



# magazine

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**Fanboys and girls** Scenes from Rubik's Cube tournaments and events across India. (R. RAVINDRAN, PTI, G. KRISHNASWAMY, M. KARUNAKARAN, V.M. MANINATHAN AND GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

# 50 YEARS OF THE CUBE

How a Hungarian professor's humble teaching tool charmed the world and continues to hold sway in the digital age

**Devangshu Datta**

**I**n a September afternoon in 1980, I boarded the Coromandel Express at Howrah station. The train arrived at Chennai Central (then 'Madras Central') early evening the next day. I caught another train from Egmore that night, and disembarked at my destination, Cuddalore, the next morning. I remember very little about the details of that 45-hour trip because I was caught in the grip of an infatuation that continues, intermittently, to this day.

Before I boarded the Coromandel, a family friend who had returned from the U.S., gifted me a Rubik's Cube, the classic 3x3 version. The Cube wasn't yet commonly available in India and I had never seen one before. I would learn later that it had already been around for six years. The inventor, Ernő Rubik, an architecture professor from Hungary (then a Communist country part of the Soviet Bloc), was already world-famous.

I spent that entire journey sleeplessly playing with it. Slowly, I worked out a solution: first solve a layer, then solve the corner cubes opposite that layer, then solve the edge cubes. I could easily reduce to just two edge cubes out of place. But fixing that last pair was very, very hard. Working it out took most of the 45 hours and my solution was a long way from optimal.

Within months, the Cube became commonplace. Local knockoffs were

being sold for ₹10-₹20. Many people had worked out solutions, or mugged them up from "cheat-sheets". Chess players were using chess clocks to compete in speed cubing contests. "Speedcubers" were taking them apart, and lubricating the mechanisms with Vaseline to make them turn faster.

Today, 50 years after Rubik invented this puzzle that was so intriguing it took him a month to solve, it continues to be popular. This despite being a mechanical construct in a digital age. Officially, over 500 million Rubik's branded cubes have been sold, and Canada's Spin Master Corp., which owns the brand, claims

it made around \$75 million in revenues from it in 2023. Unofficially, knock offs to the tune of several billion have been sold.

**Journey of evolution**  
Ambar Chatterjee, who retired as the head of the nuclear physics division at Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, is someone else with cubing experiences from 1980. He bought a cube off a Mumbai footpath and quickly realised he would have to write down his moves to devise a systematic solution.

Chatterjee (also a keen chess player who is president of the All India Web Chess Federation) borrowed an idea from chess to figure out a notation that was similar to what is now the standard cube notation. He took the cube apart to understand its mechanics and spent about a month to record all the transforms he worked out.

But when he showed the solutions to his BARC colleagues, they were unimpressed. "I had to keep looking at my transformation sheet and my notes, while newspapers were already full of stories of youngsters who could solve it in a few minutes," recalls Chatterjee. He fine-tuned his methods and practised solving without his notes. "I came across an article by mathematicians from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in *Science Today*. One of them solved the cube using group theory. The sequences given were much shorter than the ones I had worked out," he remembers.

**CONTINUED ON**

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Stanley Carvalho

**A**fter three novels, British-Indian author Sunjeev Sahota's latest, *The Spoiled Heart*, is another skilful piece of work that confirms what a gifted writer he is.

His debut book, *Ours are the Streets* (2011), was a powerful story of a Sheffield-based young Muslim man's search for identity and his political radicalisation.

Unlike his previous novels, where the narrative alternates between Britain and India, his latest is set entirely on British soil although he continues in the same vein, tackling contemporary political and social concerns. After all, by his own admission, Sahota is on the Left and has been in union and labour movements for years; he is critical of identity politics and a believer in solidarity and economic justice.

A multi-layered, intriguing and compelling page-turner, *The Spoiled Heart* is as much a tale of trade union politics, class-race divide, misogyny and elitism as it is about love, grief, and the mystery surrounding two families.

Set in the industrial city of Chesterfield in central England, the plot has two main strands – the political and the personal – revolving around the protagonist, Nayan Olak, a 40-plus Sikh factory worker who has earned the admiration of his peers for years of tireless union advocacy. Following the tragic death of his mother and son in a fire two decades earlier and consequently his marriage break-up, Nayan, who is immersed in union work, decides to run for General Secretary of the city's largest union.

**Battle of wills**  
He is pitted against British-Indian Megha Sharma who is younger, better educated, from a privileged background, and the union's first-ever Head of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The duo battles the election on differing ideas and visions leading to a vicious and destructive campaign that boils down to the working-class vs. the elite, or class vs. identity.

Nayan, a veteran unionist, with his "curled charisma", swears by "politics based around solidarity and universalism" and broad-based economic reforms to benefit the working class while



Author Sunjeev Sahota  
(GETTY IMAGES)

begun a relationship with Helen Fletcher, a health worker, who, after disappearing several years ago, has returned to town, son in tow. Nayan is also burdened as caretaker of his abusive father, battling dementia and Parkinson's.

In his heart of hearts, Nayan is an upstanding human whose mission in life is to improve the lot of the working class, a fact everyone knows. Even his colleague, Richard, who ditched Nayan to join forces with Megha, cannot hold himself back from wishing him well when he is compelled to resign: "You'll be missed. You've been the place's beating heart." One can be the beating heart of the place but hearts do get spoiled, reflects Nayan and departs quietly.

**View from the outside**  
Sahota has employed the outside-narrator device, telling the story through the eyes of Sajan, a journalist-cum-writer and Nayan's childhood friend. Through interviews with the main characters, Sajan, detective-like, leads the reader in unravelling Nayan's past, the mystery behind the fire, Helen's dark secrets and her role in Nayan's life and his inevitable downfall.

Deftly structured, with rich characterisation and a lively pace, the author has explored equality and equity and the nuances of disparate political views in building solidarity within the working class, while neatly blending politics into the narrative without sounding didactic. Add to that the imaginative telling of the family story, of loss and belonging and more.

In the end, one wonders why authors use excessive cuss words. Is it to convey the attitudes or toughness of the characters or the values of society? Sahota too drops many F-bombs (even during formal speeches and within the precincts of a gurudwara) which seem gratuitous and unnecessary.

That said, with two Booker nominations (one, a finalist) under his belt, will Sahota score a hat-trick with this latest? I'd wager that.

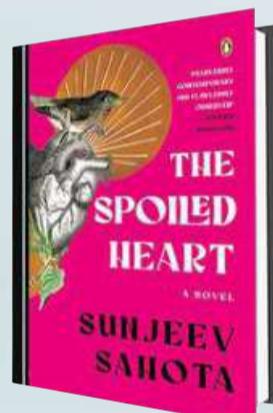
*The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist and writer.*

## GAME OF LIFE

Twice Booker-nominated Sunjeev Sahota deftly explores local politics and issues of race and identity in his latest novel

Megha, the "change candidate" donning the badge of identity politics, roots for special initiatives for oppressed groups. Megha pulls out all the stops to ensure victory but when Nayan's popularity continues to soar, she resorts to defamation and lying to wrest the election from Nayan, who is now at his wits' end. "My life's being destroyed in front of my eyes,"

**Sahota has employed the outside-narrator device, telling the story through the eyes of Sajan, a journalist and the protagonist Nayan's childhood friend. Through interviews, Sajan leads the reader in unravelling Nayan's past**



**The Spoiled Heart**  
Sunjeev Sahota  
Hamish Hamilton  
₹699

he confronts Megha who audaciously responds with, "Then stand down. Resign. That's all people want..."

On the personal front, Nayan is caught up in a complicated love story. He has

# Pole-vaulting translators

**When translated works deliver a nice little literary jolt by not just retelling the classics, but sometimes recreating them to appeal to audiences**



Mini Krishnan

**H**aving watched translators at work for many years, I think it would be fair to say that translation lies in the broad zone of evangelism: it is a deep reading of a text to interpret it in a completely different language from the original, for a completely new readership. The re-tellings that translators undertake are in the service of a certain power. Why do they choose a certain text? Often it is a difficult-to-explain drive, a "calling". They are convinced they have to make available in another language, something that deserves to be more widely known. What drives them is not fame or money though these things might have occurred to them.

Most successful translators have the capacity to forget themselves and become obsessed with writer A or text B. ("I'm suffering along with my characters.") At the most inconvenient of times I receive calls where I'm expected to drop everything and respond to: "Ei – you know what? I think I've got it!". It is a joy to listen to their enthusiasm in the world of publishing which has (had to) become uncomfortably calculating.

Translation involves re-telling as seen, for instance, in the circulation of folklore about the origin of rice, the origin of human races, or about why crocodiles are sinister and not to be trusted. A literary extension of this is 're-creating', sometimes close to the shore, sometimes risky breakaways, and translations mirror these 'creativity grants'.

