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LITERARY REVIEW

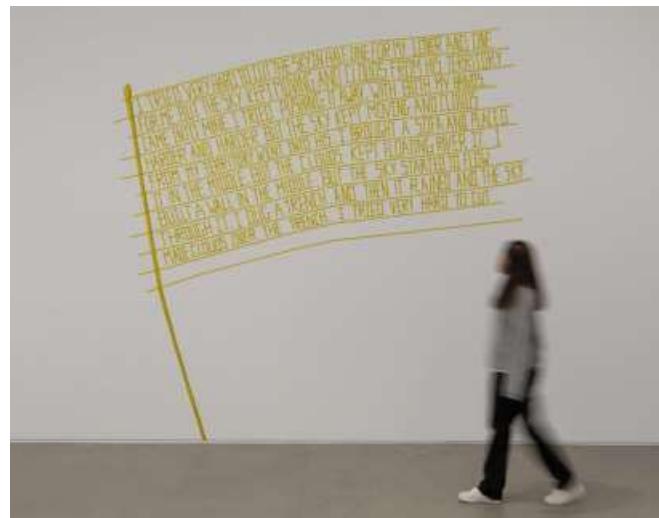
Top books of 2025 and celebrity recommendations

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(Clockwise from right)
Artworks by Shilpa
Gupta; Arpita Singh;
Doshi Retreat in Weil
Am Rhein, Germany;
and an installation at
the ongoing
Kochi-Muziris Biennale.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT,
THULASI KAKKAT)



SANJIV KUMAR

Educator and founder of Arthshila

Sanjiv Kumar founded Arthshila, an immersive platform for the arts. In a short span of time, it has grown into a network of six remarkable cultural spaces – in Ahmedabad, Santiniketan, Patna, Kochi, New Delhi, and Goa – most of them located in tier-2 towns and smaller cities. This year marked an important phase of growth, with the opening of new spaces in Goa and Kochi. The latter has already emerged as a key venue for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. What sets Kumar apart is not just his support, but his genuine curiosity and hunger to learn – he is deeply involved in his initiatives at every level, engaging with artists, institutions, and ideas with rare sincerity. Beyond Arthshila, his initiatives reflect a long-term, values-driven vision: Parivartan in Bihar, which he is nurturing into a cultural hub in his home village, and Takshila Publishing, dedicated to regional-language children's books.

Varun Gupta, co-founder and director, Chennai Photo Biennale



ART AND DESIGN

THEY SET THE TONE

Who are the influential figures who dominated art world conversations in India in 2025? We ask leading experts in the industry to weigh in

Gayatri Rangachari Shah

It has been a good year for India's art and design market. Bookended by the India Art Fair and the ongoing Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the big exhibitions and fairs of 2025 offered significant visibility for artists – from Art Mumbai's successful third outing to Serendipity Art Festival's 10th anniversary special edition.

Auction houses, too, enjoyed a landmark year. Saffronart, marking its 25th anniversary, sold a Tyeb Mehta painting, titled *Trussed Bull*, for over \$7 million at its commemorative sale, while Pundoles, Christie's, Sotheby's, and Astaguru also reported stellar results.

While the art market, valued at \$330 million, is still tiny compared to those in the West and China, the recent reduction of GST on artworks from 12% to 5% will stimulate the sector. The interior design market, currently valued at \$30.2 billion, is expected to hit \$81.2 billion by 2030. Both these sectors have been driven by rising auction turnovers, a more confident gallery ecosystem, the increasing visibility of fairs and biennales, and booming real estate. More importantly, the sector sustains a wide network of artists, designers, craftspeople and cultural workers, reflecting India's soft power.

We ask a group of cultural arbiters to identify the individuals who, in their view, shaped India's art and design

landscape in 2025 – those whose work prompted pause, reflection and, at times, applause. While some are familiar figures, such as Kiran Nadar, whose outsized impact on Indian art is undeniable, others are less widely known, yet no less meaningful in their contribution to culture.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.



KIRAN NADAR

Art patron whose KNMA collection numbers over 15,000

Kiran Nadar is one of India's foremost art patrons and philanthropists. I admire all that she does to make Indian art consistently accessible to a wide audience. This year, we were able to see an incredible Tyeb Mehta show at Art Mumbai [*Bearing Weight (with the lightness of being)*] featuring iconic works such as *Falling Figures* and *Trussed Bull*, thanks to her support. She was awarded the 2025 Asia Game Changer Award by the Asia Society for her unwavering commitment to champion Indian art on a global stage. I applaud her vision to build a world class institution for modern and contemporary Indian art for future generations [the upcoming museum in New Delhi is set to be one of India's largest art and cultural spaces].

Vikram Goyal, founder, Vikram Goyal Studio



MENEESHA KELLY

Curator who draws emerging voices into conversations

Karishma Swali, managing director and creative director, Chanakya International

PAVITRA RAJARAM

Creative director of Nilaya Anthology

Earlier this year, Pavitra Rajaram brought a new, and international, experience to art and design retail in India with Nilaya Anthology. The 100,000 sq.ft. space in Mumbai now features over 150 makers from the country and around the world. Rajaram, who is often at her 115-year-old restored bungalow in Coonoor when not in Mumbai, has another place of escape in the Maximum City's hustle and bustle – the 147-year-old neoclassical building in Fort, where the Sarmaya Arts Foundation is housed. A passion project of hers and her husband Paul Abraham's, the 'museum without boundaries' is a repository of art, artefacts, and living traditions from across the subcontinent. Nilaya and Saramaya jointly put the spotlight on Rajaram's creativity this year.

Sharan Apparao, founder, Apparao Galleries



NIKHIL CHOPRA

Artist, and the curator behind a stronger KMB 2025

First up is Kiran Nadar, for the multiple events she spearheaded this year, including the M.F. Husain show in Doha. Then, there's Nikhil Chopra. As curator of the sixth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, he has envisioned the 110-day event as a long durational performance piece, and brought it back stronger [especially after last edition's hiccups]. Through collaborations with artists from India and around the world, he will continue his interrogation of identity, colonial and local, public and private.

Dinesh Vazirani, co-founder, Saffronart & Art Mumbai



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Favourite read this year

From bestsellers on flights to revisiting classics, here are the titles these newsmakers spent time on in 2025



I spent a lot of time this year waiting in airports, taking long flights and living many days in hotel rooms. The upside of some of this tedium was being able to read more books than I usually do. The most memorable for me were *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* by Madeleine Thien, a novel of exquisite language and music about the cultural revolution in China, and *Jazz, Perfume & the Incident* by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, translated by Gregory Harris, about the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in East Timor. It blurs fiction, reportage and the surreal, and is a great study in how to write about political truths in times of state-sponsored surveillance and censorship.

Deepa Bhasthi
International Booker-winning translator
[As told to Preeti Zachariah]



The Indian Caliphate by Imran Mullah was my favourite book this year. It tells the astonishing story of the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate and the Caliph's attempts to resurrect it in the Deccan, with the help of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The tomb of the last Ottoman Caliph was remarkably built on a hill overlooking the Ellora Caves, although thanks to World War II, the Caliph was never actually buried there. A *Man For All Seasons: The Life of K.M. Panikkar* by Narayani Basu was another of my favourite reads, telling the story of the diplomat who shaped post-colonial India. I had read so much about him in my research for my book *Shattered Lands*, yet Basu's account transformed my understanding of him.

Sam Dalrymple, Historian and author
[As told to P.Z.]



As a hepatologist shepherding families through the devastation of liver failure, *Mortality* by Christopher Hitchens was my best read of 2025. It validated that in caring for the critically ill, clear-eyed humanism outweighs rituals or prayers. His unsentimental courage reflected on my practice, that honouring a patient's fading dignity and offering rational, honest compassion to the living is the ultimate form of medical care.

Cyriac Abby Philips
Hepatologist and clinical-scientist
[As told to Zubeda Hamid]

One of the most intriguing books I read this year was *Inheritors of the Earth* by Chris D. Thomas. He writes about how nature is thriving in an age of extinction. Citing data from across continents, he argues that while we are definitely losing species at an alarming rate, nature is adapting and evolving to the changes humans are wreaking on the planet. He takes a very long-term view and boldly states that we humans "have set in train processes that will increase rather than decrease the long-term diversity of the earth". At a time when there is so much doom and gloom about biodiversity loss, this book is impossibly hopeful and intellectually challenging. Worth reading and arguing over.

Rohini Nilekani, Philanthropist and founder of Arghyam Foundation [As told to P.Z.]



