

magazine

backpage

Patta-Bandha explores India's *ikat* traditions

GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE

Interview with director Raam Reddy at the Berlinale

GO TO » PAGE 5

LITERARY REVIEW

Colin Thubron on the role of the travel writer

GO TO » PAGE 2

Track the latest stories via #ThMagazine on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter)

Get connected » www.thehindu.com



GOLDEN GLOBES TO OSCARS

IS CHANGE IN THE AIR?

As awards shows battle falling viewership, the strategies are plenty: from shorter show formats and going live on streaming platforms to engaging social media influencers to conduct celebrity interviews



Festival highs (Clockwise from left) Actor Lily Gladstone at the Golden Globes; *Barbie* director Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie at the Critics' Choice Awards; the director and cast of *Poor Things*; and actor and singer Selena Gomez at the Globes; actors Emily Blunt, Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway revisit *The Devil Wears Prada* at SAG Awards; and *Oppenheimer*'s Cillian Murphy and Robert Downey Jr. at SAG Awards (GETTY IMAGES)



Aditya Mani Jha

In March 2014, actor and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres hosted the 86th Academy Awards, or the Oscars, and clicked a selfie where she posed with some of the best-known actors on the planet: Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts, Meryl Streep, Jennifer Lawrence, Angelina Jolie et al. The photo became the most retweeted image in existence within an hour of posting on Twitter, eventually racking up over 3.4 million retweets. The telecast on ABC drew in an average of 43.7 million viewers over its duration, becoming the second most-watched Oscars show in the 21st century (behind the 2000 ceremony).

For all the history made over a single evening, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which presents the Oscars, and its contemporaries have had a difficult decade since. Questions of fairness, diversity and representation, not to mention falling viewership, have cast a shadow on the relevance of movie awards in the age of social media. TV ratings have continued to fall steadily, with the 2023 Oscars reaching only 18.7 million viewers, less than half of the 2014 high point. However, 2023 saw audiences returning to cinema halls in a big way. This was as much a reversal of pandemic-era shortfalls as it was a result of marketing campaigns such as 'Barbenheimer' that promoted the year's biggest blockbusters – *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* – as a double-bill.

This year's movie awards ceremonies, coming right after the two big Hollywood strikes last year, have had to rethink their broadcast strategy and stay up-to-date. The 30th Screen Actors Guild Awards, for instance, was the first to stream live on Netflix. From the Golden Globes to the Emmys, they are all shorter now. In both 2017 and 2018, the Oscars show was nearly four hours long. In recent years, this runtime has been trimmed by almost 30 minutes. One workaround that helps reduce runtime is the pre-ceremony red carpet show – the Oscars now have an hour-long

red carpet that diehard movie fans and celeb-watchers can tune into, while the more time-strapped viewers can join in when the main ceremony starts. The Oscars have also taken the somewhat controversial decision of excluding a bunch of technical awards from the main ceremony – the winners receive their awards privately before the televised show starts.

Changed audiences

The awards season in 2024 so far hasn't been without its share of drama. For instance, the Golden Globes underwent a churn unprecedented in its history. Basically, the old voting body, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, was dissolved, and a few of its new members threatened to withhold final-round votes because they were told they wouldn't be given tickets to the ceremony. A new Golden Globe for 'Cinematic and Box Office Achievement' was instated, with *Barbie* emerging as the first-ever winner.

The BAFTAs (British Academy Film Awards), in comparison, came and went with nary a whimper – no upsets, not much drama, and along expected lines, *Oppenheimer* swept all the major awards, including Best Film and Best Director. The British press swooned over Deepika Padukone's red carpet look (in a Sabyasachi sari), and for a bit, it felt like order was being restored to the awards season.

"Viewing habits have changed significantly over the last decade or so. Earlier, people would time their day's routine to watch the live telecast of the film awards they followed. Now we're seeing on our platform a lot of people who watch the awards the same day, but not during American hours," explains Anushree Bhardwaj, Director (Marketing), Lionsgate Southeast Asia. Lionsgate Play holds exclusive live and streaming rights in India for the Emmys, Golden Globes, Critics' Choice Awards and BAFTAs. "Viewers watch when it's convenient for them, so I would say it is a combination of 'appointment viewing' and streaming-on-demand. The increased familiarity with American TV shows that streaming has brought about also helps."

While there are multiple factors behind the popularity of any awards show, Bhardwaj says the involvement of Indian celebrities is a big draw. "When we announced Deepika Padukone as one of the presenters at BAFTA this year, our engagement went through the roof," she continues. "If you want to make your show more relevant to, say, Gen Z, you will have to involve the right celebrities for that demographic. Young people will have that connect with Miley Cyrus or Justin Bieber, that folks from an earlier generation would have with Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts."

Newer award categories

The award categories themselves have also changed over the years. In 2001, the Oscars added the Best Animated Film category, which has proven to be a popular move in the years since.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4



From Matrimony.com Group



Exclusive matchmaking for Indian Elites

EliteMatrimony Presents:

Featured profiles of the week

A successful Business Tycoon,

with a net worth of more than Rs 1000 crores, who runs a businesses abroad and in India, a Tamil-speaking family, is seeking an ideal match for their daughter, 24 years, who has studied CS. Looking for a well-educated groom anywhere from Tamil Nadu, "caste no bar" from an affluent business family background with mother tongue, Tamil.

Contact Relationship Manager:
+91 - 93846 71774

A successful Business Industrialist,

with a net worth of more than Rs 1000 crores, who runs businesses all over India, a Tamil-speaking family, is seeking an ideal match for his son, 30 years, who has studied B.E / MBA. Looking for a well-educated bride, primarily from India, "caste no bar" from an affluent business family background, with mother tongue, Tamil.

Contact Relationship Manager:
+91 - 93846 71870

A successful Business Tycoon,

with a net worth of more than Rs 500 crores, who runs a business in Chennai, a Tamil-speaking family, is seeking an ideal match for his daughter, 28 years, who has studied MS. Looking for a well-educated groom, primarily from Chennai/ USA: "Reddy/ Reddiyar", from an affluent Business family background with mother tongue Tamil/Telugu.

Contact Relationship Manager:
+91 - 76958 10567

A successful Business Magnate,

with a net worth of more than Rs 1000 crores, who is into business in Chennai. A Tamil-speaking family is seeking an ideal match for his daughter, 24 years, who has studied BBA, "caste no bar" Looking for a groom preferably in Chennai

Contact Relationship Manager:
+91 - 74487 45888



Guaranteed monthly matching profiles



Dedicated Relationship Managers



15 years of matchmaking experience

www.elitematrimony.com

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK



Songs of love and longing

This lyrical novel based in the 16th century serves as both a queer-affirmative and an engaging read

Saurabh Sharma

Madho Lal Hussain. That this name signifies the oneness of the “dervish king” Hazrat Shah Hussain – the famous 16th-century Punjabi Muslim Sufi poet known for his exceptional, soul-baring Kafis – and the beautiful Hindu boy Shaikh Madho Lal from Shahdara (Pakistan) was unknown to me until recently.

In *The Sufi’s Nightingale*, writer, playwright and podcaster Sarbpreet Singh presents a fictionalised retelling of their love story. A heartwarming read, for peppered throughout this braided narrative told from the perspectives of Hussain and his “bulbul” (nightingale) and *mureed* (devotee), Maqbool, are Hussain’s verses, translated into English by the author.

The deft use of Persian and Urdu words in select places adds charm to this lyrical novel. Further, through this book, one can trace back the history of queerness in South Asia to an age and time about which nothing, besides the fact that trans people used to be decorated members of the harem, has been established.

The book begins with Maqbool expressing his jealousy towards Hussain’s love for Madho, who he sees in a pleasure house in the Bazaar-e-Husn mohalla. Not only does he feel “displaced”, he also finds that his melodious voice has stopped touching his master. Neither the ragas he used to sing nor the ballad of Heer and Ranjha manages to move his *murshid* (guru), who is intoxicated in the love of this young boy and roams around just to catch a glimpse of his divine beauty.

Society’s faultlines

Madho, however, doesn’t reciprocate the saint’s feelings initially. In fact, he rebukes him. Maqbool considers it shameful that despite this, his master relentlessly pursues Madho. Uninterestingly, back in the day as well, everyone stood united against love. It’s a tradition society continues



The Sufi’s Nightingale
Sarbpreet Singh
Speaking Tiger
₹499

to observe to date. As it gets a whiff of the affair, it outcasts the saint and shames him for his deviant desire. While Maqbool curses Madho for the sad state of his master in chapter after chapter, Hussain tells an alternate version of falling head over heels in love with the boy and connects this desire to god.

This fabulous tale not only reads as if a work of magical realism, it also highlights the fault lines of caste, gender, and sexuality that have only been leveraged to propagate differences, never to spread love. *The Sufi’s Nightingale* does the latter effortlessly, without being preachy, for an unpredictable narrative twist awaits its readers towards the end through which Singh deliberately or inadvertently manages to strike a conversation about transitioning (in the queer context).

A close reading may also signal how the initial refusal by Madho could be a result of the inevitable shame he would have attracted from his friends. And this eventually happens when they hurl homophobic slurs at him. However, all this is secondary to the book whose central theme perhaps happens to be managing one’s *nafs* (ego), as noted in one of the poems of Bulleh Shah (‘Aik Alif’), making *The Sufi’s Nightingale* both a queer-affirmative and an engaging read.

The Delhi-based queer writer and freelance journalist was trained as an engineer.

IN CONVERSATION

A BLAST FROM THE SEXIST 60s

Debut novelist Bonnie Garmus on creating a powerhouse of a heroine in her bestselling book set in the last century

Swati Daftuar

swati.daftuar@thehindu.co.in

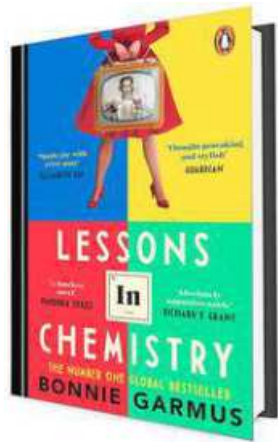
Lessons in Chemistry by debut novelist Bonnie Garmus has certainly left an indelible mark – it’s the kind of book that stays with you, fuelling ideas, and forcing certain conversations to the fore. It’s impossible to read it without drawing parallels with your own reality and lived experiences. A novel of hope, resilience and ultimately, triumph, it has an interesting origin story too. Sharing her journey with her first book, Garmus, 66, expands on conversations around feminism, sexism and storytelling. Edited excerpts:

Question: How did you take a bad day at work and channel that experience into *Lessons in Chemistry*? Was there always a part

of you that wanted to write fiction?

