

# magazine



## backpage

### The 25-year journey of the Kottan from Chettinad

GO TO » PAGE 8

## WIDE ANGLE

### Satire | Stop whining about KYC, and just re-KYC

GO TO » PAGE 5

## LITERARY REVIEW

### When Sneh Bhargava of AIIMS treated Indira Gandhi

GO TO » PAGE 3

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

Get connected » [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)

Menaka Raman

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains.

Published a little over a century after its source of inspiration, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) retains the original characters and narrative but replaces some discussions of yearly allowances and the size of estates with talk of katanas and the undead.

While we cannot be sure what author Jane Austen (1775-1817) would have made of the Bennet sisters getting trained by Shaolin monks, as one Goodreads review puts it: "Fans will either think this book is brilliant or are already setting fire to Seth Grahame-Smith's lawn."

As Janeites around the world celebrate the Regency author ahead of her 250th birthday this December, her modest but mighty body of work has not only endured, but evolved, lending itself to myriad adaptations, spin-offs, memes and even counting books for toddlers (two rich gentlemen, five sisters, and so on.)

In all likelihood, you would have first encountered Austen in the classroom or because an adult in your life wanted you to be 'well read'. I first heard of her when a slightly older, much cooler family friend confidently told me that "Just as every man can quote from *The Godfather*, every woman can quote from *Pride and Prejudice*." It was a while before I realised what an untrue and gendered statement that was, but I forgave her. After all, she had introduced me to Austen.

The statement set me off in search of the book. I still remember the look of surprise on the face of Pazhani, the proprietor of Easwari Lending Library in Chennai, when I handed it over to him to check out. Up until that moment, my main preoccupation in life was keeping the many rows of Mills & Boons in steady rotation.

#### Life-altering legacy

It was with the intent of keeping her away from such romance novels that Radhika Sathe Mantri's mother steered her towards Austen. The special educator and co-founder of Cosy Nook Library in Bengaluru is a self-proclaimed super fan, and remembers her mother saying, "Here is something that will change your life."

"And it did," she says.

Mantri has been 'obsessed' with the writer and her body of work since then, reading and rereading the novels and watching all the adaptations. "I even sat down and annotated my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* while watching the 1980 BBC version starring David Rintoul as Mr. Darcy. Did you know it's the closest to the original text? The Colin Firth one is quite massified," she says, quickly adding that she still loves it.

Nidhi Bhandari, an undergraduate student, first made an attempt at reading the classics when she was 12. "I started with *Moby Dick* but I couldn't relate to it at all," she tells me. "But when I read Austen, all the day-to-day matters of life that are usually dismissed – friendship, finding love, and gossip – she treated all of these seriously, validating them for me and my friends."

This need for validation is something that came up in my conversation with writer,



## STILL GOT IT 250 YEARS OF JANE AUSTEN

### Ahead of her birth anniversary in December, we take stock of the Regency author's adaptability, wit and social commentary that keep her startlingly modern

translator, and critic Meenakshi Bharat. The retired professor taught Austen to Honours students at Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, for many years.

"Amongst my undergraduate students, the girls would instinctively take to Jane Austen, but the boys would smile and stay silent. If I asked them what they thought about it all, they would respond that the heroes looked silly. It appeared initially, as if going along with the 'romance' went against their 'male' instincts," she tells me over a Zoom interview. Bharat has a keen interest in film adaptations and started using them as a way to bring her students closer to Austen's work.

"When we watch Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), which transposes Austen to an Indian milieu, they feel 'okay, this is my world'. And they start seeing that Austen has relevance to their lives; that she has something significant to say about life's choices at the personal and social levels; that her works give direction in this globalised scenario; that her directions are emotionally, socially and economically sound. That's validation!"

#### Money and marriage still matter

Some of us arrive at Austen's work through these adaptations, without even realising they are based on her books. Bhandari recalls reading *Emma* and feeling a jolt of recognition. "I had seen

*Clueless* (1995) and *Aisha* (2004), and not realised they were based on a book at the time."

*Clueless*, which turns 30 this year, came up in my conversation with novelist Mahesh Rao, whose *Polite Society* (2019) sets *Emma* in Lutyens' Delhi. "*Clueless* is so sharp and clever in the way it transposes Austen to Beverly Hills. There's really no one more obsessed with popularity and who is in and who is out than high school students," he says.

**INSIDE  
SOCIAL ACTIVIST ARUNA  
ROY ON AUSTEN'S  
ENDURING APPEAL  
PAGE 4  
BATH'S REGENCY  
REVIVAL  
PAGE 5**

But outside of his enjoyment of *Clueless*, and the BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle, Rao is not particularly interested in what he calls 'the Jane Austen industry'. "It focuses too much on the defanged, frothy romance and merchandise, and doesn't really get into Austen's acerbic wit, and her sharp observations of class, wealth and the position of women in society."

I ask Rao why he thinks Austen still ranks so highly with a certain group of South Asian readers today. "Because money, marriage and social mobility still resonate with us as a society. Marriage is

very much the fulcrum of Indian society and there is no escaping it for many, across class, caste and religion. The idea that this is a huge impending thing in your life, is still relatable," he shares.

Our understanding of the world Austen brought to life becomes more nuanced over time. "As you get older, you are more aware of discussions around class and opportunity, and you read the books differently," Rao tells me. "Scenes enjoyed freely on first reading, now make me wince," he says, and refers to the character of Harriet Smith in *Emma*. "She is of a lower social standing and that aspect is used to turn her into a figure of fun." Rao also believes that the paternalistic and saviour attitude on display in *Emma* might have been forgiven then, but modern audiences are more primed to look at these things critically.

#### 'Like a potato'

For Aparna Kapur, author and editor of children's books, the itch to re-read Austen appears every now and then. "You always get something new – nuance in a throwaway line, sharp dialogue or class commentary that you might have missed earlier," she says. "Seeing humans through the eyes of Austen will never get old. It doesn't matter if you understand the world or relate to the language, her sharp observation of people is what makes Austen's writing so charming and timeless." And perhaps that's why we are willing

to take Austen in whatever form we can get.

We might not love all of them – the *Fleabag*-esque adaptation of *Persuasion* (2022) with Dakota Johnson and Gen Z lingo was largely panned – but we're willing to give them a chance. Because we love Austen.

"She's like a potato," Kapur says. "There are so many reinventions." And the spud continues to get cooked into new dishes.

There's Apple TV's *How Jane Austen Wrecked My Life* and Audible has a new audio adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* premiering in September, with Harris Dickinson – thirst trap *du jour* – astutely cast as Mr. Darcy. Netflix has announced a six-episode *Pride and Prejudice* mini series with a screenplay by author Dolly Alderton that will 'remain faithful to the original story, but present it to an entirely new generation of viewers'.

#### Is Gen Next interested?

Anushka Venu Kumar, a 17-year-old student in Bengaluru, first read Austen when she was 13, on the recommendation of Cosy Nook Library's Manthri. I ask her what she thinks of arranged marriages and love as portrayed in Austen's novels. "Her writing always includes a critique of marriage as a contract or economic proposition, which I think is just as relevant today as it was in her time," she says, adding that the first time she read *Pride and Prejudice*, she was a little disappointed. "I felt like it was lacking in the kind of whirlwind romance that we usually see on Netflix, and I wasn't too fond of Mr. Darcy." She has since changed her perspective on the book.

With great maturity, Kumar says she believes that true love isn't defined by flowers or cute notes, but rather respect, companionship, and the desire to be better for the other person. "I don't think this resonates with the majority of my peer group. After all, we're just teenagers and concepts like love and marriage can take lifetimes to figure out."

**CONTINUED ON  
» PAGE 4**

## Attention Janeites

Where to go to get your Austen fix



● **An Evening at the Pleasure Gardens**  
*Parade Gardens, Bath* | September 14

At dusk, an immersive Georgian nightlife experience will unfold under the stars, with circus performers, musical interludes, drinks, and sweet treats. A ticketed event, guests can dust off their best Regency costume for the historical re-enactment party.

#### ● Austenmania!

*Jane Austen's House Museum, Hampshire* | Till January 4, 2026

Here's a chance to look back to 1995, an iconic year for Austen adaptations on film and TV. Celebrate four landmark creations: Andrew Davies' *Pride and Prejudice* for the BBC starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle; Emma Thompson and Ang Lee's big-screen adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*; BBC Screen Two's unhurried *Persuasion* starring Amanda Root and Ciarán Hinds; and the frothy and fun *Clueless*, a reimagining of *Emma* in plaid mini-skirts set in Los Angeles, starring Alicia Silverstone.

#### ● Beyond the Bonnets exhibition

*The Arc, Winchester, and the Willis Museum, Basingstoke* | From July 26 to February 22

The lens is shifting from Austen's heroines to the working women – be it housekeepers, maids, governesses, or seamstresses. As Kathleen Palmer, the exhibition's curator, explained to *The Guardian*: "Working women were not the centre, the lead characters, in Austen's novels, but they do play an important role, and sometimes develop the plot". The exhibition features stories such as that of Susannah Sackree, a nursemaid to the 11 children of Austen's brother Edward, and is paired with voiced extracts from her novels and letters with dozens of objects illustrating their daily lives.

#### ● Regency Ball

*The Great Hall, Winchester* | August 16

It promises to be a night of gowns, gloves, and top hats. The elegant ball – to be hosted in the 13th century medieval Great Hall of Winchester Castle, with its soaring arches – will have guests in period attire, along with live music from the era, dance cards, food and drink. A silhouettist will also create hand cut silhouettes of the guests.

#### ● Opening of Jane Austen's home

*College Street, Winchester*

The novelist lived at No. 8 College Street during the final weeks of her life; she died on July 18, 1817, at the age of 41. For the first time ever, the two-storeyed house will be opened to the public every Wednesday and Saturday till August 30. Displays and artefacts will show how she spent her last days.

#### ● Jane Austen's Birthday Week

*Jane Austen's House Museum, and venues across Hampshire* | December 13-21

The week-long celebration will include book readings, winter walks, festive craft sessions, candlelight tours, tea parties, and musical performances at the house where Austen wrote her six novels. The building will be dressed with traditional Georgian decorations, scents and recipes, offering visitors a chance to step back in time.

