THE HINDU
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magazine

backpage
Cacao farmers turn craft chocolatiers
GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
Tribute | Dharmendra, always the director's actor
GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW
Sam Altman and the cautionary AI tale
GO TO » PAGE 3

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BETS GONE, GAME ON

With State governments backing efforts to grow gaming capitals, events such as GamingCon Bharat connecting gamers and developers, and a ban on real money gaming, it is a promising time for the sector

Andre Rodrigues

It's August, and I'm standing in the colossal halls of Gamescom in Cologne. The largest event for computer and video games, spanning over 2,30,000 sq.m., it's where the global standard for AAA (high budget, high profile games) quality is set. Ask the 3,57,000 visitors that turned up from over 120 countries this year.

It is a dynamic ecosystem: a space where communities unite in incredible expo stands (over 1,500 exhibitors in 2025), small and large merchandisers showcase their wares, and a massive business section buzzes with gaming companies striking deals. Children and adults game, browse and buy new launches – reveals include first-person shooter game *Call of Duty: Black Ops 7*, action adventure *Hollow Knight: Silksong*, and role-playing game *Black Myth: Zhong Kui* – even as cosplay artists add to the fun.

Witnessing this global benchmark gets me thinking: we in India have the talent, the industry, and now, with GamingCon Bharat, the makings of a great expo (more on this later). We have great studios with superb plans, and State governments such as Maharashtra investing in gaming. It's time the country caught the world's attention. And our success hinges on getting the next strategic steps right. One of the biggest steps has already been taken in August: the ban of real money gaming (RMG).

Tech-tonic shift from wagers to worlds

Gaming is not a new arrival in India; it dates back to the Atari era of the 70s, with its arcade games and home consoles, and the '999-in-1' cartridges that circulated through neighbourhoods like currency in the 90s. With the arrival of RMG, however, almost a decade ago, that concept of gameplay got mixed up with gambling.

This new industry was quick to camouflage itself using the skill-based adjectives often reserved for gaming. It quickly overtook the narrative, and with its deep pockets and hefty investments, choked investments to the gaming industry (investors chasing easy, short-term RMG returns ignored studios creating original intellectual property).

The problem was not co-existence; it was cannibalisation. It starved the creative sector by commanding 80% of all gaming venture capital (VC) funding and siphoning the best engineering talent. More critically, the RMG model created severe regulatory chaos and, as confirmed by reports on the ground, dragged thousands of users into debt and addiction.

Now, there is a reset. With the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025, coming into force three months ago, it has effectively pulled the plug on online casinos. "I strongly support the RMG ban," says Vishal Gondal, co-founder of nCore Games, a Bengaluru-based mobile games and interactive entertainment company. He is unequivocal about the necessity of this shift and states, "Real-money gaming was just gambling disguised as gaming. Now that it's out of the way, India finally has the clarity to build a real gaming industry, driven by game developers, storytellers, and studios, and not betting apps."

Redefining real gaming

According to the India Gaming Report 2025, the country is home to 591 million gamers, 89.92% of whom are mobile gamers, with shooters being the most popular genre. That's set to grow to about 900 million by 2029. Interestingly, the Indian gaming sphere is not just a boys club – 44% are women, driving growth not just in casual puzzles but in narrative-driven adventures and competitive shooters.

But where Indians are distinct is in how they choose their games. "The average Indian gamer is very value conscious and wouldn't spend money on a game purely out of curiosity," says Gagan Gupta, co-founder of Mumbai-based gaming agency DTR and a lifelong gamer himself. "While free-to-play games like *Valorant* have seen success in the market, games like *Grand Theft Auto 5* have seen a massive success here despite its price, purely because of the value it brings with its huge scope."

So, for an Indian studio to succeed, they need to have quality that rivals or is better than what locals are used to, while keeping the price point right. At present, many gamers feel that indie creations lack gameplay. Reddit forums have rants on Indian games being bland and boring. Subreddit discussions range from 'Why India can't make an AAA game?' to why these passionate 'Indian GTA game developers should learn from people who are actually passionate about their craft'.

While there have been successes in the form of games such as *Raji: An Indian Epic* that has found fans in the country and across borders, the numbers aren't too large. So, why haven't there been more homegrown successes? The two biggest factors are technology and the fact that the studios are divided – building their own tech stacks with fragmented approaches, when standardisation is key. It is only now that game creation tools have become more democratised, with software such as Unreal and Unity freely available.

The newly formed Indian Game Publishers & Developers Association (IGPDA), which came into being in September, is a strong step in the right direction. Established as a unifying force, it counts tech company Nazara, nCore Games, Reliance, and six others as founding members. It is structured to bring primary players – think game developers, studios, publishers, and platforms – and partners, such as tech providers, training institutions, and investors together to collaborate on game development. "The IGPDA is designed to be India's [first] collective voice in gaming," explains Ninad Chhaya, senior vice president of corporate development at Reliance Games. "A unified platform that uplifts studios, promotes and protects IP [intellectual property] creation, and showcases India's growing influence on the global gaming stage."

Untapped potential in worldbuilding

The IGPDA's immediate challenge may be to meet global quality standards, but the bigger mandate is to amplify India's rich cultural heritage. The way Europe uses medieval history, or China and Japan use their mythology, India must define its own unique IPs to transcend our borders.

Across every gaming community, there's one comment that's constant: "When will India get its own *Black Myth Wukong* [the 2024 action role-play game's story is based on the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*]?" Over the last decade, China has been getting its gaming industry off the ground, and *Black Myth Wukong* was one of the biggest global successes for two reasons. It blended core Chinese mythology with pulse-pounding gameplay mechanics. This is the Indian gamers' high bar of success, and the aim of all gaming studios today.

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4

Expanding the ecosystem

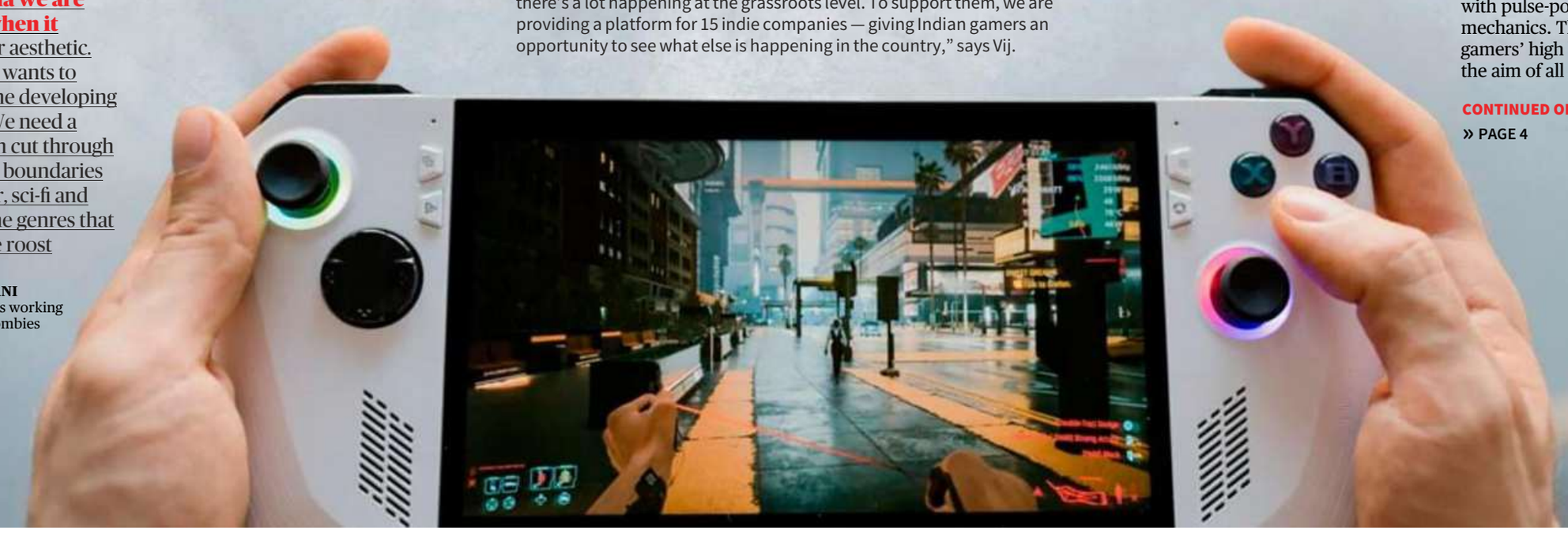
India has good gaming shows, but none has been consumer-focused festivals. So, last year, GamingCon Bharat stepped in to fill the gap. "It is more than a convention; it is the physical home for India's fast-rising gaming ecosystem. Over two days, we got close to 6,000 visitors," says Vikas Vij, managing director of IDEX Events and the founder of GamingCon Bharat. "As India's developers, creators, studios, and investors scale up, the event aims to be the stage that shows the world what the future of gaming from the country looks like." This year, they hope to double visitor numbers. There will be a strong international presence too, including French game company Ubisoft (which has developed game franchises such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry*), American PC brand CyberPower, and South Korean game publisher Krafton. "Besides big Indian companies such as Reliance Games, Nazara and the like, there's a lot happening at the grassroots level. To support them, we are providing a platform for 15 indie companies — giving Indian gamers an opportunity to see what else is happening in the country," says Vij.

I feel in India we are mediocre when it comes to our aesthetic. Also, nobody wants to spend the time developing something. We need a game that can cut through international boundaries where horror, sci-fi and fantasy are the genres that are ruling the roost

SAPNA BHAVNANI
Filmmaker, who is working on a game with zombies

Here is a country with one of the world's youngest populations, hundreds of millions of gamers, a huge tech-savvy talent pool, and a civilisational heritage that is both epic in scale and remarkably under-represented in premium games. India stands out

NICOLAS GRANATINO
Executive chairman of Tara Gaming



(Top) Cosplayers from GamingCon Bharat's first edition; and scenes from games *Fau-G*, *Raji: An Indian Epic*, *Black Myth Wukong*, and *Hades*.

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

IN CONVERSATION

LANGUAGE OF DESIRE

Author Mahesh Rao on evolving queer expressions, and his new novel set on the brink of decriminalising of homosexuality in India

Saurabh Sharma

In his latest novel, *Half Light* (Penguin Hamish Hamilton), Mahesh Rao presents two men from different social backgrounds – Pavan and Neville – united by a desire that is shunned by society as deviant, unwanted. His precise analysis of that interesting period right before a part of Section 377 was outlawed manages to capture anxieties and queer possibilities in all their complexities. Set between Darjeeling and Mumbai – the two cities that characteristically inform *Half Light*'s principal characters' lives – the novel is driven by a past that keeps gnawing at Pavan and Neville, both in forms of seminal discriminations and most importantly, a tragedy.

In this email interview, Rao shares what compelled him to write *Half Light*, and how queer expressions are changing in the age of social media. Edited excerpts:

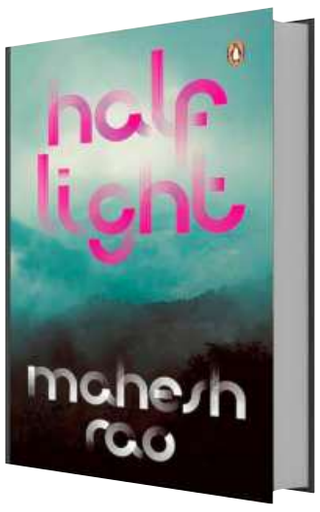
Question: *What inspired you to tell the story of two men from markedly different backgrounds, at a time before the decriminalisation of Section 377?*

Answer: There was absolutely no assurance that decriminalisation would occur when the case went before the Supreme Court for the final time. It really could have gone either way, given everything that had already occurred on that long and complex legal trajectory. So when the judgment was handed down in 2018, it seemed almost miraculous that we, as a country, had managed to rid ourselves of this law.