Answer: Yes, I’ve always wanted to write fiction. I wrote my first book at the age of five (it was very short and very bad), a full book at 12, a big book (700 pages) in my 50s (which never went anywhere), and this book, which I also wrote mostly in my 50s. But the rest of the time, I was working full-time as a creative director and copywriter. I found it difficult to be employed as a writer and then find the urge to write again when I came home from work. So in order to finish my book I had to get up 4 a.m. or 5 a.m. and write before work. Novel writing doesn’t pay well – 98% of novelists make less than minimum wage. So quitting my day job was out of the question.

As for the anger that drove the first chapter, I think anger is valuable, but in women, it is often described as rage. Men are assertive, women are aggressive



– a classic example of sexism. The meeting that fuelled the impetus for the book was another classic example of sexism. When I left the meeting, I was pretty angry. I began to wonder how many other women around the world were having the same day I was. Five minutes later, I started writing *Lessons in Chemistry*.

Q: Why did you choose that time in history as a setting for *Elizabeth Zott*? Or did she appear fully formed to you?

A: I chose the 1950s and early 60s because it was such a wildly sexist time period – the time of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. I wanted to reassure myself that we had moved forward as women in the world since that time period. And we have – but not nearly enough. I could hear Elizabeth Zott’s voice very clearly. I was writing my role model; a woman I could respect. She was not fully formed when I started, but she became consistent to me quickly. Her stoicism shines through: she’s smart, responsible, rational, and has incredible heart.

Q: There’s a certain understanding of what a ‘rom-com’ will do, an expectation. And *Lessons in Chemistry* is most definitely not a romantic comedy. But it’s sometimes been dressed as one. Was that, at least in the beginning, a part of this journey at all?

A: I never saw the book as a rom-com and was surprised when my American publisher presented that cover to me. I didn’t like it. I thought it implied the book was lightweight and girly, but my editor and publisher insisted they would never put a “chick-lit” cover on my book – that I was overthinking it. They wanted to make sure people knew it was a “fun” book, which it partly is, but it is also very dark and literary. I come

Wordsmith Bonnie Garmus worked as a creative director and copywriter for many years before she became an author. (GETTY IMAGES)

from advertising; I know the peril of deceptive images. Nevertheless, authors have very little power when it comes to covers, so my concerns were dismissed.

I still get complaints about that cover on a daily basis, both from romance readers who feel they’ve been deceived – they wanted a rom-com and got something entirely different – and from women scientists who refused to read the book because the cover belittled them. And male readers believe it’s not for them. In fact, the book is for everyone. It’s been a long, arduous journey to get people to see past that image. I think the U.K. and German covers are much better.

Q: How did you choose the voices in the book – the lenses through which we see Elizabeth Zott – and what guided those choices?

A: The other characters in the book made themselves known to me one by one. Each reflects on their experience with an opinion of Elizabeth Zott. Some hate her, some admire her, some can’t figure her out, others are fully committed to her. Elizabeth Zott is a catalyst; she changes everyone she comes in contact with, so it was important to me that readers saw her from these other angles. That way we could watch their transformation without noticing that she, herself, changes very little.

Q: She’s inspired so many people. What did you pick up from your own creation – did she surprise you? Are there lessons she taught you?

A: Elizabeth Zott continues to inspire me and surprise me. Because of her, I’m less likely to give up or give in. I’m also far more aware of the need for personal perseverance and endurance. Elizabeth Zott is not a victim. She doesn’t whine; she doesn’t pout. She acts. She stands up for what she believes is right and does not waver. Most of all, she’s rational. She bases her decisions on actual evidence and events – not fake news, opinion, or societal constructs.

READ ONLINE



“Nostalgia is a warm and very human feeling. The problem comes when

someone starts turning nostalgia into propaganda. Do not believe politicians who promise you a bright past.”

Interview with 2023 International Booker-winning author Georgi Gospodinov on magazine.thehindu.com

INTERVIEW

Travel writing in a closing world

Colin Thubron on why travel books will endure and what draws him to remote places like Siberia

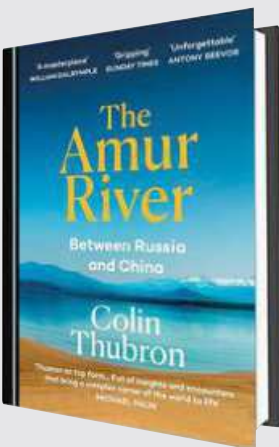
Sudipta Datta

sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

Colin Thubron, a sprightly 84, is forever trying to get away from a haunting ghost – that single white males should not be travelling to poor countries and write about it. But unwilling to be burdened by the legacy of colonialism, he has ventured out to places, the more remote the better, in Russia,

China, and also to West and East Asia, hoping it will be seen as an avenue of discovery. “Travel writing at its best is an act of empathy,” he says, at the Jaipur Literature Festival, while discussing his work, like *In Siberia*, *Shadow of the Silk Road*, and particularly his 2021 book, *The Amur River*. Edited excerpts.

Question: The death of the travel book has been predicted for long. Yet you journeyed along the Amur River



recently and wrote about it. Why has travel writing endured?

Answer: It’s a wonderful literary form of humanism, and if you travel with a feeling that the country has something to teach you, it will always be an act of empathy. The important thing is the quest, and with the world constantly changing, priorities and sensibilities change too, and a travel writer is in a great position to chronicle the shifts.

Q: Is that why you went back to Russia and China again, and travelled along the Amur?

A: The world may have shrunk, but countries are closing down and it is becoming harder to move around like I used to in my younger days, and I am not talking about my age alone. I don’t know if I will be able to travel to countries in West Asia or

Colin Thubron
(GETTY IMAGES)



Crossing lines

When faced with political extinction, Ram Vilas Paswan often used his ideological agnosticism to switch sides



Teaming up (From left) Then Bihar Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, Janata Dal leaders Ram Vilas Paswan and Sharad Yadav, during the party workers conference in Patna on October 2, 1994. (PTI)

Sobhana K. Nair
sobhanak.nair@thehindu.co.in

No one can quite recall how Ram Vilas Paswan came to be known as ‘mausam vaigyanik’ or the “weathervane of Indian politics”. In the Introduction to her book, *Ram Vilas Paswan: The Weathervane of Indian Politics*, Sobhana K. Nair writes that political commentator Abhay Kumar credits Lalu Prasad Yadav for coming up with this descriptor for his political adversary from Bihar, who would become the face of Dalits. Paswan used his ideological agnosticism to cross many political lines, as this edited excerpt shows:

In the 1998 general elections, the Janata Dal was reduced to a shadow of its 1989 self. It contested 191 seats and managed to win only six. Its vote share now stood at a little over 3%, six times less than what it got in 1989. In Bihar, it was in a pitiable situation – of the 35 seats, it lost the deposit in 27 seats. Ram Vilas Paswan was the only candidate to win. Sharad Yadav lost to Lalu Prasad Yadav from Madhepura by a margin of 51,000 votes. Bihar was neatly divided into the RJD vs NDA camp, with no slot left for the Janata Dal.

Guided solely by their motivation to defeat Lalu, Sharad Yadav and Paswan were ready to sup with the devil if need be. So when George Fernandes called out to Sharad Yadav and Paswan, they were easily enticed. ‘Paristhithi hi kuch aisi thi’ (the situation was such), Sharad Yadav said, giving himself a concession in hindsight. Realpolitik overwhelmed secular commitments.

‘Tacit understanding’

The Political Affairs Committee of the Janata Dal met on July 18 to discuss this tricky problem and the debate stretched over three days. The committee was unevenly divided with 11 of the 16 members opposing the move. “The idea of joining a BJP-led alliance hits at the very soul of the party,” said Madhu Dandavate. But both Sharad Yadav and Paswan were convinced that they would perish if they didn’t join the BJP-led NDA.

They smartly packaged the move as “reunification of the Janata Parivar (read Janata Dal)” and reviving the spirit of 1989. This was the sixth split for the Janata Dal in a decade. It is not as if the NDA welcomed them without any inhibitions. Many voiced reservations, the Janata Dal was after all the nuclear waste of Indian politics, forever simmering but without the necessary strength to detonate.

Paswan was of the view that the “corruption of the RJD and the threat to national security posed by a foreign prime ministerial candidate [Sonia Gandhi] is greater than the threat of communalism.” The very man who used to hector the BJP standing from the pulpit of secularism, now claimed that the BJP had changed. It is no longer

pursuing contentious issues such as the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the enforcement of a uniform civil code and the abrogation of Article 370, he claimed. When pointed out that the leaders of the Sangh Parivar, which included the BJP, had made no statement to this effect, Paswan said that there was a tacit understanding with the BJP on these issues.

These assertions were deeply shocking in the backdrop of Paswan’s vituperative speeches against the BJP from 1998. In the very first floor test that the Vajpayee government faced in Parliament after their victory in the February 1998 general elections, Paswan had voted against the BJP government. The government won the motion by a narrow margin of 15 votes setting the tone for an uncomfortable 13 months ahead.

During a debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President’s address, Paswan delivered one of his sharpest attacks against the BJP, beginning with his exposition on the dangers of the BJP brand of Hindutva. He scoffed at the “good cop-bad cop” binary used for Vajpayee and Advani. “If Advani is poison then Vajpayee is sugar-coated poison,” he declared.

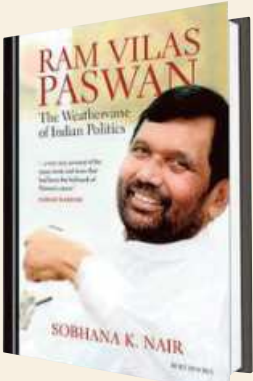
The religion debate

Paswan’s argument was simple. A nation cannot and should not have a religion. A ‘Hindu Nation’ that the BJP has been projecting simply must not be allowed to be erected. “Fire and water do not have any religion. They cannot be either Hindu or Muslim. In the same way, the nation is neither Hindu nor Muslim. If we want a Hindu nation can we then deny Khalistan?”

