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Zohran Mamdani's (right) campaign wasn't the language of glossy manifestos or billionaire donors; it was the rhythm of bus routes and bodegas. He made the working class visible again, not as statistics but as characters with agency. (KARA MCCURDY)

ZOHRAN MAMDANI

THE OUTSIDER INSIDER

How New York's mayor refuses to perform the 'good immigrant' act, puts the city's communities as his campaign's protagonists, and leans into being brown, Muslim, and socialist

Pooja Garg

Chances are you have heard of Zohran Kwame Mamdani as the newly elected mayor of New York who played 'Dhoom Machale' at the end of his victory speech. Either that or you may have, like many of us, first stumbled upon him swinging from a New York lamppost, mouthing lines from Bollywood blockbusters *Karz* and *Deewar*. In the reel that went viral with over 40 million views, Mamdani flipped those iconic dialogues into the language of his campaign: power to tenants, dignity to workers, transit for all. He had reimagined Amitabh Bachchan's defiance for Astoria's working class.

In that brief reel, just as in the rest of his campaign, one could see everything that fuels him: the instinct for play, the hunger for story, the belief that narrative forges belonging. This, coupled with over 90,000 volunteers canvassing for him, delivered him the historic win for the job said to be the most difficult in American politics after the presidency. "People don't realise what a movement it had become. Over three million doors were knocked. Mamdani really met people where they were at. Literally. On the streets, in train stations, in cultural settings like gurudwaras," says Hana Mangat, a writer and organiser from Brooklyn, who worked on Mamdani's campaign.

Son of cinema and critique

Mamdani has lived at the intersection of art and agitation. Before turning mayor-elect for New York, he was Mr. Cardamom, the rapper exploring his Indian and Ugandan roots. His mother, Mira Nair, an Oscar-nominated filmmaker, gave the world *Mississippi Masala*, *Monsoon Wedding*, and *Salaam Bombay!*. His father, Mahmood Mamdani, has spent a lifetime interrogating colonial power and teaching others to do the same. From her, Mamdani inherited the camera's empathy; from him, the scholar's impatience with injustice.

It's no accident that his politics feels cinematic. He well understands pacing, framing, and character. He builds tension, releases it with humour, and punctuates speeches like a filmmaker cutting scenes. On the campaign trail, he didn't just talk about housing and transit. He scripted a collective imagination where immigrants aren't footnotes, they're protagonists. His campaign wasn't the language of glossy manifestos or billionaire donors; it was the rhythm of bus routes and bodegas. He talked about free public transit. City-run grocery stores. Affordable housing. Childcare that didn't cost a paycheck. It was the kind of unglamorous, everyday stuff that actually decides whether a city is liveable.

And in doing that, he turned mundane policies into matters of the heart. He made the working class visible again, not as statistics but as characters with agency. "He shows an integrity that I would like my children to see in public service," says Aarti S., a New York City resident who voted for him.

What began as a borough movement found resonance beyond New York City borders. With Mamdani's quick wit, humour, and social media savvy, it spilled into national consciousness. For instance, the moment he spelled out his name for his opponent Andrew Cuomo became instantly viral, reborn online as the 'Mamdani Song', a cheeky remix of Gwen Stefani's 'Hollaback Girl'. People as far as Texas and Washington have been humming along to it.

A cultural shift

For South Asian voters who grew up on cassette tapes, pirated DVDs, and Sunday screenings, Mamdani's Bollywood punch-up was more than nostalgia. It was rebellion. It said that culture isn't soft power, it's muscle. For generations, immigrants have been told to erase their identities to survive. The South Asian success story in America has been about fitting in: the Ivy League degree, the start-up hustle, the quiet pride of middle-class endurance, gratitude for the seat at the table.

Mamdani's rise throws that narrative out the window. He refuses to perform the 'good immigrant' act of someone polite, apolitical, and endlessly grateful. He didn't just pull up a chair. He built his own table and invited the city's overlooked majority to sit beside him. And that's a radical proposition in a culture that still rewards quiet assimilation.

"Mamdani becoming the first South Asian American mayor of New York City is not just a political milestone. This is a victory for every immigrant who came to New York hoping not only to live here but to belong here," says Dilip Chauhan, a prominent South Asian community

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4-5

I've known Zohran since he was a bump in Mira's belly! All his life, Zohran has travelled the world with Mira and Mahmood wherever they went; scenarios as diverse as movie sets, the corridors of academia, glitzy film festivals, or get-togethers with his gregarious yet close-knit Indian family. It's given him his eclectic spirit, his ease with people, the way he relates to the old, the young, the marginalised, and reacts to diverse issues and situations. [Unfortunately] despite globalisation, we all live in tightly sealed silos. This was marked by the reactions to Zohran's campaign and ultimate resounding victory. In Delhi, we celebrated. Elsewhere, there was apprehension. People from the U.K., Australia, South Africa and even India are writing in predicting doom, and sending their condolences to New Yorkers. Even the leaders of his own Democratic party failed to endorse him. Obama, that was so disappointing. None of this should deflect Zohran from his vision and path. He has the energy and hopes of the young and the disadvantaged behind him. They will sustain him.

LAILA TYABJI
Designer and craft activist

Thirty years ago, I worked for two city governments in housing and community development. It was a formative experience for me, yet a lonely one. I never encountered other South Asians working in city government. So, I'm excited that Americans are going to see South Asians playing a role in sectors beyond medicine, engineering, and tech. I'm also excited for the South Asian diaspora to see all the different ways that we can show up in society, beyond the narrow stereotypical ones. It is significant to me that Mamdani comes from a family of such accomplishment, but also [different backgrounds] — Hindu and Muslim. This is such a fraught divide in India and in the diaspora. But you look at how it has cultivated such richness in their family and the work they do out in the world, and in the child that they created who holds all these traditions within himself, and that helps him relate to such a broad spectrum [of people]. So I think that's very powerful for all of us. I'm somebody who grew up in a home divided by caste and region. My father is Bengali, and my mother is South Indian, and they're from different castes. So it was an issue, but it's something that informs my perspective.

KAVITA DAS
Author and social change activist

BOOKER PRIZE 2025

'FICTION CAN TAKE RISKS'

As David Szalay's novel bags the Booker Prize, a reflection on the role of literary awards and how fiction can help people make sense of the world

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

Hungarian-British writer David Szalay's *Flesh*, this year's Booker Prize-winning novel, is a narrative of displacement, masculinity, and the weight of moral choices. A Hungarian teenager, Istvan, drifts through life – a physical relationship, an older woman, juvenile detention, the Iraq war, and finally a job as a driver for the extremely wealthy in London.

Globalisation is not an abstract concept in *Flesh* – it is felt in the teeth. Some citizens are more equal than others. The novel probes spaces, however close to the bone, where human feeling survives – including in the face of mortality. "There's still something there," says a woman about her dying husband. On a train to see his mother, in a rare, poetic moment, Istvan glimpses the landscape of his youth: "Deer flee across flooded fields. In the distance are low hills the colour of smoke."

Coincidentally, this year's Nobel Prize in Literature was also awarded to a Hungarian writer – the 71-year old László Krasznahorkai – for his work which, in the words of the Swedish Academy, "in the midst of apocalyptic terror, reaffirms the power of art". The small and land-locked nation of Hungary in Central Europe has produced some remarkable writers. The nation has also had a tumultuous history. After World War I, in the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its territory and its people – compelling a turn to a past that has always seemed larger than the present.

Questions of diversity and access remain

Krasznahorkai's university thesis was on the anti-fascist and anti-communist writer Sandor Marai, who left Hungary to live in exile. In the 1930s, Marai had been one of Hungary's leading literary figures. In 1944, when the Nazis invaded, he decided to stop writing; and in 1948, when the Russians arrived, he left. Ironically, he died by suicide in 1989, the very year when Hungary began cutting through its barbed wire border with Austria – within months, bringing down the Iron Curtain in Europe.

In a 2025 interview with novelist Hari Kunzru for *The Yale Review*, Krasznahorkai described art as "humanity's extraordinary response to the sense of lostness that is our fate". If Hungary's literary history reflects loss and renewal, Szalay brings these themes into a globalised, unequal world. *Flesh* explores themes of migration and human connection. Yet, the institutions that celebrate such writing invite their own scrutiny. Does literary prize culture build bridges in the wider community, or is it out of touch, perceived as elitist – culturally or economically – and restricted to a certain type of well-heeled reader? Whom does it include – and whom does it exclude?

Literary culture reflects the ongoing tension between creative expression, access, and inequality. The Booker Prize website announces that it is the "leading literary award in the English-speaking world". The longlist, shortlist, and award process have the power to transform writers' careers with global audiences and surging book sales. Nevertheless, questions of diversity, readability, and gatekeeping persist.

Literary prizes have their histories of omission and oversight. Tolstoy, who was repeatedly nominated for the Nobel, but never awarded, remarked that he would decline even if offered, for he believed money was the greatest source of evil. Writers like Chekhov, Proust, Borges, Woolf, and Premchand were overlooked. Sartre declined, unwilling to be institutionalised. More recently, in 2019, Austrian novelist Peter Handke – who denied the Bosnian genocide (1992-95) – was awarded the prize, provoking outrage.

Training the imagination to care

While the benefits of literary prizes are clear – sales, visibility, readership – we should look for more ways to achieve these outcomes. Organisers of literary events should also hold book discussions in local community spaces, universities, libraries, and parks, where a more diverse public can participate. Public libraries should offer these books, and conversations, to less privileged readers. Access can take the conversation beyond what can sometimes feel like self-congratulatory echo chambers.

Another, larger question remains: when attention spans diminish and people are always scrolling, does the novel still matter?

On my desk is a reminder why the answer is a clear 'yes'. Since September, I have been re-reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, first published nearly 160 years ago. I have been reading on flights and trains, at bus stops, park benches, and cafes – and I am still reading it. It is, as the publishing world likes to say, unputdownable. It is alive, and contains multitudes.

Not least of all, there is the question of how we read. The activity of reading a novel is a slow, thoughtful process. A novel is not a commodity to be "consumed" like a social media reel; it must be experienced reflectively, in an unhurried manner. When we read, we bring to the act of reading everything that makes us what we are – our contexts, personal experiences, and questions.

