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The role of artists such as Ai Weiwei in troubled times

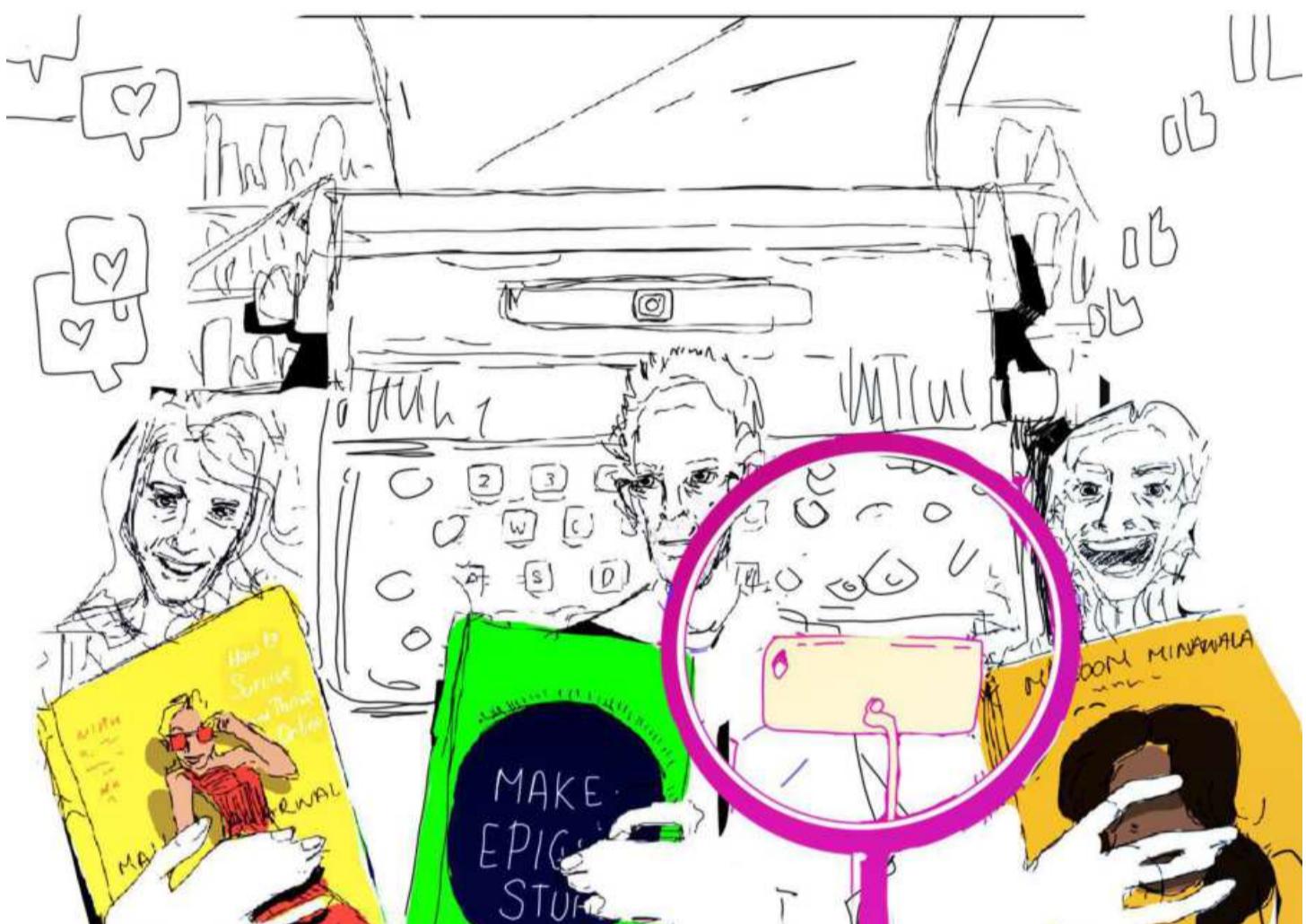
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LITERARY REVIEW

Salman Rushdie's *Knife* is a gripping memoir

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are "a regular format abroad", the trend is catching on here as well, especially with authors who are celebrity influencers, says Shabnam Srivastava, general manager-marketing at HarperCollins India. "Because their book launches have an added dimension in terms of the extra activities, they become almost a cultural event, which necessitates a pre-registration or ticketed entry."

In Agarwal's case, her ticketed book launch included a chance to collaborate with her – the golden ticket sought by budding creators and influencers to boost their own following.

Addressing non-readers

Both Minawala and Agarwal, and other influencer-authors before them, have brought us books that are an extension of their online personalities. Warikoo's books address the idea of self-improvement and financial management in different ways. "In Minawala's case, it is her own story, probably the first time that a story like this has been told with absolutely brutal honesty," says Juggernaut's editor-in-chief Parth Mehrotra.

Agarwal uses her journey to success as a way to connect with and inspire up-and-coming content creators. In fact, the books penned by most of these social media influencers could be clubbed in the self-help category. For instance, Warikoo, who has over

10 million followers across YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, is the bestselling author of *Do Epic Shit* (2021) and *Get Epic Shit Done* (2022). He says that he knew he was "not writing for the quintessential reader. I was writing for an audience that has the attention span of a goldfish, and is used to reading vertically and not horizontally."

As a result, he says, several people come up to him to confirm that his is the "first book they have ever completed". Warikoo's latest, *Make Epic Money*, which released this January, has followed the success of his earlier books, selling more than 100,000-plus copies within just 40 days of release.

Today, the idea of the "influencer" is an interesting one, and comprises both people who have begun their careers online – engaging audiences with entertaining content – and those who are domain experts with full-time careers outside of social media. The latter would include doctors such as Siddhant Bhargava or a historian like Manu Pillai. There are books being written by both sets of people. About penning her second book, Agarwal says, "I thought of who the book is for and what relevance it will have. Who is going to pick up this book?"

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WHY INFLUENCER PUBLISHING IS HAVING A BIG MOMENT

With social media celebrities turning to book publishing, guaranteeing bestsellers and hype, a look at what's motivating this switch. And what this means for authors without a strong online presence

Swati Daftuar
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Last month, Penguin India, the largest English language books publisher in the subcontinent, threw a party in Mumbai. An impressive affair by all accounts – a five-star hotel as the venue, stars and recognisable faces in the crowd, and enough food, drinks and conversation to satisfy even the hardest-to-please guests. "We had Durjoy Datta dancing, Ankur Warikoo doing some creative stunts with the attendees, and tote bags, books and other merchandise as party favours," says Pallavi Narayan, head of communications and brand partnerships at Penguin Random House India.

Other headliners that evening included actor and author Neena Gupta, radio jockey Stuti Ghosh, and sexual health educator Tanaya Narendra aka Dr. Cuterus. Penguin Palooza is what they called the event, designed to celebrate the "book influencer" – someone who has carved out a space for themselves online, doing book reviews, author interviews and other literary content. Their followers could even be a modest 5,000, a far cry from the millions a fashion or food influencer attracts.

Over the last few years, Indian publishers have taken a cue from their counterparts in the West as they increasingly consult social media influencers to create a buzz around the latest releases. But what we are now seeing are influencers trying out the role of author themselves and often creating bestsellers. According to entrepreneur Ankur Warikoo,

famous for his YouTube videos on personal finance – his most popular video (4.4 million views) is on "how to pay a 25-year loan in

just 10 years" – when he first decided to pen a book, "I was writing for an audience that doesn't read or has never read."

Last month, style blogger and fashion entrepreneur Masoom Minawala launched her first book, *She'll Never Make It* (Juggernaut Books). Minawala has a following of 1.3 million on Instagram. On April 14, she put up the first post about her book on her Instagram account – the cover blurred, and a heartfelt note about what she called her "biggest project". The next day, she revealed the cover of the book and announced its release. The same day, the book hit No.1 on Amazon in the overall books category, with over 800 orders placed in a single day.

In March, entertainment content creator Malini Agarwal aka Miss Malini launched her second book, *Under the Influence* (HarperCollins India), with a star-studded party in Mumbai. Agarwal was early on the influencer front. "I was always this face on the scene of Bollywood that used to document it as a creator before the word 'influencer' was coined," she says.

Since the release of her book, Agarwal has embarked on a pan-India book tour, with both free and ticketed events that involve a show, workshop or curated interaction. While ticketed events

With every book, an influencer is setting something down in black-and-white. Says Malini Agarwal: "The trauma for a social media creator or an influencer or someone who lives online is that you have no option [in a book] to delete a sentence. It's there forever, which is very intimidating. When you write a book, anything I've said, I can't change it, I can't go and edit it or archive it." She adds though that unlike social media users, book readers are "probably more forgiving"

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Mark Twain in Bombay

Murders, kidnapping, a complex city — Anuradha Kumar vividly recreates the author's time in India in the late 19th century



Writer's life A photo of Mark Twain from the cover of his 1897 travelogue *Following the Equator*. (BETTMANN ARCHIVE)



The Kidnapping of Mark Twain
Anuradha Kumar
Speaking Tiger
₹499

Bombay, a complex cosmopolitan city akin to London and New York with a sometimes-murky heart and an ancient soul. Into "this moving show this shining and shifting spectacle", as Twain puts it, Kumar airdrops an unlikely detective duo, American Consul Henry Baker and the beautiful, mysterious Maya Barton.

Preeti Zachariah

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The year is 1895. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, has just turned 60 and finds himself in terrible debt after a substantial investment in a failed invention: the Paige Compositor. To extricate himself from his money woes, he committed to a year-long world tour, his reminiscences of which would later come together in his travelogue *Following the Equator*, published in 1897. In January 1896, he landed in Mumbai, then Bombay, "a bewitching place, a bewildering place, an enchanting place — the Arabian Nights come again!", he wrote about the city.

Anuradha Kumar's latest novel, *The Kidnapping of Mark Twain*, is a vivid recreation of Twain's version

Pacy thriller

The novel opens with the murder of a young woman called Casi, who is believed to have been killed by her husband, Tuka Ram, a labour supervisor at one of the city's textile mills. Soon after, Twain and his family arrive in the city and are received by Henry, who as the American Consul, "had to ensure the Clemenses had a pleasant stay in Bombay, and wherever else they travelled to in India". The next day, after a rather eventful party, Twain goes missing, so Maya and Henry team up to find him; how they do, and what they encounter along the way, makes up the rest of the book.

The Kidnapping of Mark Twain is an action-packed, pacy roman polici, complete with homicides, a kidnapping, multiple antagonists and a detective duo with an unbalanced power dynamic, vaguely reminiscent of Conan Doyle's Holmes-Watson, Agatha Christie's Poirot-Hastings or Poe's Auguste Dupin and his anonymous sidekick. But it is also a lot more. Studded with references to several significant events from the 19th century, such as the long shadows cast by the British colonial enterprise, including their discriminatory policies and the start of the opium trade, the Oscar Wilde trial, the women's reform movement and the implications of Bombay's cotton mills on the city's economy — it attempts to capture the zeitgeist of that era.