Naturally, it was a moment of great euphoria and relief. But society does not always follow the lead of progressive judgments. The novel tries to embed these kinds of questions into the background of its narrative. It was also always clear to me that this book would be as much about class as it is about sexuality and desire. Class informs the way in which both these men conduct their closeted lives and is also a determinant of the way power shifts between them in the course of their relationship. In all my work, I've always been interested in mapping these areas of friction, where social strata collide against each other, resulting in tensions and conflicts that can be complex and unpredictable.

Q: *In the first part of the book, more than the 'gaze' that is often talked about, several fleeting moments of doubt signal desire. Were you trying to explore these moments as self-realisation of individual wants between the two main characters?*

A: Doubt features prominently in both of the characters' stories, although it is more foregrounded in Pavan's behaviour. At the beginning of the novel, he is sexually inexperienced, anxious about the precarity of his economic situation, and generally tentative about anything new. Neville, while brazen and persistent in his sexual conquests, is also plagued by uncertainties about his place in the world. He is able to observe and aspire to a certain kind of Mumbai life, but he has no idea how to channel his efforts into anything beyond brief moments of gratification. These distinct kinds of doubt act as the impetus for the different directions of the narrative.



> There is a certain burden of expectation that the characters in the novel carry, quite a lot of their psychic space being taken up with the business of anticipating or avoiding homophobia
>
> MAHESH RAO

Q: *Pavan's colleague in Darjeeling calls him a 'homo', and we see a similar incident panning out with Neville in his workplace in Mumbai. Two different settings, yet the harassment of the queer community remains the same. Were you trying to present how hatred unites others against minorities, irrespective of the setting?*

A: Homophobia can rear up in places, both expected and unexpected. A few years ago, a queer friend who held a senior position in the Indian office of a major international media company told me about a virulently homophobic workplace incident she had experienced, with no meaningful action taken to address her complaints. I suppose I was surprised because of her seniority and because I assumed that such an organisation might adhere to more equitable standards. The incidents in the novel try to capture the serious and more subtle ways in which these prejudices unfold in different settings. I also wanted to reckon with the fact that there is a certain burden of expectation that the characters carry, quite a lot of their psychic space being taken up with the business of anticipating or avoiding homophobia.

Q: *Birds feature constantly in the novel.*

A: The birds that Pavan sees in the forest outside Darjeeling, and more generally the forest itself, are a representation of the kind of untroubled inner life that he seeks. His days are mostly about labour, so these snatched moments in the forest are leisure and escape, but they are also about his aspirations for a more tranquil life. As I wrote the novel, I strangely found the bird imagery repeating itself in my imagination, in an almost unconscious way.

Q: *Social media has affected the way queer people organise, liaise, and satiate their desire. Would you like to comment on the way language is getting uniquely queered in the age of social media?*

A: I think mainstream Anglo-American English has always been enriched by subculture vernaculars, especially from queer and Black communities. Social media makes subcultures from all over the world more visible to us, but also gives us a sense of extraordinary cultural fragmentation. In India, we are particularly adept at seizing new vocabulary and syntax, and making it not so much Indian, as fiercely local: a brilliant amalgamation of our *bhashas* and English, encompassing Internet lingo, *filmi* argot, street slang and archly subverted orthodox language, whether it's from "high culture", bureaucracy or demagoguery.

The interviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and cultural critic.

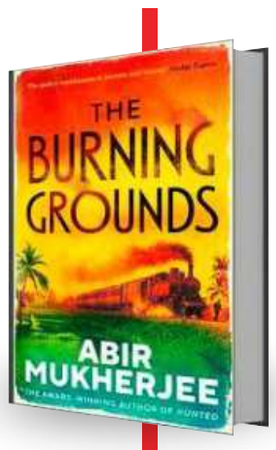
ONE FOR THE ROAD

Keep the lights on

Big-hearted stories, with a dash of the weird and unfamiliar

Swati Daftuar

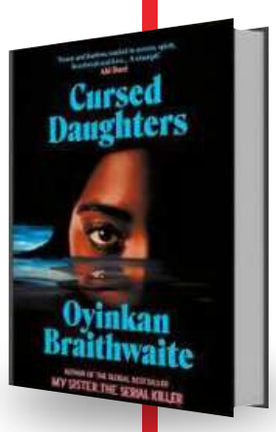
This month's stack is packed with big-hearted stories about people trying to live with what the world throws at them – a murder that shakes up a partnership, a family curse that won't let go, and love and longing that keep tugging at the edges of ordinary days. They're quieter than their premises suggest but they do a fine job of circling the human condition, with a fair bit of emotional intimacy and just enough strangeness.



The Burning Grounds | Abir Mukherjee

The author brings a steady hand to historical crime fiction, blending atmosphere with layered storytelling. In the sixth book in his mystery series set in Raj-era Calcutta, policemen Captain Sam Wyndham and Sergeant Surendranath Banerjee, investigate the murder of a well-known philanthropist. The premise is eerie but the pleasure is that old-school, big-canvas suspense Mukherjee does so well, but with the added melancholy of two men trying to work together again after drifting apart.

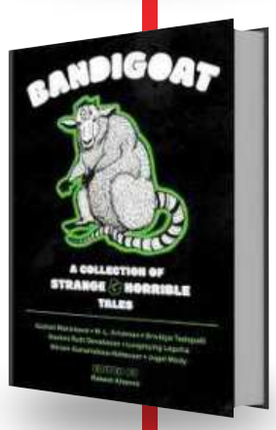
(Harvill Secker; ₹899)



Cursed Daughters | Oyinkan Braithwaite

Braithwaite, whose first novel, the knife-edged satire *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, was a critically acclaimed bestseller, has said on record that she specifically didn't want to recreate her debut. In her latest, about mothers, daughters, and the shadows families pass down without meaning to, she blends familial myths with sharp, restrained humour. The book feels like standing in a warm room with a cold draught at your neck: not horror, exactly, but the unsettling sense of being watched by your own history.

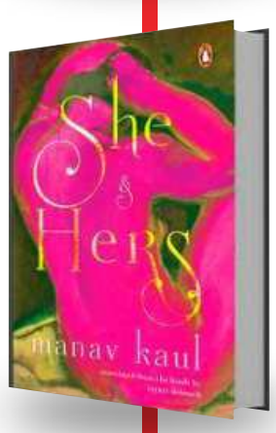
(Atlantic Books; ₹524 [ebook])



Bandigoat: A Collection of Strange & Horrible Tales | Ed. Rakesh Khanna

Another fine example of Blaft's signature quirk, this collection, put together via a crowdfunding campaign, delivers horror with a crooked grin. Seven writers, including Kuzhali Manickavel, Jugal Mody and M.L. Krishnan, take us deep inside uncanny India – from the fogged-up edges of Sikkim to a snow-choked future Delhi – with the stories always carrying that unmistakable local twang.

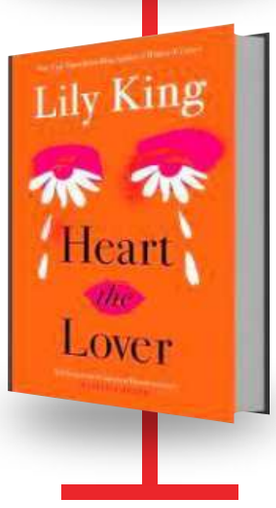
(Blaft Publications; ₹495)



She & Hers | Manav Kaul, trs Sayari Debnath

Kaul's prose feels as if he's sketching emotion in soft charcoal – always suggestive, never overstated. His work is often inflected by his theatre and acting backgrounds, and has an intimacy that's almost monologue-like at times. In this love story, Yash meets Renu and finds his ideas of gender, desire, and "normal" start to come apart in her company In his introduction, Kaul writes about how this story stayed with him for years before he could finish it, like a companion he kept returning to.

(Penguin; ₹499)



Heart the Lover | Lily King

King is very good at writing first love and how it burns itself into memory. In what may be her most autobiographical novel yet, we encounter a college love triangle in the 1980s. This book is a companion to King's 2020 novel, *Writers & Lovers*, which means long-time readers will recognise a few ghosts in the margins.

(Canongate Books; ₹1,620 [ebook])

(A monthly column on popular fiction.)

The writer is an independent journalist, editor, and literary curator.

Coming home to Urdu

Rakhshanda Jalil puts together an inspiring collection of stories by non-Muslim Urdu writers

Chittajit Mitra

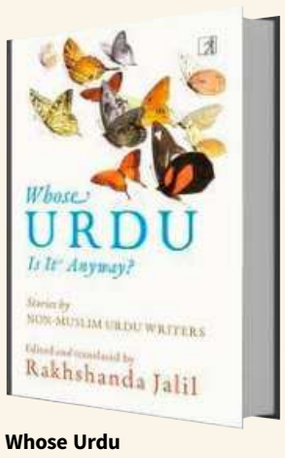
Growing up as a Bengali in Allahabad led me to learn not just Bangla from my family but also Hindustani, a language that is a mixture of both Hindi and Urdu and is the lingua franca of many people residing in the region. I can never claim that I speak just Hindi and I'm sure not many from this region can do that either.

So a few months ago, when a prominent leader from my State said that learning Urdu would lead to children becoming a *"kathmulla"* (a slur to denote a conservative Muslim), I was perplexed as to 'Whose Urdu is it anyway?' This is the title of writer and translator Rakhshanda Jalil's new translated anthology, a collection of stories by non-Muslim Urdu writers.

The book consisting of stories from 16 writers reveals the diverse issues that they dealt with.

Kanhaiyalal Kapoor's 'I Have Done My Bhartiya-karan' is a satirical take on nativism and the obsession over purity of culture. Protagonist Iqbal Chand's determination to change anything in his life which might be 'foreign' starts by changing his name to Kangaal Chand, a name suiting his economical conditions and then moves slowly towards his clothes, hairstyle, and every aspect of his life. A rude realisation awaits him as he becomes aware of the futility of this quest.

Ratan Singh's 'The Refuge' is a Partition story of a Hindu boy who lived in pre-partitioned Pakistan in a semi-joint family setup with his uncle and his family. The dysfunctional dynamics of his family leads him to find a safe space in a dark room situated at the corner of the first floor. So, when the announcements are made for people to start moving towards the newly formed borders, everyone carries their valuables and our unnamed protagonist carries the memory of his safe space, a refuge filled with darkness which he hoped could cover everyone and keep them safe.



Whose Urdu Is It Anyway?
Ed., trs Rakhshanda Jalil
Simon & Schuster India
₹499

A shared heritage

While *Whose Urdu Is It Anyway?* may be construed as just another collection of short stories, it's much more than that. A language, any language, belongs to the people who speak it and not to any religion, caste, et cetera. Urdu belongs to me, a Bangla speaker by birth, even though I might not speak it in its 'purest' form in daily life, and so does Hindi or English.