Reading is personal, yes; but literary prizes help to sustain the conditions in which writers can produce books and readers can read them. Novels are one of the ways in which we can make sense of the world, and train the imagination to care. As Szalay reminds us, "Fiction can take risks – aesthetic, formal or even moral."

The writer is in the IAS.

Hall of fame Booker Prize 2025 shortlisted authors (L-R) Ben Markovits, Katie Kitamura, Susan Choi, David Szalay, Andrew Miller and Kiran Desai ahead of the announcement of the winner in London last week; and (top) Szalay with his Prize-winning novel. (GETTY IMAGES)

IN CONVERSATION

Writing women in a man's world

Rahul Bhattacharya's new novel *Railsong* is a window into India's historical milestones and the dribble of women into the workforce

Preeti Zachariah
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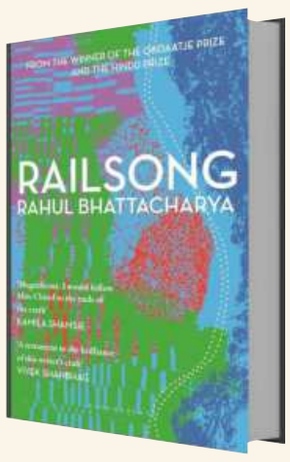
The first draft of *Railsong,* Rahul Bhattacharya's new novel (published by Bloomsbury), was written entirely in longhand. "I remember reading in a Toni Morrison interview that she would wake early in the morning, when the first light was coming in, and write on yellow legal pads with 2B pencils. I thought I'd do exactly that," says the Delhi-based writer, whose last book, *The Sly Company of People Who Care,* won the 2012 Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize and *The Hindu* Literary Prize 2011.

Bhattacharya believes that the "artisanal work" of sitting and sharpening a pencil every few sentences allows him to enter the space of creation. "I could not descend into the fictional world using a computer," he says. By the end of three years, he had a stack of legal pads filled with scrawls that he would redraft and hone over the decade it took him to finish this book. "A lot changed: the writing rhythm, the writing routines, my understanding of the world, my consciousness as a person and writer," he says. "But putting down that first draft was the most important thing."

Author Rahul Bhattacharya (NEVILLE SUKHIA)

The default male viewpoint

Railsong, which tells the story of the enterprising Charu Chitol, a motherless child growing up in a small railway town, who then runs away to Mumbai and becomes a railway woman, would have Bhattacharya spending years trawling through books, memos, circulars, and rulebooks, as well as resorting to old-fashioned legwork and travel, to create his fictional world. Since the novel spans nearly four decades, with much changing in both the railway system and the country during that period, the research often ended up being esoteric, he says. "I intended that if somebody was working in the railways between the 1950s and the early 90s, he or she should be able to recognise the world in the novel as authentic."



Creating Charu – a fully realised, complex female character who escapes being tinctured by tropes of the male gaze – was not without its challenges either. "I grew up in and continue to live in a world where the male viewpoint is considered the default," says Bhattacharya, who actively sought and read the work of women writers across geographies, languages and genres "not merely to appreciate the depth and the variety of female articulation" but to "strive towards an understanding that gave me the confidence to build Charu and the other women of the novel". The process, he adds, was rewarding. "A lot of things in the novel were a complete headache, but working on Charu always felt fresh and exciting."

Track records

The result is a narrative that rumbles amiably and elegantly as it journeys through the vicissitudes of life and the shifting emotional and political landscape of the country. The railways serve as a recurring motif for our desire for connection and momentum. Bhattacharya has written a fine English novel in chiselled prose, his sentences gleaming like the steel of railway tracks burnished by rolling wheels.

Railsong doesn't just articulate the railways as a human network, but also offers a window into significant historical milestones in the country, including "the industrial ambition of a young Nehruvian India, a famine in pre-Green Revolution India, the Emergency seen not through the Emergency itself but through the railway strike of 1974". It also chronicles the slow but steady dribble of women into the workforce: work, for Charu, doesn't just represent economic independence but a fuller engagement with the world, and "is a very significant strand of tension in the novel".

A passage to India

The Indian census is yet another vital aspect of the novel, both marking the passage of time and expanding on the idea of being an individual among the many who make up this country. This is perhaps why, despite the novel having so many characters – "I think there must be well over 100" – Bhattacharya has attempted to tease out the individual beneath the statistics, crafting every character with care, paying attention to details such as names, caste identities, and occupational hierarchies. "I find the census very fascinating in the Indian context, since it is the statistical counting of people and a collection of parameters every human being can be slotted into," he elaborates.

Railsong's cyclical narrative structure adds to the overarching train metaphor, capturing the essence of a heaving, paradoxical, pulsating nation, where tragedy, triumph, spirituality, dynamism, and tumult constantly converge, like railway junctions.

"The novel ends at the same railway station where it began, Bhombalpur, on the eve of the razing of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, which is also the anniversary of Ambedkar's death," says Bhattacharya, adding, "In literal terms, you come back to the same place in the novel, but we've journeyed quite a bit in between, haven't we?"

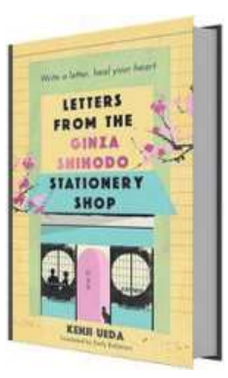
BROWSER

Queen Esther

John Irving
Scribner U.K.
₹937 (ebook)
Two decades after his Oscar win for *The Cider House Rules*, Irving revisits the orphanage in Maine, where Dr. Wilbur Larch once took in Esther, a Jewish girl whose life is marked by the enduring scars of anti-Semitism. The final chapter is set in 1981 Jerusalem when Esther is 76.

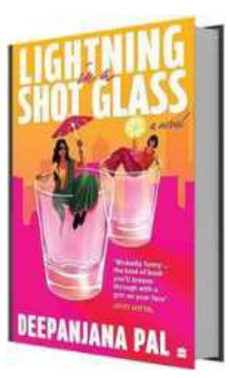
Letters from the Ginza Shihodo Stationery Shop

Kenji Ueda, trs Emily Balistrieri
Bonnier U.K.
₹499
The latest in the popular sub-genre of Japanese bookshop novels features a hidden stationery store and a perceptive owner who helps lost souls write their way back to themselves. An uplifting read for monotonous days.



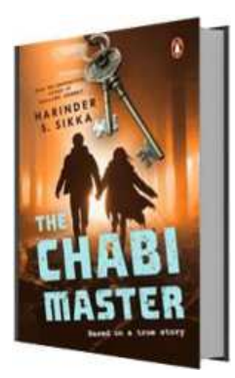
Lightning in a Shot Glass

Deepanjana Pal
HarperCollins
₹499
Comedian Aditi Mittal calls this book "wickedly funny and wildly unserious about serious things". Two women in Mumbai navigate work politics and relationship drama in this peppy romcom held together by friendship and the city's electric pulse.



The Chabimaster

Harinder S. Sikka
Penguin Metro Reads
₹399
This new book by the author of *Calling Sehmat*, the novel that inspired the Alia Bhatt spy thriller *Raazi*, is another espionage drama unfolding amid Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup in Pakistan. The story centred on a RAW agent places its various characters against documented history.



(From far left) Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, Ignaz Semmelweis and Barbara McClintock, scientists who challenged long-held ideas but were late to be honoured; and (below) Gauhar Raza. (GETTY IMAGES)

SCIENCE AND THE SACRED

Gauhar Raza's deeply humanist vision is necessary in an era of rising dogmatism, but his book is limited in scope

Vasudevan Mukunth
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In his new book, *From Myths to Science*, scientist and poet Gauhar Raza presents science as the most refined stage yet of a quest that began when the first humans began to ask questions. He honours the myths of ancient tribes and civilisations not as worthy of ridicule but as humans' first "conceptual models" to explain the universe.

Then, by tracing the path from tribal stories to Greek philosophy, the Golden Age of West Asian science, and the Copernican revolution, Raza portrays science as a collective and unending human project that turns into a living tradition.

His position is perhaps most stirring when he contrasts the ethos of science with that of what he calls "extra-scientific" knowledge systems, including organised religion. He repeatedly highlights science's greatest strength to be its willingness to say 'I don't know' in the face of a new unknown, rather than assume the dogmatic finality replete in religious scriptures.

Theory and practice

The book celebrates the fact that science is designed to be proven wrong, noting that while a scientist who successfully challenges a long-held theory is honoured and celebrated, peremptory beliefs lead to social oppression and violence, citing historical examples of persecution as well as the modern-day murders of rationalists like Narendra Dabholkar. Altogether, science is framed in *From Myths to Science* as an inherently progressive and anti-authoritarian pursuit.

This noble vision, however, risks overlooking the fact that the ideal has often been used to excuse an uncritical attitude towards science in practice. The enterprise is supposed to be self-correcting but the arc of self-correction doesn't bend by itself. As the work of the Dutch microbiologist Elisabeth Bik has shown, it takes scientists tremendous effort and considerable time, and often without the shield of institutional support against mental violence, to correct the scientific record. And scientists who challenge long-held theories are not honoured, as the experiences of Ignaz Semmelweis, Alfred Wegener, Barbara McClintock, Vera Rubin, Robin Warren, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, and Dan Shechtman illustrate. Social, political, cultural, and economic forces matter to science's identity.

In fact, this distinction between what ought to be and what is offers a useful window through which to examine some of Raza's more overarching conclusions. In *From Myths to Science*, faith has social value but is epistemologically unreliable whereas science is democratic and ethical. But when the book attempts to resolve this tension by presenting a binary with science on one side and doctrinaire systems like religion on the other, thus making a necessary moral case for science, it struggles to contain the complex lived realities in India.

For example, Raza's narrative of "dual personalities" – scientists who are rational in the lab and irrational outside – frames this as a hypocrisy born of social pressure. But as IISER Bhopal sociologist Renny Thomas has found, this isn't a contradiction but a distinct Indian mode of rationality in which "science and the sacred" cohabit a plural moral universe. By assuming that faith and scientific reason must exist in separate, conflicting compartments, the book's framework flattens a syncretic reality into a simple failure to be 'fully' rational.

