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magazine

backpage
Architecture & Design Film Festival's Mumbai debut
GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
Meenakshi Ahamed on successful Indians in the U.S.
GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW
Lit for Life | In conversation with Jenny Erpenbeck
GO TO » PAGE 2

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Reshmi Chakraborty

From the grassroots (Clockwise from far left) Saba Khan at one of her community libraries in Bhopal; a vendor-cum-volunteer of the Mirzapur Community Library; readers at a *gram panchayat*-run library in Karnataka; a camel cart library in rural Jodhpur; and Ruchi Dhona in the midst of a read-aloud session at Let's Open a Book library in Spiti Valley. (A.M. FARUQUI, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, ROOM TO READ & RUCHI DHONA)

Is there a lesson for the public library system in these community libraries, where vegetable vendors join other unlikely volunteers, and spaces are created to read, develop skills, network and foster humanity?

INSIDE INDIA'S RURAL READING ROOMS

Every morning, Sonu, a vegetable seller in Mirzapur's Mukeri Bazaar, has one important task besides setting up his tiny roadside stall. Along with friends Babua and Shobhit, a shoe-seller in the same market, Sonu, who is in his early 20s, takes turns to open the Mirzapur Community Library for the day. A free library that started last July, this room has become a place of possibilities for Sonu and his friends, all of whom are preparing to sit for state-level competitive exams.

The community library is where these youngsters find some quiet time away from the chaos of the bustling marketplace, and it is also their go-to place for preparatory books they cannot otherwise afford. Although Hindi novels and short stories pack the library's shelves and remain popular, the most in-demand titles here are the guidebooks for the U.P. Police Sub Inspector (UPSI) exam. Sonu says he is also reading *Prayas*, a Hindi short story collection by Dr. Shashi Mangal. He keeps the book alongside the baskets of spinach and brinjal in his stall, evoking much mirth among his customers.

His friend Shobhit's mother who also helps out at the family's shoe stall recently picked up *Meera Ki Prem Kahaniya* from the library to read in between work. For both of them, these are the first books they've ever read for pleasure. The library's Amazon wishlist is a curious mix – books for UPSC preparation, bank clerk exams and Class X model question papers top the list, followed by titles on Ambedkar, Gandhi and Kalam. Popular Hindi books such as *Usne Kaha Tha* come in a close third.

Almost 700 kilometres away in Bhopal, Saba Khan's Savitribai Phule Fatima Sheikh community library has also been embraced by its members. Over the past 15 years, it has grown to 11 branches spread across underserved colonies in the city. In the Naya Basera branch, the floor is covered in bright *chattais* (reed mats) the young girls bring from home, making a cheery mishmash with the red curtain on the sunny window and the children's artwork on the walls. A library banner with reformer Savitribai's image covers the other wall.

Khan, 29, started reading sessions with children in her neighbourhood in Baagh Dilkhusha in 2010. The libraries are a refuge for young people from the Dalit, Adivasi, and Pasmanda Muslim communities; many were forced to leave school due to poverty. Today, they drop in to thumb through picture books or children's books after working in tea stalls and butcher shops. Khan, a dropout herself, later self-funded her education and earned a Master's in psychology from IGNOU. She believes everybody will read if books are made accessible to them.

Across India, community libraries are bridging the gap between a struggling public library system and disadvantaged communities excluded by poverty, caste, gender, or geography. Increasingly, they are also spaces for skill development, networking and fostering a sense of belonging. Community libraries democratise access to information – free Internet browsing is a big draw – and provide safe spaces for diverse conversations. Many of them are part of the Free Library Network (FLN), a solidarity, advocacy and resource-sharing collective of free library communities across India and South Asia that are anti-caste, and gender, disability and queer-inclusive, with a network of over 250 libraries.

People come first

A believer in open libraries, Sujata Noronha, founder-director of Goa's Bookworm Trust, has trained many volunteers from across India in running community libraries. She believes that independent libraries are gaining momentum and one of the reasons could be the ailing public library system. "Our public libraries are not vibrant institutions and library work requires one to be current and responsive to the reader's needs. If the public library system is seeking inspiration, there are incredible examples on the ground," she says.

Poet and author Ranjit Hoskote observes that institutionalised systems often become bureaucratic, and this is where community libraries can help. He explains, "Community libraries have nimbleness built into their DNA and for them, it's always about people. It's not about treating books as sacrosanct objects. The library, as an institution, tends to get lost in protocols and mechanisms and ceases to ask what the library is for. Community initiatives never lose sight of that. There's always a self-critical analysis of what the library is for, and if it's meeting the needs of its users."

India faces a severe shortage of public libraries – one rural library for every 11,500 people, and one urban library for every 80,000 people, far below the global norm of one library per 3,000 people. Entry can become a barrier for some because of the fees, however nominal, or the documentation requirements. "Public libraries have procedures that are not always easy," says historian and author Rana Safvi. "Most can also be overwhelming for first-generation learners who may be hesitant to step inside because of these rules."

Safvi has been supporting two community libraries – Amma's Library in Delhi's Chand Bag and Bansa Community Library in U.P. – by sending them books regularly. "Neighbourhood community libraries are open and geared to the needs of the community around them. Very often it's the community that helps set up the library, giving children a feel of books and a sense of ownership they don't get elsewhere."

Skills development hub

Before she walked into the bright yellow corridors of the Bansa Community Library, with the Preamble to the Constitution handpainted on one of the walls, Shivani Soni, a first-generation college student, did not have much interest in books or learning. But the library introduced her to books and new friends among the young adults. "Here, I can take grammar classes and study in a good environment that I don't always have at home," says the 20-year-old.

The Bansa Library serves people from 36 nearby villages, offering computer lessons, digital learning, and programmes for women, including reading enhancement, group chats, and a tailoring centre. "The library is now a vibrant hub for learning and skill development," says founder Jatin Lalit, who is also general secretary, FLN.

A lawyer, Lalit conducts legal literacy workshops for adults at Bansa. "Many here didn't even know what a library was, but now each person uses the space according to their needs, whether to read books, use the tailoring facility, or even to obtain sanitary pads through the vending machine we have installed on the premises. Some women who come here to read are stepping out of their homes for leisure for the first time ever." The only other library in the area, according to Lalit, is inside the government college, barely known and tough to access.

In Spiti Valley, high up in the Himalayas, Ruchi Dhona's Let's Open a Book library addresses the lack of a reading habit due to geographic isolation. An avid reader who quit corporate life for social work, Dhona says over 10,000 books have been read in the library since it began in 2021. "It's a big deal because of the geography we operate in. It takes a lot of effort for a child to come to the library here regularly. The read-alouds that we do encourage them to think critically of the content they engage with," she says, adding that sound books are an instant hit among the younger members.

Hoskote, who has engaged with The Community Library Project and the MCubed Library in Mumbai, acknowledges a recent growing momentum around initiatives such as reading circles in cities. "Community libraries, or bookstores such as Leftword and Mayday in Delhi that are creating a library for marginalised children in local languages, are all addressing a need. These are all crucial initiatives. India is so vast that every effort looks minuscule, but it is real and meaningful to the community it addresses," he says.

The independent curator is, however, sceptical that the public library system would draw inspiration from community libraries, suggesting the former may require an inspired bureaucratic changemaker.

CONTINUED TO » PAGE 4

Karnataka's initiative

India's public library system can take inspiration from Karnataka's rural library revolution — decentralised *gram panchayats* have transformed public libraries into hubs of information, interaction, and inclusion. The libraries here have hand-drawn walls, child-sized sofas and beanbags, indoor plants and colourful curtains, along with digital assistants like Alexa to help the visually challenged.

Since November 2020, over 5,800 rural libraries have been revamped under the Oduva Belaku – The Right of Reading programme, supported by nonprofits such as the Azim Premji Foundation and Pratham Books. Some 50 lakh children have been enrolled for free, and these libraries also serve as resource centres for adults, says Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta, Additional Chief Secretary & Development Commissioner of Karnataka, who spearheaded the project. The library space is often used to propel learning and is everybody's favourite information hub. "Farmers have come to check YouTube for videos on cattle disease. My favourite story, however, is of a cleaner from Kodagu in her 40s, who used our digital resources and library space to self-study and clear the Class X exam."

GETTY IMAGES

Verse therapy

What should poetry mean to a middle-aged woman who is to play many roles every day?

Jaydeep Sarangi

Kashiprasad Ghosh (1820s) to Basudhara Roy (2020s), Indian English poetry has walked a long, glorious way; from uncertainty to confidence. We open Roy's *A Blur of a Woman* and see contemporary poetry at its best: *There is no ailment. Just the weather.* ('Dukha') Roy writes and expresses fiercely, tenderly, honestly and contemplatively. Over the years, the poet has evolved her own style of poetry writing, which is never loud or head-on:

...I am not giving up this light.
Look, I just scissored your coat
My last truce with light.
('Beyond Mourning')

Roy's liberal feminism works within a liberal democracy to enact socialism through poetry. It is not a manifesto or a slogan. A firm believer in the therapeutic power of verse, Roy is one of those rare poets for whom our eager ears wait, for her writing is magical.

Roy creates a soul space, letting us know how she walks into poetry through failures and successes gazed from other wisdoms. The title of this collection smells political. And her descriptions of domestic chores are vivid and honest:

...a child's pockets must be emptied of pebbles each day. Broken glass has to be swept aside, loose threads cut, nails pared (.)
('Chores')

Roy's previous collections too are replete with references to daily homemaking, home economics, relationships and the poet's personal engagement with the sensory world.

Not all doors
shut dramatically
with Nora's bang.
('Door')

A Blur of a Woman
Basudhara Roy
Red River
₹299

Roy's performance of non-linear over linear, intuition over materialism, makes her a poet with a difference. She has become a symbol of the strength, vitality and beauty of contemporary Indian English poetry.

