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magazine

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Sometimes, beauty gets in the way of functionality. I found Bengaluru's T1 has a cleaner Swiss design celebrating natural lighting, while T2 is more bejewelled but takes very long to navigate. T1 is also easier to maneuver from entrance to gate

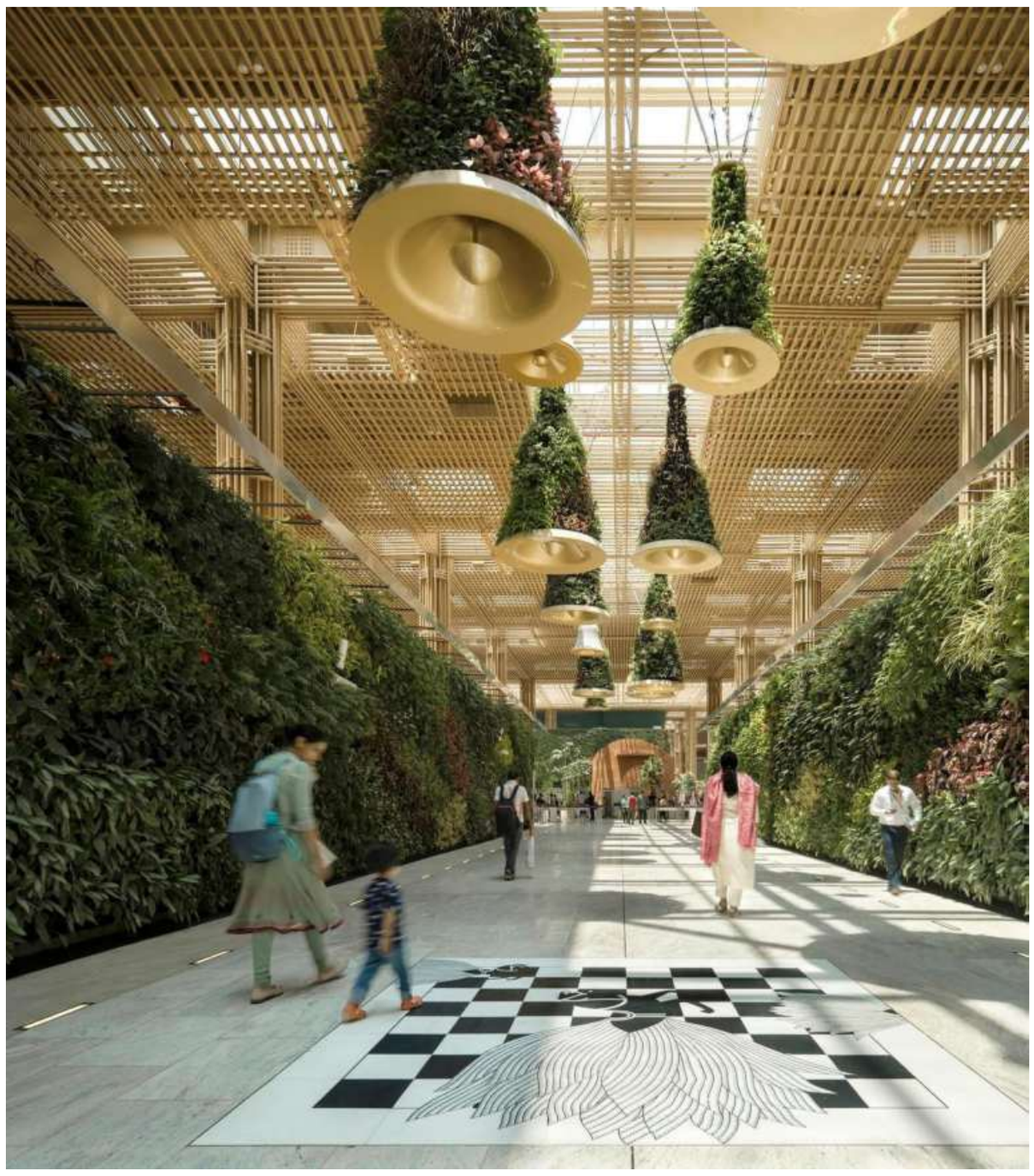
CHITRA VISHWANATH
Architect

Spot the sunflower

This unique programme helps travellers with hidden disabilities (low vision, autism, dementia, hearing loss) receive special assistance. Started at the U.K.'s Gatwick Airport in 2016, the programme is available at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad, and the Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru. Typically, a counter at the entrance will hand out a sunflower motif lanyard or button, and all wearers are then assisted to a separate gate, following protocols but with assistance.

Walking through Bengaluru T2 feels like the holiday begins the moment you step through the doors. It is beautiful, vibrant, and alive with greenery; I love the cane and bamboo, which give it this warm, earthy charm. The only missing thing is complimentary buggies for seniors who don't necessarily depend on wheelchairs, but find it difficult to walk long distances. That simple gesture would make an already wonderful experience absolutely perfect

DIPTI VARMA NARAIN
Founder, The Silver Surfers Club



Design forward (Clockwise from left) Bamboo and lush greenery at Kempegowda International Airport's Terminal 2 in Bengaluru; Mumbai's T2 terminal; and inside the newly launched Navi Mumbai International Airport. (EKANSH GOEL AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

ARE INDIA'S AIRPORTS READY TO TAKE OFF?

The new terminals at Navi Mumbai, Guwahati and Bengaluru are raking in awards for design. But despite the many innovations at Indian airports, are we on a par with the rest of the world?

Anisha Menezes

Actor and director Revathy loves flying from Kochi International Airport – and she flies for work at least twice a month. "It is designed in such a way that it has a single floor for most processes and you go through so easily. Even the pick-up area for cabs is organised so well," she says. It handles 180-225 flights per day as compared to bigger airports like Delhi and Bengaluru, which handle 800 to 1,450, respectively. "Goa's airport was also comfortable when I flew from there with my parents, who both used wheelchairs. But Bengaluru's T2, while beautiful, is too long a walk!"

For millions of Indians who choose to fly, airport design is crucial. It makes all the difference between a pleasant travel experience and one filled with stress, serpentine queues and dimly lit interiors. Airport architecture and design are no longer about just efficiency. Today, globally, the focus is on modernising terminals, enhancing sustainability, and creating intuitive design to improve passenger experience. And India is catching up, even while collapsed roofs and glass panels shattering continue to make headlines.

Big three in the news

Indian airports, in fact, are having a moment – and not just on social media, where newer builds are attracting likes, views and kudos for their biophilic design, craft, and sustainability-forward expressions. This month, the inauguration of the Navi Mumbai International Airport signalled a step forward in hi-tech airport design rooted in Indian tradition and exemplary performance.

Designed by Zaha Hadid Architects, its lotus-inspired geometry and dual column system are striking. The lotus takes the form of 12 sculptural columns with anchors that rise like unfurling petals, while 17 mega columns carry the weight of the concentric petal-like roof canopies. Each roof segment is modelled to manage daylight, wind pressure, and monsoon drainage. Inside, among other design interventions, the check-in hall uses light architecture – such as hollow columns that act as vertical light wells, drawing sunlight deep into the passenger halls – to lend an airiness to the space.

Last month, at the International Architecture Awards in Athens, Guwahati International Airport's Terminal 2 was feted for its cultural storytelling. Inspired by Assam's role as the 'gateway to the Northeast', it draws on the resilience of local bamboo and the elegance of its orchids for its design. "The *kopou phool* or foxtail orchid is a symbol of beauty and celebration, and Assamese women wear it during the Bihu festival. In the terminal's design, this elegance is paired with the versatility of bamboo," explains Nuru Karim, principal architect of Mumbai-based Nudes Architecture, who designed the soon-to-be-inaugurated terminal.

Karim roped in local craftspeople to work on the bamboo structures, and made sure motifs from the region found pride of place – from the traditional *jaapi* (headgear fashioned from the leaves of palm trees) featured across the terminal's decor, to the wall panelling that integrates the *gamocha* pattern with its lovely interplay of red and white. Another highlight: a 'sky forest'. "The landscape design features tropical and subtropical plants native to Assam, alongside bamboo groves and flowering shrubs," shares Karim.

But before it all, there was Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport Terminal 2, which made headlines in 2023 when it bagged the prestigious Prix Versailles Special Prize for an Interior for bringing the 'garden' into the airport terminal. From bamboo bells suspended from high ceilings dripping with local plants, to lantana elephants and even an indoor waterfall and cactus garden, the design was carefully curated to reflect conversations with locals, says Peter Lefkovits, principal architect at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM). "We spoke with people who grew up in the city and reminisced about tree-lined streets and a certain nostalgic longing for that era. Our aspiration for the terminal was to integrate sustainability using locally sourced materials – ivory brown granite, umber red bricks, and steel, and integrate local art forms." Between the gate concourses and the terminal building, the "forest belt" spans a 90-metre-wide stretch of planted landscape as passengers cross open-air bridges.

No longer just transit hubs

Once upon a time, airports were purely functional, focused on operations and with limited design thinking. Delhi-based architect Gautam Bhatia recalls when the airport was "a derelict warehouse of a building that came alive only when a plane arrived. Even then, both the facilities and the staff were skeletal and essential to basic operations. Baggage was handled manually, passengers never frisked".

Today, however, with India's air traffic exceeding 350 million in 2024, the country has the third-largest aviation market globally. To meet this robust growth, airport architecture cannot be just about aesthetics.

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GETTY IMAGES

SHORTLISTED FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE 2025

SECRETS IN THE DARK

With almost Márquezian descriptions, Susan Choi lends elegance to this story about a migrant family while lifting it from its political moorings

Radhika Oberoi

In an age of books that cavort for attention on social media, an age that must categorise each book through cute posts that guide the choices of fickle readers, Susan Choi's *Flashlight* is a rare novel. An immediate reason for its remarkable appeal is that it slips through taxonomies. It could be a political thriller, but it is also an extravagant tale of migrants, spanning decades, its edges blurred by trance-like recollections.

Parts of it tell of the childhood and youth of its protagonists, so one might be tempted to call it a bildungsroman, but it isn't. Childhoods are truncated by traumas that must be dealt with, and coming-of-age is a jolt rather than a joyous unfurling.

Shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize, *Flashlight* opens with a brief description of 10-year-old Louisa and her father walking on a breakwater on a beach in Japan. He holds a flashlight in one hand, and grips Louisa's fingers with his other hand. The night is cold, "...the sunset has lost all its warmth and is only a paleness against the horizon. They'll turn back soon." What happens subsequently, in that seaside town where Louisa and her parents have rented a small house in the summer of 1978, underpins the events of the novel. Her father Serk (also Seok and Hiroshi) disappears; it is presumed that he has drowned. Louisa is found on the beach, hypothermic, her mouth full of sand.

Where is home?

Flashlight unspools in sections that depict the histories and present circumstances of its characters. Serk Kang, an ethnic Korean originally named Seok, grows up in Japan, and attends a school that bestows upon him a new name – Hiroshi – a name he loves for its phonetic cadence, for the way it stretches out when it is hollered on the streets by his friends: "Hiroshiiiii!"

Serk's parents, who are from Jeju Island in South Korea, set sail for North Korea, hoping to find a socialist utopia: a flourishing economy, high-rise apartments, jobs. Serk immigrates to the U.S., an earnest doctoral candidate in electrical engineering. He meets and marries Anne, who works for an academic as a transcriptionist, and whose young life is marred by the anguish of getting pregnant at 19 and being compelled to let go of the baby.