When language is made a scapegoat of communal politics, it becomes necessary to resist the prejudice and use the language in a positive and affirming way. Urdu has intermingled organically in our lives and separating it would be like separating a soul from the body. You might be successful but in the end you would have a lifeless body. Jalil, through her immaculate translation, has made these Urdu stories written by non-Muslim writers accessible for readers, enabling us to celebrate our shared heritage and also remind us all that it is indeed *our* Urdu.

The reviewer is an independent writer, journalist and translator based in Allahabad.

THE WORLD OF CHATGPT

Two cautionary tales on Artificial Intelligence told through the prism of the life and works of Sam Altman, co-founder and CEO of OpenAI

GETTY IMAGES

Aditya Mani Jha

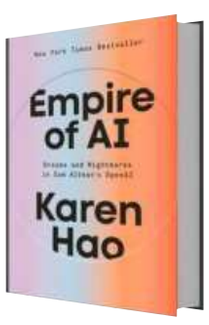
Another day, another incendiary quote by Sam Altman, co-founder and CEO of OpenAI since 2019. Recently, Altman claimed in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Welt* that AI-based systems would achieve 'superintelligence' by 2030 and within that time-frame take over 40% of existing jobs. Hyperbole is Altman's preferred mode of public discourse, so the claim by itself shouldn't come as a surprise. What is surprising is that Altman's supposedly apocalyptic timelines are becoming shorter and shorter even as whispers of an AI bubble are growing louder – the more strife OpenAI finds itself in, the taller Altman's tales become.

This is as good a time as any to delve deeper into the life and works of Altman, whose eventful stint as OpenAI CEO has been marked by controversies involving his personal and professional behaviour. A good starting point is a pair of recently released books – Keach Hagey's *The Optimist: Sam Altman, OpenAI and the Race to Invent the Future* and Karen Hao's *Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI*.

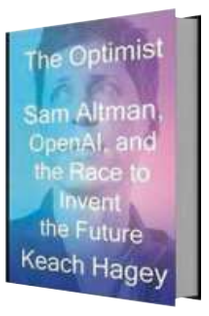
Spotlight on the personality

Hagey's book is the one with the narrower scope. It remains laser-focused on Altman the person, following him from his troubled childhood and youth till the time he founds his first startup Loopt, his time at the helm of the startup incubator YCombinator and, finally, of course, the inception of OpenAI. Some of the strongest sections in the book tackle Altman's relationships with two of the most powerful people in Silicon Valley – Palantir founder Peter Thiel and, of course, Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk. Certain passages, although well-reported and fact-checked, are written in a slightly tongue-in-cheek, almost salacious, manner, like the passage about how Altman met his future husband Oliver in Thiel's bathtub at 3 am.

Hagey writes at one point, "Optimism is the belief that human beings can be trusted to steer the future wisely. But trust is fragile currency." That line is indicative of the tone of the book, painting Altman as a bit of a tragically flawed hero, an idealist who doesn't fully understand the consequences of his choices and powers through difficult situations with sheer force of will and a talent for manipulating others.



Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI
Karen Hao
Penguin
₹2,899



The Optimist: Sam Altman, OpenAI and the Race to Invent the Future
Keach Hagey
W.W. Norton & Company
₹2,835

Flawed business model

Karen Hao's *Empire of AI* is by far the superior book, capturing the essence of Altman and also contextualising his rise amid the larger picture i.e., Silicon Valley's trajectory in the 21st century. Hao is also far more critical of Altman than Hagey. In the sections describing Altman's short-lived ouster from OpenAI and his subsequent reinstatement, Hao paints him as a Machiavellian leader, highly skilled at getting people to come around to his point of view, someone likely to lash out in a vicious way if he felt an employee or a colleague wasn't sufficiently loyal.

More important are Hao's conclusions about OpenAI's business model and the way the company is run at a day-to-day level. *Empire of AI* likens OpenAI and its peers as a sort of contemporary neo-colonial power structure. In previous centuries, big mining firms were aligned with British colonial governments around the world – resources were systematically extracted from the poor and used to further enrich the already super-wealthy. Today, OpenAI and others like Perplexity insist that they have the right to access every book, song or movie ever written, that they should get all of this free of cost because of some vague notion of collective scientific and technological progress.

Hao writes: "Over the years, I've found only one metaphor that encapsulates the nature of what these AI power players are: empires. During the long era of European colonialism, empires seized and extracted resources that were not their own and exploited the labour of the people they subjugated to mine, cultivate, and refine those resources for the empires' enrichment. They projected racist, dehumanising ideas of their own superiority and modernity to justify – and even entice the conquered into accepting – the invasion of sovereignty, the theft, and the subjugation."

As the passage above demonstrates, Hao demolishes these notions in style. These are multi-billion-dollar firms asking for handouts, and they have the audacity to claim that this would be for 'the greater good'. Historically speaking, whenever large corporate firms have asked us to ignore the rules (in this case, copyright law), it has turned out very, very badly for society. These two books are a powerful reminder that we cannot afford to make the same mistakes all over again.

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

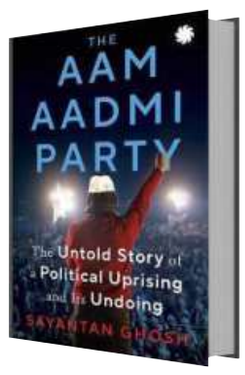
Sweeping view

A new book traces the Aam Aadmi Party's rise and fall in Delhi and how it slowly moved away from many of its founding ideas

Nikhil M. Babu
nikhil.m@thehindu.co.in

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which dominated headlines in Delhi for over a decade, has taken a backseat in the national capital, after it lost the Delhi Assembly election earlier this year. Party chief Arvind Kejriwal, who lost from his New Delhi constituency, now spends most of his time in Punjab, as the party shifts the majority of its resources to the State to retain power in the next election due in 2027.

Sayantan Ghosh's *The Aam Aadmi Party: The Untold Story of a Political Uprising and Its Undoing* take a hard look at AAP and its politics. Formed in 2012, it was seen as a new political experiment. It garnered a lot of success in a short time too, getting the 'national party' status in a little over 10 years.



The Aam Aadmi Party: The Untold Story of a Political Uprising and Its Undoing
Sayantan Ghosh
Juggernaut
₹499

Books have been written about AAP, by people who bitterly left the party, and also by those who continue to hold important positions within the party – both suffering from predictable pitfalls. Ghosh's engagement with AAP as a beat reporter gave him a relatively neutral set of lens to analyse the party. But what really sets Ghosh's book apart is his window into the inner workings of AAP and the Delhi government, when he was a research fellow for the Delhi Assembly. He had worked closely with the office of the then deputy chief minister of Delhi and de facto number 2 in AAP, Manish Sisodia.

Anecdotes and comments from insiders help readers to join the dots on why AAP behaved in a particular way at a certain point in time, considering the sheer number of changes and U-turns it has undergone. Through six parts, the book chronologically traces AAP's and, inevitably, Kejriwal's journey from the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement, to power in 2013, and the loss of Delhi in 2025.

A running theme of the book is how AAP slowly moved away from many of its founding ideas even as Kejriwal and his inner circle took control over the party.

Crony rule

One chapter talks about Vijay Nair, a lesser-known face of AAP, and the power he wields. In 'Vijay Nair: 'The Blue-Eyed Boy of Arvind ji', Ghosh writes about what he understood about Nair from the Chief Minister's Office and other sources. "It became evident that Nair controlled an elaborate network within AAP, managing everything from advertisements to social media and consultancy services. He worked with a core team, often comprising individuals not officially part of the government or party but hired through third-party companies. These consultants reportedly earned substantial salaries from party funds, illustrating Nair's wide-reaching influence over AAP's communication apparatus."

Nair, he writes, was associated with the party from 2014 and was elevated as the communication in-charge of the party in 2018. The party, however, accepted him as the 'communication in-charge' after he was arrested in the alleged liquor scam in 2022, but Kejriwal later downplayed him as "a small worker".

For anyone trying to understand the almost 13-year journey of AAP, Ghosh tries to give a nuanced picture of a party with different shades of grey. He gives credit where it is due, and criticises the party's actions at other times, despite the title being may be a little too revealing of Ghosh's stance.

Aam Aadmi Party convener and fomer Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal at a road show during the 2022 municipal election in New Delhi.
(GETTY IMAGES)

A people's king

Reinterpreting the life and legacy of Maharaja Fateh Bahadur Sahi and his war against the British

Preeti Zachariah
preeti.zachariah@thehindu.co.in

J.N. Sinha's reinterpretation of Fateh Bahadur Sahi, the central character of *The Raja, the Rebel and the Monk,* is reminiscent of the legend of Robin Hood. While this oft-forgotten 18th-century ruler of Huseypur in Saran, Bihar was referred to as "an outlaw and public nuisance" by the British, Sinha paints this "enigmatic character in India's history, lost in the vortex of myth and reality" as a freedom fighter of sorts, even implying that his rebellion against the British could be seen as India's first war of independence.

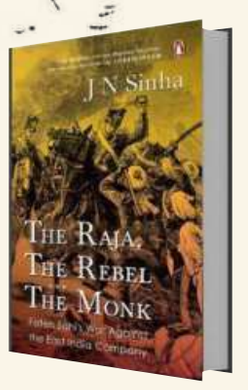
The book tells the story of this man who took refuge in the jungles of the Himalayan foothills after being displaced from his capital and fought a series of guerrilla wars against the East India Company for nearly three decades.

Ascension and reign

The book traces the Huseypur family lineage from the 7th century onwards and chronicles his ascension and rule, including his first confrontation with the British after the Battle of Buxar, when revenue officials were sent to meet him in 1767. This led to the first battle, where he was defeated despite putting up a fierce fight, and he retreated to the nearby Bhagjogni jungle. "He was, however, not reconciled to his plight, and was constantly on the lookout for an opportunity to attack Company forces and return to his citadel," Sinha writes.

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

The book describes several battles that ensued and also lingers on the larger socio-politics of the 18th century, even touching upon a scandalous liaison between the wife of a company civil servant, Catherine Noël Grand, and Sir Philip Francis, a member of the supreme council. It also talks about Sahi's choice to become an ascetic in 1808 and his legacy: despite the paucity of any written records of his life and rebellions, he "is fondly enshrined in the minds and hearts of the local people."



The Raja, The Rebel and The Monk
J.N. Sinha
Penguin Books
₹599

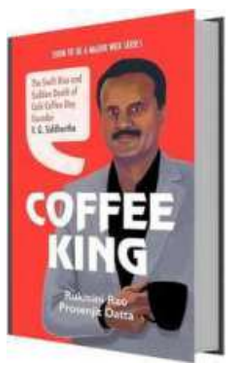
The book isn't without its flaws. For one, the inadequacy of the sourcing is evident in the text, which often seems to resort to conjecture to buffer the story. At just over 200 pages, it is not an easy book to read if one is not already associated with the history of the period. The lay reader will have to wrestle with yet another challenge: despite starting the book with an exhaustive chronology, the absence of a deeply engaging narrative and strong character-building causes names, dates, and incidents to blur, necessitating constant page-flipping. But to Sinha's credit, he has brought back to life a complex, fascinating historical character whom history had forgotten.

BROWSER

Beneath Magnolia Skies: Writings from Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills

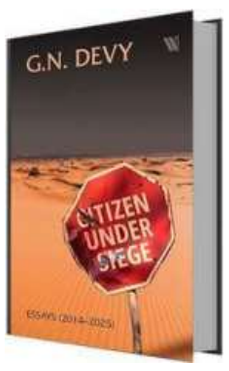
Edited by Mona Chhettri, Prava Rai
Zubaan
₹695
As Himalayan women move between tradition and modernity, what shapes do inequality, violence and prejudice take? How do women claim space and a voice within a society? Women writers, homemakers, teachers, activists speak up in this anthology.