My only grouse, perhaps, is that there is far too much going on — several characters, convoluted sub-plots, commentaries on multiple social issues — which can be confusing and cause a reader to fumble at times. But Kumar's masterful storytelling and skilled set-setting somehow propel you forward, as does the promise of the budding romance between Maya and Henry, a relationship as bewildering and complicated as the city it is set in.

that threads itself through some poems, as when the poet wistfully tells the reader:

If you want to bring me something today, bring me the republic I thought we will be some day!

The pragmatism that peeps through the book is of the gentle kind, a wry acknowledgement of how things won't change all that much. When it comes to matters of the heart, the emotions swing this way and that. There is the grey dreariness of a love long gone, of a futile waiting. In contrast, there is the soft assertion of confidence:

I'm the key to your door. Stay closed. Only I can open you.

Some of the poems don't open themselves up too easily to readers, they need to stop, absorb, re-read a line, sigh over another line. Which makes it all the more rewarding for those who persist.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based author, journalist and manuscript editor.

Bitter Gourd: Poems
Anupama Raju
Copper Coin Publishing
₹399

unknown protagonist. *It will take us all down.*
And elsewhere:
Pick up what's left of me and make me
Into a country without love.
In a lovely little poem titled 'What You Don't Know', the poet slips in a statement of quiet strength. *I am an axe, she proudly states.*
There is also a political note

Poems of love, life and country

Anupama Raju offers up the quotidian and the quirky in equal measure in her second book of poems

Sheila Kumar

In Anupama Raju's second book of poems, *Bitter Gourd*, she puts the everyday, with all its attendant activities and emotions, under keen scrutiny, and what emerges is another angle to the quotidian.

Some lines spin soft yet strong visual images, like the ones that go:

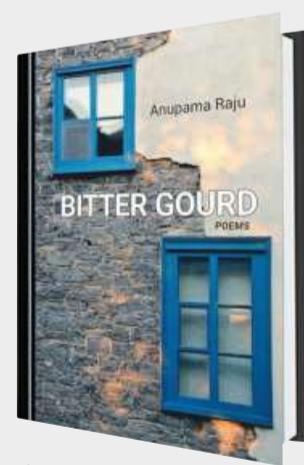
*...each time you call me mol
I'm as young as your
Malayalam,*

*Tender as elaneer, soft as panji,
Haunting as pulluvan paattu.*

In 'Table for One', the poet wafts the loneliness, the quiet, the momentary awkwardness, over to the reader, who receives it in empathetic silence. There is a decided cynical slant as when the poet states:

*Conditioners can condition
Hair, skin, legs, breasts, vagina.
But mostly screams which
Don't leave a stunned mouth
held shut by a knife.*

This inherent cynicism reveals itself throughout the book. It's a fight you started, she tells an



Bitter Gourd: Poems
Anupama Raju
Copper Coin Publishing
₹399

BROWSER

The Scent of Fallen Stars

Aishwarya Jha

Penguin

₹699

After the collapse of his academic dreams, Will finds himself amid Delhi's expat community. When he encounters Leela, his life is altered forever. And then comes Aria, looking for a mother she believed to be dead, and is soon caught up in a cataclysmic revelation.



My Beloved Life

Amitava Kumar

Aleph

₹799

Jadunath Kunwar comes from a village near Orwell's birthplace, and has had a hard upbringing. Then he goes to college, and meets people and politicians of all hues. He becomes a historian, and has a daughter. This is the story of an ordinary man's life, rendered extraordinary at times.



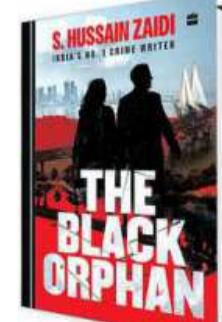
The Black Orphan

S. Hussain Zaidi

HarperCollins

₹399

When Ajay Rajvardhan of the National Investigation Agency runs into lawyer Asiya Khan in court, they are on opposite sides: he specialises in taking down terrorists and she is defending a young woman arrested on terrorism charges. Circumstances bring the two closer, but there's a larger conspiracy brewing.



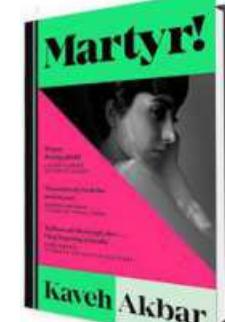
Martyr

Kaveh Akbar

Picador India

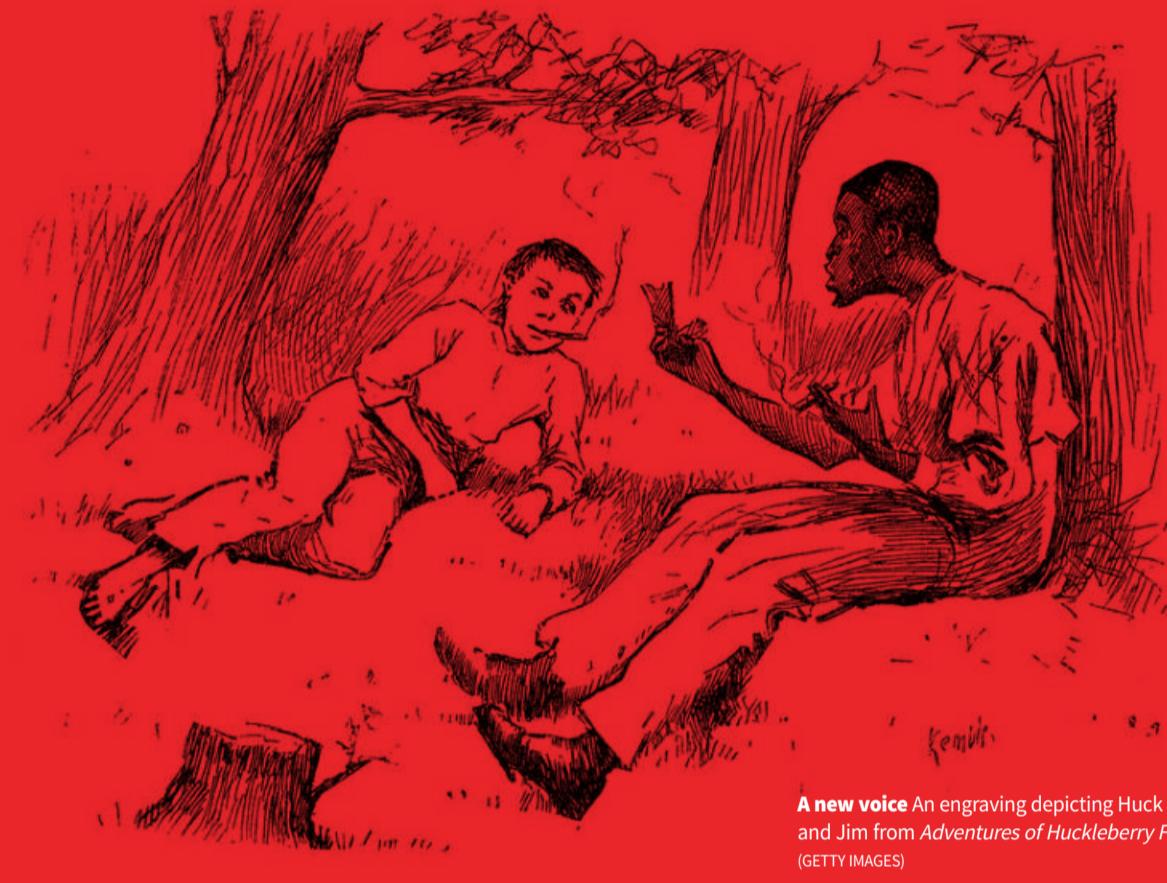
₹599

Since the death of his mother who was killed on board Iran Air flight 655 shot down by the US Navy, Cyrus Shams has been devastated. Then he meets a terminally ill artist who has decided to live out her last days in the Brooklyn Museum. What follows is a meditation on loss, civilisations, artists, poets and kings.



Using his characteristic wry humour, author Percival Everett reimagines Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and delivers a powerful new novel

WHERE JIM TELLS HIS STORY



A new voice An engraving depicting Huck and Jim from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (GETTY IMAGES)

Sudipta Datta

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Stepping into Huckleberry Finn's world, Percival Everett has written Jim into being. Mark Twain's celebrated but controversial novel of 1884, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is the story of Huck, Tom Sawyer's comrade-in-arms, who fakes his death to get away from his father, and attempts to "civilise" him. In his escape, he is unwittingly helped along by a slave, Jim, who chooses to run because his owner wants to sell him to someone else. The runaways, whose circumstances are hugely different, sail down the Mississippi river in a raft from Hannibal, Missouri, and while narrating the duo's escapades, Twain also investigates race in pre-Civil War America.

In Twain's novel, Huck and Jim are not together all the time. Taking his cue, Everett probes what happens to Jim away from Huck, giving him a voice and a chance to be present, with an incredible twist in the tale. Everett's 24th novel, *James*, is set in the Civil War era, after which slavery was abolished, but that of course did not mean freedom in the true sense of the term, as blacks or any other minority community know. Immediately, there's a chilling resonance to contemporary times. In America and anywhere else, where lives are still defined by divisions, Everett speaks to the present through the past.

Everett gives agency to Jim, as first, he takes up a pencil to write his tale, giving himself a new name — James; and then picks a violent route to get his freedom. If Twain's attempt to convey the contradictions of slavery came up short and "problematic", as Everett has said in interviews, he fills the vacuum by telling the story from the other side.

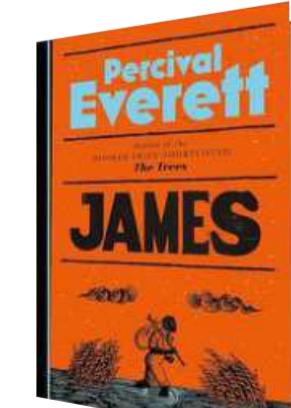
A slave's life

In the hands of Twain, who did a lot of research in local dialects, Jim's first words in the novel are "Who dah?". Everett sets up a brilliant

back story, getting into Jim's psyche and cultural space, and making him address readers directly. The novel begins with Jim waiting at the kitchen door of Miss Watson (Huck's guardian), for some corn bread that has been promised to him. "Waiting is a big part of a slave's life," he says. Jim has noticed the white boys, Huck and Tom, watching him and pretending he is "their toy". And since "it always pays to give white folks what they want", Jim steps into the yard and calls out into the night: "Who dat dere in da dark lak dat?"

Sticking to dialect helps Jim get out of prickly situations, like when he is asked if he has been in Judge Thatcher's library. "What I gone do wif a book?", and he is let off the hook. He had always wondered what white folks would do to a slave who knew what irony meant or how retribution was spelled. Jim can read — the most "subversive thing we can do in any culture", according to Everett — and speak perfect English. But he does that only when he is with family and fellow slaves. He knows only too well his survival will be at stake if there's a language slip.