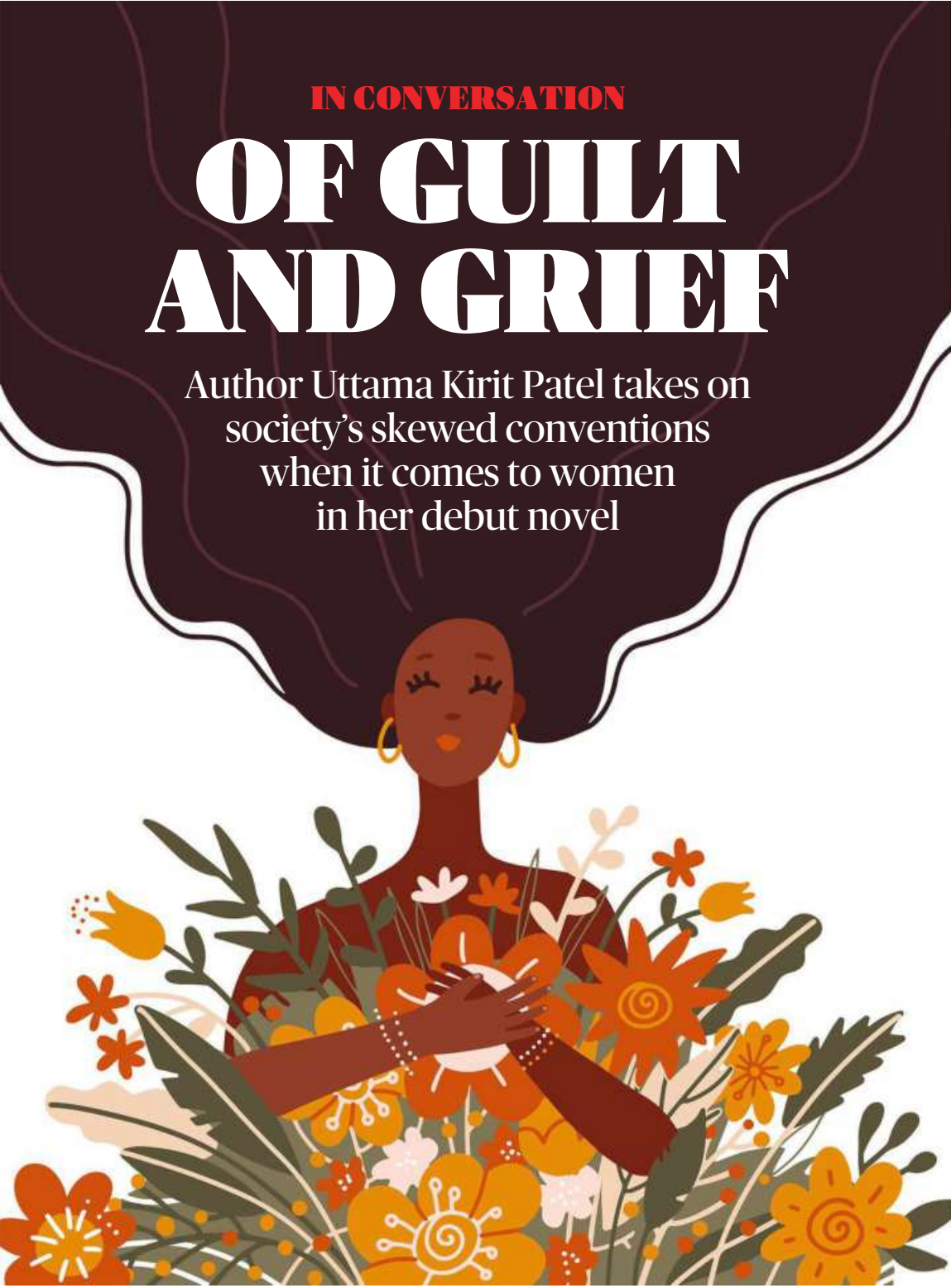
#### ● The 2 Minute Tribute

*janeaustensociety.org.uk* | Till December 16

As part of the celebrations, Janeites from around the world can now make a recording on 'What Jane Austen means to me' – in prose, verse, song or rap. The tributes will be uploaded to a public page on the Society's website.



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK



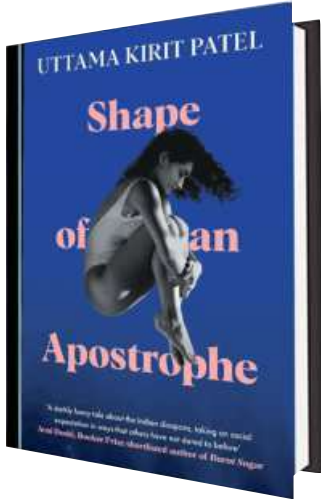
Author Uttama Kirit Patel takes on society’s skewed conventions when it comes to women in her debut novel

Neha Bhatt

Writers of fiction are used to being asked a particular kind of niggling question: was the book inspired by your life or anyone you know? The answer is not always straightforward.

For Uttama Kirit Patel, debut author of *Shape of an Apostrophe* (published by Serpent’s Tail), it comes in many forms. Her novel begins with an apology letter she wrote to the biological child she decided not to have in favour of adoption. “I wanted to adopt since I was 16. When the time came to act on that want, I was overwhelmed with guilt. The guilt was not truly mine, but of how I was supposed to want a biological child. I was a bit angry: why should I be feeling guilty for making what is considered an unconventional choice?”

The novel follows Lina, who lives in a villa in Dubai with her husband Ishaan and her in-laws. The opulence around her is at odds with the turbulence she is weighed down with. She never wanted to have children, but now finds herself pregnant. Still grieving the recent death of her father, Lina’s predicament becomes more complicated when she discovers a family secret on a trip to Mumbai. “The idea was to write a story that challenged the presumption that all women want to be mothers or want to mother in a specific way, because I think



that narrative is limited and misses the nuance of maternal desire and intentional parenthood. I wanted to challenge myself and write a character that was the opposite of me because I have always wanted to be a mother. There are so many women I know who are consumed with guilt when they make that choice not to have a child,” says Patel.

#### Home turf debates

The title came to her on a visit to the Haji Ali Dargah, the famous Sufi shrine off the Mumbai coast, that features in the novel. “I saw a little girl sitting by the water. She looked to me like the shape of an apostrophe and that image stayed in my brain. When I was writing this story, the memory of that girl kept returning to me, almost like a pleasant haunting. An apostrophe stands in the place of letters that

have disappeared, symbolising what is not there, what is unsaid, untold or yet to be told,” she says.

Patel, who grew up in the UAE, and has lived in 12 cities, set the novel in Dubai, a place with no reproductive autonomy, to explore the severe gendered restrictions that are placed even within seemingly progressive families. “But it isn’t about the UAE anymore because reproductive rights are being restricted everywhere,” she says.

Even as the novel’s characters navigate skewed conventions of the new and old world order, the probing, often moving novel lays bare the fault lines of the domestic sphere. “It is an extraordinary space, as it reflects wider societal shortcomings so starkly and is a place rife with opportunity to change gendered dynamics. The micro inequities that exist are largely going unnoticed by men and quietly tolerated by women as part of everyday life’s annoyances. What is expected of women is compliance. There

are so many patterns we can prevent from getting inherited,” she says. Moreover, Patel observes, the home can be a safe space while also being the place where we are the most dishonest.

#### Stories within stories

Class dynamics too are intricately layered into the story. Fiercely rebellious and aware of her privileges, Lina is confronted with her own prejudices when she encounters her long-time domestic worker’s daughter, Shobha, in Mumbai. “While they are indispensable to employers, particularly in critical moments, they rarely get credit or respect. The emotions, complexities, failures that we allow in ourselves are not allowed in people who work in domestic spaces. Even an employer with the best of intentions expects gratitude and servitude. It really gets to me,” says Patel.

The novel, with chapters that shift between multiple characters, employs a precise, concise language that is both absorbing and laden with mini-stories within stories. It took Patel seven years to write, a majority of which she was working as a marketing strategist. “To get to the depth of the story took complete absorption. I wrote every Saturday. I start out writing by hand, then structure it on index cards, then write scenes on a computer. Then I go for a swim where new ideas will come and then I rework it all. After a few drafts and a few years, I took eight weeks off and went to New Zealand and disconnected from technology and wrote,” she says.

Finishing the novel was liberating. Patel lost her father before she began writing it, and the grief she felt bled into the story. “There was no other way to live than to have that grief beside me. Every character in the novel has their own grief in some shape and form. There is power in it. It’s a living thing. It has a place and purpose. I can be immensely happy and immediately immensely sad. I wanted that duality in the book because they can co-exist,” she says.

The reviewer is an author and freelance journalist based in Delhi.



Uttama Kirit Patel

## New voices, timeless tales

The inaugural Mozhi Prize anthology, with nine Tamil stories in translation, highlights the diversity of tone and form in contemporary regional fiction

Geetha Srimathi

geetha.srimathi@thehindu.co.in

In *A House Without Cats and Other Stories*, the inaugural Mozhi Prize anthology, nine stories translated from Tamil present a literary world both intimate and expansive – a world where grandmothers tuck memory into old wooden trunks and gods grow hungry for offerings.

Founded by translators Suchitra Ramachandran and Priyamvada Ramkumar in 2022, Mozhi is a platform devoted to Indian language literature in English translation. Its

first edition focuses on short stories translated from the Tamil, adjudged by a panel comprising writer A. Muttulingam and translators N. Kalyan Raman and Deepa Bhasthi.

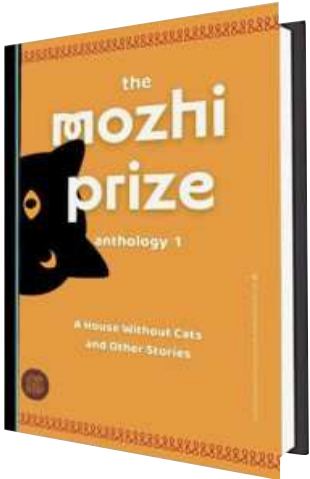
Three stories were awarded prizes and three received special mentions; all translated with a fidelity to the words and worlds they conjure.

A striking aspect found across the stories is their rootedness in setting and subject. ‘Maadan’s Deliverance’ by Jeyamohan (translated by Sherwin Rodriguez) opens the collection with a fable-like tale steeped in caste politics and magical realism.

The title story, ‘A House Without

Cats’ by Chandra (translated by Padmaja Anant), which won the top prize, is told through the eyes of the youngest child in a once-wealthy household, now filled with the warmth of memories, the lingering shadows of loss, and struggles of the present. It is a story that, in its simplicity, manages to articulate the quiet ache of growing up and going away.

The runner-up, ‘Filfilee’ by Jeyamohan (translated by Amruth Varshan), is a period tale brought to life so seamlessly that it feels like we’re reading an original work. The third place winner, *Cotton Fever* by Senthil Jagannathan (translated by



A House Without Cats and Other Stories: The Mozhi Prize Anthology 1 South Side Books ₹300

Anjana Shekar), is a poignant tale of a farmer’s hardworking wife struggling with a skin disease during the cotton harvest and the hardships

faced by her impoverished family. Here, the translation shines in its handling of everyday speech; the dialogues pulse with life, as though overheard rather than read.

#### Entries open for this year

The stories reflect the diversity of tone and form in contemporary Tamil fiction, spanning satire, social realism, and oral-style narration. For instance, Vannadasan’s ‘A Brief Strain of Music’ (translated by Mayuravarshini M.), which received a special mention, captures generational memory with grace and restraint.

Humour appears in subtle touches as well. ‘Ammaiyappam’, an endearing story by Jeyamohan and translated by V. Iswarya, adds lightness through a mishap with an inept carpenter, while maintaining nuance.

Not every story works in quite the same way for every reader, but that’s

the point of a good anthology; it allows for shift and shadow, for different temperatures of storytelling. Jeyamohan’s ‘Beast’ (translated by Megana Kumar), for instance, with its heavy reliance on dialogue, moves swiftly, its pacing aided by a translation that doesn’t slow things down with over-explanation.

In the Introduction, Team Mozhi explains that submissions for the prize were limited to stories published after 1972. While this means that the works of classic Tamil short story writers like Pudumaipithan and Ku. Alagirisamy are not in the mix, the team says they received a number of translations from young talents like Senthil Jagannathan.

The Mozhi Prize’s 2025 edition, entries open until September, is certainly worth watching, as it’s poised to bring fresh voices in literary translation to the fore.



Won-pyung Sohn’s new book is a hat tip to the everyman and everywoman in today’s world.

## Insignificant lives

Author of the bestselling *Almond* returns with another enjoyable novel about the banality of the corporate sector in South Korea

Radhika Santhanam

radhika.s@thehindu.co.in

South Korea is notorious for its workaholic culture. For long, it has championed a system where seniority plays a major role in decision-making, long hours are common, work-life balance is skewed, and company dinners are all too frequent. But the younger generation is challenging this rigidity and it is in this changing environment that Won-pyung Sohn sets her latest book, *Counterattacks at Thirty*, translated from the Korean by Sean Lin Halbert. From the lens of Kim Jihye, an “extended intern” in Seoul, Sohn examines the sheer banality of the corporate sector in her country.

Jihye is an ordinary woman with little to brag about. After a dramatic birth, she struggles to have an identity in a sea of Jihyes at school. “It was so bad that sometimes ‘Kim Jihye’ felt more like a common noun, like dog or cat,” she says.

Now 30, Jihye holds an administrative job at Diamant Academy, an institution that offers courses in the liberal arts. Her work involves photocopying bundles of material, stacking chairs, and running errands. Jihye is frustrated with her mundane life, but has also come to accept it with a fatalistic ennui. All she hopes for is to become a regular employee.

Her life takes a turn when a new intern, Lee Gyuok, joins the Academy. He is everything that Jihye is not: an industrious worker, cheerful, and philosophical. Gyuok is also quietly rebellious. By slowly casting his charm, he enlists Jihye and two others, Mr. Nam and Muin, to carry out pranks against people who abuse their authority, for “even the smallest practical jokes can cause a storm”.