Our Puranic stories appear with different characters and regional features in different re-tellings, all rich with re-creations both emotional and satirical. The basic framework of the story is familiar but it carries brilliant twists and swings. For instance, the *Mappila Ramakatha* has Shoornpanaka preparing to approach Rama:

*Her age since birth came to fifty-six  
But with effort she could seem less than forty  
...And for her disorderly teeth she  
hammered her gums...*  
(M.N. Karassery, 1987/ John Richardson Freeman, 2008)

### The queen's mandate

From the 16th century comes a Telugu work by poet Timmana, titled *Theft of a Tree*, in which relationships between the divine and the human are reimagined. The poem is based on an incident in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* where Krishna presents a parijatha flower from Indra's garden to Rukmini, his wife on earth. But the mischief-maker Narada, who gives Krishna the bloom in the first place, carries this information to Krishna's favourite wife Satyabhama.

The latter throws a tantrum and demands that Krishna fetch the whole tree from Indra's celestial garden. Well – that is done after epic battles and the humbling of Indra's forces. But in this

**Stories old and new** A scene from the play *Humare Ram* (by Gaurav Bhardwaj), based on the *Ramayana*. (PTI)

Telugu retelling, there is a nice little literary jolt. When Krishna begs Sathyabhama to be patient and asks for both forgiveness and a chance to make it up to her, he kneels before her. She is so angry that she lands a kick on his forehead! No other version of this story carries this shocker.

So what about this retelling? Well, the background concerns the genius of the poet Timmana who was part of Queen Tirumaladevi's dowry when she arrived in Krishnadevaraya's kingdom as his bride. Legend has it that one night, when she crept into bed, she accidentally placed her feet in the king's face. Outraged, Krishnadevaraya banishes her from his presence. Timmana's poem attempts to reinstate his queen, as if to say – look, even Krishna took a kick to the head, so your highness might overlook your queen's mistake. The story of this theft has threaded its way through Indian retellings for more than a thousand years (5th, 13th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries), the earliest reference appearing in the Sanskrit *Harivamsa*. It is also in many Puranic texts, including the *Vishnupurana*.

### Divine blooms

Recreating, to suit the civilisational code of different peoples, brings me to another example. In a workshop conducted in Thiruvananthapuram, participants were asked to bring regional language translations of the Sermon on the Mount. Versions of Christ's words entered the classroom dressed in Oriya, Hindi, Malayalam, and two translations from Tamil. Of the many Hindi versions available, what was read out carried a charming Indian inculcation in its rendering of the famous line: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall see God".

Translated into English, the Hindi read: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive a shower of petals from Heaven" ... Now the New Testament doesn't mention flowers but to a population used to descriptions of divine approval arriving in the form of blooms and blossoms, this would have appealed greatly.

Likewise when *Romeo and Juliet* was staged in Kannada in 1910, the audience couldn't bear its tragic ending and the next performance of the same play closed with the lovers brought back to life by Vishnu.

Thus do translators pole-vault walls of geography and culture to locate their texts in unfamiliar terrain.

*The writer coordinates a translation project for the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation.*

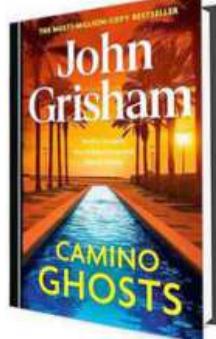
## BROWSER

### Camino Ghosts

John Grisham

Hodder & Stoughton

₹699  
After *Camino Island* and *Camino Winds*, we are back to bookseller Bruce Cable and novelist Mercer Mann for another juicy tale about a deserted island and its last inhabitant, Lovely Jackson, who will do anything to keep a realty developer away from her home.



### A Slight Angle

Ruth Vanita

Viking

₹699  
The novel is set in 1920s India and follows a group of young people in Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Banaras as they navigate life and dreams. Will the undercurrents of a nation on the brink change their destinies forever, or will they learn to swim with the tide?



### Parade

Rachel Cusk

Faber & Faber

₹629 (ebook)

The author of the autobiographical 'Outline' trilogy of novels, tells a story set in the art world. All the characters are simply called G, and their lives are intertwined, in a narrative that stretches the meaning and limits of storytelling.



### The Remains of the Body

Saikat Majumdar

Penguin

₹499

Known for his exploration of human sexuality, the author weaves an intricate tale in his latest novel about friendships, relationships and intimacy, through the lives of three Indian immigrants in North America.



# Ashwin's web

How a gully cricket player became a great off-spinner



Fine spin R. Ashwin in action at M.A. Chidambaram Stadium, Chepauk, Chennai. (B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM)

K.C. Vijaya Kumar

vijayakumar.kc@thehindu.co.in

An Indian spinner always steps in weighed under gargantuan expectations. It comes with a rich legacy as twirly men have always spun webs. Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh had to deal with the shadow of the famous quartet headlined by the late Bishan Singh Bedi, and ironically the duo inadvertently flipped pressure onto their successors.

It is to R. Ashwin's credit that he withstood the strain and with 516 Test wickets is second to Kumble (619) among Indians and is currently placed ninth in the overall tally led by Muttiah Muralitharan (800). The man from Chennai surely has a story to tell.

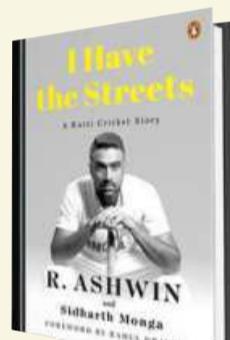
#### Quest to improve

It is an endeavour in which Ashwin finds an ally in Siddharth Monga, ESPN Cricinfo's cricket correspondent, and their joint effort is *I Have the Streets*. The book chronicles Ashwin's transition from gully cricket and his quest to constantly improve. The spinner bares his heart to Monga, who transcribes copious voice notes and gives it shape.

From being a batter to becoming one of the finest off-spinners, Ashwin throws light on the way he challenged himself. He asked his coaches for inputs, sought opinions from batters at nets and he always had questions. Equally self-aware, he writes: "In my case, acceptance will come only with performance because, aesthetically, nothing stands out about me when I bowl in the nets. No one watches me bowl and goes, 'Wow'."

There are also passages delving into his fielding and his obsession to be known as a good athlete with safe hands. Ashwin is also candid about his early days of romancing Prithi. Essentially, this book, which is also a thank you note to Chennai, reflects his love for Tamil, and there are lovely descriptions about his street-cricket friends.

Maybe since gratitude is so obvious, the usual formal acknowledgement note goes missing in this tome. Perhaps, there could be a sequel, as the book winds to a close after India's triumph in the 2011 World Cup. Ashwin made his Test debut after this epochal event and he and Monga may traverse the remaining distance over the coming years.



I Have the Streets  
R. Ashwin and  
Siddharth Monga  
Penguin Random  
House  
₹599

C. P. Rajendran

Arup K. Chatterjee's recent book, *Adam's Bridge: Sacrality, Performance, and Heritage of an Oceanic Marvel*, offers a scholarly socio-cultural insight into the enchanting geological feature called the Adam's Bridge (also known as Ram Setu). The structure in question is a linear coralline ridge separating a shallow sea between Pamban Island on the southeast coast of India and Mannar Island on the northern coast of Sri Lanka. Celebrated in Hindu mythology as a 'bridge' or 'setu' built by lord Ram's army, it has been a hot topic of discussion both among environmental scientists and religious enthusiasts, ever since the government mooted the idea of dredging a navigable route through the limestone shoals. Chatterjee takes us through a complex web of ethnography, historiography, and ecological equity concerning this oceanic structure.

#### Marvel of nature

In this eloquent work, the author enables us to think about ways of

K.K. Kailash

**T**hink of coalition politics in India, and to any student of Indian politics, the first name that comes to mind is likely to be Eswaran Sridharan. *Elections, Parties, and Coalitions in India: Theory and Recent History* brings together a collection of his articles on various issues that have shaped Indian politics since 1989. The themes covered include party system transformation, the rise and decline of political parties, political finance, and various aspects of coalition politics. Though they have previously appeared in academic journals and edited volumes, having them in one place will give that scholarship a wider audience.

Sridharan's work embraces ingenuity and rigour, combines theory with empiricism, and covers various related areas.

#### Focus on ground realities

Some coalition studies focus on theory building and avoid getting into the messy empirical details of how parties and leaders behave in the actual world. While these studies give us sophisticated models, they are often far removed from reality. At the same time, in the context of India, description has frequently triumphed over explanation. Description without an explanatory framework is tedious and vacuous and does not help understand or explain phenomena. Theory and empiricism must complement each other as they do in Sridharan's work to be helpful.

Two features consistently stand out in his work. First, he is squarely rooted in the 'soft-rational choice' tradition, which assumes that the actions of human beings are purposive and goal-motivated but not necessarily wholly directed to maximising individual benefits as assumed by the 'hard-rational choice' school. While political parties are motivated by election and re-election, they are also constrained by policy preferences, goals, and values.