John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* transports you to 1960s New Orleans, capturing colourfully the peculiarities and dialects of the vibrant, diverse characters. The book is hilarious. Our lead character, Ignatius J. Reilly, is a misanthropic, lazy, self-aggrandising narcissist who lives with his sweet, potentially alcoholic, mother. It had me chuckling to myself through its entirety.

Jim Sarbh, International Emmy-nominated actor and indie producer
[As told to Tanushree Ghosh]

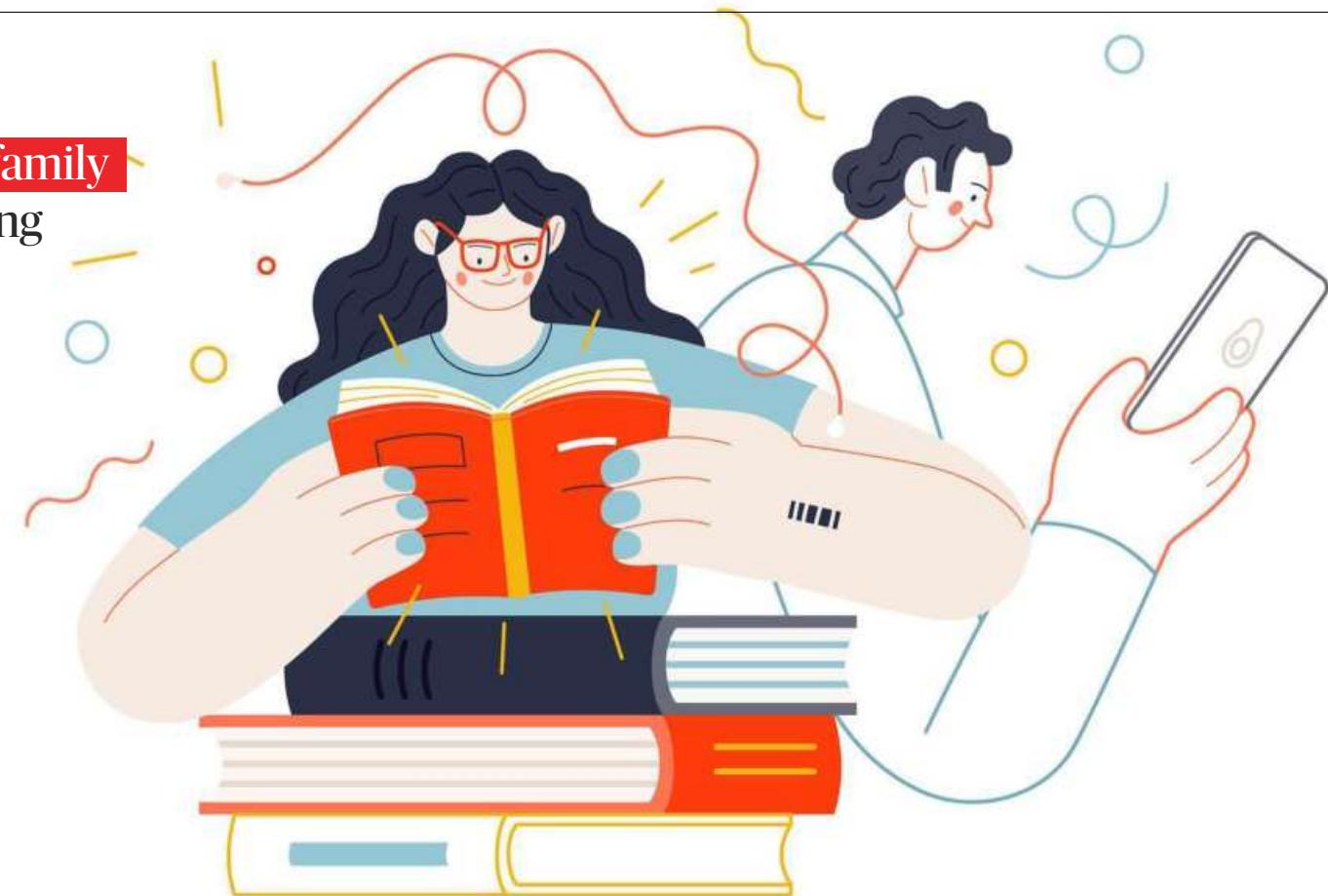


My absolute favourite this year is Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. There is so much beauty in this book. I know it's meant for a global audience but because you're Indian, when you read the book, you get so much more of the context and nuance. Each character has that kernel of truth which is necessary to make them come alive.

Twinkle Khanna, author and talk show host
[As told to Shrayana Bhattacharya]

From short stories to a family saga spanning continents

BEST FICTION



Sanjay Sipahimalani

When it comes to 'books of the year' lists, every selection is subjective and the literary landscape is too expansive to be neatly packaged. What follows, then, are 10 works of fiction from 2025 that left a lasting impression. A handful of starting points, in no particular order.

The World With its Mouth Open

by Zahid Rafiq

A collection of short stories set in Srinagar that offers glimpses into the everyday lives of people, from reporters to shopkeepers, shaped by trauma and uneasy memories. The pages are suffused with the ghosts of loss and longing, and the ominous presence of state violence is always around the corner. The open-ended narratives bear the weight of a past that refuses to stay buried, at a time when the "world with its mouth open" is waiting to swallow the fragile.

Great Eastern Hotel

by Ruchir Joshi

A capacious saga of 1940s Calcutta and its environs, in which a storied hotel becomes a metaphor for a city at a moment of historical change. With a cast of revolutionaries, artists, pickpockets, colonial officials and wanderers across social classes, the novel traces love and ambition against the backdrop of World War II, indicators of famine, and the nation's struggle for independence. The prose is riotously

playful, capturing the quirks and ambitions of the city and its inhabitants.

Venetian Vespers

by John Banville

A gripping *fin de siècle* thriller in which an English writer and his American heiress bride arrive in a murky Venice for a belated honeymoon, only to be pulled into a Gothic mix of deceit and disappearance. Banville's prose is typically atmospheric, surveying the decaying grandeur of Venice and conveying a sense of dread as reality blurs into menace.

The Artist

by Lucy Steeds

Set in sun-drenched Provence in the 1920s, when a British journalist arrives at a painter's remote farmhouse to discover a claustrophobic world of light and shadows. As summer deepens, the journalist is drawn further into the painter's spell and under the gaze of his silent, mysterious niece. The plot slowly uncovers secrets and lies, exploring the nature of power and what it takes for creative urges to survive. It's a Provencal painting in words that asks: who gets to be seen as an artist, and at what cost?

Railsong

by Rahul Bhattacharya

A character-driven chronicle of one woman's passage from a railway-colony childhood to a hard-won adulthood. She journeys on the tracks of caste, class, and

gender, against an India marked by famine, strikes, repression, communalism, and supposed economic uplift. In this way, her life reflects the changing face of the nation.

Bhattacharya's prose is both lyrical and grounded, intimate and expansive. A novel of displacement, change and forging an identity amidst the clang of locomotives and the promise and peril of progress.

Fundamentally

by Nussabah Younis

A novel about IS (Islamic State) brides that dares to be funny. It follows the travails of a London-based academic who journeys to Iraq to find herself in a world of confusing refugee camps and misplaced humanitarian zeal. The first-person voice is sharp and sly, skewering international aid and the earnestness of good intentions. It shines a light on NGO-friendly liberal pieties and moral certainties while revealing, beneath the satire, a universal need to belong.

The Eleventh Hour

by Salman Rushdie

A collection of five stories that move between India, England and the United States, circling issues of mortality, memory and the legacies we shape or inherit. Some lean towards the elegiac and the quiet reckonings of late life. Others reprise the modes familiar from *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.

Throughout, there is the presence of Rushdie's trademark wit. It's a meditation

on endings: of lives, of relationships, of stories, and even of language itself.

The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny

by Kiran Desai

A sprawling, emotionally rich saga that combines the immigrant experience, love, trauma, and even a supernatural thread into a single ambitious narrative. It follows an Indian student in Vermont and a young journalist in New York as they struggle with alienation and the pressures of identity in a foreign land. It contains a lot more than that, though, unfolding across continents, generations, and the lives of several characters as it captures the disquiet of displacement and the weight of family histories.