Each character in *Flashlight* is a repository of secrets, or of memories that moulder, aching to be shared. Serk isn't aware of the existence of Tobias, Anne's child from a former love affair. Anne longs to know about Serk's childhood in Japan, but, "His stories were devoid of other people; they contained just one small boy, alone."

The family at the epicentre of *Flashlight*'s intricate geopolitical plot-line – Serk, Anne and their only child Louisa – relocates temporarily to Japan in 1978, when the state college that employs Serk sends him there as visiting faculty. Louisa, precocious and endlessly inquisitive, adapts swiftly to her new geography and circumstances, even though the town they are in is a crowded outpost. Her Japanese improves; she begins to feel Japanese. "Of course, being called 'American' in the marketplace ruined it," the narrative divulges.

Author Susan Choi (GETTY IMAGES)

A glimmer of hope

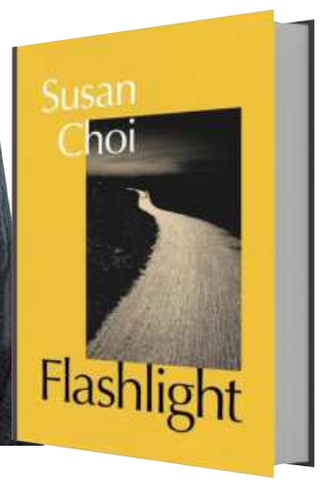
Choi recreates the streets and local markets with tender, almost mythical details, as though the characters that inhabit the bustling outdoors belong to a fairytale, and have strayed into this story of bitter nations and their festering grudges to lend it a fleeting magic.

When Anne, increasingly immobilised by a chronic illness, embarks upon a rare, brief expedition of the streets with Tobias, who reappears in her life, she discovers cluttered storefronts with "...some oblivious shrunken grandpa propped on a stool in his jock shorts, watching a tiny TV, with all the unselfconsciousness of a man in utter solitude..." There is a local temple suffused with the fragrance of steamed rice, kept in bowls for the female prophet who lingers there. Choi is spectacular, almost Márquezian in her descriptions, her long sentences winding through surreal topographies with the ease of a river that knows its course.

Apart from the granularity and elegance of its landscaping, there are other narrative abstractions that lift the novel from its political moorings. For instance, Choi frames scenes and interactions in varying degrees of light – partial, shuddering, striped. The flashlight is a recurrent conceit in the novel, appearing in the consultation room of a child psychologist, at the beach where the prefecture police and neighbours search for Serk and Louisa, at a séance in a youth hostel in London, years later.

But there is other light, a natural, mellow illumination that offers molecules of warmth, and peace. When Serk and Louisa set out for the beach, Anne is seated on a chair outside the front door: "The swollen sun, sinking low in the sky, dull and orange as a persimmon, pours its warmth onto Anne and she closes her eyes." *Flashlight* is radiant with these pinpricks of light even as its protagonists flail in the dark.

The reviewer is the author of two critically-acclaimed novels.



Flashlight
Susan Choi
Jonathan Cape
₹899

GETTY IMAGES

Know thy villain

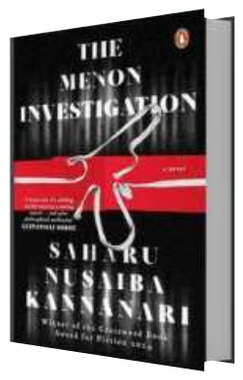
In this police procedural set in Kerala, male protagonists are the victims of an unjust patriarchal society

Sumana Mukherjee

Quick, without thinking too much, name the one villain in your life that's also a villain in every Indian's life, whether they acknowledge it or not. That's right, it's the patriarchy. Easy answer – but try framing it in a crime novel and it's likely even the sharpest mind will stumble. After all, how do you state afresh what everyone already knows?

That's where author Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari's genius lies: in laser-eyeing through all the hypocrisies of Indian society and arriving at the nub of the pain. The title of his new novel, *The Menon Investigation*, might seem specific, but it is a "multi" entendre, a reference to the lead policeman handling a cold case, a deep-dive into his psyche, and into the society that created him. The result is an unsettling novel that pushes the boundaries of genre fiction while still being respectful of fan sensitivities.

Cold cases have long been a favourite of crime writers for the page and for the screen. For one, it allows investigators – and, consequently, fiction-writers – to take out the drudgery of police work and focus on the cerebral. That is how we first encounter IG Vijay Menon, as he ruminates over the case while waiting for his little blue pill to take effect for his patient wife, the forensic surgeon Padmini Menon.



The Menon Investigation
Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari
Penguin/Viking
₹599

Eight years ago, a senior policeman by the name of Kannan Moses was shot, stabbed and burnt to death on a beach near Kozhikode. The initial probe went nowhere. Now Menon has been entrusted the responsibility for closure – but he knows it does not come without strings attached.

"He knew that investigating the investigation was an arduous task... You end up either investigating the previous investigators, or proving them incompetent by solving the case, or climaxing in front of a door you cannot dare to knock on. The end result is always bitterness or humiliation."

Shot at society

How Menon traverses this tricky road – while simultaneously dealing with a related crisis on the home front – comprises the bulk of the novel. But Kannanari splits the focus with one of the perpetrating criminals and, in doing so, gently pushes us to consider them both – as well as the murdered Moses – as victims of a merciless, caste-ridden patriarchy.

To position male protagonists in such a light is not an easy task, but the author's intimate knowledge of Kerala – and larger Indian society – informs these passages with a bitter cynicism that all readers must admit to be true and justified.

To learn about a people, read their crime fiction, a wise person once said. *The Menon Investigation* validates the observation through and through. If I have one quibble (okay, two), it is the Tharoorism – for want of a better term – that afflicts the author. He displays a special fondness for random big words (I was undone by 'snollygosters' and 'rufous mumu' and 'biweekly titivation', meaning grooming), which do not showcase erudition as much as an acquaintance with the thesaurus.

The second quibble is about the woeful under-use of Padmini Menon – but one can hope she will get more play in further instalments of the life of Vijay Menon. That is, if the outcome of this case has not shot, stabbed and burnt his career already.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based writer and editor.

History of fragile humans

The poet's understanding of people results in a collection of over 200 verses both profound and affecting in its restraint

Kinshuk Gupta

The litmus test of any poem is how smoothly it turns the inane into the profound, the crepuscular into the scintillating. Lines like *the roof comes down on Maruti's head* or *a bug perched on a statue's toe* ('Jejuri'; Arun Kolatkar) conjure myth, memory, and irony in the same breath. Poets like Wendy Cope, Jane Hirshfield, and Raymond Antrobus have also located lyricism and luminosity in the quiet corners of daily life.

In his third book of poetry, *A Different Story*, Amlanjyoti Goswami takes his place in this lineage of poets. He plays the cartographer, writing poems that appear simple on the surface but often hold profound moments of reflection, wisdom, or wonder. Much like the yellow-lit windows on the cover – each framing silhouettes of people inhabiting the same time zone in their own solitary rhythms – Goswami offers swift, impressionistic sketches of the city and its quotidian characters.

Some of the strongest poems in the collection are rooted in myth and memory, where personal and collective histories collide in surprising, lyrical ways. At a time when fact and fiction are so often blurred, and history has become a contested terrain, it is the disruptive power of myth that Goswami channels. The opening poem, 'History Points', reads almost like an invocation: *I like the kind of history...that passes from mouth to mouth like a long curved line / Zigzagging across the years, a river that grows with time*.

A Different Story
Amlanjyoti Goswami
Poetrywala
₹499

Pulsing cityscapes

This conversation about history is complicated by the poet's Northeastern ancestry, where *there was no news of tomorrow*, lending the verses a haunted interiority. Poems like 'Final Settlement' – written in the shadow of the Bhopal Gas Disaster – drag forgotten, bloodied histories back into public memory.

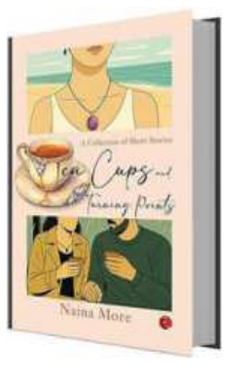
Goswami's strength also lies in his understanding of human fragility. The poems about his mother's death are powerful and affecting in their restraint. In another striking piece, 'Graduation Day', a granddaughter's convocation is juxtaposed with her grandmother's request for a second helping of lentils. *More dal, please*, she says. The poet draws a gentle contrast between ceremony and sustenance, showing how two people living parallel lives construct meaning through diverse gestures, both grand and small.

At the same time, however, one feels that the book might have benefited from a more refined selection. Strong verses alternate with less memorable ones, diluting the impact of an otherwise powerful collection of over 200 poems. And yet, the book cements Goswami's position as a poet who observes dispassionately and listens closely and in doing that, holds testimony to the city, its pulsing history, and to the silence that speaks between people.

The reviewer is the author of the Hindi short story collection Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chor Darwaja.

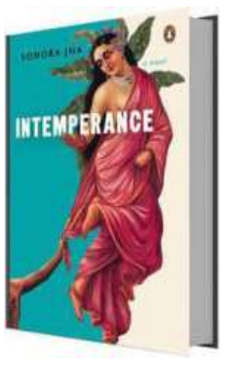
BROWSER

Tea Cups and Turning Points
Naina More
Rupa
₹395
A TEDx speaker and life coach, More's debut book is a collection of short stories exploring familial bonds and the courage it takes to either stay in or walk away from relationships. The author says her book is an invitation to pause, and to feel.

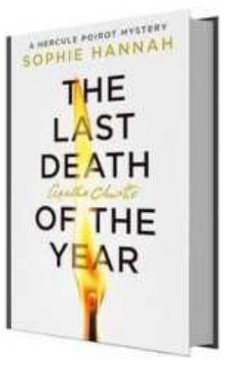


Lonely People Meet
Sayantan Ghosh
Bloomsbury
₹399
The debut novelist explores a shadowy world where identities can be rented and memories can be fabricated. Set in Delhi, the story asks how far one will go for love, even as the protagonist, an aspiring writer, grapples with a reality that increasingly feels distant.

Intemperance
Sonora Jha
Penguin
₹799
The novelist reimagines the ancient *swayamvar* as a bold feminist spectacle led by a 55-year-old woman unafraid of desire or judgment. Mixing myth and modernity, the novel examines love, power, and agency while asking what it takes to redefine masculinity.



The Last Death of The Year
Sophie Hannah
HarperCollins
₹499
The author known for her Agatha Christie 'continuation series' sets her new Hercule Poirot mystery on a Greek island on New Year's Eve, 1932. The ace detective and his companion, Inspector Catchpool, have only hours left before a murderer strikes.



In an abyss

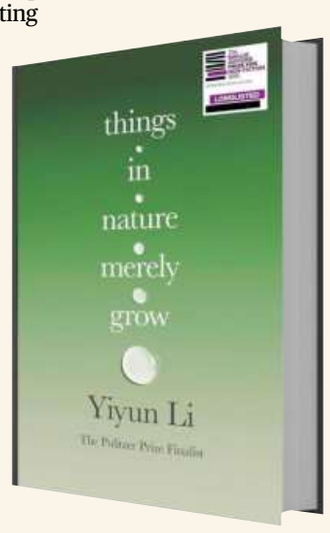
Yiyun Li's new book is a memoir of radical acceptance about loss, motherhood, and the limitations of language

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

Writing about Yiyun Li's new memoir, *Things in Nature Merely Grow*, is hard, not only because of its difficult subject, but also because the book, a finalist for the 2025 National Book Award and longlisted for the 2025 Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction, itself interrogates the inadequacy of language to express the nature of life and loss.