Emotionally intelligent, her poems take us beyond mourning for personal losses and absences. What should poetry mean to a middle-aged woman who is to play many roles every day? Roy's poems unfold her thoughts and impressions gently; the tone is balanced and she expertly underscores the sense of menace and oppression threatening to engulf the multi-layered female self. Her readers are startled by how these poems are stitched together in a language that is tender and humble, both aesthetically and functionally.

Poetry for Roy, like for the great Pablo Neruda, is about the truth of the moment. Her soft, soothing and soulful poems lift the human condition with deep thoughts into words where the language of the heart is a poem. She writes the universe on the walls. Jamshedpur should be proud to have a poet who writes in the intersection between the personal and the public.

The reviewer is a poet and the principal of New Alipore College, Kolkata.

IN CONVERSATION

JENNY ERPENBECK: OBSESSED WITH BETRAYAL

On the sidelines of *The Hindu* Lit For Life, the International Booker-winning author discusses the themes that run across her books

Radhika Santhanam
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Jenny Erpenbeck remembers the day she got a call saying she and translator Michael Hofmann had won the 2024 International Booker Prize. Neither of them was expecting it. Erpenbeck says she heard the name of the book, *Kairos*, and still didn't realise she had won. The memory makes her laugh.

Kairos, translated from the German by Hofmann, tells the story of a relationship between Katharina, a 19-year-old woman, and Hans, a 53-year-old man. It is set against the collapse of East Germany, where Erpenbeck spent her childhood. It is a love story as well as a story about history. Weaving the personal into the political is classic Erpenbeck. On the sidelines of *The Hindu* Lit For Life in Chennai, the writer speaks about the fall of the Berlin Wall, her love for music, and the themes that run across her books. Edited excerpts:

Question: *Let us start with the fall of the Berlin Wall. You had said that it suddenly felt like your childhood belonged in a museum. Could you elaborate on that?*
Answer: When it was clear that East Germany would be gone, everything I knew well suddenly became the past and I knew it would never be the present again. It was like falling into another time. It felt like we were becoming another country but by staying in the same place, which was surreal.

Q: *Does that explain why you immediately started collecting things such as milk cartons and wrapping paper? Was it a desperate need to preserve everything that you associated with your life there?*
A: You cannot keep what is lost; what is lost is lost. The idea of a museum interests me: it means that things are not of a value in your reality anymore; they are just kept for some reason. It is not sentimentality; it is more a reminder that you knew another world. If you look at the wrapping paper from the GDR [German Democratic Republic], it was of bad quality, but it reminds me of a society that was not based on profit. Of course, that world ended, but the idea of it is something worth remembering.

Q: *You speak of Bach, Mozart, Clara Haskil, Glenn Gould, etc. in* Kairos. *You were an opera director once. How has music influenced your writing?*
A: East Germany was not all about being haunted by the Stasi. I was brought up with lots of books, music, and culture. Art played a bigger role for us than it does in a capitalistic society. We could read between the lines of a book or understand what the director was trying to convey without being too direct in a theatre production.

My interest in music mainly came from my mother's side. There was a moment when I fell in love with *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi, so I started listening to the opera. I would listen to all the pieces of *Der Ring* by Wagner – each was four to five hours long – and see the connections between the motifs of forgetting and hiding.

Language is a form of music, too. It has vocals and sounds. Even when we read silently, we imagine the sound of the text and the speed. This is what you try to play with when you make music too.

Author Jenny Erpenbeck; and (bottom) translator and critic Michael Hofmann.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Q: *Katharina betrays Hans' trust in* Kairos. *In an earlier work,* The Book of Words, *the child's father's true profession is not revealed to her. Why do you think betrayal is a recurring theme? Is it a conscious choice?*
A: I would say the theme chose me. I am obsessed with it. Sometimes you don't know why you choose a topic. Now, as I am getting older, I have some clues as to why I chose this, but I can't tell you [laughs]. As Hofmann says, 'Books know more than we do. There's more in a book than you put into it.'

Q: *In some of your books, characters don't have names. In* Visitation, *people are known by their profession – gardener, architect, etc. In* The End of Days, *there is a mother, grandmother, and so on. Why is that?*
A: I don't like names. It seems to me like some authors use names in a symbolic way to give an idea of what kind of a character this is. In *Visitation*, I only gave names to those who were killed, to remember them. I gave them real names that I found in my research. I gave names to those who profited from killing other people, too.

Q: *Is it true that your father stopped writing when the Wall fell and you began writing?*
A: Not entirely true. The Wall fell and then he published one book. But he saw that the society he knew had transformed in a way that didn't interest him anymore. His subject of writing was lost and so he didn't see much sense in his work. I wrote because I saw an older generation losing their jobs and facing an existential crisis.

A slice of Germany

Poet, critic and translator Michael Hofmann on the German language and the challenges of his job

Michael Hofmann is one of Germany's most influential literary figures. The poet and critic has translated more than 80 books from German to English, including works by Franz Kafka, Hans Fallada, and Bertolt Brecht. *Kairos* is his first collaboration with author Jenny Erpenbeck. Edited excerpts from his interview during *The Hindu* Lit for Life in Chennai:

Question: *It is often said that Germans have a word for everything – one word to describe even a complex idea. So, how do you translate it, and can everything be translated?*
Answer: A lot of those words, such as angst and schadenfreude, have been adopted by the English language. The challenge in translation is not to allow the thing to become cosy in English. In *Kairos*, it was also to respect and convey Katharina's system of values and priorities which are artistic, first and foremost. It was also to avoid an American system in which young people are important. Because this was not a world in which young people were important; they were left alone to get on with things by themselves.

Q: *You have translated more than 80 books. Are you particular about what you choose to translate today?*
A: I have always been particular. I like stories that reflect Germany and that will give an English reader some insight into the country. You have to begin with the fact that the English hate foreign books and have no culture of translation. Even if it exists, the culture is very small. Sometimes, I feel I'm on the wrong side, though, because I am making it easier for the English to stay within English instead of learning German and reading Erpenbeck.

Q: *Has there been any kind of writing that's been particularly hard to translate? And is there any structure or form that you would like to translate?*
A: Translating is easy; it's like copying. The only difficult thing about it is to make it seem natural. I have done everything I have wanted to. I am very fulfilled.

– *R.S.*

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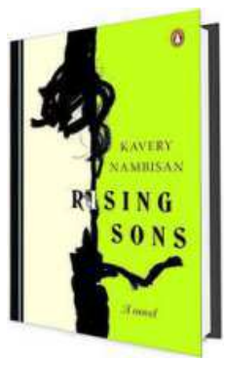
BROWSER

Too Good to Be True
Prajakta Koli
HarperCollins
₹399
YouTuber and actor Prajakta Koli says her book began life as a TV show. When the notes began to take the form of chapters, she announced to her fans that she would write a book instead. Like her popular web-series, *Mismatched*, Koli's debut book is romance-themed, and has a promotional soundtrack.

As Dark As Blood
Yasser Usman
Simon & Schuster
₹499
Crime does not pay but crime fiction most likely does, going by the number of mysteries and thrillers hitting the stands every month. Yasser Usman, journalist and Bollywood biographer, makes his foray into fiction with a story about a serial killer and a troubled cop, set in the mountains of Darjeeling.

No Place to Call My Own
Alina Gufran
Tranquebar
₹499
It's the age of millennial angst and disquiet in literary fiction, epitomised by the likes of Sally Rooney. In her debut novel, screenwriter and editor Gufran explores the theme through the voice of a queer, Muslim protagonist in contemporary India. Nearly all fiction is autofiction, says the author.

Rising Sons
Kavery Nambisan
Penguin
₹599
The surgeon and novelist is known for her activism and writing that focuses on social issues. In a slight departure, her last book, Cherry Red, Cherry Black, traced the origins of coffee in India. Nambisan returns to fiction with her newest novel, a four-part saga set in a pre-independence India divided by caste and religion.



EXTRACT

ESCAPE CLAUSES

The history of the Constitution has been marked by a concentration of power with the Union Executive, aided and abetted by the judiciary

The Constitution of India, which came into effect on January 26, 1950, is "a terrain of contestation between different visions of power and its history has been marked by a centralising drift". A new book by ***Gautam Bhatia*** *argues that the seeds of this drift – concentration of power with the Union Executive – are contained within the text and design of the Constitution itself. Over the years, the courts (in particular, the Supreme Court) have aided and abetted this through a set of 'inflection-point' judgments. An excerpt from* The Indian Constitution: A Conversation with Power.

In the seven decades of the working of the Constitution, there has been a gradual drift towards the entrenching of its first set of characteristics: unitary, concentrated, representative, electoral, homogenous, and Statist power, at the cost of federal, distributed, direct, guarantor, plural, and individual power. This shift that I call, in short, the 'centralising drift', has come about in different ways.

Constraining factors

First, there is the constitutional text itself. As Nirvikar Singh points out in the context of federalism, the Constitution is chock-full of 'escape clauses' that skew the terrain of contestation at the outset. Whether it is overriding central powers in Centre-state fiscal relations, the use of 'notwithstanding' clauses scattered throughout the Constitution, or wide-ranging gubernatorial power in the Schedule VI Areas, these escape clauses seemingly constrain and counteract the Constitution's own impulses towards the distribution and diversification of power. Such 'escape clauses' are not limited to federalism but pervade the Constitution. Whether it is presidential power to appoint the officers of fourth-branch institutions (including, even, an interim power to appoint the members of the Election Commission!), or the provisions on administrative detention, the constitutional text, as well as its silences, indicate that this is an executive-trusting document.

