THE HINDU
Sunday, May 19, 2024

magazine

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INFERNO RISING

As temperatures rise, Indian forests are under threat. Increased incidence of wildfires also mean forest departments are struggling. Should we go back to traditional knowledge? Shouldn't we invest in better technology? It's time for a rethink

ILLUSTRATION: HITESH SONAR

Rohan Premkumar

2024 is shaping up to be the hottest year on record. While it has meant sweltering days for most of us, away from the cities this has translated into more dangerous side effects – like an uptick in wildfires. With temperatures set to increase even more in the coming years due to the accelerating effects of climate change, experts and conservationists argue that better forest management practices are the need of the hour to limit the effects of fire on native forests.

The majority of wildfires globally are caused by human carelessness. Be it smoking near vegetation or, as a Tamil Nadu forest department official states, "caused by farmers and herders trying to clear portions of land to facilitate the growth of green fodder, remove weeds and improve agricultural yields". And once the spark is lit, it spreads quickly as ground fire (fuelled by undergrowth) and crown fire (which spreads from tree top to tree top). "Every year, come February, we prepare fire lines along the boundary of our estate. We clear 10 feet wide tracts of land of all the leaves, foliage and weeds, so they can act as fire breaker," says Ajoy Thipaiah, the proprietor of Kerehaklu Estate in Chikmagalur, Karnataka. While it helps, it's not always 100% foolproof. "It's hard to gauge how quickly wildfires can move because they create localised wind turbulence, as hot and cold air currents mix. This then fans the flames forward."

As we enter peak fire season, the *Magazine* investigates what's happening on-ground across the country.

THE NILGIRIS ON HIGH ALERT

IN 2024: 37 FOREST FIRES

As a child, Sobha Madhan, 39, remembers her *ajji* (grandmother) talking about the Kurumba community setting fire to their parcels of land every few years. "When large tracts of forest went up in flames, our elders would tell us that fires are natural and helpful for biodiversity," says Madhan, an *adivasi* from the Kurumba tribe in Pandalur. Fires can help reduce competition (allowing existing trees to grow larger), recycle nutrients bound up in litter, and clear out dead organic matter.

Today, after years of being targeted by the forest department, who insist the community not start fires to clear their lands, it has become clearer to Madhan why they are important. Without it, invasive species such as the common lantana, yellow cassia and boneset grow unchecked. Lantana, for instance, tends to spread voraciously, especially in the lower altitudes, limiting biodiversity and creating ready biomass to fuel any fires. "Moreover, what we see around us today are not forests, but plantations of eucalyptus, teak, rosewood, sandalwood and others, which are more prone to turn a small fire into an uncontrollable inferno. If you study any fire in the Nilgiris, you will see that the [native species] *sholas* almost never burn down," says Madhan, explaining how most native plants are more fire resistant – evergreens that have adapted over many millions of years to cope with the stresses of harsh winters and high summer temperatures. "The evergreen forests of Gudalur are long gone, only existing sporadically in small patches surrounded by vast tracts of tea, coffee and planted hardwoods. The management of these monoculture farms will be imperative in the years to come," she adds.

Forest officials state that measures are already being taken to remove vast tracts of invasive flora, alongside wattle trees and dense stands of broom and gorse shrubs that were introduced in the Nilgiris by British colonists looking to replicate home. "However, this is a difficult battle," admits the official. The process is slow and often unsuccessful due to the lack of government funding for such projects.

Firestorm alert

In March, a forest fire in Forest Dale, Coonoor, which spread from an adjoining tea estate, raged for more than seven days. The forest department staff, aided by Indian Air Force helicopters fitted with bambi buckets, battled the blaze that destroyed more than 30 acres of forest. Though the trees destroyed were primarily exotic species such as cypress, the forest was home to a variety of endemic wildlife, including the endangered Nilgiri *sholakili* (blue robin), the Nilgiri flycatcher, as well as Indian gaur, spotted chevrotains, and leopards, says Antony Grossy, a wildlife and photography enthusiast who visits the forest to document its biodiversity.

According to the State forest department records, the Forest Dale fire was among 37 that were recorded in the Nilgiris forest division in 2024, as the heatwave that affected most parts of India swept through the district. In fact, Udhagamandalam (Ooty) town recorded its highest ever temperature of 29°C since records began in 1951 – it was 5.4°C above the average temperature for the hills, stated officials from the Regional Meteorological Center, Chennai.

Adding to the threat of human error is the rising mercury. As per the Forest Survey of India's 2021 report, 45% of India's total forest cover is set to witness higher temperatures by 2030. "Higher temperatures will invariably lead to more chances of fire breaking out," says conservationist N. Mohanraj, who has been calling for better use of technology (drones, satellites, thermal imaging) and scientific techniques to mitigate the effects of forest fires across the country. Since 2023, more than 90 hectares (the size of approximately 222 football fields) of forests in the Nilgiris' division have been affected by fires.

> **Higher temperatures** will invariably lead to more chances of fire breaking out. There needs to be better use of technology and scientific techniques to mitigate the effects of forest fires across the country
>
> **N. MOHANRAJ**
> Conservationist

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Kerala's WhatsApp firefighters

Kerala has a volunteer corps of social workers to address forest fires. Fire locations shared via their WhatsApp group quickly muster up 100-odd people who have undergone training in forest firefighting, trauma care and disaster management. An experiment started by Mannarkkad Range Forest Officer N. Subair, it is fast finding success.

The volunteers are also involved in creating awareness among the people living in the fringes of the forest. "Thanks to the volunteer corps, we have been able to bring down fire incidence considerably this year, especially in Attappady, one of the most vulnerable forest areas in Kerala," says Subair.

According to Global Forest Watch, an open-source web application monitoring forests across the world in near real-time, there were 51 major satellite fire alerts in Kerala since January. But none got out of control despite the State having witnessed one of its worst summers in recent memory.

— Abdul Latheef Naha

INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE-2024 SHORTLIST

Eat, pray, live A young tourist at Porto de Galinhas beach in Pernambuco, Brazil. (GETTY IMAGES)

WORDS WITHOUT BORDERS

Two titles shortlisted for this year's International Booker Prize are from Latin America, celebrating translations, and rooted in hyper-local communities

Not a River
Selva Almada, trs Annie McDermott
Charco Press
₹1,071 (Kindle price)

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

To make the point that everyday life in Latin America is full of the most extraordinary things, Gabriel Garcia Marquez loved to cite the experiences of American explorer F.W. Up de Graff who saw, among other things, "a river with boiling water, and a place where the sound of the human voice brought on torrential rain". In a conversation with his friend Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza (*The Fragrance of Guava*, 1982), Marquez also paid tribute to his heritage, saying, "The Caribbean taught me to look at reality in a different way, to accept the supernatural as part of our everyday life." In many of his novels, Marquez wrote about the state of Latin America, its triumphs and despair, losses, revolutions and betrayals, using other-worldly tropes.

In recent times, Latin American writers such as Mariana Enriquez, Samanta Schweblin, Fernanda Melchor and others have turned to ghosts, ghouls and lost souls to mirror the realities of a continent grappling with political coups, repression, inequalities and other divides.

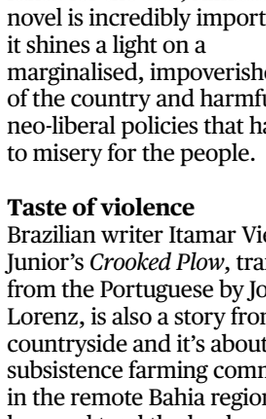
A third of this year's International Booker Prize shortlist comprises novels from Latin America rooted in magical reality and hyper-local communities, but the stories from the margins also harp on universal themes of love and loss or struggles of the poor against rich and powerful masters.

Ways of people

Selva Almada's *Not a River*, translated from the Spanish by Annie McDermott, is a story from rural Argentina, set around the Paraná River. Two friends, Enero and El Negro, are on a fishing trip with the son of Eusebio. Enero and El Negro set up camp on a river island with Tilo, the young son of Eusebio, who had drowned in the river years ago. The people of the island are not that enamoured with the 'outsiders' and tensions rise. Together with the stories and memories of the grief-stricken friends, we meet the characters of the place – a mother, Siomora, who has always liked lighting fires, her twin flirtatious daughters who live dangerously, the forest throbbing with stories, and the fish in the river, particularly a manta ray with its own tales. First published in 2021, it was translated into English this year. With Argentina now in the hands of an ultra right-wing government, which is squeezing funds for the arts, Almada's novel is incredibly important as it shines a light on a marginalised, impoverished part of the country and harmful neo-liberal policies that have led to misery for the people.

