THE HINDU
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magazine

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IMAGING:
JOSEPH GNANA SATHEESH

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE POLITICS OF SPORTSWASHING

In a bid to change the global narrative around their country's conservative image and authoritarian regime, the wealthy West Asian giant is lavishing millions of dollars on the soft power of sport

Suresh Menon

In *How Hitler Hijacked World Sport* (2011) – the story of one man co-opting sport for the Nazi cause – the author Christopher Hilton says, "he approached sport as he approached everything else, by being prepared to exploit it in the most shameless ways as long as it served his purpose. It brought an additional paradox because sport was built on exactly the opposite principles to those Hitler and the Nazis held..."

Less than a century later, another man and another political system is attempting the same strategy with a missionary zeal. Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, understands the power of sport to lend credibility to and buy acceptance for a regime which may not believe in human rights but has the resources to make the world act as if it does not matter. There are those who believe that all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten the country's image, but they are increasingly in a minority.

The latest to join the Saudi bandwagon is tennis star Rafael Nadal, who has trotted out the usual excuses about spreading the game, attracting children to it, and so on. John McEnroe has called it a slippery slope for tennis across the globe.

Also, in March, Riyadh will host the top eight players in the world for the $1 million dollar inaugural Riyadh Season World Masters of Snooker. This time there is an innovation – a 23rd ball known as the Riyadh Season gold ball, and worth 20 points.

The questions of morality versus market, human rights versus convenience, and of 'sportswashing', or using sport to distract from a country's societal abuses, aren't new. Saudi Arabia simply have more funds. And as always, morality shares a room with hypocrisy in the house of politics.

PR case study

When Saudi Arabia unpacked the Vision 2030 programme nearly eight years ago, sport (alongside investment opportunities, tourism and entertainment) was merely one of the avenues towards a more palatable image for the country. Now, the desert kingdom could become the sports hub of the world. The re-branding is on an unprecedented scale, the PR exercise likely to become a case study in textbooks.

Some years after the Public Investment Fund (PIF) – worth $700 billion – was revamped to diversify the country's oil-dependent economy came the murder and dismemberment of dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Then came the alleged mass killing of Ethiopian migrants and more atrocities that seemed to confirm the perception of Saudi Arabia as a backward, repressive country with regressive laws.

Only a small part of the PIF is invested in sport – a much greater amount is invested in U.S. venture capital funds – but sport is sexy and guaranteed to give a bigger bang for the buck. It works both domestically and internationally. Sixty-three per cent of the population is under the age of 30, and the unspoken social contract between the rulers and the youth is this: we will get you everything from international stars to futuristic cities, tourists and more. In return, keep your mouth shut.

Reputation-laundering through sports is important, but the greater ambition is to change the global narrative about the kingdom. If it upsets the equilibrium of international sports, and leads into uncharted territories, that's collateral damage.

When the PIF began to throw money at sportsmen and administrators, few ducked. Most welcomed it, especially footballers like Cristiano Ronaldo who were close to the end of their careers anyway. Saudi Arabia might not have known it would be so easy.

The kingdom hosts a range of sports events, from Formula One to WWE, the world's richest horse race, heavyweight boxing. In 2021, the PIF financed the purchase of Newcastle United football club in the English Premier League, then spent $2 billion on its own LIV Golf which then merged with the official Professional Golf Association in June 2023. In 2034, Saudi Arabia will host the football World Cup. A decade is a long time in sport.

Richest sporting leagues in the world
(average per game value in USD)

- National Football League (U.S.) **$36 million**
- Indian Premier League **$15.1 million**
- English Premier League **$11.23 million**
- Major League Baseball (US, Canada) **$9.57 million**
- National Basketball Association (US, Canada) **$2.12 million**

Source: Forbes.com, 2022

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In the boat called life

Like her impressive first book, this collection of short stories too reflects author Vauhini Vara's perceptive gaze and inventive mind

Sheila Kumar

This Is Salvaged
Vauhini Vara
Fourth Estate
₹399

Vauhini Vara's debut, *The Immortal King Rao*, a finalist for the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, was, simply put, an amazing book. As a work of speculative fiction, it had an imagined world of impressive proportions. In *This Is Salvaged*, her second book, a collection of short stories firmly rooted in reality, Vara changes course, swapping the imagined for the real.

We encounter the main characters in these tales at a certain point in their lives, and in somewhat challenging circumstances. Quite a few of them carry emotional baggage of different kinds. They are flawed, vulnerable people, and it seems like their world is collapsing around them. However, the author directs a gentle compassionate gaze at them, shorn of both sentiment and judgement. The reader then feels compelled to view them through the same lens.

The central idea that runs through the stories seems to be that life is ephemeral and only the meaningful relationships you make matter. If one is unable to do that, then there is the risk of being cast adrift. There is a faint air of melancholy and sadness that hangs over the pieces here and the cleverly infused quiet humour in some accounts lends a touch of the bittersweet. There is loneliness and loss, and different ways of coping with it. Death, alcoholism and failed dreams appear; efforts are made by the characters to stay afloat in the face of this, to salvage situations as best as possible. But as the reader is not privy to how the future will pan out for these people, there wafts an air of poignancy over their narratives.

Against the current

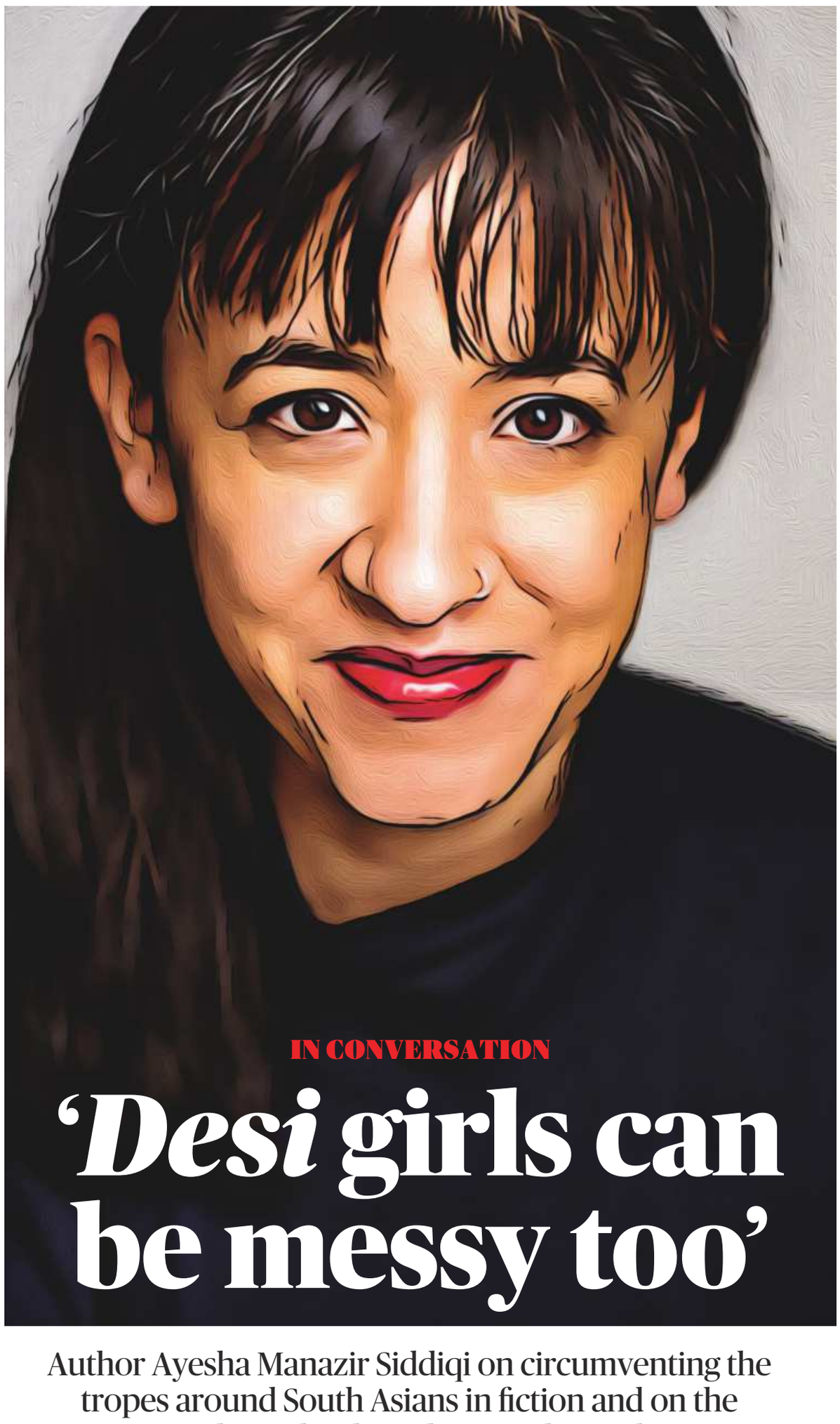
In any book of short stories, it is safe to say not all may be of the same quality. However, in this collection, almost all the stories are consistently good, which speaks volumes about the author's skill. The title story, 'This is Salvaged', is the standout one, masterful in its minute, perceptive study of the protagonist; much is packed into and conveyed in the short format.

Most of the voices in the narratives are those of women – women who are attempting to forge significant connections. Their reality is complicated and difficult. They are far from perfect. They are boats beating against the current. However, courage shines through in their attempts to claw out some sort of life.

The language is affecting in many places. Like this line in one of the stories: 'It's cold down here in the kingdom of man. Let this one child's heat warm a creature against the dying of her species.' The author's caring voice that marked her first book is evident here too. It is a publishing cliche to say an author has an 'original voice' especially when a new book is released. In Vara's case, however, it was true of her first book and is definitely true of this one too. Hers is an assured, impressive and inventive voice. One can't wait to read what she will come up with next.

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

A new path Author Vauhini Vara swaps the imagined for the real in her second book.



IN CONVERSATION

'Desi girls can be messy too'

Author Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi on circumventing the tropes around South Asians in fiction and on the complicated India-Pakistan relationship

Preeti Zachariah
preeti.zachariah@thehindu.co.in

Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi's novel, *The Centre*, draws you in from the very first line, thrusting you straight into a world that steadily gets more dystopian. "It all began with Adam. Doesn't it always?" she says, beginning by introducing the reader to a character rather aptly named after the first man.

