

Author Hari Kunzru
(CLAYTON CUBITT)

Q: Was it easy to write about the experiences of characters belonging to a race different from yours?

A: People ask this question a lot because we've become very preoccupied with questions about authenticity in recent years; but you know, if you think about it logically, fiction would be impossible without these kinds of gestures of trying to occupy the experience and the position of people different from yourself as a writer.

If I was to restrict my characters to people who shared everything about me then there would be a lot of clones walking around the stage.

Q: Writers are increasingly coming under attack. How do you feel about this?

A: Freedom of expression is fundamental to writers. Obviously, we are heavy users of that particular freedom. And governments of all kinds and in all places seem to increasingly want to try and suppress speech that they don't like. It is important for writers to be in solidarity with each other and that is why when Salman [Rushdie] was attacked, I ended up on the steps of the New York Public Library, reading from his works as a gesture of support and solidarity.

Writers around the world have similar problems and I think those who have a public profile or platform must speak up and reassert this very important principle.

Q: As an author, are you worried about Artificial Intelligence (AI) taking over content creation?

A: I am much more worried about electricity. There are various kinds of AI models that are fascinating, and certainly it has already eaten into the livelihoods of illustrators, and there are certain sorts of writing jobs that will be threatened by AI. I'm less bothered about AI immediately coming for novelists. The most worrying aspect is the enormous amount of power it uses; it immediately led companies like Google to abandon their carbon neutrality goals, their energy goals, for the next few years. We are still in the climate crisis; nothing has changed, and yet this great new strain on power generation and energy hungry models is what makes me most nervous; they'll just accelerate the ongoing climate crisis.

Q: Your wife is a novelist. What does it mean to live with another writer?

A: It is an enormous relief to me because she understands the strange patterns of behaviour that you need to have in order to make this work.

Both of us understand that the other one needs a great amount of solitude to think and time to be away from the daily hustle and bustle of family life. We both work from home; we read each other's work. At a certain point, one person holds the fort when the other is away. I feel we are very blessed.

The interviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist and writer.

IN CONVERSATION

'ENERGY HUNGRY MODELS OF AI WILL ACCELERATE CLIMATE CRISIS'

Author Hari Kunzru on the most worrying aspect of Artificial Intelligence and on exploring the complexities of the modern art world in his new novel, *Blue Ruin*

Stanley Carvalho

Ever since he burst onto the literary firmament with a million-pound advance for his debut novel *The Impressionist* (2002), British novelist Hari Kunzru, 54, has continued to write at a steady clip, with seven novels and many short stories and essays to his credit. His latest, *Blue Ruin* (Simon & Schuster), is the last of a loose trilogy preceded by *White Tears* (2017) and *Red Pill* (2019), all connected only thematically. Set during the pandemic, *Blue Ruin*, through the central characters of artists Jay and Rob, explores largely the world of contemporary art and the conflicting pursuit of art for money versus art for passion. Neatly woven in the novel are themes such as love and friendship, money, gender, race, social inequality, as Kunzru shifts the narrative from pandemic days in upstate New York to 90s London. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: Were you inspired by Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three*

Colours trilogy of films for the title?

Answer: Actually, it came about almost by accident. Once you have a 'white' novel and a 'red' novel, there's a kind of an inextricable pull towards writing a 'blue' novel.

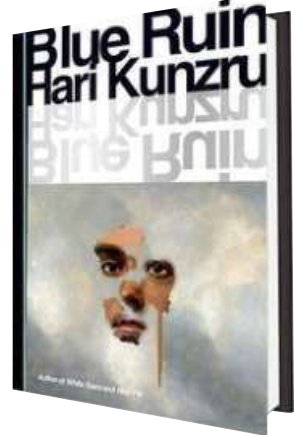
I am aware of Kieslowski's trilogy, which actually came out when I was quite young. They were in the back of my mind but I can't say there was a particular formal or thematic connection to them.

Q: In *Blue Ruin*, your protagonist is against the commercialisation of art, seeking freedom to create art that feels true. Your view on this paradox of money vs. freedom?

A: Every single person has to

face this whether they are artists or not. As a writer, you are faced with this paradox in a slightly different way, you have to be able to communicate widely enough and entertainingly enough that other people want to read. Most writers want to try and create something that's original, that actually stretches people or changes things in some way.

So, it is a kind of negotiation that everybody has to do and it is especially intense in the art world where there are large sums of money to be made if you created a particular kind of work and if you are lucky.