Taste of violence

Brazilian writer Itamar Vieira Junior's *Crooked Plow*, translated from the Portuguese by Johnny Lorenz, is also a story from the countryside and it's about a subsistence farming community in the remote Bahia region. They love and tend the land, even as there are several claimants for it. The novel begins in dramatic fashion with two sisters, Bibiana and Belonisía, discovering a knife in an old trunk belonging to their grandmother. When they want to have a taste of the knife, it leads to injuries that will scar them for life – while one sister loses her tongue and thus the ability to speak, the other is badly injured but will forever try to be her sister's interpreter. The 'crooked plow' of the title is not only the instrument used to prepare the field for sowing but the garbled sounds emanating from Belonisía whose tongue is severed: "My voice was a crooked plow, deformed, penetrating the soil only to leave it infertile, ravaged, destroyed."



Crooked Plow
Itamar Vieira Junior, trs Johnny Lorenz
Verso
₹821 (Kindle price)

It's a complex generational saga about Brazil's African and indigenous people's roots, and the narrative is filled with the ways of these people, how they live, eat, pray and reach this conclusion – "On this land, it's the strongest who survive."

Lens on racism

On the International Booker Prize longlist this year, there were two other Latin American writers: the Venezuelan Rodrigo Blanco Calderón for *Simpatía*, translated from the Spanish by Noel Hernández González and Daniel Hahn, and the Peruvian Gabriela Wiener for *Undiscovered*, translated from the Spanish by Julia Sanches. *Simpatía* is set in contemporary Venezuela and is an allegorical tale set around the fleeing of elites from the country, leaving their pets behind, with the protagonist Ulises Kan staying back to pick up the pieces. He is entrusted with building a shelter for the pets, which he will embark on not solely for altruistic reasons.

Undiscovered is about the search for identity, and a story which Wiener stumbled upon while looking at artefacts in an ethnographic museum in Paris, which was exhibiting items of European colonial plunder, many from her home country, Peru. The irony is that many of these artefacts had been picked by her great great grandfather, the Austrian colonial explorer Charles Wiener. She then dug deeper into her family's past, discovering stories of racism, violence and betrayal.

All the four novels are written by writers well known in their worlds but who are now gaining a wider readership, thanks to translations. In a recent piece translated into English by Anne McLean, Colombian writer Juan Gabriel Vasquez stressed on the importance of translations: "Translation is, among many other things, a possible antidote against close-mindedness and xenophobia of the spirit." In the time of rising hate in the world, the importance of words without borders cannot be underscored enough, and translations work towards that, broadening "our sense of what human beings are".

A long fever dream

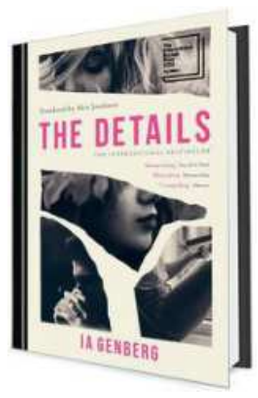
A bestseller in Sweden, Ia Genberg's *The Details* is about memories, relationships and the small details of an entire life

Nandini Bhatia

Memory never stops," wrote literature's finest memory-keeper, Annie Ernaux. Although writer and journalist Ia Genberg pivots from Ernaux's style of memoir writing and turns to the comforts of fiction, remembering is vital to her International Booker-shortlisted novel, *The Details*, translated from Swedish by Kira Josefsson.

Under bouts of fever and the nostalgia of a 25-year-old inscription on a gifted book, Genberg creates a character – an unnamed woman who is also a writer - afflicted with the same feverish nostalgia; and so, begins the act of remembering. Memories – of old lovers, broken relationships, incomplete affairs, friends who disappeared, and parents who were people first – visit her as her life moves on and away from those she remembers; fondly or not, one is not sure.

Distanced by time, memories of the narrator's past relationships come back to her with clarity as she embraces the grief of having lost them. Her relationship with Johanna, an ex-lover whose public life makes it harder for the narrator to forget their unfair, unequal relationship; Niki, the eccentric housemate, living with whom was an endless hunt for misplaced remotes and phone-cords; an exotic affair with musician Alejandro that ends as abruptly as it began – it was the "length of a breath". And finally, the story of Birgitte emerges, not as her mother but as a woman outside of motherhood, forgiven at last.



The Details
Ia Genberg, trs Kira Josefsson
Hatchette India
₹599

A nameless joy

"We live so many lives within our lives – smaller lives with people who come and go, friends who disappear, children who grow up – and I never know which of these lives is meant to serve as the frame... my "self" recedes and gives space to a nameless joy, a unified whole that preserves all the details," she writes. Details that are the building blocks of memory.

Genberg's narrator thrives on these details – the little ways that make a person's character – with a finesse which usually eludes memory. She clings to them – Johanna's coldness, "the frost"; Niki who was "brilliant when she was in the right mood"; Alejandro who was afraid of "the terrorism of the everyday", and Birgitte's "absence of personality". The only details Genberg does not offer are her narrator's, perhaps to reclaim the idea that a person is defined by those around her/ him. Their details are the details of her life.

In some sense, the novel is a reflection of Sweden of the 60s, the 80s, and at the turn of the millennium, when mobile phones were a novelty and words like "unhinged", "messy" and "anxious" were all people had to describe (and understand) mental illnesses. As the translator, Kira Josefsson, calls it, it is a "quiet book" but filled with details that we absorb in life but do not acknowledge; not as well as Genberg, at least.

The reviewer is a freelance feature writer. Instagram @read.dream.repeat

View from the Berlin Wall

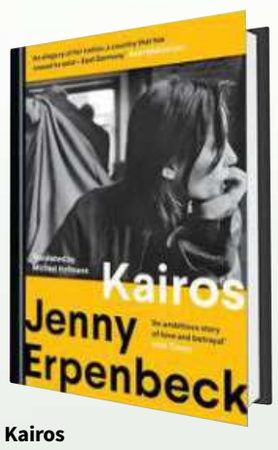
German author Jenny Erpenbeck's *Kairos* is an evocative blend of love and 20th century politics

Pranavi Sharma

The end of World War II came with a hope, hope for a society that wasn't just about the buying and selling of goods. Germany's division into East and West deepened during the Cold War, with East Germany aligning with the Soviet bloc and West Germany with Western allies. The Berlin Wall, erected in 1961 by East Germany, physically separated East Berlin from West Berlin to stem mass emigration to the West. This tangible barrier, an Iron curtain slicing through the heart of Berlin, becomes a fecund ground for the International Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *Kairos* by Jenny Erpenbeck, translated from the German by Michael Hofmann.

Erpenbeck, an author long considered a top contender for the literature Nobel, was born in East Germany, pre-1989 Wall collapse. *Kairos* is a remarkable blend of love and politics and sharply departs from Erpenbeck's head-on treatment of mortality and historical discourse in her previous works.

The novel is archaically divided into a Prologue, Box I and II, an intermezzo, and an Epilogue. It tells the story of an unexpected, wild love germinating between Katharina and Hans. Initially reminiscent of an ultimate pop fiction narrative, *Kairos* soon transcends into the realm of a national allegory, as it voices the aspirations and confines of East German socialism. The magnetic bond between Katharina, 19 at the time, and Hans, who is in his 50s, also gives way to an exploration of the utopian dreams of communism and the global solidarity against fascism.



Kairos
Jenny Erpenbeck, trs Michael Hofmann
Granta Books
₹1,040

Like a museum

Erpenbeck once said in an interview: "I thought it should be possible to make a museum in the form of a book, a sort of exhibition." The age difference between the protagonists serves as a narrative device covering two different eras in Germany – pre- and post-Berlin Wall collapse.

