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ROAD TO SKATEBOARDING GLORY

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



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

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

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

A different lifestyle

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

More than a sport, it is a lifestyle, with its own vocabulary for the various tricks performed. Shredding, for instance, is the act of skating down surfaces like stairs, using parts of the board other than the wheels, and requires tremendous skill.

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

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

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

Meet the OGs

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

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

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ACTION AT THE
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ON JULY 27, 28 AND
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Time to play (Clockwise from below) Gautham Kamath (extreme left) with youngsters at The Cave skatepark in Bengaluru; the Skateboarding In Chennai crew; a young skateboarder in Bengaluru; Shashwat Sunil of Mandi Monkeys in Delhi; and National Games gold medallist Shraddha Gaikwad in Pune. (ANKIT KOTIAN, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, JOHAN SATHYADAS & SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)



Top skateparks in India

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

boarding full-time.

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

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

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

Question: What triggered this novel? Was it a specific event?
Answer: There wasn't a specific event. I was interested in writing about how two young people would negotiate this new world, this new economy that we live in. How does a young person who wants to make it big today, who has hopes and aspirations, as all young people do across economic backgrounds, negotiate the political, economic, and cultural landscape? I know technology plays a big part in this. Young people today, especially the age group that I write about, 21-22-year-olds, have grown up in the world of technology and social media. That was my starting point. I also teach. I get to interact with youngsters who are very intelligent, well-educated, and hardworking. They are very well-tuned into the world of technology. But I also see how it has affected their mental health. They are more resilient in some ways and less so in some other ways. I am very impressed by how knowledgeable they are and I see that as a function of growing up in the age of the Internet. If you're really interested in something, you can go find out more about it. Many of my students have deep pockets of knowledge in something they are really interested in. We didn't have that in my growing up years.

Q: The characters in the novel are aspirational in varying degrees. They can go to any lengths to taste success. Do you think the idea of aspiration has changed significantly in today's India?
A: That's an interesting question in the light of the public spectacle of the recent Ambani wedding. Would this have been possible about 15 years ago? Doesn't this signify a massive shift in our cultural values and what we consider acceptable? India is still a desperately poor country. They (Ambanis) spent about

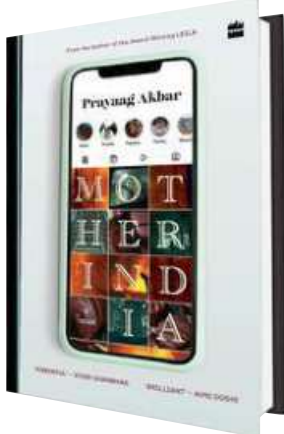


Scan the QR code to watch Prayaag Akbar in conversation on magazine.thehindu.com

IN CONVERSATION

WHY
PRAYAAG
AKBAR IS
LESS ANGRY
AND MORE
WORRIED
NOW

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



with Mayank's father and his death. When I was a journalist, a bridge collapsed and I was reporting on it. My boss asked me to not mention the name of the company that had constructed the bridge. I was perturbed by that. The concern was much more about which contractor had messed up. Sometimes you find things from the past that work well for your story. I was clear that Mayank was born in 2001-2002. I weaved the

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

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

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

Q: Soon after Leila, you had said in an interview that there were some things that really angered you over the years. Are you still angry about things around you?
A: I think I have matured. I don't feel as angry about the world as I did then. I have a son and that builds a level of contentment. Now, it's more worry about the future, about what my son who carries a Muslim name like me will face in the future if right wing-nationalism keeps going on...

Q: Tell us a little about the importance of mothers in the book and the symbol of Mother India.
A: In the book, there is Mother India, there is the activist's mother, Mayank's mother, even the dog's mother, which is a different kind of motherhood. There are different kinds of mothers in the world. There are no right and wrong approaches to motherhood. We place tremendous burdens on our mothers. They occupy an outsized role in our imagination: the giver of life, the benefactor, the personal protector of happiness, the provider of sustenance. And they never stop playing these roles. It is an idealisation. I wanted to compare that with the idealisation of the Mother India symbol. Mother India is a very powerful and positive symbol of our nationalism even if it is sometimes utilised by political people as an agent of division. It is a powerful symbol that dates to our anti-colonial struggle. And even that symbol idealises the mother. She's always painted as young and pure and untouched, which is what we want our mothers to be – unsullied, untouched, and perfect. I wanted to look at the role of the mother and actual lived experiences versus the idealised version in our head. Mayank and his mother, for instance, have a complicated relationship.



Author Rachel Cusk (GETTY IMAGES)

The baffling case of Rachel Cusk

Pranavi Sharma

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

Parade, divided into four parts – 'The Stuntman', 'The Midwife', 'The Diver' and and 'The Spy' – intertwines the lives of four distinct artists, all of them named G, with the life of the woman narrator and her husband. The predicament faced by the female artist calls to mind Margaret Atwood, who, in one of her poems, writes: *A child is not a poem, / A poem is not a child*. Women often find themselves constrained by their femininity, juggling roles as mother, wife, woman, artist – in that exact sequence, never reversed. Cusk proposes three potent (if not radical) ideas in the book: the transient nature of femininity, comparing it to the eternal recurrence of violence, motherhood, not just its thematic concerns but also scrutinising how we write about it, and questioning how women can be immortalised in stone when their existence is defined by repetition without permanence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readers are confronted with the idea of how artistic creation – whether in visual arts or literature – is often shaped by male perspectives. At one point in the novel, a woman gazes at the male artist G's painting and declares, "I want to write upside down." "...because she felt that this reality that G had so brilliantly elucidated, identical to its companion reality in every particular but for the complete inversion of its moral force, was the closest thing she knew to the mystery and tragedy of her own sex... G was not the first male artist to have described women better than women seemed able to describe themselves."

The reviewer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.



Parade
Rachel Cusk
Faber & Faber
₹650

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

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

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



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

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BROWSER

Still Lives
Reshma Ruia
Speaking Tiger
₹499
The novel follows the life of P.K. Malik as he leaves Bombay in search of business opportunities and a new life and settles in Manchester. Years later, he has fallen out of love with life and feels lost. At 55, can he start over, and is it worth the pain and trouble?