In fact, Jim gives lessons to children because safe movement through the world depends on language, for white folks expect slaves "to sound a certain way". He asks them to repeat the basics, "Don't make eye contact"; "Never



James
Percival Everett
Pan Macmillan
₹750

speak first"; and so forth. The aim is to make white people feel better because "the better they feel, the safer we are". Asked to translate, a child pipes up: "Da mo' betta dey feels, da mo' safer we be." Jim gives her a pat: "Nice."

Reflecting on race

In his writing, think *Erasure* or even *The Trees*, Everett has always used humour to present serious reflections on race, identity, history, human rights, life.

His humour, ironically, was shaped among others by Twain. There's crackling wit throughout, and remarkable descriptions of Jim's adventures on the road to freedom. When he is bitten by a rattlesnake, Jim is delirious and talks to Voltaire in his dream about equality and other such ideals. When he wakes up, Huck looks at him suspiciously: "You sho talk funny in yer sleep." Jim wriggles out of the situation by reverting to, what else, dialect.

Young George, a fellow slave Jim meets, holds him a stolen pencil and asks him to tell his story "with your ears. Listen.". Jim complies with these words: "With my pencil, I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself to here." Bad things will happen to Young George; and Jim too lives the precarious life of a runaway slave; whippings and lashings are commonplace, and mean characters drift in and out, till he takes matters into his own hands.

That Everett is a master of language and loves to paint and fly-fish is evident in his word-images and at least one vivid account of fishing. One of the great passages is when Jim — he is a slave, he is capable of doing every job — tries to catch a catfish with his bare hands, using his fingers to wriggle like worms and act as bait.

Hemingway had famously declared that all modern American literature comes from one book by Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Make it two books, for Everett's *James* is the perfect companion to Huck, giving agency to a voice we have been conditioned to not hear.

Keeping the faith

In trying times, is it possible to embrace liberalism? Gurcharan Das refuses to give up

Suresh Seshadri

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To say the world around us today is in tumult would be an understatement. At a time when almost every sphere of public life seems so deeply riven by an unprecedented degree of polarisation and intolerance of the other point of view, anyone deeply passionate about the liberal ideal is bound to find oneself enveloped by existential angst. Gurcharan Das, the Harvard-trained philosophy graduate who went on to head the global consumer goods major Procter & Gamble's Indian unit before switching from life in the corporate fast lane to a career as a successful and celebrated writer and public intellectual, finds himself today on the horns of an existential dilemma.

A life-long liberal, sworn to abide by the cardinal precepts of 'openness, mutual respect and a concern for others', Das is deeply troubled by the rising tide of illiberalism worldwide, and even more so in his home country.

'A slippery word'
In his latest book, *The Dilemma of an Indian Liberal*, originally conceived and delivered as a lecture at the Third Annual Liberals Lecture, Das sets out to use his personal journey in quest of a moral meaning to situate his understanding and embrace of liberalism. Over the course of seven chapters, Das lays down the framework of his understanding of the liberal credo. The author traverses territory seamlessly from the definition of what he terms "a slippery word" and its accompanying ideology, to the long-running Indian connection with the liberal temper manifest in the land of "330 million gods where none can afford to be jealous".

The struggle to reconcile the liberal idiom with various events and experiences of life in India across the decades – from Partition and Independence to the present day tribalistic version of nationalism – raises uncomfortable questions. Das is at once eloquent and easily relatable when he uses anecdotes from contemporary events, 'milestones' as he terms them, to string together 'The Making of an Indian Liberal', an

autobiographical reflection that parallels India's "struggle to become a liberal democracy."

Inner struggle

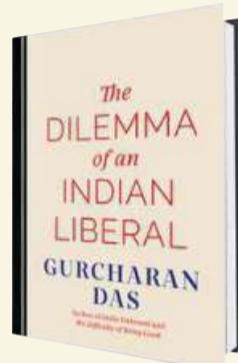
But the last two chapters, where he endeavours to point to 'Liberalism's Shortcomings' and the book's eponymous final chapter listing out what he sees as the "dilemmas, ironies and paradoxes" suffusing contemporary Indian society point to the writer's deep inner struggles to try and come to terms with a world view that is unravelling at warp speed. Here, Das turns to thinkers through the ages – exhorting liberals, for instance, to remember Aristotle's maxim that a human being is a political and social animal, who necessarily must learn to value fraternity or collective life alongside liberty and equality, or risk seeing the rise of tribalisms espoused by populist demagogues. Elsewhere, this student of John Rawls bemoans the lack of fairness and tolerance on the part of 'secular' Indians that is as unacceptable to him as "the bigotry of the Hindu right", making it difficult to be a liberal Hindu' in

today's India.

It is in the political conclusions he draws, that Das turns despondent, observing: "the liberal in India is neither electable, nor is there hope for a true liberal party. Worse, I have no one to vote for. I am thus on a lonely road." And despite his best efforts to end on a note of optimism for liberalism's prospects, citing the long arc of history, the reader is left with the feeling that the author's abiding conviction in the primacy of markets and capitalism leaves him with a blind spot to the widening inequality worldwide that is in large measure propelling the rise of illiberalism.

In another class

For the true Gurcharan Das fan or any one seeking to understand the man behind the words better, his memoir from 2023, *Another Sort of Freedom*, is altogether in another class, and a must read. The narrative takes one on a fascinating journey across time and space, across multiple continents and countries, and is laced with wit and a disarming candour that sucks one into the life of a man in search of 'moksha'. The book's enduring and endearing leitmotif is the lightness of being or 'Laghima' that Das keeps returning to in moments of profound personal insight.



The Dilemma of an Indian Liberal
Gurcharan Das
Speaking Tiger Books
₹499



Gurcharan Das (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



So, finally
Salman Rushdie and his wife Rachel Eliza Griffiths in London; (below) people hold signs in solidarity for Rushdie outside the New York Public Library.
(GETTY IMAGES AND AP)

Language is his 'knife'

Salman Rushdie writes a gripping memoir about the vicious attack on him, and wraps it ardently in a love story

Mukund Padmanabhan

Twenty-seven seconds isn't a lot of time, but as Salman Rushdie reminds us it is long enough to recite a Shakespeare sonnet or, if you are religiously inclined, the Lord's Prayer. What he may well have added was that those 27 seconds – the period in which an assassin hysterically stabbed and slashed at his eye, neck, chest, mouth and thigh – could have meant a lifetime.

Luckily for Rushdie, for the world of letters and for all those who believe in the (inextricably twinned) values of liberalism and free expression, he survived. Even better, he has lived to tell the tale in a bright and rousing book about how he dealt with the cruel cuts and, quite miraculously, stitched his body and his life together again. At a personal level, the "angel of life" prevailed over the "angel of death". At a larger and allegorical level, the Gupees (warm, talkative, even argumentative) were victorious over the Chupwalas (cold, silent, and disapproving).

Life post-fatwa

Thirty-three and a half years is the other germane span of time – one that begins with the fatwa issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini (following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*) and ends when Rushdie noticed the murderous shape of his assassin coming in "hard and low" at him just before he was about to speak at a public event in New York State in August 2022. After so long? he asks himself, almost incredulously. After all, it had been more than 20 years since he moved from Britain to the U.S., discarded his cloistered life, "to be rehabilitated out of the maximum-security world and



The book is both cathartic and inevitable, something that Andrew Wylie, Rushdie's agent prophetically recognised – telling the writer, in the face of disbelief, that he would write about it

reintroduced into polite society". Should he have been more cautious? More aware of "the danger lurking in the shadows"? Was it his fault? He rejects such thoughts because those who regret end up being shaped by the life they subsequently regret. He is glad for the full rich life he lived for 23 years in New York.

This is a positive life-affirming work and, as one may have

expected, the story about the attack, the trauma and recovery is dotted by delightful digressions, strewn with literary references, and marked by meditations, among other things, about religious faith, death, truth and ways of seeing. ("I am unable to escape the mind's fondness for free association".) An imaginary conversation with the assassin (who is referred to as A, a decision Rushdie has subsequently explained was made to deny him the "oxygen of publicity") offers the space for exploring some of these ideas.

In first person

Wrapped tightly and ardently in the middle of this gripping book, is a love story. *Knife* is dedicated to the many men and women who prevented Rushdie from dying and nursed him back on his feet, but the book is also a paean to his fifth wife Eliza (Rachel Eliza Griffiths), the gifted poet/novelist/visual artist. Rushdie describes their relationship as the final and definitive one in his life, something that the rest of his family concurred with after meeting Eliza: "Finally". "Eliza then had T-shirts made for me, with FINALLY

emblazoned upon them.") Love stories demand to be told in the first person and this could be one reason why Rushdie gives up the unusual but compelling third-person narrative in his earlier memoir *Joseph Anton*, about his post-fatwa years in seclusion and hiding. Also, as he says, "when somebody wounds you fifteen times it definitely feels very first-person. That's an 'I' story."

Knife is both cathartic and inevitable, something that Andrew Wylie, Rushdie's agent prophetically recognised – telling the writer, in the face of disbelief, that he would write about it. When Rushdie returned to writing well after the attack, he found himself casting aside the notes for his next fiction, realising that he had to write it before moving on to anything else. "To write about it would be my way of owning what happened, taking charge of it, making it mine, refusing to be a mere victim. I would answer violence with art."

Musings on freedom

There are short meditations here and there on freedom, in a way the very essence of the book, but one couldn't help wishing there was more. Rushdie suggests, and correctly, the word has become a minefield – an intellectual battleground where the classical liberal idea of freedom, embodied in the writings of men such as John Stuart Mill and Thomas Paine have been undermined by both the right and the left. If free speech has become a licence for bigotry for the former, he suggests it has been shackled by beliefs about what can or cannot be said by the latter. The painful memory in *Joseph Anton* of being denounced, sometimes aggressively, by people on both sides of the ideological spectrum – is carried over in *Knife*. In a world that seems to have all but forgotten that any credible defence of free speech must involve upholding the right of free expression to those you disagree, dislike and even abhor, Rushdie's new memoir is a reminder of the importance of rediscovering, in these volatile, polarised times, a true liberal spirit.

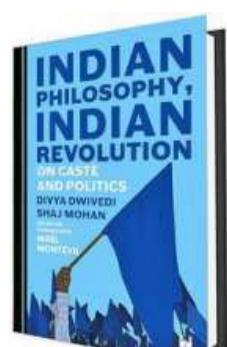
The reviewer teaches philosophy at Krea University and is the author of The Great Flap of 1942.

ALSO READ: Rushdie, Weiwei and a knife in the eye **PAGE 5**

Indian Philosophy, Indian Revolution

Divya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan Edited and introduced by Mael Montévil Westland Books ₹799

A collection of essays by two philosophers who chronicle the rise of authoritarianism in India. They present the point of view of the lower caste position in politics to the destruction of democratic norms under the BJP.