Psychological materialism is manifest in *Kairos* as the reader is routinely made aware of the material conditions (books, music, art, cafes) that lead to Katharina and Hans falling in love with each other. The narrative casts a sceptical eye on the notion of an unblemished triumph by exposing the complexities of East German society: its surveillance apparatus (Stasi), yet the remarkable wins of gender equality and political representation. As the story moves forward, East Berlin emerges not just as a setting but as a character, bringing out the ephemeral nature of both love and socialist aspirations. When Katharina arrives in West Berlin to visit a relative, she chances upon a 'sex store' and is assaulted by the freedom on offer.

Death of hope

There is a symphonic quality to the book, perhaps owing to the author's operatic history. The prose has a mix of voices and an anxious absence of quotation marks. The reader too is a part of the narrative. What starts as a glorious, almost utopian, love story turns into a rotten landscape of shifting power relations. (Debased) language is seen as a manipulative force and a facade behind which there is nothing tangible to be seen. In one section, there's a resonant Donne-esque image of Hans making love to the tunes of Mozart's *Requiem for the Dead*. Dead people like Brecht haunt the story among a generation of old communists such as Lenin and Trotsky. It is as if hope has died with the fall of the Berlin Wall. A glorious socialist project slowly fading away.

The reviewer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.

One nation West Germans celebrate the unification of Berlin in November 1989. (GETTY IMAGES)

The International Booker Prize 2024 ceremony on May 21 at London's Tate Modern will be livestreamed on The Booker Prizes' channels. (Read about the other two shortlisted books on magazine.thehindu.com)

Changing dimensions A stamp commemorating the General Election of 1967. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

From the first election to the ongoing Lok Sabha polls, tracing India's dramatic leap of democratic faith

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

In the Funeral Oration of Pericles, Greek historian Thucydides wrote about participation in Athenian democracy: "We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as a harmless, but as a useless character." In Athens, all male citizens had equal political rights. However, no woman had this right; nor did any slave.

In many developed countries, the right to vote was first given to men who owned property. It took decades of struggle for working class men to get the right; women, even later. In 1851, American abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth asked bluntly: "Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?" But American women had to wait for the vote for seven more decades.

Lobbying for suffrage

Historian Sumita Mukherjee shows that Indian women worked with British feminists to lobby for suffrage. In British India, Indian men who owned property first got the right to vote in 1919. Even by 1930, when all the British-ruled provinces had extended the franchise to women, the same property restrictions applied; this meant that less than one per cent of adult Indian women could vote. Thus in British India, electoral institutions coopted ruling elites only to strengthen the colonial state.

In 1947, when India became independent from British colonial rule, its literacy rate was less than 20%, and women's literacy less than 10%. And yet, in a breathtaking act of democratic faith, every adult person in newly independent India had the right to vote.

In her book, *How India Became Democratic* (2017), historian Ornit Shani documents that preparation for the nation's first electoral rolls began in November 1947. Led by the Constituent Assembly Secretariat, the process continued over two years, during the fallout of Partition and the integration of princely states. It continued even as India's Constitution was being drafted. This process would extend the franchise to over 173 million people, or 49% of the total population.

Shani describes how ordinary people entered the electoral process of the nation, grounding the understanding of equality, electoral democracy, and universal adult franchise before the Constitution came into force: "Doing so was India's stark act of decolonisation."

Staggering numbers

In his essay, 'The Unsung Organiser of India's First Election: Sukumar Sen', former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi describes how India's first CEC Sukumar Sen applied a systematic approach.

Polling stations had to be identified and polling officers trained. Candidates had to be given symbols that voters, 85% illiterate, could comprehend easily. Ballot papers were printed at the Government Press in Nasik. Indian scientists developed an indelible ink to ensure that no one voted more than once. Nearly 4 lakh phials were produced and despatched.

Many women from conservative families were registered as someone's wife or daughter or mother. Sen did not permit this practice. This led to the deletion of 2.8 million women's names from the lists; but he was convinced that this was the only way the next revision would see these women voters being included under their own names.

In his 2002 essay, 'The Biggest Gamble in History', historian Ramachandra Guha lists what was at stake: "4,500 seats – about 500 for Parliament, the rest for the provincial assemblies. Two lakh twenty four thousand polling booths had to be constructed, and equipped with about two million steel ballot boxes. For the making of these boxes 8,200 tonnes of steel was required. Sixteen thousand five hundred clerks were appointed on six-month contracts for typing and collating the electoral rolls, constituency-wise. About 380,000 reams of paper were used for printing the rolls. Fifty-six thousand presiding officers were chosen to supervise the voting, these aided by another 280,000, so to say, 'lesser' staff. Two lakh twenty four thousand policemen were put on duty to stop violence and intimidation. The elections and the electorate were spread out over an area of more than a million square miles."

Many women from conservative families were registered as someone's wife or daughter or mother. India's first CEC Sukumar Sen did not permit this practice. This led to the deletion of 2.8 million women's names from the lists

The first poll

After Independence, India's first elections took place from October 25, 1951, to February 21, 1952, and involved over 173 million registered voters, of whom 106 million exercised their newly acquired voting right. In 2024, India has nearly a billion voters. As elections to the 18th Lok Sabha are underway, recent books reflect Indians' enduring interest in the electoral process. For the argumentative Indian deeply interested in talking about elections, polls give more to talk about. Like cricket, election forecasting is a game of uncertainties. Exit pollster Pradeep Gupta notes in *Who Gets Elected: How and Why* (2023) that "Election forecasting is a bit like cricket... each ball is a new one." In *The Online Effect: Decoding X to Predict Election Outcomes* (2024), Sanjeev Singh looks at social media engagement of leaders and parties. And in *How We Vote: The Factors that Influence Voters* (2024) economist Surjit Bhalla and Abhinav Motheram note that Indian voters know what they are doing: "Preferences, especially political preferences, are sometimes moral, sometimes pragmatic and often instinctive and straight from the gut. But that does not mean the individuals making the choices have not thought through the arguments."

The writer is a civil servant.

Summer threat Fires in the Nilgiris forest division this year. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

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THE NILGIRIS ON HIGH ALERT

Abi T. Vanak, director of the Centre for Policy Design at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru, says that as summers get hotter and the weather drier, the chances of firestorms – more intense fires accompanied by higher winds – will increase. Fire seasons (usually from November to June, with April-May being the worst) will be longer, too.

Mohanraj feels it is high time that India invests in dedicated real time monitoring of forest fires like the NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS). "Our forest staff still use sticks and branches to fight fire, lacking equipment such as fire suits, assisted breathing apparatuses and portable firefighting equipment."

Need for indigenous know-how

Mohanraj is among a growing number of conservationists who have begun advocating "controlled burning" of forests and grasslands to reduce biomass. "This will ensure that when fires do break out, they can be more easily controlled, as they will be of lesser intensity due to having a lesser amount of fuel to burn," he says.

Fellow conservationist and an expert on the Todas, Tarun Chhabra reiterates how fire has been used as a tool over millennia by indigenous communities to manage ecosystems. "In comparative studies, it was found that in wetlands that were affected by fire, though they had lesser diversity, they were populated more by endemic species," he says, adding that endangered animals such as the Nilgiri Tahr prefer to graze on grasslands that are rejuvenated after a fire.

The Tamil Nadu forest department, as part of 'Project Nilgiri Tahr', has begun a scientific study into reestablishing native grasslands. Supriya Sahu, the State government's additional chief secretary of Environment, Climate Change and Forests, says that such efforts will "in the long run, help to reduce the spread of invasive species too".

Unfortunately, the perception that forest fires are catastrophic to the environment skews policy initiatives of governments and forest departments towards actively preventing fires, ensuring a build-up of biomass over a period, rather than burning them away, say experts. According to a forest department official, the lack of awareness of the utility of forest fires manifests in unnecessary panic among the public. "In some instances, when small patches of fire burn down highly degraded forests – where it actually benefits biodiversity – the media's and public's constant barrage of complaints has forced us to intervene and put them out," he says. The forest department and government, however, are now re-analysing their approach. "This shift has been clearly visible with the utilisation of firelines and controlled burns in tiger reserves across southern India. However, there needs to be wider adoption of these techniques," says Mohanraj.

Meanwhile, Madhan says that decades of conflict between the forest department and *adivasi* communities has resulted in most of them staying away from traditional farming and resource collection techniques. Only a small minority of the 27,000 *adivasis* in the Nilgiris follows the practices of their ancestors. "Unless the skills of forest management are passed down to our youth, this traditional knowledge will be lost forever, just like the forests," she concludes.