The Girl With The Seven Lives
Vikas Swarup
Simon & Schuster
₹499
When a 25-year-old woman is kidnapped and held hostage, she is told the only way out is to reveal the truth about her own life and deceptions. The novel is a rollercoaster of emotions, secrets and survival against impossible odds.



A Death in Cornwall
Daniel Silva
HarperCollins
₹499
From a diabolical serial killer terrorising the Cornish countryside to a stolen Picasso painting, the book travels through counties and islands following art restorer and legendary spy Gabriel Allon. This wild mystery is a tale of murder and corrupt power.



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



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

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

Question: You call ‘Gujarat Under Modi’ a “political biography of an Indian state through the personality and actions of its most resilient ruler.” Is resilience the word to describe Modi today?
Answer: I used this word to remain on a purely descriptive mode but the book makes it clear that ‘resilience’ is only one of his characteristics. And it is not unique: Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi have been even more resilient! If we look for more qualities, we would use other adjectives, charismatic, communal, populist, authoritarian, etc.

Q: He came to power with the promise of bringing the Gujarat model to Delhi. How far has he succeeded? And what has India gained from it?
A: He did, but the Gujarat model is not what people think it is. Modi has been able to scale up the politics and policies he had initiated in Gujarat to the national level: this is what the book is about; hence the subtitle [in some editions], ‘Laboratory of today’s India’.

‘GUJARAT WAS THE LABORATORY FOR TODAY’S INDIA’

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

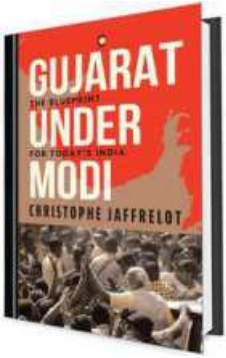
The four mainstays of his strategy in Gujarat have remained the same: communal polarisation, the capture of institutions (including the police and the judiciary), the making of a new kind of crony capitalism conducive to jobless growth as well as inequalities and, of course, Moditva, a specific kind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

Q: You talk of communal polarisation as Modi’s primary weapon in Gujarat 2002. By 2024, hasn’t polarisation given way to open hatred towards India’s minorities?
A: Polarisation is a political strategy. Certainly, attacks on minorities rely on emotions – fear and hatred are key concepts here. But they are not an end in



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

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



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

Q: In the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, the individual is secondary to the organisation. How was Modi able to turn it on its head while apparently imbibing the RSS emphasis on a hierarchy?
A: Modi, a pure product of the RSS, started to have an uneasy relation with the organisation soon after the 2002 elections. He tried to emancipate himself from the Sangh, and started to relate directly to the people, the populist way – hence his

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

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



Poles apart (Left) Women associated with ‘India Against Love Jihad’ protest against love jihad and conversion to Islam, in Bhopal; and (below) people in Chennai unite to condemn the rising mob violence and cow vigilantism. (A.M. FARUQUI AND S.R. RAGHUNATHAN)



State of the nation

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Republic Relearnt: Renewing Indian Democracy (1947-2024)
Radha Kumar
Vintage
₹999

without my hearing a word about it?” Allahabad, founded by the Mughal emperor Akbar, had been renamed Prayagraj, and Google made it official. Allahabad wasn’t the only city to face such a fate. Mughalsarai and others too were lost as the BJP government adopted a delete-your-past policy on history. Deb’s writing conveys the impression of a river in spate sweeping away all that comes in its way. A New York-based writer, Deb goes wherever controversies

beckon. From the banks of the Sarayu, he writes of the Prime Minister of India carrying “out a ceremony inaugurating the construction of the (Ram) temple” even as coronavirus raged in August 2020. Then without a warning, he asks, “Had a great Hindu temple to Ram ever previously existed here?” His exploration leads him to the Supreme Court’s words in its Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi verdict where the court admitted, “There is no specific finding that the underlying structure was a temple dedicated to Lord Ram.” Yet, “on the basis of documentary and oral evidence”, it ordered “the site to be handed over for the building of the temple.” Deb’s work is a cry of anguish for India. Kumar, on the other hand, expresses her fears gently, letting facts do the talking, building her narrative layer upon layer. In the chapter, ‘India’s Weimar Moment’, she writes that during Manmohan Singh’s decade, 2004 to 2014, India’s economy grew by “roughly 7.8% per year” and “275 million people were lifted out of poverty.” She says that after a first-term of broadly jobless growth, over 17 million new formal-sector jobs were created in his second term.

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

drummed up against Muslims. The first was the threat of Islamist terrorism, which Indians had grown to revere following a series of Pakistan-backed attacks from 1990. A key plank of Modi’s campaign in both [the] 2014 and 2019 general elections was to associate Indian Muslims with Pakistan, labelling the Muslim community ‘anti-national’ by innuendo... The second perceived threat related to cow slaughter. Between 2015 and 2017, sixty-three incidents of cow-related lynching were reported... The third perceived threat was ‘love jihad’, a term Hindu chauvinists applied to marriage between Muslim men and Hindu women. Coined in 2009, the term was assiduously promoted during the BJP campaign.” Kumar, however, believes all is not lost, and says the common Indian will call a halt to all totalitarian tendencies. “Though the conditions for totalitarianism are still incipient, considerable inroads have been made... Even totalitarians could not eradicate individual dissent. There lay hope,” she concludes. Deb though alerts readers to the challenges ahead, writing, “The Ram temple in Ayodhya, built with stone from Rajasthan, designed by an architect from Gujarat, and funded by dollars from the diaspora in the West, is only the beginning of an effort to construct a past that never was, in the hope of devising a future from which India’s Muslim inhabitants can be erased.” Remember Allahabad?

ROAD TO SKATEBOARDING GLORY

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

He set up the Delhi Skateboarders Academy in the basement of a building with wooden ramps, the first indoor venue in India and the site of the first-ever Jugaad in 2016. “The academy has, over the years, trained more than 500 children, of all ages, and the interest is only increasing, especially among girls. Parents too have started seeing it as a proper sport and not just a random pastime,” he reveals.

He explains the thrill of skateboarding despite the obvious dangers. “As children, there is little fear of falling or failing. That is one of the biggest reasons why there are so many youngsters in the sport. But, I personally think it is just the thrill of doing something most people are wary of. Normal folks will climb down three stairs; I have children who can skate down or fly over 7-8 stairs. It’s just addictive,” says Kumar, now in his 30s. He used to roller-skat as a child and picked up skateboarding on his travels through Europe and the U.S. as a student.