Laced with dark humour and filled with memorable people (and a cat called Billee, a version of the writer's own furry companion), the book tells the story of Anisa Ellahi, a Pakistani woman living in London "by myself, making mediocre *karela*-cashew stir-fry, cranking the heating up to twenty-one and still freezing, and pretending to make a living by writing subtitles for Bollywood films". Then, she meets the aforementioned Adam, and everything changes.

Siddiqi's debut novel, while an effortless read, raises big questions around appropriation, identity, the immigrant experience and language privilege. The idea for the novel began with the plot, says the London-based writer, editor and playwright. "A woman discovers a mysterious language school that promises complete fluency in any language in just 10 days, only to later discover the inner workings of such a transaction." From there, Siddiqi springboards into the larger themes. *The Centre* is also about complex, mutable human relationships. "I think the novel's central concern is to do with desire, be it for professional success or relational intimacy," says the author. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: *Can you talk about the nuanced way you've approached race and South Asian identity, circumventing common tropes and focusing on how privilege also shapes the immigrant experience?*

Answer: In the novel, the protagonist, Anisa, and the Centre's manager, Shiba, are from privileged class backgrounds, which affects every aspect of how they negotiate the world around them. It felt important to me to interrogate their privilege as best as I could.

Many South Asian writers choose to focus, in their novels, on somebody whose class background is completely different from their own – somebody who does not speak English, for instance, or lives, perhaps, in a village, or works as a rickshaw driver in India, and so on. Or they focus on another time or an older generation. There is also Kavita Bhanot's wonderful research on the British Asian novel, where she speaks of some British Asian writers' problematic depictions of backward and regressive elders and a culture that refuses to assimilate. And then there are the many stories of terrorists and forced marriages. And the truth is, you often see the writer's own prejudices and presumptions leaking into their depictions of these characters. Maybe that's where the tropes you mention come from – a disembodied filling out of details, or drawing upon stereotypes and presumptions. I have no doubt I've internalised that stuff too. But a commitment to working through it feels interesting and useful.

It's okay to think twice about what we're fighting for when we ask for 'inclusion' – what do we want to be included in and why? And also, to think about the ways in which that 'inclusion', or even the quest for it, can end up distorting our thinking

Big questions London-based writer, editor and playwright Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi.

And similarly, it felt interesting to shine a light on the protagonist's prejudices, entitlements, and general messiness. That's the other thing: it's not just white characters that can be depicted as messy and contradictory, as complex, even unlikeable. We know *desi* girls can be messy, too. My god, *so* messy. Why not show that in our books?

Q: *You've also lingered on this very complex relationship between India and Pakistan.*

A: Thank you for noticing. I grew up in Pakistan and lived in India for a little while, and I felt it would be interesting to examine the complexities of the relationship between the two countries. Anisa describes it as a relationship of 'both great longing and loathing' in the novel.

It was a long time ago, however, that I was in India, and the truth is this wouldn't be possible today. I recently had to face the fact, when trying to attend a friend's wedding in Rajkot, that it is now virtually impossible for somebody of Pakistani descent to get a visa to India. What a shame to cut off lines of communication so violently, a move that can only result in further vilification and othering.

Q: *Anisa's desire to be a "real" translator, to be recognised by an establishment, reminds me a little of June Hayward in R.F. Kuang's novel,* Yellowface, *from last year. The "establishment" has historically tended to favour white and cis men?*

A: I read *Yellowface* shortly before my novel came out and loved it. I found it very clever and revealing. Yes, of course, the 'establishment', as you say, is very white and masculine and also very secular and privileged in terms of class. However, one of the things *The Centre* questions is our desire to be a part of the 'establishment' in the first place, and the ways in which one is protected, especially as a Muslim Pakistani woman, by not being connected to it; the extent to which one can be critical and aware of structures of oppression; the confidence one is able to maintain because of not having been subject to environments where they are made to feel strange or lacking. The establishment, the centre, if you like, can suck up your soul without your ever knowing it, with your thinking that this is, in fact, exactly what you want and need. That's a part of its game.

What I'm saying is, it's okay to think twice about what we're fighting for when we ask for 'inclusion' – what do we want to be included in and why? And also, to think about the ways in which that 'inclusion', or even the quest for it, can end up distorting our thinking. Here's the possible contradiction though. At the same time, I am very happy that my book was published. Truly over the moon. *Alhamdulillah*!

I want to create more work that is experimental and pushes my own limits, and I want to have the space, encouragement, and support to create that work. I want it to be read widely. And I want to support marginalised voices in whatever way I can. But I am pointing, I guess, to the importance of staying vigilant, aware of how easily and unconsciously one's voice can be swallowed up – co-opted, tokenised, assimilated – by larger structures of power.

BROWSER

Wadia
Rohit Trilokekar
1889 Books
₹599
A drifting Rustom Wadia, bereft of pets Polly and Fluffy, joins forces with his best friend Anil Velkar and restaurateur Toral Shah for an unprecedented adventure: a journey to the Parsi holy site of Udvada. What follows is a shocking discovery.

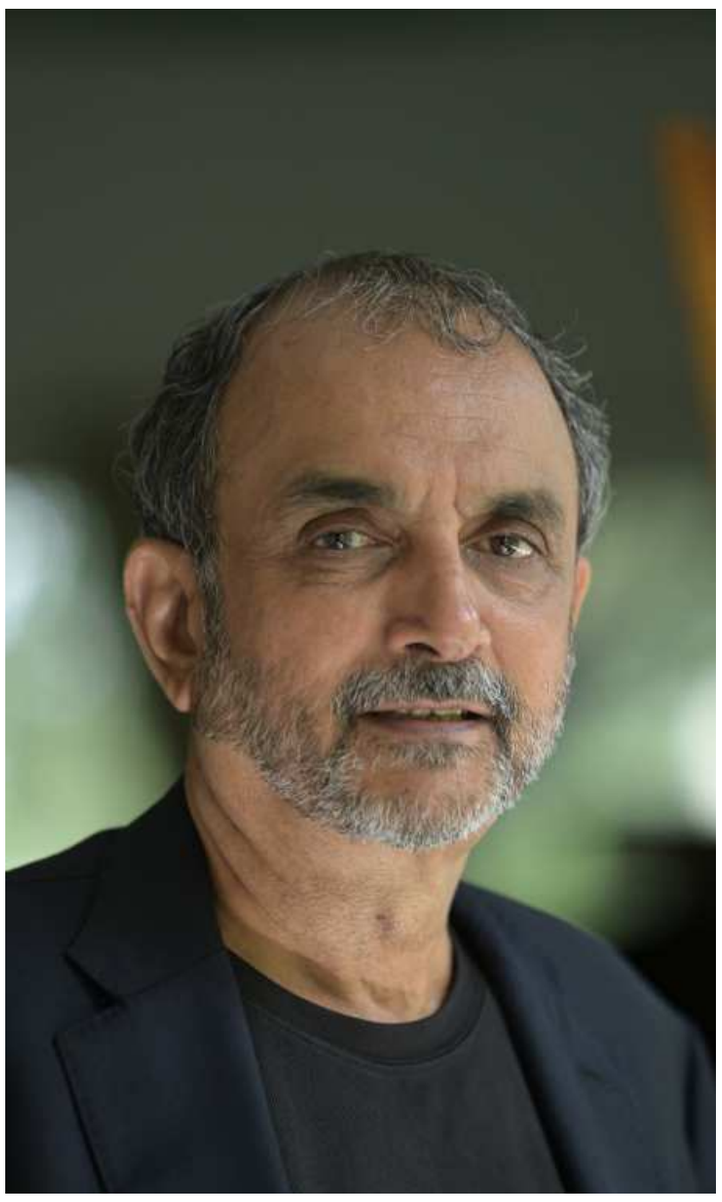
If I Have To Be A Soldier
Nikhil J. Alva
HarperCollins
₹499
It's 1966 and Mizoram is burning. Two friends find themselves on opposite sides of the conflict: Samuel Rego of the Indian Army and 'Che' Sena, an MNF commander in custody. Will the two friends find their way back to each other?

Angria
Sohail Rekhy
Penguin
₹399
Kanhoji Angre is one of history's most feared naval commanders, part of the Maratha army at a time when the Mughals were attacking them on land, and the Portuguese were destroying them at sea. This is the story of one man's fight for *swaraj* on the seas.

Bitter Gourd
Anupama Raju
Copper Coin
₹499
In her latest book of poems, Anupama Raju considers the simple acts of cleaning the house, making a meal, or picking out a colour, and imbues them with, as poet Ranjit Hoskote says, "the resonance of songs heard in the distance".

INTERVIEW

The possibility of a Japanese invasion in 1942 not only led to an exodus from several cities, including Madras and Calcutta, it also shaped major political events leading to the Quit India call to the British, says Mukund Padmanabhan



LIVES, INTERRUPTED

Manu S. Pillai

Mukund Padmanabhan's engrossing *The Great Flap of 1942* tells of a series of events triggered, ironically, by a non-event. During World War II, as the British panicked over the possibility of a Japanese invasion of India, lives were disrupted, cities abandoned, and much chaos unleashed. In an email interview, Padmanabhan talks about this strange, surreal episode in Indian – and military – history.

Question: *The book originates with a personal story. Your mother had to interrupt her studies and move inland when fear of a Japanese invasion was at its peak. What was the human and emotional cost of the whole affair?*
Answer: I live in Madras, where almost everyone I know has a story about a family member who fled the city. Conservatively, 75% of the population left, but there are reasons to believe the number could have been almost 90%. But it wasn't just Madras or Visakhapatnam (which was bombed and emptied out). People fled Calcutta and Bombay, and there was fear and migration even from unlikely interior places such as Delhi, Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur and Kodaikanal.

Unlike Partition, this exodus has been largely unmapped. Also, the book reveals that the Raj coldly encouraged people it deemed "non-essential" or "useless mouths" to flee because it felt that cities with a reduced population would be easier to manage in the circumstances. They treated the exodus like a managerial problem – one of getting "inessentials" to leave while retaining those engaged in vital services, including the production of war material.

