cassettes also offer a stronger emotional experience, evoking nostalgia for older generations and retro fascination for the youth.

The designs of cassette players were often far more creative than those of their successors. There were robot-shaped cassette players, Coca-Cola can-shaped portables, and even football-shaped players. Touchscreen cassette players once appeared in Toyota Prius cars, and tabletop Sony cassette-DVD combos existed long before touchscreen mobile phones became common. Interestingly, cassettes also played a role in the technological growth of developing countries. For instance, in India, cassettes were among the first products ever sold online.



Vijaya Bharat

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The young man consulting with me had a look of controlled anxiety. A self-check at home had shown his pulse to be faster and blood pressure to be higher than usual. It was necessary for me to find out if any stressful situation was causing the elevated numbers. He opened up and talked to me about how he had started his business from scratch and built it into a successful venture. His contented life lasted for a few years until he was duped by a partner.

"Now I am back in the dumps," he said, asking me for help with the adverse effects from the stress. He was sure about the temporariness of the situation and his ability to bounce back. "I will take a leap again and, this time, protect myself from falls," he said. Impressed with his optimism, I wrote a short course of medicines to curb his anxiety.

Leaps of faith

I reflected on the leaps of faith taken by people on different occasions. Getting married and moving out of parental care to a new family and a new place is a leap of faith, built on the fairy-tale belief of "living happily ever after". In reality, such a fairy-tale ending is not universal. Unexpected and unpleasant circumstances test the resilience and erode the confidence of young adults. Overwhelming circumstances can be handled if there are people to confide in, loved ones who can act as safety nets. A composed mind will aid in taking stock of the situation and finding solutions.

Safety nets come in many forms:

Building safety nets

Considering the uncertainties of life, everyone with whatever income should ensure safety nets for their dear ones

caring parents, a supportive spouse, considerate friends or an inherent never-say-die attitude. Taking up a new job, shifting to a new place and starting a new venture can all be seen as leaps of faith towards becoming successful. However, during the inevitable down phases, privileged are the ones who get to hear reassuring words such as, "Don't worry, I am here for you." Even non-verbal communication such as a look of concern and kindness or a gentle hand on the shoulder effectively convey, "You can count on me, just reach out." Such words give the momentum to move forward instead of ruminating over bitter interactions and wallowing in self-pity.

A health crisis that comes as a bolt

out of the blue is a serious setback that affects the life of family members. In this context, I remember working in a medical ward in the early 1980s. During the rounds, my senior colleague, with an Army background, would call some patients and their close relatives to meet him. The patient would have probably recovered from a life-threatening illness and would be awaiting discharge. The conversation would focus on the condition and warning signs to look out for. My senior colleague would wrap up with a final statement, "Sort out all your documents," hinting at official papers related to finance and property.

Such a veiled yet no-nonsense suggestion appeared apt for families of elderly patients with chronic disease. A similar situation in a young patient becomes more difficult to deal with. The vibrancy of youth and busy lifestyle do not bring to mind the "sorting of documents" in good times. Banks and insurance companies remind us to include nominees, have a joint holder for accounts or start an education policy for children.

Death can strike suddenly in the form of accidents or heart attacks. A stroke can leave us incapacitated. It is sensible for everyone to sort out their documents and share relevant information with family members. The loss of a dear one will always remain a vacuum, but the struggle to acquire the rightful entitlement can be avoided. It is sad and absurd that scammers wipe off crores of rupees within minutes while grieving dependents cannot access savings meant for them. Considering the uncertainties of life, irrespective of age, everyone with whatever income should ensure safety nets for their dear ones well before it is time.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Zohran Mamdani's win as New York's mayor is historic. ('Zohran Mamdani, the outsider insider'; Nov. 16) It signals a political shift towards progressive governance, driven by youth and grassroots energy. Nationally, it reflects a demographic change and rising diverse leadership. **N.S. Reddy**

The article captures how a fresh political style can cut through public fatigue, yet it also reminds us that authenticity must be matched by practical solutions. New Yorkers want leaders who speak boldly but also deliver on housing, transit, and fairness. If campaigns blend strong messaging with steady, transparent governance, they can rebuild trust in a city that urgently needs it.