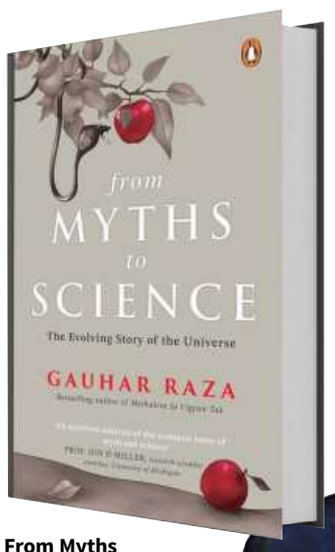
Myths as science

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Raza's more generalised and historical treatment of faith is at odds with how the Bharatiya Janata Party has mainstreamed and sustained particular forms of it, thus underestimating the faith-power imbroglio in Hindu nationalism. When the state itself weaponises myths as science, we first need to name the class and political interests that sustain religious obscurantism.

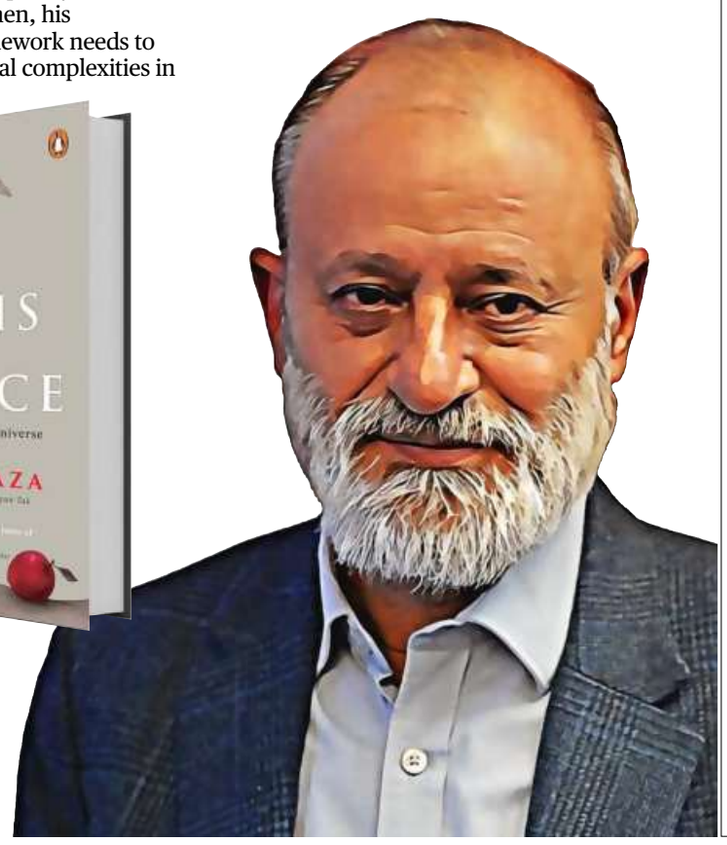
Superstition has also become commercialised. The fight to build "scientific temper" – a constitutional call that Raza considers liberating but without engaging with evidence that the term has often allowed the postcolonial state to define the 'rational citizen' and marginalise others – has also become inseparable from critiquing the capitalist commodification of faith. For his vision of an emancipatory science to be fully realised, then, his philosophical framework needs to incorporate political complexities in the form of secular education, media accountability, and research autonomy.

Taken together, Raza elevates science to a civilisational vocation by imbuing it with an almost spiritual purpose. The book's opening says the "noble task" of understanding the universe has been given to us, that "only we, the humans, can do it", and it concludes that through science, "we transform into active participants in the grand narrative of existence". Thus, science is a moralised responsibility bestowed upon our species by virtue of our consciousness and which embodies the best of the human spirit.

This deeply humanist vision is necessary in an era of rising obscurantism. The problem, however, is that *From Myths to Science* is limited in scope: it doesn't fully reckon with the historical and political conditions in which "the human spirit" of science is produced. Or how power, capital, and the state shape what counts as reason, who gets to practise it, and at whose expense its supposedly universal claims are made.



From Myths to Science
Gauhar Raza
Ebury Press
₹499



Global pharmacy

A new book maps the vast and chequered history of India's immunisation, vaccine research and development

Ramya Kannan
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Most of us have heard of Mary Mallon, or Typhoid Mary, a healthy carrier of typhoid, who was employed in wealthy households in New York and had unwittingly transmitted typhoid through her cooking. What are the odds that you know that the smallpox vaccine was brought into India by human carriers? Pretty slim.

A set of people vaccinated in Baghdad in early 1802 set sail and reached the shores of Bombay, traversing 1,800 nautical miles, to bring the vaccine to India, arm to arm. Having reached Indian shores through the only viable route for transportation those days, the vaccine was then transplanted on to a three-year-old baby Anna Dusthall, in June that year. Dusthall's arm then gave rise to the entire stock of vaccine virus in India. The cold chain network in its rudimentary form would not emerge for another 100 years at least.

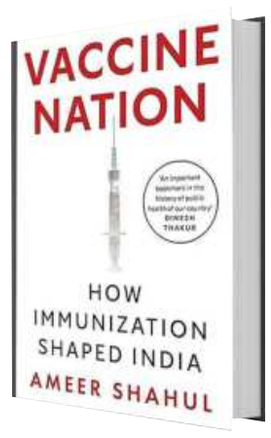
Solving a puzzle

In *Vaccine Nation*, Ameer Shahul sets together the many jigsaw pieces that contextualise India's key position in the vast and chequered history of immunisation, vaccine research and development. It might be a common perception that India has been, until recently, at the receiving end of the fruits of labour of Western laboratory work on developing vaccines, but a few pages into this book, and you realise how erroneous that perception is.

India has been a significant entity participating in scientific research on vaccines, unwittingly in the early stages, but over the years, it has developed its own capacity and scientific ingenuity. Now, thanks to its manufacturing capacity, India has emerged as a strong player in the pharmacology market.

India's vaccine prowess was for all to witness during the COVID epidemic, producing Covaxin and Covishield to supply to the world, and at rates impossible to procure anywhere else. But the nation's association with vaccines stretched far back, right to British colonial times, says Shahul, going on to trace its evolution in terms of the quest for quality and standardisation of pharmaceutical products, besides the phenomenal growth of the private sector. The way forward has been slow and full of pitfalls, but India has indeed ascended the ladder in this sector. All together, they have chiselled a niche for India in the global pharma market and have established Indian supremacy in the sector (dented nevertheless, time and again, by questions on quality).

Vaccine Nation is a well-researched, cogently-written book that prioritises storytelling as much as getting the facts right. This is the heart of the book, and within the pages of this hard-bound volume, is a treasure that should line bookshelves.



Vaccine Nation: How Immunization Shaped India
Ameer Shahul
Pan Macmillan
₹999

Brush with danger

An Australian doctor of Indian origin recalls his harrowing experience in West Asia

Sheila Kumar

The tagline of the book, *Kidnapped by Hezbollah*, reads: 'A True Story of Travel, Turmoil and Triumph', and pretty much sums up what lies at the heart of the story.

This is the true-life account of an Australia-based man of Indian origin. When Kaushik Sridhar decides he needs to visit the war-torn areas of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, his wife is less than pleased. However, he not only calms her misgivings, he gets her to accompany him, too. And so they head towards a volatile region that has been witnessing sustained unrest for a long time now.

Using a direct clean style and precise language, Sridhar tells us how beautiful the areas they visited were, lands replete with history, beauty, resilience.

This section of the book is pure travelogue, though of the whistle-stop kind.

And then, they stray into forbidden territory (despite having a driver who is a Hezbollah member) and worse, are caught clicking photographs. In a trice, they are surrounded by unsmiling men clad in black, who take away their passports, phones and vehicle keys.

There follows 14 tense hours during which their mettle is tested again and again. Everyone is separated, briefly blindfolded and repeatedly questioned. However, Sridhar says they were offered water and that their interlocutors were suspicious but not cruel.

Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon, May 2023; and (far left) Kaushik Sridhar. (WIKI COMMONS)

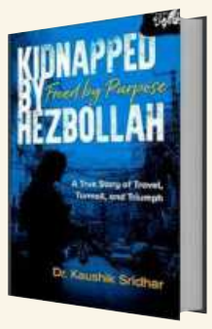
After a while Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (who was killed last year in an Israeli airstrike) himself comes to meet the detainees.

This is where the author believes his purposeful responses saved the day. Eventually, being convinced that this was a party of tourists who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, with no ulterior motive, Sridhar and his party were set free.

The Sridhar who returned from that trip was a changed man. Within months, he quit his high-stakes corporate job, moved cities, and later, started an advisory firm.

The rest of the account has Sridhar relating the lessons he learned from this less than pleasant experience at the hands of the Hezbollah. At times, these takeaways gets a bit repetitive but the overall message is one of positivity, one of taking the odds stacked against you and using them to propel yourself to just the place you want to be in.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based author, journalist and manuscript editor.



Kidnapped by Hezbollah
Kaushik Sridhar
Brolga Publishing
₹1,400

ZOHRAN MAMDANI

THE OUTSIDER INSIDER

Everybody's got a New York City story, and mine is from three decades ago. I'd landed in the city for graduate school with two suitcases and travellers checks. But I didn't have money, so I couldn't get a cart to put my suitcases on. This man stopped by me. He was there to pick up his family, and he gave me $5 and said, 'Pay it forward'. That's the essence of what New Yorkers are. They may be busy, but if they can help, they will. And that, to me, epitomises what Zohran Mamdani's campaign was all about. The fact that Zohran has Indian and African heritage, the fact that he understands what socialism means in terms of how you could be a Democrat and care for your people, is what is exciting. What is also interesting is that he is young. He's of the next generation, so for 'aunties' like us, the only job is to support him. More than excited, I'm hopeful — that the next generation is going to do what they're supposed to do, which is to lead with dignity and respect.

MADHUSHREE GHOSH
Author and speaker

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

leader and former deputy comptroller of Nassau County.