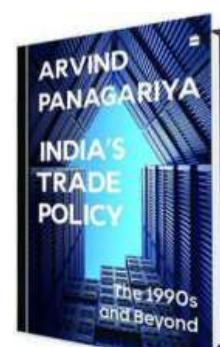
India's Trade Policy: The 1990s and Beyond

Arvind Panagariya

Arvind Collins

₹599

As chairperson of the 16th Finance Commission, Panagariya has closely observed the Indian economy, pushing for a more open economy especially with respect to international trade. His writings from 1989 to the present day have been collected in this volume.



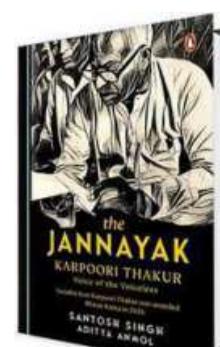
The Jannayak Karpoori Thakur: Voice of the Voiceless

Santosh Singh, Aditya Anmol

Penguin Random House India

₹599

One of Bihar's tallest leaders and chief ministers, Karpoori Thakur, popularly known as Jannayak, was posthumously honoured with the Bharat Ratna in 2024. This biography sheds light on his politics and pivotal role in laying down the reservation framework in 1978.



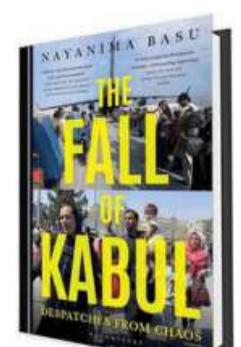
The Fall of Kabul

Nayanima Basu

Bloomsbury India

₹599

In August 2021, journalist Nayanima Basu was based in Kabul but also travelling outside and sending despatches of the Taliban storming the countryside before returning to power. In her new book, she provides glimpses of the chaos that preceded and followed the Taliban's takeover.



WHY INFLUENCER PUBLISHING IS HAVING A BIG MOMENT

CONTINUED FROM

>> PAGE 1

"People who either adore me and want to know more things about me, which might be a limited number, but also those who want to become creators themselves, which is 46 million-plus, right? I had to then ask myself, 'Is what I'm saying relevant to them in some way?'"

But what really motivates influencers to become published authors? "A book is a long-lasting thing, it's more permanent. It's not something on your feed that will disappear. People still look at books as something that gives you authentic information," says Poulomi Chatterjee, publisher, HarperCollins India. "Books make you sound intellectual. Anyone who has written a book can very much say, I'm in the league of authors," says Agarwal, adding that it's not easy to get a book published by a traditional outfit.

Profit and loss
Traditionally, India has had a pretty conservative understanding of books, readers, and what book promotions mean. It's not uncommon for both readers and publishing houses to be heard using terms such as "commercial" and "literary" books – which is not just a way to talk about sales numbers,

but also content and sometimes, even quality. "People never equated social media creators or someone on the Internet as worthy of being able to write a book, because the belief always was that social media creators were a little frivolous," says Agarwal. Resh Susan, who has run her blog and Instagram page titled "The Book Satchel" since 2015, and has a following of 54,000 on Instagram, adds: "Some authors and readers look at book content creators and think they are not serious readers. That reviews should be long posts, and not mere captions."

But as with every good conversation, this one has been growing too, changing to adapt not just to external factors such as trends and tastes, but also to internal examinations and enquiries. And with this change, publishers have found a whole new pool to fish in, and have begun to turn to the Internet and social media to find out what people, especially the younger demographics, want to read about. And who understands young people better than the influencers who have made it their business to capture the attention of millions of such people. "I think the sweet spot is having something interesting and compelling and thought-provoking to say, but to say it in the simplest way possible, so that you're democratising your ideas instead of gatekeeping them. That's what works on social media

possible, so that you're democratising your ideas instead of gatekeeping them. That is what works on social media," says sexuality educator Leezza Mangaldas, who wrote *The Sex Book* (HarperCollins India) in 2022. For Mangaldas, the big question is: "how do you compete with a smartphone?"

Of course, publishing is a mixed bag, full of hits and misses. "If you actually look under the hood, a lot of social media influencer books, the second and third titles have



I think the sweet spot is having something interesting and compelling and thought-provoking to say, but to say it in the simplest way possible, so that you're democratising your ideas instead of gatekeeping them. That's what works on social media

LEEEZA MANGALDAS
Sexuality educator and author of *The Sex Book* (2022)



Author Akshat Gupta (right) interacts with an influencer at Penguin Palooza last month. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

not worked as much as their first. Which will indicate that you are fundamentally signing on someone who is a storyteller in a short form. When it comes to a book, it works in some cases, doesn't work in others," says Anish Chandy, literary agent and founder at Labyrinth Literary Agency. While the sales might be higher than usual in the case of an influencer's book, it still doesn't mean profit for the publisher. "Whether publishers are turning a profit on these books, that is going to be a function of what the publisher is paying to acquire the book, and eventually how much the book sells." But Chandy adds that profit or loss, what definitely works is that "the publisher's biggest headache" – having the book discovered by an audience – is taken care of. And for that "the publishers are willing to pay a premium".

That social media stars come with a dedicated following is certainly a big part of things, including the book's success. "The big advantage that a Minawala or a Warikoo enjoys is that they are not reliant on traditional media for publicity. They have a direct channel of communication. That is their power. And their power is in the millions," says Juggernaut's Mehrotra. Just the two biggest English-language publishers in the country, Penguin Random House India and HarperCollins India, publish 300 and 250 new titles, respectively, every year. Chandy says that with over 10,000 registered publishers, and a massive self-publishing machinery, it's nearly impossible to arrive at a number when it comes to English language books published in India today. To stand out in this market, the ability to have a direct channel of communication with millions of potential readers is nothing short of priceless, not just for the authors, but for their publishers too.

And more and more, publishers are beginning to adapt to new ways of telling a story. They don't just have to think outside of traditional ideas when it comes to books by influencers, but also traditional narratives and formats. "Sometimes, we use

the format they have already been using on their social media pages and other places. Like in sexuality educator Leezza Mangaldas' case, we used a Q&A format for her 2022 book, *The Sex Book*, which mimicked the format she uses in her content online," says Chatterjee of HarperCollins India.

The impact influencers have made on the economy, on brands and on people's minds is irrefutable. "When there's no denying that someone has made a mark, then everything opens up for them," Agarwal says, adding that by that logic, it's not surprising that the doors of publishing have opened up for them too.

While Chandy says that social media might be more important when it comes to certain genres and categories, such as self-help, compared to, say, literary fiction, one thing is certain. "The day of the author just writing a book and sending it out to the publisher, and having no presence or putting in no effort to market or publicise the book is over."

The format they have already been using on their social media pages and other places. Like in sexuality educator Leezza Mangaldas' case, we used a Q&A format for her 2022 book, *The Sex Book*, which mimicked the format she uses in her content online," says Chatterjee of HarperCollins India.

A view from the other side T.C.A. Raghavan, author and former diplomat, whose fourth book, *Circles of Freedom* (Juggernaut Books), has just released, says that the proliferation of social media for book marketing has made a difference because "the traditional ways of buying books are under stress. The number of bookshops is much less than it used to be. Space in newspapers about new books and reviews is also crunched. And so social media certainly creates an impact. If you're not on it, and your publisher is not good at it, then it is a handicap". Raghavan adds that for his books, approximately 70% of the promotion is still via traditional channels. That's not to say that he doesn't want to utilise social media. "I think everyone wants to have younger readers. Regardless of the platform, you get an opportunity, you make use of it."

The larger landscape may not be as altered as it seems, he says. "My gut sense is that social media creates awareness about the book and the author, and more people come to know about your book releasing relatively quickly than they would have in the old days. But not all of that translates into sales," he insists, adding, "I'd like to think that books are commodities which sell slowly. In the end, if you aggregate sales over a long term, everything evens out, even the enormous immediate impact of social media. I would like to think that it depends on the quality of the book and not the profile of the author – offline or on social media."

Rushdie and Weiwei have lived according to their own rules. Both have been critical of their homeland for precisely the same reason: the opaque Communist regime in China, and the growing repression in India. Yet despite their long association with the West, Rushdie now lives in New York and Weiwei in Portugal, both draw immense creative sustenance from their country of origin. In fact, both have done their best work as an indirect correlation with national and childhood memories. Rushdie protects freedom of speech in a country that allows him to speak freely and write stories with wild and unencumbered imagination. But he also talks of an India that once was, and has now reshaped and stiffed itself.

Weiwei confronts the most feared and repressive tendencies of China with an equally carefree and bold political directness. Like Rushdie's *Knife*, there are no two ways to interpret his work. In 2010, Weiwei dropped a valuable historic vase, and filmed its shattering, thus making an artistic reference to the values of the Cultural Revolution; then, as western commerce made



Speaking up Ai Weiwei and (bottom) Salman Rushdie. (GETTY IMAGES)

RUSHDIE, WEIWEI AND A KNIFE IN THE EYE

Despite enormous threats to their life and work, the writer and the artist remain steadfastly courageous and optimistic. Here's why we need more like them

Gautam Bhatia

Art is a nail in the eye, a spike in the flesh." When Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei wrote this in his autobiography *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* (2021), he was referring to the idea that art can be used as serious provocation, a deliberate disruption that destabilizes the settled and the secure.

On August 12, 2022, Salman Rushdie received a knife in his right eye. It was not the act of artistic courage alluded to by Weiwei, but a cowardly act of a self-proclaimed assassin on an intellectual warpath with his now one-eyed victim. Rushdie had come to the Upstate New York town of Chautauqua to give a talk on the freedom to speak and write freely. His assailant had come 33 years after the infamous *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini and – after the attack – left with blood on his hands and a more

for a decade, and now, 23 years after his release, was attacked while delivering a talk on the importance of writers' safety. Conversely, for long periods, China's totalitarian regime had beaten, arrested and imprisoned Weiwei for defying their authority in his art, something that pushed him instead into a new reckless boldness. Second, and more importantly, the two are among a minuscule minority that uses art not as a medium of self-satisfaction, but as an instrument of politics and opinion. What gives strength to Rushdie's writing, or to Weiwei's sculpture or installation, is its capacity to breach political borders, thus creating new benchmarks that enlarge the public imagination.

My country – my bane, my muse
Parallels between the two are filled with curious storylines, and unusual ironies. In all the years of their individual practices in writing and art, both

Rushdie and Weiwei have lived according to their own rules. Both have been critical of their homeland for precisely the same reason: the opaque Communist regime in China, and the growing repression in India. Yet despite their long association with the West, Rushdie now lives in New York and Weiwei in Portugal, both draw immense creative sustenance from their country of origin. In fact, both have done their best work as an indirect correlation with national and childhood memories. Rushdie protects freedom of speech in a country that allows him to speak freely and write stories with wild and unencumbered imagination. But he also talks of an India that once was, and has now reshaped and stiffed itself.