It is important to note that 'escape clauses' are not self-interpreting. Their scope and limitations are subject to judicial adjudication. Consequently, much like the framers of the Constitution were faced with choices about how to organise power – the judiciary (specifically, the Supreme Court) has been faced with a set of choices about how to interpret the

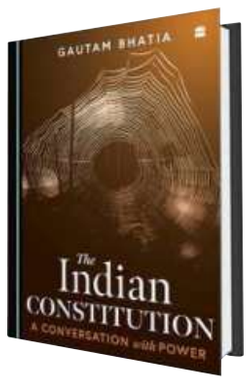
Wake-up call (Clockwise from left) A deserted view of the Dal Lake in Jammu and Kashmir; visitors at a Constitution-themed cartoon exhibition at the Ernakulam District Court premises; and a protest in Srinagar against the removal of Article 370. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK, R.K. NITHIN AND NISSAR AHMAD)

Constitution's scheme of organising power. When faced with these choices, the Supreme Court has often chosen to further facilitate or accelerate the Constitution's centralising drift. I call these judgments constitutional inflection points: they are events that definitively entrench the centralising drift, while significantly weakening the decentralising vision of power that is also present within the constitutional text.

An early Supreme Court judgment that in my view constitutes an 'inflection point' in the evolution of Indian federalism is the *State of West Bengal vs Union of India*. In this case, the Supreme Court endorsed the centralising reading of the Constitution. This reading proceeded upon a set of contested premises, but has been crystallised and entrenched by the Court's jurisprudence in the years following the judgment, contributing to federalism being one of the sites where the 'centralising drift' is most pronounced.

This 'centralising drift' infects multiple parts of the Constitution; it was at the heart of the series of controversial constitutional measures that were utilised to 'amend' Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in 2019, remove the autonomy of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and downgrade its status to a Union Territory. In my analysis of the 'Article 370 Case', an alternative understanding of Indian federalism, advanced by Justice Subba Rao's dissenting opinion in *State of West Bengal vs Union of India*, could have been applied to a concrete constitutional dispute, with very different consequences.

These judgments decided not just the issues before them, but also contributed towards shaping a 'constitutional common sense' in favour of the centralising drift. The very fact that the constitutional text is a terrain of contestation, and that the cases under study presented the judiciary with a choice, indicates that the centralising drift is not inevitable.



The Indian Constitution: A Conversation with Power
Gautam Bhatia
HarperCollins
₹599

Power and rights

As Roberto Gargarella has correctly pointed out, there is no necessary conceptual connection between centralisation of power and (for example) the protection of rights. In theory, a powerful central executive may indeed be an effective guarantor of rights. In fact, in the Indian context, as Madhav Khosla notes, there was a clear line of constitutional thinking that sought to strengthen the powers of the central executive in order to free individuals from local patterns and institutions of dominance. At the same time, the lessons of history demonstrate that a greater and greater concentration of power in a single entity or office is invariably a threat to the meaningful exercise of individual freedom, or of social transformation. This is especially true when we look at how the centralising drifts along various axes of power reinforce and entrench each other, creating a structure of power that becomes, in essence, unaccountable.

A caveat: as is true for all the axes of power, the terrain of the Constitution is not exhaustive of the question of power. There is the domain of politics, about which the Constitution often has very little, if anything, to say. In the case of federalism, in particular, the relationship between the Centre and the States has depended at least as much on the prevailing political balance of power at any given time, rather than the constitutional text and constitutional interpretation.

Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins.

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Says Hoskote, "Public libraries are not a high priority of the government. It is to the advantage of certain regimes that people shouldn't make up their minds about anything. A library is classically a place where your knowledge is expanded, you learn different perspectives. When you have a regime committed to a one-point understanding of the world, then the library becomes a dangerous space."

A working template

Many of the free community libraries take inspiration from The Community Library Project (TCLP), founded by author Mridula Koshy in 2015. It now has two branches in Delhi and one in Gurugram. TCLP runs a Leadership Development Programme that creates opportunities for library members to recognise and develop their leadership skills. "Even the smallest libraries can make a significant impact by developing critical thinkers," says Koshy. The result is proof of how an energetic and welcoming library space can change lives.

Mausam Kumari and Simpy Sharma, both 24, deputy director and director of TCLP, respectively, say that growing up with books and discussions at TCLP have shaped their independent thinking. "At home, I felt I was treated the same as my brother, but then I realised he always got the larger share. Books such as *Seeing Like A Feminist* helped me see the discrimination," says Kumari.

Sharma, who had only seen locked school library shelves until she came to TCLP, says, "Without the library, my perspective would've been buried. I wouldn't have understood equality and gender. It's helped me counter my family's views on early marriage and dowry." Both women credit their growth to diverse books and discussions. "Libraries are transformative spaces," says Koshy, "providing knowledge that helps people grow and expand their thinking."

A national library policy

Diversity of books and free access to libraries are the guiding principles that led members of the Free Library Network to draft the People's National Library Policy (PNLP 2024), released on B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary last year. The policy highlights the role of public libraries in empowering marginalised communities — Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, women, non-binary, trans, undocumented, refugee populations, and those with disabilities. Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's principles of equity, the policy advocates for an inclusive, accessible library system. "A national policy crafted without grassroots voices would fail to create a truly inclusive library system," says Koshy of TCLP. The policy has been submitted to the Ministry of Culture, with further developments pending.

Simpy Sharma, Mridula Koshy and Mausam Kumari of The Community Library Project; and (left) a rural library in Karnataka. (TCLP DELHI & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

INSIDE INDIA'S RURAL READING ROOMS

Exposure and diverse reading can truly open up awareness, even in the youngest of minds, says Banu Jagadeesan, who runs Reading Space in Cuddalore, facilitating library sessions with children across four government schools. "We focus on having books on gender, sexuality and social issues. It is very powerful to talk about this with children," she says. Jagadeesan mentions an anecdote where, while discussing a book (*Ravi's Roar* by Tom Percival) about different types of families, a child spoke about families with two mothers, reflecting the conversations at home. "It was unexpected and shows reading sessions are fostering discussions within families, too," she says.

Giving back to the community

The transformation is also evident in Khan's Bhopal libraries that work with communities where the families have barely enough space to spread out and sleep comfortably, let alone read. The libraries also double up as counselling-cum-career guidance centres. "Child marriage is very high in the communities around us. At the libraries, we help girls fill out Class X forms and counsel their families against early marriage. In fact, at all our branches we are busy May through July as we begin counselling families and creating a list of children interested in completing high school so that we can help them fill the forms," says Khan.

Sometimes, there are success stories. "Sahiba, who joined our library in Class II, completed her studies despite dropping out in Class XII initially, because she was inspired by the stories of the women she read about. We spoke to her parents and helped her resume studies and enrol in a library educator course by securing funding through a trust."

During the pandemic, Khan also launched a scholarship programme for children who had been out of school due to migration, crowdfunding their education and seeking help from the Parag Tata Trust to support them. In exchange, the students give back to the community by teaching and mentoring neighbourhood youth.

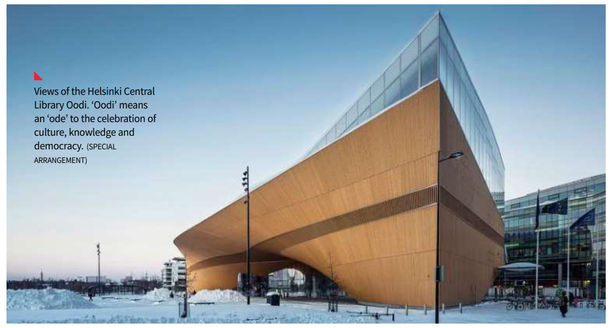
It's hard to find data on the impact small community libraries have had on literacy levels in India. But as all the library activists we spoke to said, the win is in the community owning the library and making it their own. At the Akshappura Micro Library in Thiruvananthapuram, books are arranged on a small roadside stand, and people borrow them by putting down their name and phone number in a notebook. "The community takes care," says Jithin S Vijay, secretary of Vallyasala Brothers which runs the library.

Lalit of Bansa Library believes such spaces also foster humanity. "Bansa used to be violent, but in the last five years, only 1% of books have been lost, even though the library is open 24/7 with keys left just outside for anybody to access." Rahul Mishra, founder of Mirzapur Community Library, sums it up best: "Our big win is the way the vegetable vendors and the community around take pride in the library and take care of it as they believe it shows them the way forward."

The writer is a freelance journalist and the co-author of Rethink Ageing *(2022).*

Books on wheels and boats

In the villages around Jodhpur in Rajasthan, books reach children in the village on camel carts. It's an initiative by Room to Read, a global non-profit focused on literacy and gender equality in education, that has been active in India since 2003 and runs a free flagship library programme. Community engagement is a big part of the project. "A library is more than just books; it's a transformative space for nurturing reading habits," says Poonam Garg, country director. They involve the community in their school libraries by inviting literate villagers for storytelling sessions and forming parent-child committees to manage libraries. To overcome accessibility challenges, Room to Read's 'India Gets Reading' campaign has reimagined traditional libraries over the past six years with innovative mobile libraries. Apart from the camel cart library, books have reached children in remote areas on a bike library in Uttar Pradesh, a boat library in Madhya Pradesh, and a bullock cart library in Chhattisgarh.



Views of the Helsinki Central Library Oodi. 'Oodi' means an 'ode' to the celebration of culture, knowledge and democracy. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
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LESSONS FROM HELSINKI'S OODI

With 100,000 books, social robots and a community spirit, Finland's flagship library is designed for the future

At a time when the book reading culture is declining across the world, how does one country keep it alive and thriving? The success story of Helsinki Central Library Oodi in Finland since it opened six years ago is an inspiration indeed. So, when I got the opportunity to be in the world's happiest country (voted thus for the seventh year in a row), I had to visit. Oodi is the Finnish word for 'ode' and this name, as with its design and many of its innovative features, is courtesy participatory planning and consultation with the public. I learn that the city did not want to name its iconic library after any famous personality, referencing instead the celebration of culture, knowledge and democracy.