But when faced with his own political extinction in Bihar, forced by Lalu Prasad Yadav’s extended regime, the BJP’s communal faults had disappeared overnight. For Paswan and Yadav, the split and joining the NDA turned out to be good.

In the September 1999 general elections, Sharad Yadav as a candidate of Janata Dal (United) defeated Lalu Prasad Yadav in Madhepura. Paswan cornering 56% of the vote share was back in Parliament from Hajipur.

Excerpted with permission from Roli Books.



Ram Vilas Paswan: The Weathervane of Indian Politics
Sobhana K. Nair
Roli Books
₹595



Modern environmentalist
Chandi Prasad Bhatt
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

WITNESS TO CHIPKO

Chandi Prasad Bhatt’s memoir is both a chronicle of a life and a record of the long fight to protect forests in the Garhwal

Mahesh Rangarajan

Chandi Prasad Bhatt’s memoir, *Gentle Resistance*, is a remarkable book, by a man no less unique. Bhatt came to public prominence in the wake of the Alaknanda floods of 1970. Over the next few years he concluded that the “self-reliance and self-respect” of hill communities in Garwhal and Kumaon were tied to the fate of the forests.

The Chipko protests of 1973-74 had a longer background in the loss of control of the forest in the late 19th century as timber became vital to British imperial interests. As he writes most movingly, it was the large-scale road construction after 1960 that changed things in epochal terms.

He writes of how the surroundings of Joshimath had “bears hidden by the foliage of oak trees. Tigers were known to stalk the various rivulets. By spring time, the hills were radiant with the red and pink of the rhododendron. All these beautiful trees were brutally hacked down.”

Loss of forest cover

By 1970, for him, the loss of forest cover and the wrath of the rivers gave it urgency. The historic women’s protest in Reni, Chamoli in March 1973 questioned not only a contract for a specific company but the very

approach to control and exploitation of the forest with industry and forest revenue as priority.

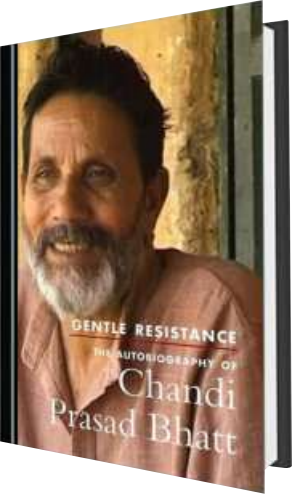
This is what makes for a fascinating read: it is both a chronicle of a life and the times of the author and a record of his long years of service in the Bhoodan movement under Vinoba Bhave and subsequently in forest-related initiatives.

The English book follows close on the Hindi original published in 2021. It is shorter and rather than being a literal translation, a rewrite of the gist of the original. This has been a meticulously executed project for the translator, Samir Banerjee. The black and white photographs tell their own story.

Rejecting hierarchies

The experiences and events of the early years of his life and milieu are of much importance. Born in 1934 to a priestly family of Gopeshwar Brahmins, his was a world of both hard scrabble struggle, and an awareness and rejection of deep-set social hierarchies. ‘Untouchability’,

The troubling part of the narrative is when he reflects on his long journey. The montane ecosystem is more fragile and construction is taking a heavy toll even as community bonds are vulnerable



Gentle Resistance, The Autobiography of Chandi Prasad Bhatt
Translated by Samir Banerjee
Permanent Black
₹895

a pernicious practice, was rife even as services of key Dalit groups, like iron smiths, carpenters and basket weavers, were integral to the wider village community.

But the austerity was real: when unable to deliver dues from customers for a well-off relative’s business he returned to his village. But the family was unable to produce enough from their agricultural fields, and it was only when Bhatt got a job at the Motor Owners Union of Garwhal that they could eat arhar dal and rice.

It was in the late 1950s after a march with Acharya Vinoba Bhave that he turned to full-time social work. This also meant that when he ploughed the land, he ate with Dalit labourers, prompting the ire of many for violating caste boundaries. The early phase that saw

the formation of the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Sangh in 1964 are critical to comprehend the roots and staying power of the later Chipko movement. The idea of village self-rule through voluntary organisation was an old Gandhian idea. The author’s pen portraits of men, women, events, and episodes are priceless. There is a self-effacing tone and a deep sense of giving others their due.

In 1959, many ideas, such as primacy to local needs in forest use and workers cooperatives to ensure gains were locally and evenly spread out, were spelt out in a report under deputy minister Baldev Singh. Later, in the 1970s, stalwart Chief Ministers of UP like N.D. Tiwari and H.N. Bahuguna gave their assurances to implement these ideas but that made no difference on the ground.

Peaceful protests

As Bhatt shows in the Reni case, it was individuals like Gaura Devi and other women protestors who managed to stall, and chase away, those licensed to fell trees for a company. Well beyond that, the cooperatives gathering and processing herbs and other products and the voluntary raising of broad-leaved tree saplings became the main stay in Chamoli. The movement as much as its method of determined peaceful protest had widespread resonance. Specific demands like an end to forest auctions were hard won.

The troubling part of the narrative is when he reflects on his long journey. The montane ecosystem is more fragile and construction is taking a heavy toll even as community bonds are vulnerable. But Bhatt’s book will stand both as an eye witness account and as inspiration.

The reviewer teaches History and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University, Haryana.

French Literature Festival at Auroville, Puducherry

On the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo, Auroville in Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, is hosting a French Literature Festival, which concludes today. The festival is a celebration of the French language and sensibility through immersion in its literature and culture.

It also spotlights how Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (Frenchwoman Mirra Alfassa) viewed France and India in the context of the world. There will be discussions on topics from French literary greats Camus and Yourcenar to Aurobindo’s thoughts on Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

The speakers include author and journalist Laurence de la Baume, JNU professor Mohar Daschaudhuri, French writer David Thomas, and others. The panels will be largely in French, with a fair bit of English translation for the larger audience.

The festival at the Unity Pavilion, Auroville, ends today.



Afghanistan for that matter any more. I have extensively travelled in Russia and wrote about it, but I wanted to see what the situation was on the ground and how these two countries, Russia and China, reacted to each other. Also, very little is known about the Amur, which is the tenth largest river in the world; Russia had once dreamed that it would be the equivalent of America’s Mississippi River, but it was not to be for various reasons.

Q: What did you find on the ground?
A: The situation is complicated. China feels treaties between the 17th and 19th centuries which gave lands near Amur to Russia were unequal and there’s resentment about it. The two sides don’t understand each other’s language, there is no inter-marriage, and

Russians in Siberia, who feel abandoned by Moscow, are afraid of being swamped by Chinese money power. I felt a great sadness for the people, the forests (incessant logging is on) and the river, which has been ravaged by floods and seen a depletion in fish.

Q: You were thrown off a horse in marshy land near Mongolia, where the Amur originates. Why did you choose to continue with the journey?
A: I knew I would never be able to return to this place again if I went back. So, I did the next best thing, I ignored the pain from two broken ribs and a fractured ankle and travelled onward, hoping to make new discoveries, which I did.

Q: Of all the countries you have travelled to, which was the most difficult journey, and where would you

want to go back?

A: My most difficult journey was to Afghanistan in 2004, while tracing the Silk Road from China to the West. I entered from Uzbekistan, and the northern part of Afghanistan where I travelled was the terrain of warlords. The journey became more dangerous as I moved west until no driver would take me farther. Of the countries I wish to return to, I’d name Syria: probably a hopeless aspiration at my age! But when I briefly lived there in 1965, it was beautiful, rich in history, and people-friendly. I did return to Damascus briefly, at my peril, some six years ago. There was fighting in the orchards nearby (I was woken each morning by distant gunfire). All the buildings I’d loved were intact, but the people I’d known were gone.

GOLDEN GLOBES TO OSCARS
IS CHANGE IN
THE AIR?

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

A common criticism of the Oscars is that they are reluctant to honour mainstream blockbusters. To address this, the Academy proposed adding a Best Popular Film category in 2018 but the idea was “postponed”. Till date, the proposal hasn’t resurfaced. Earlier this month it was announced that from 2026, the Oscars will add a new award for achievement in casting. Lobbying efforts are underway to honour stunt coordinators as well, with *John Wick* director Chad Stahelski among the prominent voices throwing their weight behind the idea.

A major attraction for TV audiences are the performances. I remember when, in 2009, it was first reported that musician A.R. Rahman would perform at the Oscars, there was a lot of buzz in the Indian media. You could tell that Indian viewers were waiting to watch the show just for Rahman (besides rooting for *Slumdog Millionaire*).

That was the era, of course, when “appointment viewing”, i.e. masses of people watching something at the exact same

time, was still a thing. Oscar diehards still talk about Hugh Jackman’s outstanding musical number from that year because it really was TV gold – celebrities playing the fool and parodying themselves. And the Academy does recognise the sway star performances hold; it was reported earlier this week that after several rounds of negotiations, Ryan Gosling had agreed to perform ‘I’m Just Ken’ from *Barbie* at this year’s Oscars.

The diversity strategy
Another major shift in the way film awards conduct their business has been in the push for diversity. Last December, the Golden Globes reported a revamping of their voter base with 47% female and 60% racially/ethnically non-white members. Non-English films can now compete for Best Drama, with *Anatomy of a Fall* (French) and *Past Lives* (Korean) making the cut this year.

Back in 2020, the Oscars released a 1,000-page memo that underlined their new inclusion standards for Best Picture hopefuls: In order to be eligible, they had to fulfil

Actor Deepika Padukone at this year’s BAFTA Film Awards. (WIRE IMAGE)

two out of four broad criteria groups. For instance, the eligibility standard around technical staff says, “At least two of the following creative leadership positions and department heads – Casting Director, Cinematographer, Composer... Writer – are from an under-represented group and at least one of those positions must belong to someone from an under-represented racial or ethnic group.”

It’s debatable whether these strategies will immediately translate to a larger audience pool, but it shows at least that the Academy is listening to criticism of its methods. The same could be said of the Golden Globes, Emmys or BAFTAs. Practically every awards show now engages social media influencers to conduct red carpet interviews and sell the elaborate affair to younger audiences globally. The SAG Awards had fashion expert Tan France interview winners backstage, and winning speeches were not cut short.