In America's political theatre, where immigrant candidates often sandpaper away their origins for mass appeal, Mamdani did the opposite. He used his South Asian identity as texture. He leaned into brownness not as branding, but as belonging. For the community, it marks a generational and cultural shift. Here's a man who refuses to apologise for his noise. He's brown, Muslim, socialist, loud, and still winning. "It's a difficult time to be brown and Muslim in the country. I am excited that Mamdani is going to be representing us," says Nahiyan Taufiq, an organiser from Queens, who worked on his campaign. When he played 'Dhoom Machale' at his victory party, it was ownership, it was a joyous reclamation that told the crowd: we don't have to mute where we come from to shape where we're going.

The politics of timing

To understand the meaning of Mamdani's win, one has to witness the mood of New York right now. Timing matters, and Mamdani's couldn't have been sharper. His win arrives at a moment when New York is tired of politicians who talk about equity while lunching with landlords. In a city as jaded as New York, authenticity is the rarest currency. Mamdani's greatest gift was to sound unscripted in a space that thrives on spin.

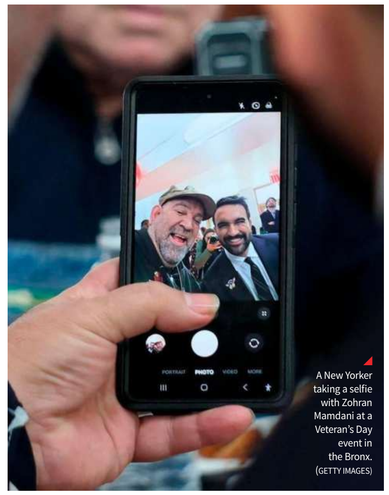
The city that once prided itself on being the beating heart of liberal democracy had begun to look like a gated economy. The pandemic exposed faultlines that years of rhetoric had tried to plaster over: housing costs that make life precarious, public transit stretched thin, and a cost-of-living crisis that has left the city's working class gasping for space.

While Mamdani has infused hope, there are questions too about whether he will be able to deliver. Many New Yorkers wonder if his promises are feasible. "If he can reduce the cost of childcare, that would be great. Also, we need to retain our gifted programmes in schools," says Aarti. "He said he would tax millionaires, but he does not have the authority to do that."

Sumit, also a New York City resident, feels that Mamdani, with his inexperience, has been set up for failure. "Mamdani lacks experience, and there are many issues. Let's take the example of rent freeze on apartments. 40% of apartments in New York City are rent-controlled. If the landlords are not allowed to raise rents, they are not likely to invest in repairing houses or building new ones."

Despite these questions that also marked his campaign trail, the city has rallied behind him. For a city where immigrant energy has long been commodified but rarely celebrated, Mamdani's ascent is a symbolic renewal. It says: the people who make New York work can also make it better. And that is the true meaning of his win: in not just the votes counted but in voices recovered.

The writer is deputy editor, Khabar *magazine, and USC Annenberg Fellow for Writing and Community*



A New Yorker taking a selfie with Zohran Mamdani at a Veteran's Day event in the Bronx. (GETTY IMAGES)

I got involved with Zohran Mamdani's campaign after I saw a TikTok about him. I was intrigued because he vocally supported Palestine, which is not something you see often in American politics. Then, as I learned more about his policies, his campaign and his background, I realised that he is a politician I could actually get behind. He advocates for the immigrant community and the working class, which are often forgotten about in this city by the rich and billionaires. [This is] one of the beginnings of us fighting back against MAGA and fascism and all the horrible things that are happening. I can already see the momentum growing from his win, people getting excited and realising that there is power in politics and voting.

NAHIYAN TAUFIQ
Communications associate and lead canvasser for Mamdani's campaign

Three million doors were knocked. That is a massive political movement, and it beat the millions of dollars that were invested against him. I [remember] getting a lot of Instagram ads from his opponent, Andrew Cuomo. The sheer Islamophobia in them [was appalling]. I got one that said Zohran supported an *imam* who promotes terrorism. They thickened his beard and made him seem like more of a foreigner. And as somebody who grew up in the Sikh community in the DC area post 9/11, it is so meaningful to me that New Yorkers saw who Zohran is on the inside. Now that he is in office, it's our job to hold him accountable. But I hope that he ushers in a new era of politics.

HANA MANGAT
Voter from Brooklyn

Zohran Mamdani; and a selection of his campaign visuals. (KARA MCCURDY)

HE BROUGHT BACK THE SERIFS

Zohran Mamdani's campaign shaped political history with visual design that leaned into colour and borrowed from bodegas and Bollywood

Naba Yasir

When Zohran Mamdani hit the streets of New York, he didn't just run a campaign, he demonstrated how visual design and brand strategy can shape political history. Through strategic visual and verbal communication, he built a movement that inspired over two million New Yorkers to vote. The highest turnout the city had seen since 1969. Every poster, speech and social media post worked to communicate trust, authenticity, and drive action.

Your brain can recall an image in less than 13 milliseconds. That's faster than a blink. In today's goldfish-attention-span society, visuals are one of the most powerful currency. And Mamdani's campaign made every millisecond count.

One of the most immediately recognisable visual elements was its hand-drawn typography. It felt warm, personable, and lived-in, the exact opposite of the corporate aesthetic strangling American politics. After Obama's 'HOPE' campaign, political branding had defaulted almost uniformly to sterile sans-serifs. Yet, Mamdani brought back humanist serifs. The letterforms immediately communicated that he was of the people, not positioned above them.

Equally strategic was the colour palette. Traditionally, Democrats default to blue. But Mamdani deployed a charged, electric royal blue paired with golden yellow and orange. The result was almost neon in impact: youthful, bold, and impossible to confuse with establishment politics. This wasn't just Democratic alignment; it signalled a new Democratic identity.

Visually, it signalled authenticity and approachability. Every element evoked the working-class fabric of New York City: bodega awning signage, MTA-era condensed lettering, taxi yellow, playful storefront typography. To South Asian and immigrant New Yorkers, the visual language subtly echoed retro Bollywood film posters. The design didn't make Mamdani look like an outsider, it made him look like someone already standing in the neighbourhood.

Visuals that 'spoke' New York

At least 26 billionaires funnelled over $22 million into opposing Mamdani. And yet they lost. One of the reasons could be that Mamdani's campaign was a visual protest in a sea of sameness.

On storefront windows and telephone poles from Queens to the Bronx, to social media graphics, the yellow-and-blue signs declaring 'Freeze the Rents', 'Childcare for All', and 'Fast and Free Buses' stood out from the standard red, white, and blue campaign graphics. The retro, grassroots aesthetic created positive associations (where political campaigns typically evoke negativity and divisiveness), while the messaging spoke directly to the everyday pain of working-class New Yorkers.

Mamdani knew exactly who he was speaking to. Through audience segmentation, he spoke to renters, working-class New Yorkers, and young progressives who long felt shut out of the political system. His storytelling was emotionally charged and visually intentional. Just as his merch design choices. They felt wearable in everyday life – something you'd wear on the subway, at a concert or while running errands. It didn't say, "I support a politician." It said, "I belong to a community." From T-shirts and bandanas to tote bags and paper fans, the campaign design created a brand that supporters wanted to wear and share, using visual design as a secret tool that made politics feel real and community-driven.

Blueprint for authenticity

Most importantly, the campaign design never positioned Mamdani as the hero. In every ad, video, and poster, the audience was the main character. Most campaigns speak at voters. Mamdani's design spoke with them and for them.

Your brain decides within the first few seconds whether someone is for you or not. Almost 95% of buying decisions happen in the subconscious mind. And in politics, buying decisions equal buying into candidates' ideologies, being willing to donate, to mobilise. Visuals have the power to send subliminal cues to the subconscious, lodge into memory, and create trust. Which is why Mamdani's visual campaign had the power to shift the entire trajectory of his movement.

Its language didn't just capture a moment, it created a movement. In a political landscape drowning in sanitised mediocrity, its design became the blueprint for what happens when authenticity, cultural fluency, and brand strategy converge. The result wasn't simply an election win. The result was a movement powered by the people themselves. And that changes everything.

The campaign was designed by Forge, a small co-op agency. Illustrator Rama Duwaji, Mamdani's wife, also played a role in the visual direction of the brand identity.

The writer is a Texas-based brand strategist and designer, and the founder of Lumiere Creative Hub.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

I was a security guard, an underpaid intern, I was washing dishes. But it wasn't like a 'mindfulness' moment, it was pure hustle. I was just trying to get enough money to buy a glass of wine for that cute girl I saw, and then maybe I'd get to kiss her...

Vir Das recounts the story of his life, with Bollywood-like ups and downs, in his memoir.

INTERVIEW

VIR DAS AND HIS CINEMATIC DREAMS

The multi-hyphenate comic on his new memoir and how filmmaking gets him into a 'flow state' all day

Aditya Mani Jha

International Emmy-winning comedian, actor, new author and soon-to-be-filmmaker – Vir Das's storied career has been one of constant reinvention. Arguably the best-known Indian stand-up comic in the world, Das recently published *The Outsider: A Memoir for Misfits* (HarperCollins India). In short, punchy chapters, Das recounts the story of his life, with Bollywood-like ups and downs. For instance, how did this "awkward guy" from Noida end up washing dishes at a Chicago café? How did his quotidian life intersect with show business? Teeming with many such entertaining anecdotes and self-deprecating humour, *The Outsider* is a lively account of an unusual path to stardom. Excerpts from an interview:

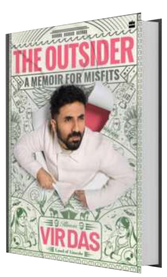
Question: *How did you begin writing* The Outsider? *And how has your relationship with the written word evolved over the years?*
Answer: To be very honest, I was against writing this book. My agents in the U.S. called me and convinced me to do it since it felt like the natural progression of an American comic's career path: 'you've won an Emmy, now write a book'. And because my career has kind of been divided between two markets, India and the U.S., I feel like I have a lot more to do in both places. I'll write a book about failure if you let me, about wondering how I got invited to this cool party. I am a five-foot-eight-and-a-half inches man from Noida and I've gatecrashed the film industry, the stand-up comedy industry.

Q: *When you look back at the time you were working multiple jobs in the U.S., trying to make ends meet, what lessons did this phase teach you? your own writing and style of comedy?*
A: COVID-19 changed my entire comedy voice. I was hiking up the side of a hill with a speaker, doing 'Ten on Ten', this series of YouTube videos. All of a sudden, you're in the middle of a forest with these people, so you can't be talking about inane things. I was like, you know guys, we've hiked up the side of a hill for this, let's talk about the country, right? It was a decent time to do political comedy because the country was on lockdown. And once I got a taste for it, there was no going back.