A city's gift

In this Nordic country with a 100% literacy rate, there is a high level of digitisation. There is no need of a separate census exercise here, as all data is available with the government, with it rolling out measures to enrich its people's lives. One of its oldest initiatives is the public libraries in the country. Calling itself "a living meeting place", Oodi was the city's gift to its people on the centenary celebration of Finland's independence. This place also made headlines recently when a book was returned 84 years after it was issued. The due date of the Finnish translation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's historical novel Refugees was December 26, 1939.

"Oodi has been designed together with the city's residents so that it can best correspond with the wishes and needs that library users have. Ideas, tips and dreams have been gathered at urban events and workshops, and through websites and various campaigns," a librarian informs me. When I decided to visit Oodi, it was when Australia was still mulling over banning social media usage for children, and there was intense debate about social media and its impact. The debate also involved the rising gaming culture and the reduction in reading habits among children and young adults across the world. And that is what intrigued me further. How is one country keeping the reading culture alive and thriving? Finland has the world's highest library readership. How does a library manage over five lakh loans of books every year, in a city of 6.5 lakh people? How does it track its one lakh books and continue to charm people so much so that over 10 million people have already visited this place within six years since it opened?

Of hobbies and ideas

Resting on two horizontal steel arches, the building is massive - spread over 10,000 square metres. When I enquire about a registration process for visitors, a smiling assistant urges me to explore the place without any inhibitions. I observe chess boards laid on tables, surrounded by players from different age groups. The library's membership opens doors to events, lectures, workshops, the theatre, cafeteria, music studios, edit bays, gaming rooms, fashion design studios, 3D printer labs, sewing rooms, museum cum experience centre, all housed within the massive building, all free of cost. From learning the Finnish language to pursuing your hobbies, from socialising with peers to trying to find roots in a new city as an immigrant - everyone's go-to place is Oodi.

"Oodi is much more than a place for books. With its meeting rooms and various studios for analogue and digital handicraft, it is a place for ideas, projects and creativity," exclaims a visiting Swiss journalist, Felicie Notter, comparing it to the libraries in her country. "Libraries in Switzerland also aim to be places where people meet, and they organise events. But it's far from the infrastructure and program Oodi proposes."

Meet the robots

At the cafeteria, I notice that young mothers have parked their prams and are relaxing for a bit. A digital board catches my eye. "Oodi facts: our Robot Veera travels about 1355 kilometres per year," it says. Next to it is the book issuing counter. With no human on the other side of it. Three computers face visitors. A reader walks in, enters the details of the book she has, and slips it right in. The book travels the conveyor belt mechanically to reach Veera, one of the three robots servicing the Oodi library since 2019, so the library staff could have more time to interact and engage with visitors.

It is Veera, along with Tatu and Patu, that sort out the one lakh books the library has. Interestingly, when the library decided to get the robots in, it turned to the children of Helsinki for suggestions. This time, it was a 10-year-old girl who suggested these names, after famous children's book characters. A fourth robot, Obotti, helps readers with book recommendations. "Obotti is an example of the City's AI experiments that seek to improve services," states the official website.

My visit to Oodi library, and observing first-hand how a city facility can have such an organic relationship with its residents of all age groups helped me understand why the Finns lead in literacy. And while the significant cost of this project (about US $97 million) is perhaps something that other countries might not be able to afford, the active role of residents in the decision making and the varied activities here offer much inspiration.

The writer was invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland.

Enter the 'bookship'

A recent visitor to Oodi, graphic novelist Jaideep Unudurti says he was impressed by the library's commitment to create a space for culture, without having any commercial motive. "I spent hours without paying for anything or even anyone asking for an ID," he recalls. Referring to the library's striking facade, he adds, "I first saw Oodi on a misty and snowy afternoon, and for some reason my first impression was that of a sailing ship. A 'bookship'. Inside, my impression was of a slightly messy but welcoming living room of the nation."

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

IN CONVERSATION

INDIAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE?

Meenakshi Ahamed discusses her new book, *Indian Genius*, and whether 2028 could see an Indian American as the U.S. president

Suhasini Haidar
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The 2024 U.S. elections threw up many surprises, but they also saw the Indian-American community come into its own – with a record six Indian-Americans being elected to Congress for what's now called the 'Samosa Caucus'. Also, many from the community, including Vivek Ramaswamy and Kash Patel, are among President Donald Trump's top nominees for positions in the administration.

Journalist Meenakshi Ahamed's latest book, *Indian Genius: The Meteoric Rise of Indians in America*, is a look at successful Indians in a number of spheres, with exclusive interviews with them. Edited excerpts from a conversation with Ahamed:

Question: *Is this election a coming of age of the Indian American community on the American political landscape?*

Answer: Oh, I definitely think that the Indians have 'arrived'. In 2020, 99 Indian-origin Americans ran for elected office up and down the ballots. Not just Congress or Senate, but also state assembly seats, council seats, and local elections. That was a pretty big phenomenon and we now have six congressmen elected. We had one senator, Kamala Harris, who was partially Indian. When Biden was vice president, he was the first one to celebrate Diwali, and it has now become an official holiday in New York and several other states. This is now an indication of not only the acceptance of Indians, but Indian culture into the mainstream.

Q: *At the same time, it does seem as if there is a door closing for new immigrants into the U.S. Trump has promised mass deportations.*

A: If Kamala Harris had won and become president, a lot of people were saying about my book, *Indian Genius*, that everyone would be talking about how many Indians have risen in America. But now it is equally important, because there's a MAGA [Make America Great Again] fight going on within the Republican Party about immigration, where you have Elon Musk and the tech [business leaders] who want to continue the H-1B visa programme and bring in technically proficient people from India and other places. On the other hand, you have the conservative sort of Steve Bannon crowd, who have said things like, 'No, America was built by white Americans, and we don't need Indian invaders.' And so it'll be interesting to see where the chips finally fall.

(Clockwise from far left) Second Lady Usha Vance; Vivek Ramaswamy; Ro Khanna; Nikki Haley; Suhas Subramanyam; and author Meenakshi Ahamed. (REUTERS, AP, AND AKHILA EASWARAN)

Q: *Your book makes the point that there have been waves of anti-immigrant feeling from a century ago when Indians couldn't even become U.S. citizens. How have they overcome these battles for acceptance?*

A: As my book points out, discrimination is nothing new in America. When the Irish came in, they were discriminated against. When the Italians came in, they faced discrimination. And so did the Jews. But they all ended up becoming mainstream. Indians began to migrate in big numbers only in the 1960s. One factor was that president Johnson passed the Medicare Act, giving millions of Americans access to healthcare. Except, the American medical system didn't have enough doctors. India was a prime place [to recruit from] because [prime minister] Nehru had invested in medical institutes. Excellent doctors were coming out of there, and they spoke English. Another factor that helped Silicon Valley was that Russia launched Sputnik [the first artificial satellite], and America thought it was going to lose the arms race against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. And so they went out and started recruiting engineers. That is when people like [businessmen] Kanwal Rekhi and Vinod Khosla came in, and others like them flooded Silicon Valley.

Q: *What is the Eight Dollar Club?*

A: That includes me! India had a shortage of foreign exchange back in the 60s, when it was a socialist country. When we left to study abroad, we were only allowed to exchange up to $8. So, you came to the U.S. with $8 in your pocket. This meant you had to have someone at the other end picking you up, taking you to where you had to go, because the fare to your university was more.

Q: *You've broken up your book into three kinds of Indian immigrants – the techies, the healers, as you call doctors, and the influencers. Why did it take so long for Indian Americans to break into this area of public affairs, policy and politics?*

A: It really hasn't taken them that long, if you think about it. Most [Indians] came after 1965 and it takes a generation to have economic security. So, the first generation is busy making money, then the second generation are the children, and they grow up with certain comforts, and they can afford to think about other careers and give back. They don't want to just do medicine or tech like their parents. So, they went into law like Neal Katyal, who has argued more cases now in front of the Supreme Court than any other minority person, and he really sees himself as a complete and total American.

Q: *In 2024, there was Kamala Harris, and Usha Vance as part of the presidential race. What about 2028? Do you foresee a face-off between two people of Indian American origin, Ro Khanna vs. Nikki Haley?*

A: It's entirely possible. If Donald Trump wasn't running, Nikki Haley had a very good chance. She was a serious candidate, got 30% of the Republican vote, and certainly got him worried. [Politician and lawyer] Ro Khanna is very thoughtful, an intellectual, and he is definitely ambitious. He does think about whether he should run for president, and I wouldn't be surprised if he runs in 2028.

Q: *Do you think that the U.S. is ready for a president of Indian origin?*

A: I'm not sure. There will certainly be a segment of the population that will not be able to tolerate it, but I think there's another 45% that it wouldn't bother at all, as long as they were smart and a good candidate. My worry about Trump 2.0 is that he really changed the culture of the U.S. when he was president, in the sense that it became more divided. I worry that an unfettered Trump might damage the country culturally in ways that will have very long-lasting repercussions, and that might also impact the Indian community negatively.

ALLEGEDLY

Epiphanies on January 20

How can anyone not be impressed by Trump's ability to make deals and promote peace?

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

My plan for 2025 is to start a new career as a mediator. I would go around mediating wherever I see conflict. For my sustained contributions to conflict-resolution, I would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which I would refuse – because I am not doing it for personal glory but to make the world great again.