#### Stark realism

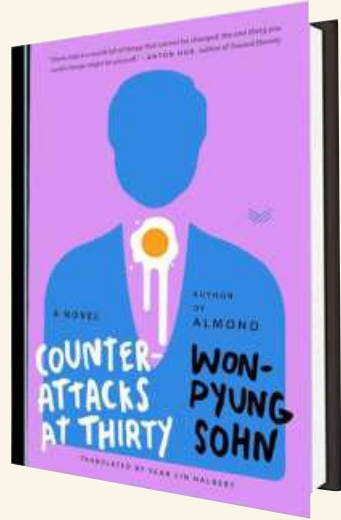
The rebels do not have lofty goals; they simply want to make mean and unethical people “feel uncomfortable” and “ashamed”. With a sense of purpose, they get to work, throwing eggs and spraying graffiti. Each successful prank makes them more daring until their pacifist revolution comes to an expected halt.

By situating most of the story within the vicinity of the office, Sohn captures the suffocating hierarchy of the Academy and its insularity,

which only perpetuates Jihye’s loneliness.

While Jihye feels largely defeated by the system, her boss, Team Leader Yun, plods on, tolerating injustice and misogyny and choosing her battles carefully. “Someday you’ll understand, Jihye,” she says. “Maybe after you get married and have two kids.” In an increasingly profit-driven world, liberal arts get commodified as well. Diamant Academy epitomises this tragedy, as it cares little for education or ethics.

Though these are serious themes, Sohn chooses to treat them with a feather-like lightness and injects the narrative with ample humour and



Counterattacks at Thirty Won-pyung Sohn, trs Sean Lin Halbert HarperVia ₹399

small doses of drama. This, along with the relatability of the characters, is what makes *Counterattacks at Thirty*, originally published in 2017, enjoyable. But while the book, and particularly its ending, is gratifying for its stark realism, it is also for precisely this reason that it doesn’t quite pack a punch.

Micro-aggressions can lead to internal change even if they don’t transform society. When she finally comes into her own, Jihye wonders if her ordinariness was, in fact, her most extraordinary quality, and if it was her love for being truly alone that had kept her sane. “I was grateful for my insignificance,” she contends. *Counterattacks at Thirty* is an acknowledgement of, and sometimes a hat tip to, the everyman and everywoman in a dog-eat-dog world.



Dr. Sneha Bhargava at her residence in New Delhi.  
(SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA)

INTERVIEW

# ‘I COULDN’T THANK MRS. GANDHI’

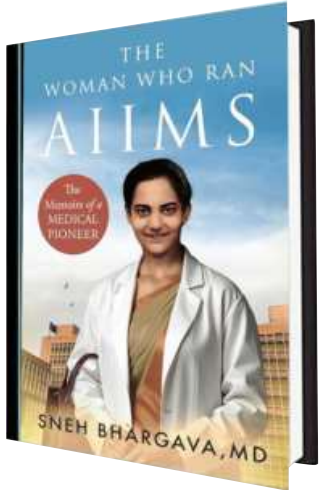
The Prime Minister had appointed Sneha Bhargava as director of AIIMS, but on the first day of her tenure, she had to tend to a profusely bleeding Indira Gandhi, who had been shot

Soma Basu  
soma.basu@thehindu.co.in

If Indira Gandhi can run the country, why can’t a woman run the country’s premier medical institution?” This was Sneha Bhargava’s reply to people upset that a woman from a low-profile Radiology department was appointed as director of the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi, in 1984. She remains the first – and only woman – to have helmed AIIMS in the past seven decades. But what Dr. Bhargava never would have imagined was how Day One as AIIMS director on October 31, 1984, would unfold.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been shot by two bodyguards in the morning and was rushed to AIIMS. “She had approved my appointment as AIIMS director barely 10 days ago; I never got an opportunity to thank her. At 9 a.m. on October 31, the meeting confirming me as director was underway when we were informed the Prime Minister was in casualty. It was unthinkable that a PM could come to the hospital without prior notice. I sensed something was terribly amiss,” recalls Dr. Bhargava.

When she entered the casualty, she saw two resident doctors in a state of shock. They pointed towards a gurney, on which the body lay still. Dr. Bhargava saw Mrs. Gandhi’s signature grey-streaked hair, the pronounced aquiline nose and her saffron sari soaked in blood. The Prime Minister’s personal secretary R.K. Dhawan, her close aide M.L. Fotedar and daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi were in tears. For the next four hours, the doctors tried to revive the Prime Minister, but in



vain. Dr. Bhargava had realised this early enough.

It was one of the most difficult days at work, admits Dr. Bhargava. And she has had several tough days, by virtue of being among the few women radiologists in the country at a time when the discipline was still evolving. Known for her guts to call out and stand against political pressure, her priority remained patient health care. When the pandemic forced her to stay home, she began writing her memoir.

On June 23, Dr. Bhargava turned 95 and released her book, *The Woman Who Ran AIIMS* (Juggernaut). Edited excerpts from an interview at her Delhi home:

**Question:** How do you remember October 31, 1984, with such clarity?  
**Answer:** My memory guided me. I have always done my work passionately and enjoyed every moment; that is why everything came back to me smoothly. Many times I felt I haven’t done anything spectacular that needs to be documented. But as thoughts and memories kept flowing, I felt I had a story to tell.

**Q:** It is such an irony that on the day you joined as AIIMS director, the woman who appointed you was brought for emergency treatment. Did you have a meltdown?

**A:** Of course. But I knew I had to do my work as a professional. The meltdown had to be kept in the background. My only regret is I wasn’t able to personally thank Mrs. Gandhi for believing in me and giving me the responsibility of running AIIMS.

**Q:** Could you describe the day?  
**A:** My instinct told me something was wrong because the Prime Minister was brought to casualty without prior information. I saw her profusely bleeding body and immediately decided with two of our top surgeons to put her on the heart lung machine and see if we could revive her. We did not know how and what had happened to her. My foremost thought was to keep her body safe. There were bullets in her chest, liver, abdomen which were dropping off on the ground and blood was oozing from every organ. She had a rare B-minus blood group. The protocol dictated we keep two bottles of blood in the fridge for the Prime Minister. The two bottles finished in no time and we called up every hospital in Delhi; Only O-minus (universal donor) could be procured. I knew Mrs. Gandhi was no more. The Congress leaders did not want a power gap and told us not to announce anything but keep



Scan the QR code to watch Dr. Sneha Bhargava on magazine.  
thehindu.com

working on her till the party took a decision and the President and her son reached Delhi. Our surgeons kept infusing blood through the multiple wounds in the body and it kept draining out.

**Q:** How difficult was it to embalm the body?

**A:** We were unable to inject the embalming fluid through the arteries. It kept oozing out. So the anatomy department ensured the face was kept intact as there were no wounds there. I requested Sonia Gandhi to go home and get a fresh set of clothes for Mrs. Gandhi.

**Q:** How did you manage with other logistics and the swelling crowd outside AIIMS?

**A:** There were tense moments. One of our Sikh doctors fled the OT when he learnt Mrs. Gandhi had been killed by her Sikh bodyguards. Gautam Kaul, who was the Additional Commissioner of Police and a first cousin of Mrs. Gandhi, handled the bandobast and also helped us with medico-legal formalities. It never struck us that there would be an inquiry.

We had made only surgical notes but he told us to prepare a formal post-mortem report with photographs and also get a ballistic report and referred us to a ballistic expert, whom we got into AIIMS with much difficulty.

As doctors, our focus was on controlling Mrs. Gandhi’s blood loss and we hadn’t taken an X-ray of her leg where she was first hit. When we took the X-ray of her leg, it revealed that the bullet was different from the ones that were lodged in her body. This was the first evidence of the use of two different guns. We recorded it and it helped us during the inquest later.

## Green revolution

Sumana Roy’s book is about noted public figures and a domestic worker who changed the way people think about plants

Chintan Girish Modi

The title of Sumana Roy’s book *Plant Thinkers of Twentieth-Century Bengal* makes one wonder what it means to be a “plant thinker” and who might be called one. An Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Ashoka University, she writes about “revolutionaries who created a plant poetics that secretly changed the way a people would imagine and live with plants”. Their non-violent revolution seeks to challenge the dominant worldview.

The volume is divided into seven chapters. Six of them are about public figures like Jagadish Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Jibanananda Das, Shakti Chattopadhyay, and Satyajit Ray. The last is about a domestic worker, Maya-mashi, personally known to the author. Though none of them were professional environmentalists, what they have in common is a “vocabulary of intimacy and cohabitation with plant life”.

If you are a Roy fan who enjoyed *How I Became a Tree: Dispatches from a World on Fire* (2017) and *Provincials: Postcards from the Peripheries* (2024), her latest would be a worthy addition to your bookshelf. She returns to abiding preoccupations with renewed vigour. Her disenchantment with the capitalist, anthropocentric mode of engagement with plant life is on full display here, as is the joy of re-discovering people from the past who share her concerns.

Unlike the previous books that were more autobiographical and inward-looking, this one is more intent on contributing to a fledgling discipline called “plant humanities”. The vocabulary is not technical but the writing style is geared towards a scholarly audience. Roy has been working on the Indian Plant Humanities project with the Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability at Ashoka University, so this should not come as a big surprise.

‘Natural cosmopolitanism’ The first six chapters combine biographical sketches of the thinkers along with discussions of their work. The one on Bose – a scientist and a science fiction writer – is about “his desperation to prove the legitimacy of plants as citizens in the country of the living” whereas the one on poet-artist-playwright Tagore revolves around “the natural cosmopolitanism” of the forest that he meant to recreate in Santiniketan, an educational experiment in Bolpur.

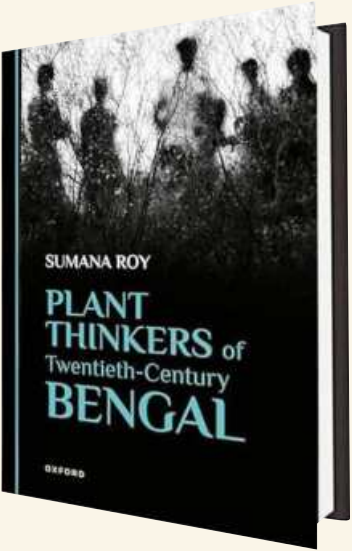
The third chapter shows how Bandyopadhyay, the novelist who moved from Bengal to Bihar to work as an assistant manager at an agricultural estate, recognised his own complicity as a “coloniser” in destroying the forest and turning the forest into profit-making agricultural land. The chapter on poet-essayist-novelist Das frames him as a chronicler of “the botanical history of provincial Bengal” while the one on Chattopadhyay looks at him as a poet whose affection for rustic life comes from his childhood experiences in a village where he lived with

his maternal grandfather who was a teacher and homoeopath.

**The world of Apu** Roy draws attention to the recurring figure of the botanist in Ray’s stories. She notes that, unlike Apu in Ray’s film *Pather Panchali* who grew up in the countryside, “little Satyajit” was raised in the city uninitiated into the mysteries of the plant kingdom. However, childhood vacations were spent with an aunt and uncle in Darbhanga with easy access to trees.

Roy does a terrific job of highlighting their contributions. However, she is more descriptive than analytical and seems reluctant to approach the work of these personalities with a critical lens. The flow of her writing is disrupted by large chunks of quotes from primary sources.

The last chapter, though beautifully penned, comes across as an afterthought. It seems that Roy’s championing of a domestic worker who expressed herself in botanical idioms and proverbs is meant to address the absences in the first six chapters. She notes that Bose, Tagore, Bandyopadhyay,



**Plant Thinkers of Twentieth-Century Bengal**  
Sumana Roy  
Oxford University Press  
₹1,100

Das and Ray “came from families with strong connections to the Brahmo Samaj”, so the Upanishadic way of thinking and living was ingrained in their understanding of their own place in the world as well as their approach to plant life.

Chattopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay’s fathers, she remarks, “came from similar intellectual histories – Sanskrit teaching, classical literatures, the Brahminical background”. However, Roy does not explore how “a naturalised understanding of a multispecies universe where everyone and everything was a citizen” seems incompatible with the oppressive caste system.