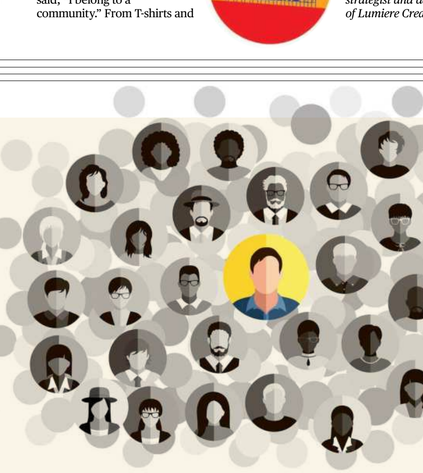
In India, it's not feasible for me to do too much testing of material because I know it'll get out... I see the phones during my shows in Delhi and Mumbai. Sometimes it's easier to test stuff in a famous venue like the Comedy Cellar in New York, where everybody's an assassin, where you have to be on your A-game.

Q: *Since you are on tour in America right now, I have to ask, have you worked on a Zohran Mamdani impression yet? What do you think about his Bollywood-themed campaign videos?*
A: I have some bits worked out. Ramy (Youssef) got the gig playing Mamdani on *Saturday Night Live*, but all five of us brown guys got the audition call, me and Hasan (Minhaj) and Nimesh Patel and a few other guys. Look, I think he [Mamdani] is leaning into who he is. Say what you will about the current phase of America but it is, at its best, a place where strangers turn up with their stories, and where those stories get eyeballs. And he has been able to do that incredibly well, in an authentic way.

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



Scan the QR code to catch Vir Das in conversation on **magazine.thehindu.com**



GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

How dare you question me, SIR?

'Not only is Aadhaar your identity, it is the power that makes your identity legit'

Which one of you is it? Is it you – who has been questioning me? I know all about you. I've seen your photo. You look like a cross-eyed, desiccated potato flattened by a road-roller. I have your finger-prints – so weak and disjointed – the only thing they'll ever authenticate is your low self-esteem. I know your irises too. They show me where you go on the web when you think no one is watching, when you think you have – my 12 digits collapse in mirth every time I hear the word – 'privacy'.

So yes, I am intrigued. How can a sad low-life like you – an entity with zero privacy, perpetually begging for OTPs just to get by, a puny digital plankton drifting aimlessly in the cloud, consumed and excreted multiple times by data sharks – ask me about my purpose? How dare you question me? I hear some of you have also insulted me on social media with comments like, "Aadhaar card's only purpose is to prove you have an Aadhaar card." Really?

I am aware the Election Commission (EC) has been saying odd things about me. I am being termed 'useless' because I'm apparently not enough to get you on the electoral roll. But neither is your voter ID – expressly made for you by the selfsame EC. So who is the useless one here? Not me, no SIR!

Endless cycle of updation and deletion

You ask me my purpose. Let me tell you this: I belong to a close-knit family of IDs and certificates, and they belong to me, all of them. If you've ever been to my place – actually, I know you've been to uidai.gov.in many, many times – you would have seen them listed, all 31 of them. Being my biggest supporters, they are rightly known as my 'supporting documents'. You may have heard of the more famous ones – ration card, voter ID, PAN, driving licence, passport. The others, though senior in age and experience, keep a low profile. These include Prisoner Induction Document (PID), family entitlement document, water bill, and property tax receipt. It is I who has given new meaning to their lives, to all of them.

For the longest time, these 31 documents lived a life of extreme neglect, filed away in moth-eaten folders and termite-infested cupboards, often struggling for breath inside stifling lamination. As a doddering old birth certificate said to me recently in a letter of appreciation, "Not a day passed when I did not wonder about my purpose. And then, one fine day, you arrived, our saviour!" Yeah, me. All sorts of IDs with an identity crisis now have a purpose.

Their purpose is to sustain the whole new universe of economic activity that I've single-handedly created – the endless cycle of enrolment, updation, deletion, and correction. The analogue elders have found relevance in the digital economy, thanks to me, and for that, they are eternally grateful. In this regard, you are their exact opposite – totally ungrateful – though I have done much more for you.

God of verification

Think back. What was your identity before I came along? Nothing. How many people knew you? Fifty? Hundred? Today, thanks to me, you have a unique identity made of 12 digits. And this digital identity of yours, along with your address and phone number, is known to legions of bots and firms you've never even heard of, thanks to my strategic leaking. That's the very definition of fame – being more known than knowing. I exist, therefore you are.

Speaking of purpose, did you have one before I intervened? You woke up, went to work, came back, watched TV, went to bed, repeat. That's how boring your life was. But now, every day has a clear purpose: change address on Aadhaar, link Aadhaar to bank account, generate masked Aadhaar for pension account, and so on.

By the way, if I didn't exist, who would you link your PAN to? Your grandmother? And have you heard of KYC – it's short for Know Your Customer, which is you. KYC is impossible without me. Without me, you cannot even know yourself, nor can anyone else. Not only am I your identity, I am the power that makes your identity legit.

So, don't you dare ask again what I am a proof of, you pathetic plate of curd rice! I am proof of you. You exist only when I say you do. I am Aadhaar, the god of verification. Click on my website, ye mighty, and despair!

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

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 20

FOMO AND INSTANT REGRET

Readers, I have once again joined a group of the most under-employed, shameless, joke-recycling people

Friends, readers and people who purchased street food in old newspaper and are now reading this while consuming *vada pav* or *dabeli* or some such item, lend me your ears. Because I have some bad news for you.

And that bad news is this: there is less than 14% of 2025 left.

No? Still not feeling a sense of alarm. Let me explain this in terms that anybody in India will understand. If the year 2025 were a T20 innings, then we currently have less than three overs of batting to go.

See. Now you feel a sense of urgency? Very good.

Now, most other columnists will tell you that this is the time to take stock, reflect on the year that has passed, before you even think of planning for the year 2026.

Those columnists are fools. Ignore all of them. Taking stock, looking back, reflecting and all are such 1990s concepts. Along with other outdated concepts such as 'parliamentary language', 'law and order', 'journalism', 'humility', 'dental hygiene', and 'stable job'.

Instead, it is time for us to look forward. This is the perfect time for smart, informed readers such as yourself to start planning for your New Year's resolution.

Perhaps you want to lose weight. Or save more money. Or eat more protein. Or spend more time outdoors. Or maybe 2026 is the year you finally figure out what a 'mutual fund' is. (Don't ask me. I don't know anything about personal finance. My constant doubt is this: if it is called a mutual fund, then how come I am always giving them money, and they never give me any money?)

But if you are struggling for a genuinely useful, life-changing idea for a New Year's resolution, then look no further. I have an idea. And it is such a great idea, that it requires its own lexical entry.

Earlier this month, I met a friend who is also a fellow football fan. Midway through our conversation, he showed me a football joke on his phone. It was very funny. We laughed heartily. And then I asked him: "So who sent you this joke, bro?"

I call everyone bro, except my actual brother. Who I call by the same name my mother used to call him: "uncultured barbarian".

Bro said: "Oh, it was sent on this WhatsApp group. The group is for hardcore Indian football fans. Some very famous people are on it."

Readers, how do you think I felt? Exactly. That irresistible human urge to hear of a WhatsApp group and then immediately feel tremendous social pressure to join it, in order to avoid the Fear of Missing Out. This urge is one of the strongest forces known to science. For nothing triggers the primal gene in our brains more than the idea that somewhere out there other humans are congregating secretly.

So, of course, I begged him to add me to the group. A few days and numerous reminders later, he added me. In that moment, when the notification popped up on my phone, it felt like I had become the first man in history to win both the Nobel Prize for Peace and the Mr. Universe contest.

Readers, this excitement lasted all of 180 seconds. For in those 180 seconds, I realised that I had just done it again. I had once again voluntarily joined a group of the most under-employed, irritating, shameless, spammy, joke-recycling people. The joy turned into regret instantly.

But now, I was in a quandary. I could not leave without making my friend look bad. I could not participate in the conversations because I am not a moron. Instead, I quietly archived the group. And once every week or so, I go back to the group and say "LOL" or "Haha" or "*Shabaash*!" to one of the comparatively less offensive jokes.

In fact, there should be a word for this regret one feels immediately after joining a WhatsApp group that one was very eager to be a part of. And that word is: chatastrophe.

Example sentence: "Within three minutes of joining the 'Hardcore Babu Antony Fans of Europe' group, Rajesh experienced acute chatastrophe when he realised it was just members reposting their execrable LinkedIn posts."

And that is my idea for a New Year's resolution. Dear readers, I implore you to make 2026 the year that you will no longer succumb to chatastrophe. Fight the urge. Save your phone. Protect your brain. Have you joined any WhatsApp groups that you instantly regretted? Leave all the gory details in the comments. Or send me an email. Maybe all of us can form a WhatsApp group?

Chatastrophe

/tʃætˈæstrəfi/
noun
Definition: The immediate and profound regret experienced upon joining a WhatsApp group one was previously desperate to be a part of, combined with the social paralysis that prevents departure, resulting in indefinite silent membership punctuated by occasional insincere emoji reactions.
Related forms:
Chatastrophic (*adj.*): Describing a WhatsApp group that induces chatastrophe.
Chatastrophist (*noun*): A person chronically suffering from multiple simultaneous chatastrophes.

Sidin Vadukut *helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Larry's choice

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

The defense against Hard Luck Louie started with three rounds of spades. Louie ruffed the third spade and saw that the best chance for his contract was a 3-3 club split. To give himself an extra chance, Louie led a diamond at trick four and played low from dummy. He won the club shift with his ace and drew trumps. When the hearts split 3-2, Louie led a diamond to dummy's ace and ruffed a diamond with his last trump. Should a defender with four clubs also have started with four diamonds, he would not be able to defend the position. In this three-card ending, a defender would not be able to keep three clubs and a diamond. Alas for Louie, that line failed on this lie of the cards and the contract went down one. Lucky Larry got the same defense. After ruffing the third spade, however, he cashed the jack of hearts and led a heart to the king. A club to the ace, a club back to the king, and a club to the queen saw Larry's extra chance come home. The defender with only two clubs was out of trumps, so Larry was able to ruff his fourth club in dummy. Which line would you choose? The odds for these two lines are very hard to calculate, but we think they are quite close. Larry's line feels a little better, but we are not sure. Bridge can be a hard game.