For example, there are lots of dogs near my place. They keep having loud arguments over who is the top dog, who is the underdog, and who is the hot dog. Sometimes things get physical – just like with humans. But the next time I see a bunch of them fighting and overturning flower pots or something, I would mediate. If they don't listen to me, I would pick up a hose and spray water on them until they stop fighting.

Or, if I see two cows fighting on the road, I would remind them of their public image as non-violent creatures, point to their exalted status as gods, and what kind of example they are setting for their human devotees. But I would not physically intervene because what if one of the cows suffers a brain haemorrhage and I get beaten up for it? You see what I mean? Mediating is not an easy job – it requires talent, smarts, and an aptitude for deal-making.

I won't stop with cows though. If a married couple were to follow the bad example of the cows and start fighting and demanding divorce, I would immediately mediate. I would draw their attention to the sanctity of marriage in our ancient culture and tell them both to drop it. In return, I will allow them to pay me not more than 30,000 bucks each plus 18% GST.

Building a brand identity

The idea is to start small, with petty disputes. Once I have built my brand identity as a mediator – which I intend to do by sharing my learnings on LinkedIn – I will gradually work my way up until I become the go-to option for mediating geo-political conflicts. If all goes well at this level, I can set up a successful practice mediating inter-planetary and/or inter-galactic conflicts.

My friends are asking: why this sudden switch to mediation? Am I not happy doing journalism? Much as I love journalism, it is not enough. I don't mean this financially, though it does pay peanuts. What really bothers me is the lack of impact.

It all began with an epiphany I had on January 20: a journalist can only report on a conflict, but a mediator can resolve it. Two hours later, I had a second epiphany: conflicts are growing all over the world. And then, I had one last and final epiphany: why not turn conflict into an opportunity to make money? That's when I knew I must become a mediator.

I may have mentioned money, but I want to clarify that my pivot to mediation is not motivated by a desire to make tonnes of money and retire to a seaside mansion in the Bahamas. I will offer my services for free. But I wouldn't kick up a fuss if the beneficiaries of my mediation, out of overwhelming gratitude, insisted on buying me a seaside mansion in the Bahamas, or nominated me for the Peace Nobel.

Making myself great again

The biggest factor behind my venture into conflict resolution is, believe it or not, a person. I hope he won't feel embarrassed if I thank him publicly for inspiring me to make myself great again – yes, it's Donald Trump. All these intellectuals writing about the worldwide impact of a second Trump presidency have completely missed his impact on ordinary people like me and you. What an amazing example, and sample, of mankind! He stopped the fighting in Gaza even before taking office. Now he's going to stop World War III in Ukraine. How can anyone not be inspired by his ability to make deals and promote peace?

By the way, after I have resolved hundreds of conflicts, if the Nobel Committee still remains unmoved, here's what I would do. I'd tell them they won't have to actually give me the Nobel, or see me holding it, because I only want the publicity for my mediation practice, not the prize itself. I'd tell them, here's the deal: how about you offer it to me first, I refuse it, and then you give it to Netanyahu or whoever you were planning on giving it to anyway? It's a win-win. Something tells me they'll take it.

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

PERSON OF INTEREST

ANISH GAWANDE: CARE IS A POLITICAL WORD

The first openly gay national spokesperson for an Indian political party on cutting through divisive discourse and fostering connections

Anish Gawande, 28, co-founded a database for politicians who support LGBTQIA+ rights; won a Rhodes scholarship; and is the first openly gay national spokesperson for an Indian political party alongside his role as an art curator. But he says his biggest achievement is convincing his father that Narendra Modi is "bad for this country". It took him 10 years. "All other achievements fade in the face of changing the mind of one man," he says.

His father, an income tax official, grew up in the heart of identity politics in Mumbai and though he was a strong believer in the welfare state and a proponent of universal healthcare, Gawande says the older man believed the Congress was "pandering to minorities". He was "enchanted" by the dream Modi presented in 2014, and like many families across the country, passionate living room arguments (and some door slamming) played out between father and son as they alternated between prime time news shows. "It set the stage for every issue that was coming up," he says. "There was a deeply polarising but animated discourse."

It took many debates about individual issues, but Gawande says the change in his father was clearly visible by 2022, after he witnessed the tripartite Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis in Maharashtra. "Now my father is a vocal opponent," Gawande says. "He's that person on a WhatsApp group who will argue with his friends."

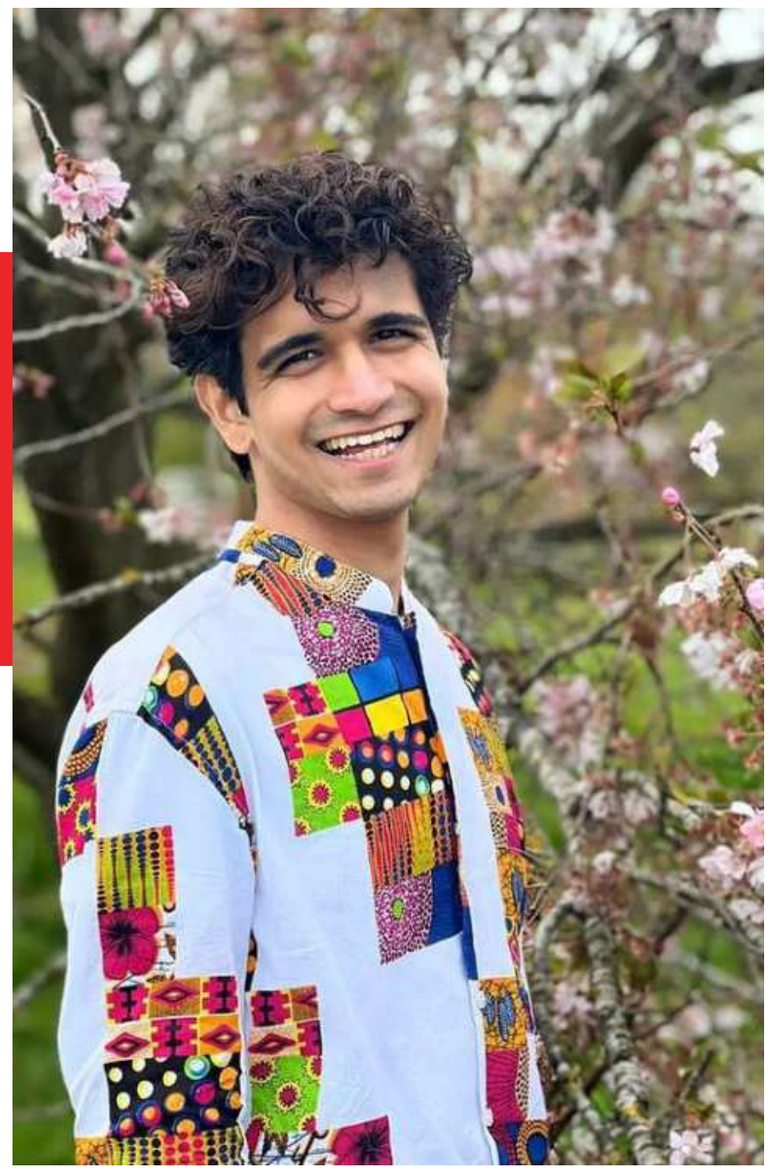
Naming LGBTQ allies

Gawande stumbled into politics at 17, when he volunteered to canvas door-to-door for former South Mumbai Congress MP Milind Deora in the 2014 general election. After a stint at Columbia University, he returned and volunteered with Deora and another influential Maharashtra politician, Ashok Chavan, for the 2019 election. Deora lost both times, the MVA government was formed, and Gawande went to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship.

In 2024, both politicians left the Congress and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party, and Gawande became the national spokesperson for Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party. "The party had demonstrated that they could support progressive causes and win," he says.

He's a politician now, but for many years he described himself as an activist. At 22, as a freshly minted comparative literature graduate from Columbia, Gawande co-founded Pink List, a website that listed the 2019 Lok Sabha candidates who had publicly supported queer and trans causes. Working with Deora and Chavan had made him realise that there was support for the community among politicians and this included MPs who had pushed for policy changes and those who had spoken up on behalf of this group.

2019 was also the last year he ran the Dara Shikoh Fellowship in Kashmir, a month-long residency for students who wanted to explore connections between gender, sexuality and caste against the backdrop of the former state's conflict. That year, those at the residency, including Gawande, had no access to phones or the Internet as India revoked Jammu & Kashmir's special status and downgraded the State to a Union Territory.



Connections and conversations
Anish Gawande entered politics when he was 17. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali is a favourite, though Gawande enjoys gifting all kinds of poetry, from Mary Oliver to Nissim Ezekiel, to fellow politicians. He started thinking differently about Kashmir when he read Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*, about a generation that grew up with state violence and fear. Gawande's upbringing was in a family that believed the Indian state could do no wrong, and Waheed's debut novel showed him a world he hadn't seen before, even on the news.

No more illusions

As a student intern at a newspaper once, Gawande proposed a project that would include Kashmiri students. "I thought if we read what they have to say about *Harry Potter*, for instance, we might dehumanise them less," he says with a grimace, acknowledging his naivety. When he somehow wrangled the permission to travel to Kashmir, escorted by his mother, his illusions were quickly crushed. "You think we want to write about *Harry Potter*? I want to write about how my grandmother has been having severe asthma attacks after a tear gas canister was thrown," one teenager told him.

Another mirage that has vanished in recent years is the status of Maharashtra as India's most progressive state. "For the longest time it was Shiv, Shahu, Phule, Ambedkar's Maharashtra," says Gawande. But the same state that gave us Ambedkar also gave us Golwalkar and the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh]."

He swears by the politics of care or centreing the notion of care in politics. It involves cutting through divisive discourse and making an argument for a fundamental human connection through conversation with those who don't share our political point of view. "The problem is that all of us have gotten so used to the idea of instant gratification, and of people supporting our ideas through retweets and likes," he says, adding that convincing people has to be done at a "granular level".