Not without its risks, skateboarding injuries range from a harmless ankle twist to more serious fractures, muscle tears and deep cuts from falls and the board itself. “Recently, one of our girls got a deep cut on her chin and had to quit the event she was participating in. It took a

while to heal and when she returned, she suffered a hairline fracture. But now she is back again. It’s a high that you cannot keep away from,” says Kumar.

More girls, more power
While the sport is unique in its gender neutrality – the equipment, tricks, ramps and surfaces are the same for both boys and girls – the Indian mindset has been restrictive of women getting on the board.

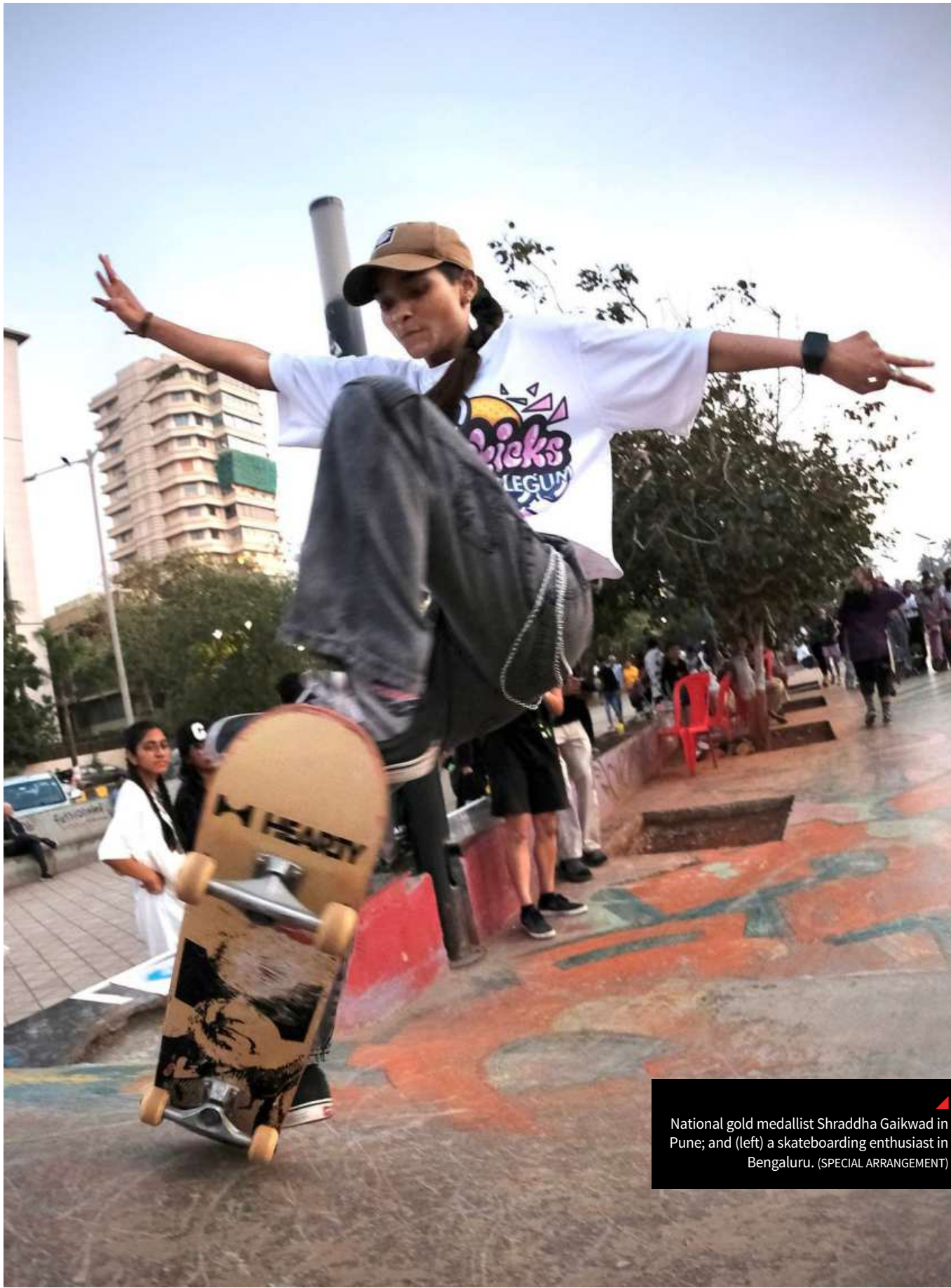
But this is changing. Says

Kamath, “There might have been restrictions earlier but not anymore, not for this generation. Parents can’t stop them and anyway, women are way more mature and more aware of things today. In fact, we encourage girls to come out more and although their numbers are still fewer than the boys, their parents are dedicated.”

National Games gold-winning Gaikwad, in fact, was the first girl in her family to travel alone when she went to participate in the 2018 edition of Jugaad. Soon, she was being approached for ad campaigns, be it Patanjali or Pantene, and then the Netflix movie *Skater Girl* happened. Gaikwad plays the role of the protagonist’s friend in the 2021 film supposedly inspired by the life of Asha Gond, who represented India in the 2018 World Skateboarding Championship. “The Olympics is a dream, of course, but skateboarding is a passion. I will do it as long as I can and if you are dedicated and work hard, there will always be people to support you,” says Gaikwad, referring to the people who

shaped her career – Abu Sheikh, the manager of the store where her father worked, and her coach Swapnil Magare, who spotted her during a workshop at the store.

The inclusion of



National gold medalist Shradha Gaikwad in Pune; and (left) a skateboarding enthusiast in Bengaluru. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Foreign influence

The growing attraction for skateboarding in India’s smaller towns and hinterlands is something that augurs well for the sport. The Janwaar Castle in Panna district of Madhya Pradesh is testament to how sports can be an agent of social change. Conceptualised and set up by German Ulrike Reinhard (in pic), the skatepark has played an important role in promoting not just gender equality – girls are given preference – but also social equality, bringing together different castes, children who would otherwise never mingle. The foreign influence on skateboarding in India, in fact, goes back years, all the way to 2003 when Englishman Nick Smith created a park in Goa for himself but which quickly became a popular hangout for the locals. Smith eventually became the go-to man for the development of many of the skateparks across the country, including the Play Arena in Bengaluru.

girls. I have seen many younger ones coming and skating, and it feels nice. When I tell people it is an Olympic sport, they are genuinely surprised and want to know more,” says Coutinho.