Avinashiappan Myilsami

Zohran Mamdani's win in New York's mayoral election is a watershed moment that has brought a sense of belonging to immigrants in the U.S. Mamdani has emerged as a world citizen.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

The traditional Hindu belief is that Krishna is one of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu that occurred from time to time to restore dharma or righteousness. ('How Vasudeva became Vishnu'; Nov. 16) The theory that Vishnu emerged from the deified hero Vasudeva is held by many art historians based on historical and archaeological evidence,

briefly referred to in the article. The seeming contradiction between the two perspectives could be ignored considering both as valid within their respective frameworks. **N. Rama Rao**



MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Let children lead

Their lived experiences of education systems, healthcare access, urban design, landscapes are rarely consulted. **Viji Varghese Eapen**

The crisis within academia

The culture of endless documentation has made genuine teaching almost impossible. **Sandra Joseph**

Freedom without security

The new workforce of a changing nation faces uncertainties in life. **Ashutosh Arke**

Students' revenge

The day of Holi was reserved for 'special treatment' for teachers. **K.S.S. Pillai**

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The thrill of flying

Enthusiasm for air travel remains strong, signifying its enduring appeal



Most passengers started

praying, some in tears, some embracing each other, and a few like us braving our fate with abandon

just a handful of us, the weary and desolate leftovers, flew to reach Bhubaneswar after a solid 24 hours' delay. To my pleasant surprise, the driver, a cheerful Sardar deputed by the undertaking was still waiting for me at the airport, all patience and smiles.

Concord, the unforgettable Another memorable trip was by a Concorde supersonic aircraft from Paris to London, covering the entire journey in less than four hours, at twice the speed of sound. One did not feel any discomfort at the supersonic speed except for the periodic thrusts when the engine developed secondary combustion.

A pity that Concordes were discontinued after one of them crashed.

Another flight which cannot be obliterated from my memory is one which almost ended in a major accident. My wife and I were on a flight from Dallas to Washington DC, with a halt in between. We were returning after attending a wedding. But just before landing at Detroit, we were told that there was a storm passing by and landing was

uncertain. Fortunately, we landed safely, but our connecting flight had been cancelled.

We were worried about staying overnight and obviously looking perplexed when a kind official from the airline offered help by accommodating us on a late-night flight to Washington DC. When we thanked him profusely, he smiled and mentioned that when he saw us looking worried, he wanted to help. He was a kindred soul from Pakistan.

The flight was full. We were sleepy and waiting to land when a most unexpected announcement came in a grave tone: there was an emergency because the landing gear had failed to descend.

The pilot announced that we would be landing on an apron, with fire engines standing by all around. Meanwhile, the aircraft would circle the airport to exhaust maximum fuel. All of a sudden, there was a deathly silence. Most passengers started praying, some in tears, some embracing each other, and a few like us braving our fate with abandon.

A few minutes passed, all waiting for the worst, and then the miracle happened: the booming voice of the captain cheerfully announced to thunderous applause that the truant landing gear had miraculously come down.

I keep wondering why my wife and I were among the few who did not feel alarmed.

Thayil Sethumadhavan

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Air travel has become a common these days; one can find travellers from every stratum of society waiting patiently for their flights at all our airports. That not only reflects the overall development of the economy, but also the trickle-down effect which provides opportunity for all to enjoy the fruits of development. As John F. Kennedy famously said, a rising tide lifts all boats!

Airports are crowded and noisy unlike in the past when one could see only the well-heeled strolling around. The usual air travellers then consisted of affluent businessmen and corporate executives, with an occasional senior civil servant thrown in. Contrast it with the present, one can see that a large section of the travellers comprises ordinary businessmen, families from the middle class, tourists and even migrant workers.