The question you raise about the human and emotional cost is interesting. One can understand our colonial rulers and the British-owned press not caring about the plight of those who fled. But surprisingly there was not much discussion even in the nationalist quarter. There is little beyond bland matter-of-fact single-columns in the Indian-owned newspapers – a reminder that the culture of reporting human interest stories, those that necessarily go beyond official statements, is something that developed much later.

Dangerous past The shell of the unexploded bomb that was dropped by Japan on Visakhapatnam during World War II in 1942, on display at Maritime Museum, Visakhapatnam; (top) Mukund Padmanabhan. (K.R. DEEPAK AND SHAJU JOHN)

Q: *Even today, the Japanese threat to India is a little known element in the country's experience of World War II. How serious was this threat, and how far was it a consequence of British paranoia?*
A: We now know that Japan had no intention of invading India in 1942. So in truth, there was no real threat. All Japan wanted was to create disruption, foster anti-British sentiment, and create an impression that Britain was incapable of defending India. This it did very effectively through sporadic air raids and sustained propaganda.

Even if there was no real threat, the Indian government – to be fair – had to prepare for the possibility, however remote, of a Japanese attack. So there was justification for some steps the administration took – from strengthening India's defence capability to implementing certain Air Raid Precaution (ARP) measures.

But at the same time, other government actions unnecessarily heightened the panic and led to the misconception of an imminent invasion. This included putting out mixed and confused messaging about Japanese intent, encouraging "non-essentials" to flee, and relying on false military intelligence that spoke of a Japanese fleet about to make landfall south of Madras in mid-April 1942. I guess one could argue that there was a touch of paranoia about all this.

Q: *As you show, fear of the Japanese affected much of the subcontinent. We also discover mixed responses of the British government. Do tell us more about the wider impact.*
A: When I began work on the book, I assumed it would be mainly about Madras. But the research called for a larger story – one that was pan-Indian and demanded a wider narrative arc starting with Japan's attack on Malaya and its military successes in Southeast Asia. Also, the book attempts to analyse how World War II shaped Britain's attitudes to India as well the impact it had on the nationalist movement. After all, the major political events of 1942 – the Cripps Mission and the developments that led to the call to Quit India – took place against the shadow of the Japanese threat. The book examines these events against the context of Japan's military ascension. The British were divided about how much to offer the Congress in return for supporting the war effort.

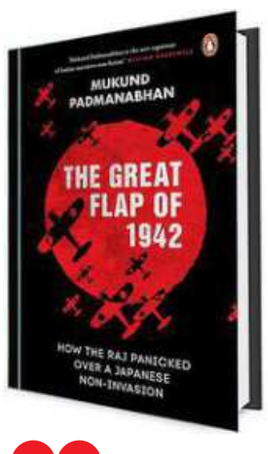
Q: *How did the nationalist movement grapple with the issue? Gandhi, for instance.*
A: The war in general, and in particular Japan's entry at the end of 1941, divided the Congress. We know that Gandhi's unswerving commitment to non-violence seemed absolutist and unreal to many Congressmen. He was opposed to India getting involved in the war whereas some of his colleagues believed it politic to offer conditional support to a beleaguered Britain in exchange for self-government, if not a promise of freedom.

Gandhi continued to maintain this position even after fears emerged that Japan would invade India. Inevitably, this led to unfair accusations that he was pro-Japan. But it is true that his commitment to non-violence blurred ideological differences and deflected attention from the significance of happenings abroad. For Gandhi, the moral distinction between aggression and counter-aggression was, at best, a very fine one. He wrote repeatedly that the best recourse in the face of aggression is passive resistance or non-cooperation.

Gandhi also appeared to believe, as did many Indians in 1942, that Japan and the Axis powers might win the war. I suggest that it is, at the very least, worth asking whether such a belief had a bearing on the rejection of the Cripps offer and the sudden emergence of what one historian described as his "strange and uniquely militant mood" that culminated in the Quit India call.

Q: *The book is peppered with small details, not all pleasant. The murder of animals in the Madras Zoo, for instance. Was there something that startled you?*
The main thing that interested me in this story was that many events – including the shooting of 'dangerous' animals, the panic, the rumours – were a result of something that never actually happened: a Japanese invasion. This lends a quirky, somewhat dystopian twist to the narrative. I did ferret out some odd, eccentric stories. I was delighted, for instance, to learn about poet W.H. Auden's brother concocting a cheap tarry substance and conducting an experiment to see whether it would produce smoke profuse enough to obscure Delhi's South Block from enemy aircraft. All this, at a time when there was absolutely zero risk of Delhi being bombed. The nearest Japanese airbase was simply too far away.

The interviewer is a historian.

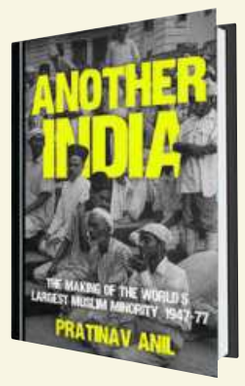


For Gandhi, the moral distinction between aggression and counter-aggression was, at best, a very fine one. He wrote repeatedly that the best recourse in the face of aggression is passive resistance or non-cooperation

The original betrayers

Pratinav Anil argues that policies of the Congress and the Muslim elite ended up hurting Indian Muslims the most

A. Faizur Rahman



Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947-77
Pratinav Anil
Penguin/Viking
₹999

Unobjective commentators have, in the last decade, perfected the art of highlighting the tribulations of being a Muslim in "Hindu India" without contrasting them with the difficulties the same Muslim faced in "secular India" that supposedly existed before 2014.

Pratinav Anil is perhaps the only modern historian who has gone against this trend to put right the wilful muting of Indian Muslim history. His new book, *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947-77*, is an in-depth analysis of anti-Muslim violence since Independence that exposes the Islamophobic facet of the country the Congress established in August 1947.

Riots and taunts

Not many know that the "most violent Hindu-Muslim conflagration of postcolonial India" was unleashed in 1964 in which a staggering 800,000 Muslims from Bengal were pushed into East Pakistan.

Indeed, it was under the Congress that the derisive "go to Pakistan" taunt was actualised when nearly 2% of Indian Muslims were sent to Pakistan after being branded infiltrators who had sneaked in to convert Hindus to Islam. Before being expelled, they were dumped in makeshift camps on the border "like herds of cattle", and forced to "sign papers declaring falsely that they were Pakistanis."

A large number of those who couldn't be "sent to Pakistan" became the victims of the "riots galore" that dotted Nehru's rule. The "institutionalised riot system" was so one-sided that Muslims made up 82% of the fatalities and 59% of the injured.

Prepossessed hostility towards Muslims was also the cause of the 1948 police action in Hyderabad which, for Anil, was "a mass pogrom" because it had resulted in the massacre of 40,000 Muslims, the rape of women, loot, arson, desecration of mosques, forcible conversions, and seizure of houses and lands. Nehru hastily suppressed the Sunderlal Report that brought out these facts.

Anil concludes that Nehruvian India wore secularism as "a fig leaf" to hide its pro-Hindu bias.

But how did the Congress get away with its brazen marginalisation of Muslims? With the help of "nationalist Muslims" and "notables", says Anil.

The former were mostly Muslim Congressmen who harmed their community by conflating India's progress with that of the Congress; shielding Congress by blaming Muslim communalists for Partition, and placing the constitutional protection of the *shariah* above the community's political rights.

The "notables" comprised upper-class Muslims (the *ashraf*) such as *mutawallis* (custodians of *waqf* properties), *waseeqadars* (princely pensioners) and *waaqifs* (dedicators of properties for *waqf*) all of whom feathered their nests in the guise of working for the community's economic development.

The "preservation of distinctive elements of Muslim culture in a non-Muslim environment" was their major preoccupation. Backing them to the hilt were the clerics, especially those belonging to the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, which Anil calls a branch of the Congress in all but name.

The "ashrafised" Islam that the ashraf-clergy nexus promoted secured the class interests of the *ashrafs* and ignored the plight of common Muslims.

No space for scrutiny

As a consequence, Muslim politics had no room for "trade unions, mass protests, anti-discrimination legislation, and subaltern solidarity" while it had plenty for "high cultural totemic symbols such as the AMU, *auqaf*, Urdu, and the *sharia*." This suited the ruling "Hindu Congress" because a politically empowered non-Hindu group was not in its interest.

Even today the *ashraf*-clergy alliance prioritises religion over social cohesion and political participation. If, for instance, *ashraf*-backed madrasas are fixated on anachronistic medievalism, many clergy-endorsed secular English medium schools controlled by wealthy Muslims promote religious identitarianism by making the skull cap (for boys) and the *hijab* (for girls) a mandatory part of the uniform.

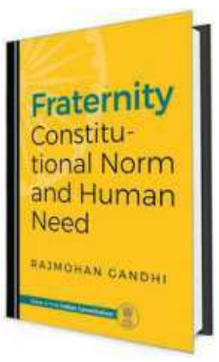
This self-ghettoisation, which is nothing short of an attempt to discourage the enrolment of non-Muslims in Muslim schools, sustains itself on the fear of the other and has the potential to render Muslim students incapable of living in multi-religious and multi-cultural societies after graduation.

Given this sad state of affairs, *Another India* couldn't have come at a better time. Its neoteric narrative is not just a searing exposé of Congress' betrayal of trustful Muslims who stayed back in India after rejecting Pakistan; it is also an invitation to Indian Muslims to acquire a sense of critical thinking and break free from the serpentine stranglehold of the *ashraf*-clergy alliance that is hell-bent on denying them the heaven-ordained right to intellectual liberation.

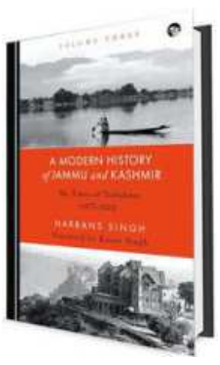
The reviewer is Secretary-General of the Islamic Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought.