"*There is no good way to say this*," opens the memoir, with the words spoken by the police who have come to inform Li and her husband that their teenage son has died by suicide. Li has heard these very same words once before, after the death of their first son. Vincent died by suicide, aged 16, in 2017; James, also by suicide, aged 19, in 2024.

The double loss of children – unfathomable, incommunicable – is at the heart of this austere and deeply felt work. Li notes that while talking about painful topics, people often reach for cliché, euphemism, or even, sometimes, metaphor itself, as a screen or for self-deception, anything to avoid getting too close to the open sore, the "never-healing wound."



Things in Nature Merely Grow
Yiyun Li
Fourth Estate/Harper Collins
₹599

Living with an extremity

Yet such language inevitably fails. She is unsparing about this tendency: "*The world, it seems to me, is governed by strong conviction and paltry imagination and meagre understanding*." Noting that words like "aching," "wrenching," and "shattering" are completely inadequate to express her situation – "all wrong words, useless in their familiarity" – she reflects on how to proceed. "*There is no good way to say this: words fall short*."

Nevertheless, language is her tool of choice as a writer; words are her work; and therefore, words will have to serve the purpose.

"*If one has to live with the extremity of losing two children, an imperfect and ineffective language is but a minor misfortune*." And so she will have to construct the sentences, to talk not only about death, but also life after the death of children: "*the only way I can make some sense out of this senseless life*."

Literature, where words live, offers moments of deep feeling. Li turns to Greek plays and Shakespearean tragedies, where grief is expressed in a high pitch of rage and despair. She hears the cries of Euripides's Hekabe, the howls of Lear, and the desolate clarity of Edgar's words: "*The worst is not/So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'*"

Thinking of a happy moment from her sons' Oakland childhood, Li remembers the words of Dante: "*Midway upon the journey of our life/I found myself within a forest dark,/For the straightforward pathway had been lost*."

As she makes the effort to give structure to every day, she recalls Philip Larkin: "Where can we live but days?"

Unflinching gaze

With forensic precision and a clear, unflinching gaze, Li focuses on facts: "*Necessity dictates that attention should be given to all details*." She structures her days and weeks, but the vastness of her loss remains. She begins to read Euclid and Wittgenstein, works on her garden, and learns to play the piano. "*And yet life is still to be lived, inside tragedies, outside tragedies, and despite tragedies*."

Time itself becomes the boulder for the Sisyphean task of just living every day: "*One carries it from morning to night*." Time is the endless present: "*There is no now and then, now and later; only now and now and now and now and now*." Li's words are spare and austere, in keeping with the lines from Marianne Moore that are read at her son's memorial: "*The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;/not in silence, but in restraint*."

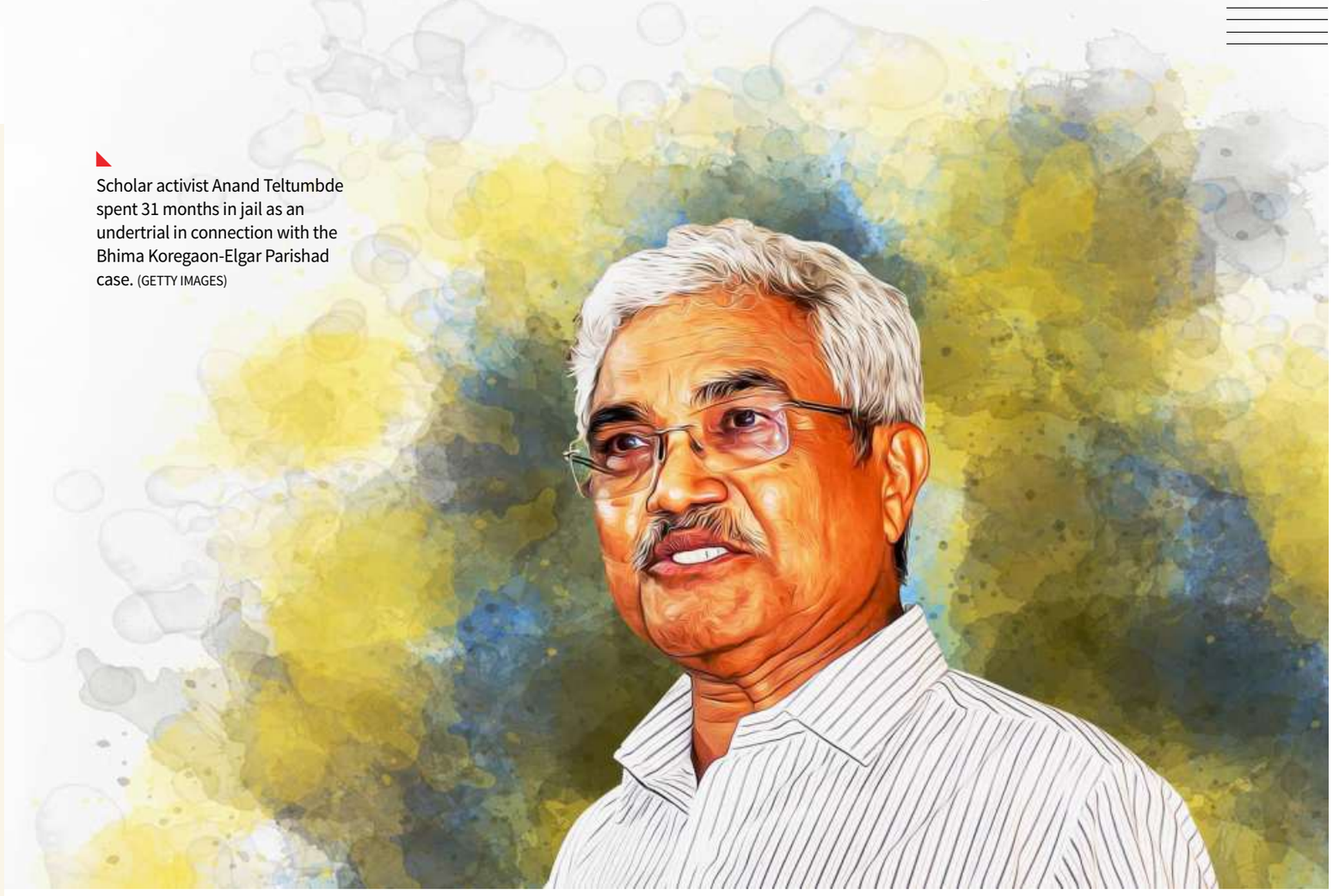
This is not a conventional "grief memoir" with a tidy narrative arc from loss and pain to healing and redemption. There is no catharsis, and no easy resolution. Some wounds do not close. Li notes this in plain, simple words: "*I am in an abyss*."

In a powerful image she describes grief as an infant that she carries in her arms, one who refuses to nurse, and refuses to fall asleep, but only cries and cries. And thus when she gardens, it is with the recognition that this means nothing beyond the simple act of tending to the plants. "*My garden is not a metaphor for hope or regeneration*." With utter clarity, in words that form the title of the memoir, she notes that this is because "*things in nature merely grow, until it is time for them to die*."

Nevertheless, even in the abyss, if grief grows, "*it will grow like a volunteer rose campion or a sweet violet or a columbine*." *Things in Nature Merely Grow* is a memoir of radical acceptance about loss, motherhood, and the limitations of language.

Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on these 24x7 helplines: KIRAN 1800-599-0019, Aasra 9820466726.

The reviewer is in the IAS.



Scholar activist Anand Teltumbde spent 31 months in jail as an undertrial in connection with the Bhima Koregaon-Elgar Parishad case. (GETTY IMAGES)

LIFE AS A POLITICAL PRISONER

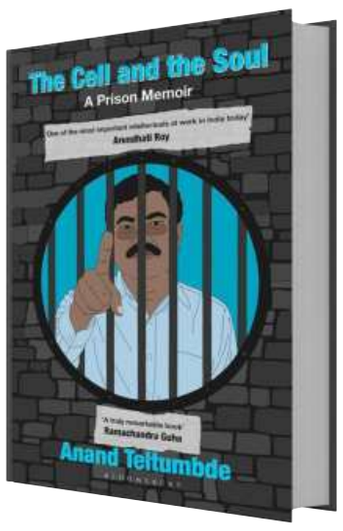
Anand Teltumbde's Taloja jail memoir is a pathology report on the cancerous rot eating away at the criminal justice system

G. Sampath
sampath.g@thehindu.co.in

What is the definition of a crime? "Crime is what the police think it is," writes Anand Teltumbde, a scholar activist who spent 31 months in jail as an undertrial in connection with the Bhima Koregaon-Elgar Parishad case. "*By this definition, police are free to arrest you, slap whatever sections they like on you and put you behind bars. Yes, the Constitution gives you the remedy of approaching the courts. But that would take years to settle, whether you committed a crime or not. Until then, you are ...a beggar for bail*."

Teltumbde's prison memoir, *The Cell and the Soul* is a pathology report on the cancerous rot eating away at the 'justice' part of India's 'criminal justice system'.

His descent into the netherworld of India's carceral system begins with evidence allegedly "fabricated" by the police – a letter to him from a Maoist "*so clumsily worded that I simply laughed at its comic content*." Teltumbde even tried to sue the cop, Param Bir Singh, for allegedly defaming him by reading out that "letter" in a press conference. But the Maharashtra government denied him sanction to do so. Teltumbde writes, "*I couldn't help but feel dejected at the thought of this system, which is not accountable to the people. On what grounds can the government refuse anyone permission to prosecute an officer who had blatantly violated the law?... these seemingly small transgressions on the part of government servants go unaddressed, accumulating into a thick crust of systemic impunity*."



The Cell and the Soul: A Prison Memoir
Anand Teltumbde
Bloomsbury
₹699

A case study

Teltumbde's intimate encounter with this "systemic impunity" is a representative case study of what's in store for any Indian citizen once the state decides to go after him.

He was arrested during the COVID pandemic. But social distancing, in a jail overcrowded to "170 per cent of its capacity", was a farce that merely "legitimised the doctors' observance of untouchability with prisoner patients."

As he details in a chapter titled, 'Entering the Hellhole', more than the physical travails, it was the daily assault on dignity that tested him the most. A sample: "*A cop would open the lock, accompany me to the toilet just ten feet away, and artificially stand on guard within the small enclosure, although the lavatory could not be shut*".

One of the more disturbing features of prison life that he documents are the petty sadisms perpetrated by the jail bureaucracy.

Denying an 84-year-old, Parkinsons-afflicted Stan Swamy a straw and sipper is an infamous example. But the variations are endless: arbitrary denial of mosquito nets, suspending inmates' phone calls, delaying mandatory meetings with family, withholding letters. It was pointless to complain to the courts as even in urgent matters, the hearing would be set after a fortnight, by which time the matter would have become infructuous. "These systemic flaws have emboldened state functionaries to act with impunity. And tragically, it is the judiciary itself that bears significant responsibility for the erosion of accountability in the state's dealings with its citizens."

The book offers compelling tales about colourful jailbirds that Teltumbde meets, befriends and sometimes antagonises. These include the whole gamut of criminal typology – from drug-traffickers and murderers, to rapists, petty thieves and cops known for being 'encounter specialists'. He discovers that the prison has its own hierarchy, with gangsters, serial killers and ex-cops at the top. Prison sociology mirrored that of the world outside. For instance, if you have money, you can buy every comfort. "*While I was once not allowed to receive food brought from my wife at JJ Hospital, I have enjoyed lavish feasts when I was visited by undertrial or convicted gangsters at the hospital*," he writes.