Come March 11, the Oscars will get another shot at redeeming themselves. Will *Oppenheimer* sweep the night again or will critical darlings such as *The Holdovers* or *The Zone of Interest* scoop up the top awards? With her standout performance in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, will Best Actress nominee Lily Gladstone become the first Native American to win an Oscar? While it’s fun to speculate about questions like these, the perceived unfairness/incompetence of Oscar voters isn’t really why the TV ratings have fallen in recent years. The real reason is a combination of changing demographics, waning celebrity power and a reluctance on the Academy’s part to transform with time. Luckily, steps are being taken to address these issues, with the hope that people return to the good ol’ days when they’d arrange their lives around a Globes or Oscars TV broadcast.

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

Movie critics weigh in

Film awards shows need an overhaul, they agree, before summing up their favourite moments



Raja Sen
Film critic and screenwriter

It’s been quite a good awards season. A lot of foreign and indie films are getting the attention. Except for the big ones like *Oppenheimer*, *Barbie* and *Killers of the Flower Moon*, the rest are films that may have otherwise flown under the radar. *Anatomy of a Fall*, for instance, is one of the most devastating and excitingly made art films with some visceral storytelling.

Most of the nominees are interesting. You know *Oppenheimer* might win in a lot of categories, but how many of those does it deserve to win? I would rate Robert de Niro’s performance in *Killers of the Flower Moon* far above Robert Downey Jr’s in *Oppenheimer*. Often what also happens is that the Academy might decide that it’s time for someone who hasn’t won before to get an Oscar. But overall, I am quite happy with the awards season because the nominations have opened up to a lot of foreign cinema.

I do think that because of the way awards shows are consumed – online, in Reels-sized bites – the speeches are getting a little too self-conscious, like they need to be funny. There are so many people who want their speeches to go viral or become memorable.

Also, it helps when there are surprise wins because then the audiences aren’t prepared: I am sure Downey Jr’s speech is being polished multiple times.

The format of the awards show needs to change because nobody is watching the whole thing. David Tennant’s opening monologue at the BAFTAs was funny and sharp. It set a tone. However, Idris Elba at the SAG Awards proved to be an uncharismatic host.

And the Oscars will be hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, who is not going to do anything particularly edgy. I feel it is time for the Oscars to not have hosts; let some luminaries from the world of cinema come in, facilitate the nominees and winners, keep it classy. Why do the Oscars also feel the need to be funny?

Having said that, I would be curious to see comedians like Dave Chappelle and Jerry Seinfeld host the show; Chappelle may make an off-colour joke but at least he will have something to say.



Baradwaj Rangan
National Award-winning film critic and author

The international movie awards season has become boring because there are no upsets; everybody seems to be thinking the same way about films. For instance, that *Oppenheimer* is the greatest movie on the planet. There must be someone who ranks *Killers of the Flower Moon* as a better film. That difference in taste and opinion is what makes things fresh and interesting.

The speeches have also become predictable. Nobody takes it as fun anymore, and it has become this serious, solemn thing. Firstly, awards don’t really mean anything because unlike in sports, art is subjective and there is no one best movie or best actor. That is what makes it fun to talk about movies, books and music, but these awards shows do not reflect that.

In his book *Cinema Speculation*, Quentin Tarantino calls out Martin Scorsese for what he said after *Taxi Driver*’s release, about being horrified when people cheered for Travis Bickle in the end. But that sort of cathartic violence is what the film was going for. So, filmmakers have long been positioning themselves morally, and with social media, it has become a game of sorts. People want to say the right things and use the right words.

I personally loved *Saltburn*, a film that was off the charts in the crazy-meter, but it didn’t get much attention because it’s considered “just a story” as opposed to a film that is about changing the world. Similarly, while *Oppenheimer* is being hailed, a Christopher Nolan film like *Inception*, a genuinely subversive piece of cinema that broke so many cinematic rules, wasn’t given enough consideration because it was seen as just a popcorn film.

I have been quite bored by most of the speeches this season. The BAFTAs had some interesting bits, like Hugh Grant’s. I miss the days when people like Hugh Jackman or Neil Patrick Harris used to put up these huge musical shows. I used to like Billy Crystal’s opening monologues a lot when he used to host the shows regularly.

(As told to Bhuvanesh Chandar)



INTERVIEW

RAAM REDDY’S
MAGIC REALISM

Men who fly with man-made wings and trees that mysteriously catch fire – *The Fable*, which premiered at the 74th Berlinale, explores surreal storylines and a secret

Aseem Chhabra

In March 2020, Raam Reddy – director of National award-winning Kannada film *Thithi* – started shooting his second feature, *The Fable*. The crew, including the two lead actors, Manoj Bajpayee and Deepak Dobriyal, had shot for three days in and around Mukteshwar in Uttarakhand, when the national lockdown was announced. While the pandemic had still not reached this small corner of the Himalayas, Reddy and his team found themselves stuck on location for three months.

“We took a lot of walks, played badminton,” Reddy shared last week in Berlin, where *The Fable* premiered in the Encounters section at the 74th Berlinale. It was a surreal experience, the reality of filmmaking



interrupted by an unexpected global pandemic that halted the three years of preparation.

In *The Fable*, Bajpayee plays Dev, a large estate owner in the Himalayas, managing fruit orchards that are

Film over pixels

As a period film set in 1989, Reddy wanted it to have an original feel – of the time and space. So, he took one more risk: he shot the project on 16mm film. “That was the stock of the time, it was the medium,” he says. “So I wanted to make it feel like we went back in time.” Using film must have cost more money, but he managed to get around it. “I believe in this transference of consciousness,” he adds. “So we, as a group, were creating a moment in time that feels a certain way. I believe that the chemical reaction of film captures that emotion better than pixels.”



Unexpected twists (Clockwise from left) Manoj Bajpayee, Deepak Dobriyal in *The Fable*; director Raam Reddy, and a still from the film. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



being attacked by insects. Strange developments, including mysterious fires in the estate, break Dev’s routine. But his life is enriched with touches of magic realism and an odd hobby the mild-mannered man finds comfort in – he builds life-size wings to help him fly over the estate and inspect it.

The Fable is a dreamlike piece of filmmaking set in 1989, where the characters cope with unpredictable occurrences. The film features Hindi, English and Pahari because Reddy wanted to use the languages spoken in the region.

Flying in the Himalayas
Reddy, who turns 35 this month, grew up in a coffee estate in the South, where he witnessed similar social organisations and class systems. He says he was “fascinated by the complex relationships

between the owner and the manager, the worker, the trespasser. Blending the story with the setting, and within the fragment of the real and magic realism, seemed entirely naturalistic. In this world, a man putting on a set of wings and jumping off a cliff like a bird felt perfectly natural to me, given the inherent mysticism of those mountains.”

The filmmaker transferred the memories of a coffee plantation to life in the Himalayas, and layered it with a childhood secret – when he was a kid, a cousin told him that he would grow wings at the age of 12. “I built a world that I wanted to inhabit myself,” he says. “All these things that captivated me, I wanted to bring them into a narrative, so I could live it through the film.”

Priyanka Bose plays Nandini, Dev’s wife and the mother of the couple’s two children, and a calming

influence on her husband. Dobriyal is Mohan, the estate’s manager and the conscience of the film, whose voiceover carries forward the narrative.

Reddy casting three cinema actors from Mumbai, and switching from Kannada to Hindi, is an attempt to reach a wider audience. He was also looking for trained actors, but with certain qualities. “Manoj and I connected. Apart from that, he’s transformative in everything he does,” he says. “We had a deeper connection on this project. He also is interested in some of the philosophical elements that I was keen to explore.”

Something in their eyes
Reddy had observed and admired Dobriyal’s performances for a long time. “With all of the actors I ask, ‘Is there a quality of transformation there?’ He is so reactive and fluid, the way he works with his eyes. I thought that it would be exciting to have someone with that kind of acting style within a cage that I built for him. Then you see the same thing functioning in a grounded individual.”

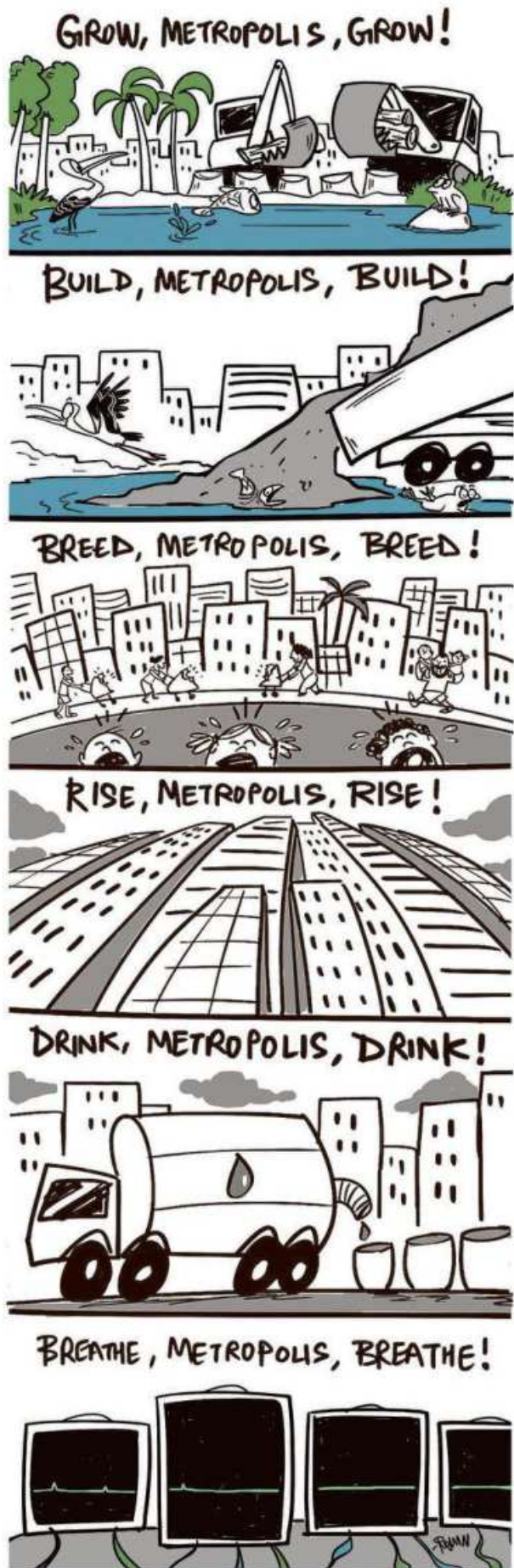
Similarly, with Priyanka. “Her heart was opened while she performed and that’s what the character needed. Her inner man was strong, not just as a character, but as an actor. I was drawn to her eyes as well,” says Reddy.