Dress code The imposition of *hijab* in schools renders Muslim students incapable of living in multi-cultural societies. (REUTERS)

Fraternity: Constitutional Norm and Human Need
Rajmohan Gandhi
Speaking Tiger
₹399
Another title in the 'Ideas of the Indian Constitution' series, this volume focuses on the idea of fraternity, moving from ancient India to modern Europe to an intimate portrait of the face-off between Gandhi and Ambedkar, which led to the Poona Pact of 1932.

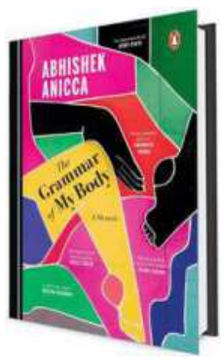


A Modern History of Jammu and Kashmir, Volume Three: The Times of Turbulence (1975-2021)
Harbans Singh
₹799
This is the final volume of a trilogy on the contemporary history of Jammu & Kashmir, which was created as a political entity by the Dogras in the 19th century. He brings readers up to date with its current status, after the abrogation of Article 370.



Deep Sea to Deep Space
Kasthuri Venkateswaran, with P. Sasikumar & M. Jothi Mani
Emerald Publishers
₹500
When a medical career proved elusive, Kasthuri Venkateswaran delved into microbiology, and rose to prominence at NASA. This autobiography was first co-authored by a scientist at ISRO in Tamil; the English translation ensures that it will be available to a wider readership.

The Grammar of My Body
Abhishek Anicca
Vintage/Penguin
₹499
Abhishek Anicca writes about everyday stories of living with disability and chronic illness. Touching on subjects like identity, questions of care and dignity, dating and shame, he questions the lack of representation in the media for marginalised communities.



SAUDI ARABIA AND THE POLITICS OF SPORTSWASHING

in the spotlight A Saudi fan wears glasses bearing the images of the Saudi King and Crown Prince during a football match. (GETTY IMAGES)

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

There has been talk of investing in the Indian Premier League too. And there is a $38 billion plan to become an esports hub by 2030. There have been offers to buy Formula One, and controlling stakes in the U.S. leagues NBA and NFL, and the ATP (tennis). All this has the fascination of watching a predator swallowing its prey.

"We know they killed Khashoggi and have a horrible record on human rights," the golfer Phil Mickelson said while joining the LIV tour. "They execute people over there for being gay. Knowing all of this, why would I even consider it? Because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity..."

Sports for humanity

Athletes will be judged by the choices they make; what might be great for the individual is not always good for the sport. "What I know about morality and the obligations of men, I owe to sport," said Albert Camus. Morality and sport ought to go together. Sport is an artificial construct, but what it stands for isn't artificial: inclusivity, fairness, justice, diversity, empathy. Sport is what makes us human, a bubble where we can see our better selves. To use it to support policies that make us less than human is a cruel paradox.

Like the American Mickelson, Saudi Arabia too see it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Mickelson's country doesn't see the contradiction in cozying up to the Crown Prince after their President Biden had called Saudi Arabia a 'pariah' following Khashoggi's murder. The U.S. is Saudi Arabia's second largest trading partner, with $46.6 billion in trade in 2022. Last year, the U.K. did $21.7 billion worth of trade with Saudi Arabia. When sports stars ask why individuals should be expected to make decisions their countries shy away from, there is no clear answer.

"Mohammed bin Salman's rule has been a truly dark time for human rights in Saudi Arabia, and no amount of talk about economic visions or of an expansion into new sporting ventures should be allowed to distract from that fact," says Amnesty International. Sportswashing, however, cannot succeed without the co-operation of individuals and countries which place profit over probity.

"We are reforming," said Saudi Sports Minister Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Saud in an interview to the *BBC*, "such events help us to reform." The Minister's admission that reforms are necessary might be significant. The enthusiasm with which administrators are genuflecting before the Saudi determination for a seat at the high table is changing the face of international sports.

Few can refuse the blandishments. Lionel Messi, who turned down an offer reportedly around half a billion dollars (he chose to play in the American league instead) is a tourism ambassador for $25 million. He is on social media saying things like, "I love Saudi Arabia. I didn't realise it was so green", posting photographs of his family holidaying there. Turns out his family was keener on the beaches of Miami than on the sands of the desert, hence his decision.

In 2018, Roger Federer had turned down a $2 million offer to play a single match in Jeddah. Tiger Woods turned down $750 million when the LIV Golf Series was inaugurated.

Already the PIF spends more money than the GDP of countries like Barbados on sport. Saudi Arabia have no hope of recovering any of that in the near future. But financial profit isn't the motive.

"In 1940 the Olympic Games will take place in Tokyo. But thereafter they will take place in Germany for all time to come..." This is Hitler, quoted by his architect and armaments minister, Albert Speer. The idea was to have a stadium in Berlin holding 450,000 people for the quadrennial event. Hitler was planning to hijack the Olympic Games. And we'll leave it at that.

The writer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?.

Top athletes on playing contract with Saudi Arabia

NEYMAR
Al-Hilal (Saudi Pro League)
$400 m

CRISTIANO RONALDO
Al Nassr (Saudi Pro League)
$214 m

KARIM BENZEMA
Al-Ittihad (Saudi Pro League)
$213 m

JON RAHM
LIV Golf
$400 m

PHIL MICKELSON
LIV Golf
$200 m

(Estimated figures)
Source: Forbes.com

Two sides A still from *Girls Will Be Girls*; and (below) director Shuchi Talati, flanked by her actors Kesav Binoy Kiron (left) and Preeti Panigrahi, at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival. (GETTY IMAGES)

BEHIND A SUNDANCE WINNER

Girls Will Be Girls, Shuchi Talati's debut feature and coming-of-age tale, was shot by a mostly female crew

Ranjita Ganesan

Shuchi Talati, writer-director of *Girls Will Be Girls*, which debuted at this year's Sundance Film Festival, wanted to create a movie set where girls could be girls. So she involved a mostly female crew to shoot the film. "In spaces which are more 'male', women wear armour. But when we don't have to fight for respect or be more masculine to be taken seriously, it opens up mental space and we can get more done," says Talati. "And because the film is about a young girl's sexuality, for me it was very important to build a safe space where the cast could be vulnerable."

Girls Will Be Girls was among the first titles picked to compete in the festival's World Cinema Dramatic Competition, where it won the Audience Award while its lead actor Preeti Panigrahi won the Special Jury Award for Acting. The movie is a delicately spun duel for attention between teen girl Mira (Panigrahi) and her young mother Anila (Kani Kusruti), after Mira befriends Sri (Kesav Binoy Kiron), an attractive new classmate at her boarding school.

Changing the pattern

U.S.-based Taiwanese filmmaker and photographer Jih-E Peng handled the cinematography, Avyakta Kapur (*Jee Karda*, Prime Video) led production design, while Amrita David came on board as editor. The film was produced by women too – Claire Chassagne from France and Richa Chadha in India, who attended college with Talati in Mumbai.

New York resident Talati's last film – a short called *A Period Piece*, in which a couple contends with blood stains on the couch after a night of intimacy – was also shot by a mostly female crew. "It was special to try and recreate that in India. Film sets are very 'male' everywhere but that is a little bit more true in India." After six years in the making, several funding applications, and a stint at the Berlinale Talents Script Station programme later, *Girls Will Be Girls* was introduced at the grand Egyptian Theatre in Park City, Utah, where an international audience gasped and giggled along with the plot's subtle twists. "We were surprised by how audibly people were reacting," cast member Kiron noted after the screening. "Because ours is actually a quiet film."

The filmmaker first began writing a story of sexual awakening set in a strict Indian school in 2018. That milieu had caught Talati's imagination ever since she spent a night at a boarding school where the bunk beds were covered in lovey-dovey etchings. "There were all these little messages by all the girls who had slept in them over the years, recording their crushes," she says. Talati was also fascinated by the boarding schools described in Enid Blyton's *St. Clare's* and *Malory Towers*, as well as her own school in Vadodara, "where they policed everyone but especially the girls".

Society's rules

As an adult looking back, the writer in Talati was struck by how much of her girlhood was governed by society. "When you are a student, you are so steeped in the culture, so while there is the thrill of exploring your sexuality, there is also shame and judgement, so you want to keep the rebellion a secret," she says. "Sometimes you don't even tell your best friend that you kissed your boyfriend."

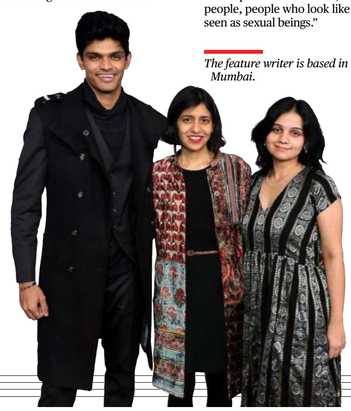
The film's protagonist Mira is one such girl who, as a straight A student and the first female head prefect of her school, must walk the tightrope between upholding the "age-old Indian culture" and asserting her budding sexual agency.

Over the course of scripting, Talati decided to marry the plot with another story she had been writing, about a fraught mother-daughter relationship. Young mothers often have to stifle their own unmet needs while raising bold and ambitious daughters. In *Girls Will Be Girls*, Anila has a mixed reaction to Mira's new friendship with Sri, being gamely permissive sometimes and resentfully prohibitive on other occasions.

The director interviewed mothers, including her own, to form the character. "It was interesting going back and talking to mothers – 'what were those years of marriage like?', 'did you want to have a career?' My mom was progressive and modern, maybe the first to wear jeans (in the family), it was interesting to see what kind of judgement she faced for that."

Girls Will Be Girls offers a welcome break from stereotypes. For instance, the Indian cinema trope of "the asexual mother" is shattered, as Anila displays a sense of energy and desire. "Nobody asks mothers these questions, but that doesn't mean there is not all this desire and heartbreak there." In another departure from the norm, the model girl on screen gets to enjoy intimacy too.