Coffee King



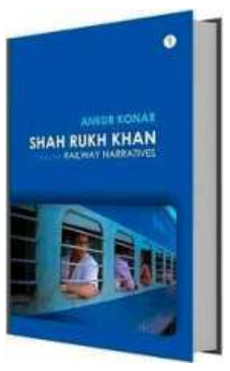
Rukmini Rao, Prosenjit Datta
Macmillan
₹699
The untimely passing of V.G. Siddhartha, founder of the Café Coffee Day chain, in July 2019 raised several questions. Two journalists trace the meteoric rise and collapse of the entrepreneur in a new book. They investigate how Siddhartha's mega enterprise fell apart, following rising debt and other pressures.

Citizen Under Siege



G.N. Devy
Westland Books
₹499
The columns of a scholar and cultural activist have been published in this collection, which look at how "the idea of 'citizen' is getting assailed in the name of religion, nation, history and knowledge." Devy wonders whether besieged Indians can regain and protect their space as citizens.

Shah Rukh Khan and the Railway Narratives



Ankur Konar
Hawakal Publishers
₹350
A writer uses the train motif, a recurring theme in many Shah Rukh Khan films, to explore train travel in India, focusing on its historical significance and social influence. Konar also looks at the downside of the repeated use of train sequences in films.

Gamers at last year's GamingCon Bharat.

BETS GONE, GAME ON

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

The dream isn't impossible. "India stands out. Here is a country with one of the world's youngest populations, hundreds of millions of gamers, a huge tech-savvy talent pool, and a civilisational heritage that is both epic in scale and remarkably under-represented in premium games," says Nicolas Granatino, executive chairman of Tara Gaming, a one-year-old game developing studio that has Amitabh Bachchan as a co-founder. It is currently making *Age of Bhaarat*, an action-adventure that features Bachchan's voice that the creators believe will be the country's first AAA game. "From a storyteller's standpoint, India is a treasure chest. The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, classical literature, regional folk traditions – these are not just myths but vast narrative universes filled with complex characters, moral dilemmas, and big ideas about duty, love, war, and the nature of reality," he adds.

The global success of role-playing game *The Witcher*, *Black Myth Wukong* and American action adventure *God of War* proves the formula – rich mythology combined with excellent gameplay – wins. But India's stories must translate into interactive set pieces and tight gameplay loops. This juggling act of uniting worldbuilding with clear narrative mechanics is what Indian studios must master to reach the world.

There's curiosity now from new creators and first-timers such as Sapna Bhavnani. The Mumbai-based filmmaker and founder of Wench Film Festival, India's first sci-fi/horror/fantasy fest, is looking at creating her own game. "I feel in India we are mediocre when it comes to our aesthetic. Also, nobody wants to spend the time developing something," says Bhavnani, who is planning to base her game on Zombiecon, a zombie walk and pub crawl that she hosts in the city. "In the fantasy genre, we automatically go to mythology, to *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. We need a game that can cut through international boundaries where horror, sci-fi and fantasy are the genres that are ruling the roost." She has identified a Mumbai-based developer for her game, but first she says she will spend time worldbuilding and developing her characters. "We have to develop something that even someone in the western market can understand."

Building the foundation

Given the concentration of game studios in Mumbai and Pune, the region has emerged as the industry's centre of gravity. "Mumbai already has everything a global gaming hub needs – be it creative DNA, film culture, art schools, tech talent and a generation that grew up on games," says Vaibhav Chavan, founder of underDOGS, who's building *Mukti*, a first-person narrative adventure game with support from Sony Playstation to bring awareness on human trafficking. "What it needs now is focus and policy support, funding, and overall nurturing of the ecosystem."

The Maharashtra government listened, and is backing the industry, in collaboration with the IGPDA, with a ₹3,000 crore gaming war chest. Together, they will work to attract gaming companies to Mumbai through policy support. Now, it is up to the studios to focus this resource on creating genuine, scalable wealth, and the government to ensure the infrastructure – accelerators, AVGC (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, and Comics) hubs – is built to pull talent away from the RMG husks and into stable, long-term creative roles. This will help in growing the gig economy, opening up more jobs for tech, acting, motion capture and voice roles across demographics and regional languages.

A few other States have their own plans in place. Tamil Nadu is readying to launch its AVGC XR (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, Comics, and Extended Reality) policy. "Gaming is very unique in that it has high creativity, relatively low employment, and high margins. So, you have to be really thoughtful about how you go about incentivising it," says Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, Minister for Information Technology and Digital Services of Tamil Nadu. The policy, which is in its final stages, is built on four pillars: education and skilling, infrastructure development, improving ease of doing business, and financial incentives. "It is very nuanced, because from day one it was developed through interaction with the industry sector – both individual companies and the Game Developer Association of India," says Rajan, adding that they are encouraging clusters of developers, which will "facilitate participation and make accessibility easier". Getting big gaming companies such as Nintendo to enter India through Tamil Nadu is on the agenda, too.

Need for a gaming convention

Every industry needs a town square for the community and businesses to convene. Just as Comic Con spotlights comic books and pop culture, a serious gaming industry demands a dedicated convention. While Japan has the Tokyo Game Show and Europe has Gamescom, India now has GamingCon Bharat. "With GamingCon Bharat, we are creating a landmark event that unites India's entire gaming community, from young players and indie developers to major studios, publishers, and investors," asserts Vikas Vij, the founder. Currently in its second year, it is currently underway in Mumbai at NESCO (ends today).

Gaming expos are more than just screens and controllers; they are the industry's megaphones. They create a platform for gaming companies and independent studios to debut their new games, and serve as a B2B nexus where studios can find investors, tools and services, as well as connect with the gaming business community. These events also fuel the "merch economy" – artists and creators selling custom apparel, action figures, and art. And it's a haven for cosplayers who, in turn, transform the event into an immersive experience. "GamingCon Bharat provides a national stage for talent, aids in the discovery of new esports players, and gives regional creators the visibility that was missing a few years ago," says Medha Srivastava, a concept and game artist. Srivastava cosplayed as Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* at the last edition.

We are on the cusp of change. The tools are on the table: the policy, the capital, and a unified IGPDA voice. The industry has got a new lease of life. The challenge now belongs to the creators and the consumers.

(With inputs from ***Surya Praphulla Kumar****)*

By bringing the country's most creative minds together in Mumbai, we are helping Maharashtra cement its place as the emerging hub of gaming in India. Our vision is to build a platform that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with global showcases like Gamescom

VIKAS VIJ
Founder of GamingCon Bharat

The designer and lifelong gaming enthusiast spends most evenings in co-op mode with his daughter.

IN CONVERSATION

'I'VE ALWAYS FELT 60 IN MY HEAD'

Actor-author Twinkle Khanna returns with witty reflections on ageing, family, and India's changing socio-political landscape

Shrayana Bhattacharya

In her heartwarming and hilarious new book, *Mrs Funnybones Returns* (published by Juggernaut), author Twinkle Khanna delves into issues both personal and political in a voice completely unique to her. Khanna is a gifted observer and chronicler of elite urbane family life in India. Far away from the self-serious scholarly tone often used for writing on social change and gender issues, Khanna, through her signature wit and candour, navigates the unfair and relentlessly rigid nature of womanhood in the country. In our conversation, she reflects on a decade – since the inaugural *Mrs Funnybones* – of change in India, her writing process, and the power of laughter at a time of division. Edited excerpts:

Question: *When you take a step back and look at the collection, is there a thread that ties all the stories together?*
Answer: When I started thinking about this collection, I wanted to show how India has changed over the past decade – and layer that with how I've changed, too. My family offered a point for reflection and analysis: I lost loved ones; my daughter grew up; my son became a young adult. Managing the writing of time across all these columns was a technical challenge. I wanted to bridge the past decade – politics, elections, technology – within these pieces. I approached the collection the way I would make my daughter have an antibiotic – I will start with saying it is sweet, and I will make *sure* the first dose is a sweet syrup. Some columns were chosen to make you laugh and draw you in, others to make you reflect. The book starts lighthearted, but as you go along, it deepens into themes of loss, grief, and mortality. And hopefully, it ends with optimism.

Q: *Can you tell us how the collection accumulated? How long did it take to put this together?*
A: I resisted doing a sequel for a long time. My editor, Chiki Sarkar, keeps saying that the *Funnybones* voice comes easily to me, and I take it for granted, compared to my fiction. Perhaps, I resisted the sequel because of this. But over time, I realised my newspaper columns – and the first *Mrs Funnybones* (2015) – meant a lot to people. When I was touring to launch *Welcome to Paradise* (2023), I met a young woman who called the *Funnybones* book her bowl of *kheer* as it offered comfort. Another reader even took the book to Afghanistan while covering the war. That's when I understood this was more than just entertainment for myself or others – it was connection. That's when I decided to work on a collection.

Q: Mrs Funnybones *returns at a complex time in India – new technologies, new socio-political cleavages, or perhaps new ways to manifest old grievances. I noticed how the stories capture the way these larger changes creep into our families. The book feels more political than your past work; you write about rituals and godmen. In a time of deepening divides, can laughter survive and bridge gaps?*
A: If laughter doesn't bring us together, what hope is there? Humour is a unifying thread. We lost somebody recently and I went to pay condolences. I noticed how there is always someone whose job is to make family members laugh. And the family needs it; they require that release. If laughter can join you in your lowest moments, why not when you see the world differently? You can't convert someone, but you can connect with them. I don't believe differing views make anyone inferior. I always wonder: what can I learn from this person? For me, laughter is that bridge. Can somebody else use laughter as a bridge? Yes, you can but your jokes have to be pretty good.

Q: *I am writing a book on 'Indian Uncles' and found the character of Uncle Biren hilarious and insightful. I am excited to see how other readers react to him. Where did he come from?*
A: Uncle Biren is an amalgamation – a bunch of uncles from my family and acquaintances. I have Punjabis and Gujaratis at home, which makes all family gatherings very lively. The Gujaratis are ruling the roost these days, full of pride. My mother-in-law's side is Kashmiri, I have family from the Hindu and the Ismaili world – these experiences reach my columns.

Q: *I found the stories on motherhood and your own father very moving. Between the time your columns started and the release of this book, how have gender roles within families evolved in contemporary India?*
A: Honestly, not much has changed. I was 39 when the columns started; now I'm 52. Through this time, the fabric of our society and family life have remained the same. Although, our aspirations have shifted; women have more of a voice. But deep-rooted conditioning persists. Women take on the work of care because of how we view our own roles, no one is forcing us. The new generation is far freer of this baggage. Change will come through how we raise our children, and how we demonstrate small changes within ourselves.

Q: *How do you write so candidly about ageing? There is no awkward self-consciousness in those pieces.*
A: I've always felt 60 in my head! Ageing never terrified me – it felt liberating. Even in my 30s, I planned for grey hair, short nails, and riding a scooter in Goa. I viewed ageing as a phase that would free me from many responsibilities. I also realised that by writing about my own ageing, I can take control of my narrative, instead of letting society or someone else decide what ageing means for how I look or how desirable I am. My body is desirable to me, even if it is falling apart. Writing helps me work through these dilemmas, loneliness, fear. That's when I realised I'm truly a writer and nothing else: when I could write my way through a problem.