Instruments of control

Teltumbde's memoir calls for a serious debate on the very purpose and utility of prisons. Innumerable studies have shown that incarceration has little impact on recidivism. If imprisonment is meant to be retributive justice – the idea of justice as vengeance – research has shown that it is the "certainty of being caught, rather than the severity of punishment" that is more effective in preventing crime. So why then do we lock up people for years together? India has over 5.5 lakh prisoners in 1,400 jails, "with nearly 80% awaiting trial for more than three years". Why is this necessary?

Teltumbde's explanation is that prisons are instruments of control designed to regulate behaviour in a society that fails to provide the basics – healthcare, education and livelihood security. Not surprisingly, countries with a strong social infrastructure have the most humane approach to prisons. Finland, for instance, presents an inspiring success story of open prisons. Norway prioritises education and personal development opportunities that enable reintegration of ex-prisoners in society. India, on the other hand, has no qualms keeping a PhD scholar in prison, seemingly forever, without trial. As Teltumbde asks: "*Will India, gripped by power-hungry politicians who have weaponised the prison system to suppress dissent and sequester opponents, ever consider such reforms?*"

History of a movement

An account of how the DMK converted the Dravidian movement into a political and electoral force

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Ever since the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in Tamil Nadu with a sensational victory in the 1967 Assembly election, ousting the Congress permanently from power, it has been a subject of study among researchers and academics, both in the country and outside. It is against this backdrop that Vignesh Rajahmani's *The Dravidian Pathway* has to be read. The author's sympathy for the DMK, the subject he chose to cover, is obvious, as his main objective is to give an account of how the party converted the Dravidian movement into a political and electoral force.

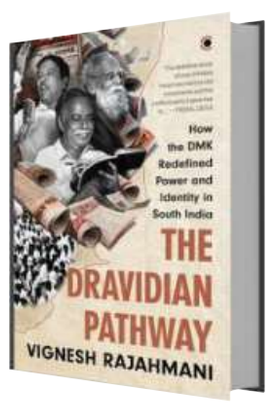
Rajahmani takes pains to highlight an aspect – the impact of a widespread presence of party-oriented reading rooms – that, according to him, played an important role in the success of the DMK in 1967, an area not much discussed elaborately.

His concept of "Dravidian-Tamil" identity requires further study,

Cadres of DMK staging a protest in front of Pondicherry University against Central Government Education Policy, near Puducherry. (S.S. KUMAR)

though the author has not come up with any substantive reason for the concept to be regarded as unique or special. His tables on the social category-wise breakdown of legislators, elected to the Tamil Nadu Assembly from 1952 to 1967, provide an idea how the State had ensured the representation of Other Backward Classes to the extent of at least 40% (in 1952, the figure was 39.8%) even in the 15 years immediately after Independence.

This is in stark contrast to the present situation in many other States where OBCs' share in elected panchayats leaves much to be desired.



The Dravidian Pathway
Vignesh Rajahmani
Context
₹799

Fact check

The author should have approached the subject by adopting a much more rigorous and critical scrutiny of the material that he gathered in the course of his study. For instance, he is completely off the mark when he states (page 139) that "the Chief Minister had refused to meet student representatives on January 25" during the anti-Hindi agitation that was at its peak in 1965. The Chief Minister in question was M. Bhaktavatsalam, who was in Vellore that day when the student representatives sought an audience with him. Instead of the Chief Minister, Industries Minister R. Venkataraman met the students. All this was recorded not just by Bhaktavatsalam in his memoir, which was published in 1971, but also by *The Hindu*.

Subsequently, the Chief Minister met the students at least twice, including P. Seenivasan, who defeated the Congress' towering leader K. Kamaraj in 1967. Likewise, the author's statement on Bhaktavatsalam's suggestion that people "eat the meat of rats" might have been based on the propaganda of the former Chief Minister's political adversaries but there is no reference in any credible literature on the contemporary political history of Tamil Nadu to his so-called suggestion. The author would have done better if he maintained a respectable distance with the subject.

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

ARE INDIA'S AIRPORTS READY TO TAKE OFF?

Delhiite Divya Prabhu, mother to two toddlers, believes airports could make travel so much easier. "If only they had clean, sanitised strollers available at entry points, instead of making us walk halfway across," she says. "We have travelled via the airports in New Delhi, Goa and Mumbai, and we have missed simple things like clean bathrooms with diaper changing tables, and play areas."

If you are a senior, then wheelchair access as you enter the airport and shorter distances to navigate are more important, says 76-year-old Usha Varma. "I usually fly out of Bengaluru and it's a beautiful space, but we need immediate wheelchair access to travel through such a large terminal, especially if you have a carry-on bag in tow," says Varma. Her pick of best airports are Abu Dhabi and Japan. "The staff is kind and they are proactive with wheelchairs."

For Bengaluru-based Vinita Chaitanya, travel is a work necessity. Constantly on the move, airports feature frequently in the interior stylist and designer's day-to-day, and she is vocal about them, even taking to Instagram Stories to document the best and the worst. The new lounge at Bengaluru's T2 she deems "well designed, with plenty of space to relax while you wait", but points out that security lines could be better managed. "For every 10 security lines, there's only one for women. That needs to change," she states. "We need to space out elevators for those with wheelchairs and have more than one escalator leading to the baggage carousels. That space needs to be better managed."

Newer projects are factoring in aircraft size, air traffic, security requirements, and design features such as biophilic interiors and intuitive wayfinding – using natural light and curved pathways – to balance passenger experience with the functional needs of the airport. One of the areas they are succeeding in is embracing a sense of place by honouring indigenous materials and craftsmanship, and shaping guest experience through regionally inspired dining and art installations by local artists. At Kempegowda, for example, SOM used materials such as bamboo, brick, and natural stone, a combination that is rarely seen in airports. In Guwahati, Karim used bamboo extensively "to lower the carbon footprint, and green corridors to improve the microclimate". At Kochi, Revathy says the wooden furniture immediately connects her to the State. "It's a nice touch, and I don't know how they maintain them!"

An important aspect is to design pod hotels and rooms, like they have in Japan, for airports that host a lot of layovers. Instead, we are stuck for hours, without room to stretch and relax

GAUTAM BHATIA
Architect

Internationally, Helsinki is my favorite. It is the quietest airport I've been to; it has great interactive digital visuals showing the change of seasons and grounds you to the space. I think we are doing well with clean air and well-managed spaces in Indian airports. But going forward, we need more quiet spaces

IRAM SULTAN
Interior designer

What works vs. what needs work

India has 117 domestic and 33 international airports (according to the Ministry of Civil Aviation). With the numbers only set to grow, it is imperative to have a deep understanding of long-term needs, with built-in flexibility to absorb future technology. "All gates at T2 in Bengaluru are equipped with 'swing' capacity, or the flexibility to handle different wide-body and narrow-body aircraft," explains Lefkovits. "This plan allows the terminal to thrive as an international travel destination as it increases annual passenger capacity." Many airport designers are taking a modular approach too, mixing agent desks and fully automated stations. This 'plug and play' approach means as the technology changes, airports can swap out those elements without having to reconfigure the space.

The integration of digital systems, IoT, and automation is also making travel more seamless and efficient. But while technology such as DigiYatra allows for time efficiency, there are other factors that need attention in several Indian airports. For instance, as the gateways to a country, attention to well-lit spaces at the first point of entry is crucial. "At most airports, the immigration line can be a forbidding, dimly lit area instead of being bright, airy and welcoming. It makes the whole process intimidating," says Mumbai-based Abha Narain Lambah, the conservation architect behind the revival of the David Sassoon Library and Reading Room, and a frequent traveller with an expectedly critical eye for design. "Having a certain amount of natural lighting solves this, and intuitive wayfinding also helps people navigate the spaces easily. Bengaluru and Mumbai T2 are good examples for this, as there's ample natural light."

Chaitanya has a bone to pick about international transfers. "You often have to leave the airport and re-enter with your bag. At Delhi, I had to get my bags and transfer them to a second luggage belt, all located in different areas. It's such an inconvenience at 3 a.m. That can definitely be streamlined." The interior designer adds that the signs at the Dubai airport to specify queue wait times are helpful, and could be a lesson for us. "We can also balance technology with personnel; train them to direct passengers well [seniors or those with visible or invisible disabilities]. And more medical facilities spread over terminals is also a good idea."

While there are lounges aplenty, many travellers ask that architects look into creating smaller open areas and more free play areas. Delhi architect Bhatia feels airports should incorporate a rooftop open garden lounge that taps into the local milieu and weather. "We can opt for open areas where security protocols can still be maintained. Jakarta airport is interesting in that respect; they have seasonal plants over the walking paths," he says. Prabhu says that among all the fancy stores and restaurants, there should be "a small kiosk for parents where you can find wipes, and other travel essentials for young children. Places to engage kids are also so important".

At older airports, a lot of this can be addressed by renovation or retrofitting, provided that their structural integrity remains sound and aligns with long-term plans. "Retrofitting helps conserve resources, preserve heritage, and modernise existing systems," says Karim of Nudes Architecture. "However, when structural limitations or rising passenger demand exceed safe and efficient capacity, a complete rebuild becomes the more practical and future-ready solution."

Airports as living ecosystems

As per the International Air Transport Association, the number of operational airports in India has grown from 74 to 162 in just under a decade, with plans for expansion to 350 by 2047. Meanwhile, the global airport construction market is projected to reach $1.8 trillion by 2030, according to February's 'Airport Construction - Global Strategic Business Report' from Research and Markets. All this means that trends will change constantly – think AI, robotics for passengers, and net-zero terminal buildings (aviation contributes to 2%-3% of global greenhouse gas emissions).

According to S.R. Sikka, principal architect of New Dehli-based Sikka Associate Architects, which has designed 30 Indian terminals over four decades, "Sustainability and climate resilience must be embedded at the core of airport design. It begins with climate-responsive planning: optimising orientation, daylighting, shading, and natural ventilation to reduce energy demand. Equally important is on-site renewable energy generation, and adaptive design strategies that build resilience – through stormwater management, flexible infrastructure, and materials suited to changing climatic conditions."

Karim echoes this, adding that in the future, "terminals could be built with smart materials that are climate resilient, respond to passengers with haptic technology, and even create their own clean energy". Technology would play a big part, too. "With AI managing flows, waiting areas may disappear, and the terminal itself will act like a sentient environment – spaces that can sense people, understand moods, and adjust light, sound, or air to improve comfort. By mid-century, the airport may no longer feel like a machine for travel, but more like a living organism – part transport hub, part public square, part power plant – reshaping how we travel, interact, and belong," he concludes.

The freelance writer is based in Chennai.

Art and design Guwahati International Airport's Terminal 2 won the 2025 International Architecture Award. Its design highlights local bamboo and orchids; (top left) Vinita Chaitanya.

Accessibility and inclusive design

Function and aesthetics cannot be all that an airport offers. The best terminal designs also use empathy as a tool to cater to a wide range of travellers' needs, abilities, and emotions. Ligi Sunil and her husband Sunil Baby used to travel regularly with their son, Jaiden, who had cerebral palsy. When he passed away in 2023 at the age of 18, the couple founded 18NotOut in Bengaluru in his memory. It assists families in planning accessible travel through airports, stations and hotels, tailoring itineraries to people with special needs.