On the Calculation of Volume III

by Solvej Balle, trs Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell

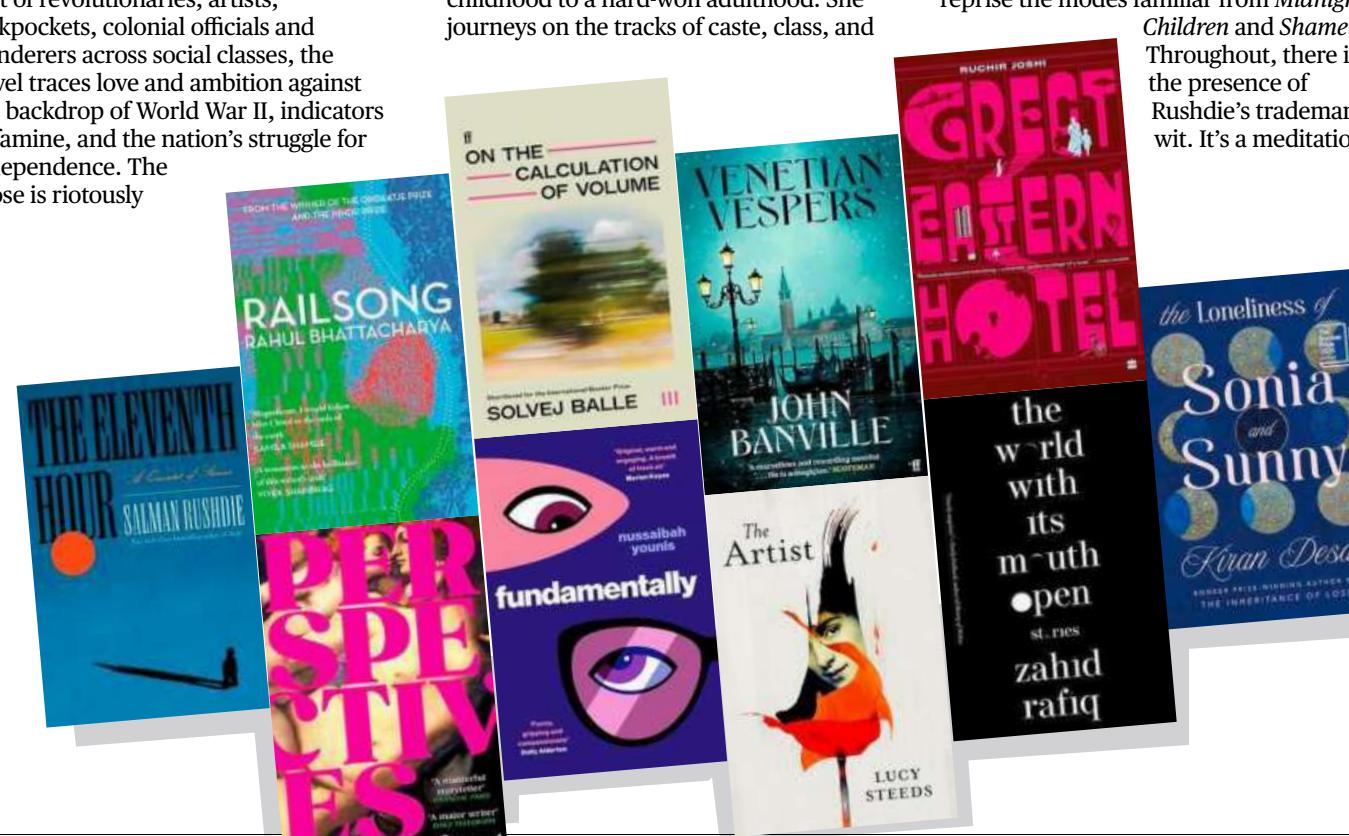
The first part of this Danish time-freezing fable appeared in English in 2024; the second and third followed this year, with four more still to come. The premise is familiar: a woman finds herself living the same day over and over again. The implications, however, are anything but typical. Balle approaches this notion of eternal recurrence by probing questions of identity, relationships, and responsibility. By examining what it means to live when time no longer moves forward, she touches upon subjective experience versus the external world, human agency versus collective responsibility, and isolation versus intimacy. In short, this is no mere rehash of *Groundhog Day* or *Russian Doll*.

Perspective(s)

by Laurent Binet, trs Sam Taylor

Binet's novel, translated from the French, begins in 1557 Florence when painter Jacopo da Pontormo is discovered dead in a church, stabbed through the heart, as he is finishing a set of frescoes. What follows is a murder mystery narrated through letters exchanged by real and fictional characters including Michelangelo, Cellini, and artist-historian Giorgio Vasari, who manages to sort through the chaff and piece together the truth. Ingenious, witty, and very readable, the novel weaves crime, art, and palace intrigue to show how different perspectives shape both painting and politics.

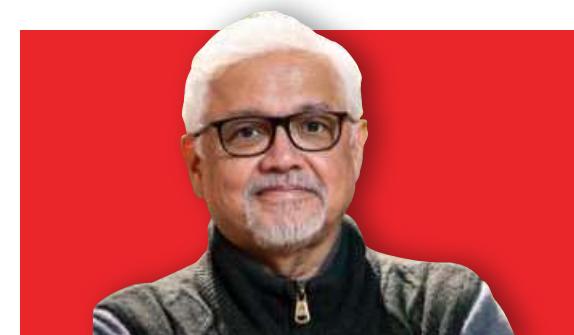
The writer is based in Mumbai.



The most hauntingly beautiful book I have recently read is Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. It is a biography of her relationship with her mother which, in the manner that it is written, breaks with the romantic myths or condemnation that normally comes with depictions of motherhood. This book believes that motherhood (and daughterhood) is complex and that there is a need to understand it beyond the binaries of good and bad. Moreover, the world of the book is vibrant with a cast of colourful characters. *Mother Mary Comes to Me* stays with you long after you have read it.

Sharmila Tagore, National Film Award-winning actor
[As told to T.G.]





It's not easy to pick out just one book for the whole year, but if I had to do it, I would say it is *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. Set against the background of the opioid crisis in the United States, *Demon Copperhead* is a haunting, moving, and at times, heartbreak novel. But one of the great rewards of reading Kingsolver is that there is always a reassuring sense of being in the hands of a writer who is deeply kind — and so she is once again with her Demon.

Amitav Ghosh, *Jnanpith* award-winning author



I really enjoyed reading *The Day the Chariot Moved* by Subroto Bagchi. It's an inspiring book that describes the nature and complexities of transformational change, especially of government institutions. The style is simple, honest, full of humour and you immediately identify with the characters being described. Bagchi travels through rural and tribal Odisha looking for young boys and girls who, despite all odds, followed their passion and found careers their parents could not dream of. Most of all, it is an uplifting read that shows how political will and an empowered leader with the vision and right team can change the lives of ordinary Indians in unimaginable ways.

Soumya Swaminathan, Chairperson, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, and Former Chief Scientist, World Health Organization [As told to Zubeda Hamid]

BOOKS OF 2025

BEST NON-FICTION

From touching memoirs to devastating exposes, these titles reflect themes of loss, hope and societal challenges

Sudipta Datta

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The year ends with grim tidings that people aren't reading enough. As feverish studies are on to examine how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is impacting the world of books, writers are exploring ideas that resonate with these fraught times. In a year of war and unimaginable loss, here are the top 10 non-fiction books of 2025, some holding out hope against all odds:

Is a River Alive?

by Robert Macfarlane

Macfarlane imagines rivers not as resources, but as a living entity with rights. He studies three rivers – the Rio Los Cedros in an Ecuadorian cloud-forest, the “wounded creeks, lagoons and estuaries” of Adyar in Chennai, and the Mutehakau Shipi at Nitassinan, homeland of the Innu people, in Canada – and the threats they face. But though rivers “are easily wounded”, Macfarlane shows that if given a chance, they heal themselves with remarkable speed. “Hope is the thing with rivers,” he insists.

The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community

by Nirmala Lakshman

This is a deeply researched account of the Tamils and their history. The Tamils, writes Lakshman, are inheritors of a disaggregated culture and history, stemming from diverse historical

experiences of caste and community. “But they unite broadly in the emotional bandwidth of language and particular sentiments.” Calling it a “genre-bender”, *The Hindu* review said: “One of the finer sections in the book is devoted to exploring the concept of the *tinais*, the five distinct natural regions of ancient Tamilakam that, at once, determined idiosyncratic lifestyles while reflecting diverse cultural ecosystems. One way to read it is to see *tinais* as a framework for both separateness and interconnection, a running theme in *The Tamils*.“

Meet The Savarnas

by Ravikant Kisana

The author combines memoir, social observation, ethnographic insights and cultural exposition to hold a mirror to savarna supremacy. “Think of South Asia – India especially – as full of people sitting in a cramped and dirty basement... looking up at what is a glass ceiling for them but is, in fact, a floor above in which lives a very small group of people.” The group above are the savarnas, who “have access to all the switches in all the rooms of the house, including the basement. They switch on the lights and switch them off at will”.