Firefighting succulents

While there are no fire-proof plants, their moisture content can determine if a plant would burn. Some, such as succulents, can even act as fire retardants. Agave and euphorbia tend to melt rather than ignite, and can help create defensible spaces to help firefighters stop a wildfire. This is especially useful for farms and plantations that abut forests. "Recently, I read that vetiver grass is inherently fire resistant. So, it is something we are now trying to plant along the periphery," says Thipaiah of Kerehaklu Estate. "Maybe the forest department can try planting them too, especially on the slopes, to create fire breaks."

KODAIKANAL'S BIG BLAZE

FIRST MAJOR FOREST FIRE IN 15 YEARS

Reena Raghavamoorthy

A. Arulsamy, an area councillor of Kodaikanal, was driving with his friends to visit the Murugan temple in the village of Poombarai on May 3, when his car was stopped and asked to turn back. He could see a fire burning in the forest on one side of the road. "There were ashes on the other side and a lot of smoke, too," he recalls.

Wildfires are common across the Palani Hills in February and March, the driest months of the year. But the forest department was not prepared for the scale of the inferno that raged between April 26 and May 4. A spark from an electric pole started the fire, which soon spread into the forest. Wind velocity and the enormous fuel load – in the form of layers of dry eucalyptus leaves accumulated on the ground over the years – helped spread the fire, fast and furiously.

District Forest Officer Yogesh Kumar Meena, who spent three days and nights in the forest with his field staff, says, "During this fire incident, we learned that the best guides are our local staff and people. They know the way in and out." Around 200 locals formed a human chain to transport water from the roadside deep into the forest, where no vehicles or heavy machinery could reach. Traffic heading towards Poombarai and Mannavanur was also blocked to allow water tankers free movement.

"We had to call teams from various divisions, up to Ramanathapuram, Sivaganga, Theni, Madurai, Anamalai Tiger Reserve, and Udumalpet," says Meena. Ten kilometres in, they created a fire line – a gap of 20-30 feet of land cleared of foliage so that the blaze runs out of fuel to burn when it crosses it – to contain the blaze.

After days of fighting the raging flames, the fire was contained within 300 hectares of forest land. Most of the trees that burned down were eucalyptus, wattle and pine – all invasive species and part of artificial plantations. "The canopy of shola trees, thankfully, is as it is," he says.

Karvin Antony, an eco-watcher in Kodaikanal's Forest Department and one of the men on-site, states that he has never witnessed a fire of such magnitude. When the delayed rains finally made an appearance on May 4, "no words could describe our happiness", he says. Nature took care of itself.

Going forward, Meena states that "we are going to have more coordinated efforts and awareness programmes with the local community. We are also planning to give training to a few specialised people."

The writer is a Kodai resident.

Nature's fury Wildfire blazes through the night; and destruction on a Kodai farm after a forest fire spread. (PTI, VINAY PARADE)

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

INSIDE THE 'LIBERATION ZONE'

On the Gaza solidarity encampment at George Washington University, and the wider resonance of student protests across history

Suhasini Haidar
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Campus protests are a rite of passage for youth everywhere, and also their first dose of reality as they pit students against the full might of the state. Stepping into the Gaza solidarity encampment at George Washington University (GWU) in early May, I realised that nowhere in the world was that comparison more stark – as young men and women railed against the war, just a few blocks away from the White House and the world's most powerful government.

Already, campuses around the country were afire with protests over images from Gaza – the killing of civilians, including thousands of children, the daily bombardment of residential buildings and hospitals by the Israeli Defence Forces in reprisal for the brutal October 7 terror attack by Hamas on Israeli citizens in towns and kibbutzim that shocked the world last year. The police crackdown on Columbia University had just taken place, the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) had seen violent clashes between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli supporters, amid standoffs at more than a dozen other such campuses across the U.S.

There in the University Yard (U-Yard), the protesters had pitched dozens of tents, declaring it a 'Liberation Zone'. The encampment itself was well organised, with volunteers running food stalls round the clock, and even a small 'grocery' for sudden needs such as bottled water, soap and toothpaste, torches and batteries. Organisers had a roster of speakers who would address the encampment in the evenings, before music and chants took over until well past midnight. For Muslim students, rows of mats were set out in a corner for prayer. Most protesters wore the Arab keffiyeh scarf, popularised by the Palestinian movement as a mark of solidarity, but also to cover their faces. In an age of social media 'doxxing', no one wanted to take the chance of being identified.

What stood out was a statue of the man after whom the university and the American capital are named – George Washington, the first President of the U.S. He was now draped in a cape of the Palestinian black, white, green and red flag, a keffiyeh around his face and his body covered with protest stickers and spray paint.

Controversial speech

"Not another nickel, not another dime... Free, free, free Palestine," the crowds chanted, calling on the U.S. government to stop funding Israel. "We will not stop, we will not rest... Disclose, Divest," they shouted, demanding that the university give up Israeli investments and financial dealings. Other chants were more controversial and according to officials, bordered on hate speech, including, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free", and "We don't want no two-state, we want... forty-eight", referring to Palestine in 1948 before the Israeli State was formed by a UN resolution.

The chant "Resistance is justified, when facing a genocide", was seen by some as a defence of the Hamas attacks, and I watched heated arguments over just where the line between 'free speech' and 'hate speech' was, and when 'a protest becomes a mob'. Clearly, the U.S.'s role in West Asia, with all its blood-soaked history, had come home to the American campus in an election year. Most of all, there was a sense among the students that their protests had no support from any quarter of political leadership: while Trump called the police storming of the Columbia hall occupied by students a "beautiful thing", Biden condemned the protests as "anti-Semitic" and largely ignorant.

"The administration is accusing us of disrespecting the university," a student said angrily, when I questioned some of the chants being raised. "But Israel has bombed every university in Gaza. Why aren't they worried about that?" I met some counter-protesters who said that they felt unsafe as the U-yard protests were right in the middle of their campus; but there were also many Jewish students who joined the protests with 'not in my name' placards. While GWU professors mostly stayed out of the protests, a few volunteered for the 'Peace Committee', setting up lines between one group of protesters and another.

At all times, police were posted at the ends of the yard, keeping a watch on the protesters, intervening only when things got tense, like when pro-Israeli 'counter-protesters' entered the yard with their own slogans, or when college administrators attempted to speak to the protesters, asking them to vacate the area and return to class. While they did not stop students from putting up a giant flag of Palestine over the yard, the police officers, not much older than the students themselves, were visibly upset when protesters tried to take down the U.S. flag, and after a brief physical struggle, managed to push them back.

Face off Pro-Palestinian protesters line up in front of university President Ellen Granberg's house during a demonstration, thwarted by riot police; (and left) a statue of George Washington draped in a Palestinian flag and wrapped in a *keffiyeh* in University Yard. (GETTY IMAGES)

March of time

The polarised nature of the arguments this summer reminded me of my own time as a student in Boston, home to more than 50 universities, when George H.W. Bush launched the First Iraq War in 1990. As foreign students, we were warned to stay out of protests as we could lose our visa status, but I went to watch, out of curiousity, and as a journalism student. I remember being stunned by the thousands of anti-war protesters coming over the Boston University Bridge, only to be met with an equal force of students from the other side who defended the war against Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Both sides were eventually beaten back by baton-wielding riot-police, but the ferocity of the students about what was essentially a foreign policy issue, was unforgettable.

On any university campus, the concept of free speech is one of the most empowering and also explosive ideas – one that allows young students to push the limits of what they can think, say, chant, deface or even burn. After the encampment was finally cleared by the police in riot gear in the early hours of May 8, 33 protesters were arrested. The tents were removed, the yard was locked, and the Washington statue covered in a grey cloth until it could be cleaned and restored.

While the defacing of the nation's founding father may seem appalling to many, think of Washington's own words to Army officers in 1783 (Newburg Address): "If Men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments... [dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter."

From the civil rights marches of the 1960s, to the anti-Vietnam war movement, to students then coming out against the second U.S. war in Iraq, to the current pro-Palestine encampments, American campuses have seen several iterations of such protests. None of them changed U.S. policy in the short term, but in the long term, each have earned their place in history.