"You cannot convince 50,000 people," he says. "You can convince five." Gawande is proof you can at least convince your father.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

The only card

East-West vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a major championship some years ago. South was American expert Fred Hamilton. North's raise was limited by his failure to bid three hearts, which would have shown a raise with at least invitational values. The actual three-spade bid was a weaker raise.

East won the opening diamond lead with the ace and shifted to the queen of clubs. Hamilton won with the ace and led the jack of hearts, covered with the king, and won in dummy with the ace. Hamilton cashed the queen of hearts, shedding his diamond loser from hand, and led the nine of clubs. This was covered by 10 and won with the king. South cashed the king of diamonds and led the three of clubs to dummy's eight and East's jack as West shed a heart. East returned a diamond, ruffed by South.

Hamilton now led the good seven of clubs. There was no loser to discard from the dummy, and a deep analysis tells us that West can defeat the contract by playing any card from his hand except the five of spades. The five of spades seemed like a harmless play, killing the seven of clubs with a worthless trump, and that is exactly what West played. Hamilton overruffed in dummy, ruffed a heart in his hand, and exited with a low spade. West won with his ace, but in this two-card ending, East's remaining trumps were trapped and any card from West allowed the contract to make. Nicely played!

NORTH
♠ J 8 6
♡ A Q 6 3
◇ J 9 8
♣ 9 8 2

WEST
♠ A 5
♡ K 10 9 8 7 5
◇ Q 3 2
♣ 6 5

EAST
♠ Q 9 4
♡ 4 2
◇ A 6 5 4
♣ Q J 10 4

SOUTH
♠ K 10 7 3 2
♡ J
◇ K 10 7
♣ A K 7 3

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2♡	Pass	Pass	2♠
Pass	3♠	Pass	4♠
All pass			

Opening lead: Two of ◇

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

The Constitution is not a mere lawyer's document; it is a vehicle of life, and its spirit is always the spirit of age: B.R. Ambedkar

A copy of the Constitution is kept in the Parliament library in New Delhi. (PTI)

Berty Ashley

1 On January 26, 1950, the Constitution of India came into effect and replaced the Government of India Act, 1935, as the country's fundamental governing document. This led to India becoming a republic, and consequently this day is celebrated as Republic Day. Due to geographical, historical, and legal considerations, what aspect of the Indian Constitution is a world record?

2 There are two copies of the Constitution kept in the library of the Parliament. One is in English and the other in Hindi. With 395 articles, 22 parts and eight schedules it has more than a hundred thousand words. What was the contribution of Prem Behari Narain Raizada to the Constitution?

3 The two copies of the Constitution are preserved in a display case, which was constructed in collaboration with the Getty Conservation Institute, USA, The National Physical Laboratory and the Parliament library. What inert gas is inside the case to ensure the paper doesn't get affected?

4 The first section captures the essence of the Indian Constitution and plays a crucial role in outlining its fundamental features. The arrangement of the terms and their order clearly highlight their significance. What is this section called?

5 The first five words establish who the sovereign authorities of the country are – the ones who grant the government all the power it holds. What are these five words that make us all the authors of the Constitution and empower us to choose our government?

6 During the Emergency in 1977, the 42nd amendment was enacted when two words were added to the first line of the preamble. The first word refers to achievement of goals in democratic, evolutionary and non-violent means and that wealth should be shared equally by society through distributive justice. What word is this?

7 The second word ensures that the relationship between the government and religious groups is governed by the Constitution and the law, signifying equal freedom and respect for all religions. It was initially rejected by the Constituent Assembly, as they believed it was inherently reflected in the Constitution itself. What is this word that separates the powers of the state and religion and represents a spirit we, as authors of the Constitution, should uphold?

8 Which principle, enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, guarantees the right to freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship for all Indian citizens?

9 Which principle in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution ensures no section of society is given special privileges or subjected to discrimination, while guaranteeing fair opportunities for everyone?

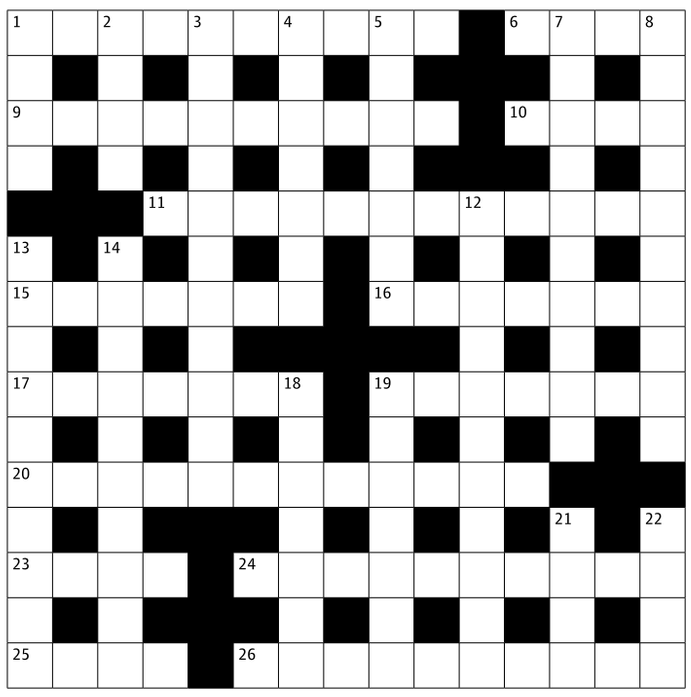
10 The second-to-last line includes a term that embodies a sense of brotherhood and unity among the people of the country. It fosters a shared sense of belonging and eliminates divisions based on region, community, caste, religion, or other factors that could threaten the unity of the nation. What is this term?

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

Answers

1. The world's longest Constitution
2. He wrote it by hand
3. Nitrogen (Not Helium as Google and many articles say)
4. The Preamble
5. We, the people of India
6. Socialist
7. Secular
8. Liberty
9. Equality
10. Fraternity

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3342



Across

1 Excitedly earning tip, returning a coat? (10)
6 Bulk of the artificial intelligence from land on Indochinese Peninsula (4)
9 Duck and swan given kind of seed: with this, get in! (4,6)
10 In *Macbeth*, a dagger is one mainstay (4)
11 'Time to get up, Mr. Warne: would you like some dried fruit?' (4,3,5)
15 In Hamilton — or Mansell — we see overpowering force (7)
16 Swallow pork pie first, and rest (3-4)
17 Feeling queasy and green in France, Everyman leaves (7)
19 With pie standing in for a roast: most inadequate (7)
20 Nastily, he invited one to fail to reach fruition (3,2,3,4)
23 In audition, furrows... finding lice (4)
24 So, you grill bananas to magnificent effect? (10)
25 Wildly yearn, losing resistance for musician (4)
26 Fling glove — not good — a loud exhibition (4,6)

Down

1 Burrow into ground for parsnip? (4)
2 Spy to stay up (4)
3 Breathtaking goddess, like Erato? (11)
4 Tense idiots crowding front of limo: they're left hanging (7)
5 Primarily 'named' — or maybe 'in name alone', legally? (7)
7 Those whose régime may often be seedy? (10)
8 'Germinate', loosely translated when primate principally involved? (10)
12 Risen on the wing, glimpses of emperor penguin pets: that's novel (11)
13 Envied Nice resort, that's clear to see (2,8)
14 Pertly ruin gathering, in an obscene manner (10)
18 Venetian game... (7)
19 ...overturn gear (7)
21 Where you could find central parts of East Siam? (4)
22 Tradesperson adding colour, extract of *Goodyera* (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3341

	D	I	V	I	N	E	T	R	I	L	O	G	Y	
	R	A		O		R		N		D		A		
L	A	M	P		I	D	I	O	T	B	O	A	R	D
	C		E		S		P		E		U		D	
M	U	E	S	L	I		L	U	N	A	R	D	A	Y
	L				E		E		D		L		R	
H	A	S	H	B	R	O	W	N		P	E	R	M	
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V	I	L	L	A	I	N	S		A	S	P	E	C	T
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P	I	A	N	O	S	T	O	O	L		U	V	E	A
	F		E		U		R		I		M		S	
	T	H	R	E	E	P	E	N	N	Y	B	I	T	

The debilitating silence

If people remain quiet and do not speak out against injustice, they should also take the blame for the outrage

Tharsni M.
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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

"Not all men are bad." It's a refrain that comes up whenever discussions about gender violence and harassment arise, and it's accompanied by a sense of frustration.

Men feel unfairly lumped in with those who commit horrible crimes, as if all men are somehow responsible for the actions of a few. And sure, not every man is a criminal. But here is the question we need to ask: even if not all men are directly involved in crimes, how many of them are complicit in a system that allows those crimes to persist?

Imagine, out of 100 men, 10% are habitual offenders, who repeatedly engage in abusive or violent behaviour. Add another 5% who might be one-time offenders who justify their actions with excuses such as "I was drunk" or "It was just one mistake." Often, men feel that society focuses on this 15%, and they grow defensive. "Why should I be judged for what other men have done," they ask. But let us look beyond that 15%. What about the remaining 85% of men?

Many of the 85% are not directly committing crimes, but their behaviours, attitudes, and silence contribute to the problem. Take another 20% of that group who engage in what we can call "passive crimes". These are men who may misbehave in public, grope women on buses, or catcall them. Another 20% carry a deep-seated sense of male entitlement, often justifying the actions of offenders with comments such as "What was she wearing?" or "She shouldn't have been out so late." They hold the belief that a woman's choices make her responsible for her circumstances. Then, we have another 20% who witness injustice but remain silent. They may hear inappropriate comments or see harassment unfold, but choose not to act, feeling it's not their problem.