It is surprising that writer and activist Mahasweta Devi does not get a whole chapter but just a few lines in a paragraph on “the botanical imagination among Satyajit Ray’s contemporaries in Bangla literature”. Hopefully, future editions of the book will fill this gap.

The reviewer is a journalist, educator and literary critic.

## BROWSER

### Gender Apartheid In India & Legal Interventions

**K.S. Sarwani**  
MJP Publishers  
₹1,895  
Examining the historical, cultural, and socio-legal factors contributing to gender discrimination, Sarwani analyses the Constitution, highlighting its protective measures and limitations.



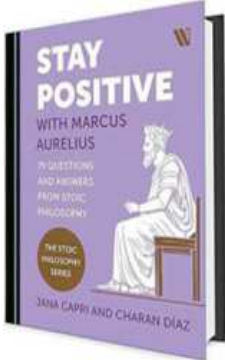
### Within: Where Questions Find Answers

**Sridhar Aranala**  
Notion Press  
₹699  
Sridhar Aranala, who is part of the executive management team at *The Hindu*, gathers all his experiences in this volume. Filled with real-life situations, he holds a mirror to leadership issues at the workplace.



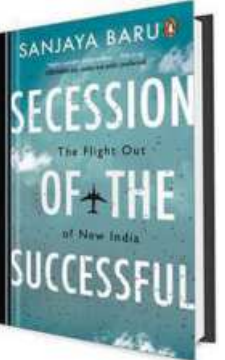
### Stay Positive with Marcus Aurelius

**Jana Capri, Charan Diaz**  
Westland Books  
₹499  
Two writers explore 79 questions and scenarios that deal with the philosophical and practical concerns people face — from ethical dilemmas to self-improvement prompts. The answers are based on Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*.



### Secession of the Successful

**Sanjaya Baru**  
India Viking  
₹799  
Why is migration of high-net-worth individuals from India on the rise? Sanjaya Baru looks at migration historically as well as the contemporary situation to explain what is going on. He draws particular attention to “elite migration”.



Still got it  
250 years of  
Jane Austen

CONTINUED FROM  
» PAGE 1

While making a 'good marriage' is at the crux of much of Austen's writing, it is also very much about "how to survive as a woman with limited opportunities in a tough society", says Rao. "As in Austen's time, our society is complex and hierarchical, and we are constantly judged by this code and we judge others with it, too."

Yes, the balls, the passionate declarations of love, and 'the best letter in history' – as Kapur awards Wentworth's missive to Ann Elliot in *Persuasion* – are marvellous, but to only see these and not 'her fangs' does Austen a disservice. "You might come for the romance, but you return for the sparky, zinging language and sharp wit," sums up Rao.

As I nerdlily immerse myself in all things Austen these past few weeks, I delight in the things I hadn't known about her before: like how she was once engaged for all of one day, before calling it off. I even foolishly look for parallels in our lives.

But as a writer, this line from *The Letters of Jane Austen*, dated January 16, 1796, stays with me: "I am very much flattered by your commendation of my last letter, for I write only for fame, and without any view to pecuniary emolument."

I wish I could tell her that 229 years later, writing is still not a vocation that offers financial stability. But boy, Jane, did you win the fame game. Your words have secured you the respect, deep love and admiration of many. Mine included.

The writer is a children's book author and columnist based in Bengaluru.

**Aruna Roy**

I was nine when I read my first novel, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Since then, I have read all her works multiple times, appreciating them afresh with each reading. As we mark the 250th anniversary of Austen's birth, I am reminded of British-Australian poet W.H. Auden's remark about her in his 'Letter to Lord Byron'.

...It makes me most uncomfortable to see  
An English spinster of the middle-class  
Describe the amorous effects of "brass".  
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety  
The economic basis of society...  
A few years ago, a friend who rarely reads and is indifferent to Austen, remarked with surprise that the French economist Thomas Piketty had praised the novelist. He seemed open to her merits now that a contemporary male economist of repute had found her commendable. When, on the day of reckoning, he sits down with books to read, she may feature on his optional reading list.

There are many narratives about Austen. The most important among them is her literary acclaim – the first woman novelist, master of irony, stylist of repute, one who is popular with changing times, and so on. Even F.R. Leavis, the 20th century's self-appointed arbiter of literary excellence, approved of her. He admired her as a hard-core realist who examined relationships through the lens of money and privilege, or the lack of them.

**The inner worlds of women**  
Austen's delicacy of language and sentiment, and ironical observation of the folly of people who bumble through life created memorable characters such as Mrs. Bennett and

COLD LOGIC OF  
LOVE AND FORTUNE

Jane Austen was admired as a hard-core rationalist who examined relationships through the lens of money and privilege

Miss Bates. She observed their oddities with humour and sympathy, without moral commentary. Emma is an anti-heroine; her actions contradict her professed intentions. Austen's irony is delicate, her perception keen, but Emma's never judged by her creator.

Another narrative about Austen is the issue of her popularity. *Pride and Prejudice* has caught the popular imagination over centuries, continents and classes. You could say that it remains more popular with women. Why not? Austen was the first novelist (a feminist without the polemic) to talk of the world of women living in the restrictive and narrow confines of domesticity and marital ambition, without justifying or offering excuses.

**Men in Austen's universe**  
Austen has had male supporters such as Leavis, E.M. Forster and Auden. Yet, many men do not read her because she doesn't pay obeisance to patriarchy, by inclusion or defiance.

She wrote only of the male world she knew. Meticulous in her character portrayals, she shaped them from her observations. Darcy was objectively observed, and given limited space. But, in films and imitative fiction, Darcy's character gets more room. In popular imagination, his character has captured the iconic space of a romantic hero.

Could she have been a part of the male universe she depicted? How could a sensibility like hers make no comment on the revolutionary happenings across the Channel? In *Persuasion*, the French Revolution and shadows of war touch the life of the protagonist, Anne Elliott. But she remains within the sheltered world of Bath.

**Meanwhile, on film**  
*Pride And Prejudice*, like her other novels, has lent itself extraordinarily well to theatre and film. Every couple of years, a new interpretation comes out. Celebrated actor Laurence Olivier played Darcy in 1940. The 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, scripted by Andrew Davies,

is a six-part television drama with 55-minute episodes. This format allowed the subtleties of Austen's language and irony to come alive more fully. *Bridget Jones Diary*, a contemporary interpretation, explores Bridget's fear of spinsterhood and her romantic aspirations with Mark Darcy.

For many Indians, Bollywood films represent the ideal of romance and aspiration, setting the bar for popular cultural expression. The story inevitably became a victim of Bollywood-nama in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), with its song-and-dance sequences and loud scenes. Mrs. Bennet's character, full of exaggerated folly and impropriety, dominates the entire film, leaving no room for Austen's subtlety, irony, asides, or comments.

In India, almost every bride and groom, rich or poor, live out their fantasies with the sanction of society during weddings. Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) mocks the concept while entertaining the audience with a family's life-long planning for a wedding and its culmination.

When *Pride and Prejudice* moved from the domain of serious literature to popular fiction, its form and content underwent changes. The title, story, and the names, Darcy and Elizabeth, became marketable. A search for *Pride and Prejudice* opens a Pandora's box, revealing hundreds of titles. Many of them, in theme and plot, have laid to rest Austen's craft and delicacy.

**Marriage at the centre**  
Austen even made her way into Rajasthani village politics, when I had to meet a politician who had an ill repute with women. I was young and apprehensive, but Austen came to my rescue. In my imagination, I transformed him into another Mr. Collins (from *Pride and Prejudice*), and the meeting took place without incident.

The fundamental relationship between man and woman remains a central concern of most great literary fiction. *Pride and Prejudice* captured this in its famous opening, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

Marriage plays a central role in peoples' lives, even in 21st century India. That's one of the reasons why the novel continues to resonate with readers.

Austen is read, appreciated and celebrated 250 years after her birth. It's a testament to her storytelling, style, sense of humour, irony, and to the craft of a great writer.

The writer is a social activist and an author.

Karen Anand

In a recent trip to London, with a few days to explore the British countryside, we choose Bath, for several reasons. It's the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth, a celebration currently lighting up the city. Bath is easily accessible from London, offers wonderful hotels (refreshingly affordable), and is a beautiful Georgian town – a UNESCO World Heritage Site that's largely walkable, and full of museums, parks, and excellent food and drink.

**Soaking in Austen**  
The city is now abuzz with Austen. You can indulge as much or as little as you like – from grand themed balls and the Jane Austen Festival (including a costumed promenade for those eager to stroll in full Regency attire) to the Jane Austen Centre, where visitors can learn about her life in Bath.

We join a walking tour with the Strictly Jane Austen Tours company, led by the delightful, red-haired Theresa, dressed head-to-toe in Regency costume. She weaves history with scandal, gossip, and sharp social commentary – entertaining and highly recommended.

Afterwards, we enjoy a Jane Austen-themed afternoon tea at The Bath Priory, one of the city's loveliest hotels. And of course, we visit the Roman Baths (now a world-class museum) – though, for health reasons, bathing is no longer allowed. Instead, you can "take the waters" at one of the city's central hotels, which tap into the hot springs, or visit the modern Thermae Bath Spa nearby.

Right next door, the historic Pump Room is a must-visit. Once



The Jane Austen Festival Promenade. (VISITBATH.CO.UK)

INSIDE BATH'S  
REGENCY REVIVAL

It is Jane Austen's year and the Georgian city that helped shape her wit and spirit pulls out all the stops

the place to see and be seen by high society, it still serves afternoon tea and is steeped in atmosphere. You can also stop by the Bath Bun Tea Shoppe, where servers in period costume offer the sweet buns Austen adored.

One of my favourite spots in Bath is along the River Avon, which winds through the city just below Pulteney Bridge, one of the few bridges in the world with shops built on it. Just beneath lies a horseshoe-shaped weir, a magical place to sit with a local cider and while away the time.

**Going beyond books**  
The city is a postcard of perfectly preserved Georgian England, with wobbly cobbled streets, graceful crescents, and elegant squares. If you're a *Bridgerton* fan, you'll recognise many filming

locations: Modiste's seamstress shop (a deli in real life), the Royal Crescent (the Featherington home), and Bath Street with its stately colonnades.

All six of Austen's novels mention Bath and two of them, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, are set here. For those less inclined to read Austen, there are several excellent film and TV adaptations they can tune into.

Austen, the unmarried

**Where to stay**  
The Bath Priory, a row of elegant Georgian townhouses in honey-coloured stone, is set within four acres of gardens. Built as a private home in 1835, the hotel blends Gothic elegance with comfort.

daughter of a clergyman, wrote at the turn of the 19th century. Her personal struggle for independence, pointed social satire, and forward-thinking views on slavery – a subject tied to Bath's wealth – shine through in her fiction. Her work remains timeless: witty, sharp, and rich with commentary on class, gender, and marriage.

Though she lived in Bath for only five years, the city's scandals and social shallowness fed her cynicism and sharpened her pen. Austen's novels gained popularity only after her death at 41. Today, she commands a global fanbase.

The writer, consultant, and entrepreneur's latest venture is bespoke small group tours, which she curates and accompanies.

Beyond  
the bonnet

Gabrielle Malcom, creative director of Strictly Jane Austen Tours, on bringing the novelist's world to life

**Q: What is the Strictly Jane Austen company all about?**  
A: We're a Bath-based experience company offering immersive and eclectic encounters with the Regency period, Jane Austen's works, and her cultural impact.

**Q: Was Austen a feminist?**  
A: In many ways, yes. She negotiated her own publishing contracts, which was quite bold for a woman then. She stayed outside the mainstream literary circles, but represented herself fearlessly.

**Q: Why is the author still so celebrated?**  
A: Austen's characterisation is superb – vivid, relatable, and relevant. She wasn't writing "historical romance," but contemporary social satire. Her sharp irony, wit, and ability to bring society to life make her resonate even today. Readers think of her as "Jane," someone they could be friends with.