The strongest performance in the film, however, is delivered by Tillotama Shome, who is in the film for less than 10 minutes, playing a village woman, a mother, married to a suspicious character. “Her character really sits at the core of the story,” Reddy says. “The layers to that scene where she narrates a story to her children so they can sleep, are very important. There’s a reason why the film is called *The Fable*.”

The writer is a film festival programmer and author.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Sunil Rajagopal

This year, winter came on the night of Deepavali, in a sky torn by incessant explosions of colour and light. It came on the wings of a huge, slow moving flight of egrets swimming south, hugging the coast, underterred by the umbrellas of falling fire.

This extraordinary tableau was a reminder that our cities, for all their hazards, are not the sterile spaces we believe them to be. Increasingly, evidence points to non-human life actively finding ways to thrive in urban areas, often without our knowledge. One global study (started in 2017), which tracked 529 bird species, found that an incredible 66 were found only in urban areas. As agriculture becomes increasingly mono-cropped and chemical-dependent, even bees may be more abundant in cities than rural scapes.

Many of those egrets probably settled down with long-distance migrants around the Mutnukad backwaters, to the south of Chennai. On Margazhi mornings, the widening strands of yellow sand and restless waves in the creek are alive with white. While

WILD IN THE CITY
GULLS FOR
WEATHER
UPDATES

The annual return of gulls and terns is a sign of calmer waters and better catch. And proof that urban spaces can be unexpected sanctuaries for wildlife



gulls slice inland, terns rove bay-wards. Spot-billed pelicans kiss the waves like flying boats. Cormorants dip and dive while elegant painted storks and great egrets meditate in the shallows. Nervous sandpipers stalk at the edges, hopping away from the surf. A dowdy pond heron abruptly bursts into brilliant light on an upturned boat. A hefty Eurasian curlew, a sand and pebble-winged wader with feet the colour of the waves, is nearly

invisible till it tilts its head to unveil a slender down-curved bill.

Sign of calmer waters
Why are so many sea birds coloured like they are? The answer may lie in who is looking at them. Seen by prey from underwater, their white bodies merge with the bright sky. And when seen by predators from above, their greys meld into the waves below. Melanin makes the wing tips black and abrasion resistant.

Gulls and terns are interesting to observe because of their diet and

habits. Their population and movement patterns are good indicators of ecosystem health, weather patterns, and even ocean currents and fish movement. Experienced fishermen often track tides and fish by relying on their activity. At first, there is little to distinguish between gulls and terns; both largely white and grey with dark wing patches. Look closer and they reveal themselves to be very different creatures. Terns are delicate; sleek and streamlined with thin, sharp bills and wings.

Why are so many sea birds coloured like they are? The answer may lie in who is looking at them. Seen by prey from underwater, their white bodies merge with the bright sky. And when seen by predators from above, their greys meld into the waves below

The first in a series that looks at urban spaces as havens for biodiversity and often overlooked species.

The writer is an amateur birder based in Chennai.



Sweeping the creek on forked tails, 30 feet above, peering intently below for prey which they strike with steep dives. When not flying, terns rest on sandbars on short, non-webbed feet. Nearly a dozen tern species are seen in Chennai during winter. Many are migratory, like the elegant greater crested tern, the pigeon-sized gull-billed tern, and the smaller whiskered tern. The most impressive representative though is the Caspian, the largest of its kind, with a long flaming bill contrasting with its black capped head. These birds undertake their long annual migrations at night on 4.5-ft wings, with young birds relying on male parents to successfully complete their pilgrimage.

The sturdy gulls, meanwhile, are a bizarre blend of angel with devil. They glow with a translucent, other-worldly quality while meandering up and down on angled wings. Perfect, spotless beings, till they swoop down on an unsuspecting cormorant to steal its catch. They are raucous thieves and scavengers, not averse to bullying crows and humans. They do fish, often by ducking their head under the surface and paddling around like ducks on webbed feet. Here, the most numerous brown-headed gulls from Ladakh are in mixed flocks with their black-headed brethren from central Asia.

Winged visitors (Clockwise from above) A seagull; an egret in flight; tern; and a flock of egrets on Deepavali. (SUNIL RAJAGOPAL)

Alternate habitats
Bird behaviour is always in tune with their ecosystems. This year, migrants seem more numerous to the south of Chennai, due to the oil spill near Ennore in north Chennai. Gulls are smart and adaptable; many European gull populations are now exclusively inland, urban, and thrive on waste. Tern numbers, meanwhile, are falling. The recent State of India’s Birds report indicates a 70%-80% long-term decline for many of these once common species, a worrying sign for fishermen.

Such changes also raise questions on how cities are evolving. By 2050, it is estimated that there will be 9.5 billion of us, with 68% living in cities. We now know that cities contribute to the resilience of at least some species. Perhaps we could, with some planning and prioritisation – such as mapping and preserving existing vegetation and habitat, or having dedicated green spaces with native species – enable cities to become havens for migratory stopovers, and provide conditions to adapt to our ‘development’ and climate change.



BINGE WATCH

Murder in really cold places

There’s more than one reason why this sub-genre of crime and thriller TV and cinema is popular with audiences

The fourth season of HBO’s *True Detective* – subtitled *Night Country* – wrapped up last week with a stirring finale, one that underlined this season’s moody, atmospheric blend of whodunnit and psychological horror. Showrunner Issa López, who wrote/co-wrote and directed all six episodes, had previously mixed these two genres in her acclaimed 2017 film *Tigers Are Not Afraid*. Here, she picks the perfect setting for *Night Country*’s slow-burn, cold-case thrills: a fictional town called Ennis in Alaska.

The two detectives at the heart of the show are local police chief Liz Danvers (Jodie Foster) and trooper Evangelina Navarro (Kali Reis), investigating the mysterious disappearance of a crew of scientists. It may or may not be related to the cold case of a murdered activist from the indigenous Inupiat people.

The cast and crew shot the episodes in Iceland as well as in Alaska, both of which involved shooting in -20 degrees Celsius. The story is set in the two weeks immediately after winter solstice, i.e. a fortnight without the sun, amplifying the North Pole-adjacent

vibe. Both Foster and Reis anchor the story with impressive performances – Foster in particular nailing the role of Chief Danvers, who she recently described as “an Alaskan Karen” in an interview.

Harsh conditions
Why is “murder in really cold places” such a compelling brief for crime fiction? We certainly seem to have a lot of them. Noah Hawley’s TV series *Fargo* (based on the 1996 Coen Brothers movie of the same name) completed its fifth season in January, and is going strong with both audiences and critics. The harsh Minnesota winter and the region’s snowy landscapes are constant fixtures in *Fargo*.

Author Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander series of detective novels are all set in Ystad, Sweden, where the maximum temperature in winters is often 0 degrees Celsius or less. Arnaldur Indridason’s Inspector Erlendur mysteries are set in super-cold places in and around Iceland. 21st century cinema also has an impressive line-up of this sub-genre: *Whitout* (2009), *In Order of Disappearance* (2014), *Polar* (2019), and many others. A closer look at *True Detective*:

Night Country tells us the reasons behind the sub-genre’s popularity, and why it offers a technically sound route to classic whodunnit storytelling. One of the most important factors from a storytelling perspective is the lack of resources. Cold, remote places are unlikely to have high-tech crime labs, or prompt forensic professionals to hurry the investigation along. It’s much more likely that some hand-hewn version of crime scene investigation is in play.

Wholesome amateurism
We see an example of this in *Night Country* after the first three bodies are discovered frozen solid in the ice, a ‘corpse’ that’s melting slowly and needs the attention of a proper forensic scientist. Sadly, Chief Danvers doesn’t have one at her disposal and so, she asks one of her juniors to call in his veterinary doctor friend to come take a look. To his credit, he is able to confirm that the cause of death wasn’t freezing; the people were killed before they froze (“I’ve seen dead animals in the sun, and they don’t look anything like this, this is all wrong”). This wholesome amateurism adds a fun dimension to the crime-solving.



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

For more than 20 years now, I have been an extremely online person. My first real engagement with the Internet was through the popular blogging site, livejournal, around 2002. It was an exhilarating experience, being able to explore who you are, find readers and connect with people. I am still friends with the people I encountered there, two decades later, despite the fact that I have never met most of them in real life.

The entire ethos of the Internet then was its authenticity. The people I came to follow on livejournal were from all over the world and had a wide variety of interests and expertise: a roller skater in Dallas, a dentist's associate in Kent, a young student struggling with loneliness and his acne in Toronto, a secretary who sometimes turned tricks to make some extra money. They were all being their real selves online, occasionally making use of the option of anonymity and talking about the things they found difficult to in their real lives. At the time, the Internet was where you could be yourself and where you encountered other truths.

In the years that followed, the use of the Internet expanded to include conveniences. We trusted it to deliver us all kinds of supplies, manage our money, apply for jobs, find partners. If you met a person in real life and began an argument about something, you settled it on the basis of what Google told us. We couldn't trust one another, but we believed the Internet.

Cut to 2024. On my screen is the video of a young man reading a book. Totally realistic. Except, he's sitting on a cloud. On clicking next, I encounter giant woolly mammoths



Real or realistic, what's your pick?

As AI 'breaks' things, a counter-cultural moment is seeing people migrate from the digital to analogue

walking towards me, the snow they churn misting around them. It is so real that it feels like I am watching it on an iMax screen. These videos are the first public iteration of Sora, OpenAI's latest, an AI model that "can create realistic and imaginative scenes from text instructions". Meaning, you can just write basic

instructions in a tool bar and the software can give you a video that is entirely made up but looks real.

Real value of the Internet
In the last few months, such demonstrations of the capabilities of AI have been received with both alarm and admiration. The

adventurous and the evangelists have embraced these developments and immediately adapted to them and put them to use in making their lives more efficient. But vital concerns have been raised about its impact on jobs, privacy violations and automation of weapons. Some of us have been left quaking in fear.

Out and about Shoppers at a mall in Shenzhen, China; (and below) image from OpenAI's text-to-video model Sora. (BLOOMBERG, OPENAI)



To me, the primary question is, when everything is "realistic", what happens to reality itself? If I can't tell whether what I am seeing or hearing is real or fake, am I not going to just assume that nothing is authentic? And therefore, what then is the value of the Internet?