Ground reality

The Olympic dream that these young enthusiasts harbour though is tempered with an awareness of ground realities. “In India, we are at least a decade behind in skills and everything else, and it will take time,” says Pabale. To put things into context, Cocona Hiraki of Japan and Sky Brown of Great Britain, medallists in the park skateboarding category at the Tokyo Olympics, were both 13 at the time. As was Rayssa Leal of Brazil, who won silver in the street category; Japan’s Momiji Nishiya, who won gold, was 14.

Interestingly, while skateboarding is considered a quintessential American sport, the dominant countries, among the women athletes, are Japan, Australia, Brazil and Britain. “There is a long way to go. It will take years probably but the

journey has begun and we hope to do our best,” says a confident Coutinho.

Kamath is more circumspect. “Not for another 20 years at least,” he asserts. “And then too, only if there is support from government bodies in terms of participation and facilities.” But the landscape is changing rapidly, no doubt, he admits. From one skate park in 2012 to almost 40 now across the country – from Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, and Delhi to Chandigarh, Visakhapatnam, Ranchi and Gwalior – the thrill of performing on a plank of wood on wheels is catching on.

Skateboarding, in a sense, is a unique sport with its inherent contradictions: not much equipment required but the one needed does not come cheap, starting at ₹1,000 for a beginner’s board and ₹4,000 for a regular board. It is an aspirational lifestyle but has children mostly from non-privileged or middle-class families. “I could not ask my parents for a board for a long time. I was still in school then and could not buy one for myself either,” Coutinho says.

College-going Pabale, daughter of a single working mother, tries to manage her expenses by herself – from buying boards to travelling and participating in events and generating social media engagement – but admits it is not easy. Says Surjeet of Delhi Skateboarders Academy, “Many parents often donate gear and boards to the less-privileged children who train at our academy for free, and trust me, those are some of the most brilliant youngsters I have seen.”

At the Paris Olympics beginning this weekend, skateboarder Vaneeraya Sukasem from Thailand will be one of the youngest athletes in competition. Videos show the 12-year-old practising her signature move, called The Feeble, as she glides over railings and flips the board before landing on it expertly. The day is not far when an Indian teenager will make the nation of 1.4 billion proud on the Olympics podium. As the likes of Coutinho, Gaikwad and Anand would say, we fly in hope.

Anatomy of a skateboard

TRUCK

Made of metal, there is one at each end. It connects and keeps the wheels in place with the deck, and helps control the board

WHEELS

Four in all, two on each truck. They come in different sizes and materials depending on the surface on which the board is to be used

GRIP TAPE

A sandpaper like material that is stuck to the top of the deck to increase friction and provide better grip

DECK

The main part of the skateboard. Usually made of 7-ply maple wood, it is now also mixed with other composite materials such as fibreglass and carbon, to make it lighter and more durable

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

THE MARINE FUNGUS *Parengyodontium album* CAN BREAK DOWN PLASTIC LITTER! FINALLY, A CURE FOR THE PLANET!

LOOK, YOUR SPECIES GENERATES 350 MILLION TONNES OF PLASTIC WASTE EACH YEAR. DO YOU EXPECT A FUNGUS TO SAVE THE WORLD?

YOU EITHER STOP MAKING ALL THAT LITTER, OR TURN INTO PLASTIC DECOMPOSERS YOURSELVES.

IF YOU ASK ME, THE ONLY WAY OF TACKLING THE PLASTIC CRISIS IS FOR YOUR 8-1 BILLION STRONG SPECIES TO START CONSUMING PLASTIC LITTER, A TONNE PER PERSON.

WHAT? HAVING A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN AT THE NUMBERS I JUST ROLLED OUT?

LOOK! A LIVING, BREATHING MASS OF MICROPLASTICS BREAKING ITSELF DOWN!

FINALLY, A CURE FOR THE PLANET!



Masters of disguise (Clockwise from below) Seahorse Anahita; Four Seasons Resort Mauritius; and the spiny seahorse. (BERNARDO NASCIMENTO, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

SNORKELLING WITH WILY SEAHORSES

How a luxury resort in Mauritius is reacquainting guests and locals with the horse-faced fish, and contributing to its protection

Janaki Lenin

How did the seahorse pull off its rise? I blink with disbelief. Until Rick-Ernest Bonnier, the Four Seasons Mauritius’ ocean environment manager, pointed it out, it had pretended to be part of a marine sponge. I circle back, peering at the spike-covered creature through the snorkel mask. My eyesight must be getting worse because its S-shaped body doesn’t bear any resemblance to the cup-shaped protuberances of the sponge to which it had attached itself.

You must see the 10-cm horse-faced fish in its natural habitat to believe its magical ability to vanish in plain sight. My problem was, like most people who have seen seahorses in aquariums, I recognise them by their profile. Here, it would have to lie on its side in the sand for me to see. And they aren’t cooperative like that! I spend a few more seconds gazing at this toy-come-to-life, as it sways with the tidal current. Then I kick my fins to catch up with the turbulence of Bonnier’s wake. Below me spreads the underwater scape of the sandy lagoon with columns of Sargassum seagrass, an assortment of algae, and the

occasional stand of Acropora coral. Within minutes, he wheels around and vigorously points to a coral. I look closely around the edges. Nothing. Is it hiding in the middle of the coral, among the straight pointed limbs? No. Where is the blasted seahorse?

Glancing up at Bonnier’s masked face, I wave my outstretched palm sideways gesturing ‘where’. He dives until his forehead hovers a foot above the creature and, miraculously, the fish stands out from the background. Somehow, its curvy body has become one with the angular coral.

A few minutes later, we pause, standing in the shallows with our



masks riding above our foreheads. “How do you spot them? What’s your search image?” I ask. “The tops of their heads,” he replies. We resume our leisurely ‘seahorse safari’, our faces below the water’s surface. Even after Bonnier points them out, I can’t immediately see the crowns of the four subsequent seahorses.