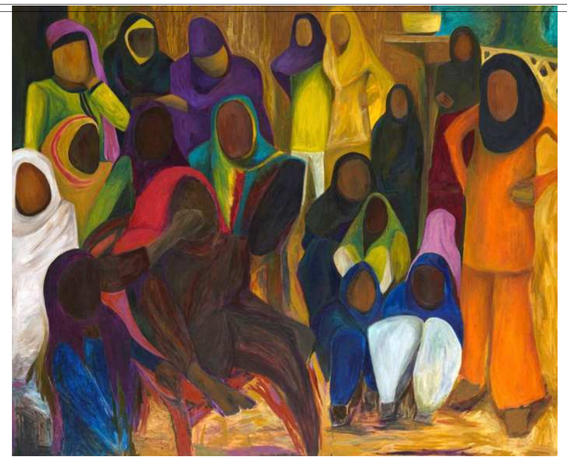
"Teenage sexuality is not something we really see in Indian cinema. The vamps are allowed access to sexuality, the good women are not, and women on screen are often punished for exploring that part of themselves," the director said at the film's premiere. "So for me it was important that brown, Indian people, people who look like me, are seen as sexual beings."



The feature writer is based in Mumbai.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Freeze frame (Clockwise from left) Aban Raza's paintings depicting women in Alwar, Rajasthan; at the Tikri border in Delhi-Haryana; Virmati with a painting of Pengawan; and the artist. (GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEINRUECKE, KHUSHIRAM, PABLO BARTHOLOMEW)

SHAPED BY HER ENCOUNTERS

Artist Aban Raza, who will receive the Asia Arts Future (India) Award at the India Art Fair, has been documenting events — protests and communal attacks — as they have been unfolding in the country

Ela Das

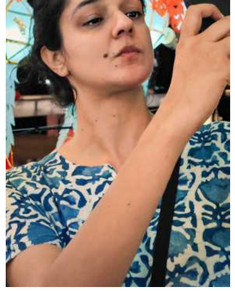
Sangeeta, a farmer, a pink *dupatta* draped over her head and shoulders, holds up a painting to the camera. The canvas, painted in 2021, depicts the massive farmers' agitation at the Tikri border, where a trolley-full of women protesters are on their way to occupy and block one side of the highway. Their fists are raised in jubilant rebellion; one of them waves the national flag. You can almost hear their chants. "There was a great sense of elation and also a reflection of the citizens' desire to demand their rights," says artist Aban Raza who was at the scene and captured the moment with her oils. "It was incredibly inspiring to see the many groups of women organising themselves to participate in the protests. They had come up with a rotational system where a few women arrived from their village to Delhi's border, stayed for a couple of days, and then went back, only to be replaced by a new group of women," Raza says.

An award-winning contemporary artist based in New Delhi, Raza's work confronts the diverse ways in which Indian citizens register their presence and their protest in the public sphere, whether Shaheen Bagh – the site of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill protests – or the 2020-2021 Indian farmers' protest along the Delhi border. "It is a constant struggle, because there are a lot of ethical questions one keeps debating. Who am I to tell someone else's story, especially from a place of privilege? Such questions could make one feel hollow, but you're reassured each time you try to do something," she says. However, reading relentlessly about how divided this country is or how the economic rift keeps growing, Raza feels she is going down a rabbit hole at times. "It can be terribly disheartening," she says. "When they attacked Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University, I didn't really know what they were doing while I was standing amidst it. But when people's lives are deteriorating, and you see a beautiful country slipping away, you can't look the other way."

Raza's work goes beyond the churn of politics and touches upon the mundane, the everyday lives of forgotten people: farmers harvesting crops, women sleeping in comfortable proximity on a train journey, toiling construction workers at Delhi's Rajpath.

On fridges at home

There is tremendous awareness and almost a sense of burden on her shoulders when she acknowledges gaining money off these circumstances through her art. "If I'm making money from a painting of a protest, the onus is on me to engage and give back to that particular cause. It's also confusing because once a movement has died, one may not always know exactly whom to reallocate funds to," she points out. However, an exhibition titled *There is Something Tremendous About the Blue Sky* in 2022 at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai – covering the farmers' protest, where she stood in solidarity with them while documenting their stories daily – echoed through an audience beyond the cocooned art world. Images of her works began circulating across newspapers and among people in Punjab, even farmers; and an activist made smaller postcards of her paintings that found their way to people's fridges in the remotest homes.



When they attacked Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University, I didn't really know what they were doing while I was standing amidst it. But when people's lives are deteriorating, and you see a beautiful country slipping away, you can't look the other way

ABAN RAZA

As we hear slogans from the streets revering the newly minted Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, we discuss how her career as an artist, which began in 2014, largely covers the unravelling of democracy over the past decade. "It's a trajectory that follows a disgraceful series of politics," she says looking back at events that echo through her work, such as the 2015 Dadri incident where a mob attacked the home of 52-year-old Mohammed Akhlaq, killing him, because he was suspected to have slaughtered a cow; or when women are told not to wear jeans; or when student activist Umar Khalid was taken into custody amidst the Jawaharlal Nehru University sedition row.

Painting memories

In 2017, 25 years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Raza visited the site. "They didn't allow phones inside, and we had to place them in lockers a kilometre away. The area was completely caged in. After passing the Ram Lalla idol, we were offered *prasad*. The site was barren except for this idol. I would like to paint the land from my memory of it," she says. This, along with a series of ongoing paintings bearing the memory of original sites and their historic names against it, will "add to the discourse on how you can't change India's past". Other places depicted in her works include Allahabad (now Prayagraj) or Aurangzeb Road in New Delhi (renamed Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Road).

This month at the India Art Fair in New Delhi, Raza will receive the Asia Arts Future (India) Award at the annual Asia Arts Game Changer Awards India. The Future (South Asia) category recognises artistic practices from the subcontinent that articulate lived experiences of a region and its cultural landscape. "There's no application for this award, and it's purely my work that gets recognised by the industry, which pushes me to keep doing what I do. The journey of an artist is a lonely one, with very isolating experiences," she sighs. Does her journey ever make her fearful or want to give up? "I won't stop speaking or fighting. I may distance myself from issues if the air gets dangerous; but I will keep documenting events as they unfold."

The writer and creative consultant is based in Mumbai.

BINGE WATCH

Animating the Oscars

Distinct styles, themes and creators make up this year's Best Animated Picture nominees at the 2024 Academy Awards

The award for Best Animated Feature only began at the Oscars in 2001, but since then it has quickly become one of the most respected and followed categories, even as the Oscars' overall cultural cachet continues to deplete steadily. This year, too, the five nominees make up a really strong field, featuring arguably the world's most beloved maker of animated films alongside a host of exciting new names working across a range of styles. Any one of these films would make for a worthy winner, it has to be said.

Peter Sohn's *Elemental* is Pixar doing what it does best – creating heartwarming stories featuring unconventional protagonists. *Elemental* is set in a world peopled by anthropomorphic natural elements, like the two central characters Ember Lumen (Leah Lewis) and Wade Ripple (Mamoudou Athie). As their names suggest, Ember is a fire element while Wade is a water element, so their developing feelings for each other is complicated, to say the least. Truth be told, *Elemental* has the heart and soul of a really good Bollywood melodrama and therefore it knows exactly how and when to roll out the lachrymose moments – like the one where Wade makes the usually-fiery Ember cry by admitting his feelings for her.

Pixar's usual animation style, featuring clean lines and minimalist facial features, is adapted slightly for this film. The lines are softer, more fluid, and the animators impressively incorporate the laws of physics (specifically, those governing how water and fire move). An ideal watch for a lazy Sunday, just keep the hankies within arm's reach.

Postmodern humour

Nick Bruno and Troy Quane's *Nimona* is adapted from ND Stevenson's superb 2015 graphic novel of the same name. When I reviewed the book, I was especially impressed by the story's allusive, postmodern humour and its adept subversion of 'science vs. magic' tropes. The film takes these strengths to the next level, imbuing its shapeshifting protagonist with a layer of additional pathos.

The story, a send-up of superhero tales, follows a supervillain called Ballister Boldheart, and his sidekick, the titular Nimona, a cheerful and rotund teenager who is actually a super-powerful shapeshifter. The animation style is in line with Stevenson's deceptively simple-looking illustrations, and the end product is one of the best YA (young adult) stories of the decade.

2018's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* was one of those rare animated films that became not just box office royalty but also one of the most critically-acclaimed films of the last few years. It was always going to be an uphill task to follow that up, but somehow last year's *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* did exactly that. In this story, Miles Morales (Shameik Moore), who has just made his peace with the existence of the multiverse (and the presence of multiple Spider-people), must fight a deadly, dimension-hopping new supervillain called The Spot (Jason Schwartzman).

Much of the earlier film's visual trickery is improved upon here, with spectacular results: the Spot, for instance, looks like a rough pencil sketch to begin with but as he starts adding to his strength, his 'outline' becomes clearer to the audience as well. My only complaint with the film is that it ends on a whopper of a cliffhanger, like so many franchise films do these days. It remains to be seen whether the Academy voters choose to overlook this.

Pablo Berger's *Robot Dreams* is perhaps the most poignant, bittersweet nominee this year, one which takes its billing as 'tragicomedy' very seriously indeed. Based on the eponymous Sara Varon comic strip, this is the story of a dog (named, simply, Dog) who out of loneliness builds a robot friend for himself. And if you're thinking that such a story must be filled with schmaltzy, overly sentimental dialogue, think again. *Robot Dreams*' big artistic conceit is that it has no spoken lines of dialogue at all (although written/ printed text does appear sometimes).

The illustration/ animation style is quite conventional: big, stark, well-defined lines *a la* children's comic-books, which works perfectly because these characters are archetypes, not mavericks. Think 90s' *Archie's* comics, but even goofier. A wonderfully mature take on friendship, loneliness and the inevitable changes that happen to everybody as they age.

Return of the master

Which brings us, at last, to *The Boy and the Heron* by grandmaster Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli. We were told after his last film, *The Wind Rises* (2013), that the maestro had retired, and so this new film feels all the more like a surprise gift. The story follows a young boy named Mahito during the Pacific War. Mahito's mother has recently died in a hospital fire and his father has married the dead woman's sister. Lonely, vulnerable and confused, Mahito discovers an abandoned tower in his town – a tower that comes with a miraculous talking grey heron. As the heron draws Mahito further and further into a magical, oceanic dreamworld, the young boy must figure out this realm's secrets – and make his peace with his own repressed emotions.