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

Makeovers The Cheraman Juma Masjid after the first renovation in 1994; and (far right) after it was restored in 2021, to resemble its original form. (GETTY IMAGES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

THE TEMPLE-LIKE MOSQUE OF KERALA

The centuries-old Cheraman Juma Masjid is a confluence of three ideas: Chinese from the East, Islam from the West, and Hinduism from the North

In the Gulf of Khambhat, Gujarat, that had long trading links with Arabia, there is the Barwada Masjid (outsiders' mosque) in Ghoga, which points not to Mecca, but to Jerusalem. It is known that in the lifetime of the Prophet, prayers were first offered in the direction of Jerusalem before he changed the direction to Mecca. Mosques were built by sailors during the lifetime of the Prophet, since the 7th century, along the coasts of India. The most famous of these is the Cheraman Juma Masjid in Kerala's Thrissur district, widely believed to be the oldest mosque in the subcontinent.

The original structure of the Cheraman mosque is similar to a pagoda, like many temples of Kerala, indicating Chinese influence. Until recent times, it did not display architecture typically associated with Islamic structures: the minaret, the dome and the true arches. These forms were introduced to India by Central Asia warlords who entered North India in the 12th century. The temple-like mosque of Kerala also has much to say about how Brahmins arrived in Kerala from North India. Thus the mosque is a confluence of three ideas: Chinese from the East, Islam from the West, and Hinduism from the North.

Brahmins from the North

As per the 17th century Malayalam text *Keralolpathi*, we are told that in Vedic times, Parashurama killed the unrighteous Kshatriyas of North India. He then travelled to the 'inauspicious' south, crossing the Tropic of Cancer and the Vindhyas, to cleanse himself of this sin. The sea recoiled in horror when he threw his blood-soaked axe, revealing the coast of Kerala. Here, Parashurama brought Brahmins from Ahichhatra, which is located in Aryavarta, the zone triangulated by Ganga, Yamuna and the Himalaya mountains.

Brahmins were given land on condition they practise matrilineal traditions in memory of his mother, Renuka, who he had been forced to behead (and later resurrect) following accusations of infidelity. When the Brahmins refused, Parashurama brought casteless people from other parts of India. They were called Shudras as they would be providing services to the Brahmins, as farmhands, warriors, toddy tappers and boatmen. These communities did not let their daughters leave the parental home, as in Brahmin families. Their husbands, often Brahmins, came to them. According to Brahmin custom, the wife stayed in the husband's house, and the property only went to the eldest son.

Parashurama then established a whole set of temples, to which the Brahmins and the land was allocated. But since the Brahmins could not collaborate with each other, they needed a king who was brought from a foreign land. These were the Chera kings. These kings were only supposed to rule the land, not enjoy its fortune. But the last of these Chera kings broke a rule. He who was supposed to do the protecting (*rakshikkuka*) chose instead to do the enjoying (*anubhavikkuka*), and so was exiled.

This last Chera king is also said to have seen the splitting of the moon, one of the few miracles attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which made him travel to the land of Mecca, where he converted to Islam. On realising he may die before he reached his homeland, he instructed a group of Arab noblemen to travel to Kerala and build the Cheraman mosque.

The historical Chera kings existed from 300 BCE (long after Vedic times) and their rule came to an end in the 10th century (long after the time of Prophet Muhammad). Brahmins obtained land here probably after the 7th or 8th century as per Kadamba dynasty land grant records. But folklore doesn't care much for historical dates.

Connecting East and West

Kerala was the midpoint stop of ships plying the grand sea route between Arabia and China, a thousand years ago. Sailors would stop here for supplies. From China came silk and porcelain. From Arabia came much valued horses.

The Chinese who traded with Arabs introduced their style of architecture and the famous Chinese fishing nets to Kerala. They even influenced Siddha medicine with its leanings on the power of mercury to give immortality, and pulse-reading techniques. While many talk about how Bodhidharma took martial arts from Kerala to China, few remember the reverse flow of knowledge.

One of the greatest Chinese mariners to stop at Kerala, with his grand ships, and who was probably buried at sea off the coast of Kozhikode, was a Muslim eunuch called Zheng He, from the Ming Court. After this 15th century voyage, the Chinese emperor blocked sea explorations. The official reason was they did not want to trouble the faraway tributary states. The real reason may have been petty court politics.

The sea routes, shunned by Brahmins, and later Chinese, were eventually dominated by Arabs and then Europeans, who first entered India via Kerala, and changed the course of history forever.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Tiny difference

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a match between a team from the USA and a team from Indonesia. South for the USA team was expert Eric Greco. Both tables reached game in hearts, and both Wests started with a low trump. Both declarers won the opening lead and led a spade to West's ace, and both Wests continued with the ace and another trump to South.

The Indonesian declarer led the queen of diamonds to the king and ace. A diamond back to the 10 was followed by a spade ruff in dummy and a spade discard on the jack of diamonds. There were still two spade losers to come and the contract drifted down one.

NORTH
♠ 8
♡ 9 8 3 2
◇ A J 6
♣ 10 9 8 7 4

WEST
♠ A K 2
♡ A 10 7
◇ K 9 7 4 2
♣ K J

EAST
♠ Q 10 6 5
♡ 5
◇ 8 5 3
♣ Q 6 5 3 2

SOUTH
♠ J 9 7 4 3
♡ K Q J 6 4
◇ Q 10
♣ A

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♠	1NT	Pass	Pass
2♡	Pass	3♡	Pass
4♡	All pass		

Opening lead: Seven of ♡

Greco took the trouble to cash the ace of clubs before leading the queen of diamonds. West covered with the king and Greco won with dummy's ace. A club ruff saw a second honor fall from West. Greco ruffed a spade in dummy and led the 10 of clubs for a ruffing finesse. When East proved to have the queen, Greco had 10 tricks. Well done!

West could have ruined declarer's timing and defeated the contract by not covering the queen of diamonds, but West, like most of us, could not see into the future.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

In the Caribbean, the temperature never changes, the sun just goes down: Kris Marshall

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1743, physicist Jean-Pierre Christin developed a scale which became the most common way of measuring temperature around the world. He had improved an already existing scale in which 0 (zero) represented the boiling point of water and 100 the freezing point. He inverted this scale, which was named after its inventor. Also known as centigrade, what was the name of the original scale?

2 One of the first people to use the 'reverse Celsius' scale was a Swedish botanist called Carl Linnaeus who used a custom-made thermometer to track the ambient temperature in his greenhouse. He had a huge collection of plants from all around the world that needed to be kept at different temperatures. By keeping and studying these plants, what did he give the world of science that is followed till date?

3 High temperatures lead to metal expanding to more than its usual length. In a particular scenario, to prevent the possible accidents that could come of this, the metal bits are not bolted flush with each other but with a small gap.

Prince of Botanists A statue of Carl Linnaeus at Skansen Park, Stockholm. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

This leads to a characteristic sound effect that has been captured in many songs and movies. Where would one see these gaps?

4 Farmers of a certain crop in France and Spain have had a very tough time because of the record high temperatures across Europe. The usually juicy fruit can be processed to make a very expensive product, but the plants were so parched that the product could only be sold as a dry fruit, which is seen in cereals and cookies. What is the fruit and dry fruit?

5 The hottest temperature ever achieved by man is a staggering four billion degrees Celsius. That's 250,000 times hotter than the core of the sun and was produced at the Brookhaven Natural Laboratory in their Heavy Ion Collider. To produce this intense heat, they smashed two ions of the most stable element in the periodic table together. What element is this which, because of its stable nature, is universally valued very highly?

6 In 1924, Albert Einstein and Satyendra Nath Bose proposed a state of matter called 'Bose-Einstein condensate', where atoms form a kind of glob with exotic properties. This happens at temperatures close to absolute zero (-273.15° C). Under this frigid condition, it has been shown that a particular entity – known and studied for its ultimate speed – cannot just be slowed down but stopped in its tracks. What entity is this?

7 At 9 a.m. on January 14, 1972, the town of Loma, Montana, recorded a temperature of -47.7° C (-54° F). Over the day a downslope chinook wind affected the temperature and the next morning at 8 the town recorded 9.4° C (49° F). This 24-hour period led to what Guinness World Record for the town of Loma?

8 The SI unit of temperature starts at 0, which is the coldest possible temperature (Absolute Zero) and then goes up by one for every degree rise in Celsius. So, to convert to this scale one just needs to add 273.15. Named after a British scientist, which scale is this?