Second, Sridharan's explanatory framework is located in the institutional school. This approach has significantly contributed to our understanding of coalition behaviour in the context of India and has also enriched comparative studies. Most coalition propositions have primarily been derived from the experiences of political systems that are unitary rather than federal, use a proportional representative system (PR) of electoral laws rather than the first-past-the-post system and are consensual rather than majoritarian parliamentary systems. Sridharan's work underlines the inadequacies of conventional theoretical propositions drawn from particular institutional settings.

#### Structural findings

Three particular findings from Sridharan's work about the first-past-the-post system and Duvergerian dynamics and how they change the incentive structure for political parties are worth highlighting. First, unlike proportional representative systems, where post-electoral alliances are the norm, there is an incentive for pre-electoral coalitions and alliances under the first-past-the-post systems to prevent the wastage of votes. Second, he also pointed out that a small vote swing in the first-past-the-post systems could

**Power walk**  
Bharatiya Janata Party supporters at a rally. (ANI)



# AFTER THE VERDICT

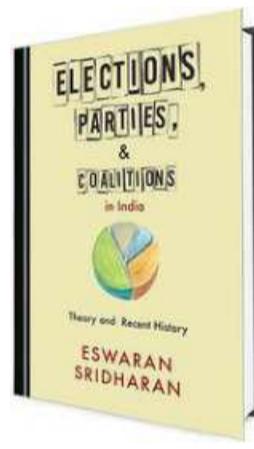
Eswaran Sridharan's essays will help readers make sense of the current turn to a coalition government at the Centre

disproportionately impact seat shares. Third, third-placed parties/candidates in such a system could become pivotal players if they play their cards correctly.

On the federal dimension, there are two noteworthy contributions. First, Sridharan finds that the division of power between multiple levels of government makes the State-level power politically attractive for parties to form single-State parties. Duvergerian dynamics then lead to two-party or bipolar state-party systems. Given the cultural and linguistic differences across the country and the variation in the politicisation of cleavages, we could have multiple bipolarities that could lead to a multi-party system at the federal level.

Second, he demonstrates that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) strategically entered into alliances, leveraging its third-party position in different parts of the country to expand its geographical footprint. This "bridging alliance" strategy enabled the BJP to overcome numerous deficiencies.

**First, minority governments can survive when the opposition is ideologically divided. Second, the Indian parliamentary rules only require governments to show that the majority does not oppose them rather than demonstrate a majority**



Elections, Parties, & Coalitions in India: Theory and Recent History  
Eswaran Sridharan  
Permanent Black  
₹1,095

they could also form in executive-dominated majoritarian systems under three conditions. First, minority governments can survive when the opposition is ideologically divided. Second, the Indian parliamentary rules only require governments to show that the majority does not oppose them rather than demonstrate a majority.

**Congress' role**  
On the survival of the Congress party, he notes that it would be tough to recover as an umbrella party, given the social and economic transformation that has taken place. Given the changes in the political economy, the Congress would have to reinvent itself, balancing growth and equity. He warns that pushing itself to become a 'pro-poor party' could be self-limiting when a large section of the electorate identifies as middle class.

All those who want to make sense of the current turn to power sharing and coalition governments at the centre, should read this book.

The reviewer is with the Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad.

that led to the fall of the government in 1996. It allowed the BJP to spread out and increase its numbers, create a pool of supporters, and, more importantly, check the Congress, the other main polity-wide party. This desire to become coalitionable gave State-based parties a greater say at the national level. Territorial compatibility and alliances have since become the main coalition-enabling component of India's coalitional system.

In coalition studies, minority governments were considered to be a product of a particular institutional milieu. Sridharan's studies have shown



# Protecting a 'geo-heritage'

An objective historiography of the Ram Setu argues why it should be left alone

heritagisation of this marvel of nature by fostering cross-cultural collaborative efforts. He does not allow the otherwise widely prevalent dichotomy between religion and science to affect the historiography of Adam's Bridge because he offers to answer whether the 'Ramayan legacy,' as he calls it, is adequate to historicise and produce objective knowledge on Adam's Bridge or Ram Setu. Besides the obvious challenge of multiple versions of *Ramayan* – several of which do not even tackle

the episode of the building of the legendary bridge – Chatterjee's task is made more complex by the fact that he intends to give no inferior weightage to the history of science, anthropology of religion, colonial history, history of cartography in India, the administrative history of dredging plans in the Sethusamudram region, environmental history, the plight of Tamil fishermen on both sides of the international border, and so on.

Like this reviewer, Chatterjee too

perhaps understands that the current frenzy to legitimise Indic myths and legends through 'scientific' jargon may have some political value but the long-term losses to its reputation can undermine the short-term profits for some groups. Where Chatterjee differs resolutely from rigid scientific or religious notions is in suggesting that scientific temperament, geological awareness, and religious sentiments can play complementary and not conflictual roles in society.



Adam's Bridge:  
Sacrality,  
Performance,  
and Heritage of an  
Oceanic  
Marvel  
Arup K.  
Chatterjee  
Routledge  
₹10,920

Lanka with Ramayan's 'Lanka'.

Colonial Orientalists popularised the phraseology 'Ram Setu' in the 18th and 19th centuries when Hindu merchants of Jaffna and Tamil country were not as sentimentally attached to the idea of a legendary sacred 'bridge' connecting India and Ceylon. However, according to Chatterjee, the Sethupathis of the region had been the protectors of the 'Sethu' since at least the fourteenth century.

The book ends on a philosophical note, which suggests that the region around Adam's Bridge needs to be monumentalised as a sacred 'bridge' and preserved as a 'geo-heritage'. The environmental fragility of this region does require serious conversations, and pseudo-science and post-truth are certainly not the way forward. This book will be extremely significant for those who desire a reasonably objective historiography of Ram Setu.

The reviewer is an adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and author of 'Rumbling Earth: The Story of Indian Earthquakes'.

**Lost in colours** Rubik's Cube-inspired artists L. Narasimha Sri Charan and (right) Hariprasad C.M. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



CONTINUED FROM  
» PAGE 1

Now, at 71, Chatterjee says, "I want to try it again afresh! This time, I am going to replace the stickers with chess figurines. The six faces will be king, queen, rook, bishop, knight and pawn. This may introduce another constraint of symmetry since the pieces will need to be oriented with the same side up."

Cubing remains a global passion with old-timers like Chatterjee looking to innovate while many youngsters pick up the mantle of quick-solving. India has plenty of hobby cubers and many local speed-cubing competitions, though it's yet to make a big splash at the world speed-cubing level. It does have cubers who have done unusual things such as solving it with their feet, though. Speed cubes are no longer lubricated by Vaseline – they come with internal magnets and better materials to twist smoother.

There are also multiple variations on the original Cube. The World Cube Association (WCA) hosts biennial "twisty" world championships with 17 variants, including cubes with different numbers of pieces to

each side (2x2, 3x3, all the way to 7x7), as well as modified shapes such as the Pyraminx (pyramid) and Megaminx (dodecahedron), blindfold events, and so on. The WCA also helps enthusiasts organise cubing competitions everywhere.

**Fastest fingers**  
There are speedcuber legends like Max Park, the Korean-American world champion. Ratified WCA world records are measured down to the hundredths of seconds. Park's speed record for the 3x3, which he set in 2023, is 3.13 seconds. Park, who is autistic, has a legendary rivalry with the Australian champion, Feliks Zemdegs, though they are also close friends. There is a moving Netflix documentary, *The Speed Cubers*, featuring these two champions and their relationship. The 100 fastest single-solve WCA times are all under 5 seconds and there isn't an Indian in that list. The national championships have, however, featured sub-5-second timings but no Indian has yet done it in a WCA event.

The learning curve for solvers has changed as the world has gone digital. Over the decades, hundreds of solving

## 50 YEARS OF THE CUBE



### A great stressbuster

Rubik's Cube is a truly remarkable and minimalist invention. It is preconceived, it facilitates attention, memory, pattern recognition, and visual spatial functioning of the brain. Unlike digital gaming, it does not stimulate the senses through constant stimuli. Instead, it facilitates goal-focused and determined actions with persistence – all life lessons, especially for the young. It is pro-mental health, and a great stressbuster for those struggling with anxiety and mood symptoms. However, addiction has been reported with the Cube (individual experiences rather than case series) and it does expose one to the risk of "wanting too much of what one perceives as the good thing".

**Dr. Ennappadam S. Krishnamoorthy**  
Neuropsychiatrist and founder, Buddhi Clinic

a doctor and his daughter. Now that girl has become a doctor, too. Some of my students joined because they were impressed seeing their children or grandchildren solve the Cube." Muthukrishnan also conducts free workshops, including free training for orphans.