Miyazaki has always had a genius for combining fantastic, otherworldly visuals with very grounded and realistic emotional dilemmas. *The Boy and the Heron* is no different, and is among his finest works yet. His signature 2D animation style – with hand-painted frames that use watercolours and acrylic paint – never looked as gorgeous as it does here.

I think both *Robot Dreams* and *The Boy and the Heron* are strong favourites thanks to their overall quality. Quite simply, these are films that are far too good in far too many departments. But as I mentioned earlier, the rest of the field is pretty strong as well and I think, say, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* winning would be no slight on any of its fellow nominees either.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

MODERN TIMES

Wedding shenanigans Actor Aamir Khan greets ex-wife Kiran Rao at his daughter Ira's wedding; and (below) a family portrait. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

HOW TO BE A FAMILY: VERSION 2.0

Ira Khan's wedding was a refreshingly new take on contemporary relationships

Ok, I'll just come out and say it. My secret pleasure is celebrity weddings. What better way to gawk at the clothes and jewellery and all the shenanigans of the rich and the shiny than at their weddings. Especially considering how easy it is now that everyone has a phone camera and celebrities themselves are spending all their time leaking Instagram videos of their private event. This has been a good season for celebrity wedding enthusiasts, and despite the wide array of choices, for me, it has not been difficult to choose a favourite. It was that of Ira, Aamir Khan's daughter's wedding, which was a glorious demonstration of a functioning blended family.

Here's a primer on Khan's life and the relevant characters for those not in the know. Khan was married in '80s to Reena and they have two kids, Junaid and Ira. Khan and Reena divorced in 2002 and in 2005, he married an assistant director, Kiran Rao. They have a teenage son, Azad. In 2021, Khan and Kiran too divorced, but said they will remain loving co-parents. Last month was Ira's wedding to Nupur Shikhare, her fitness trainer, a man so consumed by his profession that he literally ran 8 km to the wedding altar and was married while attired in a vest and a pair of shorts. It was all rather cute, if you ask me, cocking a snook at the perfectly outfitted little *maharajahs* and *maharanis*, which is the staple look at other celebrity events. As is usual, many videos of the event emerged. In one, Reena and Kiran are taking gifts to the groom's home. They are seen chatting with each other, one presumably makes a joke, the other laughs. It is clear they share an easy relationship with each other. In another video, Kiran is standing next to the groom's mother. Khan is chatting with her about something and in response to something she says, he pulls her in for a warm peck on her cheek. Unless they are both excellent actors who are constantly aware of the presence of cameras, it seems to be a simple moment between two ex-es who are now friends. It's a refreshingly new take on modern relationships.

Not a zoo exhibit

Being friends with the ex is challenging, but rewarding. As is being part of a blended family. When my husband and I decided we were better off living separately, all our efforts went into minimising the disruptions in our child's world. He stayed close by, dropped in every evening until bedtime, stayed over when I was travelling. We still go on holidays together. I visit his mother when I am in her town. None of this is easy, the relationship hinges on a tenuous balance and one wrong word or decision can easily bring back the old anger and re-open closed wounds. But when it works, it's magical. Now, 10 years later, even though our child is grown up and there are fewer reasons to be together, what we are left with is the friendship that first brought us together. When people see us together or hear our story they are astonished.

In India, where tradition is paramount and centuries of wisdom suggests that two people stay bound in a marriage no matter how unsatisfying, there is no template on how to live if you move out of this track. You are pretty much abandoned to figure your own way out. The only examples of post-separation life suggest that you remain at loggerheads with your former partner and spend the rest of your lives fighting them inside and outside courtrooms. A cordial break-up, where you are not interested in flinging mud at each other, is so far beyond people's imagination that it is impossible to explain your situation and not be looked at like you are an exhibit in a zoo.

Real people

Add to this the possibility that one or both of the partners meets someone new and embarks on a subsequent relationship, it's enough to make the neighbourhood WhatsApp uncle's head explode in outrage and confusion. He is aghast at watching Kiran sing a goofy song at her former husband's daughter's wedding, he needs a flowchart to just work the relationships out. These are connections that don't lend themselves to language, even in India where every possible relative has a specific word. And yet, as Ira Khan's wedding videos showed, these are real people. And even though society expects that they be miserable and angry because they haven't shown the 'institution of marriage' the respect it supposedly deserves, they have managed to build a happy life.

Khan's celebrity endorsement of this lifestyle is critical, it shows a path out of marriage that is not bitter and helps people understand, even if not appreciate, that an alternate reality is possible.

Veena Venugopal *is the author of* Independence Day: A People's History.

GOREN BRIDGE

The reward

East-West vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

South in today's deal was American expert Josh Donn. Donn played this deal beautifully, only to find out that any bridge player could have made the contract by inferior play. Virtue had to be its own reward for Donn, but we can admire his play.

West had been uncomfortable in the auction, acting like he wanted to bid something over three no trump. East played a discouraging spade at trick one and Donn decided that West likely had A-Q-10-x-x of spades. There was a certain diamond loser, and if that trick had to be lost to East, a spade return by East would have defeated the contract. Donn ducked the opening lead and let the queen win. West shifted to the queen of clubs and now clubs became the suit to worry about. Should East win the diamond, this time a club return would defeat the contract. Donn had to build one more trick before going after his five diamond tricks, so he won the king of clubs in dummy and led a spade to his king!

West won with the ace and cleared the spades, but the contract was now safe provided that the diamond trick could be lost to East. Ace and another diamond accomplished just that and Donn claimed his contract. West's singleton king of diamonds was most annoying. Any declarer could have made this contract by winning the opening spade lead and leading a diamond, letting West hold the king when he played it. Oh well. Very nicely played!

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

WEST
♠ A Q 10 8 5
♡ 5 3
◇ K
♣ Q J 7 6 5

EAST
♠ 9 7
♡ K Q 10 8 6 4
◇ Q 10
♣ 8 4 2

SOUTH
♠ K J 2
♡ A J 9
◇ 9 7 5 2
♣ A 10 9

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
2◇	Pass	3NT	All pass

Opening lead: Queen of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

'You are a dancing queen'

Berty Ashley

1 Born on this day in 1938, Birju Maharaj was an exponent of the Lucknow *gharana* of a certain dance. He was awarded the Padma Vibhushan for his contribution to the dance form, which is attributed to the travelling storytellers of North India. What dance is this, whose name comes from the Sanskrit word for 'story'?

2 This dance form originated from a village in Andhra Pradesh, with which it shares its name. It developed as a religious art form that was taken by travelling artists from temple to temple. The earliest descriptions of it can be found in the *Natya Shastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts. What is the name of this dance, and the eponymous village from which it originates?

3 Predominantly performed by women, this dance originated in the temples of a State – from which it derives its name – on the eastern coast of India. The performance usually tells a story from Hindu mythology using motifs called *bhangas*. What dance form is this, which the world famously saw in the Michael Jackson music video *Black or White*?

4 This traditional dance form is known for its colourful make-up, bright costumes and exaggerated facial expressions. Almost always performed by men, it is native to Kerala. What dance is this, which also incorporates movements from the South Indian martial art 'Kalaripayattu'?

5 This dance originates from Gujarat, and is traditionally performed around a lamp for the goddess Durga. Its name comes from the Sanskrit word for 'womb', and the dance itself is a representation of the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth around the one unmoving symbol of god, i.e., the lamp. What dance is this, which one usually sees during *Navaratri*?

6 Developed by the Meitei civilisation, this dance is centred on Radha-Krishna. Characterised by gentle eyes and soft body movements, its performance is mainly a spiritual experience. What dance form is this, named after an ancient kingdom that became a full-fledged state in 1972?

7 This classical dance traditionally comprises a delicate solo performance by women. It was banned briefly during the British Raj, but the ban was later repealed. The dance is named after the female *avatar* of Vishnu, and dancers train rigorously to perfect the delicate expressions required to perform it. What is this dance that originated in Kerala?

8 The people of Tulu Nadu – a region that consists of districts of Karnataka and Kerala – have many unique traditions, one of which is Nagaradhane. The dance is said to have originated as a mark of respect to an entity that kept paddy fields free from rodents in this predominantly agricultural area. Which entity does this dance centre around?

9 This is a traditional folk dance of Punjab characterised by vigorous kicks, leaps and thrusting arm and shoulder movements. Usually accompanied by the beat of a *dhol*, this energetic dance form originated from communal celebrations of farmers. What dance is this, that is now a favourite among DJs and school programmes?

10 One of the earliest depictions of this dance form can be found in the characteristic postures sculpted on temple walls in South India. Initially only performed within temples, the dance has now crossed over to non-religious locations, and modern productions can be seen at most school functions. What is this ancient dance form, which gets its name from the words for 'emotion', 'melody', 'rhythm' and 'dance'?

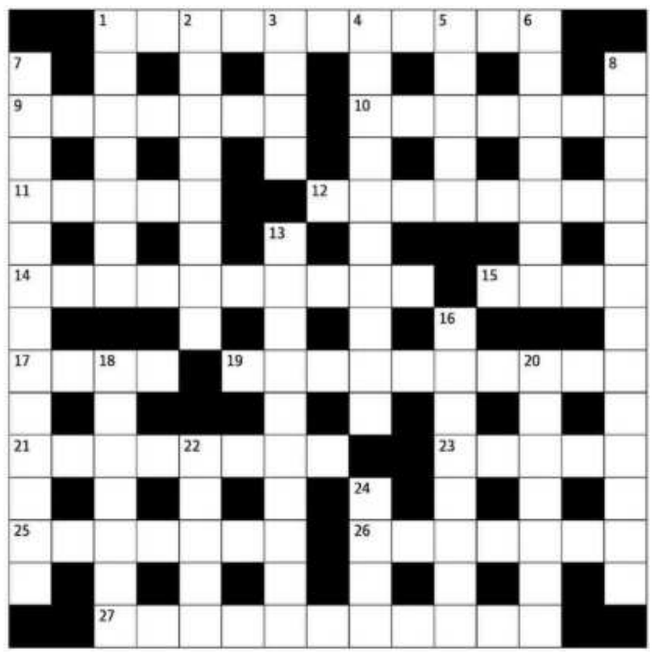
A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley.