Pregnant dads and moonlit births
On the beach an hour later, stepping out of my fins and shivering in the wetsuit in the Southern Hemisphere’s winter, I am elated to have finally seen these bony fish. In preparation for the trip, I had read up on the fascinating creatures. One of those ‘Did you know’ realisations was: adult male seahorses are pregnant all their lives. The female deposits eggs in his kangaroo-like pouch where the babies hatch and grow,

the gestation period varying with species, until they are ready for life in the open sea. On a full moon night, the father goes into labour, spewing out hundreds of babies from his spasming body. Later that same night, the female returns to lay more eggs. And so the cycle resumes.

While most fish use their tails to get around, seahorses use theirs to stay put, their grasping tails latching on to algae, seagrass or coral. They ineffectively propel themselves with small fins on their back and the sides of their head. So, the chances of seeing one again in the same vicinity are high – if you can see through their disguise. Most people assume that you need to dive to spot seahorses. The two species along the Anahita coast, the thorny seahorse and the common seahorse, live in waters so shallow that you have to time your snorkelling trip with the high tide.

This surprises visitors, just as it did Bonnier when he first spotted a crusty millipede shape in the sand. He had snapped a photo and, not trusting his own judgment, sent the image to experts for confirmation.

Under threat everywhere
Seahorse populations are diminishing across the world, with the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) listing the approximately 50 species as near threatened, and two – the Knysna or Cape seahorse from South Africa and White’s seahorse of Australia – as endangered. Habitat destruction, pollution, and unsustainable fishing practices have all contributed to the dwindling numbers. As has illegal trade, driven by traditional Chinese medicine that claims it helps with potency disorders, asthma and pain.

“What surprised me was that Anahita is one of the few places around Mauritius where a well-established population [of seahorses] still exists,” says Bernardo Nascimento, curator and



What surprised me was that Anahita is one of the few places around Mauritius where a well-established population of seahorses still exists. [It helps that the area is clean, and doesn’t have a lot of tourists or fishing]

BERNARDO NASCIMENTO Curator, Odysseo Oceanarium

head educator at Odysseo Oceanarium in Port Louis, the country’s capital. It helps that the area is clean, doesn’t have a lot of tourists or fishing, and the plants and animals that the fish rely on for cover and prey are in good health.

Learning from the dodo
The mangroves and sandy beaches of the Four Seasons wrap around the estuary of the Grand River South East, on the east coast of Mauritius. They lie within the approximately 6 sq. km. ‘Trou d’Eau Douce Fishing Reserve’ where, industrial fishing is prohibited, allowing marine species to thrive.

Guests who can afford to stay at the luxury resort aren’t the only beneficiaries of these riches. On low occupancy days, Bonnier and his team bring school children from across the island for a day of nature walks and snorkelling. With the shadow of the dodo, the international emblem of man-caused extinction, hanging over their heritage, most Mauritians are already aware of the urgency of conservation.

The resort grounds host a wealth of plant, animal and bird life. Mauritian fruit bats roost on the avenues of banyan trees, and jewel-like geckos dart among the fronds of the blue latania palm trees. Beside the spa is a plant nursery for species native to the island. Many of them are pretty with red leaf margins and stems, an evolutionary defence against the island’s native herbivores, the now-extinct giant tortoises. Bonnier hopes to slowly replace the common flowering plants and trees in the gardens with these.

Taking guests to see these fish is just the first step in a long-term programme. In the next stage, Bonnier plans to collaborate with the Odysseo Oceanarium to survey the Anahita stretch, identify individual animals, study their behaviour, and perhaps even create a nursery for the ‘sea-foals’.

The day after my encounter with the seahorses, Bonnier took a family with two young children out into the lagoon and showed them three red juveniles within 30 minutes. Even though they froze in the water, the kids were thrilled by the experience. The next day they asked Bonnier, “Can we go see the seahorses again?”

The writer’s latest book, co-authored with Romulus Whitaker, is *Snakes, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll*.

The biggest, fattest Indian wedding ever has been a humbling experience. At first, I affected an air of studied disdain for the naked opulence of the Anant Ambani-Radhika Merchant wedding extravaganza. A journalist friend messaged from abroad to ask if I was following the wedding. I replied snootily, “Trying hard to avoid it.” I had forgotten what Oscar Wilde had written: “Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can’t get into it, do that.” Part of my weariness stemmed from the fact that the wedding seemed to be without end. As Subham Chaudhuri, the popular Bengali comedy content creator @bong short, said in a video: “This is like the soul that lives on endlessly... People’s semesters end, the entire T-20 World Cup ends, Euro Cup ends, Copa America ends, Ronaldo’s form ends but the Ambani wedding never ends.” Some remarked that the wedding, like the groom’s name, is *anant* – without an end. Clearly nothing succeeds like excess.

“Will you talk about the incongruity of it all on air?” asked my journalist friend. I hastily brushed up on facts and figures – the Ambanis’ net worth, the number of cars in one of the diamond necklaces, the VVIP guest list as well as India’s wealth gap and social indices. During the pre-wedding hoopla, Swati Narayan, author of *Unequal: Why India Lags Behind its Neighbours* (2023), said in an interview that the “inequality in India is the worst that it’s been since the days of the British Raj” and the “entire bottom half of India’s population has to survive on 6% of the country’s wealth”. But many also felt the richest man in India had the right to spend his money any way he wanted.

The Windors of India

For Indians, a fairytale wedding had once meant Prince Charles marrying Lady Diana in London. Now, a *Guardian* headline read: ‘Ambani wedding: After months of celebratory, the “Windors” of India finally set to marry’. But with a price tag estimated at \$600 million, the Windors probably cannot afford a wedding like that any more.



POP-A-RAZZI

The wedding that kept giving

It wasn’t aspirational but there was something about the opulence of the Ambani wedding that had many of us transfixed to the proceedings

As I scrolled through the wedding and pre-wedding videos on Instagram in the name of research, I realised that white people, especially men, still look extremely uncomfortable in Indian regalia. Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, all looked like they had wandered out of a Halloween party, stiff cutouts in Maharaja costumes. Also, thanks to the wedding, I learnt who John Cena was. Actor and wrestler and wedding guest. Cena too looked awkward as he tried out his Bollywood moves in his blue

outfit with roses on his shoulders. I count that as a moment of post-colonial revenge. Indian celebs can carry off western suits and gowns with aplomb these days. But the white people are tiptoeing around Indian culture nervously, hoping they are not making an utter fool of themselves. Generations of Indian immigrants who were once mocked as they tried to navigate western culture must be chuckling quietly. The First World-ers were now part of

the backdrop for our Monsoon Wedding, the extras adding exotic colour but completely out-jewelled by the locals.