NORTH
♠ 7 6 3
♡ K Q 5
◇ A 10 5 3
♣ K 7 5

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

EAST
♠ A 9 8 5 2
♡ 8 4
◇ Q 8 7 4
♣ J 6

SOUTH
♠ J 4
♡ A J 10 9 3
◇ 9 2
♣ A Q 8 4

The bidding:

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

*Forcing

Opening lead: King of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has November 16 ever given us?

On November 16, 2003, a 16-year-old made his official debut for FC Barcelona, as a substitute in a friendly against FC Porto. He went on to be named the World's Best Player a record eight times. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On this date in 1855, who was the first European on record to see the mighty Mosi-oa-Tunya (thundering smoke) on the Zambezi River? Having set out as a missionary, he became famous as an explorer. Who was this person who inspired a famous quote?

2 Born on this day in 1916, American voice actor Daws Butler became renowned for the work he did with Hanna-Barbera cartoons. His most famous voicing was for a resident of the fictionalised Yellowstone National Park . This character, inspired by a baseball player, would try to steal picnic baskets from tourists. Name the character.

3 On November 16, 1933, Swiss physicist Fritz Zwicky published his seminal article "The Redshift of Extragalactic Nebulae". In it, he theorised the existence of a new type of matter he called 'dunkle Materie'. Not yet confirmed, the question remains: what is the name of the matter that does not interact with light?

4 On this date in 1945, this specialised agency of the United Nations was founded. It was started to promote world peace through international cooperation in various non-political aspects. What is the name of this organisation, known by its acronym, that is often misquoted in fake WhatsApp forwards?

5 On November 16, 1945, two new elements were discovered by scientists at the University of Chicago. The first was with atomic number 95, which was named Americium. The second (96) was the first (and so far, the only one) to be named after a couple. What is the name of element 96?

6 On November 16, 1959, this musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II opened at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre in New York City. It ran for 1,443 performances and was made into an Academy Award-winning movie in 1965. What musical followed an Austrian captain and his seven children?

7 On this date in 1965, the Soviet Union launched the Venera 3 space probe. It became the first spacecraft to reach the surface of another planet when it crashed on March 1, 1966. On which planet did it land?

8 Born on November 16, 1971, this cricketer was named a test captain at the age of 22 and became the record third fast-bowler to captain a national team. Feared for his reverse swing, who was this bowler who made Olympic sprinter Usain Bolt say that his favourite cricket team was Pakistan?

9 On November 16, 2003, a 16-year-old made his official debut for FC Barcelona, as a substitute in a friendly against FC Porto. He went on to be named the World's Best Player a record eight times. This Argentine player currently holds a record 1,290 goal contributions. Who is he?

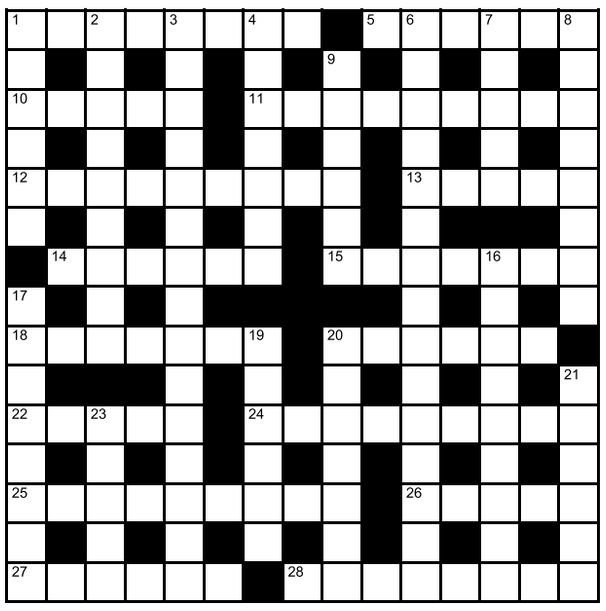
10 On this date in 2001, which movie was officially released in the U.S. and the U.K. – with two different titles – and instantly broke all records? It was the first of eight films of a series that spanned a decade and earned more than $7 billion worldwide. Which is this movie whose title refers to a student of ancient science ?

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

Answers

1. David Livingstone
2. Yogi Bear
3. Dark Matter
4. UNESCO
5. Curium
6. The Sound of Music
7. Venus
8. Waqar Younis
9. Lionel Messi
10. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's / Sorcerer's Stone

THE HINDU **SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 30** (Set by Dr. X)



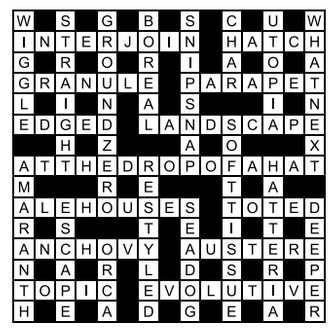
Across

1 Fine independent girl captivated by lousy rogue? Try to explain that! (2,6)
5 Part of chest is sore, covered by red rash (6)
10 Leader of band finishes and bows (5)
11 Foremost of stars acquired outstanding following (9)
12 Get article about giving up ultimately harmful product causing cancer (9)
13 Creeps in spot, knocking back drinks - extremely disgusting (5)
14 Ancient warship in German city, endlessly circling island (6)
15 One seen in recreation room playing snooker essentially with couple (4,3)
18 Author, we hear, is one who redresses wrong (7)
20 Trounced in game shows, giving up (6)
22 Temperature in area around engine (5)
24 Altering track by old band (9)
25 Caught unawares by open AI's endless range of knowledge (9)
26 Explosive stuff in container brought back by rebellious men (5)
27 Programme featuring extremely unkempt musician (6)
28 Wrong indeed, so unfair (3-5)

Down

1 Start to admire swamp around both sides of creek in retreat (2,4)
2 Stylish Attorney-General involved in dalliance is cheating (9)
3 Complaint after bad meal in a resort - it gets messy (15)
4 Flower-shaped ornament is extremely elegant in new store (7)
6 What surgeon removing implants will do to remind one of past unpleasant experiences (6,3,6)
7 Twist arm around wrestler's back (5)
8 Badly regrets eating essentially spicy roll (8)
9 Peddled very pure cocaine essentially in wild party (4-2)
16 Found guilty of fraud and wrongdoing, arresting Tesla's director (9)
17 Intro to big announcement by comic drinking liquor (4,4)
19 Reshoot scene of libertine cuddling European model (6)
20 Most stylish leader of group performing has new hairstyle (7)
21 Ancient American lodge collapsed (3-3)
23 Chirp of a small bird is pretty tuneful primarily (5)

SOLUTION NO. 29



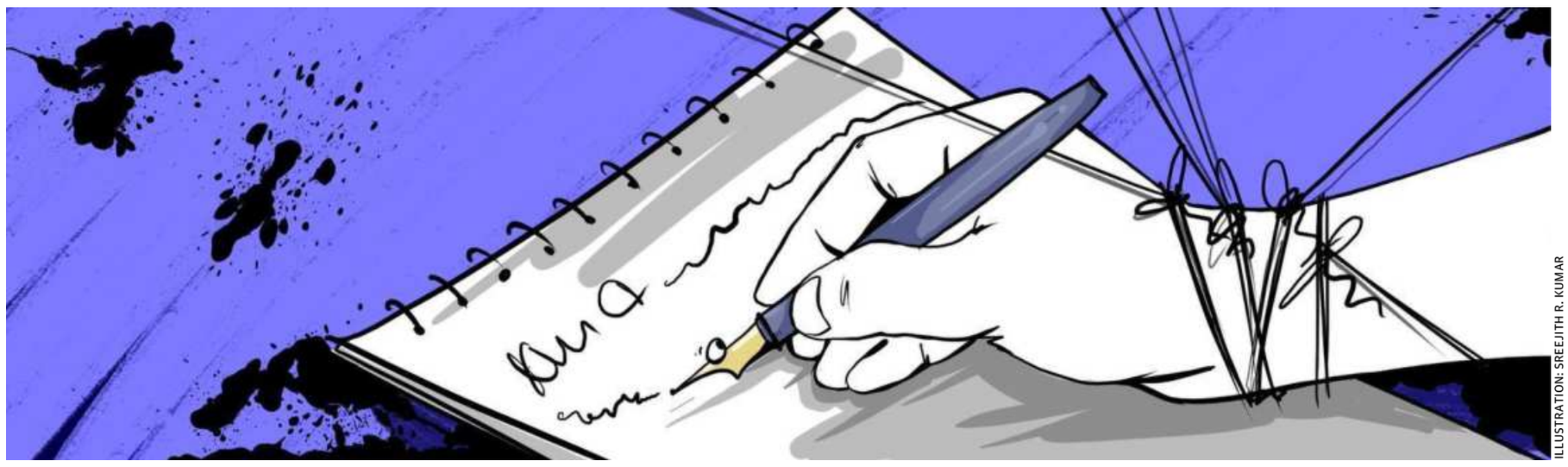


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The writers' predicament

In these fraught times, they should balance courage with caution, purpose with prudence

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Never before have times been so challenging for those who don the mantle of a writer, composing articles, tweets, blogs, or social commentaries. While freedom of speech and expression is heralded as a fundamental right, the reality often reveals a stark contradiction. The so-called freedom to express is frequently shackled by invisible barriers, making the act of writing or typing a cautious exercise rather than a liberating one.

This dilemma is especially poignant for freelance writers who, despite the allure of independence, often find themselves caught in complex constraints. The notion of freelancing is, more often than not, a comforting illusion.

Here, I address those unbiased, thoughtful, and responsible individuals who write with a social conscience, not those driven solely by vanity or self-promotion.

As conscientious writers, we are perpetually aware of the delicate boundaries – the numerous *Lakshman Rekhas* – that must not be crossed, whether knowingly or inadvertently. The fear of overstepping these boundaries stems from the sensitivity surrounding religion and faith on one side, and on the other, the volatile realms of regional and national politics. In addition, writers risk becoming vilified in public debates about racism, casteism, feminism, misogyny, body shaming, and so on.