9 A triple point is the temperature at which a substance's traditional three states of matter (solid, liquid, gas) exist in equilibrium. The smallest difference in temperature can alter the state in one way or the other. Where one can see this phenomenon is a sport where the athlete by putting light pressure on the surface, changes the state of water and then uses its new property to showcase their skills. What sport is this?

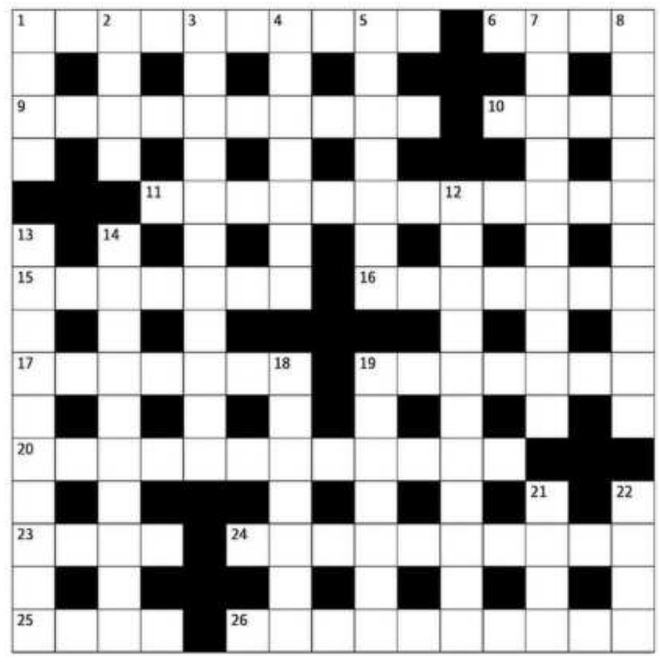
10 The Harvard Spectral classification shows the classification of stars in the universe according to their effective temperature and relative colour. If the coolest stars, which burn at 2,300K-3900K shine Orangish Red, then in what colour is the hottest star at >33,000K shine?

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. Celsius
2. Scientific names of plants and animals (Binomial nomenclature)
3. Railway tracks
4. Grape and raisin
5. Gold
6. Light can be slowed to a dead stop.
7. Highest temperature difference in one day (57.2° C / 103° F)
8. Kelvin
9. Ice-skating
10. Blue Star

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3307



Across

1 Becomes too much for captain after wicket in cricketing stints (10)
6 Kindly reject bitterly cold Frenchman (4)
9 Mild and soft cheese a Roman partakes of no end, primarily? (10)
10 Kiss with audacity (4)
11 Sweet-chasers consumed snacks (6,6)
15 Overhits, lacking at first – after training, does well (7)
16 Worked out the bill, perhaps made sense (5,2)
17 Impudence: slip audibly giving you mouth (3-4)
19 Everyman is going to ... is going to ... show spite (3,4)
20 Notice – noticed – small tools (8,4)
23 Escape, knocking back lager(4)
24 A little bit alarmingly disturbed (10)
25 Money needed when haircut's hard (4)
26 The Britons gathered: Ruby, Beryl and 10 more (10)

Down

1 Cockneys live in these units? (4)
2 Oriental net assets regularly disappearing (4)
3 I beg your pardon!? 'Down with the solver', etc? (4,4,3)
4 Swift in air(7)
5 Some acclaim and elation for country's first democratic leader(7)
7 Booze, a kiss and music in retreat in old city (10)
8 Cleans up: as does autumnal gardener? (5,1,4)
12 A little drunk makes suggestive gesture, being game (11)
13 Like, stressed (10)
14 Qualities of estates? (10)
18 Bread in such a pâtisserie (7)
19 Visible wisdom (2,5)
21 And, finally, Vienna roll comes round (4)
22 Tiny shred of memory: morsel, did you say? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3306

The hand of **friendship**

True friends stick together even during crisis. *Manjummel Boys* is thus life-affirming

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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

For me, the constraints of judicial office have fortunately not come in the way of pursuit of other interests, one of which is compulsive movie watching. I stumbled upon the movie titled *Manjummel Boys* on an OTT platform some days ago. I was told by my intern, who hails from Kerala, that it is a must-watch movie.

The story is of a group of friends going on a trip to Kodaikanal. The impulses of youth soon take over, and they go to a prohibited area called the Devil's Kitchen (popularly known as Guna Cave). One of them accidentally slips into the cave. The others quickly swing into a daring rescue mission to save him from a perilously deep pit from which nobody has ever returned alive.

The most striking aspect of this movie is its revelation of "true friendship". I am reminded of the famous saying of Aristotle, "What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies." I was also reminded of an incident which I had almost forgotten. When I was in the first or second form, I had a very close friend, Sathyanarayanan. We were playing near a pond behind an old temple, and I accidentally got into the deeper part of the waters and was sinking. My dear friend, who was of my age, instantaneously got into the pond and pulled me out even without thinking twice about his life and safety. This incident, stored somewhere deep inside my subconscious mind, popped out and brought tears to my eyes while watching the film. I have lost contact with him and was wondering how I could have forgotten someone who saved my life. I hope that I will meet him at some stage and thank him for his selfless act. Without *Manjummel Boys*, this memory would not have surfaced and probably would have perished with me.

I remember reading somewhere these beautiful and soulful words: "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."

We are living in an era where no deeper meanings are ascribed to relationships. Today, relationships are all about having fun. When we are stressed out or face a difficult situation in life, we are no longer turning to relationships for solace. We have started turning to the device and social media for temporary solace, apart from hitting the watering holes. The millennials and Gen Z children are growing up as an anxious generation with growing impatience. This is proving to be a stumbling block for sustained relationships. Like jumping from one job to another or from one place to another, unfortunately, we have also started jumping from one relationship to another. A long-term relationship is a meandering and long-drawn process. Many are under the impression that they have thousands of friends and followers on social media without understanding that it is a mirage. In reality, how many true friends are there with deeper relationships is an important question to be answered by each one of us.

I happened to hear a TED talk by Robert Waldinger on what makes a good and satisfied life? What keeps us healthy and happy as we go through life? Where would you put your time and energy to achieve it? He talks about a study conducted from 1938 by Harvard University of 724 men from teenage to old age year after year for about 75 years. Nearly 60 out of the 724 are still alive. The important lesson that was learnt was "Good relationships keep us happier and healthier". Period.

Cry of agony

In the film, one of the friends falls into a deep pit and from somewhere deep down, the others are able to hear the cry of agony. That was enough for them to stay put and fight against all odds and ultimately one of them dares to get into that dangerous tunnel and pull out his badly bruised friend alive. This miracle can happen only in true deep relationships, not those struck on social media. The best a social media friend can do is send messages such as "Oh, I am shocked" and "Praying for safe rescue". Or probably someone will take a video of the rescue operation and post it with the message "Forward as much as possible" and ultimately end it up with an "RIP". This movie is a reiteration of what a true relationship is all about.

The local people tell the anxious friends that the specific area was off-limits to people for a reason and that so far 13 people had fallen into that hole and no one was ever recovered, dead or alive. Scared even more, the friends reach the local police station, where they are beaten; the police are bent upon registering an FIR against them for entering a restricted area. They are also accused of murdering Subhash (the one who falls into the pit) and giving false complaints, and no help is offered. Finally after being convinced and fearing a backlash from the local people for failing to help, one of the police officers agrees to go with them to the cave. On the way, he tells the friends that the last person who fell into the hole was the nephew of a former Union Minister around 10 years ago and all the strings were pulled to rescue him, but those efforts went in vain.

The police officer, after inspecting the hole, suggests that they leave Subhash as he probably is no longer alive. They try lowering a rope, for Subhash to hold on but are sceptical that he may not be in a situation to do so after a deep fall. The fire department and more police officers are called to the scene, but they are scared to go inside the hole to retrieve him. Seeing this, one of the friends, Siju David, decides to go down. The police officers are initially reluctant, but finally agree after being convinced by the friends and the local people. Siju is lowered into the hole, but along the way, the rope runs out, and the police are worried that it is unsafe to go any lower as there might be low oxygen levels and they are not willing to risk Siju's life as well. However, Siju puts his foot down and makes it clear that he cannot leave Subash in the pit. The police arrange for more rope and at about 120 feet, Siju can see Subash barely lying on a ledge covered in blood and muddy rainwater. Siju is able to retrieve him and the rest of the friends pull them up together successfully. Not to forget that this is a real incident made into a movie.