### A therapeutic tool

As research around the Cube indicates, software developers tend to be interested in cubing and the hobby runs across generations. Sirish Somanchi, now in his mid-40s, first started playing with the Cube 30 years ago. His children also like solving.

Somanchi points out how the Cube shows up in pop culture. "For example, Will Smith gets a job in the 2006 movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* because he can solve the Cube." There are also anecdotes of the Cube featuring in Google and Microsoft interviews. However, Somanchi chuckles as he admits he's never been asked to solve a cube at a professional interview. The Hyderabad engineer also says his children have learnt by watching YouTube videos, whereas he picked it up by searching online for algorithms.

In the case of S. Aswin, another software developer, the interest was inherited. The



### I think probably the Cube reminds us we have hands...

**I think probably the Cube reminds us we have hands... You are not just thinking you are doing something. It's a piece of art you are emotionally involved with... New generations have developed the same strong relationship with the Cube**

**ERNŐ RUBIK**  
Inventor of Rubik's Cube

The writer is a journalist with an abiding interest in mathematical puzzles.

variants as well as simply solving.

Shaun Pinto from Bengaluru is a classic representative of the younger generation of cubers. The 15-year-old has just finished Class X and he averages under 15 seconds solving the 3x3. "I first solved it when I was seven and could do it then in about five minutes, and then slowly started chipping away at my times. I used to compete quite a bit a few years ago," says Pinto. "The cubing fraternity is one of the most wholesome and welcoming communities, it's easy for anybody to feel welcome, no matter their speed, age, disabilities, etc. Children who get into speedcubing have really good social circles, a healthy sense of community and belonging, and end up with valuable life lessons. The pursuit of improving it is also a very beautiful one."

His words are a reminder of Park's experience. Park's mother Miki taught him the Cube in order to help him develop his motor coordination skills. She discovered him starting to connect with other cubers and became more socially comfortable as well. Using the Cube as a therapeutic tool, or a way to enter an accepting community may be a possibility.

Professor Rubik conceptualised the Cube as an interesting teaching device that would help students develop a sense of 3D shapes and patterns. It also helps to develop visual memory and hand-eye coordination as solvers learn more algorithms and instantly identify what works. Fifty years down the line, the little multicoloured toy has become a cross-cultural icon that helps connect people across continents.



**Purnima Sah**  
purnima.sah@thehindu.co.in

**L**ast month, on the 50th anniversary of the Rubik's Cube, Mitsubishi Electric's TOKUFASTbot set a new Guinness World Record by solving a 3x3 puzzle in just 0.305 seconds – the time it takes a human eye to blink. The human record for solving a 3x3 Cube stands at 3.13 seconds (USA's Max Park, 2023). According to the World Cube Association (WCA), there are 2,21,713 cubers in the world and 17,610 in India, the fastest of them being 17-year-old Abhishek R. (9.71 seconds) from Kerala.

Since its invention five decades ago, lovers of the Cube have found new ways to take this game of twists

# YOUNG SPEEDSTERS ON THE RISE

From a club at IIT Bombay to international tournaments, India's cubing enthusiasts are slowly making their mark and nursing hopes of government support



**Cubers at IIT Bombay's Rubik's Cube Club; and (top left) speedcuber Shivam Bansal.** (EMMANUEL YOGIN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



who says, "All the cubers who participate or organise do it out of personal interest as there is no sponsorship or recognition for this as a sport by the government."

**Broad appeal**  
Software professional Shivam Bansal, 24, from Agra, has been cubing since 2010. A former world record holder in 3x3 multi-blindfolded (MBLD), he is currently ranked fourth in the category, and is the Asian champion in 5x5 blindfolded and MBLD. He is the no.1 Indian in Kinch ranks, which is the overall ranking in Rubik's Cube. He also holds two Guinness World Records in MBLD 48/48 and most cubes solved in an hour by a team. "The inspiration runs in the family as my sister,

**Behind a competition**  
Soham Adarkar, co-founder of Cubenana, an online store for cubing supplies, has been competing and organising Rubik's Cube events since 2015. So far, he has participated in 42 competitions and organised and supported over 30 official competitions and several unofficial cubing events across Maharashtra, Kerala, New Delhi, Punjab, Goa, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. To organise a Rubik's Cube competition, he says, one just needs a sound understanding of the game, a venue and a good team. "Once the pre-requisites are met, you send a request to WCA, which regulates all official speed cubing competitions across the world," adds.

For a country that chucks out chess grandmasters by the dozen, it comes as a surprise that the Rubik's Cube is still considered a mere toy, continues Adarkar. "Although the competitions are self-funded and the organisers don't make any money from a competition since the WCA is a recognised non-profit, we do it for the community."

Saumya, is also a cuber," says Bansal. "She is the only Indian female cuber to participate in two world championships. She is also the former female national record holder in Pyraminx, Skewb."

A cuber from the age of 10, Bansal has his sights set on the upcoming Rubik's WCA Asian Mastership 2024 to be held in November, and the WCA World Championship 2025 in Washington.

**Professor Rubik**  
Rubik's Cube was invented by professor Ernő Rubik, a Hungarian architect and sculptor. He created the cube in 1974 as a teaching aid for his students at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. The cube consists of a 3x3x3 grid of smaller cubes, allowing it to be twisted and turned in various directions. It was first sold commercially in 1980 and quickly became a global phenomenon, with millions sold worldwide.

**We want to encourage more people to take up the Cube.** All the cubers who participate in or organise events do it out of personal interest as there is no sponsorship or recognition for this as a sport by the government

**ABHIJEET GHODGAONKAR**  
WCA trainee delegate and Advisory Council Member

President Droupadi Murmu with Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and foreign dignitaries at the ceremony. (PTI)

Some people feel the NSCI head should be chosen by a three-member committee consisting of the prime minister, leader of the Opposition and a prominent crony capitalist. I disagree. I feel the judicial model would work better to preserve my autonomy. So I was thinking I could be appointed India's Swearing-In-Chief by a collegium, consisting of my uncle, my aunt, and my gastroenterologist.

**Who do you bear allegiance to?**  
By the way, I find the entire process, as it stands currently, outdated, and one size fits all. Not every minister-designate believes in God, or in the Constitution, for that matter. How does it help to make an unbeliever and/or closet Constitution-hater "swear in the name of God" that he will bear true allegiance to the Constitution of India and that he "will do right to all manner of people in accordance with the Constitution and the law, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will".

Once I'm appointed, the first thing I'd do is customise the pro forma text for each individual based on his character and political history. If I find that he loves his mother and adores kickbacks, I'd edit his oath such that he swears "on my mother" instead of "in the name of God", and if he ever found himself or his colleagues doing corrupt things, he would send all the evidence to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

History has shown us – through countless scams – that public servants don't always "do right" or follow the Constitution. Guess why? It's because they weren't sworn in right. All I'm saying is, let me fix this.

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



### GREEN HUMOUR

**Rohan Chakravarty**



### ALLEGEDLY

## Let me swear them in

I am excellent at saying 'T. Happily, it is also the most important word for the swearing-inner

**W**atching the grand ceremony on June 9, I couldn't help thinking I'd make a great swearing-inner. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to be President. All I'm saying is they could hire someone like me for the actual, physical part of the job, like the Railways hires caterers to feed passengers.

I'm not seeking a permanent job. A contractual position with no PF, no holidays, and no fixed working hours is also fine. I would do this for free, except that it might give the impression anyone could do it. Anyone can't. I'm sure Mahatma Gandhi would be hopeless at administering oaths – he was too obsessed with truth.

I, on the other hand, have what it takes. First of all, I am excellent at saying 'I'. My wife says the most common word out of my mouth is 'I'. Happily, it is also the most important word for the swearing-inner. Since I have a lifetime of practice, there would be

zero chance of stammering, stumbling or mispronunciation.

**Not a one-person job**  
As for compensation, I'm willing to settle for ₹50,000 per 'I' per minister. With two 'I's per minister – one for the oath of office and one for the oath of secrecy – I would have earned a modest ₹72 lakh on June 9. Friends who know about my unique talent tell me I should charge different rates for different categories of public officials. The highest rate should be for the President, which could be ₹2 crore, since it is a matter of national prestige. India might be a poor country, but you don't want a cheap oath-administrator at a ceremony attended by ORS-sipping oligarchs.

The next highest slab would be for the Prime Minister, set at ₹1.5 crore. In case a prime minister-designate has a massive ego and takes umbrage at being sworn in at a lower rate than someone else, I don't mind

accepting an extra ₹51 lakh. But that has to be in cash, as there obviously can't be a money trail if we are bending the protocol. Some Marxist types may find this remuneration too high for an evening's work. But do consider that swearing-in is the most important act of a public official. No cabinet minister can do a single thing – no one will even pay them a bribe – unless they do this first.