The audience is bombarded incessantly by images and narratives – print, broadcast, and social media all report war crimes, social and cultural apathies, human suffering, and cruelty inflicted upon the defenceless. This relentless exposure evokes a deep, shared anguish. The feeling of helplessness that we feel are all testimony that humanity still lives on. For writers moved by such crises, the impulse to speak out candidly is natural. Yet with every expression comes the risk of misinterpretation or mislabelling. Neutral or context-specific commentary is too easily twisted as leftist or rightist, progressive or regressive, or at the least labelled as "intellectual arrogance" regardless of original intent. Thus, the space for genuine free expression narrows.

Writers tread a precarious tightrope, fearing backlash from all sides, be it trolling, legal threats, or social ostracism. The history of writers who dared confront uncomfortable truths is sobering from Galileo's persecution for scientific truths to Salman Rushdie's *fatwa* and Perumal Murugan's struggles against cultural and political censure. Their experiences are haunting reminders that hitting the nail on the head often demands circumspection, metaphor, or silence. In this climate, writers must balance courage with caution, purpose with prudence. This paradox defines our times and challenges the very essence of what it means to be free in expression.

Used textbooks were a blessing

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In the 1960s and 1970s, buying new school textbooks were beyond the economic means of parents. Even sending children to school was deemed to be a burden on the parents.

Unlike now, in those days, school textbooks were not supplied free to children studying in government-run schools. Private schools were unheard-of, not only in villages but even in small towns.

Without exception, all students had to buy textbooks in the open market. To minimise the financial burden on parents, most of the students preferred to buy used textbooks. Less availability of new textbooks and their prices forced many to go for used textbooks preferably from their immediate seniors studying in the same school.

The hunt for the "right senior" commences right after the final-year exams. Not all students keep their books in ship shape. A few who keep their books in good condition were the most sought after.

After a thorough enquiry, a senior student was zeroed in. After visiting his house and verifying books, a decision to buy or not was taken. If the books were found to be in good condition, a bargain was struck. Sometimes, parents' help and elders' guidance were taken.

Generally, used textbooks were available at half the price of the cover price. If cover papers were missing and the pages dog-eared, such books fetch less than 40% of the printed price.

My entire school education has been completed with the help of used books only. Once, while purchasing them from a senior student, I faced a piquant situation. Of the six prescribed textbooks, only four were in good condition. But the seller put the condition of "all or nothing". After much bargaining and with the help of my parents, the books were purchased. It was my first lesson on how to navigate and survive in society.

To claim ownership of the used textbooks, the previous name was struck off and our names were written in bold letters. To give the books a new look, an old newspaper was used as wrap. And they were well taken care of till the completion of the annual exams.

Now every parent wants to buy new textbooks for their children. In our times, old textbooks and waste paper were ground to pulp and mixed with fenugreek seeds, and the paste was used to plaster bamboo baskets, winnows, and other storage items made of palm fronds.

Romancing books

They offer not just stories but also a sense of comfort, identity, emotional resonance, and companionship

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

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I love books. I like to have them around, see them, dote over them, and feel proud of them. They give me comfort and companionship, even when unopened.

When I got married, I stepped into my in-laws' house with one suitcase of clothes and one big box of books. That box, with hindsight, carried more than paper – it carried memories, my ideologies, dreams, and the version of me that refused to be left behind.

Many decades later, when I moved into a small furnished flat in Colaba, I felt oddly displaced. "There's nothing of mine here," I told my family. I was allowed to bring just one or two things of my own. Naturally, I chose two bookshelves. Once they stood against the wall, filled with my old companions, the flat began to feel like home.

Am I a voracious reader? Not any longer. Gone are the days when a book would be read, argued over, and dissected with friends – sometimes leading to heated debates or laughter. Now, when I read, I don't retain the details. What stays with me are the feelings – sadness, joy, tenderness, amusement. The content fades, but the emotion lingers. Perhaps because I now read not to know, but simply to enjoy the pleasure of good writing; not to peep into others' lives, but to return to my own centre.

And yet, my fading memory has not dimmed my passion for acquiring books. I can walk past a jewellery shop or resist a sari sale, but I cannot walk past a bookshop. The smell of paper and ink, the gentle rustle of pages – they conspire to seduce me. When there is a book sale, the greedy me surfaces. I buy in bulk – some for myself, others as gifts for children, friends, or anyone who might share the joy. Parting with my old books breaks my heart. No wonder I'm called a hoarder. Books calm me. Their very presence feels grounding. During my college days, I used to visit a bookshop every day – not to buy, but to sit on a small stool and read a few pages. The anticipation of returning the next day, of holding the same book again, was enough. When one day I found it had been sold, I was heartbroken – as though a secret love affair had ended.

Am I a bibliomaniac? Hardly. A bibliophile? Maybe, but not quite. I think I am a romancer of books. I love them not just for what they contain, but for how they make me feel – alive, anchored, and in love with the world.

All that matters is showing up

Has education become so uninspiring that students come to the class only because they are forced to?

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

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You have submitted every assignment on time, given confident presentations before the whole class, performed well in midterms, and participated wholeheartedly in extracurricular activities. Yet, your academic journey is marked as "unsatisfactory". You might even be debarred from the end-of-semester exams, all because your attendance falls below 75%.

When teachers were reading outdated slides in class, you were out there doing internships and developing real-world skills. You studied the topics listed in the syllabus not by sitting in lectures, but by learning from online sources. Yet, the system does not care about what you have learned; it only cares about where you learned it from. The rule values presence over performance, quantity over quality.

Outdated rule

The 75% attendance rule was originally introduced to promote discipline and ensure regularity. The intention was noble: to encourage students to attend classes and stay engaged with the syllabus. But in practice, this rule has largely failed to achieve its goal. Students no longer attend classes to learn; they attend to mark their presence. For many, classrooms have become just another checkbox to tick rather than a space for intellectual growth.

This obsession with attendance raises an uncomfortable question: has education become so uninspiring that students show up only because they are forced to? If classroom teaching merely means reading from slides, is that truly education?

The reality is harsh, students scroll through reels at the backbench while professors mechanically read presentations. The process is being followed, but the purpose is lost.

If students are attending college out of compulsion and not curiosity, then the system needs introspection. Shouldn't teachers whose classes attract genuine learners, not attendance seekers, be recognised as examples of effective teaching? Students pay lakhs in fees, yet many attend not for learning but to maintain a percentage. It's a silent irony of higher education: students come to college to stay eligible, not educated.

Beyond learning, the rule also stifles personal development. Internships, debates, speeches, and research work, all essential for building confidence and real-world experience, often take a backseat because students can't risk losing attendance. How can one develop skills beyond the four walls of a classroom when the system traps them inside?

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The article captures a generational shift in how wealth and work are perceived. ('Chasing FIRE, facing reality'; Nov. 9) The FIRE movement is not about escaping work but redefining it for purpose and autonomy. FIRE should not become another race in disguise; the goal is mindful living, not obsessive saving.
Harsh Pawaria

The cover story strikes a chord in an age where financial independence is both aspiration and illusion. The FIRE movement, while empowering, risks oversimplifying retirement into a numbers game, ignoring the emotional and social costs of early exit.
Avinashiappan Myilsami

With average life expectancy going to 70 and beyond, it is nothing but mere foolishness and a hasty measure to call it a day at the age of 40. Even after the standard superannuation age of 60, a large lifespan remains ahead, when one can leisurely practise hobbies and pastimes much to the heart's content.
Seshagiri Row Karry

Enduring legacy

Danish Mahal survives in Lucknow despite all hardships as Urdu is still very relevant there. ('Inside Lucknow's Urdu landmark'; Nov. 9) Jashan-e-Rekta, an annual event in Delhi and its ever-increasing popularity among Gen Z, is a testament to this fact.
Deepak Taak

Urdu was once a widely spoken language in India, and the nation has produced numerous esteemed *ghazal* artists. It is indeed troubling to observe that in contemporary society, the appreciation for this exquisite language is waning.
Sajna Hameed

Exploiting caste

I agree entirely with Anand Teltumbde that caste-based reservations have only aggravated caste distinctions and clamour for more reservation, while the objective of social justice is sidelined.('Counting caste'; Nov. 9) This has only helped politicians to manipulate caste for their political ends and use the various caste groups as vote banks.
Anil Kumar Karra

Beauty of art

The Taj Mahal is, and will always remain, one of the most fascinating monuments in the world. ('The Taj Mahal speaks for itself'; Nov. 9) Though some may attempt to embellish its history with religious overtones, its splendour transcends all such boundaries. Monuments like the Taj Mahal are not meant to be judged through the lens of faith or politics, but to be admired for their beauty, artistry, and legacy.
Oswin Fernandes S.J.

The Taj is a symbol of love and beauty providing sublime joy to the beholder of this majestic edifice. It is built to perfection with symmetrical architecture and delightful floral designs in pietra dura. The magnificence of the Taj Mahal immerses visitors in its aura of beauty and creates memories, which are relished for a lifetime.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The vanishing art of listening
What people long for is not advice, but the feeling of being heard, an assurance that their words matter
Sujata Gautam

Love for the stars
The skills developed through astronomy are invaluable in today's technology-driven world
Rudrashis Datta

Lipstick, lies, and lead
Women have been treated as objects to be moulded, priced, and displayed
Sabahat Fida

A laugh a day keeps stress at bay
It makes us feel lighter, energetic, and cheerful
Lakshmi R. Srinivas

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(Clockwise from far left) *The Summit of Women's Voices* by Sonal Ambani at the Sculpture Park; Phaneendra Nath Chaturvedi's *A Throne of a Thousand Wings*; an artwork by Pinaki Ranjan Mohanty; Art Mumbai co-founder Minal Vazirani; Thota Vaikuntam's patinated bronze; and an M.F. Husain painting. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The third edition of Art Mumbai is its biggest yet. But is it helping carve a strong niche for itself and the city?