"I would rate T2 at the Bengaluru Airport the best for people with special needs and disabilities, and that's gender- and age-agnostic. Post booking, Kempegowda has a WhatsApp group that guides them to the airport entrance where they are greeted by a staff member who stays with them through the journey," says Baby. "In terms of training, the airport has far more nuance in the way they approach families and children, and how they lead people to a room for those with neurodivergence. However, we need more thought into designing food courts that are open to wheelchairs at the table, more handholding around the baggage carousel, and the use of the aerobridge with passengers on wheelchairs."

Vinaya Chinnappa, CEO of social enterprise Incluzza, a part of EnAble India group (which provides a wide range of disability inclusion services to organisations), says that being someone who travels with prosthetic limbs is tough, and certain provisions can make travel more inclusive. "Travel must go beyond compliance, from the physical infrastructure to the staff who need to be sensitised to act with empathy while dealing with the needs of passengers. Earlier, people had to remove prostheses to go through security, but now that protocol has changed. That's a step in the right direction." Incluzza helped design the Sensory Room at the Bengaluru airport, the first of its kind in the country, to cater to a spectrum of people who are not neurotypical. Chinnappa explains, "Many passengers need assistance to remain calm and we offer low sensory inputs, softer sounds and weighted blankets. We have received positive responses on social media, and other airports have reached out to explore such initiatives."

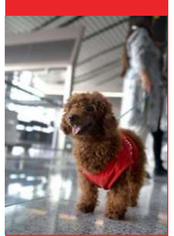
Terminal 2 in Mumbai is well-maintained and easy to get through. Also, the staff is attentive. While travelling from there last year, I had not booked a wheelchair. But they noticed my gait and made it a point to request one for me. It made the whole journey so much smoother, and was a welcome reminder how these positive experiences leave a lasting impression

YVONNE RASQUINHA
Senior traveller

Positive change The Navi Mumbai airport facade; and (below) travellers at Mumbai T2. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Jam at the airport

From mid-2025, the Delhi International Airport Limited has introduced Del Vibes across the Indira Gandhi International Airport. It transforms the airport terminals into a concert venue, with music and dance performances, and workshops. While the schedule is subject to change, travellers can expect Bengali Fusion by the Pancham Group (October), *ghazals* by Sursangam Group (November), and Konkani music by Nacho Group (December).

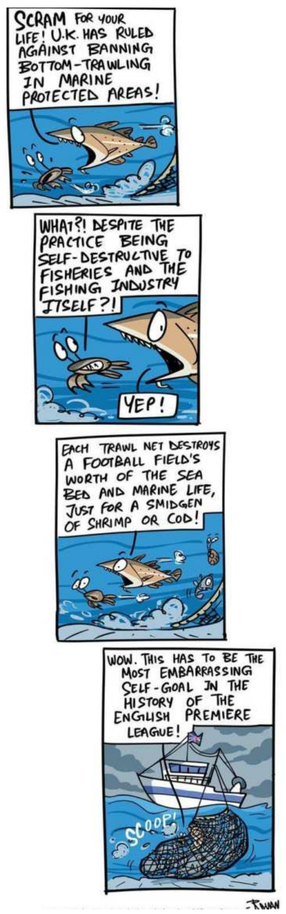


Paws and Peace

In August, two toy poodle therapy dogs were recruited by Hyderabad's Rajiv Gandhi International Airport. Since then, the dogs, accompanied by trained handlers, interact with travellers for four to six hours each day — helping calm and comfort them — at designated areas after the security check point, both in the domestic and international departure areas.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



GOING BEYOND THE FULL STOP

Exploring the tradition of the expansive sentence and how authors such as Woolf, Pynchon, and this year's Literature Nobel laureate László Krasznahorkai manage to effectively communicate consciousness

Vasudevan Mukunth
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How do you communicate consciousness, one of science's most persistent enigmas? For more than a century, neuroscientists, physicists, and philosophers have tried to locate the point in time and space where subjective experience emerges from objective matter, yet the bridge between brain and mind continues to evade formal description.

Competing frameworks of how scientists can organise neurological knowledge in order for it all to make sense have failed to resolve how perception becomes self-perception. Even evolutionary accounts that traced consciousness to cognitive advantages have struggled to explain how these computational processes acquired what remains best described as an inner light.

Perhaps the bigger problem is that science was built to measure objects, but now it must somehow account for a subject. Until it can describe experience without reducing it to mechanism, consciousness will remain an unfinished frontier.

Art, however, is born of that inner light, and its expression has long sought to give shape to the unmeasurable continuity of awareness itself. The long sentence, in particular, has always tempted writers who believe consciousness refuses to stop at the period mark. Across languages and centuries, novelists have stretched sentences until they mirror the mind's own digressive, recursive, and porous impulses.

Its better exponents (in this writer's limited view) in more recent times include Thomas Pynchon, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, W.G. Sebald, and László Krasznahorkai – winner of this year's Nobel Prize in Literature. Their sentences are the stories themselves, architected using breath and memory.

Playing with structure

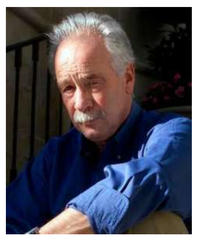
The long sentence is, in Woolf's work, a way to turn consciousness into narrative form. For both the Ramsay family's promised trip to a lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and the six choral soliloquies of *The Waves* (1931), Woolf replaces the usual order of cause and effect with a rhythm that moves like thought, fluid and filled with sudden illuminations. Rather than describe characters moving through the world, Woolf traces how they feel the world passing through them, and thus the shimmer of light on water could expand into memories of childhood, loss, and desire. Punctuation is a breath in the mind's own tide, capturing the ceaseless effort to hold the present before it vanishes. Thus the English writer achieves what science still struggles to: a language that describes consciousness from within.

Faulkner, writing from the haunted South of early 20th century U.S., uses the long sentence as a vessel for memory and guilt. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), entire histories unfold within a single paragraph. His sentences often loop, self-intersect, and refuse to finish for fear of facing their consequences, mimicking a mind circling its own pain. A memory of a family dinner could suddenly become a betrayal or a death. By allowing sentences to wander in this way, Faulkner wields grammar like psychology, with every pause or omission feeling like repression made audible.

For Sebald, the long sentence is an elegy. In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), the German author walks the coast of East Anglia while meditating on the slow erosion of landscapes, empires, and lives. His paragraphs drift without hurry, moving from a photograph to a ruin to a historical anecdote as if time were a continuous mist. Sebald's restraint forces the reader to make peace with the slow erosion of meaning over time, until the sentences become heavy with the weight of remembering.

For Krasznahorkai, on the other hand, the long sentence is a means to the end itself. In *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989), a small town unravels when a mysterious circus arrives, carrying a giant dead whale and rumours of chaos. The prose echoes the spreading panic: paragraphs running for pages, joined by endless conjunctions that refuse to let the reader rest. The result is both claustrophobic and hypnotic as narrators perceive decaying towns, futile revolts, and a cosmic weariness without respite. The Hungarian novelist's sentences are an unstoppable, biblical flood, yet within that torrent is a strange serenity, the possibility that they could hold the ruins together a little longer.

With Pynchon, however, they fall apart, or perhaps they have always been that way. In V. (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), he builds rapid, centrifugal narratives filled with rockets, corporations, conspiracies, and jokes – all spinning out of control. Mirroring this entropy, his sentences' clauses pile up, crammed with technical jargon and historical detours. Reading him is like surfing the data stream of the 20th century, where everything connects to everything else and nothing stays coherent for long. The sprawl is a kind of realism for an age of excess.



(Clockwise from left) Authors László Krasznahorkai; Virginia Woolf; William Faulkner; and W.G. Sebald. (GETTY IMAGES)

Shaping the reader's senses

Comparing these writers reveals the long sentence to be a spectrum. Even more recently, among many others, Irish novelist Mike McCormack used it in *Solar Bones* (2016) to bridge death and life; American-British writer Lucy Ellmann in *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) to deliver a tour de force on the state of America; and French novelist Mathias Énard in *Zone* (2008) to collapse geography and memory.

Their choice reflects a shared intuition that the architecture of the sentence can shape the reader's sense of time, space, and morals – probably an absurd notion in this age of compressed communication. The long sentence, after all, forces cognition to slow to the tempo of thought and renders language itself an experience.

Their choice also reveals that awareness is not discrete or divisible, as neurons and algorithms would have it, but continuous – a rhythm that outlasts the body, gathers the past within the present, and spills into imagined futures. In the authors' long and winding lines, language becomes an experiment through which consciousness learns to witness its own unfolding.

Devotees transport an idol of Kali ahead of Kali Puja in Kolkata. (GETTY IMAGES)

POP-A-RAZZI

Growing up with Kali

October has always seen Kolkata celebrate the fierce goddess over Diwali. It's time to remember what she stands for

While the rest of India celebrates Diwali, West Bengal worships Kali. Yes, Durga Puja – the 10-day festival that precedes Kali Puja by a few weeks – has UNESCO's intangible heritage status; it gets international attention; it is bigger, glitzier and grander than any other festival in Kolkata. But this is the goddess Kali's stomping ground. English historian H.E.A. Cotton wrote "Kali, the patron saint of the city, is at Kalighat." Kali has the city's heart. In fact, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who lives a stone's throw from the Kalighat temple, is a renowned devotee of the goddess.

Kali is the goddess of deserted areas. She is worshipped in the dead of night. She appears naked and unashamed, unconcerned about what she is wearing. She fits no definition of a "good girl". And that is why, at a time when Kolkata is gearing up for Kali Puja, the Chief Minister's comments following the rape of a medical student in the State are especially galling.

"How did she come out [of the hostel] at 12:30 a.m.?" Banerjee said, according to media reports. She said while it was everyone's right to go out, "when and wherever they want to", she cautioned private institutions like medical colleges to be careful. "Especially when it's a girl child, they should not be allowed to go out at night."

Her remarks have ignited a political firestorm. The opposition has accused her of victim blaming. Sadly, almost no political party can claim moral high ground when it comes to blaming the victim of assault. Good girls don't stay out that late. Good girls don't dress like that. Good girls don't go around alone in deserted areas. We have heard that refrain over and over again.

When journalist Soumya Viswanathan was murdered in Delhi in 2008, then chief minister Sheila Dikshit said, "All by herself till 3 a.m. at night... you should not be so adventurous." After a rape case in Gurugram in 2012, the city bosses said women should not work after 8 p.m. If they had to, they needed to tell the labour department in advance.

Never out of place

At one time, Kali embarrassed me. I was then living and working in California, where Diwali usually meant good *desi* food and a few sparklers in the backyard at some Indian friend's house party.

When culturally conscious American friends would wish me Happy Diwali, I wanted to tell them that I had really grown up with Kali Puja, not Diwali, in Kolkata. Our local Kali Puja *pandal* came up every year outside our bedroom window. One year, an errant firework set it ablaze and I remember the flames leaving our house blackened and sooty. Next day, the goddess stood exposed amidst the charred remains of the *pandal*. She didn't look too out of place. This, after all, is a goddess who is as much at home in a crematorium as she is in the house of a devotee.

But Kali, blue or black, naked and fierce, tongue dripping blood, is much harder to explain to westerners than the more motherly Durga, a far more conventional deity. So, I would just smile and nod when people wished me Happy Diwali.

Always on her own terms

Today, in Kolkata, I see Kali being slowly domesticated in our *bhadralok* neighbourhoods. She is often not naked anymore. She wears a white sari with a red border. White *shola* (pith) jewellery covers her nakedness. She is becoming more family-friendly. And it is true, Kali is also a mother goddess. She has a whole genre of songs dedicated to her, *Shyamasangeet*, that imagines her as the mother who is as dark as the night. It's a rare adoration in India of something that's not "fair and lovely".