Q: *What's next? I heard you were writing speculative fiction.*
A: I'm 30,000 words into my next novel. It is my world right now. That's all I can say!

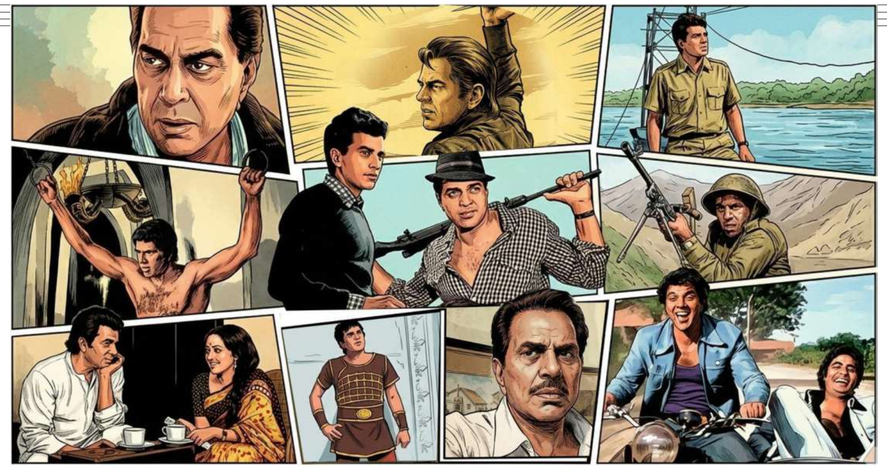
The interviewer is an economist and the award-winning author of Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh *(2021).*

This book comes a decade after Twinkle Khanna's first *Mrs Funnybones* title.

Scan the QR code to read the full interview and watch Twinkle Khanna in conversation on magazine. thehindu.com

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



TRIBUTE [1935-2025]

HOW DHARMENDRA DEFIED SAMENESS

He shone bright in a galaxy helmed by Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan, but awards remained elusive

Saibal Chatterjee

Dharmendra always had *Devdas* in his sights. He was a lad of 20 when his idol Dilip Kumar played the ill-fated eponymous lover. He saw the 1955 Bimal Roy film repeatedly, preparing himself mentally for the role.

In the mid-1970s, Gulzar cast Dharmendra against type in his version of *Devdas*. The poet-lyricist-filmmaker knew, and Dharmendra had demonstrated often enough, that there was more to him than just action.

An incredibly handsome Punjabi youth who arrived in Bombay to give stardom a shot, Dharmendra weathered a few false starts before he starred in more than 300 films in a 65-year career.

Sadly, *Devdas* wasn't one of them. The project was shelved after Gulzar shot a few reels. But, if nothing else, the film that never saw the light of day proved Dharmendra was a director's actor that the era's best filmmakers could readily repose faith in.

Remoulding masculinity

In *Phool Aur Patthar*, the 1966 drama that forged Dharmendra's tough-guy screen persona, he was a criminal capable of kindness to strangers. In a brief sequence, his character takes his shirt off and uses it to cover an old lady shivering in the cold.

That movie moment was a watershed. It defined Dharmendra's brand of virility: aggressive masculinity tempered with a benign streak. While that was the keystone of his image, he frequently and successfully ventured beyond its boundaries.

As an actor, he straddled a wide gamut – from rugged and macho to romantic and gentle, from comic to caustic, from emotionally charged to psychologically scarred, from playful to profound. He flitted effortlessly between irrepressible and vulnerable, smouldering and subdued, without ever alienating his core constituency.

Dharmendra, a magnetic but media-shy luminary who steadfastly resisted interviews, floated back and forth between Bimal Roy, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Chetan Anand, and Rajinder Singh Bedi (who directed him in 1973's *Phagun*, in which he had a cameo) on the one hand, and Prakash Mehra (*Samadhi*), Manmohan Desai (*Dharam-Veer*) and Nasir Hussain (*Yaadon Ki Baarat*) on the other.

He reigned supreme from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, an eventful period during which his personal life provided constant grist to the rumour mill, leading to run-ins with persistent gossip columnists.

Popular, reliable, durable

In the late 1990s, he turned to supporting roles, beginning with *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998). A decade on, he was in two commercially successful films, Anurag Basu's quirky urban drama *Life in a... Metro* (2007) and Sriram Raghavan's neo-noir thriller *Johnny Gaddar* (2007).

Dharmendra's popularity was as enormous as it was durable. Neither the terrific triumvirate of Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand who preceded him nor the all-conquering duo of Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan who altered 1970s Hindi cinema could influence the course of his stardom or dim its lustre.

A star like no other Dharmendra passed away in Mumbai on November 24, aged 89.
(AI CREATED: ARIVARASU M.)

Rajesh Khanna shot to the top in 1969 with two massive hits, *Aradhana* and *Do Raaste*. Many male stars of the era were swept away. Not Dharmendra. He continued his stellar run.

His films during this phase ranged from genteel dramas directed by Asit Sen and Hrishikesh Mukherjee to crowd-pleasers helmed by Arjun Hingorani, who launched the actor in *Dil Bhi Tera Hum Bhi Tere* (1960) and then in the 1970s cast him in every single film he made.

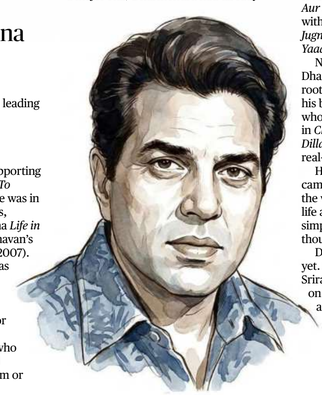
Bachchan, who stormed the industry with *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Deewaar* (1975), threatened to scupper many careers. Dharmendra stood firm against the angry young man blitzkrieg.

In fact, the story goes that Dharmendra recommended Bachchan to Ramesh Sippy for 1975's biggest hit, *Sholay*. The same year, the two actors joined forces in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Chupke Chupke*, too. The two films had nothing in common but Dharmendra, like Bachchan, was perfectly at ease in both.

His pairing with Hema Malini, who was to become his second wife in 1980, was frequent but there was never a phase in Dharmendra's professional life when he was in danger of succumbing to monotony in terms of either the films he chose or the co-actors he worked with.

Quiet but lasting entry

Before *Phool Aur Patthar* turned him into a major star, Dharmendra had already made his presence felt in Bimal Roy's *Bandini* (1963) and Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* (1964).



The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.

Surprisingly for a man from the land of the *bhangra*, Dharmendra possessed limited dancing skills. His two left feet did not dent his box-office clout. If anything, it added a dimension to his *jatt yamla pagla deewana* image that yelled loud and clear: "tough guys don't dance".

Awards eluded him during his active years as a leading man but a couple of honours were eventually conferred upon him – a Padma Bhushan in 2012 and a Filmfare Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997.

The year that *Phool Aur Patthar*, co-starring Meena Kumari, hit the screen, Dharmendra had two other memorable releases – Asit Sen's *Mamta*, with Suchitra Sen and Ashok Kumar, and Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anupama*, with Sharmila Tagore. Before the end of the decade, he delivered what ranks among his best screen performances ever as an idealistic young man in *Satyakam*, featuring Sharmila and directed by Mukherjee.

That '70s showman

In the 1970s, his career soared into the stratosphere with films such as Raj Khosla's *Mera Gaon Mera Desh*, which tapped into his action star credentials, and Ramesh Sippy's *Seeta Aur Geeta*. In *Guddi* (1971), Mukherjee cast Dharmendra as himself in a story about a middle-class schoolgirl (debutante Jaya Bhaduri) smitten by the matinee idol.

On cue, Dharmendra delivered an uninterrupted string of hits in 1972 and 1973. The purple patch began with *Seeta Aur Geeta* and *Raja Jani*, and culminated with money-spinners such as *Loafer*, *Jugnu*, *Jheel Ke Us Paar*, *Blackmail* and *Yaadon Ki Baaraat* (all in 1973).

No matter how high he rose, Dharmendra never lost touch with his roots, an attribute that shone through in his best screen performances, no matter who he was playing – a botany professor in *Chupke Chupke*, a Sanskrit lecturer in *Dillagi*, or a fictionalised avatar of a real-life war hero in *Haqeeqat*.

He often wrote poetry and read it on camera for his fans. His lines reflected the wisdom of a man who had lived a full life as well as manifested the rustic simplicity and emotional directness of his thoughts.

Dharmendra is gone but he is not done yet. His final film, *Ikkis*, directed by Sriram Raghavan, is scheduled for release on December 25. And that certainly isn't all. A success story such as his segues into showbiz folklore. It never ends. It lives on in the imprint it leaves.

ALLEGEDLY

Call it evolution

All living things adapt to a changing environment, and true Delhiites are no exception

AI GENERATED IMAGE

Last week, an old friend who lives abroad landed in Delhi for a visit. This gentleman – let's call him Bro – was born and brought up in Delhi. Unfortunately, in May 2014, when India, as predicted by Nehru, was awakening to life and freedom, Bro quit India and moved to London.

But Bro remained a patriot. Like me, he is a big devotee of the Supreme Leader and a fervent believer in the India growth story. I was excited to meet him after 11 years.

When we finally shook hands, the first thing he said to me was, "You know, flying back from London to India, it feels as if I've moved from a developing country to a developed one."

"I know," I said. "It is because of Vikas."

We loaded his luggage into my luxury, non-polluting, diesel SUV and set off for his 7-star hotel in Lodhi Estate. But on the way, things started happening to him.

First, his face turned an ashen grey, exactly the colour of the Delhi sky in November. Then he sneezed non-stop 122 times. Then he started coughing, and coughed all the way to the hotel where the guard stopped us at the gate and called the manager.

The manager informed us we won't be allowed in as they have a policy against coughers.

"He is not a 'cougher'," I said. "He just has a cough."

"Our guests are paying through their nose to stay here, sir," he said. "But your friend has a running nose."

"His nose is not the one your guests are paying through," I pointed out.

"Sir, the cougher will spoil the vibe of our hotel."

"My friend has a reservation," I said.

"We will refund everything," the manager said, before breaking into a Level-3 sneeze that blew the turban off the guard's head.

"You just sneezed!" I said. "This is pure hypocrisy."

Bro tugged at my sleeve. "Let's go."

"Go where?" I asked, but he couldn't answer because he was busy scratching himself. His body was covered in red rashes.

"Take me to a doctor."

"Shall we go to Apollo?"

"No," he said. "I prefer Apollo's beautiful sister Aphrodite."

On our way to the hospital, he coughed so violently one of his lungs fell out. Thanks to my reflexes, I caught it before it hit the floor. It was my first time holding a live human lung. It reminded me of the filter inside my RO, except Bro's lung was sparkling clean. I handed it to a passing nurse for safekeeping.

"Where is it from?" she wanted to know.

"From here," I said, pointing to Bro's heaving chest.

"This lung's protective coating of smoke, tar, PM10 and PM2.5 is completely missing. What happened?"

"Sister, he has been living in the U.K. for many years," I said.

"U.K.?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a poor country where they don't provide free universal access to particulate matter like we do here in India."

"That explains it," the nurse sighed. "No wonder he is struggling to breathe."