The first note that users of the Internet, as opposed to technophiles, express is fear of this technology. It is not just how incomprehensible such a future life is likely to be, but also the loss of safeguards that we had previously assumed. If our money in the banks is not safe, for instance, what is the point of the convenience of Internet banking. All of these concerns are seeding the birth of a counter-cultural moment of people migrating from the digital to the analogue; abandoning the simpler and easier way of doing things online and going back to the more

traditional means. The signs are already visible. After a dip in the years between 2009 and 2013, sales of printed books have shown a resurgence, while e-readers sales have stagnated. In India, some 94% of retail bank customers visit the branch at least once a year. Business papers report that not only are existing malls seeing larger footfalls, millions of square feet are getting added to mall space in India.

These trends are more likely than not to appear in other industries as well. Industries that have had its business model broken by the Internet are slowly making a comeback. I can't wait for the introduction of a well-produced magazine that is available only in print, an idea I have been touting to everyone and one that is being received with fewer eye rolls now.

It is inevitable that AI will break things first and fast. There will certainly be a new kind of life on the other side when things settle down. But I for one am glad that it is not my generation that will be at the epicentre of this tornado. Imagine being an 18-year-old now stepping into a future where everything is uncertain, not finding a job because a computer does it better and losing whatever little money you've saved because of a deep fake scam. For once, being older seems like a blessing. Maybe that will be something to discuss with my new friends in the line at the bank or while waiting for the robot at the grocery store to reboot.

(Do the AI stories scare you or fascinate you? I'd love to know.)

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



Sorcery in the air

Both vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a tournament in Turkey. A competitive auction saw North-South bid reasonably to game in hearts. The contract seems doomed on this lie of the cards, but there was magic in the air. The defense started with two high spades and a third spade, ruffed by

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

The bidding:			
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠	Pass	1NT	2♥
2♣	3♥	Pass	4♥
All pass			
Opening lead: Ace of ♠			
East with the three of hearts and over-ruffed with the four. Ruffing out dummy's spade winner seemed like a good idea, but it proved to be an			

his hand with the ace of diamonds, leaving this position:
South drew the last trump with the queen of hearts, shedding a diamond from dummy, and East could not defend the position. Should he discard a club, South would duck a club to East and set up his own clubs. East discarded a diamond, instead, so South led a diamond to the king and another diamond to East, who hand to lead

away from his king of clubs. Making four after a beautifully played deal.		NORTH		EAST	
		♠ Void		♠ Void	
		♥ Void		♥ Void	
		♦ K 9 6 4		♦ J 8 7	
		♣ Q 4		♣ K J 10	
		WEST		SOUTH	
		♠ 10 4 3		♠ Void	
		♥ J		♥ Q	
		♦ Q		♦ 10	
		♣ 5		♣ A 6 3 2	

Easy like Sunday morning

Into the wild

Berty Ashley

The Binturong or bearcat is an endangered species of mammal found in Southeast Asia. Its urine releases a compound called 2-AP, which has the same smell as something you would encounter in a movie theatre. What movie theatre delectable has this smell, which usually foreshadows that entertainment is coming?

This particular species of shrimp is a most efficient hunter, thanks to its disproportionately large claws that resemble a weapon invented in the 16th century. It sports a 'hammer' that when released, creates an enormously powerful wave of bubbles that stuns its prey and even breaks aquariums. Named after this weapon, what is this powerful shrimp known as?

This family of monkeys is shown onscreen a lot, including the monkey Marcel from *Friends*. They get their name from the fact that their facial colours resemble an order of Catholic monks who wear brown robes with hoods. The same order is also responsible for the name of a type of coffee, which has equal amounts of espresso, steamed milk, and foam. What monkeys are these?

The scientific name for this popular animal is *camelopardalis*. It comes from its Ancient Greek name, which refers to its shape (a desert animal) and skin-pattern (a jungle animal).



Photogenic mammals In Central America, these white faced monkeys, also called *carablanca*, are ubiquitous. (GETTY IMAGES)

What animal is this, that a few years back was discovered to have four species?

In the 1950s and 60s, Russia and the United States were in competition to send things into space. Dogs, monkeys and even jellyfish were sent into sub-orbital space. In 1968, the Russians were the first to send two animals onboard the spacecraft Zond 5 to orbit the Moon, before safely bringing them back to Earth. What animals were these, that at one time were travelling at 25,000 kmph, whereas on Earth, they are historically known for doing the opposite?

In all animals, it's the female of the species who gives birth, except in one case: in this marine species, the male has a pouch-like uterus into which the

female inserts the eggs. For the next 24 days, the father incubates the eggs, provides them with nutrients and eventually, gives birth. Which animal is this, whose name *hippocampus* is Greek for 'bent horse'?

All animals evolved to eat the right way up, so that gravity could help push the food down. There is only one animal that has to eat with its head upside down. This is because it developed bristles on its top beak to filter out mud and water that gets sucked in with the food. If it ate the right way up, it wouldn't be able to use the filter. What animal is this, whose colour comes from what it eats?

A Grolar or Pizzly is a rare, unique-looking animal that has existed in North America

since 2006. It is genetically confirmed to be the hybrid of two species that split thousands of years ago. These two species rarely meet in the wild, and the occurrence of the hybrid has been attributed to a single female of their species. Which two species make up this hybrid?

These animals are so weird that zoologists initially thought they were being pranked. They are mammals but have a gullet; they exude electrical impulses like fish, have venomous spurs like reptiles, webbed feet like amphibians, lay eggs like birds and glow under UV light like party goers. What wacky animal is this, that when wearing a hat is called 'Perry'?

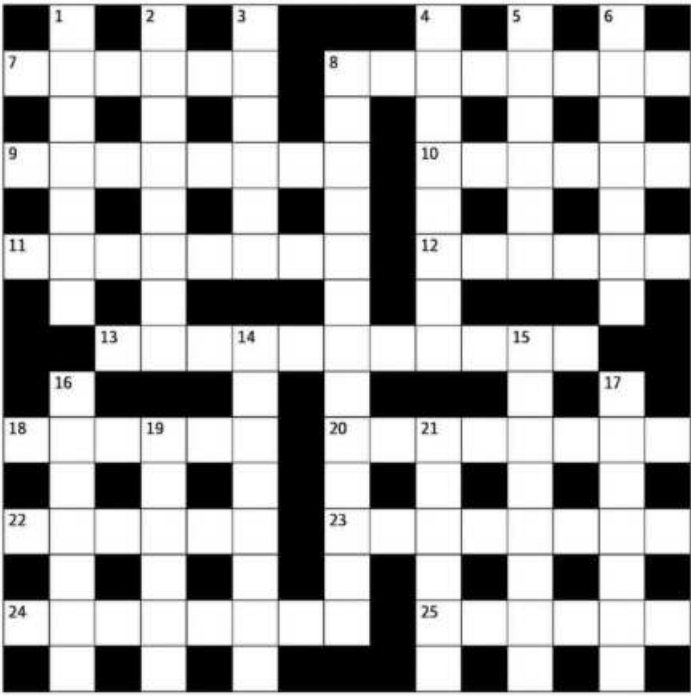
Turritopsis dohrnii is a species of tiny jellyfish found in oceans all around the world. It has an extraordinary ability to revert to a larval stage after having become a free-swimming adult. This ability has led to scientists to give it what name, which almost sounds like a cartoon villain?

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

1. Popcorn
2. Fright Shrimp
3. Capuchin Monkey
4. Giraffe
5. Tortoises
6. Seahorse
7. Flamingo
8. Polar bear and Grizzly bear
9. Duck-Billed Platypus
10. The Immortal Jellyfish

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3296



- Across**
- 7 Note you'll hear: warmer Mexican fare (6)
 - 8 I'm persuasive. Like a milkshake? (8)
 - 9 Cryptic clue for wolf - or pheasant, perhaps (8)
 - 10 Meal measures up perfectly? To some extent (6)
 - 11 In Korean capital, lacking energy, scoff seeing sweet potato pie, etc (4,4)
 - 12 Singular hawk, we're told, dined - but not at home (3,3)
 - 13 Old French president concealing origins of affair involving starlet: sauce! (11)
 - 18 With teetotaller absent, brunette prepared something with rye (6)
 - 20 Clown to stagger back: source of clip-clop sounds? (8)
 - 22 Put lid on whisky (6)
 - 23 Everyman 'a hilarious person'; did you say? That's ... sweet(3,5)
 - 24 Good job that's how some like their steak (4,4)
 - 25 Northern Europeans' roots (6)

- Down**
- 1 Some paratha, ricotta and a kind of bean (7)
 - 2 Rice and this curry can be arranged for Leonardo da Vinci! (8)
 - 3 Booze; aroma: roses - or latterly, oak, primarily? (6)
 - 4 Mostly chocolately dessert? In other

- words ... it includes lamb (8)
- 5 Form an attachment to rice, perhaps (6)
 - 6 Languish with idiot having assembled something for pasta sauce (4,3)
 - 8 I sailed oceans meandering to find Riviera speciality (6,7)
 - 14 Initially lacking punch (initially lacking): long time to get something to eat(8)
 - 15 Not finishing various starters of Italian endives, dressed like some tomatoes (3-5)
 - 16 Attractive people that are often fuzzy and usually stoned (7)
 - 17 Ship that may contain broccoli (7)
 - 19 Grit that's used for storing wine (6)
 - 21 Characteristic of Leicester ...? How to characterise some grins? (6)

SOLUTION NO. 3295





The travails of a woman officer

Fitting in is tough when one is considered a 'tyrant' by some or 'too confident' by others. Yet, facing challenges is all part of the day's work

Ekta Meemroth
mekta1990@gmail.com

You are a young and influential officer in one of the prominent Ministries in the country. Every day, you are looked upon as a decision-maker or as someone who will redress grievances, which are just two roles of the many that you are expected to play. Cudgelling your brains at any given time, placing signature after signature on never-ending stacks of paper, interacting with a complex mix of people, and partaking in a series of ghastly meetings – it's all in a day's work. At meetings with those senior to you, if you talk confidently with your well-known ardour, you will notice perplexing expressions on most of the faces. A sign of "You aren't supposed to speak that much, young lady" or "At least not with that much confidence". You wonder if you should have

remained silent. Then come the field inspections where, literally, a small army follows you everywhere you go and four trolley-men are with you all the time, making way for "madam". Anxious subordinate staff wait solicitously for the inspection to end. Some always carry a tote bag full of grievances while others appear quite content. Quadragenarian and quinquagenarian staff find it difficult to take orders from their young woman boss. This is partially attributed to your age, which is almost half theirs, and the rest to their patriarchal mindset and upbringing that clearly sets out the notion "a woman can't give orders to a man". Try imposing a modicum of discipline and you will be honoured with titles like "tyrant" forthwith. On the other hand, those higher up tend to downplay some of the brilliant suggestions put forward by you. No amount of hard or smart work will let you enter the "inner circle". All of these challenges lead to situations where performing even the most basic of duties becomes a "task" for you.