Weiwei confronts the most feared and repressive tendencies of China with an equally carefree and bold political directness. Like Rushdie's *Knife*, there are no two ways to interpret his work. In 2010, Weiwei dropped a valuable historic vase, and filmed its shattering, thus making an artistic reference to the values of the Cultural Revolution; then, as western commerce made



Whose wealth is it?

I

t's shocking how the Election Commission (EC) has become a mute spectator to repeated violations of the Model Code of Conduct, even when the violators are trying every trick to sow divisions between the majority and the minority. Yes, I am talking about the Congress and how its starriest campaigner has been allowed to go around promoting disaffection between the country's biggest majority (the poor) and the smallest minority (the rich). Not satisfied with fanning resentment between the two, the Congress has gone a step further by openly talking about wealth redistribution – the socialist equivalent of Pearl Harbour.

I'll be the first to admit that I am no genius at economics, nor do I have the beautiful mathematical mind of a Russell Crowe. But all said and done, economics is not rocket science, or even science. Some of you may have seen this popular economics column called 'No proof is required, hence proved'. I'd say that's a pithy summary of how intelligent people should approach economic questions such as wealth redistribution. So, I'm going to clear the air on the redistribution debate by relying on my own economic common

sense and mathematical prowess instead of turning to overrated experts. So, bear with me and you shall be rewarded with unprecedented insights.

On the key question, let's be clear: wealth redistribution happens all the time. Regardless of which party is in power. But there are two kinds of wealth redistribution. There is the good kind, which promotes social stability by locking everyone in their designated place in the social order, just like in the caste system. Then there is the bad kind, which disrupts the traditional social order by increasing unnecessary social mobility between different classes of the class ladder.

The poor are happy
Over the past decade, India has witnessed healthy redistribution of the good kind – from the poor and middle classes to the billionaire elite. Till date, all evidence points to everyone being happy with this arrangement. The rich are happy, obviously, because they have gotten richer. And the poor are happy, because they have got a temple, plus the sense of belonging that comes with being part of a WhatsApp group. What more do the poor need to keep up with their identity of being poor?

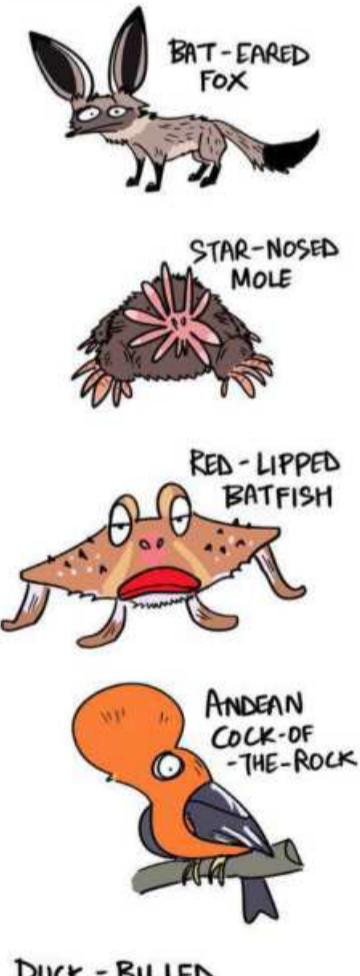
And yet, the EC is reluctant to stop politicians from making incendiary references to wealth redistribution and jobs. Let's hope better sense prevails soon and it clamps down on this phenomenon with the same alacrity with which it has cracked down on communal rhetoric.

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

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

EVOLUTION'S BEST WORK AS A CARTOONIST



PLEASE JUST GIVE HER THAT REUBEN.
HAPPY CARTOONISTS DAY!



Finding meaning (Clockwise from left) An exhibit at *Critical Zones: In Search of a Common Ground*, New Delhi; Carola Lentz; and a performance at Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan in New Delhi. (KALASH BHATT AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

STEERING ART AND CULTURE IN TROUBLED TIMES

The president of Goethe-Institut on how artists and cultural institutions can transcend divides and foster dialogue

Carola Lentz

Multiple crises in my home country, Germany, and around the world have reopened debates on the significance of artistic production and cultural work. Political intrusion into cultural spaces is not an unusual phenomenon because often culture is the symbolic arena where societies try to examine who they are, process what shapes them, and reflect on how to grow together. However, the global rise of illiberalism is increasingly challenging this vital function.

As artists, cultural practitioners and intellectuals, our efforts to navigate ambiguities, understand diverse perspectives, and respect the

rationality of alternative world-views are now constrained by questions that tend to interfere with fundamental freedoms: who are we allowed to criticise? with whom are we expected to express solidarity? which voices must be amplified, and which ones silenced or omitted? to what extent should culture encompass the political?

Culture can be, and has been in the past, used as a powerful instrument for propaganda, but also for liberation. The power of culture comes from its ability to influence people's emotional states, particularly through formats that are not necessarily discursive, but more affective, such as music, images, performance, and art. Culture is a double-edged sword – it can embody greater understanding or be used to create more hatred and prejudice; wielding it as a cultural institution or practitioner is a great responsibility.

In Germany, for instance, I have observed that the conflict in West Asia has polarised public discussions and fuelled an intense debate on public funding of culture and the freedom of expression. I am convinced that owing to the historical weight of the Holocaust, Germany, along with its cultural institutions, must steadfastly denounce any and all instances of anti-Semitism. However, there is debate as to how exactly to define anti-Semitism, and where to draw the necessary red lines. Right now, there seems to be a tendency to limit the spaces of freedom of expression – through boycott calls, event cancellations and threats to funding – in mere anticipation of anti-Semitism, even before arguments are fully articulated.

Not everywhere in the world are the red lines defined in the exact same ways, and therefore robust debate is essential. However, it is equally crucial not to enable intolerant, repressive, and violent hate speech and actions in the name of freedom of expression. The discourse of cultural institutions thus becomes a balancing act where the urgency to create inclusive narratives must be negotiated daily.

Listening and sharing
As an anthropologist, I have learned that too rigid controls stifle expression that lies at the heart of human art and culture, and that curiosity permits authentic and relevant questions to emerge. As cultural arbiters in these unprecedented times, it is imperative that we build bridges of solidarity that transcend geopolitical divides and foster thoughtful dialogue.

Since assuming the role of President of the Goethe-Institut in November 2020, I have witnessed



At new political conjunctures, memory makers reconsider who the heroes of their resistance are; which foundational figures are given place in the national pantheon; or what gets highlighted as precursors of independence for a nation-state... narrow or selective interpretations can censor and even erase the multiple dimensions of remembrance.

The writer is an internationally acclaimed anthropologist, and since 2020, the president of the Goethe-Institut.

CM
YKCM
YK

manifesto is suggesting! Why? It's simple: they want to fill the hearts and minds of the poor with resentments against the rich.

Obsession with unemployment
This whole rich-poor rhetoric is so 1960s, it's ridiculous. Same goes for the Congress campaign's obsession with unemployment. Who in their right mind talks about jobs in the age of AI and entrepreneurship? Today, every Indian, be they rich or poor, aspires to be a wealth creator, not a job-seeker. That's why the Congress banging on about so-called joblessness is despicable. It's nothing but a desperate bid to garner votes by polarising the electorate to employment-seekers and employment-deniers. If this is not a clear-cut case of hate speech against the nation's wealthy minority, I don't know what is.

And yet, the EC is reluctant to stop politicians from making incendiary references to wealth redistribution and jobs. Let's hope better sense prevails soon and it clamps down on this phenomenon with the same alacrity with which it has cracked down on communal rhetoric.

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

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You know who is living her best life? Indrani Mukerjea, that's who. On April 29, she celebrated International Dance Day by performing a classic waltz with choreographer Sandip Soparrkar. A couple of days before that, she was on a news channel talking about new perspectives in life and societal norms. Mukerjea is in high demand and she is very busy.

In May 2022, after spending more than six years in jail for allegedly murdering her daughter, Sheena Bora, Mukerjea secured bail. Since then, she has written a book, starred in a Netflix series about her life, given TEDx talks, has been the chief guest at college functions, and speaker at literature festivals and media conclaves. She has also been spending time doing glamorous photoshoots and has found her "true calling" in dance. She records all of these accomplishments in great detail on her Instagram page, where she has 1.6 million followers, and her posts receive thousands of 'likes' with people commenting about how inspiring she is.

Manipulating the narrative
I must confess that even as a person who has lived long enough now to expect that anything is possible, I did not realise I'd see a day when thousands of people would find Mukerjea "inspiring". This is a woman who for years passed her daughter (and son) off as her "siblings", and who later emerged as the prime suspect in the murder of her own child. A lot of adjectives spring to mind,

MODERN TIMES

THE CULT OF FAME

The fan following that murder accused Indrani Mukerjea enjoys today is a puzzling reflection of the society we live in

but 'inspiring' is not one of them. To be clear, Mukerjea's high-profile current life is not an example of a person re-integrating into society after bearing out the punishment for a crime. She has not been acquitted of the charges of murder, she is merely out on bail. And yet, she seems to be sashaying into college auditoriums and five-star convention centres to loud cheers. I could not find a video of what she spoke to the students of Mumbai's K.C. College about, but in her Instagram post of the event, Mukerjea wrote that she was "emphasizing upon the spirit of participation. Because sometimes the journey itself is the destination". I don't know what kind of career aspirations students of the college have, but

traversing the road to Arthur Road Jail is unlikely to be in their top five choices. Yet, right underneath this caption, someone has commented, "Ur persona has impressed me to the core."

While it is one (mildly deplorable) thing to be intrigued by the life of a person accused of a



ILLUSTRATION: SONU YADIP SINHA

heinous crime, it is quite another to be impressed or inspired by them. Mukerjea, who is clearly a master communicator, has cast her narrative in the language of feminism; she says people are envious of her success, that while she was called a social climber, any man in her place would have been applauded as being "ambitious". This is a shrewd move, because she is using a common trope that many women have faced and utilising that to shield her from any scrutiny or criticism.

Greed vs. morality

More importantly, Mukerjea has seized on the fact that publishing houses and television production companies often allow greed to trump over any moral compass they might have and has sold her story to the highest bidders. In the West, laws commonly known as the Son of Sam law are designed to prohibit criminals from profiting from their crimes. Famously, the footballer O.J. Simpson (who was acquitted of the charges of murdering his wife and her friend, Ron Goldman) was asked to hand over the rights of his book, *If I Did It: Confessions of the Killer* (2007), to the family of Goldman. In India, we have no such law. The Central Bureau of Investigation had filed a case asking for a stay on Mukerjea's

Netflix series, but the court ruled that it found nothing prejudicial that could cause concern in the ongoing trial of the murder of Sheena Bora.