One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This

by Omar El Akkad

The book follows a viral tweet put out by the Egypt-born, U.S.-based journalist in October 2023, days after the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel’s violent response against Palestinians in Gaza. “One

day, when it’s safe, when there’s no personal downside to calling a thing what it is, when it’s too late to hold anyone accountable, everyone will have always been against this,” he posted on social media. As an immigrant in the West, he was soon questioning everything, particularly why a vast majority of the Western world’s political power centres were enacting a “campaign of active genocide” against the Palestinian people. El Akkad’s non-fiction debut, which won the National Book Award this year, is a “break-up letter” to the West and its ideas of freedom and justice.

Mother Mary Comes to Me

by Arundhati Roy

Roy, who won the 1997 Booker Prize for her novel, *The God of Small Things*, wrote this memoir after she lost her mother, Mary Roy. She was 89, and had lived a life of tumult, building a school from scratch in Kerala’s Kottayam, fighting for women’s equal rights under Christian inheritance laws, and also being someone who could not be “put under neat divisions”. The author and her brother had to contend with their mother’s bouts of asthma and violent rage. Roy left home at 18, she writes, to continue loving her mother. In an interview, she says, “...if your own mother is the danger. Then you don’t trust anything.” Did she get some sort of closure in her complicated relationship with her mother? Yes and no – and that’s why the memoir.

Careless People

by Sarah Wynn-Williams

This is a devastating portrait of Meta (Facebook) and the reckless ways of its leadership, particularly Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg. A former Director of Global Public Policy at the company, Wynn-Williams’s account of Facebook’s role in global events, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, is chilling. As a review in *The Hindu* notes, her book is an essential starting point to understand the way social media platforms can shape not only individual lives but entire nations and global movements.

Dapaan: Tales from Kashmir's Conflict

by Ipsita Chakravarty

The author-journalist gathers stories from places in Kashmir, “walls, parks, marketplaces, news pages, web pages”, before they are erased. In a year when there were several books on Kashmir, including Mehak Jamal’s *Loyal Kashmir: Love and Longing in a Torn Land and City of Kashmir: Srinagar, A Popular History* by Sameer Hamdani, and after the government banned 25 books written on Kashmir, Chakravarty’s endeavour to keep alive stories of erasure is poignant and important. As Jamal says in her review: “In a land where official narratives try to overwrite lived truth, every retelling is an assertion of presence, of existing.”

Called by the Hills

by Anuradha Roy

The author brings alive the mountains, and the joys – and perils – of living in close proximity to the wild. The landscape is stunning, and Roy’s beautiful watercolours embellish the pages. It’s her first non-fiction book after five fiction titles. It draws from magazine articles, and jottings in diaries of her initial years in Ranikhet in the Uttarakhand mountains. In a conversation with *The Hindu*, Roy says she thinks of the book as a “travelogue by someone who stopped travelling, and stayed in the place she was writing about”.

Empire of AI

by Karen Hao

This book is a cautionary tale about one of Silicon Valley’s most spectacular success stories, the launch of ChatGPT in 2022. Hao had been investigating the world of AI for years and soon she turned to the startup OpenAI and Sam Altman, the man who “made it all happen” and routinely announced its slate of products. At forums, Altman harps on the “transformative and beneficial” aspects of the technology. In her author’s note, Hao writes that the book tells the inside story of OpenAI, “a profile of a scientific ambition turned into an aggressive, ideological money-fuelled quest;... a meditation on power.”

The Dark Secrets of Johnson & Johnson

by Gardiner Harris

Harris uncovers the dangerous practices across the company’s repertoire of drugs and products, from baby powder to metal-on-metal hip implants, all adversely impacting the health of users. Chillingly, the company continued to market them, fully cognisant of the harmful effects. In a conversation with *The Hindu*, Harris explains the modus operandi: “J&J, early on, would find out that its product was dangerous, would hide those dangers not only from the public, but from the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] and other regulatory agencies, knowing that it could result in a number of deaths.”



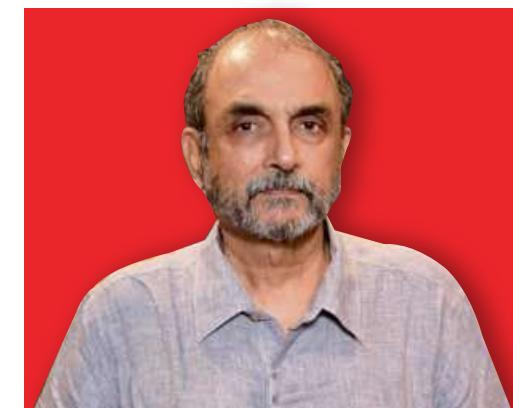
I do try to read and sometimes, unfortunately, time being scarce, one skims. But I would say that the ones that stand out certainly are two women writers: Arundhati Roy’s rather searing memoir (*Mother Mary Comes to Me*) and Kiran Desai’s novel, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. Then there is this rather startling book, *Operation Sindoor: The Untold Story of India’s Deep Strikes Inside Pakistan* by Lt. Gen. KJS Dhillon (Retd.). In the case of Roy, her writing is magical; she knows how to command the words and make them dance for her. With Desai, there is tremendous feeling, emotion and, I think, some serious levels of personal experience embedded in the story. And Gen. Dhillon, of course, it is his knowledge and his action, as well as his astonishing insights on something that has just happened.

Shashi Tharoor, Lok Sabha MP
[As told to Preeti Zachariah]



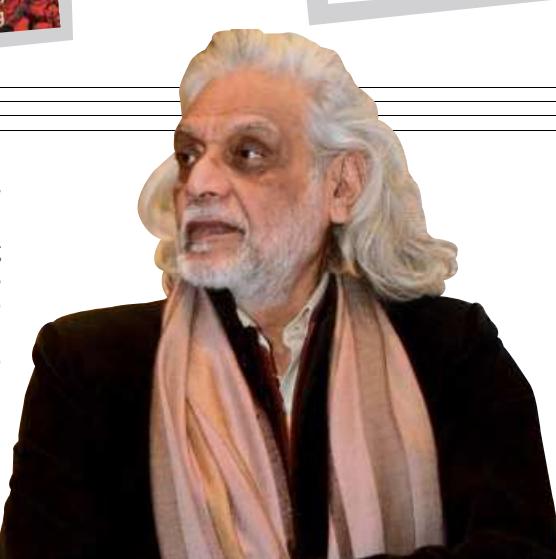
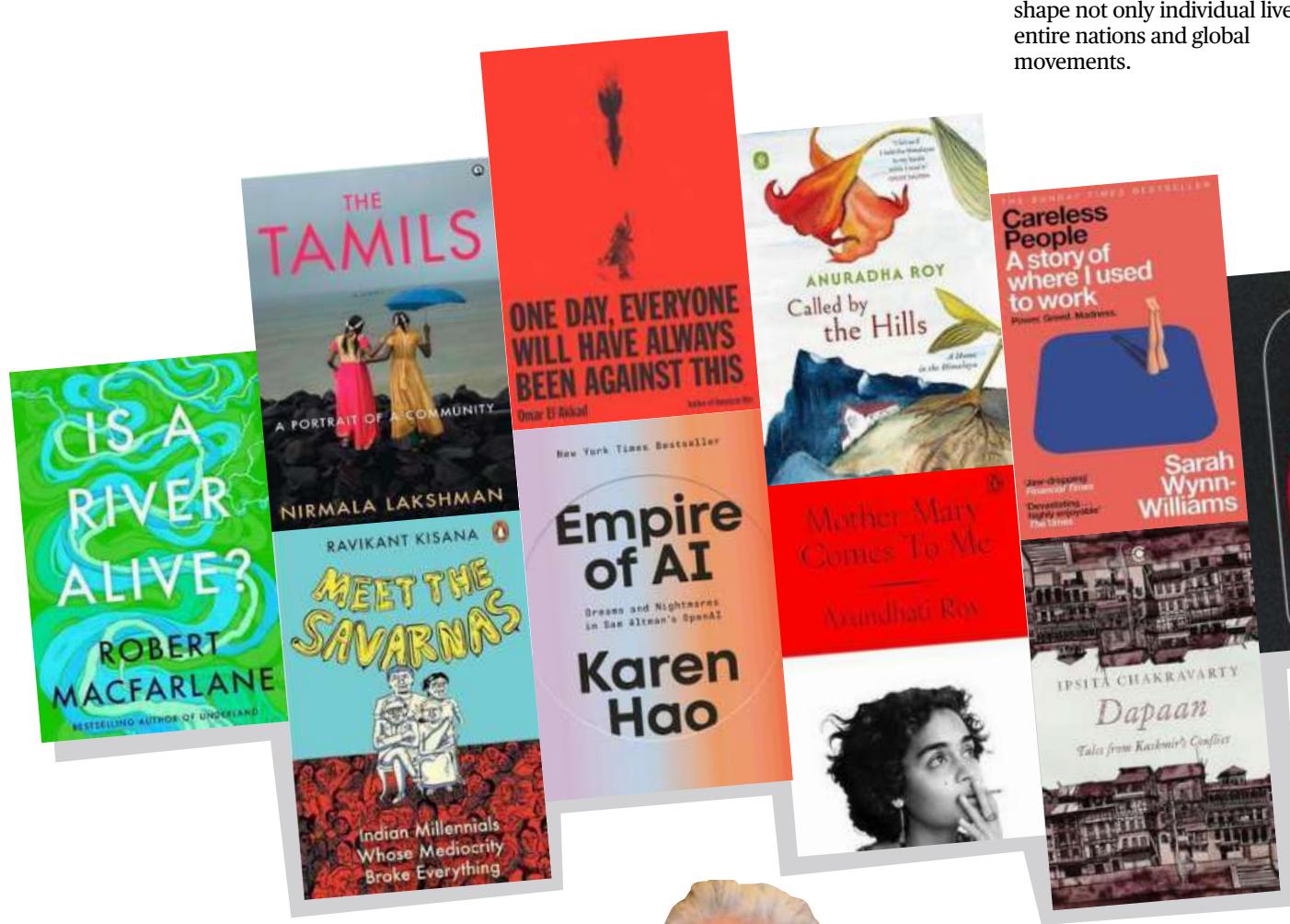
Zara Chowdhary’s *The Lucky Ones* is written as a memoir of Gujarat 2002, the writer’s own story of those days as a 16-year-old. As she stood at the balcony of her apartment in Ahmedabad, she saw smoke inching closer. Will the fire engulf them too? Reading it brought back many memories of my own childhood of witnessing the first televised riot of India; how I started feeling the weight of our identity. It was as if the entire world was looking at you, talking about you, obsessing about you, caricaturing you. But at the same time, if you were to be killed tomorrow, your personhood, you as an individual, will be forgotten. The book moved me to tears.