As a woman officer in formal gatherings, you are rather conspicuous; nevertheless, you suddenly seem invisible to those around you or they are simply disinclined to strike up a conversation with you. At the time of enjoying dainty treats and bonne bouche, you will be given a chance to start first but then you were never famished in the first place. Oh, they even cut a cake on Women's Day to commemorate the contribution of their women staff but you are neither asked to join in as an 'officer' nor as a 'contributor'. Due to professional obligations, you have to attend several after-work casual bashes with officers and their families. Every such gathering has two groups of officers: those who drink and those who are teetotalers; but, no, neither group wants a lady officer in their space. There is also a third subgroup, "the wives in-crowd". This subgroup is often seen discussing only-God-knows-what and giggling all the time in parties. This group doesn't want to talk to a woman officer and you can't join them either as it is an unwritten rule that "the wife is to be treated on a par with her husband's designation and with the same respect and decorum as what is associated with her husband's post". Any aberration from this rule will hurt big egos, and this certainly is the last thing you would want in a hierarchical set-up. So, amid the tumult you grab a seat, sit alone in the throng, in dead silence, pondering how as a woman officer you just don't fit in. Suddenly you realise you have a saviour to rescue you from this unbearable ennui, your smartphone. Then you go home, dump all thoughts in a mental bin and go to bed thinking about tomorrow. You wake up, pull yourself together, and pick up your armour again to face the new day.

Everyday management

How women in our lives teach lessons in effective use of resources

Ambika Shankar
awritingventure@gmail.com

Mummyji!, called out Lali, our house-help. "We are hosting a *haldi* ceremony for my son. I would love for all of you to join us," she said. While it might sound like a typical wedding invitation, this event held a particular significance. In South Indian households, there is a tradition of giving *vethalai paaku*, a plate consisting of betel leaves, *kumkum*, bangles, *supari*, flowers, and non-powdered *haldi* (turmeric), to married women during puja. Lali had been accumulating the *haldi* that she received from my mother-in-law for over a year. Remarkably, she decided to use this collection to make the turmeric powder for her son's ceremony. To me, she embodied the essence of an everyday entrepreneur, showcasing qualities that extend beyond the conventional understanding of the term. Many of us can relate to such women who, in their own ways, embody the spirit of everyday entrepreneurship. My father-in-law often praised my maternal grandmother as a walking management book. She ensured there was always enough in the house through effective management of resources and situations. My mother is another case in point. During hard times, she would ensure that the little money available was used sensibly, another quality an entrepreneur must have – maintaining working capital to keep things going even in the absence of incoming finances. My *paati* had a way of her own. My *thatha* used to buy milk in a small vessel. With that she made coffee, tea, curd, and even butter. As I grew up, I realised, that the magic was in management. Today, as I run a small start-up, I try to incorporate the things I learnt from them.

A powerful tool for introspection

Research supports the benefits of journaling, and psychologists vouch for its mental health perks

Sneha Sharma
sneha.gaud@gmail.com

When I was a child, there was an old Godrej wardrobe in my house that would pique my curiosity about its contents. It was kept locked and opened only once a year during Deepavali cleaning when we would be in school. Did it hold some riches, I wondered. As days passed, the curiosity grew. Sensing my restlessness, my father threw it open for us one day. The mouldering diaries inside took me entirely by surprise. Why did my family hide this junk? Interestingly, the ink on those yellow, moist sheets of paper was still legible, and the diaries sang the tune of my family's bygone golden era. Written in neat handwriting with a fountain pen, the letters were a testament to various family affairs – struggles, friendships, and collective decisions taken. Today, research supports the benefits of journaling, and psychologists vouch for its mental health perks. In a book titled *Opening Up by Writing It Down*, Pennebaker and Smyth survey the scientific history of expressive writing, its benefits, and how to make it work for you. They say that in the moments of feeling stuck, this powerful writing practice can get you out of the vortex of confusion and initiate a process of healing. Exploring the emotionally challenging

events in your life and writing about them continuously for 20 minutes can give you an authentic cathartic experience. This venting exercise can help connect the dots of myriad feelings and bring closure to an unpleasant experience. **Healing trauma** This is useful not only in expressive writing but also for a brilliant psychological exploration of our deepest thoughts, dreams, traumas, desires, and secrets. It also proves to be a great sleep inducer. But unlike what many of us think, the beneficial aspect of journaling does not end here. Reading what you have put on paper and tracing where your thoughts lead you to gives a peek into your personality – how confused, insecure, or solution-oriented you are. It helps you step back and create a distance between the chain of thoughts you have just unleashed on paper and a clear mind. When this happens, the problem-solving appears more straightforward, and the targets seem more achievable. Just like microplanning helps manage time better with an effective backup plan ready beforehand, tracing our thoughts and distancing them from us can help pluck out emotional weeds if we practise this process daily.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



The right to choose

Let's ask women what they want instead of making decisions for them

Amrasha Singh
amrashaasinghi2@gmail.com

The first time I wondered about the autonomy of women was at a time when I did not know the meaning of the term. It popped up in my head when I was watching

Tom and Jerry, a popular show in our early years. In one of the episodes, Tom and another cat try to woo a female cat and start to compete. No one asked her about her choice and I thought, "Why aren't they asking her? That would solve all the problems." Of course, the cartoon was made for fun viewing

Again I thought, why don't they just ask her whom she wants to kiss? Films have a long way to go in how they portray women. Movies such as *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* have a target audience. Some may say such films are only made for entertainment, but no one can deny the fan base the films have. These movies have protagonists who think it is okay to slap a woman. And some women are shown to consider this an expression of 'love'. Things need to change. This is not OK.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is truly a revolutionary feat of science, set to become a core component of all modern software in the coming years. ('AI at work: partner of rival?'; Feb. 25) This presents a threat but also an opportunity. Prudent governance at the global level will be essential to ensure that this technology will bring about broadly shared safety and prosperity.

K.M.K. Murthy

India should expose its youth to this emerging technology, and grab opportunities to lead the world on the AI front. We have already proved our IT credentials in the global market, and now should strive to be world leaders in AI too.

Atheerath Naineni

Contrary to the general perception of AI as a job killer, it is now increasingly being seen as a productivity enhancer in organisations across the spectrum. Particularly, AI has opened up immense possibilities for generating creative content. It can be useful in the tech domain too, where human intelligence has inherent limitations. Shamefully, we have also seen the advent of deepfakes. There should be a robust regulatory policy framework and deployment of necessary firewalls when it comes to emerging technological innovations.

G. Ramasubramanyam

Save mother tongue

Participation of people in 'Save our language' campaigns, as in the case of the Soliga tribe, is a prerequisite in conservation of languages throughout the world. ('Learning the Soliga alphabet'; Feb. 25) But

success requires the wholehearted support of governments and voluntary organisations.

Prajeet Dev Boinapally

'Truckloads of money'

G. Sampath's latest column on choosing between a Bharat Ratna and a Rajya Sabha seat explains the degeneration our country is going through. ('Bharat Ratna vs. Rajya Sabha seat'; Feb. 25) Sadly, the Bharat Ratna is sometimes bestowed on those who have hurt our secular democracy. Rajya Sabha seats are given to capitalists who can donate tonnes of money to the party coffers. There is an urgent need to reverse this trend.

P.H. Hema Sagar

The satirist par excellence has hit the bull's eye in his article. The suggestion given by his Amma, which led to the author's decision to become Sri Sri Sampathananda, was the masterstroke. The punchline – "I can get Bharat Ratna later also, even posthumously" – had me roaring with laughter.

C.K. Prem Kumar

Shrinking habitat

The destructive impact of developmental projects on the valuable ecosystem of the Nilgiris is saddening. ('Why gaurs are tumbling down the Nilgiris'; Feb. 25) With artificially cut mountainsides being dangerous for larger animals such as gaurs and elephants, it would increase the rate of wildlife mishaps. The Nilgiris landscape is renowned for its diverse collection of flora and fauna. Photographs taken nearly two centuries ago are a sad reminder of this beautiful ecosystem that is being destroyed.

Monita Sutherson



MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Grief the leveller

We live through memories of those we have loved.

Sudha Devi Nayak

Tea and coffee tango

Which beverage casts the longer lasting spell?

Nirmala Varma

The reality of being India's daughter

The struggle is constant and we plead for basic respect

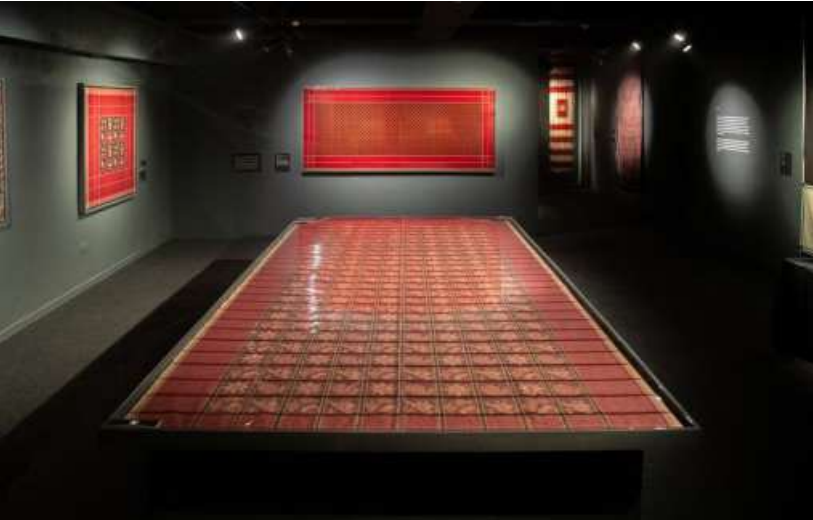
Ann Mary Devasia

The nature of faith

Its power must be used for good each and every time

Malini Seshadri

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.