Guilty pleasure
In fact, the wedding was a guilty pleasure that kept giving. Many of us played spot-the-celeb. Friends gossiped excitedly about who was in the Bachchan family photo and who was not. Mamata Banerjee and Kim Kardashian were captured in the same frame while Baba Ramdev did a jig. Some of us gaped. Some guffawed. Some made hilarious memes and reels. Many just rolled their eyes and then scrolled some more. It wasn’t aspirational because it was so utterly over the top but it clearly fed some primal need in many of us like a junk food fix. It was our big fat virtual tub of caramel and cheese popcorn while the wedding guests had their Zucchini and Asparagus Tiroditto and Extreme Altitude seeds.

Best of all, I even got a surprise gift. Not an Audemars Piguet (I had to Google what that was) as the groomsmen did. I discovered that John Cena and I follow each other on X. I have no idea how that happened. I don’t recall following him. He, with 14.3 million followers, has absolutely no reason to follow me. Another journalist also posted a screenshot saying she too had discovered to her astonishment that Cena followed her. A columnist friend said aggrievedly, “He’s still not following me. Now I’m feeling slighted.” I felt a mild sense of having arrived somewhere in some petty pecking order.

However, the radio interview about the incongruity of the biggest fattest Indian wedding never happened. I was bumped by a bona fide celebrity who, unlike me, had actually been invited to the wedding. So I just sidled off to the market to buy provisions to cook my special dinner. My menu was humble pie. But, at least, I still had John Cena.

Sandip Roy, the author of *Don’t Let Him Know, likes to let everyone know about his opinions whether asked or not.*

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

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

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

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

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



FROM CULT TO CULTURE

THE OTHER AYODHYA

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

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

Ramayana, Ramakien and more

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

The reach of Rama

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

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

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Strange places

Both vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

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

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

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

NORTH		WEST		EAST		SOUTH	
♠	K J 5 3	♠	A 9 7 4 2	♠	10 8 6	♠	Q
♥	A Q J 2	♥	10 7 5	♥	K 9 6 4 3	♥	8
♦	5	♦	A 8 6 3	♦	J	♦	K Q 10 9 7 4 2
♣	10 7 6 4	♣	Q	♣	A J 9 3	♣	K 8 5 2

The bidding:			
NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1♣	Pass	1♦	1♠
Pass	3♦*	Dbl	Pass
Pass	3♠	4♦	All pass
*Spade fit, shortness in diamonds			

Opening lead: Queen of ♣

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

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

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

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Space and beyond!

Berty Ashley

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

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

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

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



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

mathematical calculations. Which planet is this?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

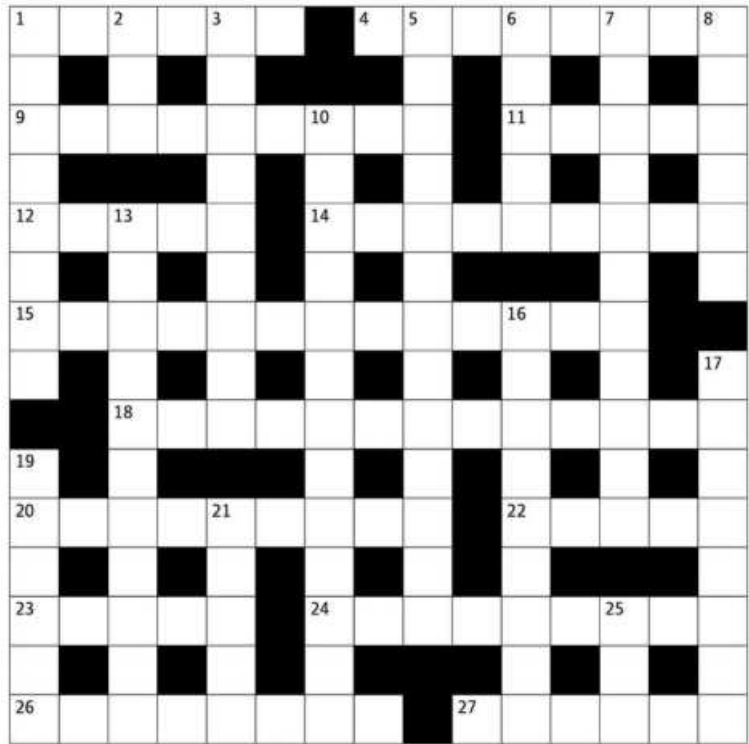
A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called ‘Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion’.

@bertyashley

- 1. The size of the Earth
- 2. Neil Armstrong stepped out on the moon
- 3. Atlantis
- 4. Neptune
- 5. White holes
- 6. Cold welding
- 7. Jupiter
- 8. Diamond (Lucy in the sky with diamonds)
- 9. Mercury
- 10. Raspberry and rum

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3316



- Across**
- 1 Pauses in *Hamlet* upsetting (3-3)
 - 4 As these words are like most poetry (8)
 - 9 Perhaps Sturgeon’s gone east for pescatarian option (4,5)
 - 11 Stray found in mountains (5)
 - 12 Follow edges of footprint? (5)
 - 14 Lowers trousers, having consumed liquor: high-risk actions (4,5)
 - 15 Critical memos rewritten; they only cover small areas (13)
 - 18 Greatly enjoy percussion overwhelming Sweden’s rowdy music (8,5)
 - 20 At home with insignificant type, idiot, nothing, no-name (9)
 - 22 Send out one’s children (5)
 - 23 Cut – or pure, you say? (5)
 - 24 Stalls accommodating greedy guts, prickly types (9)
 - 26 Aversion: staidest upset (8)
 - 27 Guides some of gnus herself (6)

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

- 6 Casts Cockney as gentry (5)
- 7 Young man with gloom lifting snogs wildly in erotic verse (4,2,5)
- 8 Primarily, decidedly ritzy / elegantly styled – suit yourself! (6)
- 10 Film rebooted: *I Took The Limes* (4,4,2,3)
- 13 Fancy lady revamping sad churches (11)
- 16 Delicious quality: after time, wine going to head (9)
- 17 Rates fools, storing jam with no lid (8)
- 19 Passed over – lamented (6)
- 21 Creep up on a policeman in Limerick (5)
- 25 Everyman? Joke (3)

SOLUTION NO. 3315



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The white fleece spins its way into dark wool and spreads upon the expanse of the blue sky. It begins to boom and not even the biggest bass can match its terrible tremors. As in the days gone by when trumpets and drums heralded the arrival of the king, this thunder heralds the arrival of the monsoon. Pitter-patter the raindrops fall and cool the thousands of hot heads below. The heat breaks, the breeze drapes a cold draught over itself and the leaves change into a darker shade of green.