Thinking ahead, I also conducted an oath-taker survey across states and Union Territories. Turns out, swearing in is not a one-person job. There are way too many posts and I can't be everywhere at once. Even if I could, what about my carbon footprint? So, I would need a Secretariat, like the NHR. We could call it the National Commission for Swearing-In (NCSI), headed by the Swearing-In-Chief (me). The NCSI would have mini-secretariats in every state, and a staff of 2,000 to serve filter coffee, rava dosa, and ras malai to visitors.

## FROM SHELDON TO SPIDEY AND WALL-E

Pop culture and the Cube as a metaphor for love, life and everything in between



iconic of them all, is from the Will Smith classic *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2008). In 1981, Smith's penniless salesman protagonist Chris Gardner meets hotshot stockbroker Jay Twistle (Brian Howe) in a taxi. Twistle heads Dean Witter Reynolds, a large brokerage and securities firm of the 70s and 80s. This is Gardner's one shot at entering the world of finance and he impresses Twistle by solving a Rubik's Cube during the cab ride (in a previous scene, we saw him practising in his bedroom). Gardner is asked to join the firm as an intern stockbroker. The producers of the film hired 22-year-old Tyson Mao to train Smith for this scene. Mao is a Taiwanese-American speedcuber and one of the founders of the World Cube Association.

During the pandemic, a number of American pro basketball players took up the Rubik's Cube as a way of killing time during lockdowns. NBA legend Steph Curry, widely

considered one of the greatest

players of all time, uploaded videos of himself solving the Cube on Instagram. He later learnt how to solve the Cube blindfolded as well (there are several well-documented algorithmic methods). It is rare to come across a toy or a puzzle that holds such a broad appeal among people of all ages and descriptions, and that's what makes the Rubik's Cube such a special thing.

**The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.**

end, we see him having solved the puzzle – which is also the only coloured object in his reality. Of course, the process of solving the Cube also mirrors Noir's existential crisis as the story progresses. The Spidey scene reminded me of the versatility of this simple and sweet device. *WALL-E* (2008) famously used the Cube as a romantic gesture between the robot protagonists WALL-E and EVE. The Jennifer Lopez music video for 'Ain't Your Mama' (2016) showed the singer playing women from every decade starting with the 1950s, with the video being structured as a mini-history of second-wave feminism. She is shown to excel at tasks that men around her are struggling with, and in one moment she takes a Rubik's Cube from a waffling man and solves it on the spot.

**The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.**

More recently, the vivid colours of the Cube were used in an interesting visual gag, in one of the most original animated films of recent times, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). In this film, we see Spider-Men and Spider-Women from different realities converging to train Miles Morales, the Spider-Man in the 'default' reality. One of these alt-Spiders is Spider-Man Noir (Nicolas Cage), who comes from a black-and-white reality as suggested by his name. The grim, brooding Noir, tortured by the bloodshed that marks the crime-fighting life, is preoccupied by a Rubik's Cube that he keeps on his person at all times. Towards the

end, we see him having solved the puzzle – which is also the only coloured object in his reality. Of course, the process of solving the Cube also mirrors Noir's existential crisis as the story progresses. The Spidey scene reminded me of the versatility of this simple and sweet device. *WALL-E* (2008) famously used the Cube as a romantic gesture between the robot protagonists WALL-E and EVE. The Jennifer Lopez music video for 'Ain't Your Mama' (2016) showed the singer playing women from every decade starting with the 1950s, with the video being structured as a mini-history of second-wave feminism. She is shown to excel at tasks that men around her are struggling with, and in one moment she takes a Rubik's Cube from a waffling man and solves it on the spot.

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**The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.**

## FROM CULT TO CULTURE

The community is the transition zone between the monotheistic and polytheistic mythologies of West and South Asia

## TRACING PARSIS AND THEIR MONOTHEISM

**I**n finds the agiary on the western coast of India, in Mumbai and towns such as Sanjan and Diu in Gujarat. These fire temples of the Zoroastrians, frequented by those who call themselves Parsis or the people of Persia, are distinguished by their unique artwork that evokes memories of ancient Mesopotamia: giant winged bulls with human heads, and birds with human torso and head.

These creatures can be traced to 8th century BCE Assyrian architecture in the lands we now call Iraq. They eventually made their way to Persia, by 5 BCE. The fantastic beasts combined the strength of bulls and eagles, and were seen as servants of the 'one true God'. This was a revolutionary

idea in the otherwise polytheistic and pagan ancient world.

Gods were represented by images back then, and housed in temples. But the Persians chose fire, preferably that which came from the sky as lightning, to represent the formless Ahura Mazda – the benevolent power, one who is not a jealous god, one who does not demand obedience. Persian monotheism influenced the Jewish community, which was exiled in Babylon at the time. The Jews were seeking a narrative to unite the displaced tribes, and they were inspired by Persian ideas such as Paradise, the Devil, and the Day of Judgement. Though the Jewish god would be a jealous one, seeking absolute fidelity and submission. Thus was born the Jewish *Bible*,



which would later become the *Old Testament* of the Christians, and would influence stories referred to in the *Koran*. The world forgot the origin of these stories, but they still survive in India, a land that gave refuge to all religions. Albeit conditionally.

**Embracing caste to survive**  
As per legend, and documented in the 16th century CE in works such as *Qissa-e-Sanjan (Legend of Sanjan)*, the Parsis arrived on the Gujarat coast over a thousand years ago, seeking refuge from Arabic invaders. The local Indian kings – the

**Temple guardians** The *godha* or human-headed winged bull at Udvada Atash Behram, Gujarat. (DELZAD KARANI/GETTY IMAGES)

Pratiharas and the Solankis – were reluctant to accept them as refugees. They were apprehensive of foreigners because they were aware of the rising tide of Islam. The refugees, however, assured the king that they would not proselytise their faith or convert locals. They would, instead, mingle 'like sugar in milk' – adopting the Indian way, speaking the local language, and dressing up as the natives did. Caste rules were implied.

Even today, the Parsi community has strict rules of endogamy, and non-Parsis are not allowed to enter the agiary (just as many temples forbid entry to non-Hindus).

Ironically, the community owes its rise during colonial times to the fact that the British found them easier to deal with (they ate meat and eggs) than the Muslims (who they never trusted) and the Brahmins (whose caste rules they found annoying).

The 19th century saw more Parsis coming to India, particularly to Mumbai. A century later, Persia had been renamed Iran by Reza Shah, a Nazi sympathiser, who wanted to remind the world that the word 'Arya' was first inscribed by the Achaemenid emperor Darius the Great over 2,500 years ago, at Behistun, a large rock relief in the mountains of western Iran. The new wave of immigrants to India were called Irani, and became famous for their cafe culture. Though they follow the same monotheistic faith and come from the same homeland, Irani are seen as a separate community by the Parsis. Caste manifests in various ways, one could argue.

**Indo-European connection**  
The Parsi community forms the transition zone between the monotheistic mythologies of West Asia and the polytheistic mythologies of South Asia. Genetic, linguistic and archaeological evidence now informs us that the eastern arm of the Indo-European speaking people, who domesticated the horse and invented the chariot around 2000 BCE, settled in the Oxus basin around 1700 BCE, where they were exposed to a thermogenic herb. They split into two groups – one went west towards Iran, and referred to the herb as 'horna', while the other crossed the Hindu Kush, and came east to India and called the herb 'soma'.

The former mingled with the Mesopotamians and became monotheists under influence of a prophet called Zarathustra. He referred to the Devil as Angra Manu, and to demons as 'div'. The latter referred to their gods as 'deva'. For the west-moving Arya people, Yima was the first human; for the east-moving Aryas, Yama was the first human who died. The two groups would meet as strangers, nearly 2,000 years after the separation, and they would discover their common roots, rather alarmingly, because of enquiries by European racists on the origins of civilisation.

And despite the Aryan connection, neither can the Hindus enter the Parsi agiary, nor can the Parsis enter orthodox Hindu temples, in the 21st century.

**Devdutt Pattanaik**  
is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.

## GOREN BRIDGE

## Interesting hand

North-South vulnerable,  
North deals

**Bob Jones**

**T**oday's deal is from a recent tournament in Europe. The given auction is a little obscure, but many pairs reached six diamonds, presumably after different auctions. A club slam might seem better but note that a club slam would quickly fail after a diamond ruff.

What would you lead against six diamonds with the West hand? Many players led the ace of spades. Declarer had no trouble from there, ruffing in dummy and knocking out the ace of diamonds. Should they need an entry to hand in order to finish drawing the trumps, the jack of clubs was the key entry. The contract also made easily on a heart lead.