But Kali is a different kind of mother figure than Durga who arrives with her family in tow. Kali, kinetic and ecstatic, is awe-inspiring in the ferocity of her love. She takes no prisoners in her battle against evil. She slew the demons Chanda and Munda and thus became known as Chamunda. She is Chhinnamasta, who holds her own severed head in her hand, the blood spurting out of her neck. She is no silently suffering mother.

And we clearly need her now more than ever. The clay lamps that usher in Diwali are pretty but more than anything else, we need a Kali, unfettered and unapologetic, living on her own terms.

It's strange irony then that the government of the State that worships her with such fervour should think the best way to keep women safe is to impose a curfew on them. After all, long before 'Take Back the Night' became a movement, Kali, naked, ferocious and shameless, took back the night.

Sandip Roy, *author of* Don't Let Him Know, *likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.*

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 18

ENOUGH OF THIS PATRIOTIC ROLLER COASTER

It is bad news when the world of youth combines with the world of public officials

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Readers, when it comes to young people, I have one simple policy: do whatever you want but don't come near me. I only make exceptions for one group of youngsters: my children. They are allowed to approach me but no closer than 15 feet, unless prior permission is obtained in written form.

In fact, everyone of a certain age should have a "All the best but don't come near me" approach me when it comes to the youth.

And what if the world of youth combines with the world of public officials? Then my simple advice is, turn in the opposite direction and run as fast as you can. Or take an Uber.

Earlier this week, I spotted a story in the media. All details are changed to avoid any legal complications.

The real story started some years ago when a youth cleared the entrance exam and became a public servant. Immediately, the news was reported as follows: "Humble youth from Bandra has joined public service, future of India looks bright, this is a great day for all Indians."

There are more problems in this news headline than a copy of *Problems in General Physics* by I.E. Irodov.

First of all, finding a humble youth from Bandra is like finding an actual author at a literature festival. Possible, but not plausible. Once all the film stars, movie directors, fashion models, politicians, chefs, current sportspeople, retired sportspeople, business magnates, latest startup icons have all left, then maybe you will find an author cowering in the corner.

Secondly, how does the youth joining public service suddenly make our future bright? My friend, you think every other public servant in India started when they were 40 years old? Look around you. That traffic police fellow? Once a youth. The chief executive who just laid off 50,000 people due to an unavoidable business landscape before increasing their own salary due to unavoidable business landscape? That gentleman on the train who took your seat and then spent 45 minutes pretending like it was their seat before you gave up and stole someone else's seat? All youth.

But back to the story. This uplifting youth from Bandra went on to become something of a celebrity. He was so popular that the government gave him special permission to deliver motivational speeches and online lectures on a variety of uplifting subjects such as, and I quote a news story, "...implementation of law, enhancing government flagship schemes, maintaining ethical conduct during employment, and fostering discipline and professionalism. He also taught about integrity and Civil Service exam preparation, emphasising honesty, transparency, and dedication upon entering the service".

Is your heart soaring? Very good. Now please return your heart to normal location.

Because in June this year, this same youth was caught accepting a ₹10 lakh bribe from a local businessman. What is more, when officials from the raiding team checked his house, they found cash bundles worth another ₹50 lakh or so. Today you can find officially released photos of these bundles perfectly arranged on a bed in the officer's quarters.

Friends, I hate this. You hate this. And it happens over and over again. Uplifting story of youth dedicating life to country; followed, a few months later, by uplifting story of same youth dedicating himself to a lifelong passion of collecting bed-sized stacks of currency notes.

So much so that I have decided that we need a new term in the English language for this emotional ride on the patriotic rollercoaster. And that word is: trollmodel.

Example sentence: "After six months of motivational speeches about integrity and service, he completed his trollmodel transformation when he was caught re-registering the indoor stadium in his mother's name."

Have you been betrayed by a trollmodel recently? I feel for you. Why not idolise newspaper columnists instead? Just a thought.

Trollmodel
/ˈtrəʊlmɒdəl/
noun
Definition: A young public servant or official who is initially celebrated as an inspirational role model, only to subsequently be exposed for corruption, bribery, or other forms of misconduct, thereby trolling the nation's hopes and expectations.
Related forms:
Trollmodeling (*verb*): The act of betraying public trust after being celebrated as a role model.
Trollmodelled (*adj*): Describing someone who has completed the journey from inspiration to corruption.
Trollmodelry (*noun*): The systematic pattern of inspiring youth turning into corrupt officials.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Thoughtful play

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Thomas Bessis, from France, is not only a top French player, but he has many accomplishments in international competition. This includes top finishes in major American events. He was East in today's deal, played some years ago when he was still a junior.

West led the king of spades, which declarer decided to duck in dummy. Bessis discouraged with the three, but declarer tried to muddy the picture by playing the five from his hand. West realized, however, that if Bessis was trying to encourage a spade continuation, with a holding of jack-three-two, then declarer would only have two spades and there was no future in the spade suit for the defense. West needed to reach the East hand for a spade play through declarer. That was impossible in clubs and very unlikely in trumps. An entry in hearts was possible, but it had to be done without setting up dummy's jack of hearts for a spade discard. West led a low heart and declarer made a subtle error by playing the seven from dummy. Bessis's normal play would be to cover the seven with the eight, playing partner for the queen of hearts rather than the ace.

Bessis wondered why declarer had not played the nine from dummy. That would be declarer's normal play if he held the ace. Bessis decided that the only reason was that declarer did not hold the ace! Bessis rose with his king, winning the trick, and returned a spade. The contract now had to fail. Very nice defense.

NORTH
♠ A 9 4
♡ J 9 7
◇ A 5 3
♣ K Q 10 5

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

EAST
♠ 6 3
♡ K 10 8 5 4
◇ J 10 2
♣ 7 3 2

SOUTH
♠ J 5 2
♡ Q 6
◇ K Q 9 8 7 6
♣ 8 4

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2◇	2♠	3◇	All pass

Opening lead: King of ♠

QUIZ

Easy, like Sunday morning

Starry, starry night!

Shining bright Although we depict sunlight as yellow, and it is classified as a 'yellow-dwarf' star, what is the sun's true colour? (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 Born on this date in 1910, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar was an astrophysicist who was awarded the 1983 Nobel Prize in physics for his work on the evolution of stars. One of the most important values named after him is the Chandrasekhar Limit. What happens to stars above the limit when they collapse?

2 One of the most regularly used numbers to denote this particular observation is 'a million'. That is not true, with the number being more around 2,000 and going up to 2,500 on a clear night. What does this number denote?

3 Proxima Centauri is a low-mass star that is 4.25 light-years away. It is too small to be seen with the naked eye. What is the star's significance, which is referred to in its name?

4 The temperature of the star also has its corresponding colour, with which a star burns bright. The stellar colour classification defies normal on-Earth convention as stars get hotter. What colour are the hottest stars?

5 Our sun is a nearly perfect sphere of hot plasma that emits light in all colours of the visible spectrum. So, although we depict sunlight as yellow, and it is classified as a 'yellow dwarf' star, what colour is the sun?

6 The original word for these entities was 'astron' in Ancient Greek. They recognised 12 of these, and across many cultures, the same have been referenced, with them having special significance attached to each. Currently, the International Astronomical Union has identified 88 of these. What are these?

7 'Lucy' is a white dwarf star located 50 light years away and has a diametre of 4,000 km. It has become crystallised after a pulsar stripped away most of its mass, leaving behind a carbon core under immense pressure over billions of years. What do scientists believe it is now made of, which led to its name?

8 One ritual in Indian weddings is for the newlyweds to spot the stars Arundhati (Alcor) and Vasishtha (Mizar) in the Big Dipper constellation. This garners a lot of symbolic significance because of the relation between the two stars. What kind of star system do they form?

9 On a clear night, you can see as far as 19 quadrillion miles up into the sky, with the star Deneb in Cygnus being the farthest. As the light of a star travels these vast distances into our vision, turbulence in Earth's atmosphere causes disturbances in the light's path. What does this lead to, which should remind you of a rhyme?

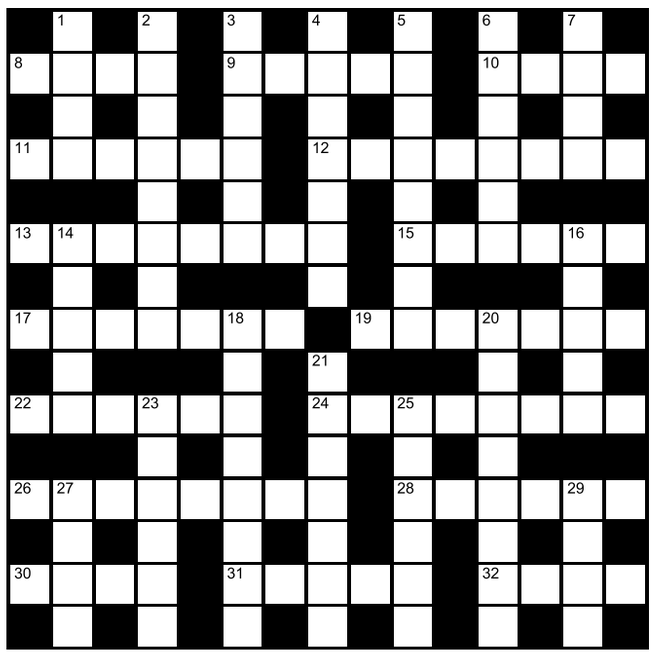
10 There are 59 countries whose national flags depict a star, with the United States having the maximum at 50. Of them, what is unique about the flags of Brazil, Australia and New Zealand?

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

Answers

1. They become a blackhole or a neutron star.
2. Number of stars visible to the naked eye.
3. Closest to Earth after the sun ('Proxima' means nearest)
4. Blue. 'Red Hot' stars are the coldest.
5. The sun is white
6. Constellations
7. A Diamond Star (Lucy in the sky with Diamonds)
8. Binary star system, where they orbit each other.
9. Twinkling of stars
10. They depict actual stars in the sky (constellations) and not just symbolic.

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 26 (Set by Incognito)



Across
8 President's vehicle is in front of hotel (4)
9 A Greek endlessly gives consent (5)
10 Prayer leader from Kohima mosque (4)
11 Dancing balladeers throwing away ball in Indian Ocean inlet (3,3)
12 Perhaps, submarine endures a storm (8)
13 Embarrassed ovine (8)
15 Left before song taking model equipment used by cowboy (6)
17 Praise how abdomen is after losing weight (7)
19 Non-professional friend in Australia starting to ride (7)
22 He makes trousers and coat end with gold (6)
24 Practise on funeral carriage (8)
26 What a witch should know for writing words? (8)
28 Untethered poster falling out (6)
30 Cheese available in debriefings (4)
31 Ships' companies' voyage, I hear (5)
32 Sadly, salad is tossed without a bit of dill (4)

Down
1 Air from Neptune does not have neon and phosphorus (4)
2 Charlie has examination... Turned out to be most pure (8)
3 Country initially admitting woman in African country (6)
4 Medico takes small quantity for making a type of beer (7)
5 Bob? Found hanging, marking time... (8)
6 Where one may see oneself shaving? (6)
7 Walk through water perhaps, with poster at end of parade (4)
14 Imphal man's game (5)
16 Is next to a model in vehicle (5)
18 Wrongly pierce behind each component of spectacles (8)
20 Ate from time meant for beverage consumption (3,5)
21 Boy with rascals producing shoes (7)
23 Flowers from Ellis Island (6)
25 Husky and horse running round middle of May (6)
27 Country converting rupee endlessly (4)
29 Even an apartment? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 25

		S		T		R		G				B		
B	U	Y	E	R		E	U	R	O	P	I	U	M	
E		M		I		D		E		R		R		T
H	I	B	A	C	H	I		Y	A	O	U	N	D	E
A		O		O		N				R		E		N
V	A	L	E	T	E	D		P	R	A	I	R	I	E
E		I				I		O		T				T
		C	O	L	L	A	B	O	R	A	T	E		
A				I		N		H				X		S
P	Y	J	A	M	A	S		P	I	T	A	P	A	T
H		A		I				O		I		O		R
I	M	P	E	T	U	S		O	R	G	A	N	Z	A
D		E		E		C		H		H		E		T
	G	R	A	D	U	A	T	E		T	O	N	G	A
		Y				B		D		S		T		

George John
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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The colour of the seasons

Festivals, a quickening that comes when people act in concert, track the revolution of earth

When celebrating festivals, humans are really celebrating the turning of earth. Long before religions gave names and stories to feasts, people gathered because the rains had come, the harvest was secure, or the sun returned after the year's longest night. The origins of festivals lie less in temples and scriptures than in the weather, the soil, and the shared relief of survival.