MAKING OF AN ART CAPITAL

Nidhi Gupta

Mumbai was built on energy and motion and imagination," muses Minal Vazirani, "It is not a city that sits still." Days before the third edition of Art Mumbai is to open – significantly bigger than last year – its co-founder sits in the midst of the bustle at Mahalaxmi Racecourse, speaking about the desire to capture the flavour of the city in their three-day art blowout. "I think that sense of restlessness continues to move the city."

It's an apt description for Art Mumbai itself: a fair that has grown more than 60% in gallery participation since its debut in 2023, and expects to double its visitor numbers from last year. With over 2,000 works, 82 galleries, a star-studded speaker series, a curated sculpture park featuring women artists from the subcontinent (including Adeela Suleman, Shanthamani Muddaiah and Tarini Sethi), parallel exhibitions, walks and performances, and at least two art parties each night, Art Mumbai has stepped it up, moving at supersonic speed. But its evolution also captures a significant moment for India's financial capital: can a city that never sits still become a place where art takes root?

Mumbai as an art hub has never been an alien notion, says Vazirani, anchored as the city is in a strong market. In fact, she cites an early 2000s study conducted for Saffronart suggesting that the city comprises an estimated 65% of India's total art market – a staggering figure that speaks to decades of collecting culture. "The Mumbai art market has been strong and steady, but I think Mumbai can be a little understated about things."

She points to the city's undeniable artistic legacy: it has Sir JJ School of Art, one of India's oldest art institutions. It was home to the Progressive Artists' Group, founded in 1947, and a defining chapter in modern art. It is also home to the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute, whose influence during the 1960s and '70s has rippled across music and theatre. "We also have the Prithvi Theatre, the NCPA, the Royal Opera House, which have been venues and incubators for incredible performers and talent," Vazirani notes.

A compounding effect

Fast forward to the 21st century, and the current burst in new galleries (from 47A to Subcontinent to Muziris Contemporary), record-breaking auctions and public-facing programmes such as Mumbai Gallery Weekend and Art & Wonderment's walks are only augmenting a momentum that had begun to gather in the early- to mid-2000s, when Indian art saw its first big boom.

Yet, perhaps, something was missing – or rather, something needed activating. Enter Art Mumbai, which in its third year has had what Aparajita Jain of Nature Morte calls a "compounding effect". "A fair is fundamentally about sales, and they've done very well on that front," she says. "It's becoming a more serious affair but also, around this time, galleries put in that much effort. It becomes an aggregation."

Indeed, in the last week, much wine has flowed and many cheese platters have circulated as new exhibitions have opened in galleries and museums across the city. Nature Morte is presenting a solo show by museum-celebrated artist Asim Waqif. Tarq's artist Sameer Kulavoor has an exhibition at the Bhau Daji Lad Museum, curated by the museum director Tasneem Zakaria Mehta.

The National Gallery of Modern Art has opened a Krishen Khanna retrospective, curated by Zehra Jumabhoy and Kajoli Khanna, timed to the fair. There's also a Tyeb Mehta retrospective opening at the fair before moving to Saffronart gallery for the rest of the month – significant because, as Roobina Karode, director and chief curator of KNMA Delhi, points out, Mehta "drew a lot from the streets and from the everyday of Mumbai, particularly fascinated by the Bandra abattoir he sketched extensively". Meanwhile, Art Deco Alive! is organising walks, talks and street parties well into the last week of November.

"The city comes alive at this time," says Prateek Raja of Experimenter.

Just last weekend, Raja signalled off the week's festivities by hosting an Asia Society Trailblazers conversation with the Japanese immersive art behemoth teamLab – gazing into the future of art, immersive, digital and the human experience.

Collectors from satellite cities

The comparisons to other art capitals are inevitable. Raja notes that those fairs changed the landscape of the cities because they collaborated with much more agile governments to establish museums and evangelise local communities. "While Mumbai doesn't need a tourism push, what a fair like this does is that it brings a new cultural angle to the city." The city and its galleries are now attracting collectors from satellite cities – Pune, Nashik, Baroda, Raipur, Nagpur – expanding the regional market.

Yet, there's a limit to what a temporary event can accomplish. "Look at the Middle East: with all the movements in Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia, it is becoming more important. Still, Dubai has had Art Dubai for 20 years now, but its gallery ecosystem is quite weak. It is not an art capital in the way Paris or New York are," says Raja. It's not just about that fair. It's about artists who live there, make it their home."

Jitish Kallat echoes this. "Mumbai has long had all the right raw materials for art to thrive," says the artist and curator, whose works are part of the Chemould Prescott Road booth at Art Mumbai. "Besides it has been a muse in countless artworks, poems and films. That said, an art capital grows through the interplay of artists, galleries, institutions and publics. Strengthening public institutions, museums, archives and civic spaces will be key to sustaining this evolution."

Mumbaikars take ownership

Delhi is home to a refined art ecosystem, gigantic museums, and India's most enthusiastic living art collector, Kiran Nadar. It's a circuit that existed before India Art Fair launched in 2008, but is also built upon it. Mumbai, meanwhile, has energy. Vazirani describes visitors who "come in and acquire works" with genuine engagement. "They read, they study, they take notes, they have conversations with people." The construction boom means "people now have larger apartments that they are looking to fill with art". The fair, with its convivial atmosphere, becomes a gateway for those who might not think the gallery is for them.

Perhaps most tellingly, Mumbaikars feel they have a stake. "Art Mumbai increasingly feels like the coming together of a community and the building of a fellowship among the art fraternity that gathers every November in Mumbai," says Vazirani. "Mumbai has all the trappings of the actual things that a global art city needs," says Raja. "It has a market, it has a keen audience. It has artists even if the city is pushing them beyond the limits of the city. It has some very important institutions. It has an active gallery scene. So, Mumbai will get there. It's a matter of time and a question of sustainability. And that depends on all of us."

The Mumbai-based independent journalist writes on culture, lifestyle and technology.

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

How Vasudeva became Vishnu

From Indo-Greek coins to a four-armed soldier and a granite relief, tracing the evolution of the cosmic preserver

In Malhar, a small town near Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, we find an image of a soldier with four arms, holding a conch shell, a wheel and a mace. It has been identified as the earliest image of Vishnu. The inscription on the stone has been dated to 200 BCE. It records that the image was consecrated by Bharadvaja, the wife of Parnadatta, a governor of the Saurashtra region in the Gupta period. This makes it the earliest example of a woman donor in Indian art.

Malhar lay on an ancient trade route connecting Kaushambi to Puri, a corridor of commerce and culture. In all probability, this is not a Vishnu image. It is an image of Vasudeva-Krishna of the *Mahabharata*, who displays his four-armed form to Arjuna. The Malhar Vishnu, though simple and rather unremarkable, captures a transitional moment when the heroic Vasudeva was slowly turning into the divine Vishnu of the temples.

Until the identification of the Malhar Vasudeva, the oldest known images of Krishna were small

Bas-relief of Krishna lifting Mount Govardhana in Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Indo-Greek coins from Afghanistan, also dating to 200 BCE, that show two men standing side by side. One holds a mace and a conch, the other a plough and a club. The Greek legends call them Sankarshana and Vasudeva, i.e., Balarama and Krishna. The foreign 'Yavana' kings, ruling from Afghanistan and Punjab, saw how popular the Indian hero-gods were and struck coins to honour them. Around the same time, inscriptions on the Heliodorus pillar in Madhya Pradesh (the 2nd century BCE sandstone column built by the Greek ambassador Heliodorus in honour of Vishnu) speak of devotion to Vasudeva-Krishna. This is where the journey begins – of the rise of Vishnu from Vasudeva, 2,200 years ago.

Lab of divine imagery

During the Kushan period, roughly 100 CE, India was a laboratory of divine imagery. Artisans experimented with multi-armed and multi-headed forms. Some made an eight-armed god striding across the sky. Others showed a being with a boar's head or three bodies fused into one. These were not yet fixed 'Vishnus'. They were experiments – attempts to make visible the divine energy that older Vedic hymns described abstractly as "the one who strides across the universe".

By 200 CE, in the workshops of Mathura, artists carved Krishna fighting the horse-demon Keshin, or standing with his brother and sister. A few showed him with four arms, holding the discus and mace described in the *Bhagavad Gita*. There is an image that suggests the *vishwarupa* or cosmic form, with animal heads emerging from Krishna's side. The artists were trying to capture something the poets had begun to imagine – the god who could appear as a man yet reveal himself as cosmic.

By the Gupta period, around 400 CE, this experimentation settled into a standard form: the calm, four-armed Vishnu with discus, conch, mace, and lotus. The cosmic god had a face and posture. The sculptor's hand had finally caught up with the poet's imagination. What had once been Krishna's symbols now belonged to Vishnu. In Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, on the walls of the Dashavatara temple, there is a four-armed Vishnu reclining on a serpent and another riding an eagle. These are images of Vishnu we are familiar with.

The cowherd hero

Texts support this change. The *Harivamsha*, an epilogue to the *Mahabharata* written around this time, tells of the cowherd Krishna who later reveals himself as Vishnu. Krishna is a child; he has parents. Vishnu is self-created. Sculpture follows the same logic – the youthful, two-armed Krishna fighting demons and lifting mountains; the four-armed Vishnu presiding serenely over the universe. Krishna is the mortal finite avatar of the immortal infinite Vishnu.

Among Krishna's many adventures, one image became especially popular – the lifting of Mount Govardhana. When Indra, the rain god, punished the cowherds with a storm, Krishna lifted the mountain on his little finger to shelter his people. In this act, Krishna grows to cosmic size, echoing the Vedic Vishnu who takes three giant steps across the world. This moment united the hero of Vrindavan with the god of the *Vedas*.

The story of Krishna lifting the mountain travelled to the eastern coast of India and thence to Cambodia. Around 700 CE, in Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, artists carved a bas-relief on a granite cliff showing Krishna raising Govardhana. This art panel also has the earliest images of cows and calves in India. Before that, we have only images of the humped bull. This stone panel is the earliest suggestion of the cosmic 'cow' heaven known as *Go-loka*.

Art historians are now showing how Vishnu emerged from the hero Vasudeva and not the other way around. From small Indo-Greek coins and modest Malhar and Mathura carvings to the grand cliffs of Mamallapuram, we can trace how a cowherd hero of the *Mahabharata* became the cosmic preserver of the *Puranas*.

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