Somewhere, a woman decides to make hot, sizzling *pakodas* to the delight of her children, while a couple of friends take shelter from the rain below the tarpaulin of their favourite snack cart. Farmers rejoice everywhere as raindrops soak the soil and give it a chance to flaunt its lush fertility. My grandmother, as was her wont, used to stand near the window and observe it all, a happy smile on her face.

And how beautiful is a monsoon by Bollywood? The setting for the flowering of a romance or perhaps just a celebration of love. A couple sheltering themselves in a single raincoat. Another couple just dancing their hearts out under drenching rain.

But rain is not the same everywhere. Spread across a large expanse, it rages in one part of town while the other may be dry. Thundering and rumbling, it fells large trees as if they were mere matchboxes. Lights go out, candles are brought in, a dark gloom settles. Nostalgia, achingly bittersweet memories creep up. All the things that one has ever lost are remembered, triggered by rain.

Devastating effect

Back in the villages, farmers scream horror as the crops that they had grown, ploughed, watered and planned for so many months, are trampled upon by the heavy hand of a vicious storm. Roadside dwellers hold onto their shanties for dear life. One wild whirlwind and it could sweep their whole home away. And then there are some who do not even have those, and their knees simply buckle under the force of nature as they surrender, sometimes with their life itself. The same Bollywood which has given us such iconic monsoon romances suddenly takes a dark turn. It becomes the harbinger of bad news, a symbol of an ill omen, the setting of something dramatic.

This is the duality of the monsoon. A season built on contrasts. Scorching heat giving way to cold rainfall. Dark clouds float with silver linings, and heavy storms are followed by streaking rainbows.

There is romance on one side and tragedy on the

The many moods of the monsoon

From the soft pitter-patter to the booming thunderstorm, the rains traverse an entire spectrum across the subcontinent



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

other. Little joys bloom here and heavy sorrows settle there. Someone sees new hope and someone sees impending doom. As the season falls upon us, this duality confronts and surrounds us yet again. The pendulum of emotions has begun its oscillations, the contrasts have begun a battle against each other, and a new chapter of life slowly unfolds in their wake.

Elders often boast of having seen more monsoons

than we have. They have lived this contrast over and over again with all its ups and downs. Once you experience the monsoon deeply, you are not the same any more.

The monsoon is synonymous with change, growth, rebirth. You, too, have changed, grown and transformed. And though it may rain on all of us, the monsoon that we embrace, is very distinctly our own.

What’s in a surname?

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In Shakespeare’s iconic play *Romeo and Juliet*, there is a famous line by Juliet: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” However, the reality is that names matter, especially when it comes to maiden names.

A maiden name is more than just a string of letters; rather, it symbolises one’s identity, inheritance, and background. It also symbolises the lineage. But marriage, for instance, causes this identity change greatly among women. Women usually cease using their surnames after they are married and often add their husband’s surname.

The idea of changing surnames after getting married can be traced back to a historical period where women were seen as extensions of men and their families. Therefore, this transformation indicated the new duties and rights they took in the marital home.

This practice has been followed by Indian women for many generations, sometimes willingly, but more often under societal pressure. Changing names is not just a personal decision that one makes; it is expected of someone in society.

The change of last name can have a profound psychological and social impact on women. When women are forced to discard their names, they might feel like losing themselves since they are being required to wipe away a part of their past.

This alteration affects professional identities. It may be difficult for women who made a career or built a reputation using their maiden names as they shift to another name identity.

A woman’s maiden name forms an essential aspect of her identity, representing her past and heritage. Over time, it is important to make sure that a woman has all the right to choose whether it will be better for her to preserve it, without imposing any pressures of judgment from society.

It’s just by giving such autonomy we can fully recognise a woman’s uniqueness and promote gender equality.

Himalayan experience

The towering ranges bring a sense of tranquillity to the troubled mind

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In a recent trip to Nepal, we got the opportunity to take the early-morning mountain flight. The one-hour flight takes off from the Kathmandu airport to the Himalayan mountain ranges, including Mount Everest. All passengers get window seats for a clear and close-up view. A few minutes after take-off, the pilot takes you to a height of over 20,000 feet. Then the mountains come into view. In a sea of snow-white clouds, these magnificent peaks rise tall

and majestic, like sentinels of the sky. As the tour operators tell you, it’s a “once in a lifetime experience”.

The jagged, snow-covered mountains fill you with awe, reminding you that nature is indeed a manifestation of the almighty. A feeling of being at the top of the world! As the aircraft slowly traverses the length of the ranges, the cabin attendant tells you the names of the individual peaks – Gauri Shankar, Annapurna, Kanchenjunga and so on. And there, nestled between the Nuptse and Lhotse peaks is Everest. The peak that many vie to



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

conquer, and have conquered in the past. It is also called Sagarmatha. Many of these peaks have been named after Gods. When you interact with the local people, you can understand why. Their religious fervour and devotion, among the young and old alike, is unsurpassed. One can see why, from ancient times, the kings have built so many spectacular temples. The architecture is unique and the woodwork unbelievably intricate. The Buddhist shrines and

stupas are equally elegant. Living in the vicinity of the towering mountains, people have an ingrained reverence for God and his creations. Nepal is also the birthplace of Lord Buddha, the embodiment of peace and serenity.

The people are friendly and you are accorded the best in hospitality. They are peace loving and believe in living in harmony with nature and with each other. The baser emotions are rarely expressed, possibly due to their spirituality and innate sense of humility.

The grandeur of the towering mountain ranges is a sight to behold and brings a sense of tranquillity even to the most troubled mind. When the mere sighting of Mount Everest gives such a feeling of immense satisfaction, it is easy to understand the exhilaration felt by those who actually climbed the mountain and conquered its peak.