**NORTH**  
♦ Void  
♥ A K  
♦ J 10 9 4  
♣ A K Q 9 7 6 3

**WEST**  
♠ A J 9 5  
♥ Q 9 8 4  
♦ A 8 7 3  
♣ 5

**EAST**  
♠ Q 10 8 6 4 3  
♥ J 10 6 3  
♦ 5  
♣ 8 2

**SOUTH**  
♠ K 7 2  
♥ 7 5 2  
♦ K Q 6 2  
♣ J 10 4

**The bidding:**  
**NORTH EAST SOUTH WEST**  
2♣ 2♦ 3♦ 4♣  
5♣ Pass 6♦ All pass

**Opening lead:** ?

Several West players cleverly led a low spade from their ace. Declarer could have made the slam by discarding from dummy, but they naturally ruffed and the slam was defeated.

West's ability to hold up his ace of trumps was crucial to the defence.

Only one West player, Karol Lohay from Slovakia, found the killing lead of the five of clubs. It might

seem silly to lead a singleton when there is no chance that partner will gain the lead. A club ruff would be impossible. The lead killed declarer's jack of clubs entry before he was ready to use it. Lohay ducked the first two trumps, won the third, and led the ace of spades. Declarer ruffed in dummy, but could not get to his hand to draw the last trump. Nice lead!

## QUIZ

## Easy like Sunday morning

What has June 16 ever given us?

**Berty Ashley**

**1** On this day in 1884, a new attraction called the "Switchback Railway" was opened in New York's Coney Island amusement park. LaMarcus Thompson designed it specifically as a ride rather than convert a pre-existing system. Two parallel tracks descended from 50-ft towers and gave people a view of the landscape. What was this the very first example of?

**2** Born this day in 1890, English comedian Arthur Stanley started his career onstage in music hall. He was an understudy to Charlie Chaplin with whom he travelled to America on the same boat. In 1921, he starred in the movie, *Lucky Dog*, along with Oliver Hardy, and soon they became a legendary pair for three decades. How better do we know Arthur, and the duo?

**3** On this day in 1903, this company was formed, eventually becoming the second most valuable brand in its sector globally. Initially created by Caleb Bradham and sold as 'Brad's Drink', it was later renamed to advertise the fact that it relieved dyspepsia. What brand is this?

**4** On this day in 1911, this company was founded as the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company in New York and specialised in record-keeping and measuring systems. When it started making punch-card tabulating systems in 1924, it was renamed, which eventually



**'Where legends are born'** The Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, from July 5-20 this year, is the second-largest annual jazz festival in the world after Canada's Montreal International Jazz Festival. (GETTY IMAGES)

became known by its acronym. Now the largest industrial research organisation in the world, which company is this that is also known as the 'Big Blue'?

**5** On this day in 1960, this cult psychological horror film opened in New York City. Shot entirely in Black and White, and revolving around a controversial subject it became a surprise hit even getting nominated for four Oscar awards. Which culturally significant movie is this that in its aftermath had many women complaining that they were afraid to step into the shower?

**6** On this day in 1963, the Soviet Space Program launched their mission Vostok 6. The cosmonaut onboard spent three days in space (more than all the

astronauts had done till then combined). Till date, the youngest and the only one to have done such a flight solo, who is this record-breaking person who as of 2024 is the only surviving Vostok cosmonaut?

**7** On this day in 1967, Swiss-born Claude Nobs launched the first Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland that eventually became a legendary event. In 1971, a hard rock band was in the audience to watch musician Frank Zappa perform at a casino on Lake Geneva, when an audience member foolishly let off a flare gun. It caused a fire that burned the casino down but Nobs personally saved a lot of lives. The band wrote a song about this, which made them world famous. What band and song?

**8** On this day 1977, this organisation was incorporated in California as Software Development Laboratories (SDL), by Larry Ellison, Bob Miner and Ed Oates. Eventually, they became the third-largest software company in the world. Which company is this, named after a character from Greek mythology who could predict the future?

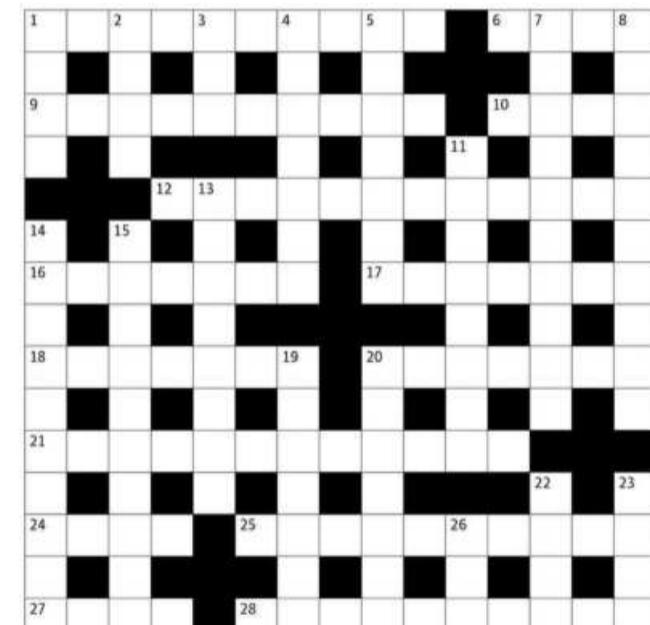
**9** On this day in 2010, this country became the first nation to institute a total ban on tobacco calling it 'reprehensible regardless of whether it was viewed from a religious or a public health lens'. The ban was temporarily lifted in 2020 during the COVID crisis to stop the illegal traders coming from its neighbouring country, India. Which country is this?

**10** On this day in 2018, during the World Cup, this technology was officially used for the first time. Referee Andres Cunha awarded France a penalty, leading to 2-1 win over Australia. What technology is this that a referee asks for by miming a box with his hands?

**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

10. VAR (Video Assistant Referee)  
9. Bhutan  
8. Decade  
7. Deep Purple — Smoked on the water, a fire in the sky  
6. Valentina Tereshkova  
5. Roller coaster  
4. IBM  
3. Pepsi  
2. Stein Laurel of Laurel and Hardy  
1. Assistant Referee

## THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3311

**Across**

- 1 Charts showing me origins of shipping forecast areas: peril at sea (6,4)
- 2 Hosts, quietly bitter ones (10)
- 3 Ceremony, ponderous pronouncement crashes pips regularly (4)
- 4 Bloody bell sounded by Spooner lookalike (4,6)
- 5 Fish eaten by Martha Kearney (4)
- 6 See 20d
- 7 Marian welcomes Tara's tip, one that's out of this world (7)
- 8 Bohemian radio's dead air (4-3)
- 9 Intro to *Loose Ends* interrupting journalists: they rise in irritation (7)
- 10 Fashionable panelist on the radio, one putting you in stitches? (7)
- 11 Mysteries arisen: bears with start of *Things Fell Apart*? (5-7)
- 12 Award describing second letter from Soul Music producer (4)
- 13 Powerful man alongside Nick Robinson at the start and end, dancing about? (10)
- 14 Check third character in *Just One Thing*'s heading off (4)
- 15 Artist had yarn with owl, taking part in *Ramblings* (4,6)
- 16 Line of assault course (7)
- 17 Countless cuttin' (7)
- 18 Initially, Everyman's trusting Claudia Hammond to make impression (4)
- 19 Brian Aldridge, somewhat obsessive (4)
- 20 Woman's Hour, yes, covered one who laughs (3)

## SOLUTION NO. 3310





# Lost in a mountain of books

**There are still people who buy paper editions and build a personal library**

Vivek K. Agnihotri

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**T**hese days, it is neither fashionable nor feasible for families to have a library at home, except for keeping some coffee table books. Even those who like to read would rather watch videos on the books and authors, or read the e-book editions, which are cheaper and do not require space for storage in cupboards.

But there are still people, not necessarily of the older generation, who prefer to read paper editions of books and read them by turning pages and

occasionally smelling their distinct aroma. Some of us not only read books but also have personal copies which are copiously marked for reference. Some of us also record meticulous notes on the margins or on the back pages of the book for various purposes, including writing articles. A recent bestseller could serve as an ice breaker or form the basis of an opening gambit when you meet a friend who is part of your coterie.

Over the years, I have collected a large number of books and after reading them, also distributed them by mini-truck loads; not to mention those that were borrowed and never returned. When living at places with no easy access to bookshops, I often joined book clubs which delivered one book every month, including classics as well as popular fiction. I have also occasionally gone berserk at railway stations and airports in search of something new which caught my attention.

Of course, I have borrowed books from libraries, taken notes and returned them. However, I had a sad experience in my university library whenever I went there to pick up a classic. Quite often I found the relevant pages either torn or cut out in those bad old days, before the popularisation of the photocopier. It made me realise that it would be better if I could have my own collection to the extent possible. I also borrowed books from the personal libraries of some of my professors, which was a better option.