The next morning, Bro underwent emergency surgery where they installed a new lung coated with a double layer of charcoal and cement dust. He was discharged in three days, and he's perfectly fine now. His cough is gone, his rashes have disappeared, and he spends hours at the ITO signal without a mask. He was so comfortable at 900-plus AQI that I sent him in my place to cheer for my son Kattabomman on his school's Sports Day.

"I always knew this whole brouhaha about Delhi air pollution was just smoke without fire," Bro said, lighting a *beedi*. "All living things adapt to a changing environment, and true Delhiites are no exception."

"That's called evolution," I said. "I hope you realise what a big mistake it was to leave Delhi for London. In just 11 years, your lungs lost their native resilience and became so lily-livered they went into GASP 4 when GRAP 3 was in force."

"You're right," he nodded. "But I want to ask all those chaps creating nuisance doing protests for clean air. How did people survive the Ice Age? Did anyone protest back then for hot air?"

"Good point," I said.

"And how did we survive the dinosaurs?" he went on. "Were dinosaurs less dangerous than air pollution?"

"Erm... Bro, I don't think humans survived the dinosaurs."

"What do you mean?" he said. "We are here today, aren't we? But I see no dinosaurs."

"Never mind," I said. "But I agree. Pollution is not the problem. People are the problem."

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

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50 YEARS OF BOOK REVIEWS

India's first review journal in English is holding a seminar on translation and publishing in Bengaluru

Widely considered India's first review journal to appear in English, *The Book Review* (TBR), started by three bibliophile friends, turns 50 next year. As a part of its golden jubilee celebrations, TBR is hosting a seminar on literary translations, titled *Echoes Across Tongues*, in Bengaluru next week.

Set up by Chitra Narayanan, Uma Iyengar and Chandra Chari in 1976, TBR was begun with the intention to review books of all genres published in India. "Our basic job is reviewing books in the source language which has resulted in the book being translated too, at times. We have been focusing on languages, and over the years, have brought out language-specific issues as well," says Iyengar. In August this year, TBR held a roundtable in Delhi, to discuss the state of Indian publishing since Independence and the role of reviews.

The upcoming Bengaluru session, which will go on for a day-and-a-half, will comprise three segments. The first session, 'The Art of Translation', will be chaired by author Chandan Gowda and will include writers Kamalakar Bhat, Vivek Shanbaug and Arshia Sattar on the panel. The second one on multilingual translation will be helmed by award-winning translator Vanamala Viswanatha, with the panel comprising V.S. Sreedhara, Mini Krishnan and E.V. Ramakrishnan, among others.

Poet and translator A.J. Thomas will oversee the last segment on translating different genres and he will be joined by International Booker-winning translator Deepa Bhasthi, among others.

Underlining the need to rethink the role and relevance of literary translations, Viswanatha, who has translated medieval and modern Kannada writing, including, most recently, Kuvempu's epic, *Bride in the Hills*, says, "We can write a new kind of history of our nation... there is a critical mass of translations of Indian texts across multiple languages written over the last century that reflects the other Indias outside the realm of writing in English now," she says.

Translator T.S. Saravanan hopes to discuss the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in translating. "The negative mindset about AI translations is not true. Generally, there are two groups of translators: those who stay away from technology and those using it, and the truth lies somewhere in between both. That is the mentality we are going to discuss." He, however, emphasises on the human element. "AI can be used, provided the appropriate prompt is given. It helps boost speed, too. But the human touch is needed."

Adds Viswanatha, "Irony, sarcasm, reiteration, metaphor, proverbs – all these literary tropes are as yet beyond the realm of AI. It can be an ally to the translator, and may not necessarily be a threat. A human translator is not easily replaceable, at least right now, especially in literary translations."

A book shop in Srinagar; and (below, L-R) authors and translators Vanamala Viswanatha, Chandan Gowda and Deepa Bhasthi, who will be a part of TBR's panel discussions. (GETTY IMAGES, SAMPATH KUMAR G.P., MURALI KUMAR K.)

Niche interest

Iyengar recalls how editors from *The New York Review of Books* were invited to TBR's 20th anniversary celebrations in 1996. "They shared that they came into being because *The New Yorker* went on strike, and how they were able to sell a humongous amount of copies for the very first issue," she says.

Though TBR continues to focus on books published in India, it occasionally receives works from universities on topics of Indian scholarship. But the publication, which also has an online edition, "continues to be a niche journal", says Iyengar, adding that reader interest has increased since they went online.

"We started out by chipping in ₹1,500 each because there was no book review journal in India at the time. And even today, there doesn't seem to be another one in English. Though *Biblio* reviews books, their issues come out sporadically," says Iyengar.

(With inputs from ***Tanushree Ghosh****)*

Echoes Across Tongues *is on December 4, 5 at Bangalore International Centre. Details: Instagram @thebookreviewindia*

GOREN BRIDGE

Wish I hadn't done that

Neither vulnerable, East deals

Bob Jones

The values for North's two-spade bid are hard to find. Perhaps he thought his modest club fit entitled him to an aggressive bid. South was Tolga Ozbay, from Turkey, who drove to game expecting to find a better dummy.

East won the opening heart lead with the ace and continued with the queen of hearts to declarer's king. Ozbay placed East with seven points in hearts and presumably the ace of spades for his opening bid. West had doubled on, at most, two minor suit queens. The contract would have no chance if West had all the missing clubs, or even queen-10-third. Ozbay had to hope for a friendlier trump position. If he led a spade, East would take his ace and lead a third heart, almost certainly promoting a trump trick for West. Instead, Ozbay led the jack of clubs and ran it when West played low. This pinned East's 10 and gave Ozbay a chance, but it was far from over.

The diamond queen was still a problem. He could ruff a diamond in dummy, but he would not be able to get back to his hand without allowing a trump promotion for West. He cashed the ace of diamonds and then led the 10 of diamonds. West played low, as would most everyone, and Ozbay discarded a heart from dummy. He discarded dummy's remaining heart on the king of diamonds and ruffed his last diamond. He left the ace of clubs in dummy and led a spade, but there was now no chance for West to get a trump promotion. Beautifully played!

Neither vulnerable, East deals

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

The bidding:

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
1♡	2♣	Pass	2♠
Pass	3◇	Pass	4♣
Pass	5♣	Dbl	All pass

Opening lead: Eight of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has November 30 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 Born on November 30, 1835, Samuel Clemens was a novelist who was responsible for some of America's greatest literature. Trained as a printer, he is thought to be the first novelist to write using a typewriter. Who is this author whose pen name means '12 feet of water'?

2 Born this date in 1858, this polymath was a pioneer in studying microwave optics. He also studied plant response to stimuli and wrote Bengali science fiction. Who is this scientist who has a crater on the moon and a research institute named after him?

3 Born this date in 1874, this British military officer still owes ₹13 to the Bangalore Club for a whiskey he drank in 1896. He went on to become the Prime Minister of the U.K. twice. Who was this statesman whose actions had global effects?

4 Born November 30, 1925, William H. Gates, Sr., was an American lawyer who specialised in corporate and technology disputes. He was chair of the World Justice Project, which aimed to strengthen the Rule of Law for all communities. What is the name of his son who went on to run a tech company?

5 Born on this date in 1929, Joan Ganz Cooney was a journalist who was working with an educational TV station in New York. During a dinner party with her boss, she brought up the potential of using TV to educate children. This led to the creation of what show that uses puppets to showcase American culture?

Filmmaker Ridley Scott, who was nominated for an Oscar for *Gladiator*. (GETTY IMAGES)

6 Born on this date in 1937, Ridley Scott is an English director known for his epic films with a signature visual style. Although he was nominated for an Oscar award for *Gladiator* and *The Martian*, another movie of his was chosen for preservation by the Library of Congress. It was one of his earliest films. What movie follows a starship crew attacked by a strange creature?

7 Born this date in 1945, Roger Glover is a Welsh bass player who is responsible for coming up with the title of one of the most famous songs in rock history. He based it on an event the band had witnessed where a fan had set off a flare during a Frank Zappa concert on the Lake Geneva shoreline. What song is this and by which band?

8 Born on this date in 1955, Kevin Conroy was an American TV actor. In the 90s, he started doing the voice for an iconic comic book character and soon became the fan favourite. His deep, gravelly voice suited the caped crusader perfectly. Which character did he voice for more than 30 years?

9 Born on November 30, 1977, Steve Aoki is an American DJ who is one of the highest-grossing EDM artists of the last decade. As part of his set, a signature move involves him throwing something at the audience. Since 2013's Lollapalooza, what has he been throwing at his fans that should remind you of a common birthday stunt?

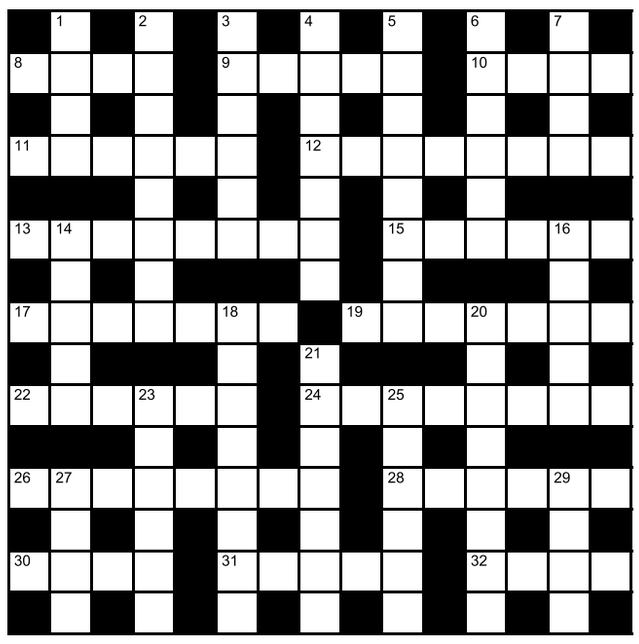
10 Born on November 30, 1990, this Norwegian is one of the youngest to achieve super-stardom in his sport. When not engaging in mental combat over a board, he likes playing DOTA or fantasy football. Who is this prodigy who recently lost to two Indians younger than him?

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. Mark Twain
2. Jagadish Chandra Bose
3. Winston Churchill
4. Bill Gates
5. Sesame Street
6. *Alien*
7. 'Smoke on the water' by Deep Purple
8. Batman
9. Cake
10. Magnus Carlsen

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 32 (Set by Incognito)



Across

8 King giving up no good electrical vehicle for starters. Capital! (4)
9 Leaders of social media consume beverage producing water vapour (5)
10 American's pull (4)
11 Delta soil shortage (6)
12 Salesman returns after small journey for paint remover (8)
13 Shape changed before conflict in city (8)
15 Average in south- south-east is meagre (6)
17 First girl leaves cricketer Mike for boy on strike (7)
19 Stout soldier returning to take university exam initially shows tiredness (7)
22 Saint hugged large plant in avenue (6)
24 Most speedy transport departs around one (8)
26 Answer to get past father's scimitar, for example (8)
28 Young lady inserted same erroneously in driving licence initially (6)
30 Move prison (4)
31 And organised Chief Engineer's ball! (5)
32 None may produce gas! (4)

Down

1 Returning, sir, with a bit of experience to get up (4)
2 Six balls host misplayed went beyond intended target (8)
3 Avoid prunes chewed to some extent (6)
4 Church certain to include point for denouncement (7)
5 In Asia, Mike and brother producing divine nourishment (8)
6 Short-sightedness resulting from consumption of poi prepared in cooked yam (6)
7 Perhaps, keen to produce a joint (4)
14 Demand and obtain previous statute (5)
16 Closes cabin in ship (5)
18 Strings supporting tennis barrier badly constructed... not cut... (3,5)
20 Popular, indeed, guy admitted without explaining at first (2,6)
21 Free energy in explosive weapon (7)
23 European nurse to be dislodged! See to it! (6)
25 Softly continued, "Cushioned" (6)
27 Performs in play from contract stage (4)
29 So, about-turn for cupid? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 31

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The weight of the everyday

Muscles are not for vanity; they are invaluable in the cut and thrust of daily life

Thomas Paul
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You don't need to know your "deltoids" from your "trapezius" or count calories on a smartwatch to start exercising. Just look around. Every day, life throws at us a series of weightlifting contests disguised as ordinary tasks – and most of us fail in them spectacularly.