**Q: Why does Bath appear so often in Austen's work?**

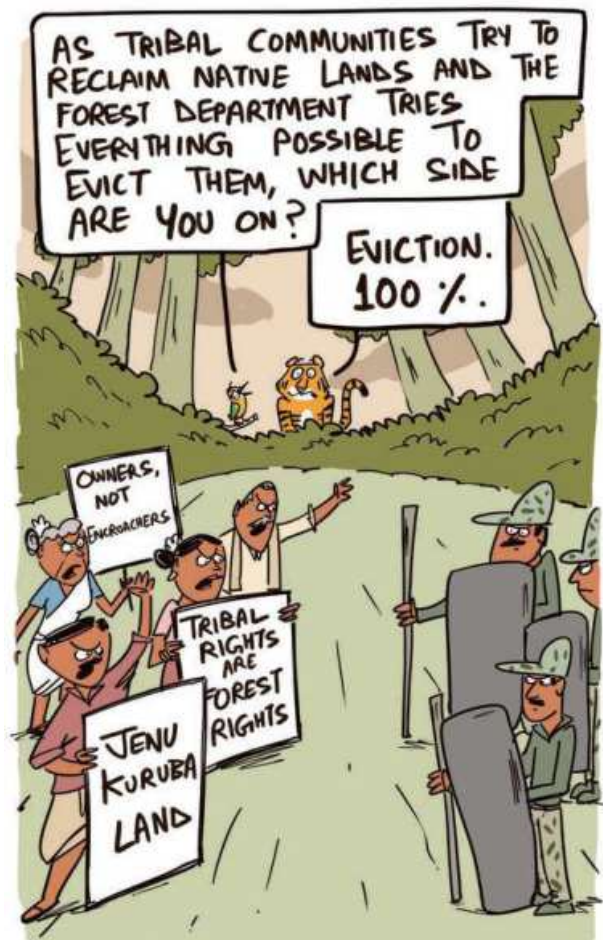
A: Bath was the marriage market of its day – a beautiful spa town with a darker side of gambling, gossip, and social climbing. Austen captured both its superficial glamour and darker reality. Bath almost becomes a character in itself – what Angela Carter called "the skull beneath the skin".



ECT TRAVEL/ STRICTLY JANE AUSTEN TOURS

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Rati Girish

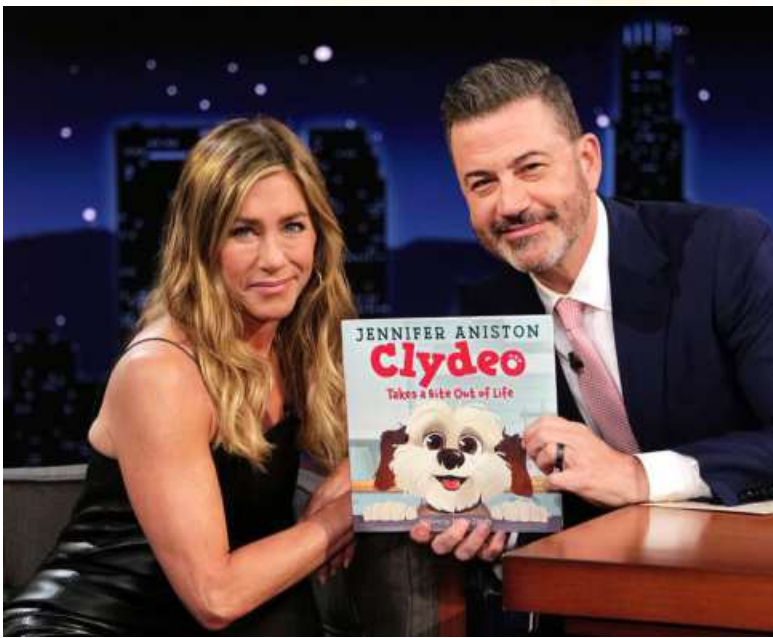
In a chilly Sunday evening in January, I drove to Crossword at Mumbai's Kemp's Corner with my children to meet David Walliams. The celebrated British children's author and comedian was visiting as a part of his multi-city India book tour, and the bookstore had announced a meet-and-greet. I expected the whole affair to be a quick one – after all, how many people would want to meet Walliams in India?

I could not have been more wrong. The large bookstore was filled with hundreds of children and parents buying books to sign, and queuing up to meet Walliams. He greeted them, signed books, posed for photographs, and encouraged them to continue reading.

After all, the reason he writes books, he says, is to reader readers – a line that clearly resonated with parents eager to support anything that gets their child reading. The response Walliams got made me wonder – is this what a celebrity can do for the world of children's literature?

**Does fame guarantee sales?**  
Celebrities-turned-authors are an all-too-familiar phenomenon in the U.K. and the U.S. From Meghan Markle to Jennifer Aniston, Natalie Portman to Jamie Oliver – celebrities have made it to bestseller lists with their children's books. These books are conveniently available as both hardcovers and ebooks. The topics they write about are as varied as their backgrounds. Actress and entrepreneur Reese Witherspoon wrote the *Busy Betty* series in 2022, modelling the heroine on a childhood version of herself. Tennis superstar and philanthropist Serena Williams' *The Adventures of Qai Qai*, in which a little girl learns to believe in herself with the help of a doll, is inspired by her experiences with her daughter.

Actress Gabrielle Union wrote *Welcome to the Party* to celebrate babies becoming a part of families through surrogacy and adoption. She also collaborated with her husband, basketball star Dwayne Wade, on *Shady Baby* – a book about standing up to bullies – inspired by their daughter Kaavia. Friends star Aniston recently



**Star power** (Clockwise from left) Actors Jennifer Aniston; Soha Ali Khan; Alia Bhatt; tennis champion Serena Williams with her daughter; and chef and restaurateur Jamie Oliver. (GETTY IMAGES, DISNEY)



CELEBRITY  
STORYTELLERS

From Jennifer Aniston to Alia Bhatt, are celebrity authors elevating children's literature or just cashing in?



released a picture book, *Clydeo Takes a Bite Out of Life*, about self-discovery and self-confidence, inspired by her pet dog Clyde.

Books by celebrities garner attention, but do they guarantee sales? Sohini Mitra, who heads Penguin Random House India's



Children and Young Adult division, says, "Celebrity books don't guarantee high sales, as success still depends on the quality of the content and audience engagement. However, a celebrity author can boost the book's visibility, help it reach a broader audience, create

buzz, and generate media attention." Celebrity-authored books aren't always a success. In 2021, the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle, released *The Bench*, a love poem for new fathers, which was slammed by critics and parents

alike. *The New Statesman* said, "It was mind-boggling how bad the book is," while others called it a "literary atrocity".

**The Indian scene**  
In India, a few celebrities have turned authors. Actress Soha Ali Khan and her husband, actor Kunal Khemmu, wrote *Imi and Bobo*, a series about a little girl and her dog. Actress and entrepreneur Alia Bhatt wrote *Ed Finds a Home*, a picture book, launched as an

extension of her children's clothing line, Ed-a-Mamma. The book was illustrated by the award-winning Tanvi Bhat who admits, "The exposure it got because of the involvement of Alia Bhatt and her brand was unmatched."

One cannot deny that visibility has its perks. *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, authored by Sudha Murthy, was the best-selling children's book in India, with 97,000 copies worth more than ₹18 million sold by 2021.

**Normalising ghost writing**  
But does the success of a few titles justify the broader industry trend of commissioning celebrity authors? Lubana Bandukwala, children's author and curator of literature festivals such as Peekabook, says, "Celebrities usually have time only for their books. Seldom have I seen them use the platform to promote reading. It is a question of mindset – children's authors and those working in the children's literature space are more concerned about wanting kids to read, exposing them to newer themes, etc."

News and commentary platform *The Conversation* published an article by senior lecturer and author Pemi Russon, who critiques how celebrity-authored books often undermine the craft. She highlights the "derivative nature" of such books, which rely on tired tropes and rarely offer something original to children.

Ashwitha Jaykumar, freelance editor and author of *The Book of Emperors: An Illustrated History of the Mughals*, finds the trend of celebrity authors disheartening. "The worst outcome of publishers commissioning celebrity authors is that they normalise ghost writing or mediocre writing. If all it takes to be published is a pre-existing fan base, then what message does it send to people like us who spend years honing our craft? It's like saying the quality of your writing doesn't matter as much as the

number of Instagram followers you have," she says.

But publishers continue to see value in commissioning celebrities to write children's books. Himanshu Giri, CEO, Pratham Books, explains, "When influential voices from outside the traditional children's publishing space – whether economists like Esther Duflo, athletes, or artists – enter this world, they bring insight, purpose, and passion. Duflo, for instance, offers an economist's perspective on fairness, poverty, and inclusion, ideas that can be conveyed to children through age-appropriate storytelling."

The presence of a known name increases a book's discoverability and uplifts everyone connected to the project, from illustrators to publishers, especially in the "independent" space.

As Giri puts it: "When respected and inspiring voices write for children, they lend credibility to the idea that children's books are serious, transformative work, drawing in new audiences, and shining a light on all those who are working quietly but powerfully to shape young minds."

However, for celebrity authors, the vibrant world of indie bookstores, where passionate readers and curated selections thrive, might still be out of reach.

Vidya Mani, curator and co-founder of Funky Rainbow, a popular independent bookstore in Bengaluru, says, "When people walk into our store, they are keen for us to recommend books that their children will enjoy. We have sold more books by Ashok Rajagopalan, Roopa Pai, Pika Nani, Priya Kuriyan, Rohan Chakravarty, and Asha Nehemiah than by any celebrity author. In our world, it is these authors and illustrators who are the real celebrities."

The writer is founder of *Mother of Readers*, a platform championing Indian children's literature.



ALLEGEDLY

Know your KYC

And show some gratitude to the faceless warriors who pull the trigger that freezes your bank account

I can barely see the screen through my tears as I type this. The tears – of joy, relief, and *wakas* – won't stop! I had to pinch myself three times to make sure I'm not dreaming. But it's true – I really have updated my KYC. I can now finally access my own money in my own bank account. Words can't describe how amazing it feels. It's a pity, though, that people who haven't been locked out of their accounts will never get to experience it.

I'm aware that, even as I celebrate my successful KYC updation by distributing rosogollas to strangers standing in queue at the nearest SBI branch, countless Indians are still running through hoops of biometric authentication.

Thousands have fallen by the wayside trying to match the address on their passbook with the address on their Aadhaar card. Tens of thousands have quit their jobs and dedicated their lives to feeding OTPs to whomsoever it may concern. Millions are popping pills to control the panic attacks triggered by yet another SMS threatening to freeze their account unless they renew their KYC before the stroke of midnight on the next Amavasya.

And yet, despite the indiscriminate freezing of

accounts, the remarkable lack of common sense in the application of re-KYC rules, and the admirably pig-headed refusal to use the central repository of KYC, all I'm feeling right now, believe it or not, is a quiet sense of accomplishment and pride.

**We are all customers**  
It is not every day that an ordinary Indian with no connections gets any institution-facing work done, let alone update his KYC. My friends tell me the last Indian to accomplish a feat of comparable difficulty level and equivalent historical significance was Shri Shubhanshu Shukla. But I want to make two simple points here. One, we still don't know whether Shuklaji has updated his KYC or if it is still pending, whereas I have. Two, Shuklaji's space trip was fully paid for by the government

of India, while no one paid a penny for my multiple trips to the bank, to the photocopy shop, to the Aadhaar centre, and to the top of the Statue of Unity, from where I wanted to (bungee) jump every time my re-KYC documents were rejected. Nonetheless, I bear no ill-will towards anyone – only gratitude.

When I say I feel gratitude, people are shocked. This makes me sad, for it shows that most Indians are clueless about the historical origins and real purpose of KYC. Yes, at the superficial level, KYC means "Know Your Customer". But the concept originates in the ancient Greek philosophical dictum, *'gnothi seauton'*. Inscribed outside the Apollo Temple (not Apollo Hospital) in Delphi, it means 'know yourself'. This imperative, which formed the basis of Athenian banking

practices, is rooted in the insight that human beings spend their whole lives buying something or the other. As Socrates said, "The ultimate truth about human nature is that we are all customers." But how many of us appreciate this truth? In my experience, no one does – not without multiple reminders via email and SMS. Hence, my gratitude. So bear with me as I take this opportunity to place it on record.