Umar Khalid, Activist
[As told to Tanushree Ghosh]



One of the nicest books I read this year was something that was published maybe a couple of years back. It failed to win the Booker Prize, but I think it truly deserved to, and that was Claire Keegan’s *Small Things Like These*. It’s a very, very slim book about the life of young women in Ireland and a certain tradition which has come under great criticism. But it reflects the fact that a really tiny novel, more of a novella actually, can be so extraordinarily moving and so extraordinarily powerful.

Mukund Padmanabhan,
Author and journalist



I have long wondered about the legacy a horse carries as it strides through history, claimed by many yet belonging only to its own rhythm. My canvases taught me this truth; each stance revealed a forgotten journey. Yashaswini Chandra’s *The Tale of the Horse* made that intuition real, showing how narrative can shift perception and give substance to imagination, anchoring fantasy in the deep soil of heritage.

Muzaffar Ali, Filmmaker and artist
[As told to T.G.]



I read a lot of non-fiction, but one that has stayed with me is Joya Chatterji’s *Bengal Divided*. The book carries a lot of truth about India, how India got independence and how history has been kept away from the readers. I’ve also been reading Humayun Ahmed, I resonate with his way of describing character, the place, himself and the situation around him and his characters. I surrender myself as a writer to him. I also often re-read Munshi Premchand, I like his style of writing. The society he saw when he was alive remains the same, it has not changed, in terms of casteism, religious dogmas and the woman’s place in it.

Anuparna Roy, Director, Songs of Forgotten Trees
[As told to T.G.]

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
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In a nippy November evening, the large murals and sculptures on the lit-up façade of Ellora Caves' eighth-century Kailasa temple, the world's largest human-made monolithic rock structure, come alive. Each mural narrates a story of ancient Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions. Much as Delhi-based Scottish author-historian William Dalrymple does on the stage, against that backdrop.

If he speaks of the era's history, sitarist Pandit Shubhendra Rao and his Dutch cellist-wife Saskia Rao-de Haas recreate the historical 1967 United Nations (UN) General Assembly concert of Pandit Ravi Shankar and Yehudi Menuhin. The 80th year of the UN was celebrated with a spectacle at the Ellora rock-cut caves, which along with Ajanta, were among the first Indian sites to get the UNESCO World Heritage status in 1983. AIKYAM 2025 witnessed performances by international artists from seven countries and brought together ambassadors and diplomats from over 36 countries.

When Delhi-based Australian researcher Dr. Scott Robert Hearnden arrived in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (formerly Aurangabad) for the curated heritage tour last month, the changes were visible.

At his five-star hotel, *solkadhi* (a digestive drink) welcomed him as he walked into a folk *laavni* dance performance. Awaiting him were a handcrafted metallic replica of the Ajanta dancing girl in Bidriwork, bright handwoven tablemats, and a



THE UN AT 80

ELLORA DESERVES BETTER

AIKYAM 2025 highlights the need to draw global tourists to India's UNESCO World Heritage Sites

Himroo silk-cotton shawl. "In the last 20 years that I've been coming to India, the experience has changed dramatically. There is an ability to have an immersive

experience here," says Dr. Hearnden. "But we still rely on our tour operators. Access to authentic experiences by ourselves is still a challenge. It will be helpful

to have more information out in the world."

Global Tourism rankings published by the World Economic Forum, in their biennial Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024, places India at the 39th rank. Tourism in India is no longer only about visiting historic sites but about bespoke experiences. AIKYAM 2025 curated by New Delhi non-profit Sopaan, founded by Siddhant Mohtaa and his former-diplomat mother Monica Mohtaa, is one such endeavour.

Heritage in neglect

The Ajanta Caves are a stunning example of rock-cut Buddhist cave monuments. While basalt cliff-cut Ellora Caves have massive Buddhist monasteries, Jain and Hindu temples. It represents a symbolic

Etched in stone The large murals and sculptures in the Kailasa temple at Ellora make it the world's largest human-made monolithic rock structure. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

religious and architectural co-existence.

Ellora is around 30 km and Ajanta 100 km from the nearest city, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar. However, unlike the Taj Mahal, they don't draw much international attention. This is primarily because of the lack of robust infrastructure, logistical challenges, hotels in the vicinity and washrooms on the unmotorable roads.

Dalrymple says, "This is one of the most historically significant sites in South Asia, not just in India." He adds how the region has an unbroken history of veneration for over 2,000 years, and quips that with better infrastructure and promotion/publicity, it has the potential to attract tourists from South Asia, West Asia, and other regions.

"The Ajanta Caves, carved from the 2nd century BCE, give an exclusive glimpse into Buddhist culture. And yet, we do not see the international Buddhist tourists come here," says Dr. Madhup Mohta, a former diplomat now associated with Sopaan.

Neither does it draw the Turks who are interested in the Ottoman Empire, as the last Ottoman emperor's empty tomb is situated there, says Dalrymple. "There are no boards, no signages, no paths to take you to some of the historic locations. Some of the sites are littered with waste," he states, adding that the entire region has just as much potential for

international tourism as Agra and Delhi.

'Cultural soft power'

Spanish Ambassador Juan Antonio March Pujol calls India a "cultural soft power". "What is 80 years of the UN, looking at the millennium of history behind us? For a culture like India, this is just a drop in the ocean of culture and beauty," he says.

Tim Curtis, director of UNESCO New Delhi Regional Office for South Asia states that the Heritage Site status is granted to cultural and natural sites of outstanding universal values. "These caves and temples are one of humanity's greatest engineering and architecture. They help define the global understanding of India's heritage. Ajanta represents the pinnacle of architecture. It went on to influence the Far East, as far as Java, in ancient Asia. Ellora has astonished us through the scientific knowledge and prowess in carving these cliffs. This remains unmatched in human history," he says.

These cave temples show what societies can achieve when they choose coexistence over exclusion, adds Curtis, that protecting world heritage is our collective responsibility.

According to a report by market research company TechNavio, the cultural tourism market size is forecast to increase by \$8.41 billion, between 2024 and 2029, positioning India as a leading destination. Can events like AIKYAM 2025 help?

Dr. Mohtaa says, "Our effort was to bring the place on the international tourism map." For starters, government focus on its upkeep will help market these sites better.

The writer was invited to AIKYAM 2025 by Sopaan.