No parallel

One question which kept ringing in my ears was, "Would I assume the role of Siju to rescue my friend whom I know is alive but to rescue him, I must get into that perilously deep pit?" I don't want to be a hypocrite and with utmost honesty, I must state that I would not have willingly assumed the role of Siju. It was a revelation.

The movie also portrays the level of conditioning of mind prevalent in the system, particularly in the police force. I realised that if one doesn't keep introspecting oneself and stay humane, a human life or his sufferings will be taken for granted and we will not hesitate to close the case routinely. Human rights, life, and liberty are all not empty words and everyone involved in public service has to internalise it and treat every case/file with a human touch.

You might get the impression that it is unusual for a judge to share his experience about a movie. It is not so. A judge is expected to keep his eyes and ears open to everything that happens around him. You never know from where you will get the revelation or inspiration.

The author is a judge of the Madras High Court

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Most architects are hesitant to opt for routine designs and easily available materials. ('Building with Indian craftsmen'; May 12) Lack of skilled craftsmen and the cost of traditional designs seem to be the reason. We should encourage traditional artisans and opt for innovative fusion architecture mixing local crafts with modern designs.
N.S. Reddy

Reading the cover story was music to my ears. Art-integration is an approach to teaching in which students demonstrate their understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area like architecture and meets evolving objectives in both. There is plenty of scope for craft in public educational institutions.
K.M.K. Murthy

Ozempic conversation

Junk food always trumps healthy food in taste and obesity has become a gigantic problem all over the world. ('Caught between big food and big pharma'; May 12) Food corporations have been "fattening" people and making them obese, whereas 'big pharma' has been offering the "magic pill" to reduce that fat. Both are happily laughing all the way to the bank. "Why don't you go on a diet and exercise instead?" is a question people are reluctant to face.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Of film festivals

The interview with the famous cinematographer-filmmaker was interesting. ('Santosh Sivan's Cannes glory'; May 12) Kudos to him on the conferment of the Pierre Angenieux tribute at the Cannes Film festival this month. It is a crowning glory that he will get to deliver a master class for Cannes delegates.
Devadas K. Nair

Urban hunters

The adaptability of peregrine falcons to the concrete jungle is a good sign in a fast-changing world. ('Peregrines in a skyscraper'; May 12) With this bird of prey finding urban areas a feasible habitat, awareness programmes for the public on peregrine nesting sites in multi-storeyed buildings and wetlands should be conducted. The importance of this raptor in the environment has to be understood.
Monita Sutherson

Seeing a Shaheen falcon myself from my 18th floor balcony, where it used to rest and hunt, was a great learning experience. It had made an unoccupied penthouse its home. I have seen it hunt pigeons and even parakeets. In Bengaluru, there are places where the migratory peregrine comes every year and perches on higher floors of apartments.
Balu

Opposing ends

In recent years, the space for dissent has shrunk woefully. ('The art of disagreement'; May 12) Gone are the days when two people could argue their case vehemently and still terminate their debate with a welcome cup of tea, leaving as friends and not enemies. In today's polarised times, people avoid issues on which there are chances of bad blood flowing.
Narendra Dani

MORE ON THE WEB

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Paralysis of Imagination
The newer generations see reading as a mundane act
Suvrat Arora

Pursuit of happiness
To be happy about the success of another is indeed a gift
Sudha Devi Nayak

A journey of self-discovery
A job hunt ends in an adventure with unexpected twists and turns
S. Helen

Takeaways from the playground
The various life lessons sports activities teach us
Janani Krishnakumar

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Unlocking the many mysteries of the 'key'

Shankar Gopalkrishnan
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Over 15 years ago, we had just moved into a new flat. On one of the first days, we found ourselves locked out! "I thought you had the keys!" my wife said. "I thought you had the keys!" I retorted. Many a happy family has thus been marooned, the culprit being the main door fitted with an automatic lock.

You have exactly two choices: break down the main door, or have someone get into the home, in stealth mode, through the window. We think our homes are safe, secure, and out of bounds from nefarious elements. But all it took the security person was one leap from the neighbour's flat to our restroom window. That done, he entered our flat and let us in! So much for our "notional" sense of security.

We immediately made friends with our neighbours. We gave them a set of keys for safekeeping. But what if the neighbours are on a holiday and we get locked out? We gave another set of keys to the housemaid. What if the housemaid is also away on that fateful day? Now, everyone on the planet has our house key!

House keys are slippery fellows. You stuff it in your pants pocket on your way to the office. In the evening, just as you are about to enter your flat, you feel your pocket, and it's gone! Some stories have an unusual ending similar to the twist in an art film. Your wife lets you in, and you mumble, "I don't know where I lost the house key!" She replies, "You never took it to the office in the first place! It is still by the washbasin!"

Keys with keychains have other issues. At the most opportune moment, just when you are leaning over the embankment, with a raging ocean below, you twirl the keychain, and this one time, out goes the keychain along with your key...into the swirling water! I told you, keys have a rebellious streak and can never be totally domesticated.

Jolted by hiccups and the mind games

Many superstitions and associated beliefs surround this unwelcome annoyance

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A friend casually remarked that hiccups are not as frequent as these once were, prompting me to ponder what's life without a few hiccups. Several friends agree that recalling a recent hiccup episode is indeed impossible. Does that mean the diaphragm in the body has ceased its involuntary spasm to produce the characteristic "hic" sound that multiplies several times per minute? If hiccups are indeed becoming rare, what does it hold for its associated beliefs?

My mother held the belief that hiccups were a sign that someone close to us harboured negative thoughts about us. As soon as I would get hiccups, she would suggest potential culprits, with the hope the hiccups would bounce back to the thinker. I found humour in this superstition, pondering if hiccups were a way to dispel bad energy before it returned to its sender. While I didn't take these ominous thoughts to heart, the idea did entertain the notion that I was on someone's mind.

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These beliefs unexpectedly influence our lives, with hiccups often interpreted to predict future events. I have learned that in some cultures, hiccups are viewed as a sign that not only brings back memories but also signals the start of a new journey.

Aside from beliefs, hiccups can be an unwelcome nuisance, yet they have been transformed into a source of delight by a category of hiccups restaurants offering unique drinks with a creative twist. For a majority, hiccups are still an unwelcome annoyance. Charles Osborne holds the world record for continuous hiccups. Following an accident in 1922, he suffered from non-stop hiccups until his death in 1990. Though hiccups have been much discussed, the ordeal of this Iowa native stands as the longest recorded bout of hiccups.

Interestingly, this unpleasant condition perpetuates the superstition that hiccups mean you are on someone's mind. All said, I find myself stuck to the folklore which suggests that getting hiccups means someone is talking about you or missing you. How far is this true remains obscure? In medieval times, hiccups were thought to be caused by a mythical creature called 'elves'. Whatever be it, there is no denying that hiccups are often annoying and frustrating because they can disrupt life at the most inconvenient times.

Cultural construct

Is the cultural construct around hiccups aimed at comforting us? If my experience indicates that hiccups are indeed getting uncommon, could it mean that our diaphragm has effectively managed involuntary spasms, or is it related to the fact that not many people seem to miss me? Since communication through WhatsApp helps us remember most of our contacts, it's conceivable that our brain may have stopped triggering the hiccups response. A friend suggests that we better consider digital notifications as the new hiccups.

A new exhibition turns the focus on 19th and early 20th century Bengal art, featuring Kalighat *pats*, oils, and mass-produced prints that included erotica

BENGAL'S BABUS AND SUNDARIS

Deepthi Sasidharan

Disparate in genres and united by a common geography, the newly opened exhibition on Bengal art, *The Babu and the Bazaar*, is a fabulous reflection of a bygone Calcutta. Starting in the 19th century, the city was the commercial hub of British India and its only seaport. Ships crowded the Hooghly river, evidence of the brisk mercantile trade in fine fabrics, tea, jute, opium, and rice.