First flight

My first experience of air travel was on my way to join the National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie after the well-earned success at the Civil Services Examination. My father smilingly paid for the flight in recognition of my efforts at cracking the exam, which was a tough nut even in those days. The cost of travel from Madras to Delhi by a Caravelle

plane was about half the monthly salary I would make in the prestigious Service. Yet, the memory of that flight remains with me even after some sixty years! Watching the heavenly clouds passing below was such a thrilling experience. In fact, I felt let down when the pilot announced the landing at Palam after three hours of flight; I felt that it was too short for the money I doled out.

Later, while in the government, air travel became frequent, and the work took me to several airports in India and abroad. It became routine, but nothing ever gave me the thrill that I felt during my first flight. Nevertheless, there are a few flights that I remember.

One that sticks to memory is a flight from Bombay to

(Clockwise from below) A painting of Marie Antoinette; Kate Moss in an Antoinette-inspired creation by Sarah Burton for McQueen; the V&A exhibition; bracelet clasps; the queen's beaded silk slippers; the Sutherland Diamonds linked to the Affair of the Diamond Necklace; Antoinette's chair; and contemporary fashion inspired by Antoinette. (PETER KELLEHER, JARON JAMES, CHRISTOPHE FOVIN, KIRA ZUMKLEY AND DOMINIKA NAISH)



Akanksha Kamath

The most fashionable, scrutinised and controversial queen in history", as curator Sarah Grant calls Marie Antoinette of France, now has a show at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum. You may remember Tiktoks and Instagram reels from a few weeks ago of guests sporting white wigs and powdered faces, dripping with jewels and carrying painted hand fans at the London museum. Yes, it's fun, but more than showcasing excess, *Marie Antoinette Style*, the first major U.K. survey devoted to the 18th century French queen, endeavours, through over 250 objects spanning dress, jewellery, scent, interiors and film, to explain how style became crown, shield and trap all at once.

From the moment you enter Galleries 38 and 39, the tone is set: this is an immersive experience, a walk through a queen's identity. The first section outlines Antoinette's arrival in France as a 14-year-old Austrian archduchess in 1770, her marriage to Louis XVI, and her gradual rise as an arbiter of taste in the French court. Grant notes that while Antoinette "is still seen as a by-word for excess and frivolity, it is a trope based on mythology". The exhibition's aim is to reposition her not as a caricature, but as a woman who shaped the culture of her age and whose style continues to do so.

"Marie Antoinette is someone who has never gone away as a famous figure," explains Patricia Mears, deputy director of The Museum at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. From the time she crossed that border into France, she became almost an inanimate object, subject to abuse. "People made fun of her colouring, because she was blonde – but not really blonde-blonde, more of a strawberry or redhead. They looked down on her Germanic culture and background. It was extraordinary how they bashed her terribly. And ironically, she surfaced and rose above that, through this idealised environment that she created," she explains.

It's this environment that has found a stronghold throughout culture today, and is at the heart of the exhibition. The display of garments and accessories is sumptuous. Visitors encounter court dresses of silk and brocade, a slipper of beaded pink silk, fragments of original textiles that survived the passage of war and revolution. In a high-profile loan from the Château de Versailles sits a rivière of diamonds once linked to the infamous Affair of the Diamond Necklace (when swindlers tricked a cardinal to obtain the necklace under the pretence of finding favour with the queen).

Scent lessons from Antoinette
In the middle section of the exhibition comes one of its most striking interventions: fragrance. As Grant explains: "From the very beginning, scent was hugely

LET THEM WEAR BOWS

In London, V&A Museum's new Marie Antoinette exhibition repositions her as a woman who shaped the culture of her age, and continues to do so



important to Antoinette. Her interiors were scented and all her fashion accessories." The museum commissioned four distinct olfactory installations: the first evokes youthful floral triumphs; the second, the powdered salons of Versailles; the third, the pastoral gardens of the Petit Trianon; and the final one, the stark, damp cell of the Conciergerie where she awaited execution. This sensory dimension underscores that among Antoinette's many tools was the embodied self: not simply how one looked but how one was experienced.

That self-fashioning was central to her survival in a hostile court. Mears reminds us that Antoinette was "the subject of a lot of negative propaganda". The show displays caricatures that depict her as a milkmaid dancing as France starves, and yet, "she asserted herself where she could... using what she could". Dressing, decorating, patronising luxury trades – all these became strategies of visibility and influence in a world where formal power was denied to her.