Finally, there is the 10-15% of men who do speak up. They are the ones who step in when they see something wrong. They will challenge a friend who makes a sexist joke or help a stranger in trouble.

It's important to recognise that the issue is not exclusive to men. Women, too, can perpetuate these harmful systems. Many women unknowingly contribute to victim-blaming stereotypes, and remain silent in the face of harassment. While these actions might not be intentional, they feed into the cycle of violence and denial. Men, too, face violence and harassment, but society often ignores this. Male survivors often face an added layer of shame and stigma, making it even harder for them to seek help because of the stereotype attached to them. As a result, male victims of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse are often dismissed or ignored.

This is not just a "men's problem" or a "women's problem". Every time someone justifies violence, every time someone stays silent in the face of injustice, they are part of the problem. Whether it's subtle harassment or outright violence, crimes don't happen in a vacuum. They are made possible by the culture we create together. Wrong is wrong, no matter who does it. Let us stop pointing fingers but start looking at ourselves.

Perpetrators, bystanders, or enablers, we all have a part to play in creating a safer, more respectful world.

Addressing this issue is not just about punishing criminals; it starts with challenging harmful mindsets, speaking out when we see wrong, and standing together in the fight for justice, no matter who the victim is. In a world where silence often protects the guilty, let us be the voices. The truth is we are all part of the problem, and that means we all have the power to be part of the solution.

A road-roller down city streets

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Let's face it. Most of our cities have bad roads. The reasons are many – maybe, it is the volume of traffic or the unseasonable rain. You may own the fanciest car, but life is a great leveller. Your fancy car must negotiate a mud-road here and a ditch there, a pothole here and a crater there. In the process, it gets all bruised and battered, and soon, it is reduced to a shadow of its former, pristine self.

Earlier this week, I saw a road-roller parked by the wayside. It was a Eureka moment. Why not sell the car and buy this road-roller instead? The more I thought about it, more overwhelming were the benefits.

Owning a road-roller is like taking matters into your own hands, taking the bull by its horns, as they say. Bad roads? No problem at all! The road-roller will level the bad road to submission. You pave your own path, literally! And once you have levelled the road, think about the rest of humanity. They can simply follow you, your road-roller's footprint, rather. This is exactly what the poet meant when he wrote, "Footprints that perhaps another, sailing over life's solemn main, a forlorn and ship-wrecked brother, seeing, shall take heart again!" What better social service than this, I say?

Many of us have an intrinsic desire to own a posh car. Why? Introspection will reveal we do not want the car per se, we want that "attention", to be a "head-turner", a "cynosure of all eyes", as they say. For this attention seeker, a road-roller is like manna from heaven. After all, the biggest head-turner on the road is the road-roller. It's like riding atop an elephant. Who will not notice you, looking regal and majestic, as you hurtle down the road, on your road-roller?

Most of our cars are too delicate. Just one touch from a neighbouring car, and it crumples like paper. Think about the number of times the fender has got dented, or the sides scratched? A road-roller will have none of these problems – no dents, no scratches, nothing! It is built like a beast, like a bison, like a Patton tank!

Any innovation will face initial resistance. When we weigh the pros and cons carefully, the advantages of a road-roller outweigh the negative points, hands down. I am waiting for the day to drive my road-roller down M.G. Road.

A place of worship for all

A dilapidated temple in Kashmir changes into a *Sarv Dharamsthal*

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While serving in the Army, I had the opportunity to master several Indian languages and learn about the customs of various religions. The credit for this goes to the innumerable postings which always used to push me out of my comfort zone. I had learnt Gurkhali from the fearless Gurkhas and Punjabi from the lionhearted Sikhs.

I was once posted as the Deputy Commander who happens to be the ex-officio Officer Commanding Troops of the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry regiment in that brigade headquarters.

In the blink of an eye, I had learnt the "Salah procedure" of Islamic prayer and would join the Muslim soldiers in offering prayers.

After about a few months, my Commander finally approved my annual leave. On the last PT parade before leave, my Subedar Major, a Muslim, and I were jogging on an offbeat track when my eyes fell on a dilapidated temple. "If someone constructed it, he should have ensured its maintenance," I told him.

The next day, my family and I departed for the much-deserved break. After about a month, on the very first day back in office, I found a neatly handwritten invitation from the Subedar Major for some inauguration. I

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advised him that this privilege was the prerogative of the Commander and not the Deputy. "This has to be inaugurated by you only," he said. "At least tell me what I have to inaugurate," I asked him inquisitively. "I will tell you on the ground during PT parade tomorrow," he replied.

I had a restless night wondering about the surprise in store for me. The next morning, he took me on a jog on the same route where I had spotted the derelict temple. On reaching there, I was speechless. The crumbling structure had been given a complete makeover. The cracks in the walls and the damaged roof had been repaired. The walls, ceiling and the dome had been given a fresh coat of paint.

I deeply appreciated his warm gesture and the Herculean effort. In the same breath, I ordered him to convert the temple into a *Sarv Dharamsthal* by placing the Guru Granth Sahib, the Bible, and the Koran inside. When I visited the same brigade last month, it satisfied me no end when I witnessed troops from all religions offering prayers in the building. Whenever I read these days about mandir-masjid conflict straining our secular fabric, I am reminded about my Subedar Major who proved himself to be a pluralist in the real sense of the term.

A teacher by the name of Gandhiji

He shared many traits with the Mahatma, honest, courageous and persistent

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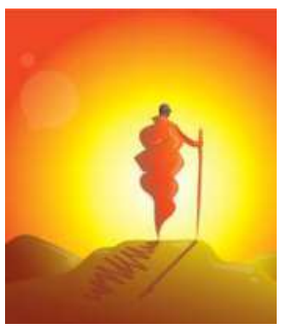
Despite many detractors, then and now, Mahatma Gandhi's life was an exemplar. His autobiography, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, is full of incidents and episodes which have lessons for all of us. I had no occasion to come face-to-face with Mahatma Gandhi. Unlike my elder brother, I didn't even get an opportunity to be seated on his lap.

During my high school days, there was a teacher who was popularly known as "Gandhiji". My father came to know about his skills and popularity as a teacher. He wanted me to be in his class. However the problem was that I was in the arts stream, whereas Gandhiji taught science. In those days, children were required to choose their stream from the high school itself.



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When they returned to school after the summer break following the final examination of the eighth standard, they were required to gather in the assembly hall. The headmaster used to ask the students to stand in one of the three spaces in the hall, earmarked for science, commerce and arts streams, respectively. As per my father's directions, I went and joined the group on the dais meant for the arts students. So I could not be in Gandhiji's class. My father somehow convinced the principal and got me enrolled in the class taught by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji was a teacher of mathematics and English, an unusual combination, for the high school. With a flowing black-and-white beard, which he stroked from time to time, he looked more a saint than a teacher. His teaching methods were unusual. Although he was a very nice and caring person, when it came to teaching, he was a hard task master. In addition to a large bouquet of homework, he used to take surprise tests off and on and was full of praise for those students who did well and at the same time named and shamed those who did not.

If a student had not done his work he did not ask them to extend their palm and cane them as he could have in those days, but he used to slap his own face hard a few times.

Perhaps my teacher was called Gandhiji because he had many of the traits of Mahatma Gandhi. He was honest, courageous and persistent. He stood up for what he believed in. He was non-violent in the sense that he did not punish the students but rather himself because he thought that the students' failings were due to some shortcomings in his own conduct.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

India is a country where stray dogs have activists to protect them but nobody raises a voices for indigenous communities. ('It's not as simple as ABC'; Jan.19) , Both people and animals must be protected.
Sinan T.K.

Sterilisation of dogs is an arduous exercise. Corruption by officials involved in this task is particularly distressing. The government should eradicate stray dog menance in a more scientific manner so that people can walk on the streets without fear.
Sravana Ramachandran

The Animal Welfare Board of India should simplify the licensing of animal welfare NGOs, besides scrutinising usage of funds and treatment of animals. Effective collaboration from the public, animal activists and the Government is the need of the hour.
Monita Sutherson

No mincing words

The manner in which seasoned diplomat-turned-politician Mani Shankar Aiyar has been carrying on his duties to his party and society despite the so called 'losses' he mentions in his memoir proves that he remains an optimist, nay, an incurable optimist. ('Mani talks'; Jan. 19) I would like to encourage him with the immortal lines of Shelley: Mani, 'if winter comes, can spring be far behind?'
Fiona Waltair

Stories in bronze

Dimpy Menon's bronze sculptures symbolise human beings' eternal desire to tell stories. ('My encounter with the dream whisperers'; Jan. 19) She skilfully uses bronze as a canvas to showcase the variegated nature of human emotions and their universality.
Anusha Pillay

Work-life balance

Work is meant to make both ends meet. ('Work on Sundays'; Jan. 19) We also need relaxation and recreation, hence a weekly off on Sundays is a must. The bliss we get thus is the wage thereof.
Sanath Kumar T.S.