In Kerala, where I live, Onam is the great annual punctuation mark. It is said to honour the return of the just King Mahabali; yet at heart, it is a harvest festival. The monsoon has withdrawn, the paddy is ripe, and families gather for the *sadhya* laid out on banana leaves. Children craft floral carpets to beckon abundance. Long before the Mahabali story was woven in, Onam belonged to the rhythm of rain and rice.

The same pattern appears everywhere. Christmas sits at the dark hinge of the northern year, close to the winter solstice, when people have long kindled light against the longest night. Easter rides the swell of spring; its eggs and hares are older than any sermon – plain symbols of renewal. In India, Deepavali arrives with the end of harvest and the onset of winter. Lamps once pushed back the early dusk before the epic of Rama's homecoming gave the festival its beloved story. At the other end of the world, Carnival erupts just as winter loosens its grip in Europe and Latin America, a brief licence of colour and dance before the austerity of Lent. Geography sets the rhythm; religion provides the script.

'Collective effervescence'

Why, though, do festivals matter so much even to urban lives far from the field and the season? Part of the answer is psychological. The sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote of "collective effervescence" – the quickening that comes when people act in concert. Music, procession, lamps, and shared meals synchronise us. Neuroscience would add that ritual repetition and communal joy soothe anxiety and release the chemistry of bonding. Lighting a lamp or decorating a tree makes the world feel, if only for an evening, coherent and kind.

Festivals also carry a quiet philosophy. They turn necessity into meaning. The bare fact of survival – light returning, crops ripening – is lifted into symbols of hope and moral order. When placing a lamp in a window, people do more than remember a myth; they vote for the side of light. When sitting together for a *sadhya*, caste and status blur for a meal, and people perform an egalitarian wish that is better than the everyday practice. These acts do not abolish inequality, but they rehearse the world as it might be.

There is memory at work as well. To repeat the gestures of grandparents is to belong to a place and a story. Festivals are archives you can smell and taste: the resin of a new wick, the spice of the *avial*, the wax on a candle. In repeating the ritual, one stitches the private calendar of the family to the public calendar of the land.

And festivals are an antidote to despair. Even in seasons of loss or fear, people find ways to celebrate: a single lamp on a balcony, a modest meal shared, a song hummed at dusk. The point is not denial; it is defiance. A festival says: we know darkness, and yet we choose light.

In the time of climate disruption, the link between festivals and nature carries a warning. If Christmas depends on winter light, if Easter leans on spring's renewal, if Deepavali and Onam draw strength from predictable harvests and rains, then a deranged climate threatens not only food and work but also culture and continuity. To protect earth is also to protect festivals – the very grammar by which people mark time and express hope.

Perhaps that is why these days remain beloved even to the secular. One may not subscribe to every article of faith, but almost everyone longs for the warmth of a shared table, the choreography of a procession, the moment the first lamp is lit. Festivals began in the weather; they endure in the soul. In celebrating earth, people find that they are, in the end, celebrating one another.

The power of not being loved

Kattamreddy A.R.
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There are moments in life when a person feels profoundly unloved. This may happen even while surrounded by relations, achievements, and the outward extravagance of living. There can be an opulence of choice, an abundance of material wealth, and friendships that appear plentiful; yet in the quiet winds of the inner self, a clear truth sometimes whispers: I am still alone.

This is not necessarily a sign of illness or disorder; it is, in fact, a deeply human experience. At some point in the journey, everyone encounters it, through personal loss, strained relationships, or the subtle but painful absence of reciprocity, even from one's own children, whose love we often expect to picture the completeness of life.

Take, for instance, a marital relationship. At times, it can become one-sided, demanding, consuming, and devoid of genuine gratitude. Even those closest to us may not be truly receptive to our feelings, let alone offer the warmth of real reciprocation.

At some point, situational displays of affection reveal themselves as hollow, leaving behind a deeper sense of isolation. Yet, within this absence lies a peculiar strength, a power forged quietly in silence and struggle.

The power of not being loved does not arrive gently. At first, it strikes as an ache, a quiet trauma that unsettles the heart, leaving us raw with questions of worth and belonging. Loneliness in such moments feels heavy, almost unbearable. And yet, with time, the same absence begins to shift its shape. What once wounded slowly hardens into strength. It grows into emotional resilience, a quiet inner resource that teaches us how to stand without leaning too heavily on others. In that stillness, dependence on validation fades.

Loneliness, no longer a wound, it becomes a space, an opening where independence takes root, where the self learns endurance, and where silence itself begins to nourish.

Philosophically, the power of not being loved points to profound existential lessons.

Humans are wired for connection, recognition, and celebration, yet life does not always provide these gifts. The absence of love teaches us to face this truth squarely: not every bond will be mutual, not every gesture acknowledged.

Digital dictionary

It's essential for smart work, but one cannot keep aside the printed version

Muhsin Mutteth
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The English language adds to the linguistic diversity of India. It has a rich history of cultural exchange in which new words flowed into the cultural nerves of the people on the subcontinent. Mango from *Maangai*, jungle from *Jangal*, bungalow from *Bangla* and so on. The exchange is continuing in the 21st century.

In this journey of languages, dictionaries form the backbone, especially in developing vocabularies.

As the world observed yet another Dictionary Day on October 16, we are in the age of "auto-correct". Does this make dictionaries irrelevant? In the digital age, application software predicts what is in our mind and help us to complete the sentence. If able to answer why a sentence is being auto-corrected, we are in the right way of using technology in assisting language.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

In the case of printed dictionaries, we make a conscious decision on choosing a word and its placement in a sentence.

I had an Oxford pocket dictionary during my school days. As I studied in a Malayalam-medium school, use of English was confined to the second-language textbooks. It was a herculean task to read even a single sentence without a dictionary. I had to depend on it for each word. But I can proudly say it was a memorable experience flipping through pages searching the words in the alphabetical order. Rather, it was more effective for memorisation of each word and understanding where to use a particular word properly in a sentence.

Was it a boring activity to flip through the pages of dictionary? Yes. But the spelling of each and every word I found on the dictionary is still in my mind. I do not get that benefit when my sentences are decided by technology.

Have you come across the word "tradwife"? Gen Alpha will obviously say yes. Yet another word is "skibidi", a slang which originated from the viral YouTube series Skibidi Toilet. These are among the words to be added to the Cambridge Dictionary this year. This is the new normal in the digital age. But, if somebody asks me to write down the word "skibidi" on paper, I am not sure whether I will be able to spell it correctly. Because I found this word on an electronic device.

At the same time, if somebody asks me to write down any word that I had searched and found in the old printed dictionary, I'm confident to do that. For me, this is the gap between the printed and digital versions of the dictionaries.

In defence of waiting

Why slowing down is not a loss of time but a quiet gain of meaning

Adyasakti Maharana
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It is a familiar sight in India: serpentine queues outside temples, patients waiting patiently in crowded hospitals, or students refreshing websites for examination results. These intervals, though woven into our daily lives, are usually dismissed as irritants. In a society that increasingly prizes speed, waiting is treated as inefficiency, almost as failure. Delivery apps measure themselves in minutes, trains boast reduced travel times, and conversations collapse on instant replies. Yet the neglected intervals of waiting may hold lessons that speed cannot offer. Far from being wasted time, waiting is the architecture through which endurance, reflection, and patience quietly take shape.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Modern technology has worked tirelessly to erase waiting. A film that once required a trip to the cinema is now streamed in seconds. A letter that once travelled across oceans is replaced by the instant message. While these advances undoubtedly ease life, they also erode our tolerance for pause. The smallest delay is now felt as inconvenience. In making efficiency absolute, we risk forgetting that time not filled with activity is not necessarily empty.

Building expectation

Psychology shows how perception of waiting is rarely objective. A five-minute delay at a traffic signal may feel intolerable because of impatience, whereas a six-month anticipation of meeting a loved one may be endured with surprising ease. Waiting then is never just about clock time. It is about how human expectation shapes experience. In some contexts, it breeds frustration; in others, it deepens awareness. The interval, whether dreaded or cherished, is active not, passive.

History and literature offer countless illustrations. Farmers have long known that the harvest ripens only in its own season, and impatience cannot hasten it. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* made delay itself the stage, reflecting the human struggle with meaning in suspended time. Artists too speak of the "fallow period", when inspiration is absent but imagination is silently ripening. Across fields, the wisdom is the same: waiting protects depth from the shallowness of haste.

Why, then does waiting trouble us so much today? Partly because it challenges our illusion of control.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The RTI Act is a powerful tool for achieving transparency and accountability, yet practical challenges persist. ('20 years of the RTI Act'; Oct. 12) Its effectiveness can be improved through simplified access, awareness campaigns, local help centres, and strict monitoring of timelines.
N.S. Reddy

The RTI Act has reached a milestone while also serving as a mirror to Indian society. It has empowered citizens to question authority and expose corruption. Reviving its spirit now calls for stronger accountability, citizen vigilance, and political will to ensure transparency remains a living principle, not a fading promise.
Avinashiappan Myilsami

Recent attempts to dilute the RTI Act raise concerns about its enforcement. It is imperative that both the government and civil society work together to strengthen the implementation of the law through better infrastructure, protection for whistleblowers, and public awareness campaigns, especially in underserved areas.
Sajid Farooq

It is disheartening to see the intentional, systematic undermining of our 'sunshine law', which came into effect after a prolonged grassroots struggle. Without a strong transparency environment, which the RTI Act means to provide, the entire foundation of our democracy is jeopardised.
Kamal Laddha

True role model

From living a life circumscribed by conservative family and religious values behind closed doors to emerging as a poet and novelist, and eventually becoming a Parliamentarian, Salma's journey is remarkable and inspirational. ('Liberation behind closed doors'; Oct. 12) Her inimitable storytelling style and her ability to weave the trials and tribulations of real women into the pages of her fiction are indeed praiseworthy.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Saving the planet

Legendary primatologist Jane Goodall's tireless efforts striving for peace and hope in a world affected by environmental devastation and wildlife exploitation is unparalleled. ('Jane Goodall: The harbinger of hope'; Oct. 12) This iconic personality who championed peace and harmony between human beings and other forms of life on earth is indeed a worthy contender for the Nobel Peace Prize.
Monita Sutherson

Following trends

The article was a valuable read, addressing the current trends that citizens follow in the digital landscape. ('Unpacking the prefix'; Oct. 12) Undeniably, the word 'un' has its positive connotations. But we need to understand its depth and implications and use it wisely to maintain healthy relationships while choosing to un-friend those who negatively impact our mental and social well-being.
Sajna Hameed

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Stuck in traffic, stuck in life?
When what should be a 45-minute commute stretches to three hours in the silicon city
K. Swapna

Being honest
It pays, definitely in the long run
Vivek K. Agnihotri

When the sea becomes a neighbour
The fresh wind rushes in, cool, salty, untamed
Atharva Bhuse

Artificial intelligence and teachers
It's undoubtedly a powerful tool for education and efficiency in the classroom
Prabhat Kumar

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THE SANA REZWAN EFFECT IN JODHPUR

The patron is determined to take art from centres of power to the masses, at schools, parks and stepwells. And Jodhpur Art Week is a good example

Deepthi Sasidharan

Sana Rezwan began collecting art while running an art marketing agency in New York. She may not have realised it then, but the many hats she'd worn in her life till then – establishing Indelust, a platform to source ethical fashion from India and Pakistan; sitting on the Advisory Arts Council of Harvard University's South Asia Institute and as a patron of The Metropolitan Museum of Art; coupled with her experience as a senior director in her family business – were all training for her most ambitious venture yet.