Pastel palettes and soft power
From that point, the exhibition widens the lens. In a court defined by hierarchy and surveillance, Antoinette mastered not only what she wore but the environments she occupied. Interiors were used as infrastructure to showcase a kind of soft power, says Grant. "Her role was one of soft power, supporting the French luxury trades and industries. She was incredibly active and

influential when one considers the restrictive conventions within which she had to operate."

The exhibition draws out how this ideology of soft power manifested in colour, silhouette and material. Pastel palettes softened the visual temperature of rooms once dominated by red and gold; diaphanous white muslins and imported Indian cottons signalled a desire for naturalism and freedom of movement; florals and ribbons celebrated a gently theatrical femininity. Mears notes that these were "softer, closer to nature" and that Christian Dior's favourite couture grey was rooted in the 18th-century tones of Antoinette's interiors.

A chameleon queen
In the exhibition's portraits, as visitors meander through its rooms, Antoinette's chameleonic capability becomes a quiet revelation. She is never one thing for long. As Mears puts it, her power lay in "being able to transform oneself in multiple ways". You see her dazzling in jewels to "outshine" court rivals; next, in a tailored riding habit derived from menswear; and then in a pastoral chemise, "dressing up as a little milkmaid" in her escape theatre at the Petit Trianon (for entertainment away from the main palace). All were

Power of objects

Antoinette had a stronghold on interiors, including cutlery, chairs, a whole gamut of experience – as seen in the exhibition, from room to room. There is a reason modern interiors continue to borrow from this "ceaseless century", Mears says. It was under Antoinette's patronage that the body became central to craft. For instance, the perfect chair, the side table to lay down your things. Comfort became a central, and radical, point of view in Antoinette's world. However, objects outlast upheaval, but they can also attract it. The recent

high-profile heist of historic jewels at the Louvre – French treasures once linked to monarchy now lifted in a cinematic raid – shows our polarised relationship with the excesses of the past.



Building of taste

Antoinette used culture to reach people of influence. She was "by some distance the most musical French queen in history", collaborating with composers Mozart and Gluck; she cultivated a refined and distinctive aesthetic that fused nature with stagecraft in theatres. These were her diplomatic tools: the building of taste, the elevation of artisanship, the shaping of how modern Europe would come to understand pleasure, beauty and the domestic sphere.

V&A's royal four

The narrative of the objects at the exhibition is structured chronologically in four acts, traversing Antoinette's early embrace of luxury; her reinvention in the 1780s amid the fashion of Anglomania (an excessive interest in all things English) and pastoral fantasy; the dawn of the French revolution; and finally her legacy in the centuries that followed.

Antoinette's aesthetic, which can be summed up as sweet, feminine, close-to-nature. Throughout fashion history, that look has been appreciated and accentuated – from Valentino couture, to Vivienne Westwood brides dressed in panniers, and even Miley Cyrus channelling Versailles on stage. "Her legacy is so strong and her influence is so broad that it adapts itself to the current climate," she explains.

Out of step with today?

But if bows, corsetry and satin feel wildly out of step with a world in crisis – as seen across the latest Paris Fashion Week's extravagant silhouettes courtesy Saint Laurent and more – Mears offers some context. She says that when style loses direction and becomes cacophonous (think social media hype or sameness), people look to eras of refinement. "People who are looking for true beauty, refined aesthetics, go back to a period that did it that way," she says. In doing so, ultra-femininity becomes not regression, but "self-power... as a way to fight back". Flounce, fluff, softer palettes become a kind of purity of taste.

As you reach the end of the show, while there is the dress she wore to her execution, it doesn't conclude with the guillotine. One emerges understanding that Antoinette's visual language has never been erased, only continually reinterpreted. Ballet's romantic revival, cottage-core fantasy, the return of bows and bijoux in luxury fashion – all sit within a lineage she helped ignite. And it was interesting getting to know "Madame Déficit" in a new light.

Marie Antoinette Style is at the V&A Museum till March 22, 2026.

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