After pointedly ignoring the content machinery churning out Indrani

Mukerjea juice, I must confess that I too finally succumbed and watched this 'court-approved' show. It is a window into a deeply dysfunctional family, and since her ex-husband, Peter, and his family did not participate in the show, we are left only with life lessons from Mukerjea herself, her daughter and an estranged son, who she had not only passed off as her brother but had also committed to a psychiatric facility.

Mukerjea is out of jail, freshly divorced and has homes in Spain and Bristol, as well as a painting by Pablo Picasso, as a part of her settlement. She says a lot of things on the show, her eyes gleaming, about herself, her life, her difficulties, her successes. The one thing she doesn't express is sadness about the death of her own child.

I came away from the show feeling, in many ways, violated. But clearly, I am part of a minority here. Mukerjea's popularity is the true reflection of how society feels about her. We live in a time when fame and notoriety are all mixed up and followership is everything, and in this milieu, Mukerjea is a star. On Instagram, she often refers to herself as a "phoenix", rising from the ashes. The cult of Indrani Mukerjea will likely rise further. The shame of that is on us.



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

GOREN BRIDGE

Bringing it home

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a recent tournament in Australia. South was young Australian star James Coutts. This was a delicate auction to an aggressive game, but it gave Coutts a chance to strut his stuff. East won the opening club lead and continued with another club. Coutts ruffed in dummy and led a spade to his ace. East had very long clubs so Coutts

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

The bidding:

SOUTH	INT	WEST	2♦	NORTH	3♣	EAST	All pass
Pass	Pass	Dbl*	Pass	3♦	Pass		

*Takeout

Opening lead: Jack of ♣

reasoned that West was likely to have length in hearts. Coutts led a low heart and inserted dummy's nine when West played low. That won,

but East's discard was a blow. Coutts led a spade to his king and continued with the queen of spades. Coutts led his last club and

discarded a spade from dummy when West ruffed with the seven. Having no black cards left, West shifted to a diamond, picking up the queen for declarer. Coutts cashed three diamonds ending in dummy. This was the position:

Coutts led dummy's spade and ruffed it with the queen of hearts! West could do no better than to overruff and lead away from his jack of hearts. Beautifully played!

NORTH	♠ J
	♥ K 4
	♦ Void
	♣ Void

EAST	♠ Void
	♥ Void
	♦ 8
	♣ A 10

WEST	♠ Void
	♥ A J 8
	♦ Void
	♣ Void

SOUTH	♠ Void
	♥ Q 10 6
	♦ Void
	♣ Void

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

'Not all those who wander are lost'

Berty Ashley

1 Born on this day in 1864, Nellie Bly was the pioneer of investigative journalism. In 1888, she suggested to the editor of the *New York World* that she could attempt to recreate the journey from a novel that had been released in 1873. She did the 40,070 km trip and 72 days later, arrived back in New York. Which novel was she inspired by?

2 Juan Sebastián Elcano was a Spanish navigator who was on board the ship Victoria on a certain expedition that started in 1519. The original captain was killed in the Philippines during the journey, after which Elcano took over and led 17 survivors in the very first documented circumnavigation of the world. Which explorer started the expedition, after whom places and space probes have been named?

3 Maestre Anes was a German navigator who was one of the survivors who worked under Elcano. Three years later, he signed up under captain García Loaisa to map the Pacific Ocean and discover spice sources in the East. The crew was captured by the Portuguese while returning and only four people survived, Anes being one of them. What record did he achieve with this feat?

4 Woodes Rogers was an Englishman who captained the ship 'Duke' around the world for three years starting from 1707, capturing Spanish ships. During



Comic journey Members of the British comedy group Monty Python — (from left) John Cleese as a centurion, Michael Palin as Pontius Pilate, and Graham Chapman as Biggs Dickus. (GETTY IMAGES)

one voyage, they discovered Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who was marooned on an island off the coast of Chile. The rescued sailor's story inspired an author to write which popular novel?

5 Jean Baret enlisted as an assistant to the naturalist Philibert Commerson on the Bougainville expedition around the world. An expert botanist, Baret is responsible for discovering lots of new plants and in 1769, came home to document the findings. It was only much later that it came to be known that Baret's first name was actually 'Jeanne'. What world 'first' did this make Jeanne Baret?

6 Fabian Bellingshausen was a Russian explorer who was part of the very first Russian circumnavigation. His success led

Emperor Alexander I to select him as the captain of another expedition to the Southern Ocean. During this journey, on January 27, 1819, they discovered what he described as 'ice fields'. What was this, which till date remains the last of its kind to be discovered?

7 Robert Fitzroy of the English Royal Navy was a meteorologist who invented the word 'forecast' and set up the Met Office. He captained the HMS Beagle on a five-year scientific voyage around the world. To enliven the tedious journey, he onboarded a young naturalist with whom he could discuss science. Who did he take on board who, thanks to this trip, changed the world of biology?

8 Robin Knox-Johnston set off from England on his boat on June 14, 1968 and returned to the

spot on April 22, 1969. What record did he set, which earned him the title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire?

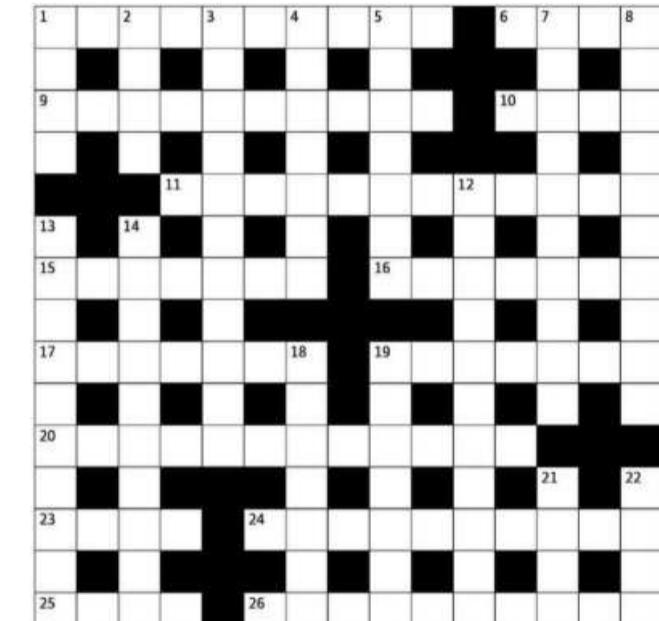
9 The INS Tarangini became the first Indian Naval ship to circumnavigate the globe when it visited 36 ports in 2003. In 2008, the ship retraced the path followed by ancient seafarers of an empire that stretched across Southeast Asia in the 9th century. By visiting Jakarta, Singapore, and Phuket, the ship emulated ancient seafarers of which empire?

10 Born this day in 1943, Sir Michael Palin of the comedy group Monty Python did a trilogy of travel shows for the BBC. He retraced the steps of Phileas Fogg in *Around the World in 80 Days*, and then circumnavigated the Pacific Ocean in *Full Circle*. In 1991, he set off on a journey following the 30-degree east line of longitude, covering Scandinavia, the Soviet Union and Africa. What was the name of the show, which referenced his starting and finishing points and the fact that they were the extremes?

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

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3305



Across

- 1 ... deductions processed? (10)
- 6 Quiet commercial for fish (4)
- 9 Try facial hair, leading to sorrows (10)
- 10 Insect which, when knocked back, leaves aftertaste (4)
- 11 Startled Finance with memo describing Director: that's a little novel (2,4,3,3)
- 15 Wreaths unopened, rearranged for source of wood (3,4)
- 16 Flirtatious: like a pleasing crossword clue? (7)
- 17 Alert! Debt changing hands two out of three times (3,4)
- 19 Recorded match on the radio, leading to ... beef? (3,4)
- 20 Get some scoff there, Cordelia - with no one knowing (3,3,6)
- 23 Buffoon's regularly seen 'ETs' vehicles' (4)
- 24 Absent-minded father of the bride might be this shocked (10)
- 25 Add powder. Remove powder(4)
- 26 Pop perhaps wanting a bit of waffle (6,4)

Down

- 1 Author often adjacent to Rice? (4)
- 2 Rise, being angry (audibly) (4)
- 3 Rebuilt barefoot, panting (3,2,6)
- 4 Normally involving: capers; olives (7)

(if stoned); eggs – primarily? (7)

5 Perhaps lead with a small amount(7)

7 Patriarch and ma identified, in some measure, source of help (10)

8 Fruit coming at last, it seems, for romantic evenings (4,6)

12 Tattered, leathern and characteristic of bygone era (11)

13 Cold gâteau spread on a roll (10)

14 Healthy eating, eg fried onion rings and donuts, did you say? (5,5)

18 Collapse, having lost heart after second misgiving (7)

19 Rows – in a predecessor of tennis? (7)

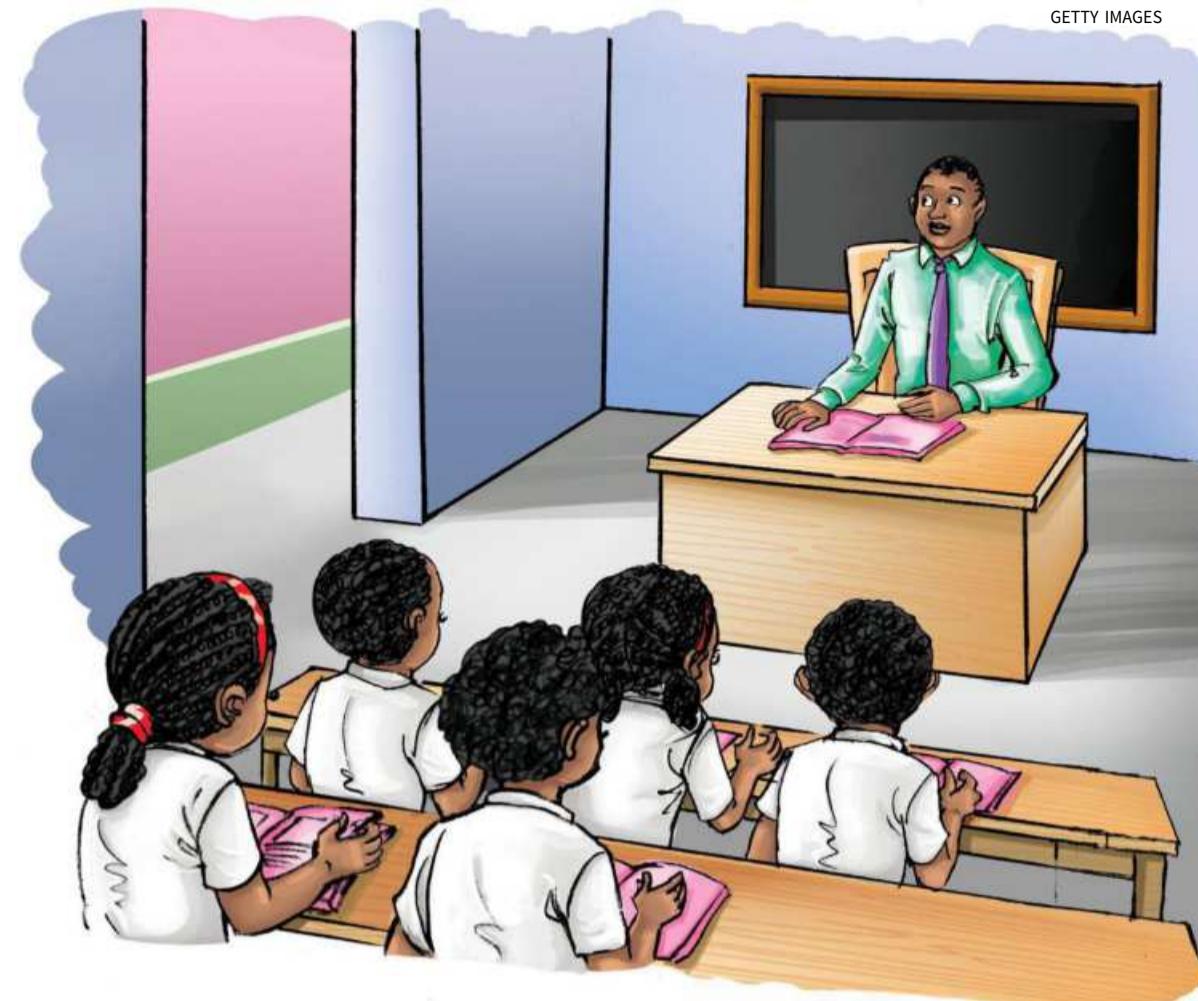
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SOLUTION NO. 3304