Ina Puri

As a collector of *ikat* saris, I have a defining memory of the weave. An exquisite cotton *ikat* sari woven by Pitabas Meher, whose father Mohan Meher received the National Award for the design. In shades of deep red and indigo, it was inspired by a board game and replicated the motifs of the dice with script and numbers. I wore it to receive the Rajat Kamal from President Abdul Kalam in 2003 for producing the documentary *Meeting Manjit*. Later, I had the occasion to acquire more beautiful weaves from Meher, before discovering newer designers such as Gunjan Jain, and institutions like Meera Mehta and Pavithra Muddaya who have been experimenting with *ikat*. So, it is with keen interest that I have been following the progress of *Patta-Bandha: The Art of Indian Ikat*. The third in a trio of exhibitions centred around the repertoire of Indian textiles, it is curated by Mayank Mansingh Kaul, in collaboration with the National Crafts Museum and Hastakala Academy and Devi Art Foundation. On a cold winter morning, Kaul and collector Lekha Poddar walk a small group of us through *Patta-Bandha* (*patta* means thread and *bandha* in Sanskrit is to tie or bind) at the National Crafts Museum. We discover that the exhibition is not just a visually immersive experience, but a deeply researched study of *ikat*'s long tradition,

IKAT'S INDIAN JOURNEY

Featuring saris and ceremonial cloths, the ongoing exhibition at Delhi's National Crafts Museum is a compact study of the yarn tradition

contextualised through its geographical spread. "*Ikat* is a word of Malay-Indonesian origin that is now used to describe all kinds of tie and dye on yarn techniques around the world. The title of the exhibition is an attempt to give an identity to the genres of this tradition in India," says Kaul. "Through the trio of exhibitions, we are also trying to create an introduction to prominent Indian weaving traditions for a lay person." He explains that the initiative had been in the works for a while, which gave him the time to sift through vast archives to ensure that the chosen pieces were justly representational. While most of the 34 pieces on display were sourced from Odisha, Gujarat, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh – the regions famous for their *ikat* tradition – some are from the Deccan and Maharashtra too. Complementing the archetypal manifestations of Indian *ikat* is a group of works by contemporary



practitioners such as Sumakshi Singh, Akhila Krishnan and Bashobi Tewari. "Because of Devi Art Foundation's larger mandate of contemporary art, we have tried to mix the historical with the contemporary, and show that many



of the traditions are continuing," adds Kaul. "They suggest new possibilities for the tie and dye technique of yarns intrinsic to *ikat*."

Single, double and compound Scenographer Reha Sodhi's sensitive lighting of the *ikats* on display, from the woven saris to ceremonial cloths, panels, calligraphic weaves, bed covers, *rumals*, and fragments, is dramatic. She manages to create a niche for each, be it a Telia Rumal (*ikat* handkerchief) or Krishnan's hanging chandelier of threads. Among the many exhibits, a few stand out. Like the Mulberry Zari Saree, dating back to the late 19th or early 20th century – intricately patterned in single *ikat* along the warp in the border and tie and dye

Contemporary study

In a study in contrast to the conventional *ikats* at the show, Sumakshi Singh's *Spiral Staircase* (cotton and silk threads, hand tie and dye with machine stitching, 2023-24), a quiet palette of blue and white, explores the transformation of the imagery of solid architecture into tactile impressions. Another work that makes an arresting visual is Krishnan's *Naksha: Patterns in Space & Time* (cotton thread, paper tie & dye, in collaboration with Neha Puri Dhir and Govindbhai), and Rakesh Thakore's *Table Cover* – a textile designer's modernist intervention with *ikat* that highlights its mathematical precision.

Tied fast (Clockwise from far left) A cotton bedcover with single *ikat* from Andhra Pradesh/Telangana; panel by Sudam Guin, and a ceremonial cloth; Molkalmuru chukki sari; and a mulberry silk sari from West Odisha. (DEVI ART FOUNDATION)

in the *aanchal* – or the Molkalmuru Chukki Saree from Chitradurga district (1990s to 2000s), where weavers of Sokulasali, Pattasali and Padmasali communities weave an intricate pattern using contrasting colours between the border and the body.

A compound *ikat* panel in the Odisha tradition created by Sudam Guin, with a fish motif, catches the eye. Highlighting the Twenty Point Programme, which was introduced by the Indian government in 1975, it has woven English letters that list agriculture, housing, taxation, employment, and so on. Each woven piece comes with its own narrative, such as the exquisite *patola* created by weaver Chotalal Salvi and designed by Rakesh Thakore (one half of fashion design label Abraham & Thakore), as part of the Vishwakarma series of exhibitions dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, where the triangular motifs placed along a horizontal band in the end panels make for a stunning effect. Or the *patola* with betel leaf motifs – to be used as a veil or a sari – that was the preferred garment of affluent Jain and Hindu women in central or northern Gujarat.

Unlike the earlier exhibitions from the trio, *Fine Count* and *Vayan*, dedicated to fine muslins and brocades respectively, the *ikat* exhibition becomes especially meaningful when you see that till date, this textile is worn by the affluent classes as much as the middle classes. A fact that is reflected in the elaborately-patterned *ikats* and Telia Rumal with its bright red, brown and black checks, to the priest's *chadar* (shawl) with decorative devotional text. *The exhibition is on at the National Crafts Museum till March 11. A one-day symposium is on today, featuring a guided walkthrough and presentations by speakers including Gunjan Jain and Savan Salvi.*

The writer is a Gurgaon based-curator, author and collector.

Day trips to Kashmir's border towns

As the army welcomes trekkers and tourists to Gurez and Keran, one can see local life play out and catch glimpses of the other side



Gurez

116 km from Baramulla
The trip to Gurez is through mountains fragrant with pine. Some of the trees have strangely curved trunks, pointing to their tenacity to cling to the steep and treacherous sides of the gold streaked rock – reminiscent of the mountainsides in Ladakh. The three-and-a-half hour journey from Bandipora takes us through Sopore, a town that was once a hotbed of militant activity, but is now peaceful, alongside the Wular Lake, and over the rugged peaks of the Pir Panjal range. Security is tight here. Every now and then, an army truck passes us. There are several army camps; the one in Tragbal issues passes to enter Gurez. Then, you turn a bend and Razdan Pass opens out on to jewel-green hillsides. Several *bakarwals* (a nomadic tribe) cross the peaks looking for pasture for their flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, occasionally causing a traffic jam on the narrow mountain road.



A sudden mist envelops us; it descends like a cloud and we stop to take photos. Before we reach Gurez, we encounter the gushing Kishanganga, a tributary of the Jhelum river that is dammed outside the village. It is a unique, cloudy blue and is aptly called Neelum across the border, in Pakistan. The sight is stunning, and reminiscent of the fjords and lakes of Switzerland and Scandinavia. We turn a bend in the road and the village of Gurez appears, nestling in a valley between peaks that rise majestically. Gurez has a history of 2,000

years. It was part of the silk route between Kashmir, China and Central Asia. Today, it is a typical Kashmiri village with wooden houses. The army runs a canteen here where you can pick up burgers, chow mein and a watery cup of cappuccino. You can also ask for the staple Gurezi dish of steaming potatoes dipped in butter, which is delicious. The only other sign of urbanisation is the sign reading 'I Love Gurez'... possibly an army installation. The bazaar running in the middle of the village sells vegetables, meat and some basic winter wear. Tourists are still rare, which is why there are practically no hotels, but homestays and camps are plenty. Trekkers regularly camp here. I am tempted to sit by the clear river and meditate, but we have time only for a quick lunch and photographs, before we leave for Baramulla. It is dangerous to drive on these mountain roads after dark.

Sohaila Kapur

Kashmir was once known for its spirituality – and not for Pakistani militants and infiltrators as in the 90s. It was fertile ground for spiritual movements, be it the Buddhist, Shaivite and Sufi Islamic traditions, during the medieval ages. They knitted the secular culture called Kashmiriyat that preached brotherhood and peace, and which was lost after Partition. So, when the army in northern Kashmir opened a few border towns close to the Line of Control to tourists last year, I made plans to visit. Before these hidden gems are invaded by the curious. From among the many – Machil and Tangdhar, to Teetwal, Tulail, Uri and more – I picked Keran and Gurez: north-west and north-east respectively from Baramulla, the big city near the border with Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.



few kilometres on, it shrivels to a rocky, dusty trail. There is repair work going on. A stream runs alongside, in the gorge. Keran is an underdeveloped village, which is just waking up to its newly declared status as a tourist spot. There are a few homestays and tourist bungalows; camping is popular here too. Makeshift wooden houses sell Maggie and packaged snacks for the few people who visit, possibly to gawk at the Pakistani side. The curiosity is the same on the other side, which looks far more developed. Sturdy buildings with gaily painted corrugated roofs dot emerald green fields. There is a promenade with a railing and a black signboard that declares it is Kashmir, Pakistan. People walk about, admiring the view and looking into India.

A giant *tiranga* flutters in lonely splendour on our side. A bunch of schoolgirls in burqas sit chatting under it. I spot and old man looking wistfully at the other side. The lack of building actually gives us an unfettered view of the river and the Pir Panjal peaks – two belonging to India and the third to Pakistan. Plastic chairs are provided for those who want to sit in quiet contemplation. Two Kashmiri boys splash about in the waters where it narrows into a stream. One of them clammers onto a rock and flattens out to sun himself like a tortoise, with the waters raging below. People wash their faces in the stream and drink its water. After about an hour, we decide to leave. The path back is narrow and the terrain rocky. We fear a puncture, but we reach home safe.

The author is an actor, director and travel writer.



Keran

62.9 km from Baramulla
Next, we head to Keran in Kupwara district. The village is surrounded by dense forests, which have been used by militants to infiltrate into India. Security is still a major concern, so the route is through a huge army camp with a helipad,

which issues passes to enter the area. As we make our way through, we see a large number of soldiers undergoing combat training. Most are from South India or Rajasthan; there are few Kashmiris in the army. The route is breathtaking, through thickly forested deodar trees. The road is metalled, but a