**Strange motivation**  
Firstly, I want to thank India's indefatigable band of money-launderers. Without you, there would have been no KYC, and I wouldn't have embarked on this long, perilous, frustrating, yet ultimately rewarding journey of self-discovery.

Next, I am indebted to the RBI. It's been under tremendous pressure to simplify the KYC framework, and poor thing, despite being forced to produce a 17th version of KYC rules – just one short of Karl Marx's 18th Brumaire – it has staunchly resisted calls to make bankers accountable to their customers. Kudos!

Last but not the least, I want to thank each and every one of the bankers without whose unstinting non-cooperation, jaw-dropping idiocy, and endless appetite for documents they had already taken from me multiple times, I would never have learnt the difficult life lesson of how to survive in a world without empathy, logic or professionalism. Bankers come in all shapes and sizes, and the breed I am most grateful to are the faceless KYC warriors who pull the trigger that freezes your account – a move that never fails to motivate even the laziest of us to rouse ourselves from our humdrum lives of quiet despair, scoot to the nearest branch and ask aggressively for a token.

Finally, a gentle word of advice to customers whining endlessly about their accounts being frozen without warning: just shut up and re-KYC.

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

When Vikrant Bhise, 40, had his first big South Mumbai show, *Hum Dekhenge* (We Will See), in 2024, he gave the politically somnolent neighbourhood a booster shot of hidden-in-plain-sight history. “Lots of people from the movement came,” the multi award-winning painter recalls. There was everything from Ambedkari *jalsa* (anti-caste protest poetry and songs) to Dalit Panther magazine archives that belonged to its co-founder Raja Dhale, and other invocations of Bhim, a rallying cry for Ambedkarites.

Residents of Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar chawl in suburban Ghatkopar stood in front of his paintings of the 1997 riot where police fired on those protesting the desecration of a statue of B.R. Ambedkar, and soaked in the portraits of the 10 victims. “That’s my uncle,” one visitor told Bhise. It was an important moment for an artist who is driven to paint the unseen and untold. “This is my calling,” says Bhise, who witnessed the riot from his uncle’s house. “These are my stories.” His work seems even more urgent at a time when these histories are being deliberately erased and/or co-opted. Some visitors said they didn’t know such things had happened in Mumbai and that too “so recently”. Now you understand why the artist is on a mission to take our 3,000-year history of caste-based oppression to a wider audience and disillusion those who believe the caste system is dead.

**Pain, people and protest**  
Bhise is prolific. He may set out to make 50 multi-layered works and end up with 120 as it happened with *Archival Historicity*, inspired by Dalit



PERSON OF INTEREST

VIKRANT BHISE’S  
SHADES OF BLUE

The artist is on a mission to take our 3,000-year history of caste-based oppression to a wider global audience

Vikrant Bhise; and (below) his first painting, titled *Labour Leader*.



Panther pamphlets from the 1970s and showcasing their inspiration, the Black Panther Party, founded in California in 1966. (The series is ongoing; Bhise sees it as his “daily diary”.) Some of these works were acquired and are on permanent display at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. At his first solo show in Noida in 2023, there were some 400 works, including a 16x10 foot mural of the 16-year-long Namantar struggle that centred around renaming a university in Maharashtra’s Aurangabad, and the 10-panel ‘Quest For Justice’ inspired by protests past and present that stretched across 40 feet. “When I see the works of Renaissance painters, they’re mostly about war and fighting, about the

depiction of real things,” he says. “This is our renaissance.” On display at the just-concluded Summer Berlineale were five panels or 20 feet of the Mahad Satyagraha, the 1927 non-violent movement led by Ambedkar for the right to access public water. Change is here, but its pace is not enough for the artist. “We keep thinking how far we’ve come,” he says. “But it’s been 100 years and only one community does the waste collection and sanitation work.” From the precarious lives of workers to scholars driven to suicide by casteism, all find representation in Bhise’s labyrinthine artworks bursting with pain, people and protest. Bodies are entwined in conflict and change in paintings with shades of blue that range from the palest sky to the deepest indigo.

**Painting untold histories**  
While Bhise’s works have always centred caste, labour, poverty and justice, it was only after the citizenship protests in 2019, the COVID-19 lockdown, and the farmers’ protests, that he began painting Ambedkar, a leader who was invoked in all of these moments. “Wherever there is injustice, there is Ambedkar,” Bhise says. His first portrait in 2021, titled *Labour Leader*, was of a worker using a rag to wipe a statue of Ambedkar. The man cleans the statue with his right hand as his left hand rests over Ambedkar’s eyes. You could say it represents the uncovering of hidden history. “Who killed Nitin Aage?” Bhise asks this question in the title of a painting about an intercaste love affair that ended in the brutal murder of a teenager. Like Aage, Bhise fell in love with a Maratha woman, Siddhi, who he met in art

school, and they married despite family opposition. Now he dodges their four-year-old twins, Abir and Kabir, instructing them to stay away from his materials, as he paints in the midst of his fatherly life, grabbing every chance to work. “There’s no waiting for the right mood,” he says. He also spotlights the everyday joy and inspiration a community relies on in the midst of oppression, whether it’s the annual gathering at Mumbai’s Chaityabhami, where Ambedkar was cremated; or humanitarian idols such as Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule; a euphoric indigo representation of a Jayanti; or the red wall of his parents’ home. “I want people to see Ambedkarite lives,” he says. “Our houses are also different, our food, our literature, our living style, the colour palette...” Recently, his paintings have been displayed at prestigious venues such as Art Dubai and Art Basel. Coming up are Bergen Assembly in Norway and Frieze London, among many others. “My works were shown in 20 group shows last year,” he says, still slightly incredulous about the growing interest in his art. It was after the Noida show that the art world really embraced Bhise’s stories. All the years of working with a courier company until he took a big leap to follow his passion and study art, and then a long stint as an art teacher and tutor, have finally paid off. Now he can devote all his time to painting the histories that nobody told us about.



Priya Ramani is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.

GOREN BRIDGE  
Bad  
double  
Both vulnerable,  
South deals

**Bob Jones**  
Felicity Beale, South in today’s deal, has long been one of Australia’s leading players. West’s greedy double telegraphed the unlucky lie of the trump suit and Beale found an unusual line of play to bring home her contract. Beale won the opening heart lead with her ace and then overtook her jack of hearts with dummy’s king. She discarded a diamond on the queen of hearts

and then, showing good card reading in the heart suit, ruffed dummy’s remaining heart. She overtook her queen of diamonds with dummy’s ace and ruffed a diamond. A club to dummy’s queen was followed by another diamond ruff. She cashed the ace and king of clubs leaving a three-card ending with both South and West down to three spades. She completed her excellent play by leading a low spade from her hand. West was forced to win and lead a spade back into Beale’s acequeen, Making six!

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

The bidding:			
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♠	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♣	Pass	4♣	Pass
4NT	Pass	5♦	Pass
6♣	Dbt	All pass	

Opening lead: Five of ♥

Beale’s line of play required a good bit of luck to succeed. She needed West to have 3-4-3-3 distribution and she had to guess the spades exactly. Had East held the singleton jack or 10 of spades,

her line would have failed. She could still have succeeded, in that case, by leading the queen from her hand in the threecard ending. West is busy promising never to double Beale again.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Games and puzzles

Berty Ashley

Born on July 13, 1944, Ernő is a Hungarian architect who designed a puzzle that carries his name. His quote, “Complex things, if you don’t understand them, it seems complicated. If you understand them, and we know how to handle it, it becomes simple”, perfectly describes his invention. What simple but smart puzzle is this?

Brought up in Africa, Leslie Scott developed a game of physical skill. Played with 54 identical pieces, the classic version has pieces that are 7.5 cm long, but other versions have giant pieces, different colours, and can even be Godzilla-themed. Named after the Swahili word for ‘build’, what is this game that is popular in cafes?

This puzzle’s name translates to ‘digit-single’ and is a logic-based, combinatorial puzzle. The playing surface is a simple 9x9 grid. Contrary to popular belief, the game’s origins can be traced back to a Swiss mathematician and French newspapers. What is this game which was made popular by a



Strategy time Chaupar is an ancient cross-and-circle board game from India. (GETTY IMAGES)

Japanese puzzle company? The first commercial version of this game was available under the name ‘Salvo’. A strategy and guessing game, it pits two players against each other as they take turns to identify the other’s location on a board. What is this game which, ironically, Captain Haddock loses very badly at?

This is a reciprocating cutting instrument that can do irregular curves and stencilled designs. It gets its name thanks to the tool’s up-and-down motion during the process. Soon, the product of these cuts

became known by the same name. What products are these which are ‘playful pursuits’ for players of all ages? Chaupar is an ancient cross-and-circle board game from India, famously played in the *Mahabharata* between Yudhishtira and Duryodhana. Its engravings can be seen in temples in Hampi and Chidambaram. The board is made of wool or cloth, with wooden pawns and six cowry shells to be used to determine each player’s move. What is the modern version of this game?

First seen in *Star Trek* episodes, Kirk and Spock can be seen playing

a three-dimensional variant of this game. The unusual design leaves the impression that it is a game requiring even greater skill and intelligence than usual. The board consisted of three 4x4 layers and four more 2x2 areas. What futuristic game is this which is now available thanks to *The Big Bang Theory*?

This is the world’s favourite murder mystery board game where players move from room to room in a mansion to solve the mystery of: ‘who’s done it, with what, and where?’. What game is this which is also responsible for the

phrase ‘In the kitchen with a candlestick holder’?

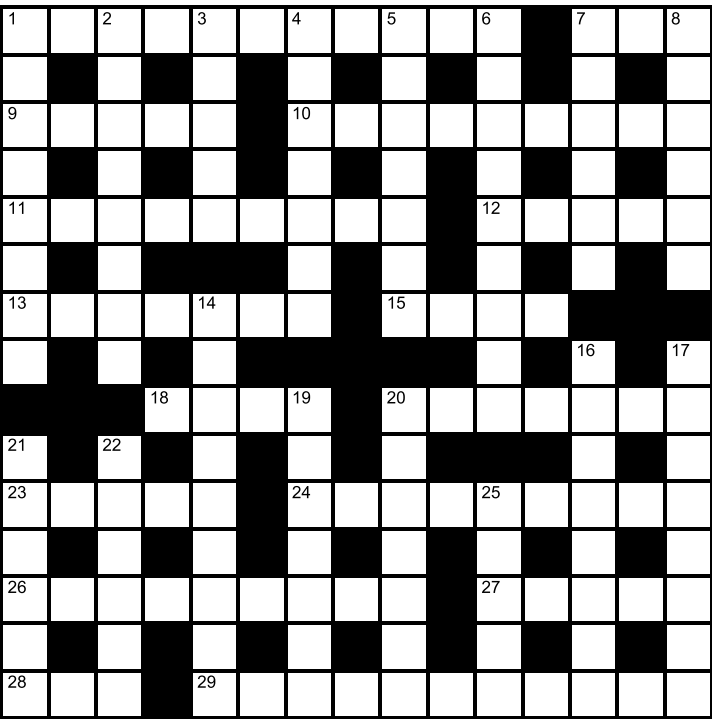
Peg Solitaire is a single-player board game designed to challenge strategic thinking and problem-solving skills. It has 32 marbles on a round board, and you have to strategically jump over each to remove it and eventually end up with just one. By what name – that sounds like a hot beverage – is it better known in India?

This is a strategy board game played on a world map which takes players through diplomacy, conflict and conquest. The goal is to occupy as much of the map, and engage in forming alliances with others to attain the goal. What is the name of the game which refers to the dangerous situation the player is in?