Being out of shape has been your comfort zone. You are at the airport baggage carousel watching your suitcase doing lazy circles on the conveyor belt, coming around for the third time. You are summoning the courage to pull the thing without getting dragged into the carousel yourself. Meanwhile, fit travellers stride up, grab their monster luggage one-handed, and are out heading for the exit.

You are on a crowded train, trying to hoist a suitcase into the overhead rack while everyone goes quiet watching your trembling arms, wondering whether a cardiac episode is on the way. You wobble on tiptoe, grunt, and finally tip it in, earning relieved applause from fellow passengers. Congratulations, you have just done a set of "shoulder presses" in public – unintentionally, but effectively.

At home, the gym comes to you in far sneakier ways. The bed you decide to shift "just a little to the left" reveals your true fitness level. Ten seconds later, you are red-faced, and promising never to clean under it again. Or changing that gas cylinder – the real test of strength and character. You wrestle it into position like a sumo contestant, trying to maintain dignity while panting.

Even small tasks morph into Olympic events: opening a stubborn pickle jar can feel like an arm-wrestling contest. The door that refuses to budge? That is the "forearm day" you skipped last week coming back to haunt you. And if you have ever carried grocery bags in both hands, refusing to make two trips, you have already done an inelegant "deadlift" circuit.

Then there is the outdoor scene requiring you to be an action hero. The car stalls in the middle of the road and you need to move it to a side. You look around for help, but it's just you, your steering wheel, and gravity. You push, grunt, while your biceps send an SOS. Or take the two-wheeler that runs out of petrol half a kilometre from the pump – a real-life endurance test you did not sign up for.

A friend trips and falls; you rush to help but realise lifting a full-grown adult is harder than it looks. You tug, strain, and nearly join him on the ground.

The elevator is out, so you climb 10 flights with groceries, muttering that it's "good cardio". Sure – if you survive to tell the tale.

Leisure, too, demands muscle. Having fun is tough. That weekend trek looked "easy" online until the first incline when your lungs are wheezing in surround sound. The backpack that felt feather-light at home now weighs like guilt. Even playing with children is a challenge – their energy levels mock your fitness app.

In all these scenarios, your body does not need fancy names for exercises. It just needs strength – plain, old, dependable muscle power. And that does not come from good intentions or ergonomic chairs. It comes from using your muscles regularly before life uses them for you.

So, yes – get to the gym. Don't overthink it. You don't need to study "core activation" or 20 different manoeuvres. Just start with dumbbells and progress to other workouts gradually. Push, pull, squat, lift – the human body was designed to move weight.

If you have ever said, "I don't have time to work out," remember that life will make time for you to regret it – at the worst possible moment. Muscles are not built for vanity – they are built for ability. They are what stand between you and that helpless feeling when faced with everyday weight-bearing moments. Strength gives you options: to lift, to help, to act – and occasionally, to impress the crowd at the baggage carousel.

Every repetition you do in the gym is a rehearsal for life's small weightlifting moments, from hauling a suitcase to lifting a loved one. A muscle works on the "use it or lose it" principle. And some day, you will thank your leg muscles for showing up when the elevator did not.

Whispers of ink and iron

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The typewriter, which was used widely and extensively during the early 20th century, marked a turning point in written communication and office work. These early typewriters were mechanical devices that allowed users to imprint characters onto paper using inked typebars. The most iconic among them was the Sholes and Glidden typewriter, which was introduced in 1873 and later marketed by Remington, which popularised the QWERTY keyboard layout still in use today.

These machines transformed documentation process by quickening the pace of written communication and improving the legibility of text. They carved out a space for themselves in business offices, law firms, and government institutions. A workforce led by women typists created a new normal, giving rise to secretarial professions and changing gender dynamics in the workplace. Although these machines were bulky and entirely manual, they were highly valued for their durability and reliability.

The rhythmic rattling of typebars striking paper became a familiar sound in offices, and the typewriter grew to be an icon. By the mid-20th century, nearly every office desk had a typewriter. Manual models evolved into electric versions, which further enhanced efficiency. This indispensable machine was then viewed not only as a writing tool but also considered as a symbol of discipline, organisation, and professionalism.

Some writers and artists still admire typewriters for their tactile feedback and for offering a distraction-free experience. But for most people, they are relics of the past and elegant reminders of an age when writing was more deliberate and permanent before the digital era pinged.

The typewriter may no longer be practical in today's fast-paced world of screens and cloud storage, but it lives on in the memory of everyone who has used it at least once – eternal, mechanical, and oddly poetic. It reminds us of a time when writing was a craft, not just content.

Watch out for 'digital dementia'

Humans risk weakening memory and problem-solving abilities by leaning on AI for everything

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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

A monk sits quietly beneath a tree, eyes closed and mind calm. In silence, he finds clarity. Now imagine bringing that same mindset to our use of artificial intelligence (AI). Could ancient wisdom guide us in navigating the digital age, where machines increasingly shape our memory, thinking, and creativity?

AI today can process data faster than any human, filter out distractions, and make our lives more efficient. Yet, there is a risk. Just as the Tin Woodman of old stories lost his humanity piece by piece as he turned into metal, we too risk weakening our memory and problem-solving abilities if we lean on AI for everything. Researchers call this "digital dementia" – the gradual fading of neural connections when we stop exercising our brains.

Monks remind us that awareness and discipline are the solutions. Silence is not just the absence of sound. It is the presence of deep listening and clarity. In the same way, using AI wisely means staying conscious rather than blindly dependent. The middle path is balance: not avoiding AI out of fear and not surrendering to it with complete trust. Instead, we must use it as a tool while keeping creativity, memory, and empathy at the centre.

The science is clear. When we challenge our brains – by recalling a phone number, solving a puzzle without Google searches, or writing without auto-complete, we strengthen the neural connections that make us uniquely human. At the same time, AI can serve as a partner, taking over repetitive tasks and giving us more space for imagination. The real danger is not AI itself but the possibility of forgetting who we are when we stop thinking for ourselves. The most powerful computer in the world is still the human brain, but it remains so only if we keep it active and sharp.

AI can handle the noise, but it is our responsibility to protect memory, curiosity, and creativity.

In defence of occasional idling

It goes hand in hand with daydreaming, amiably complementing each other

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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

It may seem illogical (and even ironical) to defend idleness. To many, the very thought of idling is horrifying. Yet, no matter what its critics may say, there's something about idling that's patently irresistible at times. Maybe it's our 'couldn't-care-less' attitude to the consequences of idling, or perhaps it's the sheer pleasure of yielding to the temptation of doing absolutely nothing – and enjoying every minute of it. This is particularly so in a world driven inexorably by hectic work schedules, in a world dominated by work and little else.

It was humorist Jerome K. Jerome who once observed tongue-in-cheek, "I like work. It fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours."

And then, in almost the same breath, he went on to add, quite irrepressibly, "It's impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do!" It's a perverse sentiment, echoed by another humorist Mary Wilson Little who observed jocularly, "There's no pleasure in having nothing to do; the fun is in having lots to do and not doing it!"

Idling and daydreaming usually go hand in hand, amiably complementing each other. Yet, thanks to mental conditioning over the years, we tend to brand idling as an abominable vice to be avoided as far as possible. We seldom realise it's indeed an effective 'safety valve' that enables us to counter and withstand the punishing pressures of our workday lives.

As such, one certainly doesn't have to feel guilty about indulging in a spell of well-earned and fully justified idleness after completing a stint of physically or mentally draining work. Indeed, one owes it to oneself.

I'm certainly not advocating irresponsible or unjustified idleness in any manner.

Rather, the intention is to highlight what an occasional spell of absolute inactivity can do to recharge one's batteries, reignite one's interest in and renew one's commitment to one's job. Everyone inevitably succumbs to the temptation of idling now and then, and it does one far more good than one can imagine.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The surge in podcast listenership is a promising sign of India's evolving media usage. ('Inside India's podcast generation'; Nov. 23) Yet, the shift to vodcasts raises questions about accessibility and digital equity. While urban audiences embrace video formats, millions in low-bandwidth regions risk being left behind.
Avinashiappan Myilsami

India's podcast boom shows how nearly 100 million listeners are embracing new audio spaces. With podcasts, broadcasts, telecasts and web series shaping Gen Z, young minds now absorb information faster and more effectively than ever before. As this digital surge continues, we must ask: are we guiding the media or is the media guiding us?
Lestern

India now ranks third in podcast consumption. This achievement owes much to the creativity of Indian podcasters and the enthusiasm of listeners who have embraced the medium wholeheartedly. What began as an explosion of experimentation has steadily transformed into a narrative of organic growth and cultural evolution.
Faiz Mohammed Pathan

Representation matters

As Ruhi Tewari highlights in her book, the Nari Shakti Vandan Act has come at an opportune moment to bridge the democratic deficit in India. ('A voting force'; Nov. 23) We must leverage the rising voter turnout of women to achieve gender parity in political representation. Likewise, discussions must be stirred up to address the gross under-representation of women in judiciary, particularly in higher judiciary.
Rohit Kaushik

The transition from the "era of indifference" to the era of "active participation" in voting patterns of women in India has been so transformative that it is shaping the fortunes of political parties. Progress on the education front and implementation of welfare schemes are positively impacting women's voting patterns. But a better representation of women in the legislature hinges on the implementation of the Women's Reservation Act.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Nostalgic trip

Sita Bhaskar's novel that brings back Malgudi for today's generation is certainly a befitting tribute to R.K. Narayan. ('An aunty revives Malgudi'; Nov. 23) Narayan weaved subtle humour in his writing to make a comment on society, cultural practices and the joys of everyday life, taking readers on a literary sojourn.
D. Karthikeyan

Wonder doctor

The magic in Dinshaw Pardiwala's fingers has come as a boon to eminent sportspersons in India. ('Dinshaw Pardiwala: Doctor to India's champions'; Nov. 23) We need more such devoted doctors who can make good use of their expertise to revive the lives and careers of athletes.
C.V. Aravind

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Rethinking AI integration in education
Growing accustomed to convenience of AI outputs, humans often begin to lose the sense of agency
S.A. Thameemul Ansari

The stories that dishes narrate
Food is a diary in disguise, with each dish becoming a chapter, and every bite a bookmark
Alka Jain

Why deferred gratification?
Many save beautiful things for an unknown rosy future because they have never been taught to love themselves
Viji Narayan

Where hell breaks loose
The drama that is the high-decibel panel discussion on TV
Saraswathi Narayanan

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THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, November 30, 2025

CACAO FARMERS WITH CRAFT AMBITIONS

Now the people growing cacao beans are experimenting with roasts and fermentation to create their own small-batch of chocolate brands

Joshua Muyiwa

Opening the windows of the tree house on Varanashi Organic Farms was a soothing balm. Looking out into treetops spearing the cotton-candy sky at this 100-acre family farm in Adyanadka, a village in Dakshina Kannada District, our city bones were lulled into finding their forest feet.