Soldier and the train

Distant whistle of an engine evokes poignant thoughts of love and loss

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A recent journey aboard a sleek carriage of a Vande Bharat Express stirred memories of countless train journeys. We soldiers had a special bond with Railways. The train was once the “umbilical cord” that connected soldiers to their roots with rickety coaches ferrying military men between the frontiers and their remote villages. For a soldier on a lonely patrol, the distant whistle of a midnight train evokes poignant thoughts of love, loss, and longing.



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Unlike today’s trendy, swift coaches, second-class journeys were characterised by slow, meandering trips spanning several days. One did not really mind smoke and heat on the homeward trip, but it was

the return leg that presented a formidable challenge. Once the journey commenced, the traveller’s world shrank to the confines of the snaking compartments, with virtually no communication with the outside world. Occasionally, a newspaper vendor would make an appearance, providing those eager for updates with a chance to purchase a copy.

As one traversed the long plains during the blistering North Indian summer, a compelling image often crossed the mind. “What if India had not been partitioned?” This was a fleeting thought emerging from a weary traveller, a reflection on the prospect of an even more protracted journey to the frontiers on the Durand Line, devoid of any ill intentions towards

the mother nation.

Getting confirmation for the onward booking was a rare occurrence and it was a great relief to find a reserved seat, upon boarding the connecting train. Trains not only transported the soldiers but were also the conduits for precious tidings from their homes. The crimson-painted mail coaches carried postcards and inland letters. Messages from loved ones, scribbled on these missives, embarked on a journey that spanned weeks, passing through numerous hands and patiently waiting on platforms before finally reaching the soldier on the border. Whispers of gossip, clandestine love notes, updates on court cases, and the sombre announcements of death, all took days to reach their recipients.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

When integrated with sustainable pisciculture and aquaculture practices backed by technological developments, fisheries and aquaculture are effective in attaining food security. (‘In the interest of small fry’; July 14)

Lab-grown and cell-cultured meat production methods should be extended to the fisheries sector to meet the growing demands without overexploitation of resources and compromising on nutrient values.

Viveka Vardhan Naidu Bhyripudi

Management measures like promoting sustainable fishing practices, enforcement of off-seasons and banning destructive fishing practices like purse-seining and deep sea trawling, addressing climate change impacts on marine environment and eco-labelling can contribute to the sustainable development of the fisheries.

T.N. Venugopalan

The long Indian coast provides for a huge variety of fish but consumers mostly buy what is available in the market. Improving awareness of consumers about the seasonal availability and nutritional value of different fish and fishing holidays during breeding season will make it more sustainable and beneficial.

N.S. Reddy

The habit of eating small fish in India is quite important to ‘decolonise’

the Indian culinary mind. The cultural importance of eating chutney made of small fish, popularly known as *shutki*, reflects a strong piscine culture in Tripura and other Northeastern states of India. It acts as a bridge between the older and younger generations. The taste buds of the younger generation are thus shaped to identify more ways to prepare dishes out of small fish.

Aniket Mohapatra

The same trouble continues to plague the hills of Northeast and Darjeeling as well. (‘All is not well at Changthang’; July 14)

It’s time campers and rash tourist bikers are fined heavily for dumping garbage and washing kitchen wares in pristine rivers. Tourists should be made aware of sustainable tourism in the ecologically-fragile Himalayas and shown how their carelessness can threaten the flora and fauna there.

Saranya Dutta

This misuse of the UAPA needs to stop. (‘Banojyostna Lahiri: a modern love story’; July 14)

Considering the long detention period and the resulting trauma the person arrested and their close ones undergo, the apex court should step in to fast-track the trials. Curbing the freedom of speech and expression (Article 19) and defining those who criticise the government as terrorists shows the real intention of those in power. This needs to stop.

Rohith Varon S.S.



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Akanksha Kamath

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

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

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

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

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



GALA DALÍ IN THE COMPANY OF ‘DIFFICULT’ WOMEN

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



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

But it’s also a matter of making money. “At a time when public funding has diminished quite a lot in the last decade or so, museums rely on what we call blockbuster exhibitions,” explains Coraça. “Exhibitions that touch a nerve in audiences, either because they’re responding to something that society is grappling with or that’s always caught people’s interest – usually celebrities.” Be it fashion designers Mary Quant and Gabrielle Chanel, or singer-songwriter Taylor Swift – the American performer’s in-concert wardrobe is going on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London this month – the bold female persona with a sensational storyline has become fodder for museums.



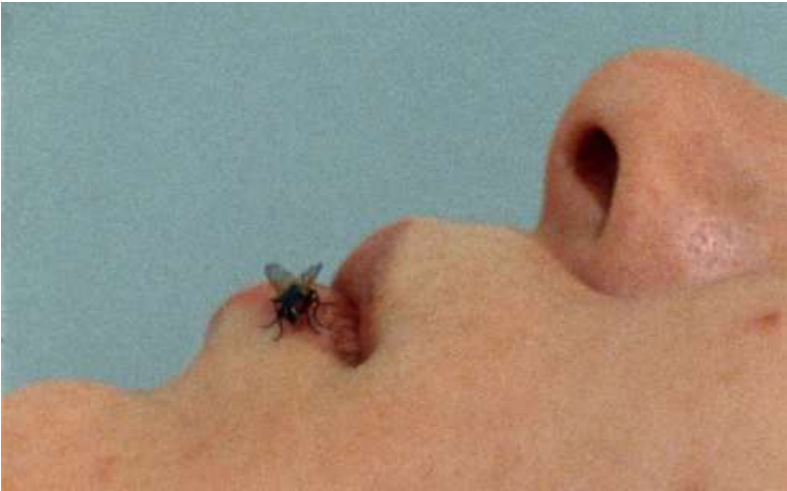
And it’s working. “It’s our fascination with these strong women that reels us in,” says Carrie Scott, art historian and founder of Seen.art, a broadcast channel and art consultancy that demystifies the world of art. “We’re all curious to see what the fuss was all about. So, it’s really smart of exhibitions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

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

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

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

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



If you ask for what you want and you aren’t considered important enough, you are deemed ‘difficult’. To get to the rooms or circles these women occupied, they would’ve had to be difficult

ZAHRA KHAN
Founder, Art Divvy



It’s on display at the V&A.”

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

A modern resonance

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

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

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

Cogs in the wheel

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

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

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

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



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