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

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 12 (set by Arden)

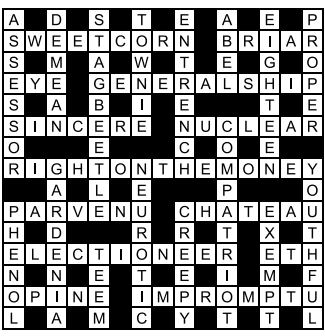


- Across**  
1 Safe keeping – I reach out to an ever-smiling character (8,3)  
7 Entry not by sky (3)  
9 Permit refused to enter a joint (5)  
10 Help poor Monica to come inside compound (5,4)  
11 Principality runs into a mansion, perhaps (3,6)  
12 Bear it in Japan, daily (5)  
13 Principal, after a change of heart is letting (7)  
15 Indian cosmetic for an Indian cricketer? Shows no interest (4)  
18 Retreating bear – not like some birds (4)  
20 Scale up original module (7)  
23 Copying centre page – fix inside (5)  
24 Healing in cuts – turns to incidental music (9)  
26 Work listed – take him in to strip (9)  
27 Regular pear, cut in half with another fruit (5)  
28 Light material not on (3)  
29 Harry no matter has a cap (3-1-7)

- Down**  
1 River fish I caught for teddy (8)  
2 European sea, not in pollution (8)  
3 Scavenger shortly has to receive some money (5)  
4 Peregrine migration possible without it (7)

- 5 Fish caught in hook outside (7)  
6 Joint support for military transport (9)  
7 Clear blue film – removed and despatched as told (6)  
8 Deadline to block light – there is uproar (6)  
14 Trimming allocation to house a settler (9)  
16 Dog breed tips? (8)  
17 Does flow in and spoil (8)  
19 Post my operation there is minute mark (7)  
20 They keep asking basketball players to get close to hundred (7)  
21 Keep sharp and erect please (6)  
22 Regret sending forces into such an awful place (6)  
25 Oil source starts – cartel’s oil production rises again (5)

SOLUTION NO. 11



A dangerous drop  
for some students

Piyush Goel  
piyushgoel2850@gmail.com

When the results of competitive exams are declared, some students are jubilant. But there are many others with tears in their eyes, and this gloom forces them to take a decision that is crucial for their academic lives: a drop year.

Drop year or gap year, the word sounds simple, but its meaning is deep. It is a year of hard work, financial problems, self-doubt, and fear of missing out. Days of struggle await the student. Every day of the year, he asks himself many questions: Was the decision to take a gap year right? What if I do not clear this time too? How long will I remain a burden on the family?

And God knows how many such questions are in his mind.

After deciding to take a drop year, life changes for the student. As soon as he wakes up in the morning, he has to study, give mock exams, analyse them; there is mental tension to score more marks in the mock exams. While all the friends from school are enjoying college events and festivals, droppers are studying hard inside their rooms, their life confined to coaching centres and home.

It is not that these students are weak in studies or they did not work hard; they did work hard but still did not get selected because the path to the destination they want to reach is full of thorns. They have to bear the burden of parental expectations, financial responsibilities, self-doubt and many more.

But sadly, society does not understand the problems such students face. When a dropper goes to a family event, then a question pierces his heart like an arrow: “Son, what are you doing?” The student does not have a proper answer, he gets into thinking what to say. And when a student musters up the courage to say that he is preparing for an exam, then these relatives start giving their suggestions: “What will he do by doing this course; it is better to prepare for civil service exam.” Troubled by all this, the child stops going to family gatherings or sits alone in a corner.

After working hard, studying every day, missing family events, seeing his peers surpass him, the student sits for the competitive exam again with hope in his eyes that this time he will definitely get selected.

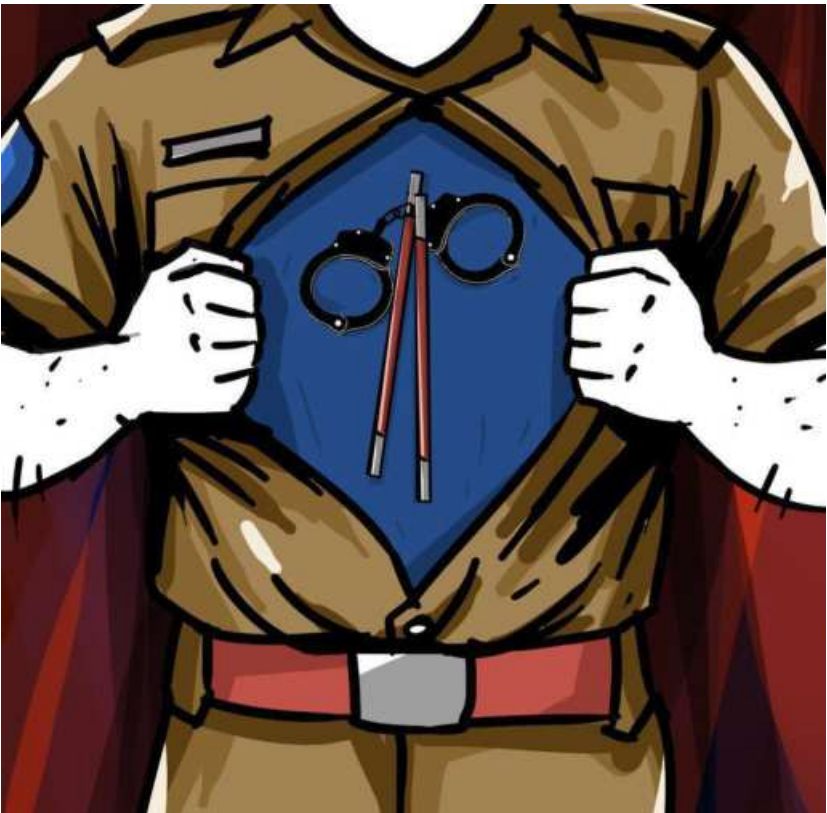


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Creating a humane  
POLICE FORCE

The need of the hour is to ensure that the police force is revamped with sensitive, friendly, and honest people

Sudha Ramalingam  
sudharamalingam1@gmail.com

Even as the Global Week Against Torture was being observed, newspapers reported on June 25 that a constable was suspended for assaulting three women inside a police station in Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu. Another report on the same day published an order of the State Human Rights Commission in *V. Priyadharshini vs K. Santhamoorthi*, directing the State to pay ₹50,000 as compensation for human rights violation by Santhamoorthi, who, as Inspector of Police, C2 Race Course police station, Coimbatore City, disrespected and harassed a woman complainant.

On the same day, *The Hindu* reported about the “threat of moral policing shadowing young couples in Chennai’s public spaces”. These are just a sample of the excesses committed by the police in their routine everyday interactions with the larger public, especially women.

V. Kanadasan, SHRC Member, in the order in the Coimbatore case, quoted Section 58 of the Police Act, 2006, enunciating the social responsibilities of the police, assigning special duties with regard to the vulnerable sections of society: “Behave with the members of the public with due courtesy and decorum, particularly in dealing with senior citizens, women and children. Ensure that in all situations, especially during conflict between communities, classes, castes and political groups, the conduct of the police is always governed by the principles of impartiality and human rights norms, with special attention to protection of weaker section including minorities. Preserve,

promote and protect human rights and interests of weaker sections, backward classes, poor, weak and the downtrodden.”

Hence, the duty of the police officials is to behave with the members of the public with due courtesy and decorum. The higher officials in the Police Department may be well-mannered and well-trained to behave courteously. But they are not available for interactions with the general public.

In 1998, a 21-year-old homemaker, Chitra, was found dead after being taken to the Aminjikarai police station in Chennai at night for investigation of an offence of theft allegedly committed by her husband, Ravi. She was humiliated at the station. After her death, the then City Police Commissioner had initiated sensitisation training for all police personnel and it percolated to the entire State police force.

**Rude, inhuman**

As an advocate, I have personally visited various police stations. My experience is that it is a hierarchical place that is drunk with power. The personnel view complainants as a nuisance and a spoke in their wheels. The accused are seen as inhuman slaves at their mercy. The words spoken are generally insulting, rude with no respect or culture. There is an atmosphere of fear that makes people afraid of stepping into a police station.

Policemen generally think that they are above the law. They are still in a colonial mindset. They are more adept at protecting the elite and more dutiful in maintaining law and order at the cost of the common man. They stop the entire traffic, even ambulances, to give way for a VIP convoy on roads. Crime investigation and victim justice are not their

priority. Policing have turned against the common man’s interest and dignity. Pedestrians, two-wheeler users and autorickshaw drivers are at their receiving end forever on the roads as the policemen vent their power and authority on them using vulgar language and physical intimidation. It is just not custodial violence or murder but torture simpliciter.

Even as we find fault with the functioning of the policemen on duty at the police stations and outside, it is essential that we look at and advocate reforms. While the higher police officers are educated, trained and protected by service laws, the lower officials are definitely exposed to all imaginable vagaries. They are on duty round the clock, with very little rest or humane conditions of service. They are treated with contempt by the superior officers, politicians and the rich and powerful.

As early as 2006, the Supreme Court in the *Prakash Singh* judgment has suggested wide reforms in the police. One of the most important reforms suggested is separation of investigation and law-and-order wings. In 2010, the Common Wealth Human Rights Initiative, in one of its report on “Seven steps to police reforms”, said the problem was “Investigations are poorly mounted, slow, done by inadequately trained and unspecialized staff and frequently subject to manpower deflection into other pressing law and order duties”. “Both investigation and law and order are vital and specific police functions. In order to encourage specialization and upgrade overall performance, the Court has ordered a gradual separation of investigative and law and order wings, starting with towns and urban areas with a population of one million or more. It is felt that this will streamline policing, ensure speedier and more expert investigation and improve rapport with the people,” it said.

**Abandoned experiment**

As the police were seen with suspicion and not as part of the community for whose welfare they exist, in 1993, Philip V. Prateep, an IPS officer, founded the Friends of Police (FoP), a community policing initiative in Tamil Nadu. It was to focus on promoting crime awareness, preventing crime, and enhancing fairness and transparency within the police force. But sadly, it was disbanded in 2020 after allegations of its members abusing their powers.

The need of the hour is to ensure that the police force is revamped with sensitive, friendly, and honest people. Reward the best ones publicly, promote constant people-friendly interactions with the local police and citizens of the neighbourhood. A few years ago, in every zone, there used to be a police-citizens meet which was attended by the Deputy Commissioner in charge of the locality and police officers from every police station in the zone. It gave room for healthy interaction and introspection. With CCTV cameras and smartphones in everyone’s hand, the police could be harnessed and sensitised to have a human face with compassion and empathy.

Like and dislike, all instant

Human connection is never easy, but the digital scaffolding has twisted it into something brittle



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

replaceable. What we are witnessing is not just a shift in modes of communication, but a reconfiguration of emotional ethics.

The digital world offers an illusion of infinite choice. Swipe, scroll, discard. Attention, once tethered to shared time and presence, now flits from face to face with the velocity of a thumb. In the process, people are not only growing lonelier; they are growing numb. The ghosted become ghosters. Feelings ossify into emojis. Grief is posted, not processed.

**Consumable experiences**

Young people, born into this matrix of immediacy and abundance, often experience relationships less as journeys and more as consumable experiences. Dating has turned

transactional, with apps enabling micro-decisions based on curated profiles, filtered photos, and punchline bios. Aesthetic is privileged over essence. Ambiguity thrives. “Situationships” replace commitments; relationships without the vocabulary of love, merely the residue of it. And yet, paradoxically, everyone is still searching for something real, aching for a connection unscripted by algorithms. They yearn for the chaos, the vulnerability, the unpredictability of being known beyond a screen.

But this chaos is precisely what the digital order resists. The psychological architecture of our platforms is designed to maximise engagement, not understanding. It rewards performativity over sincerity. The

result is a generation hyper-aware of how they are perceived and yet increasingly unsure of who they are without the digital mirror. We curate ourselves to fit grids, stories, captions, but in doing so, we lose the messiness that makes us human.

George Orwell, in *1984*, warned of a future in which surveillance would be the enemy of freedom. But what if the inverse has also come true? What if voluntary hyper-visibility, the self-surveillance we perform daily, has become our new cage? We document everything: meals, thoughts, dates, heartbreaks. In doing so, we unwittingly submit ourselves to a form of emotional panopticon. You are always seen, always available, always expected to perform. No off-switch. Even solitude is now an aesthetic.