Courting tradition This dance form incorporates movements from the martial art 'Kalaripayattu'. (GETTY IMAGES)

Answers

1. Kathak
2. Kuchipudi
3. Odissi
4. Kathakali
5. Garba
6. Manipuri
7. Mohiniyattam
8. The cobra
9. Bhangra
10. Bharatanatyam

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3292



Across

1 Wild excitations and thrills (11)
9 Slice of Kashmiri cottage cheese (7)
10 After November, say, one's eaten more crackers (7)
11 Nick wanting direction, disheartened, embracing Conservatives' leader (5)
12 Make music, sad and quiet (4,4)
14 Record me in retreat: 'One denies responsibility' (10)
15 It's a flipping sparkling wine (4)
17 Compulsion to cleanse failing to start (4)
19 In advance, rustling up salad of rock pigeon (10)
21 Poignant, timeless article describing female relative (8)
23 King and queen on a Swedish coin (5)
25 Opera's musicians including Dutch thinker (7)
26 Boiling fruit for exciting social engagement (3,4)
27 Fiancé and messy bo'sun bathed (7-2-2)

Down

1 Prompts marksmen to find targets here, did you say? (7)
2 Vietnamese festival that starts year offspring mostly accepted in irritable fashion (8)
3 Medical procedure that follows whiskey? (1-3)
4 Secret kind of trick (10)
5 Sound of disapproval twice at the outset, Everyman's one to be taught a lesson (5)
6 Old rakes initially wearing smart clothes: they're after wives (7)
7 Female relative, imperious, departs; merriment stifled at first (13)
8 Source of refreshment befuddled king and writer (8,5)
13 In a Nissan, the writer's on island somewhere in S. Pacific (10)
16 Time for quiet: pet dog becomes talking animal (8)
18 Grand old university buffet offering Hungarian stew (7)
20 Pick out one very good behind (7)
22 Newspaper X (5)
24 Country. Habitable ...? African desert, primarily! (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3291

Shocking reality

While reality shows are seen as entertainment, there is a growing concern about their impact on the youth

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ILLUSTRATION : SREEJITH R.KUMAR

Gone are the days of wholesome family viewing. Indian television screens are ablaze with a new breed of "entertainment": reality shows. But are these shows truly reflecting reality, or are they instead warping the minds of youth, cultivating intolerance, and breeding hate?

The answer, unfortunately, is tilted towards the latter. These shows often thrive on manufactured drama, pitting contestants against each other in a cut-throat struggle for fame and fortune. Backstabbing, manipulation, and even physical aggression become accepted forms of "entertainment", normalising toxic behaviour for impressionable young viewers. The lines between competition and outright cruelty blur, leading to a decrease in tolerance for differing opinions and perspectives.

In recent years, Indian reality shows have become a cultural phenomenon, captivating audiences with their drama, emotion, and fierce competition. While these shows have undoubtedly entertained millions, there is a growing concern about their impact on the youth, as they are contributing to a decrease in tolerance levels, the rise of hate toxicity, and the creation of divisive fan wars on social media platforms.

The rise of social media platforms has added another layer to the toxicity. Viewers, passionate about their favourite contestants, take to X, formerly Twitter, and YouTube to express their opinions. Unfortunately, these platforms have become breeding grounds for hate, with fans using hashtags to create a virtual battleground. What was once a source of entertainment has transformed into a space where viewers engage in online skirmishes, hurling insults and threats at each other.

Fan wars, fuelled by a sense of loyalty towards their favourite stars, have escalated to a point where it has become a cause for concern. The intensity of these battles often reaches disturbing levels, with fans not only attacking each other but also targeting the contestants and judges of the reality shows. This not only creates a toxic online atmosphere but also spills over into real life, affecting relationships and social dynamics.

The consequences are real and chilling. Studies have shown a correlation between reality show viewership and increased aggression, decreased empathy, and a rising tide of intolerance. Young minds bombarded with negativity and hate disguised as entertainment, struggle to cope. Mental instability, anxiety, and depression become alarmingly common.

Low tolerance

One of the most alarming consequences of the surge in reality show popularity is the apparent decline in tolerance among the youth. These shows often thrive on conflict, sensationalism, and dramatic confrontations, fostering an environment where participants are encouraged to engage in heated arguments and rivalries. The constant exposure to such confrontations can desensitise viewers, normalising aggressive behaviour and diminishing their capacity for patience and understanding in real-life situations.

As we witness the dark side of the impact of Indian reality shows on the youth, it becomes imperative for producers, broadcasters, and regulators to take responsibility. Striking a balance between entertainment and responsible content creation is crucial to ensuring that the youth is not adversely affected. Behind the scenes, the stars of these reality shows bask in the limelight, enjoying the attention and adulation from their dedicated fan base. However, the unintended consequence of this fame is the toll it takes on the mental health of both participants and viewers. Constant exposure to negativity, criticism, and online hate can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and maintain a flawless public image adds to the burden, leaving individuals grappling with mental instability.

Remember, reality shows are not an accurate reflection of the world we live in. They are carefully crafted narratives designed to exploit our emotions and generate revenue.

The real world is messy and complex, full of diverse perspectives and genuine human connection. It's time for our youth to remove the toxic screens and rediscover the beauty and richness of genuine human interaction. Let's reclaim the narrative, reject the hate, and build a future where tolerance and empathy reign supreme.

Bring back bell-bottoms

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Alas, gone perhaps for good are those halcyon days in the 1970s and 1980s when bell-bottom trousers were the rage among men and women, young and old alike. Every one keen to keep up with the Joneses, sartorially, flaunted these trousers with flared and floppy bottoms with panache – a welcome change from the staid and tight-fitting "drainpipes" then in vogue.

Bell-bottoms (or 'bells' as these were often termed) were a hugely popular fashion statement – with Amitabh Bachchan and Zeenat Aman, then upcoming stars, sporting them flamboyantly. To say that the garment captivated us wouldn't be an exaggeration. We youngsters strode around with a regal air, our bell-bottoms reassuringly and gracefully flapping around our ankles – and sometimes sweeping the floor to signify we were ultra-fashionable! None liked to be seen wearing anything else.

People then, as now, were quite fashion-conscious, often competitively so, reminding one of Oscar Wilde's tongue-in-cheek jibe: "Fashion is what one wears oneself; what is unfashionable is what other people wear!"

True, bell-bottoms did require more cloth than conventional trousers, but none begrudged the extra cost as such was their wide-ranging appeal. In comparison, today's unisex, skin-tight trousers that often end well above the ankles (and sometimes just below the knees) give an old fogey like me the impression that the wearer is either skimping on costs or the cloth shrank unexpectedly!

The durability of a sartorial fashion is perhaps an indicator of its popularity. By this criterion alone, bell-bottoms fashionably flapped their way through the 1970s and 1980s, popularised by no less iconic a group than the Beatles. Indeed, many ardent adherents (yours truly included) proudly sported these trousers well into the 1990s even after their popularity had waned. As a memento of those heady days, I still have a pair mothballed away in a trunk.

Eggs and their yokes

They make for yummy breakfasts, but eggs still don't get their due!

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At the breakfast table, while savouring my favoured toast and cheese omelette, I found myself mulling over the vexed question of what came first. Did the shell have precedence over the feather, in a manner of speaking. Food can, often, be a precursor to sublime thoughts. If a soldier can bravely march on his stomach across vast geographies from Macedonia to Tigris and Euphrates, and Isaac Newton can, in a sense, "egg" time to boil over, food clearly assumes precedence over all else.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Returning to the ubiquitous egg, without which many breakfasts the world over would be incomplete despite the dietician's proscription, its role is unjustly that of *Trishanku*. It clearly seems unfair to deny its rightful place to something that, with time and some degree of indulgence, would not only have plenty to crow about but would also rule the roost, literally speaking. One should spare a thought for the oval white "tempter" with infinite powers of metamorphosis on its own without having to break out of its shell into its final form. It has a family tree that branches off into, *inter alia*, the unassuming boiled egg, the irresistible omelette or scrambled versions, the unputdown-able egg devil, the delectable French toast, or the poached form with sunny side up or down variants.

Clearly, in a world where even the proverbial devil gets its due, this flexible "angel" that, in its myriad forms, caters to taste buds at the breakfast table should justifiably be given its pride of place and plate. While the vegetarian keeps off egg as forbidden non-vegetarian fare, the non-vegetarian, ironically, does the same during lunch or dinner when chicken, mutton or fish distractions are available. It's a case of devaluation not in years, months or weeks, but in those few hours between breakfast and lunch. Paradoxically, for non-vegetarians, the most preferred food at breakfast becomes, often, the most abjured item at lunch or dinner. Such fickleness provides food for thought on the pronounced discriminatory approach that drives an invisible but palpable wedge between egg and chicken. As an intermediary between diehard vegetarians and no-holds-barred non-vegetarians is the third category of gourmands masquerading as 'eggitarians'. They confine themselves within the boundaries of vegetarian fare and "eggy" stuff while scrupulously refraining from infiltrating to non-vegetarian options.

On the simmer

Food and women are flung into fires to become unidentifiable masses

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I just finished watching the movie *Darlings*. The protagonist is cooking breakfast for her husband, who had beaten her black and blue the previous night. She bangs the utensils that seem to whimper and sniffle at the wife-beating regimen they sit through every day. The remorseless husband observes monstrously, trying to win over his ragged doll while she snaps and cooks, face glued to the fire. In numerous kitchens, food has symbolised the condition of human desires, sorrows, and predicaments.

I was reminded of Githa Hariharan's short story *Gajar Halwa*, where a young woman migrant domestic labourer, Perumayee, slogs in a Delhi kitchen endlessly grating and peeling red carrots to make the traditional Indian sweet prepared with much ado to symbolise love and familial bondings. Sadly, for Perumayee and other women tied up in loveless domesticity, the heaps of grated carrots and mounds of peels become metaphors for unending misery and sorrow. The process of carrot halwa preparation is

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transformed into a narrative on poverty, dejection, powerlessness, greed, resistance, and much more. The luscious and steaming red halwa simmering with excitement to be savoured and gutted is a vivid reminder of the struggle in Perumayee's home for a bite of food.