But an early experience which kept me away from the library for a number of years I still cannot forget. I was in school then and my teacher, who considered me a good student, advised me to read a particular

book by borrowing it from the library. I had never been to a library before that. I went and met the librarian and told him that I wanted a particular book. In a casual manner, which is peculiar to professionals, he told me to get the details of the book from the catalogue and pointed his finger towards a stack of shelves. With great trepidation, I reached that section at the back of the library. Initially I did not know what to do. After some opening and closing of drawers, I realised that there were cards with the names of authors and the titles of the books written thereon, arranged in some order. Still I was a bit confused about how to proceed.

I stood there looking this way and that when I found another student coming my way. I told him about my predicament. He was patient. He told me how to go about looking for the details of a particular book. After some difficulty, I located the accession card of the book I was looking for. With great joy, I pulled it out, tearing the perforated portion in the process, and came to the librarian and placed the card before him.

"This is the book I want," I said. The librarian was aghast and looked at my face as if I was a creature from early part of the creation. He not only shouted at me for a long time for my misdemeanour in causing the devastation but also imposed a fine, to pay which I did not have enough cash. He said that it would be added to my school fees. My father not only paid the fine but also bought me that book and other books which I might need, without batting an eyelid. And they proved to be the building blocks of my personal library.

## An unexpected connection amid the clouds

M.R. Krishnan  
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**I** found myself aboard a flight, nestled into my cherished window seat, armed with the intention of tackling my cluttered inbox. It was a weekend journey, tickets soaring into five figures, and I had splurged a little extra for the comfort of that preferred spot by the window.

As I settled in, preparing to embark on my digital clean-up mission, fate intervened in the form of a young mother and her lively five-year-old daughter. They approached me, their faces a mixture of hopeful anticipation and uncertainty, seeking a favour. The mother explained that she and her own mother were separated by rows of seats, and pleaded for a swap to unite the family during the flight.

I gently declined, citing my attachment to the window seat. Yet, as the cabin filled with eager travellers and the little girl's plaintive cries for the coveted view from the window echoed around us, a twinge of guilt gnawed at me. I couldn't help but wonder if I had made the right choice. Attempting to bury my discomfort, I dived myself into my digital tasks, but the weight of the situation lingered. It wasn't until the arrival of the flight attendant, bearing refreshments, when an opportunity for reconciliation found a way to ease the tension. With a simple gesture, I ordered two boxes of cashew nuts and extended one to the mother and child, a peace offering of sorts. Despite initial reluctance, the mother graciously accepted. Soon enough, she began sharing the nuts with her daughter, and our interaction led to a lively exchange of conversations. I must say the child initially refused to have the nuts, insisting that she wanted only noodles.

As the flight continued its journey, the mother continued the conversation, sharing tales of her family trip to Thanjavur, culminating in a warm exchange as we bid farewell upon landing.

Reflecting on the unexpected turn of events, I realised the profound impact of a simple act of kindness – a small box of nuts that had opened the door to understanding and companionship, turning what could have been a tale of missed connections into a story of shared humanity.

## A transplant that is best avoided

**Relocating to another continent may not suit the elderly, though many go with the flow and do not complain**

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**D**octor, we just came for a check-up. Our daughter is in the U.S., and she is due for delivery. We are going to be there with her for the next one year, to look after the baby."

The elderly couple, both with chronic heart disease, were medically fit to undertake the trip.

"Have a nice time," I said smiling.

"Doctor, visiting the U.S. for a holiday for a few weeks is nice, but now that we have been there thrice, there is no charm. This time, we are going to fulfil our duty as baby-sitters. Cloistered indoors during winter with snow outside, no way to get out, no place to go and no neighbours to talk

to, it is really depressing. My son-in-law has sent all the tickets and arranged wheelchair transfer for us to avoid hassles at transit," the husband said.

I have heard this familiar dialogue at least a dozen times in the past six months.

Travelling to the U.S. last time, I counted up to 19 healthy-looking elders waiting to board on a wheelchair. During the 13-hour flight, I walked down the aisle and chatted with a couple of them, and they turned out to be travelling for a similar unpaid baby-sitting.

On a bright sunny day in May 2015, the University of Michigan campus was getting ready for its first unique transplantation programme, one that would take place without a scalpel or blood spill and



were inflated to lift the tree up. A mobile crane lifted the tree and laid it flat on a huge tow truck, and the tree was eventually transported to its new location and replanted. Six months later, the first new leaf sprouted indicating that the \$4-million project was a success.

Did the tree like the new location, was it comfortable in the new neighbourhood, the new set of birds and squirrels? No one cared. The point that the relocation facilitated birth of a new faculty building was welcomed by one and all.

Relocation is uncomfortable, but children and young adults quickly adapt to it. I remember how excited my children were when we shifted to our new house. But my parents fondly remembered their old small "cosy" bedroom for years. Youngsters adapt easily, relocating old souls is a tough job.

Old, mature trees don't complain; even when relocated for the birth of a new project. Same is true for wheelchair-bound transcontinental elderly babysitters.

gaze into it, reflects the sludge, muck, and stagnation wrought on my mind by the day's stupor. But wait.

I let my gaze saunter slowly from surface to depth. I see the leaves of the water lilies shimmer. The baby paddy frogs sit stoically on the leaves. Their sibling tadpoles dart around so fast that it looks like a single tadpole appearing everywhere all at once. The fish rake up the muddy water looking for food. The puddle flies walk nimbly over the water. I see how even the unmoving dull mud undulates in corralled algal peaks and valleys. Then I reflect on how the mango leaves, yellow,

brown, and some even green, tremble to their death. The weaver ants bend lush green leaves to their iron will with their frail bodies. Dragonflies and damselflies fly in a symphony of point and counterpoint.

The bulbul shakes his crested head as he pops a fruit into his throat. The orb weaver spiders braid all this magic into their webs furnishing them with the fading sun's golden threads. I reflect on how the pond reflects all this embellished with frog eggs that criss-cross in grey threads. There are no dead stagnant places in our world. There is only life sauntering wildly over everything with silver, golden, and grey threads. And in the sauntering wild lies the preservation of everything.

## Seeing the world in a slushy pond

**There is life sauntering wildly over everything with gold, grey threads**

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**T**o saunter, says Thoreau, is to either rove idly in search of a holy land that one has no intention of reaching or to become so completely bereft of home that one is at home anywhere.

On a dreary evening, wilfully bereft of my home, I sauntered to the edge of a nearby pond that I had no intention of reaching. Having sauntered there with my feet, I sauntered now with

my eyes. A sludge- and muck-filled pond, it instantly conjures metaphors of a sluggish mind in which the clear stream of reason has lost its way. This pond, as I



### FEEDBACK

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

#### Cover story

It's time India maintains buffer cocoa reserves to avoid future shock. ('Why cocoa prices are driving people nuts'; June 9) The ethical practices of bakers and entrepreneurs in reducing profit margins and providing genuine cocoa products at standard prices are appreciated. India can also reap benefits by securing potential trade with Southeast Asian nations, which are also on the leader board in cocoa production.

**Sanath Kumar T.S.**  
**Viveka Vardhan Naidu**  
**Bhyrupudi**

It's good news for cacao farmers in India. They should reap the benefits of widening gap between demand and supply of cacao production worldwide. By adopting better crop management techniques and introducing high quality varieties, they can achieve increased productivity, which will fetch them good price as well as fame globally.

**N.S. Reddy**

With low production in African countries, India has got better chances of increasing the Forastero bean variety which is well suited under Indian weather conditions.

Considering the rising global demand for cocoa, states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu must explore and increase the current area of cultivation along the Western Ghats and hilly terrains.

**R.V. Baskaran**

In an era when limited overs cricket was unknown and lofted shots

were rare, Salim Durrani had some big-hitting sixes in his repertoire. ('Lord of flair'; June 9) The author of the book deserves praise for his biography on Durrani, the forgotten luminary of bygone times. Surely, the ingenious all-rounder deserved to play more than the 29 Tests he did for India.

**Green capital**  
Among the Baghs of Delhi, Amrit Udayan, formerly known as the Mughal Garden, holds pride of place. ('Baghs of past and present'; June 9) It is open to the public in February-March every year when it attracts people from far and near.

**N.Rama Rao**  
Gandhi is one of the few world leaders who has made a lasting impact on the people, leaders and societies in many parts of the world. ('On Gandhi's trail in South Africa'; June 9) As Albert Einstein had said, "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this (Gandhi) ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth".

**Kosaraju Chandramouli**

**Future foods**  
In a world of marketing and personal branding, collaborations could be the right choice for Indian chefs to showcase their calibre. ('The chef's gamble'; June 9) It's good to know that people are willing to try different cuisines instead of sticking to their traditional tastes.