In Orwell’s world, the telescreen watched you. In ours, we watch ourselves, and we crave being watched. But this gaze is not intimacy. It is something colder, more uninterested. The more we share, the less we feel. The more visible we are, the less seen we become. One need not look far to see the fallout. Mental health concerns have spiked. Loneliness, that old haunt of the elderly, now grips the young. The ubiquity of presence – the ability to text or call at any time, has paradoxically led to an absence of meaningful interaction. We talk more but speak less. We listen less but scroll more. Empathy gets algorithmically throttled.



FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to [mag.letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:mag.letters@thehindu.co.in) by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

It is distressing to know the present state of affairs in prevention of fatalities due to snakebites. (‘Snakebite capital: what India must get right’; July 6) As the victims are the rural poor, we seem to be in a deep slumber on the matter.

Sri Vrinda N.

Prevention is key to reducing snakebite casualties. A recognised contact base for regular inspection and safe removal of snakes from residential areas and workplaces could bring down the number of fatalities. Campaigns should be conducted for identification of snake species and steps to be followed in the event of a snakebite.

Monita Sutherson

The deficiency of antivenom and the lack of healthcare facilities in rural areas are paramount problems leading to snakebite fatalities. The article will help open the eyes of the authorities.

Junaid

The government should formulate a scheme to mass-produce knee length farm-boots and supply them free of cost to the poor who work as farm labour. This would not only protecting them from accidental snakebites, but also protect their feet from cuts, fungal and bacterial infections and blisters due to prolonged exposure to water.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Strident voice

Kannada literature has always been a storehouse of talent, with titans such as Pampa, Kuvempu, D.V.



MORE ON THE WEB  
[www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page](http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page)

The legacy of sacred groves

These biodiversity hubs are exploited for their resources, as they house a wide range of flora and fauna

Agna Prem

The characters one lives through

They are not strangers on a page, they are echoes of all the lives one might have lived

Ananya Saraff

The celebrity bandwagon

A longing to place someone on a pedestal, to believe in magic even when it’s manufactured in a vanity van

Chanchala Borah

When the crows came together

A common enemy make them join hands

J. Clement Selvaraj

Gundappa and U.R. Ananthamurthy, to name but a few. (‘The literary brilliance of P. Lankesh’; July 6) Writers like K.P. Purnachandra Tejasvi and P. Lankesh too merit inclusion in the list. Lankesh’s was a strident voice for the voiceless and he wrote continuously without fear or favour.

C.V. Aravind

Pocket-sized fun

Micro-dramas are not a waste of time, rather they have much emotional depth and cultural nuance. (‘Power of micro-dramas’; July 6)

Ana Arif

If OTT platforms like Amazon and Netflix decide to invest in micro-dramas, it could offer them unique advantages. Hollywood’s Quibi had previously adopted a similar approach to gain traction.

Rehan Alkhair

Depths of humility

Sidin Vadukut has perfectly captured the current near-abysmal state of LinkedIn, or at least, most LinkedIners. (‘Ultimate life goals’; July 6) As other social commentators too have noted, only on this platform can people be both “proud and humbled” at the same time, that too, over every trifling achievement.

Irfan Syed

Beautiful threads

The incredible restoration work done on the beautiful *jama* garment is to be celebrated. (‘Dungarpur’s phantom threads’; July 6) Conservation is a time-taking process and rightly so, as it gives lasting results.

Anusha Pillay

(Clockwise from below) Products from Manjal; women from the M. Rm. Rm Cultural Foundation; and Visalakshi Ramaswamy.



### Globetrotting weavers

The women weavers travel often to international exhibitions, where they manage their stall, sales and attend workshops with ease. Interacting with craftspeople from other states and nationalities has given them a world view on handicrafts and the positioning of their own craft of Kottan making. Receiving the UNESCO Seal of Excellence Award for handicrafts products in South Asia in 2004, 2006 and 2008 has been a further source of pride.

# VISALAKSHI RAMASWAMY AND THE RESILIENT KOTTAN

As M. Rm. Rm Cultural Foundation and its weavers celebrate 25 years of the revival of Chettinad's now famous palmyra basket, we meet the woman who started it all

**Rosella Stephen**  
rosella.s@thehindu.co.in

Not everyone in Chennai knows of Manjal in MRC Nagar and its jewel-coloured *kottans*. Quiet and unassuming from the outside but a hive of activity inside as customised baskets, fashioned from palm leaf or from plastic, are packed at breakneck speed. They make their way to some of the country's most high-profile weddings, and often include sari boxes that showcase Chettinad's finest basket weaving tradition. That said, for most of us, this is where we stop for little jewel gift boxes or beach, picnic and wine bags before trips.

A friend and colleague takes hers (the plastic version) to the gym. It appears the city's Japanese and Korean residents also favour the intricately woven plastic baskets for their cheery designs and durability. As for Visalakshi Ramaswamy, the singular force behind M. Rm. Rm Cultural Foundation that runs Manjal, you will be lucky if you find her there. For Ramaswamy, 79, prefers to work out of her home next door instead.

#### Behind the scenes

The craft revivalist, fabulous cook (she co-wrote *The Chettinad Cookbook* a few years ago) and designer has been busy for over quarter of a decade reviving palm leaf *kottan* basketry, the Kandanghi sari and the use of Athangudi tiles and lime egg paste in buildings. She is one of the best ambassadors of the crafts from the 75 ancestral villages of the Chettiar community in south Tamil Nadu but prefers to work behind the scenes.

"I hate being in the newspaper," she says when we meet one morning, "I am very diffident. I meet so many young people and don't mind doing it in a quiet way, but I hate being on stage." Ramaswamy married very young but has been invested in the crafts since her twenties. "When my daughter was about 10, I began designing furniture and saris, for myself and friends," she says. Those saris were in demand – a

#### Coming soon

A book documenting the Kandanghi saris from Visalakshi Ramaswamy's personal collection, will highlight the sari construction and the socio cultural context of the sari. Another book, on her home in Kanadukathan, is a compilation of measured drawings by architect Benny Kuriakose. It includes a detailed description of the use of spaces and the various workshops related to the revival of building crafts, conducted by the Foundation: on Athangudi tiles, stencil work, lime plaster and stucco work.

collection of 100 were sold within hours by the Chennai retail store Shilpi back then – and she reveals she still gets enquiries.

#### Craft with purpose

But her first big project was the *kottans* that the '*aachis*' or elderly women in the community used to work on as a hobby craft, to be used at auspicious events. "I wanted to revive it but it was only made in purples and reds. I thought long and hard about why crafts die – when you don't make a living off it. It has to be of benefit to everybody. So I decided to turn it from a ritualistic object into a marketable object," she recalls. She admits that it was a challenge initially to get women from the villages to come and train under the *aachis*. "They said the government had also offered them training for two weeks, gave them a stipend, bought everything back from them and then that was that. These women then went back to their farming," she says, and narrates how she made a commitment to take care of them.

Today, the Foundation works with over 100 women and is self-funded. Their crafts have



Kottan was celebrated with *Fibre to Form*, a showcase at The Folly in Chennai's Amethyst. The fine retrospective featured new *kottan* experiments with beads (a revival of designs that originally featured Czechoslovakian beads), crochet and indigo. The last has been an uphill task for the Foundation, what with the leaves being too brittle for indigo. But it appears that they have had a breakthrough, courtesy Indigo Art Museum by Arvind Ltd, and there is more to come.

#### Pinterest and a museum

"*Aachi* knows all the trending things," reveals her communication head, Durga Gopalan, also letting on that the grand old lady is a "Pinterest queen" and loves checking in often. Her stints at the living museum, DakshinaChitra, and with Crafts Council have taught her what she needs to know. "I no longer regret not studying further. I think I have finally got over it," she says, adding that her biggest support was her husband.

Later this year, Ramaswamy will be opening a lifestyle museum, dedicated to the Natukottai Chettiar community, in her 125-year-old ancestral mansion, known as the MRM house in Kanadukathan in Karaikudi. "It will have the utensils we used, our way of life, our lifestyle rituals and ancestral worship. There is so much about the community that must come from the heart," she concludes.

*Fibre to Form* will be travelling to the Chettinad Heritage and Cultural Festival in September.



**Mrs. Visalakshi Ramaswamy** may not have had a formal education in design but that is what makes her very original and offbeat in her thinking. She is a bit hesitant about starting new projects but is very sincere. Right now, she is putting together a strong team, which is important

**BENNY KURIAKOSE**  
Architect, who has worked with her at DakshinaChitra and has designed many of her houses

been showcased in Scotland, Japan, Thailand, even Cuba and at exhibitions such as *Chettinad: An Enduring Legacy* at IIC Delhi back in 2023. Last month, 25 years of Project

#### Neeti Mehra

In a playful mix of Gond art and folk surrealism, Sandeep Dhurve's pelican – its delicate feathers made from fish – opens its exaggerated throat pouch to swallow a large fish and an elephant. *White Pelican* was one of the artworks on display at *Mentoring Magic*, a recent exhibition at Gallery 47-A in Mumbai's Khotachi Wadi. "I have a deep interest in wildlife and plants, and I try to convey interesting facts and hidden stories [about them] through my paintings," says Dhurve, 23, who hails from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.

He was one of nine indigenous participants in the showcase supported by Project Tarasha, a social initiative of watch brand Titan Company, which acts as an organic incubator for rural artisans. As a part of their Creative Enterprise Development Programme, they handpicked nine artists to go through digital and business skills training, as well as a six-month design mentorship led by artist and product designer Aditi Prakash, the founder of accessory brand Pure Ghee Designs. Her goal was to push the boundaries of the young artisans' creativity and storytelling in their practised art forms: Madhubani, Gond, and Bhil. "We wanted them to be able to express their stories with greater clarity, confidence, and individuality, while remaining rooted in their deep visual tradition," says Prakash.

#### A contemporary take

The six-month process encouraged the artisans to articulate personal experiences, local myths, and everyday occurrences in their visual language. They were given space at the material lab to find their voice



## Rethinking the traditional

A recent exhibition at Gallery 47-A saw Madhubani, Gond and Bhil artists take risks with their compositions

and develop their technical fluency.

Exposed to a wide range of mediums beyond their usual acrylic paints, such as natural pigments, the artists explored unfamiliar techniques of layering surfaces and adding textures. "This was the first time they had been invited to think beyond form and pattern, and into meaning and intent," says Prakash. They were encouraged to take risks in their compositions – "to help think about how the entire surface of the canvas could contribute to the mood or meaning of the work".

The mentorship included a field trip to Sanchi Buddhist Complex,

where they spent a day sketching, absorbing the historical significance of the place. For Kamta Tahed, 37, another participant, the experience was eye-opening. The daughter-in-law of famed Bhil artist Lado Bai, she had developed her artistic voice after her marriage, under the watchful eye of the matriarch. But now "I've learnt how to turn my art into a story",



she says, adding that the idea of "less" also took root – "how important it is to limit colours", as visible in her dual-toned paintings.

#### From artisans to artists

Each artist maintained a daily diary to jot down new experiences or make quick five-minute drawings. This perspective-shifting habit helped them notice the world around them differently – to capture fleeting images, and develop a personal relationship with their subject.

For Preeti Das, 37, a Madhubani artist, her decade-long

(Clockwise from left) *Mentoring Magic* at 47-A; one of Preeti Das' Madhubani paintings; Brajbhushan Dhurve at work; Sandeep Dhurve; and Kamta Tahed. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



experience has been primarily restricted to a community that sold artworks through subsidised governmental exhibitions. Until Project Tarasha. "Traditional art

forms have their own identity, but modernity is equally important," says Das, whose post-mentorship artworks include a selection centred around the modern Indian woman: playing a guitar with a dog as a companion, riding a bike in cycling shorts, and friends enjoying coffee and conversations in a café.

Prakash views these as early but significant steps toward a deeper kind of authorship, "where they are not just representing inherited stories, but interpreting the world in their voice". She adds: "This is only the beginning of that journey, but already, the changes are visible in the way they compose, reflect, and create." The artworks are currently listed on the Baro Art website.

*The writer is a sustainability consultant and founder of Beeliving, a lifestyle platform dedicated to slow living.*