I happened to study Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*, a play on child incest and its scarred victims. A mother-daughter duo, Shanta and Mala, have been sexually abused since childhood by none other than Shanta's brother. Food symbolism touches the play, and we find Mala accusing her mother of bribing her with food whenever she tried to confide in as a helpless seven-year-old sexual abuse victim.

In the gendered world, food and women are flung into fires till they simmer, boil, and become unidentifiable masses. Food is a traveller, a vagabond searching for doorbells and doorknobs of homes where kitchens are armed with the latest gadgets that can put any five-star kitchen to shame. Still, the most iconic corner is the dustbin with half-jammed food boxes and delivery tapes.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The animation industry in India has reached its apex thanks to young creators. ('India's expanding animation slate'; Jan. 28) Lack of financial assistance and bias against animated movies poses a barrier to its growth. Amazing talent should be an asset, and the government should use the medium for effective communication.
Viveka Vardhan Naidu Bhyripudi

The characters, objects, and world of animation need to appeal to viewers. This includes having an easy-to-read design, good drawing, and memorable personalities. There is no formula to get this right, but it starts with strong character development. Too much realism can ruin the animation.
K.M.K. Murthy

Weight of history

The conversation with Booker-winning author Damon Galgut gives a glimpse into his personality, both as a humble human and a conscientious novelist. ('Curse of the South African writer'; Jan. 28) His writings address racial tension, human greed and folly. No wonder Galgut was attracted by India's 'inclusiveness and tolerance', but saddened by their erosion over time.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Children's books

Given the climate crisis, it is high time youngsters are enlightened about the significance of preserving nature. ('Cinderella fights climate change'; Jan. 28) Every baby step towards ecological sustainability merits acknowledgement. Humour and fiction together may help give youngsters the push to protect nature.
Chitra Joseph

There's no better way to keep the world vigilant about climate change than to blend it into works of fiction. Fairytales and pop culture especially seem to be working wonders in raising the climate change topic subtly with younger audiences.
Pranati R. Narain

Guilty questions

Where are you, Mr. Sampath? We did not find you at The Hindu Lit Fest 2024 in Chennai. ('Where are you?'; Jan. 28) Your conspicuous absence was baffling. We really missed your biting satire. Tell us where you are.
K. Pradeep

Pioneering women

A big round of applause to Tanuja Chandra for her pioneering OTT series *Wedding.con*. ('Tanuja Chandra: the sisterhood of stories'; Jan. 28) Our prejudiced society has made marriage a precondition to survive. The incompatibility between couples is the root cause for ever-increasing divorce cases. Hope the series emboldens women to be particular when choosing their other half.
M.B. Zahir Abbas

Spotlight on fabric

The artwork at the exhibition *Entwined* depicts the creativity of threads, which connects textile skills and humanity. ('Textile, an expressive medium'; Jan. 28) How textile imports during the British Raj threatened the local cottage industry of khadi could not have been more eloquently expressed than in Smriti Dixit's work.
N. Rama Rao

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Minimalism as a way of life
Modify lifestyle, change mindset, cut down on unwanted possessions and comforts
T.N. Venugopalan

Why this difference?
The predominant societal mindset dictates that women should prioritise traditional roles over careers
H. Kalpana Rao

No country for old people
When boarding flights or buses, there is no help coming
Lakshmi R. Srinivas

The best ride
Even in the 1990s, a bicycle used to be a trusted steed
Bhanu Prakash

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Voice of innovation
Britain's King Charles III is accompanied by the president of Chanel and le 19M, Bruno Pavlovsky, (second from left) and Leena Nair, during his visit to Paris last September; (below) Leena Nair.
(GETTY IMAGES AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Growing up, Nair was constantly told 'girls can't do this'. "After a point, I had to stop listening. I remember my mother saying, 'Oh, my god, you're so ambitious. Who's going to marry you?' This is such a problem."

'SO TALENTED, SHOULD HAVE BEEN A BOY'

As the first Indian and first non-white CEO of Chanel, Leena Nair has challenged biases all her life. Now, she's banking on her 30 years of HR experience to further the fashion house's influence

Gayatri Rangachari Shah

On a crisp November day in Oxfordshire, Leena Nair, the statuesque 54-year-old CEO of the uber luxury fashion brand Chanel, sat inconspicuously in the second row of BoF Voices, a prestigious annual conference organised by *The Business of Fashion*, the fashion-focused digital media company. Wearing a gold-buttoned red Chanel jacket, with leather pants and short black boots, Nair was speaking at the conference, her first such public engagement after assuming the top job at Chanel, the French luxury fashion house, in January 2022. A 30-year veteran of Unilever, the Kolhapur, Maharashtra, native has been keeping a low profile since her appointment, a milestone moment not just for her, but for the fashion industry as well.

Indian-origin CEOs have broken glass ceilings in tech, finance, and consumer goods, but the global luxury fashion sector is stubbornly white and male. Nair is the first Indian, first non-white and only the second woman to assume the CEO role in Chanel's 114-year history. It is now the only major fashion company with both a female CEO and a female creative director (Virginie Viard).

"Gobsmacked," is how Nair described her initial reaction when she got the call from Chanel. "I hadn't seen it coming," she told Imran Amed, BoF's founder, who interviewed her at the conference. "To be honest, I was in tears because I loved Unilever so much. I was like, 'No, I'm not going to leave Unilever.' And, you know, my husband said, 'Honey, you're not getting a divorce. You're just leaving and joining another company.'"

Chanel, which is owned by the Wertheimer family, is one of the last privately-held luxury fashion companies, with annual revenues of more than $17 billion, from the sale of clothing, leather goods, beauty, skincare, perfumes and cosmetics, jewellery, watches and eyewear, sold across its 310 boutiques (the brand's iconic Maxi 2.55 handbag, for instance, retails for $11,500 while a classic tweed jacket starts at $6,000). Its charitable outlay is about $100 million annually. In a freewheeling and candid chat with Amed, Nair said she decided to take the plunge to join Chanel because of fashion's enormous impact and influence, and because of its philanthropic work with women and girls globally. She received 7,000 emails and letters from women around the world when her Chanel job was announced.

Leena Nair's appointment as Global CEO of Chanel was a watershed moment in fashion. Whereas most luxury megabrands hunt for executives from within the industry, Chanel made the decision to hire someone with no fashion industry experience — someone who came through the HR function and someone who is a woman and South Asian. All of these make Leena a unique leader. She is also very inspiring as she is an authentic and clear communicator who has been busy listening, learning and crafting a vision and strategy for Chanel. I see this as a bid to modernise the corporate culture of Chanel, which has historically been a very discreet — some might even say secretive — organisation. So much of the work that Chanel does remains a mystery to its customers, at a time when they expect the brands they buy from to uphold a shared sense of values.

IMRAN AMED,
Founder and CEO, *The Business of Fashion*

Meeting challenges head-on
Nair has spent the past year-and-a-half touring and visiting 100 Chanel retail outlets, factories and offices, from Panama to Pacific Palisades (in Los Angeles), interacting with people on the shop floor, taking senior executives to meet innovators at Google and Disney, and pushing Fondation Chanel, the company's charitable arm. She has spoken of supportive mentors like Indra Nooyi, and Nigel Higgins of Barclays; her deep experience in HR has made her hone in on the importance of human capital.

She has taken a cautious approach to the press, giving very few interviews. Instead, she has focused on how to bring Chanel, which has a reputation for being conservative and somewhat stodgy – it doesn't have an e-commerce presence except in beauty – into the 21st century. Nair's aim, she said at Voices, is to concentrate on innovation, by investing in 30 startups tied to academic institutions, and in pushing sustainability and philanthropy.

These days Nair finds herself hobnobbing with King Charles and Queen Camilla, French President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a world away from the industry in which she cut her teeth: mass, fast-moving consumer goods. Not one to shy away from a challenge – she describes herself as having accomplished many 'firsts'; she was educated in Kolhapur's first school for girls and hers was the first batch to graduate. She was constantly told 'girls can't do this', she said at Voices. "After a point, I had to stop listening. I remember my mother saying, 'Oh, my god, you're so ambitious. Who's going to marry you?' This is such a problem. And, you know, the sort of comments I would get is 'You're so talented, you should have been a boy'."

She did, in fact, get married, through an arranged marriage, to Kumar Nair, a financial services entrepreneur. The couple has two sons and lives in Wimbledon. During the pandemic, Nair lost her mother to COVID-19; her father, who has dementia, lives with the couple.

'I have the principles of running a business'
Despite the barbs growing up, Nair studied electronics and telecommunications engineering at Walchand College of Engineering in Sangli, Maharashtra, and received an MBA from XLRI, Jamshedpur, where she earned a gold medal. She joined Hindustan Unilever as an intern, and in 1992, as a management trainee. Nair says she was often the only woman on the factory floor of HUL's industrial estates around the country. "Every morning, as the buses came in with the workers, there would be a pause at the gates of our factory so everybody could look out, peep at me and then go through because I was such an alien," she said. She was instrumental in putting in bathrooms for women on the factory floors – jokingly referred to as 'Leena's loos' – and quickly rose through the ranks.

Although trained as an engineer, Nair worked in human resources, not the sexiest division in any organisation, yet she managed to shine, using her analytical skills to approach thorny personnel issues. Under her tenure, Unilever went from 38% representation of women in managerial roles to 50%.

Anil Chopra, the former head of Lakmé, which HUL acquired in 1998, worked closely with Nair for over a decade. He recalls meeting her initially when she was a junior manager helping oversee the cosmetics company's integration into the consumer goods giant. "She was open, understanding and very frank to say 'I don't know too many things and I have to learn'," Chopra says. He also notes that Nair had an innate curiosity and was able to soak in different aspects of the business rapidly. He remembers that she was made a mentor to her own boss, who had a prickly management style.

As for being viewed as the ultimate outsider in a notoriously insular industry, Nair has a befitting reply. She told Amed: "To be honest, I know global sales, scale, size, and how to manage 150,000 people. I have the principles of running a business, the principles of bringing home the bacon, of being a leader who can engender followership that is transferable across industries." Perhaps the adept, subtle yet steely Nair is precisely what a 21st century fashion brand needs.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.