ANSWERS



Language conundrum

Can two languages walk the road of education together, holding each other's hands, and grow?

Nimesh Ved

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Two colleagues recently went for some workshops. The organisations they applied to sent not only the application forms but also the follow-up emails in multiple languages. The entire communication was in two languages – English and Hindi. This set me thinking. Is this the way out of the Hindi-English conundrum?

We are part of a Hindi-medium school in eastern Uttar Pradesh, and like many other schools in the

landscape, we are grappling with the conundrum. Over the years we have either pitched one language against the other or as an alternative to the other, and, as a corollary, have been left struggling at both.

I talk about Hindi, but I would hazard a guess that the scenario is not very different with other regional languages and dialects as well. In other words, 'Hindi' can well be replaced with 'regional language'.

Today, we have many English-medium schools – by name or claim or registration with authorities. In most of these schools, teachers struggle with English. They primarily teach in Hindi. Those who teach English as a language, invest time in talking about the rules of English grammar with children. English writing, more often than not, remains on the planning board. English speaking, if at all, is rare. These rules, therefore, are seldom used. These teachers get little support at the school.

Some of the younger teachers study English to prepare for examinations that will help them secure a government job. English for them seldom evolves into a language they enjoy; it remains a forced task. Among the senior teachers, there are many who scorn at English. They pride themselves in Hindi, a language which is closer to their culture. Hindi for them is the proverbial 'us', and English 'them'. But,

for some reason, most of them send their children to English-medium schools.

My focus is on the schools meant for those not financially well-off; read the majority of our schools. Most of the children at these schools engage with English only during the school hours. And, in many cases, only during the English periods. When the English teacher or the child is away from school or during the holidays, there are long stretches when there is no exposure to the language. This does not help. The children struggle with English. The ASER 2023 report states that of the children in the 14-18 age group, only a little over half can read sentences in English.

The scenario, of course, is one that is changing, and changing quickly. To begin with, we have 'Hinglish' today. The Collins Dictionary defines it as a variety of English incorporating elements of Hindi. Publishers of children books are increasingly bringing out bilingual books, besides, of course, the translations. The Oxford English Dictionary too has transliterated Hindi words now, and the list is increasing each year. Some States have also introduced 'mirror image' textbooks, with one page in the regional language and the facing page with the same content in English. To add to all this, the Hindi that we read today, unlike not long ago, is not very different from the Hindi that we speak!

We have noticed these changes play out at our school as well. During the language sessions for teachers, we have noticed increased use of English words in passages in Hindi, especially in the recently published texts. On similar lines when we read English, especially children's books, we come across more Hindi words than earlier. These terms help make the writing relatable. They also raise questions. Would it augur well to have such words in both languages, as and when they occur, in the school textbooks? Would the teachers too need to use both these languages – on the blackboard, during the examinations, in their conversations? Do we need our teachers to be proficient in both English and Hindi?

In a linguistically rich country like ours – the People's Linguistic Survey of India documented 780 languages – it may not be a great idea to learn just one language. And given where we are today, the growth of English is dependent on Hindi and vice versa. Writer Frank Smith puts it better: one language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.

Can we recall the doyens of Hindi poetry like Harivansh Rai Bachchan and Firaq Gorakhpuri who taught English in universities? People have achieved a lot by walking together. Can two languages walk the road together, holding each other's hands, and grow? Can we begin with our schools?

The power of versatility

Jacks-of-all-trades are the lifeblood of a community

Teen Maria George

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I belong to the most underestimated tribe of people often categorised as the "jack-of-all-trades, master of none". I once complained about it to my mother, expressing how I dabble in various areas – organisation, art, public speaking, anchoring – yet lack the mastery in any particular field. I possess skills in dancing, drawing, teaching, and other fields, but nothing stands out enough for recognition. My mother reassured me that this versatility is a gift. She believed I could excel in anything and survive anywhere.

Now, I believe individuals like us make a difference. We are the lifeblood of a community. We can handle everything adequately, saving the day without fanfare. Unfortunately, our stories often go untold.

When immediate event planning is needed, everyone turns to that person, who is no different from those beside them, but carries the burden because they can handle all roles, from leader to teammate. While masters may perfect their craft, taking away our credit, we are busy lamenting our lack of specialisation and admiring their polished talent.

We are model students, avoiding trouble with teachers or peers, making decent scores without excelling or failing. We maintain a balanced social circle without stirring animosity. People seek our opinions, often receiving the right one. We find ourselves writing speeches or choreographing dances because we are always willing to help.

This versatility doesn't come effortlessly; it requires effort. We strive to be involved in everything, and that matters. Though we may lack mastery, we offer great company anywhere, having researched topics you might wish to discuss. Above all, we embrace being simply jacks.

The service dream

From rejection and self-doubt to resilience and a hope for success

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It's that time of the year when news channels and dailies feature the journeys of Civil Services Examination toppers.

For a few, it is the time to rejoice, to revel in the light of success after spending years inside the four walls of a room with only books as companions. However, for many others, it means rejection, self-doubt, dispiritedness, anxiety, and depression. No, I don't belong to either category at present. My tryst with the exam

ended 10 months ago when I failed the preliminary examination in my last attempt. When the mark sheet came, it turned out that I had crossed the cut-off for the actual paper but failed the aptitude test. This was more painful. Imagine securing 100% in your board examination in all subjects and then failing in physical education. This is exactly like that.

One might say, what is even the purpose of pondering on this? Well, for us aspirants, the pain never goes away. The aspirants' journey entails a sheer amount of hard work and a great deal of resilience, patience, and



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endurance. You will always find characters around you who never fail to demotivate you or discredit your effort. They would say: "A probability of 0.01% and you think you will make it? Ha, don't waste your time." Or, "Oh, that person was an IITian, and that is why they could clear it."

Having the service dream in itself is a courageous move. For most of us aspirants, it is a

dream that holds meaning, a dream that can transform lives, a dream that goes beyond self and puts others first. While most of our non-aspirant peers are crossing various milestones in life, we are different. We find happiness in that room, rummaging through our notes, revising the new and old amendments made to the Constitution, visualising the world map in our heads, and recalling the architectural achievements of the Cholas. We are happy because we are hopeful that one day all this effort will have a beautiful ending.

Failure in this journey is not uncommon, but it remains limited to the selection process. At the end of it all, you will succeed in becoming a better version of yourself. However, the pain still remains.



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kicking up the sand by the side of the road. A phone was placed nearby. Thinking that he must be covering up some forgotten relic, I walked up to him. He gestured to me to go away. How was I supposed to know that he was "grooving" to the latest Badshah?

And that was just the beginning. Little did I realise that I had to deal with these Gen-Z Michael Jacksons on a daily basis – at train stations, in front of bathroom mirrors, and in the middle of roads.

Where else can they find a gaping audience emanating silent words of encouragement?

To be honest, before I

toddlers to octogenarians, anyone can take to the real stage and shake a leg (or break one).

An old couple, sporting sunglasses, were devotedly learning the #KatchiSera dance steps on their terrace while their son sneaked away with his girlfriend. I heard this story from an acquaintance who shared my apathy towards reels.

More worrying is the state of those constantly trying to perfect the art of making reels. They change costume every minute, practise the same dance steps a few hundred times and ask my opinion – a few thousand times – and in the end choose not to do the reel. These people have taught me the most important lesson in life – to not talk about reels.

Instead, I talk about the sky, the flowers, and vainly attempt to tweet #Lookupplease.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The story of Bryan Johnson reminded me of Yatayi in the *Mahabharata*, who borrowed the youthfulness of his son to stay young. ('The race to become superhuman'; Apr. 28) All these biohacking practices are not scientifically corroborated. Curiously, the practitioners are not qualified doctors and gullible people obsessed with ageing are easy targets. The concept of a superman is a myth but what we can do is increase our wellness through lifestyle modifications.

T.N. Venugopalan

At present, biohackers lack any regulation and accountability. Safety risks are plenty and protocols are seldom followed by DIY practitioners. Though intermittent fasting and cryotherapy have their own relevance, sometimes they may prove costly.

Since all these activities involve risks, regulation is mandatory.

Shravna Ramachandran

Biohacking for achieving better health and fitness is definitely good. But extreme and unproven self experiments such as gene modification are too risky as they may lead to dangerous mutations posing a threat to human existence itself. Such practices need to be nipped in the bud itself.

N.S. Reddy

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A. Raveendranath

To downgrade the importance of the Civil Services is not a valid proposition. Those who come out successful in these exams are the crème de la crème of society, and those who denigrate it remind us of the 'sour grape' aphorism. Happiness is the ultimate touchstone. Doing what you like is freedom and liking what you do is happiness.

Lakshmi Sundaram

Happiness is the ultimate touchstone. Doing what you like is freedom and liking what you do is happiness.

A. Raveendranath

Touchstones of happiness

Not all can become an Elon Musk or Mukesh Ambani to lead a luxurious life. ('Aspiring to be Ambani'; Apr. 28) To be content with what one has and to eke out a decent living, will make people more happy; for happiness does not consist in things but in thoughts.

N.R. Ramachandran

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A. Raveendranath

Train travel

The comfort and human connection it offers during journeys cannot be matched.

Lakshmi Sundaram

A remarkable grandmother

She curated letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings, leaving behind a precious archive.

V. Vijaysree

Nouns and verbs seem to effortlessly take up each other's functions these days.