It was truly a city of opposites: of the extremely wealthy and the impoverished, where black Victorian boots were worn with *dhotis* and saris, and bejewelled courtesans carried lace parasols. The newly-wealthy – designated as *babu* – was English-educated and obsessed with pursuing his pleasures. In contrast, the bazaar and its tradespeople catered to the throngs of pilgrims at Kalighat temples, soldiers, and the new immigrants that fuelled a cosmopolitan Calcutta.

Around the Kali temple sat artists, known as *patuas*, who made the Kalighat *pat*. What began as paintings on cloth, later became watercolours on paper that were sought-after souvenirs. Humorous paintings of Bengali men in black coats sitting in languor, beaten by their wives, or in a secret love tryst were especially popular. With a clear aim to please their patrons, the art coalesced into a genre called Kalighat painting, a unique mélange of styles, mediums and inspirations.

Drawn from the 19th and 20th centuries, the art at the exhibition is curated in three broad segments: the original Kalighat *pats* and its inspired prints, lithographs and oleographs, often with jewellery and attire borrowed from communities across India; oils on canvas inspired by Kalighat themes and pandering to the nouveau riche; and reverse glass paintings created by artists in Canton (Guangzhou, China), another British trading centre, in the hopes of finding a new market in India.

At DAG, The Taj Mahal Palace, till June 29.

The writer is the founder-director of Eka Archiving Services.

1

The iconography of goddess Lakshmi is pan-Indian. Here, she is shown seated cross-legged on a lotus and being showered with water from a pot by elephants on either side. Notice the quintessential Kalighat style of watercolour on paper and a plain background — and, charmingly, an ink pen note by the owner, likely a foreigner, in cursive hand: "A beautiful lady sitting on a lotus. She is the goddess of riches."

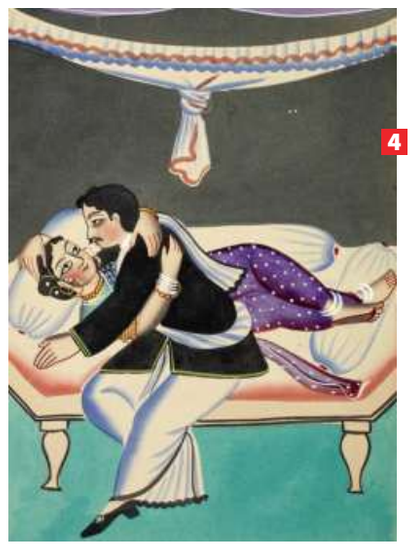
2

Calcutta's leitmotif, the fierce Goddess Kali, is depicted as a wrathful Dakshina Kali standing on a supine Shiva in this oil on canvas. Her fabulous jewellery, besides the plethora of gold ornaments and a tiara inspired by the traditional Bengali *solar mukut*, also includes a gory skull necklace and a girdle of hacked arms of her enemies around her waist. Her bejewelled magnificence, highlighted in gold pigment, is a reflection of the city's cross-cultural nature.

3

With strong Vaishnavite influences, this Rath Yatra shows the journey of Lord Krishna and his brother Balarama as they leave their home in Gokul. Dramatic in scope, as the ladies lament their beloved's leaving, the painting indicates multiple influences of 19th century Bengal. The women's attire is inspired by Rajasthan's *lehenga-choli*, and a colonnaded white mansion that peeks out from the top right reflects the rapidly changing architecture of the city.

4



19th century Bengal had two distinct cultures. While White Calcutta busied itself trying to look like a city of the British Empire, teeming with colonial architecture and urban spaces, the natives inhabited poorer areas in Black Calcutta. Here, disease was rampant as was social ostracisation based on caste and societal taboos. Widows, known by their white saris with black borders, were abandoned, unemployable and often took to begging outside the temples or were forced into prostitution. This category of erotica was ironically called the '*sundari*' image and tells a silent story of survival.

Watercolours of deracinated *babus* were popular. 19th century Calcutta was a city of wealthy men, perpetually drunk and enjoying its many offerings. Typically commissioned to titillate, these paintings also show the changing lifestyle of the times, where new furniture and accessories — like the *babu*'s Victorian shoes — were making an appearance.

5

6

Erotic chromolithograph prints such as this 'pin-up' poster, were often copied from oil paintings or inspired by Kalighat *pats*. They were popular tourist souvenirs.

A classic Kalighat *pat*, it shows a beauty at her daily toilet, fixing a flower in her hair with *alta* dye-stained palms. Notice the semi-erotic overtones and profuse jewellery. Later artists were directly influenced by the style and themes of the *patuas*. For example, Jamini Roy, the Bengal modernist painter, would style his iconography much like this painting — with a similar posture, jewellery and clothes — reinterpreting the subject with his notable graphic lines.

7

How to embroider 'stained glass'

A series of residencies at Vastrakala aims to encourage collaborations between French artists and local embroiderers

Anubhuti Krishna

Vastrakala's intricate hand embroidery is part of private homes in France, the Opera de Monte Carlo in Monaco, and even the refurbished throne of French emperor Napoleon. Now, the artisans are expanding their repertoire – with collaborations. The latest addition is textile that resembles stained glass, jointly created by French multidisciplinary designer Victoire de Brantes and the embroiderers during a four-month residency.

"At Vastrakala [co-founded by French entrepreneur Jean-François Lesage], we have had regular interventions with artists, notably painters, but this was our first real artistic residency," says co-founder and managing director Malavika Shivakumar. In collaboration with Villa Swagatam, a platform for cultural exchanges between Indian and French artists, the residencies are aimed at creating new forms of embroidery and developing fresh products for the Chennai-based embroidery atelier.

De Brantes was particularly drawn to Vastrakala because of her familiarity with Lesage Interieurs, which works with museums, architects, designers, and upholsterers globally. "The synergy between the two cultural landscapes appealed to me greatly," shares the 25-year-old, who spent her childhood between South India and the south of France, and was greatly inspired by traditional Indian crafts.

"A typical day, which started at 9 a.m., was filled with creative drawings, tracking the progress of samples and prototypes, and observation and exploration of materials and archives," says De Brantes, who was mentored by Lesage, the artistic director, and worked with a dedicated team of 15 artisans. Her days followed a natural rhythm, she adds, "with tea and lunch breaks with the staff, and traditional rituals, including the weekly *puja* every Friday".

Stitch in time (Left) Victoire de Brantes with mentor Jean-François Lesage; and Vastrakala's embroiderers at work. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Lesage's language of embroidery

For De Brantes, embroidery was a new medium. Staying at the premises – a massive 45,000 sq. ft. atelier near Sriperumbudur employing close to 200 craftspeople – meant she could spend all her time learning the techniques. "Under Lesage's mentorship, I delved into the language of embroidery. Drawing from technical references, archival insights, and diverse inspirations, we cultivated a shared creative approach that fostered a collaborative atmosphere, enabling the embroiderers, tailors, and myself to collectively shape the project," she says.

The objective was to create a new form of embroidery that incorporated functionality and beauty. "The 'new' aspect of the design development lies in the modular nature of the embroidery, traditionally known to be one final composition," she states. "Here, various panels are crafted to come together, forming different narratives such as curtains and wall dividers." This approach offers flexibility and versatility in creating diverse configurations to suit different spaces and purposes.

"The modular embroidered panel Victoire created plays with the idea of filtering natural light [with the opaque and transparent areas completing each other]. The result appears as a textile stained glass," explains Lesage, whose interest in the Indian craft was ignited in the 1980s. "Her immersion with the artisans let her build her own comprehension of techniques, materials and their potential use, transforming traditional ways into her own language."

Contemporary sensibilities

The residency helped the embroiderers, too. "With design, it is not about invention, but about reinterpretation," says Shivakumar, explaining that the key to staying relevant is being open to different approaches. "Our artisans got to learn how the same material can be used differently."

For instance, De Brantes explored how to integrate different departments, such as fashion, tailoring and embroidery to create interior products. She incorporated elements of fashion and interiors – from embroidery stitches to diverse materials – in newer combinations, and reinterpreted accessories like cuff links and oversized buttons into unique embellishments in dividers and curtains.

Though the residency is over, the collaboration continues and will lead up to a joint exhibition later this year and a series of products, including curtains and screens. "We are looking at how we can showcase and celebrate what we have created together," says Shivakumar, adding that this is the first of a series of three residencies that will roll out over three years. "There is a playfulness to the product, which we feel will appeal to contemporary sensibilities."

The writer is passionate about food, design, and travel.