**Sandhya Suresh V.**



### MORE ON THE WEB

[www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page](http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page)

#### A flair for criticism

The trick is in concealing the harsh truth and lacing the bluntness with veiled hints

**Nirmala Varma**

#### No retirement blues

Catch up with friends, have lovely conversations and revive hobbies

**Lakshmi R. Srinivas**

#### Read and make merry

Once the habit is formed, the craze and enthusiasm for books will never fade away

**Anuradha**

#### The tale of a wasted legacy

A desk abandoned despite it holding a rich legacy of literature

**P.M. Warrier**

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: [openpage@thehindu.co.in](mailto:openpage@thehindu.co.in) Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

## Vinita Makhija

**I**t is a warm day in the Chirang district of Bongaigaon, a two-hour drive from Guwahati, Assam. We are at the handloom section at the ANT (Action North East) campus. Since last year, Royal Enfield has been collaborating with the NGO – which works for women's empowerment and to create voluntary action in the Northeast of India – on 'The Himalayan Knot'.

The motorcycle giant's initiative is an endeavour to create meaningful fashion, focused on textiles from the Himalayan belt. Each edition, they will collaborate with prominent fashion designers who are expected to engage meaningfully with the entire value chain of creating a heritage textile piece over six to eight months. For the second edition, focused on capsule lines with eri silk from Assam and Meghalaya and Bodo weaves, it was silk worm rearers, spinners, dyers, weavers, and tailors.

At ANT, I'm on a special mission – to see the tiny silkworms (called *era* in Assamese) in person. All eri silk is miscredited as *ahimsa* (non-violent), but the tribespeople and Northeastern textile experts are quick to explain that it comes down to ethical practice. An honourable process takes around 50 days, one of the longest harvest cycles of any silk, making eri perhaps the most expensive. In the Northeast, conscious practice can also mean nose-to-tail eating – in this case, using the silk worms as a source of edible protein in Garo cuisine once it has finished spinning the cocoon. But as eri silk rearing is an important source of employment, many unchecked rearers raise the worms for the sole purpose of sale, encouraging increased mating cycles, which is contrary to the non-violence rules.

## Along for the ride

Mandeep 'Mandy' Merwah peers at a cotton patch that is being handwoven by a Bodo weaver, guided by Smitha Murthy, a design mentor at ANT. "The tiny bike motifs really speak to the rider in me," says the 52-year-old independent behaviour change trainer. Merwah is one of eight rider-researchers with us journalists on an immersive and exploratory trip organised by Royal Enfield.

The focus for them is to collect metadata for UNESCO, as part of the company's 'Social Mission' – discovering (charting new routes for travellers), documenting (via videos, interviews, written text) and promoting the Intangible Cultural



Through meaningful fashion capsules and in-depth documentation, the motorcycle giant's new initiative hopes to highlight regional practices of the indigenous communities

## HOW ROYAL ENFIELD IS DOCUMENTING THE NORTHEAST



Inspiration on two wheels (Clockwise from centre) Silkworm cocoons; at ANT; designs from the 'Country Road' edit; a weaver at work; and Eka's Korzok shawl. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

showcased his eri silk explorations in both India and abroad for over 25 years. His 'Jajabor' jacket (₹8,000), in the 'Homecoming' collection, includes an illustrated Assam map lined with rhinoceros. The 'Black and White Crossing' shirt (₹4,000) incorporates the ANT campus coordinates as woven design elements on the sleeve.

"It is not just about creating collections. The Himalayan Knot is a collaborative effort to bring together the Himalayan communities, conservation specialists, craftspeople, and designers to conserve pastoral land and safeguard the living heritage for future generations," says Bidisha Dey, executive director of Eicher Group Foundation. The project's final vision is to partner with 100 communities. The group is looking to highlight clusters in Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

The Himalayan Knot collections are exclusively available on [store.royalenfield.com](http://store.royalenfield.com).

The writer is a Mumbai-based fashion stylist.

Heritage (ICH) of India. The motoring company also intends to publish its findings in a book, and a rich digital repository is in place for future generations.

"For riders, long bike trips are usually about the road, the freedom, and [bonding with] friends. But spending so much time with the tribes and, in a way, being a record of their oral history is incredibly special," Mandy says. While I focus on Bodo weaving techniques, the rider-researchers will interact with the Garo tribe in Meghalaya, its chefs who are keeping their cuisines authentic, take part in *chubitchi*-making (Meghalaya's

famous rice beer), and connect with the custodians of the sacred Wangala dance.

**Weaving tyre tracks**  
Sushant Abrol, of up-and-coming Delhi-based menswear label Countrymade by Sushant Abrol, is one among three designers participating in the second edition. An avid rider himself, he says, "Owning an Enfield bike within two years of my design career, and now this collection is a testament to the power of manifestation." His collection consists of six jackets and shirts, aptly titled 'Country Road'. Made with cotton yarn in a Bodo

weave, it includes a black shirt inspired by tyre tracks (₹3,400), and a blue half-sleeve number featuring Enfield's famous '350' bike (₹2,950).

Meanwhile, senior designer Sonam Dubal, known for his fantastical jackets and decades-long work with eri silk has designed the 'Homecoming' capsule collection, and Rina Singh of Eka has created 'Go North' with Ladakhi pashmina for her edit.

**The silkworm cycle**  
A short ride from the ANT campus, we find ourselves in the centre of a village home. Under a cloth encasement, thousands of eri

silkworms chow down on castor plants. The worms feed for 21 days, and on reaching maturation, spin their cocoon. The sheath is spun with both sides open, making it easier for the worm to escape, and the silk can be classified as *ahimsa* or vegan silk – a preferred choice of textile for vegans, monks, and the Buddhist communities.

"I am a Sikkimese Buddhist. Being one with nature is in our blood," says Dubal, who was born in Assam and credits his upbringing in an inherently conscious environment for his design ethos. Favouring Asian cuts and a zero-waste ideology, he has

how we determine value in our lives. They'll also recognise the sculptor's affinity for figurative expression through the animal kingdom – horses, lions, elephants, birds and bears have all been rendered, often in stainless steel (with the help of skilled artisans) over a three-decade career.

"Stainless steel holds a particular appeal due to its strength, durability, and modern aesthetic," explains Ambani, who has also worked with bronze, fibre and wood when she was looking to imbue her works with a warm, timeless quality. "Stainless steel has proved useful [in this work] to aesthetically embody the nature of patriarchy. It allows for a clean, polished finish that can convey both power and precision, which is essential for a piece like *Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune*. The material's reflective quality also adds an interactive dimension, engaging viewers as they see themselves mirrored in the sculpture."

**Triggering action, motivating change**  
This piece has sparked personal reflection from visitors, says Ambani, whose previous appearance at the Venice Biennale, with the emotive work *Riderless Sky*, also triggered a great deal of interactive engagement. "I hope visitors take away a heightened awareness of the pervasive nature of the gender pay gap and feel inspired to take concrete actions towards achieving gender equality. The goal is to provoke thought, elicit empathy, and motivate change."

The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, writing on culture, lifestyle and technology.

## Patriarchy in stainless steel

A bull riddled with crimson arrows brings sculptor Sonal Ambani's statement on the gender pay gap to the Venice Biennale



Bullish Sonal Ambani; and the sculptor's work, *Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune*, at the Venice Biennale. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



**Strong, clean, mirrored**  
Across her three-decade-long career, Ambani has built a niche for large-scale, impactful work. It is a practice born of her parents' encouragement – her father ran an art gallery in New York, and they would take her to visit places such as the Storm King Art Centre, the iconic open-air museum in New Windsor.

She has presented work in prestigious rooms, including the Leila Heller Gallery, and was one of the artists selected for the Elephant Parade in 2018. Ambani has been

inspired by artists such as Anish Kapoor, Bharti Kher, Antony Gormley and Lorenzo Quinn – taking lessons from each on form (how to manipulate space or intricate craftsmanship) and content (identity and societal issues).

Those familiar with her work will recognise the bull from her pandemic-era piece *Ethereal Value*, which meant to spark thought on

## Nidhi Gupta

**Y**ears before she picked up the welding machine, Sonal Ambani's instrument of choice was the double bass. "At school, I was the first bass for my school's orchestra," says the artist-sculptor who grew up in New York and now lives in London. "Despite my hard work and ability, when the all-state orchestra was constituted, I was surprised to see that without an audition, it was assumed that a boy should play the first chair."

Ambani says she could not contextualise it back then, but after seeing a similar pattern repeat over and over again, it has become clear to her that

patriarchal structures not only create gender biases in opportunities for girls and women the world over, but also continue to perpetuate economic inequality. This realisation was further influenced by Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin's studies on women and work – all of which form the basis of Ambani's latest sculpture, on show at the 'Personal Structures' segment of the ongoing Venice Biennale.

At the European Cultural

Centre in Palazzo Mora, stands the poetically titled *Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune*: a bull (representing male hegemony) charging towards a circular red target, as crimson arrows pierce its thick, stainless-steel hide which itself is a filigree-like structure of global currency signs. To contribute to the dialogue to end such discrimination, this is Ambani's "visual metaphor for the gender pay gap".