C.S. Krishnamurthy

Reflecting on language

Nouns and verbs seem to effortlessly take up each other's functions these days.

C.S. Krishnamurthy

Searching for the Mahatma

Exploring the legacy of Champaran, and a hope for a revival of Gandhian values.

J.N. Sinha

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Alcova

Among the many installations at the itinerant platform for freethinking design, Spanish designer Alvaro Catalán de Ocón's new addition to his 'PET Lamp Project' stood out.

Inspired by the interlinked architecture of the Frafra people's family compounds in Ghana, the PET Lamp Gurunsi series is woven from local elephant grass and recycled PET bottles by artisan weavers of Baba Tree Baskets (above). It merged cultural preservation of craftsmanship with sustainable recycling techniques. Another brilliant exhibit, its innovation and display, was Japanese architect Junya Ishigami's new furniture series. Walking into a brick grotto at the villa, originally used for ice storage in summertime, his collection of chairs, tables, partitions and lamps spilled out in an interplay of lightness and simplicity — exploring materials such as leather rattan, wood and steel.

**Dimorestudio**

At Dimorecentrale, the new multi-purpose space by Dimorestudio — one of Europe's most in-demand design companies — there were a number of stunning exhibits. From Bonacina 1889's rattan furniture to French fashion maison Yves Salomon's debut furniture collection, in collaboration with Chapo Crédit. But Dimorestudio's co-founder Emiliano Salci's 'Limited Edition' stood out. For the seven-piece collection, the Italian designer revived and contemporised classic pieces from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Think a chest of drawers with an organ (keyboard) shaped backrest in veneered boxwood or a lacquered wood sideboard with the base in brushed steel. All the pieces were deconstructed and reassembled, with modern accessories and lacquers in brass, gold and steel. Each piece came personally signed by Salci.

Vikram Goyal

Milan is always exciting, as Italy's historic heart of design, manufacturing and fashion. But it is especially so during the week of Salone del Mobile. Every April, the annual furniture fair sees the streets overflowing as thousands of makers, curators, and buyers convene for a week's worth of inspiration, conversation, antipasti and aperitivo. In fact, 2024 had a record-breaking 3.5 lakh plus people attend, to see over 1,950 exhibitors from 27 countries.

I always prefer to arrive on Sunday, to wander the fair before the crowds find it. It is when the locals come as well. This year there were more people from outside the design fraternity joining the throng, with hour-long queues at events such as the annual installation by Milanese firm

Dimorestudio and the launch of French luxury brand Hermès' interiors collection. It spilled over to the satellite fair Alcova's takeover of Villa Borsani, Modernist architect Osvaldo Borsani's former home, and the 19th-century Villa Bagatti Valsecchi, too. A 45-minute drive away, it featured 80 exhibitors from 27 countries.

There were several trends to be noted, across Salone and Fuorisalone (the series of fringe events and installations across the city held at the same time): innovative tables were ubiquitous, as were interesting vessels and table toppers. But the dominant one was the collaborations between luxury fashion maisons and designers — from Bottega Veneta X Le Corbusier Foundation to Yves Saint Laurent X Gio Ponti archive.

There was a strong spotlight on India, too. Jaipur Rugs celebrated the Indo-Italian connection through three

collabs: monochrome carpets with Chanel-owned yarn atelier Vimar 1991; a geometric series by Italian architect Michele De Lucchi; and Zig Zag, a collection of abstract designs by studio DAAA Haus. Vikram Goyal Studio had its second showcase at Nilufar Gallery — a series of limited-edition furniture (consoles and benches) and lighting fixtures (chandeliers and wall sconces) handcrafted by Indian artisans who specialise in heritage metalwork techniques.

Here are a few exhibits that impressed, as I walked around Milan, with its gothic and neoclassical buildings steeped in stories playing backdrop to contemporary design.

The writer is based in New Delhi, and has spent two decades refining a contemporary design language within the international collective design market.

DESIGN STOPOVER IN MILAN

The Delhi-based designer shares finds from Salone del Mobile — from lamps woven with PET bottles and Ghanaian grass to deconstructed furniture

The 'Time Traveller' exhibition, spread across the gallery's two venues, was a complex exploration of the story of design and its evolution. Among founder Nina Yasher's curation, Italian designers Andrea Mancuso and Christian Pellizzari made an impression. Mancuso's pieces evoked the artist's process — where abstract lines, doodles and concepts gradually take shape. His solo show, titled Pentimenti, was divided into three: Sgraffito (marble tables and chandeliers), Strata (coffee tables and vases) and Stria (centrepieces). With the creative use of materials such as marble, glass and bronze, the collection was an excavation of craft-driven techniques and novel material applications. Meanwhile, Pellizzari had an arresting display of red chandeliers and lightworks made with Murano glass. The story goes that the designer encountered vast bushes of Brugmansia (a plant with pendulous flowers) on a morning stroll and then envisioned the shapes recreated in Murano glass. His inspiration from Venice and Muranese art was visible in each piece.

Nilufar Gallery

For its eighth, and most ambitious, exhibition at Salone, the Spanish luxury house commissioned 24 internationally renowned artists and designers to create lamps — using materials and styles of their own choosing. Some remarkable pieces ensued, ranging from the rustic to the futuristic. Standouts included Canadian multi-disciplinary artist Anne Low's 'Fir Candle', made with brass and hand-dyed and handwoven silk; U.K.-based ceramist Akiko Hirai's 'Mangetsu to Mikazuki', a standing lamp in a weathered metal canister holding ashen birch twigs (pictured); and Japanese bamboo artist Hafu Matsumoto's homage to Loewe's famous Puzzle and Hammock bags, with an interwoven lamp.

Loewe Lamps

veiled satire on the political drama of 1970s India called *The Tale of the Talking Face*. The story of a princess whose autocratic rule brought nothing but suffering to her people, despite her ambition of progress for her country, is a universal record of the ever-deepening crisis of democracy and the threat of totalitarianism.

"One Hundred Years and Counting" shows that KG is still relevant, and it is for us to see how we can keep engaging with him," says Adajania, pointing out his sand-cast cement mural installation from 1969 — part of Gandhi Darshan's 'India of My Dreams' pavilion in Delhi — which talks about the Gandhian notion of the idealised village. Through it, she

explores his ideological affinity with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Rabindranath Tagore, who have "all been neutralised as icons, emptied of content or vilified". As she puts it, it is interesting to see a resurgence of the legacy of "arguably the most popular and relevant artist and teacher of independent India" through exhibitions across Mumbai, Vadodara and Kolkata, when the legacy of his peers is being extinguished.

Till June 21 at Emami Art, Kolkata Centre for Creativity.

The writer is an expert on South Asian art and culture.

A new retrospective in Kolkata aims to showcase the sheer breadth of K.G. Subramanyan's creativity



KG: Kolkata's Tamil visionary

Ritika Kochhar

During my visit to the Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC), a day after the opening of K.G. Subramanyan's retrospective at Emami Art, I hear several stories about the renowned artist. Mani da, as he was affectionately known, "had a sweet tooth", says Chaiti Nath, a programme executive at KCC. "A colleague used to bake cakes for him every weekend in Shantiniketan. Even though I only met him when he was already 'KG' [shortened from Kalpathi Ganpathi], and he would come for lectures surrounded by people, he was always nice to me. He even did a quick sketch in my notebook once."

Subramanyan, it seems, gave away his art to everyone — many of those who studied in Shantiniketan or visited the institution had received works from him. "Even then, there was enough artwork for so many retrospectives [like this one

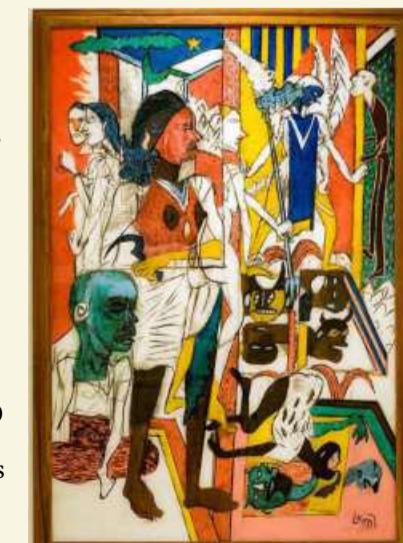
to mark the Kerala-born Tamil Brahmin's centenary birth anniversary]," adds Nath. Another person tells me that the late artist, who passed away in 2016, had a caustic sense of humour.

I seem to find mentions of KG everywhere I turn in Kolkata. Serendipitously, there are references to him even in *Holding Time Captive*, the biography of theatre persona and art collector Ebrahim Alkazi that I'm engrossed in. This comes as a surprise because I associate Alkazi with the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group and KG had his roots firmly in Shantiniketan and folk arts such as *patachitra*. They seem miles away from each other, but a Kolkata friend tells me that Alkazi helped KG travel to England as a Fellow at the prestigious St. Catherine's College, Oxford, in the 1980s.

Painter, activist, teacher
KG experimented with a range of materials as well as themes. Over

the 70-odd years of his career, he was a painter, printmaker, author, toy maker, muralist, and relief sculptor who made significant contributions to institutions such as the All-India Handloom Board and the World Craft Council Board. He remained an activist, institution builder, and teacher till the end of his life both at Shantiniketan and Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU) in Baroda.

This exhibition, *One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-Scripting KG Subramanyan* — which has over 200 works curated by cultural theorist Nancy Adajania from the collections of Seagull Foundation, MSU, and Asia Art Archive — looks at KG's large repository of work. As Adajania explains, this includes his "early paintings from the 1950s; iconic reverse paintings on acrylic, which look like polychrome stained glass windows; marker pen works on paper; postcard-size drawings from his visit to China; and toys made for the fine arts fairs". It also



A polymath's legacy (Clockwise from above) *The Reaper*; reverse paintings on acrylic at Emami Art; K.G. Subramanyan preparing for a puppet show in 1968; toys made by the artist. (SEAGULL FOUNDATION, ASIA ART ARCHIVE, INDRAPRAMIT ROY, AND VIVIAN SARKY)



has never-seen archival material such as handcrafted mock-ups of his children's books and preparatory sketches for murals. The maquettes of his final mural, the massive 2.7 x 10.9-metre, black-and-white acrylic on canvas called *The War of the Relics* (2013), which uses motifs from myth and contemporary culture to show the medieval mindset of human confrontation, are stunning. KG was 88 and had just had major surgery when he decided to make the huge piece.

Telling it like it is
But KG's activist mindset didn't just extend to the grandiose. My favourite part of the exhibition is a children's book that is a thinly

explores his ideological affinity with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Rabindranath Tagore, who have "all been neutralised as icons, emptied of content or vilified". As she puts it, it is interesting to see a resurgence of the legacy of "arguably the most popular and relevant artist and teacher of independent India" through exhibitions across Mumbai, Vadodara and Kolkata, when the legacy of his peers is being extinguished.

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