For the next three days, we immersed ourselves in the Cacao Residency hosted by the cacao-growing farm along with Goya, a food media company, and the Indian Cacao & Craft Chocolate Festival, a five-year-old initiative that brings together the stakeholders in India's cacao and craft chocolate ecosystem. We learnt about the evolution in farming methods and processing techniques, witnessed the making of a craft bar, and tasted a selection of small-batch chocolates.

At a time when headlines are being overtaken by news of rising cocoa prices, and social media is warning consumers to check the label for 'chocolate flavouring' – an attempt by brands to find cheaper ways to keep their products on shelves – it was interesting to walk up to the oldest cacao trees in South India. Partha Varanashi, the ninth-generation farmer of this over-200-year-old property, shares how these 65-year-old trees were brought as saplings to the farm by his late grandfather Varanashi Subraya Bhat.

Numerous strains of cacao from South America and other cacao-growing countries were tried and tested for their viability and yield at the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute before settling on two hybrids. From Bhat, these saplings were distributed to other farms in the region, "and within the next five years, they were producing over 50 tonnes of cacao [sold to Cadbury]", says Varanashi.

In the mid-80s, however, "when Cadbury lowballed farmers on the price for cacao", Bhat's other founding venture, the farmers' cooperative Central Arecanut and Cacao Marketing and Co-operative Society (CAMPCO), added another first. They decided to start their own production in Puttur. "It was then the biggest chocolate factory in South Asia," Varanashi explains, adding that it boosted chocolate consumption in the South.

International nod

Bigger, older craft chocolate brands such as Mason & Co, Manam, Naviluna, and Paul and Mike have been slowly making their mark on the international stage — winning awards and finding new markets. Kochi-based Paul and Mike, one of India's early craft chocolate brands, won the country's first gold at the 2024 International Chocolate Awards in Romania for their milk chocolate-coated salted capers. They've previously won a silver for their 64% dark Sichuan pepper and orange peel vegan chocolate. Manam is another strong contender. Besides winning awards at the Academy of Chocolate Awards UK 2024, the Hyderabad-based craft chocolate brand even earned a place on *Time* magazine's World's Greatest Places 2024.

Not an ordinary chocolate bar

Today, things are very different. Craft chocolate is on the rise across the country, and in just the last three to four years, around 20 bean-to-bar makers have come up across India, states Ketaki Churi, chocolatier and co-founder of the Indian Cacao & Craft Chocolate Festival. "Most of the small-batch, craft chocolate brands emerging, especially in South India, are from cacao growers themselves," she says. The upcoming chocolate festival has 15 craft brands attending – a mix of big players such as Manam and Mason & Co. and small-batch.

While there are universally-applicable theories to arriving at a wrapped chocolate bar, Churi argues that craft chocolate stands apart because of its attention to the littlest details. "Like, I could decide to turn the cacao beans more often, let the fermentation run for more days, or dry and roast for longer, play with temperature in the service of achieving a certain taste. But in truth, one only understands the profile of the bean once you've made chocolate from it," she says. "These aren't the kinds of parameters that large-scale, commercial chocolate brands care about." She is speaking from first-hand knowledge – of making Terra, the in-house tree-to-bar craft brand from Varanashi Organic Farms.

Only taste matters

The south of India has several regions where weather conditions are suitable for growing cacao. But despite farms in Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, India accounts for only 1% of the world's cocoa bean production, says Churi.

(Clockwise from top) P.S. Balasubrahmanya in his cacao farm; Anuttama bars; Partha Varanashi with his 65-year-old cacao trees; Ketaki Churi; craft chocolate; and a cacao pod. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

A reputation for inferior quality and poor handling of harvested beans have also plagued the Indian cacao story. But now newer hybrid varieties and better training are ushering in change. Sai Nair is an engineer turned chocolatier and the name behind Oona, a two-year-old bean-to-bar brand based in Uttarakhand. According to him, if cacao is grown properly, ripened correctly, mindfully fermented, dried with care, and roasted with attention, then it is going to taste good. Nair, who sources his cacao from three farms in Kerala, adds, "We can keep saying chocolate from Latin America or the Ivory Coast is better, but all of it boils down to marketing." He reasons that "taste is the only thing that matters" and if it fulfils this requirement, then it is good.

Nair points to our relationship with mangoes to attempt to pin down our budding romance with Indian cacao. "We have over a thousand varieties of mangoes in India; they are grown in different parts of the country in varied climates, resulting in fruits with an assortment of flavour profiles," he says. "While people around the world might harp on Alphonso, I'm sure most of us have had a mango that tastes better." Similarly, Nair urges us "to try Indian cacao beans from different farms and craft chocolate from several makers to find a taste that suits you".

Today, farmers and chocolate makers are nudging each other into bettering each others' crafts. The word 'terroir' is being thrown around in the service of creating legitimacy for Indian cacao. While Nair agrees that cacao beans from two neighbouring farms will taste different because of their farming practices (such as multi-cropping), he adds that it is "the interventions of the farmer during the processing" that creates the tasting notes of a bean.

"Farmers are making changes to the growing and processing of cacao [such as removing astringency from beans] as a means to test the value of the crop," says P.S. Balasubrahmanya, a cacao farmer in Bettampady in Dakshina Kannada District, and co-founder of Anuttama Chocolate. "Five years ago, Indian cacao sold in the wholesale marketplace for around ₹200 a kilo. But the few farmers who sold to craft chocolatiers priced their beans at ₹450 a kilo [because they sorted good beans]." Today, the price has doubled with "cacao beans for craft chocolate going up to ₹1,500 for a kilo" depending on the farm (with better farming practices). If a farmer wants to get greater bang for his cocoa beans, then he has had to learn, adapt and implement newer techniques.

Raising the bar

Such on-ground mediations by cacao farmers and chocolate makers have begun to pay off. "Everyone is curious, knowledge is being generously shared through channels like chocolate-focused workshops and festivals, and even equipment is accessible in terms of pricing and availability – so there's a strong craft chocolate ecosystem being formed," says Anisha Oommen, co-founder of Goya.

Balasubrahmanya sees the coming five years as being exciting for the Indian craft chocolate industry. "Shifts in the market don't happen overnight, but every year there seems to be an increment in Indian chocolate brands. And cacao growers are increasing too," he says, speaking from anecdotal evidence, where he has noticed "a lot more farmers in Dakshina Kannada returning to growing cacao after cutting down their trees around five years ago because of low pricing and the lack of a market".

The Indian Cacao & Craft Chocolate Festival runs Dec. 5-7, at Sabh, Shivaji Nagar, Bengaluru. Details: craftchocolateindia.com

The writer and poet is based in Bengaluru.

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

A LITTLE LIFE

When Phuphee made room to breathe

Sometimes you need silence to heal and thrive, and cups of *nun chai* and *makkai saott*

On a warm afternoon, we were sitting in Phuphee's kitchen toasting *makkai* (corn) to make *soatt* (ground corn). Phuphee would make large batches of *makkai saott* around late August when the last of the corn is harvested. We were chatting, when someone ran in shouting. It was a lady from the village and she begged Phuphee to come straight away as someone's *noashe* (daughter-in-law) had been possessed by a *jinn*.

Phuphee grabbed her *keep* (top part of the Kashmiri *burqa*) and the three of us ran into the village where everyone was gathered around Dar Sahab's house. Even from a distance we could see the youngest daughter-in-law looking wild, her hair flying around her. She kept screaming at her mother-in-law who looked visibly scared.

As soon as the mother-in-law saw Phuphee, she started weeping and asking her to cure the girl of the *jinn*. The daughter-in-law, whose name was Shama, continued screaming, repeating the same thing over and over again: '*Baeti ches insaan* [I am also human].'

Phuphee went over to Shama and held her hands in her own until she started to calm down. Phuphee then took off her *keep* and wrapped it around Shama and led her into the house. She asked the mother-in-law to make a cup of *nun chai* with a dollop of ghee. From her pocket, she handed her a small packet with *makkai soatt* and instructed her to put it in the tea. Phuphee and Shama went upstairs and an hour later, Phuphee emerged on her own.

'She is sleeping now. Do not disturb her. Let her rest,' Phuphee instructed them.

She took the mother-in-law into the kitchen. Ten minutes later she came out, and we left. As we walked back home, I asked Phuphee what had happened to Shama.

She motioned for us to sit under a *chinar* tree. She took a couple of cigarettes from her *pheran* pocket and lit them. After she had smoked for a couple of minutes, she said, 'Shama has a very serious illness. She has to have treatment for a long time. The treatment is long and difficult, and the cure isn't guaranteed. She is unable to do anything at home now. She cannot look after the house or the children or even herself for that matter.'

Phuphee went quiet and smoked her cigarettes. It seemed like she was trying to solve something in her mind. When she had finished, we got up and went home. Once she got back, she asked one of the helpers to bring us *nun chai* and *soatt*. I asked her if she had given the mother-in-law a *taaveez* for Shama. She smiled as she mixed spoonfuls of *soatt* into the *nun chai* for me.

'When I mix the *soatt* with the tea, it seems to disappear, but it is still there. It is the same with words,' she said.

Phuphee explained that Shama's mother-in-law had two sons. Both were married. Shama was the eldest daughter-in-law. When the younger son got married, his wife had become very unwell for a number of years. Though she had recovered and lived a normal life, she was constantly reminded of the time when she had been riddled with illnesses. Now, Shama had become unwell. And it had transpired that the mother-in-law went around telling everyone about how '*goednyeth aes laktyis sakhti, waen che baedyis* [first the youngest son had a difficult life and now the eldest]'.

Someone in the village had relayed this information to Shama. Upon hearing these words, Shama had felt a fire take hold of her heart. What had particularly angered her was that her mother-in-law had made no comments about how awful it was for Shama to be in this situation. Shama had asked Phuphee, 'Why when I am the one who is ill, is my discomfort secondary to everyone else's? How has it become about the discomfort of others?'

'What did you say?' I asked Phuphee.

'I said nothing. Shama already knows the answers,' Phuphee replied.

I sat there wondering what she already knew.

'But did you give them a *taaveez*?' I asked impatiently.

Phuphee sighed.

'Yes I did, but it was not for Shama. I told her the *jinn* had not possessed Shama. It had possessed her [mother-in-law] and the only way to kill it was through abstinence of speech. She must limit what she says to the absolute minimum and she must never speak more than two words in front of Shama because that would especially strengthen the *jinn*,' Phuphee said.

She then got up, gave me a kiss on my forehead, and said, 'Never, forget this. There is a special place in hell for women who deprive other women of their autonomy. Men make the shackles, but it is often other women who throw away the key.' And she walked out to grind the rest of the corn.

I sat there, overwhelmed. Many years later, I understood why she had shut the mother-in-law's mouth. It was an act that seemed insignificant, but it gave Shama a little space. In a world designed by men and propagated by many women, a world where women have no ownership over anything, not even their pain or discomfort in illness, Phuphee had managed to lift the mother-in-law's foot off Shama's neck long enough for her to breathe.

***Saba Mahjoor,** a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life's vagaries.*