Staring at the computer, instead of your spouse, for over 90 hours a week is stressful, to say the least. Already many employees are overworked and suffer from mental health issues. An outing with family or friends on the weekends is a much-needed destressing exercise.
N.R. Ramachandran

Queer art

Photographer Sunil Gupta's journey towards bringing gay imagery to museums and galleries is remarkable. ('Behind Sunil Gupta's queer lens'; Jan. 19) His efforts have captured the attention of people the world over, and bridged the gap between gay art and mainstream discourse.
Misbah

Keep up the good work

Kudos to the writer for throwing light on the recent developments in Goa. ('Butter chicken in Goa; Jan. 5') It is shocking that land acts were amended to disturb the natural beauty of the state. Urgent steps must be taken by the Goan community to save their homeland from changes that impact the cultural and socio-economic identity of the place.
Bhupendra Kumar

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

A minefield
Technological advances and information overload have made it easier for misunderstandings to arise
Janani Krishnakumar

Everyday happiness
With retirement, the 'now' belongs to you
H. Kalpana Rao

Maps we navigate
They kindle a spirit of curiosity, beckoning us to explore uncharted territories and conquer new frontiers
J. Clement Selvaraj

Learn to unlearn
What really stops us from doing it is a fear of failure
Viji Narayan

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With a programme spotlighting critical voices from the region, gamified discussions, and over 20 films, Architecture & Design Film Festival's Mumbai debut was engaging and educational

ARCHITECTURE'S BIG SCREEN MOMENT

Alisha Lad

At the debut Architecture & Design Film Festival (ADFF) in Mumbai – brought to India from across the Atlantic by STIR, a media house and curatorial agency, earlier this month – one question took over all the rest: how has this not been done before? In a country where industry-led trade shows and design fairs are a dime-a-dozen, silo-ing a profession that impacts us all, this was a breath of fresh air.

The city's iconic National Centre for the Performing Arts played host to this South Asian premiere, where these interconnected worlds collided and cross-pollinated using a medium we can all relate to: cinema. "Both cinema and architecture influence and get influenced by the cultural commentary of a country. And, they influence each other too," says Amit Gupta, founder and editor-in-chief at STIR. The medium is crucial in breaking the exclusivity of design circles, and inviting all creatives to participate in understanding the impact of design and architecture.

Vast themes were traversed: riveting dramas such as *E.1027*, a tale of obsession, love and loss through a home built by Irish architect Eileen Grey in France's Cote d'Azur, which later captured the attention of celebrated architect Le Corbusier, the mastermind behind Chandigarh; documentaries such as *Soviet Bus Stops*, which traces buildings created as small acts of poetry in a totalitarian regime; and biographies such as the Oscar-nominated *My Architect*, a heartfelt portrait of renowned American architect Louis Kahn's past, painted by his son who barely knew him.

Over three days, 20+ international films, a multi-faceted public programme, and a comprehensive lineup of talks brought a new flavour to this New York-origin festival's remarkable 16 years (and counting) run. Its goal? To create an educational yet entertaining annual environment where fundamentally human stories narrated through film spark discussions about design in South Asia. As New York-based architect Suchi Reddy explains, "Architecture is not just an echo chamber for the cognisant, it has a value for society. ADFF bridges this gap with a much-needed venue for meaningful discourse."

Sparking conversations (Clockwise from above) *Chromacosm*; posters of a few films screened at ADFF; *The Architect Has Left The Building*, one of two special projects at the event; and an installation at 'Frames of Reference'. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Breaking silos

Conversations to bring ADFF to India began two years ago and, ever since, its curation was guided by a deeper enquiry: how does one truly bring it home? To give contextual depth, relevant films from previous editions were fished out and aired again alongside new entries rooted in the region's history – such as a biography on Sri Lanka's Geoffrey Bawa and his works of tropical modernism, and *Lovely Villa*, which walks viewers through the iconic LIC Colony by Indian architect and urban planner Charles Correa in Borivali, underlining the relationship between architecture, family, memories and everyday life.

Sustainability emerged as a perennial theme through *Biocentrics*, a dive into nature as a source of design inspiration and *Fashion Reimagined*, where a young designer's new collection of field-to-finished garments catalyses personal change and a societal revolution.

Kyle Bergman, director and founder of ADFF (who worked on the festival lineup in the company of Martino Stierli, New York City's Museum of Modern Art's Philip Johnson chief curator of architecture and design) says, "We have a broad view of 'design' – it encompasses everything, especially beyond the tangible. While schools tend to silo disciplines, once you get out, design is for everyone."

This was clear through the comprehensive public programme, put together for the first time in the history of ADFF, titled '-log(ue)': an inventive twist to the suffix -logue/-log and its Hindi homonym 'लोग' which stands for people. Disciplinary jargon was eschewed, as were the run-of-the-mill panel discussions. Instead, the audience – a refreshing outpouring of creative professionals limited not only to architects, but design lovers, film enthusiasts and connoisseurs of culture – huddled together in the central Pavilion Park to discuss fresh ideas. For instance, with a card game called *Aamchi Mumbai*, the audience discussed ways in which design could improve the city, gamifying the idea of being an active, involved citizen.

'Multiple ways of seeing'

Also at Pavilion Park, the 'Frames of Reference' installations offered a glimpse into the creative processes of 10 globally renowned Indian architects, from Mumbai's SHROFFLEóN to Tania and Sandeep Khosla of TSK Design in Bengaluru. One of them was *Chromacosm*, by Reddy in collaboration with Asian Paints, where more than 2,000 colours came together to fade to black, mimicking pixelation on screen as a 3D experience you could walk through. As festival curator Samta Nadeem puts it, "When we talk about building our world/future, it has to be inclusive, but most importantly, it has to be plural, allowing for multiple ways of seeing."

The oft-used ADFF tagline 'Design Directs Everything', as Bergman shares, has become increasingly relevant today. Visual media, voraciously consumed through streaming and social media platforms, has inarguably become the most impactful way to reach, move and affect audiences. And in an uncertain world – where increasingly, AI-generated content is consumed – every creator across the world needs to meet to expand the narrative of what it means to create and design. The things we create impact and shape our reality.

An architect-turned-journalist, the writer hopes her passion for storytelling drives an incisive cultural commentary.

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

A LITTLE LIFE

Phuphee serves some lemonade

And teaches a lesson on erasure by holding back the lemons

One balmy July afternoon, a few weeks before I got married, two families from the village arrived at Phuphee's house. We were sitting on the verandah, tumbling in and out of a light sleep after a heavy lunch of *riste te paalak* (meatballs with spinach) when we saw them walking towards us. The families were in laws.

'*Aaaze paizihaa aesyii zamdoad batte khyoan* [we should have had yoghurt and rice for lunch today],' Phuphee whispered, as both clans got closer to us. The boy's father was striding in front. He greeted Phuphee and launched into a barrage of accusations about how modernisation had reached the heart of the village and sown its devilish seeds in every home. Phuphee raised her hand and he was forced to stop mid-sentence. She pointed to the young woman in the group, and asked her to come forward and tell her what the matter was.

'His family consulted a *peer* [spiritual doctor] and he told them that my name is cursed. It will bring them misfortune unless it is changed,' she blurted out.

'Is this correct?' Phuphee asked

'Yes, we have consulted the great Shah *saab*, and he has told us her name must be changed,' replied the boy's father.

Phuphee asked the boy what he thought about this, and he mumbled something that no one present understood.

'I like my name and I don't want to change it,' the young woman added.

'*Amyis chu jinn tchaamut, natte koas koor kaeryi ithpaith kath* [she has been possessed by a *jinn*, otherwise which girl would talk like this],' the boy's father said.

Phuphee sat there looking at the girl intently. She called for the helper from the kitchen and whispered instructions in her ear.

A little while later, Phuphee offered everyone sliced apples from her orchard sprinkled with black salt, and a lavender lemonade. The apples tasted fresh and juicy, but as soon as everyone had a sip, their faces fell. There was no sugar in it. In fact, there was no lemon either. It was just water with some lavender in it, which on its own had a bitter tinge to it. The boy's father said that maybe the helper had forgotten to add the ingredients.

Phuphee replied that the lemonade had been made to her strict instructions.

The boy's father said he didn't think it was lemonade. The helper had made a mistake.

Phuphee replied, 'It is lemonade, I assure you.'

He was getting a little agitated.

'I don't think this is lemonade. It is water sprinkled with lavender, dear sister.'

'Does it matter what it is called?' asked Phuphee, glaring at him.

When everyone had finished their drink, she told them she would consult the spirits and that they should come back the next day, preferably in smaller numbers.

Phuphee knew that the reason they wanted to change the young woman's name was because she had failed to conceive after two years of marriage. And the blame had been placed squarely at her feet.

The next day the boy and the girl arrived, with only their immediate families in tow.

'There is something that can be done that will 'uncurse' both of them,' Phuphee informed the father.

'Anything you say, sister,' he replied.

'They will both have to change their names,' she said.

The boy's father looked astounded. 'That is the most absurd thing I have every heard. Whoever heard of a man having to change his name,' he sputtered.

'*Jinn chene raai karaan zanaan mohnivis manz, su che insaan sinz kaem* [*jinns* are not biased, they don't possess people on the basis of gender; that's the job of humans],' Phuphee replied calmly.

Everyone was silent. Phuphee wrote down two names on two pieces of paper and handed it to the boy and girl. 'From today, these are your names,' she said. 'Remember them well.'

The families got up and left, disorientated by what had just taken place.

I asked Phuphee later why she hadn't stood up for the girl. Why hadn't she tried to explain to the boy's side how ludicrous their ideas were? And what exactly had been the point of changing both their names? I was seething with anger.

Phuphee sat there silently smoking her two cigarettes. When she had stubbed them out in a glass of lavender water that wasn't lemonade, she said, 'You cannot change the world by simply asking it to meet you where you think it should be. No, *myoan gaash* [the light of my eyes], you have to meet the world where it is, and from there drag it, kicking and screaming if need be, to where it ought to be. This situation is not new. Society in general and men in particular seem to believe that women are erasable. As for changing both their names, it was simply an attempt at levelling the field. Who knows, the boy might understand a little about what it feels like to be erased and renamed and repackaged according to the will of another person.'

I was too angry and overwhelmed to really understand what she was saying. But a few weeks later when I got married, I started grasping the reality of what she had meant by erasure.

The attempts are stealthily carried out, a bit like drops of rain falling constantly and continuously in one place, gradually changing the geography of the object so that it no longer resembles what it started out as.

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