GOREN BRIDGE

A kind deck Both vulnerable. South deals

Bob Jones

North's jump to four hearts denied anything useful - certainly no ace or king - so perhaps South should have passed right there. South bid on, however. He had a wonderful hand and he was hoping to catch enough in dummy to give him a reasonable play for 12 tricks.

South ruffed the opening spade lead with the 10 of hearts, saving his lower trumps as entries to dummy. He cashed the ace and

king of hearts, then led the eight of hearts to dummy's nine. A losing diamond finesse at this point would leave him needing East to have a doubleton king of clubs. He wouldn't have enough entries to dummy to take two club finesse. He judged that it was better to take the club finesse, so he tried a club to his queen. Had that lost to the king, he would still be able to ruff the fourth club in dummy, even if the clubs split 3-3, and take the diamond finesse. The club finesse won, however, and there was no reason to think that

NORTH

♠ Q 5
♥ 9 7 4 2
♦ J 10 9 5
♣ 7 5 3

WEST

♠ J 10 9 8 4 3
♥ 5
♦ Q 8 6 4
♣ 9 4

SOUTH

♠ Void
♥ A K Q 10 8 6
♦ A K 2
♣ A Q J 8

EAST

♠ A K 7 6 2
♥ J 3
♦ 7 3
♣ K 10 6 2

The bidding:

SOUTH 2♣
WEST Pass
NORTH 2♦
Pass

EAST Pass
Pass

Opening lead: Jack of ♠

West might have ducked with the king. South now simply played the ace, king, and another diamond. He ruffed the spade continuation high and led the six of hearts to dummy's seven. He discarded a club on the jack of diamonds and

repeated the club finesse for his contract.

This was a lovely line of play. It would have been an unkind deck of cards that would not have rewarded him with his slam bonus.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has December 28 ever given us?



Berty Ashley

1 On December 28, 1065, King Edward the Confessor oversaw the consecration of a grand new church, where he wished to be buried. When he died a week later, his successor was coronated there. Since then, 39 monarchs have been crowned there. It is the burial site of more than 3,000 prominent Britons. Which church is this?

2 On December 28, 1885, this political party was founded in the Bombay Presidency. Seventy-two delegates representing the different provinces of India came together to present nine resolutions to the British. Which party was this that Womesh Chunder Bonnerjee became the first president of on this date?

3 On this day in 1886, Josephine Cochrane was granted patent

#355139 for her invention. She was motivated by the number of fine China dishes the servants had broken. Her machine used water pressure for the job and eventually became a household appliance. What did she invent?

4 On December 28, 1895, 40 people were charged and entry fee, by the Lumière brothers, to watch 10 short films at the Grand Café in Boulevard des Capucines, Paris. Each film was 40-50 seconds

long, with scenes such as workers leaving the factory and a baby putting her hand in a goldfish bowl. In history, what was this the very first kind of?

5 On this day in 1895, physicist Wilhelm Röntgen published a paper detailing his discovery of a new type of radiation. This radiation, he realised, could pass through books and papers on his desk. Early texts referred to them as Chi-rays. By what name is his discovery known now?

6 Born on this date in 1922, Stanley Martin Lieber was an American publisher who grew up in New York, influenced by books such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. He started working at a magazine called *Timely Comics*, which eventually became *Marvel Comics*. Lieber was responsible for many multi-billion-dollar franchises. He is better known by what name now?

7 Born on December 28, 1932, Dhirajlal Hirachand _____ was the son of a village schoolteacher in Junagadh district, Gujarat. Wanting to start a textile business, he started 'Majin' to import polyester yarn to India. This soon became the Reliance Commercial Corporation in a tiny room with one telephone. How better do we know this person?

8 Born on December 28, 1937, businessman originally graduated with a degree in architecture. He started

his life in the family business on the shop floor of Tata Steel. Who was this visionary whose philanthropy and support of rural development is well documented?

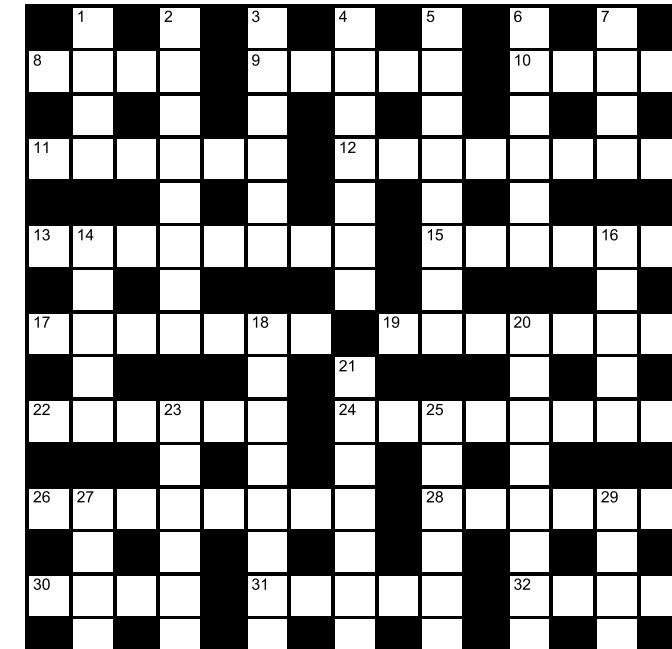
9 On December 28, 1968, this album went to #1 on the charts and stayed #1 for nine weeks. The album featured a plain white sleeve with no graphics or text, except the name of the band embossed. The cover was the direct opposite of the previous year's album cover, which was vividly coloured. Which band is his discovery known now?

10 On December 28, 2002, Reid Hoffman and two colleagues started this company in Mountain View, California. It was one of the first business-oriented social networks. Which platform is this that Indians are one of the biggest users of?

11 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

12 10 LinkedIn
8. Ratna Tare
7. Prabhakar Ambani
6. S. Balaji
5. X-Taxis
4. The first cinema, screening
3. Indian National Congress
2. Westerner Abby
1. Westerner Abby

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 36 (Set by Incognito)



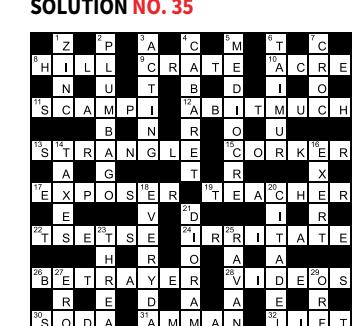
Across

- 8 Festive event in Nagaland (4)
- 9/10 Portable weapons? They are not really useful to T.rex (5,4)
- 11 Renews road surface and passes on (6)
- 12 Wildly ride into settlement and demolished (4,4)
- 13 Arranged parts with each groom (8)
- 15 Nurses accepting settler's disease (6)
- 17 Revealed ox speed was wrongly stated (7)
- 19 Alleged, "Medical is botched up" (7)
- 22 Go with Cortes on tour (6)
- 24 Start part of play that is about tax (8)
- 26 A piece of legislation about commencement of indigenous repair covers Royal Air Force planes (8)
- 28 Accident is initially highlighted in diagrammatic representation of a location (6)
- 30 Mark's comrades leaving demo running away (4)
- 31 Usage charges cover right to trouble (5)
- 32 Atop church at one time (4)

Down

- 1 Romantic outing in Nalgonda, Telangana (4)
- 2 Maiden leaves loveless Ramgoolam crazy when going round a Trump resort (3-1-4)
- 3 Fully consumes unusually small energy source under pressure, for starters (4,2)
- 4 Artillery unit's source of electricity (7)

SOLUTION NO. 35



Shelley Walia

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Following an odyssey of navigation and negotiation, we finally procured a place of repose, whereupon the initial fatigue gave way to an effervescent sense of exhilaration. As we immersed ourselves in the midst of Venice's art festival, the city's labyrinthine topography was transformed into a vibrant tableau of creative expression. It was then that Venice's ineffable charm asserted itself, its seductive power transcending the mundane.

The Adriatic shimmered in the distance, breathing salt and history, while La Parata, with its waterborne pageantry, offered the spectacle of a city that long ago decided to live both on land and sea. And as we stood on the Bridge of Sighs, its baroque archway, whisperings of prisoners gazing their last at the lagoon, recalled for me the Bridge of Sighs in Oxford, spanning the New College Lane. Two bridges, continents apart, yet bound together in my memory, one an emblem of scholarship, the other of longing and exile. To me, Venice is always both eternal and fleeting. Its stones speak of endurance, yet its waters remind us that all is flux.