In 2022, she established the Public Arts Trust of India (PATI), a non-profit that focused on cultural projects across the country. PATI's flagship ventures, the Jaipur Art Week and the Jodhpur Art Week, are now annual events. Together with her team, Rezwan curates a considered blend of site-specific installations, exhibitions and performances that bring enchantment to everyday public spaces. Government schools, neglected public parks and traditional architectural structures such as stepwells become art sites.

Who is it for? Everyone. The recently concluded Jodhpur Arts Week drew over 100,000 visitors across 10 public venues. With international senior artists such as Chila Kumari Singh dialoguing with traditional architecture and young talents like Sarahu Kilaru and Aku Zeliang pondering on the possibilities of craft and expression, this edition – inspired by 'Hath Ro Hunar' (meaning 'skill of the hand' in Marwari) – exemplifies Rezwan's powerful vision for democratising art.

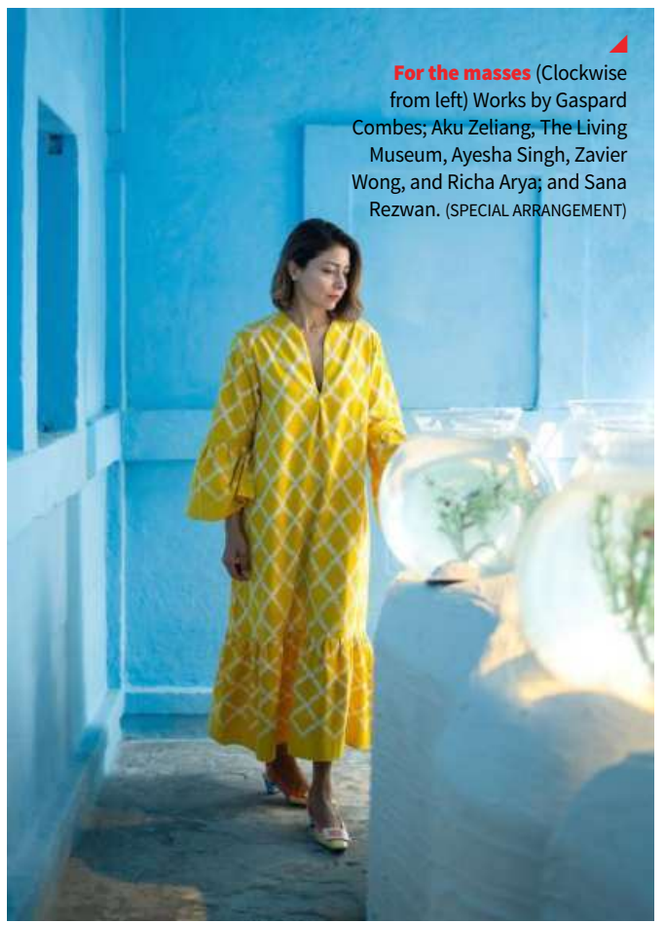
Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: *Tell us about PATI. It's intriguing that it includes the word 'public' – a clear indicator of its vision.*
Answer: At its core, PATI is an experiment in decentralisation. We aim to shift the locus of cultural attention away from the traditional centres of power and visibility, and instead build platforms where regional narratives, artisanal practices, and contemporary interventions intersect. Our vision is one of inclusivity and keeping the 'public' at its heart – not simply in terms of audience reach, but in terms of whose voices, histories, and modes of making are brought into dialogue with one another.

Importantly, this vision is not confined to episodic festivals. Through the year, PATI runs a Creative Arts Education Programme across five government schools in Jodhpur, supported by a fellowship model that embeds young educators into classrooms. Parallelly, our ambassador programme offers internships for high-school students who are eager to expand their knowledge of art and its wider social resonances. These year-round initiatives are central to our ethos: they ensure that public art is not just encountered as spectacle, but integrated into the everyday life of the city.

Q: *What led to the idea of creating an art week in Jodhpur?*
A: I wanted sustained engagement, so the idea of an art week was less about producing a festival and more about generating a framework for this. Jodhpur, with its layered architectural fabric and living craft traditions, offered a particularly fertile ground. The project is not merely an event but a proposition: how contemporary artistic practice might resonate within a city where heritage is not static but continually negotiated?

Q: *Why Jodhpur?*
A: It embodies a continuum of cultural production – from the artisanal to the monumental. It is a city where stone carving, dyeing, and metalwork co-exist with the fortresses and palaces that dominate its skyline. To me, Jodhpur represents both resilience and imagination. Importantly, it also exemplifies the possibility of decentralisation: an insistence that world-class cultural programming can – and should – take place outside metropolitan capitals.



For the masses (Clockwise from left) Works by Gaspard Combes; Aku Zeliang, The Living Museum, Ayesha Singh, Zavier Wong, and Richa Arya; and Sana Rezwan. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Q: *With artists like Ayesha Singh and Chila Kumari Burman a part of the programme, how is Jodhpur Art Week creating space for women's voices and stories within the wider art narrative?*
A: Foregrounding women artists is not a curatorial afterthought but a structural necessity. Artists such as Ayesha Singh and Chila Kumari Burman interrogate power, patriarchy, and identity through divergent aesthetic strategies – Singh through architectural interventions that expose hidden hierarchies, Burman through a neon-saturated iconography that reclaims visibility. By positioning such practices at the heart of the art week, we aim to unsettle inherited narratives and open space for feminist imaginaries to shape the discourse of contemporary art in India.

Q: *What steps are being taken to make Jodhpur Art Week accessible and engaging for audiences?*
A: Accessibility operates on multiple registers. Spatially, our decision to embed projects within stepwells, gardens, and public courtyards ensures that the city itself becomes the exhibition site. Our outreach with schools and artisans situates learning and participation at the centre of the festival. The education and ambassador programmes also build bridges of familiarity, ensuring that the festival is not experienced as a temporary imposition but as part of an ongoing civic dialogue. Internationally, collaborations with institutions such as the Institut Français and the British Council extend our conversations beyond national borders. Accessibility, then, is not only about removing barriers to entry, but about constructing an ethos of shared ownership.

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

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

Kailasa in Cambodia

Tourists may prefer Angkor Wat, but the temple at Koh Ker shows the power of Shiva and the classic Deva-raja

A few decades before the Chola king Rajaraja I built the Brihadeeswara Temple in Tamil Nadu, around 1000 AD, a Khmer king called Jayavarman IV had begun building a temple to replicate the Kailasa mountain in Cambodia, at Koh Ker, complete with a tank that would replicate the river Ganga. It followed Tantrik principles of architecture, and a nearby riverbed was covered with hundreds of Shiva *lingas* to transform the water into Ganga.

This was 200 years before the building of the now famous tourist destination Angkor Wat. The Shiva of Koh Ker is not some gentle *yogi*. He is a great god of kings, a god of power, a god of dominance, a Tantrik god.

Built in the 10th century CE, Koh Ker was for a brief moment the capital of the Khmer Empire before Angkor took over. Jayavarman IV was not interested in modesty; he wanted a capital that proclaimed power. So, he placed Shiva at the centre of everything.

At Koh Ker, he built a massive seven-tiered pyramid called Prasat Thom. Prasat means '*prasada*' or enclosure in Sanskrit, a common term for temples. It looks nothing like the curving *shikhara* of Indian temples. It looks like a step-pyramid, raw and imposing, more Mayan than Indian. But on top of it stood the *linga* of Shiva, rising like a cosmic pillar, visible from miles around.

The message was clear: the king was Shiva's chosen, the axis of the universe had been placed in his capital, and his earthly representative. This is classic Deva-raja (God-king) cult, where the god and the king merge into one cosmic being. You can see why Jayavarman IV wanted Koh Ker as his capital. It was propaganda in stone.

Shiva as an empire

Around this pyramid, the site was filled with dozens of Shiva temples. Archaeologists have counted more than 180 sanctuaries scattered across 80 square kilometres. Many shrines were built to house *lingas*, each named with cosmic attributes: Prasat Krahom, Prasat Pram, and so on.

The sculptures from Koh Ker are stunning. Some of the finest images of Shiva's sons, Skanda and Ganesha, come from here. The most impressive is one of Skanda seated on a peacock, a rare Cambodian image. Another famous image is of Shiva playing with baby Skanda, and it is never clear if this is a representation of a god or the king. Then there are fragments of a massive five-headed, ten-armed dancing Shiva. Many sculptures were stolen and now housed in museums around the world.

Propaganda in stone (Clockwise from left) The temple at Koh Ker; a multi-headed serpent statue; and a Shiva *linga* at the temple complex. (GETTY IMAGES)

What makes Koh Ker different from Angkor Wat is that here Shiva is clearly supreme. At Angkor, you see Vishnu cults rise, and later Buddhist domination. But Koh Ker is pure Shaiva power. The inscriptions are clear that Jayavarman IV's devotion was to Tribhuvaneshvara, Lord of the Three Worlds, another name for Shiva. The architecture backs this up. Every stone, wall, and sanctuary announces Shaiva supremacy.

It is also worth noting how the Khmer kings reimagined Indian ideas. In India, the Shiva *linga* is often housed in dark sanctums. In Koh Ker, it is raised up in the open, high above on a pyramid. This is the god of kingship, not the god of hermits.

Ellora's Kailasa temple is carved out of living rock, but it hides the *linga* in the depths of a mountain. Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu is even more distinct. Its sanctum has no *linga* at all but an empty space with a hanging garland, symbolising Shiva as the cosmic dancer, subtle and unseen.

Koh Ker is the opposite of both – a 36-metre-high pyramid, rough blocks stacked in the jungle, carrying a Shiva *linga* at the top like a flagpole of the empire.

The audacity of a king

Today, Koh Ker is mostly in ruins. Tourists still prefer Angkor Wat, but anyone who visits the former feels the raw difference. Angkor is polished grandeur, with Vishnu, Shiva, and later Buddha all jostling. Koh Ker is blunt power: Shiva as an empire.

After Jayavarman IV's death, the capital shifted back to Angkor. Koh Ker was abandoned, its grand pyramid left isolated in the jungle. The colossal *linga* that once crowned the pyramid is gone, probably destroyed or stolen. What remains is a ghost of Shaiva power.

But sometimes ghosts are more telling than monuments. Koh Ker shows us the audacity of a king who dared to centre the cosmos on Shiva, only for history to move on.

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