Moreover, the city embodies the quintessence of literary nostalgia, a storied landscape haunted by the spectral presence of writers who have long since departed, yet remain indelibly etched in the city's collective memory. At Harry's Bar, a venerable institution that has borne witness to the city's most intimate moments, Ernest Hemingway once sat, sipping whiskey and pouring his fiery thoughts onto paper. His words, "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end," resonate deeply within the city's labyrinthine alleys, where the very fabric of existence seems to be woven from threads of experience and remembrance. In *Across the River and into the Trees*, Hemingway's lyrical meditation on love, mortality, and the human condition, Venice stands out as a city where "the light was as old as the city itself", a phrase that haunts me still, particularly as dusk descends over the lagoon, distilling the essence of the eternal and the ephemeral.

A smile comes on my face as I visualise Byron, restless as always, swimming across the Grand Canal that filled his verses with Venetian excess. "Oh Venice! Venice! when



Storied city: Venice's enduring enchantment may be attributed to its capacity to inspire subjective interpretation and personal narrative. GETTY IMAGES

Dancing with the shadows in Venice

The Italian city is eternal yet fleeting. Its stones speak of endurance and waters show flux

thy marble walls/ Are level with the waters, there shall be/ A cry of nations o'er thy sunken halls." And at the back of my mind, I see Thomas Mann relishing the city's languid beauty with its seeds of mortality so explicitly depicted in *Death in Venice*. It was Joseph Brodsky, who, in his *Watermark*, found in the city's winter fog the perfect metaphor for exile and remembrance.

And then there was that night, when Venice offered us its most unforgettable scene. Almost midnight, in Piazza San Marco, before the luminous façade of St. Mark's Basilica, the true gateway and beating heart of the city. The crowd had thinned, and the music that always seems to hang in the air had slowed to a softer rhythm. We began to dance, careless of the passing time. I had smuggled a bottle of champagne in my inner pocket. As the waltz of our steps echoed in the ancient stones, the cork suddenly shot out with a

sharp bang, startling pigeons into flight and sending a ripple of laughter through the square. For a moment, Venice itself seemed to join the revelry, its centuries of grandeur meeting our impromptu burst. That moment was ours, a flash of intimacy woven into the public theatre of Venice. The square had seen emperors, merchants, artists, and exiles; now it witnessed a pair of wanderers toasting midnight, their laughter mingling with the salt wind off the Adriatic.

Venice's enduring enchantment may be attributed to its capacity to inspire subjective interpretation and personal narrative, inviting each visitor to construct their own idiosyncratic Venice, woven from disparate threads of art, memory, and serendipity. For me, the city remains an evocative palimpsest, layered with the spectral presence of past experiences and connections that transcend geographical boundaries.

The cure for the future

Gene therapy now offers potential for treating many common conditions

Tiny Nair
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I was never neat, tidy, or a perfectionist in school; nor am I now. "You must have inherited it from your father," my mom used to comment while tidying up my room. I have heard my wife say the same to my son. It must be in the genes. The futility of altering genes is unquestionable.

All that changed on January 19, 2021, when a toddler from Nashik, Maharashtra, received the first injection of a new gene therapy (Zolgensma) that cost a massive ₹16 crore for an incurable, rare genetic disease called spinal muscular atrophy. Gene therapy had finally reached our neighbourhood. There remains one last question: could such treatment someday offer a cure for common diseases such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure?

The human genome is deeply embedded, etched in indelible ink within (almost) every cell. The genes, which are DNA segments, have their code copied to RNA, which are used at the ribosome to produce essential chemicals with diverse functions, such as hormones that regulate blood sugar (insulin), enzymes that digest food (pepsin), and even the pigment that informs skin colour (melanin).

While traditional pharmacology aims to "chemically correct" the disrupted body metabolism without addressing the root cause, gene therapy offers the potential for a proper cure.

Common diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol are not purely genetic defects of a single gene but involve mild variations in multiple genes. Their disease expression is influenced by environmental factors such as diet and lifestyle. Therefore, gene therapy is



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



T.M. Thyagarajan

Fond memories of a venerable guru

Alamelu Ramakrishnan

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Sangita Kalanidhi Sri T.M. Thyagarajan, fondly called TMT sir by his friends, admirers and students, was a storehouse of knowledge. He would never flaunt his *vidwat* nor speak condescendingly of other artistes, be they established or just gaining entry into the fold. Many students have very happy and fond memories of TMT sir as a guru. This writer had the good fortune of being under his tutelage for three years while she was a student of the then Central College of Carnatic Music, Chennai.

Whenever a new composition was taught, he would ask everyone to sing individually so that he could correct each one and see to it that everyone had internalised what he had taught. When a student kept making the same mistake or was not able to reproduce the *sangatis* or the *raga bhava* correctly, he would repeat the same phrase or line innumerable times. Never once had he been seen losing his cool or getting irritated.

Whenever he set to music a new composition, he would teach it to the students in the class. That way, he would be able to appreciate and assess the aesthetic beauty of the composition in terms of *raga*, *tala*, and *sahitya*. He set to music many of the compositions of Vallalar, the ashtalakshmi *stotram* in eight captivating *ragas*, and many a composition in Tamil of other less-known composers. For all his *vidwat* and competence, he would always be in the background and never show off his scholarship.



('New life into old narratives'; Dec. 21)
Truly, archaeological evidence plays a vital role in bridging the gap between modern humans and our ancestors

Sahil Shaikh

Humanising history

Manish Gaekwad's *Nautch Boy* offers a searingly intimate gaze into the cloistered world of the *kothas*, humanising a history often obscured by societal prejudice. ('His own story'; Dec 21) The memoir masterfully deconstructs gender binaries by placing a male observer at the heart of a traditionally feminine-coded artistic space.

Sahal Cholayil

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The article offers a calm and persuasive look at how women are creating informal vital support systems in urban spaces. By focusing on everyday acts — midnight walks, WhatsApp groups, fitness routines — it reminds readers that solidarity often grows quietly, outside institutions. ('Sisterhood in the city'; Dec. 21) The piece is most effective in showing that these networks are not about exclusion, but survival and shared learning in cities that can feel isolating and unsafe.

Abharna Barathi

The emergence of informal women's networks signals a quiet but firm shift in urban civic culture. These spaces, built on trust and shared experience, offer more than solidarity; they challenge the invisibility of women in public life. While such initiatives may not dismantle structural patriarchy overnight, they do recalibrate agency and foster collective resilience.

K.S. Sakunthala

Captivating stories
The author draws the reader's attention to history through captivating human stories.



THE HINDU GROUP

TUNE INTO THE MAGIC OF MARGAZHI

The Hindu Margazhi Music Contest
invites you to honour the celebrated musical season with your performance. Let your art be heard, acknowledged, and remembered. Share your talent, earn recognition, and become part of a tradition that continues to inspire.

Categories:

Carnatic Vocals
Hindustani Vocals
Instrumental

Age Group:

Children below 12 years
Juniors 13-19 years
Seniors 20-40 years

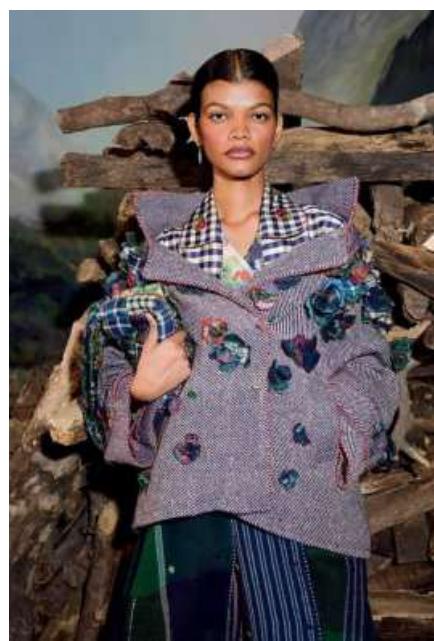


Margazhi Music Contest

Made Of Chennai

THE HINDU

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**péro****Kadua weave jacket**

After years of careful world-building, però's pieces carry a signature that feels familiar to long-time followers and new buyers alike. From the quilted pink Hello Kitty coat to its much-loved Kullu weaves, the brand creates garments that feel as good as they look. For this list, we recommend the handwoven chequered silk reversible jacket in a *kadua* weave from Varanasi. Part of their wildly popular 100 unique jackets edit, the checks are a nod to southern textile traditions, while the *kadua* extra weft technique creates delicate florals that appear as if embroidered. This painstaking weave uses a supplementary weft technique where each motif is hand woven with extra threads with such precision that it leaves no loose threads at the back.

**Jigmat Couture****Thik-ma jacket**

A well-defined wardrobe would be remiss without the unique Northeastern sensibility. Take *thik-ma*, the traditional tie-and-dye technique jacket from Jigmat Couture. The process (practised largely in Zanskar and Changthang in Ladakh) uses resist dyeing with natural threads to create bold circular motifs, long believed to ward off the evil eye. Some of the earliest visual records appear in the 11th-century murals of Tibet's Alchi Monastery, where the textile was used to veil Thanka paintings. Zanskar artisans use *thik-ma* to make their traditional *stak-ta* costumes, *bok* capes, and *pabu* shoes. Jigmat Couture draws from this lineage, working with natural vegetable dyes on handspun, handwoven lambswool, cashmere, and yak wool.

**Jodi****Kala cotton jackets**

Made in Kala cotton, hand-dyed and hand-embroidered, Jodi, the young brand founded by two magazine stylists, has come into its own. Known for its playful approach to block-printing from Jaipur and whimsical embroidery finished in Pune — think local flora, folk dancers, and fantastical creatures — the jackets allow for a lightness of expression without losing craft depth. The coarser style of cotton is perfect for everyday pieces that need to survive on-the-go days. Pair them with voluminous skirts or matching handloom trousers for a relaxed yet intentional look. Bonus: try the brand's take on beaded scrunchies, playful bags, and mix and match from its language's repertoire.

NOT WITHOUT MY JACKET

Craft-focused pieces that lean into native design and sustainability, and will hold good through the new year

Vinita Makhija

Injiri
Micro bandhani jacket

Since 2009, Chinar Farooqui's label has built a loyal following, with wearers collecting her pieces season after season, constructing a wardrobe where they can stack and layer from her old and new pieces. Farooqui is best known for her work with *desi* wool, contemporary *jamdani*, and softly structured checks. If you were looking for a forever piece, however, her micro *bandhani* jacket stands out.

Rendered in vivid hues that are a nod to Rajasthan's enduring love for bright colours, the placement of the dots are inspired by the skirts of the Halepotra community in Kutch, a region that continues to be her playground and long-term site of textile practice.



The jacket is the first thing people notice and the last thing they forget," Tom Ford, one of fashion's most formidable forces, isn't wrong. In the colder months up north, or as the festive season takes over in the south, outerwear does far more than keep the chill out.

Good coats are conversation starters, punctuation marks of a whole look. While a classic Burberry or Barbour trench may often be touted as a capsule wardrobe essential, in a country as craft-rich as ours, it makes sense to go several steps further and invest in pieces that could one day be classified as heirlooms. After all, you may not want to repeat a shirt every week, but wearing the same jacket through an entire season can still feel striking.

Be it coats that lean into folklore or jackets with woven flowers and *lubu* beads, here are six fits for the new year.

The writer is a Mumbai-based fashion stylist.

**Payal Khandwala****Silk brocade jacket**

There is something distinct about women designing for women. Khandwala's minimal chic designs have found admirers among discerning consumers and A-list actors such as Deepika Padukone, Alia Bhatt, and Tabu. Despite the widespread revival of Banarasi brocade over the last two decades, the designer's work stands apart for its clarity and restraint. This handwoven, longline silk brocade jacket from her Autumn-Winter collection reinterprets the structure of a classic men's *sherwani* into a precisely constructed feminine form. The subtle nod to heritage motifs, the *jaal* pattern all take from patterns we may have previously seen on saris, but their controlled addition to a jacket makes the interpretation fresh.

**Boito****The Tara and Tarini coats**

The slow fashion label's focus on Odisha's tribal textiles and *ikats* has quickly established it as a brand to watch closely. Its engagement with mythological narratives is evident in the Tara Tarini Coat, inspired by the fierce sister goddesses of Odia folklore. In Tara, tailored in crimson Sambalpuri *ikat* silk, white motifs depict the goddess in her mountain abode. A *dokra* metal belt, cast using the ancient lost wax technique, adds sculptural strength, echoing ritual armour. Its twin, the Tarini, is a long ensemble crafted in organic, handwoven Kotpad cotton, dyed in shades reminiscent of fertile riverbeds. Traditional motifs reference tribal customs and rituals, with the goddess' eyes offering a protective gaze over extra weft birds, peacocks, temples, and trees. The belt is strung with colourful *lubu* beads, traditionally worn by women of the Bonda community.

On the third day of *chillai kalaan* (a period of extreme-cold weather that starts on December 21 and lasts 40 days), while everything outside lay buried under a heavy blanket of snow, we all sat in Phuphee's kitchen trying to hold on to the warmth emanating from the *daan* (a mud oven). It was my first winter in Kashmir after having spent many years in England.

We were sitting in Phuphee's kitchen talking amongst ourselves about nothing and everything. Though the topics were harmless enough, one could feel a mild irritation in everyone's tone, which often presents itself in the late afternoon coinciding with a drop in everyone's blood sugar.

During *chillai kalaan*, Phuphee never let the fire in the *daan* go out. She often woke up in the middle of the night to feed wood and kindling into its hungry mouth. Detecting the rise of temperatures in the kitchen, Phuphee got up, rustled up some potatoes and started roasting them in the *kangri* (a portable heater made of an earthenware pot inside a wicker basket).

She made a hollow in the middle of the *kangri*, placed the potatoes inside, covered them with the burning embers and ash, and left them to roast until they were done. She then pulled them out with her bare hands, broke them into two, salted them a little and handed them to us. Once everyone was sated, they all dispersed for prayers. I was still sitting by the *daan* raking the embers. She came and sat next to me.

'Kya daleel myaan gaash? Tche



ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

A LITTLE LIFE

Of gods and potatoes

What you believe in can be as similar or dissimilar as the good old tuber boiled, roasted or fried, says Phuphee

kyazi loatiy? [What's the matter, light of my eyes? Why do you seem low?], she said, gently rubbing my head.

Since I had arrived from England in the late summer and started at the new school, I had found the adjustment challenging. Everything was different. It felt loud and harsh, especially school. I missed my school in England, but most of all I missed my friends.

One day I had a very difficult

conversation with a teacher, who couldn't comprehend why I hadn't caught up with the new curriculum. She decided the best way to get me to learn faster was to tell me in front of the whole class that I would amount to nothing. I wept bitterly and asked to be excused. I ran out of class, and when I finally came to a stop I found myself in front of the chapel.

The school was a missionary school run by nuns. The chapel

was for their use, but the students were allowed to use it, too. I went in and it was very quiet. I walked to the front where there was a pulpit on one side and a statue of Mary on the other. In the middle there was Jesus, on the cross.

I was not a Christian, but I felt reverence and a strange feeling of peace descended over me. It was the first time since starting school that I had felt this calm, and not wanting to let go of this feeling, I

sat down on one of the benches at the side. After some time another girl came in. I watched her intently as she walked to the front, dipped her fingers into a bowl and sprinkled water on her head and then sat down.

The next day during break time, I went back. I walked in, sat on the side and after a little while I left. It was a moment of calm in a day that felt overwhelming. Those few minutes in the chapel every day helped me cope.

One day, I casually mentioned it to my cousins who went to the boys' missionary school. They were shocked. How could I do something so grave? They proceeded to tell me how it was a terrible sin and that on the day of judgement I would be boiled and roasted like a potato in the deep fires of hell. Though I didn't pay attention to everything they said, I started wondering whether there was any truth in it. I was 15 at the time and though I had never been a deeply religious person, I certainly didn't want to be turned into fries.

Phuphee sat there listening patiently. She said it was an important question and she would speak to her best friend, Maetonji (a nun who was the matron of a local maternity hospital). I felt relieved that she had not laughed it off. The next day, Phuphee asked me to come to her room. She was roasting potatoes again in the *kangri*.

She said she had spoken to Maetonji earlier that day and they had both come to the conclusion that I would not be roasted or grilled, and would be safe from god's wrath. She explained that

though sometimes people got a bit confused between gods, in this particular case, there was some overlap in beliefs and that should be enough to see me through.

I was relieved but a small thought niggled away at me. Was it an act of betrayal to find peace with someone else's god?

'Myaan jaan [my life], what you have to remember is that sometimes God sends us our answers through channels we least expect from. You know Maetonji is a Christian and a nun. I am a Muslim and clearly not a nun. We are close friends. We are similar in many ways but different, too. There is only one universal fact that you must remember: that we are all potatoes, some boiled, some roasted. Differently cooked but still potatoes,' she said, a little smile playing on her lips as she got up to get ready for her prayers.

At the door, she stopped again, and said, 'A hungry person needs food and a troubled person needs peace. Do you think god, any god for that matter, would be offended by what nourishes the soul of his follower?'

With those words, she washed away any unease that still lingered in my heart and, for the first time since being there, I devoured the potatoes she had left on my plate, to my stomach's and heart's content.

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