It is important for writers to be in solidarity with each other and that is why when Salman [Rushdie] was attacked, I ended up on the steps of the New York Public Library, reading from his works as a gesture of support and solidarity



Rising up Panels from *Woman, Life, Freedom*; and (bottom) author Marjane Satrapi. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Art of rebellion

Who better than Marjane Satrapi to headline an inspiring set of graphic novel-style essays on life in Iran? But the artworks lack surprise and the text is a tad listless

Joshua Muiyiwa

It's been more than two decades since Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, *Persepolis* (2000), took us behind the scenes of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Through the everyday life of a lippy, young girl growing up in this period, we experience and eavesdrop on the senselessness and strangeness of religious revolution. The arrests and brutal torture that follow; the constant, choking surveillance of the morality police; and the effects of the Iran-Iraq War – after all of this time, *Persepolis* remains plucky, poignant and powerful.

With similar expectations, I dove into *Woman, Life, Freedom*, an anthology of graphic essays, because 54-year-old Satrapi is the headliner and is credited with creating this collection. This volume takes its title from the protest chant, 'Jin Jiyan Azadi', of the 2022 feminist uprising in Iran following the beating to death of Mahsa 'Jina' Amini, who was arrested by the morality police for wearing her headscarf "improperly".

Over three sections, and through 24 graphic narratives, the 20 writers and artists collectively lay out the events surrounding Amini's custodial death in a Tehran prison and the protests ignited by her death. We get a refresher the course on climate and characters of the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, and finally, we are witnesses to the daily acts of continued resistance.

Stories of everyday courage

Through these comics, we learn "Iran's mythical history is brimming with fierce women who break chains and inspire freedom". We learn their names. We are given a sense of living under round-the-clock state censorship and the insidious networks of the 'Nofuzi', or Iran's morality police. We are visitors to Evvin prison, a



Woman, Life, Freedom
Marjane Satrapi
Seven Stories Press
₹2,899

"windowless and stinking" "hellhole" where the imprisoned women are tortured into signing false confessions of their immoral crimes. We learn the names of more women. We are told of Shakiba who cross-dressed as a man to watch a men's football match and of Sahar Khodayari, called the "the Blue Girl" who was caught sneaking into another one, given jail time and self-immolated in protest. These stories of courage from the everyday to the extraordinary are heartbreaking and inspiring. Cynically, it gives us an idea of the little it takes to upset the appletart.

A pleasure coaxed by the collaborative quality of *Woman, Life, Freedom* is the range of artistic styles showcased – from parodying political cartoons, seeming like illustrations in an artist's sketchbook, to some others that simply illuminate the text. There's Deloupy's realistic sensibilities with clean lines



and clear backgrounds to Bee's graphic style – most reminiscent of Satrapi – simple but emotive, to Coco's thickly applied lines and colourful panels to Joann Sfar's untethered, liberated lines. Touka Neyestani's caricature stylings in 'The Winter of Executions' is a standout, it speaks to the role of men in making the 2022 feminist uprising different from the previous times. These men were hanged to death, and here, they are given the dignity of having their faces seen. But the echo of the state's hand in their deaths haunts the pages with human legs swinging below each of their portraits. At the bottom of the page flows a river of blood, and the Ayatollah with a walking stick, drowning within it as we turn each page.

Haunting images

Also, the many drawings of Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the current supreme leader of Iran, become the commonality that allows us to gauge the varying styles of these artists. Here too, Neyestani's nightmarish vision of Khamenei as Zahhak, a mythical, cruel, bloodthirsty king from Persian lore, is the most notable. To add to the horror, this tyrant has two, human brain-feeding serpents rising out of each shoulder – an image that gnaws even as I write this review.

But much like revolutions in hindsight (don't shoot!), *Woman, Life, Freedom*, at times, feels like it had too many voices in the choir. And this collective squarely seems to be singing to the West. The graphic styles and imagery, while varied, feel too familiar. It doesn't fight to marry the calligraphic, geometric aesthetic of Islamic art with the modern graphic novel. Or set up any other opposition to this practice or format. Therefore, the resulting artworks aren't entirely surprising, and didn't linger with me for long. The accompanying text is too explanatory, and doesn't always match the energy of the drawings either.

But this graphic anthology does fulfil its duty. *Woman, Life, Freedom* is a reminder that the state's murder of Mahsa Amini isn't pointless, but I do wish, for martyrs in the future, that the lines they birth – both drawings and discourse – are sharper.

The reviewer is a poet and writer based in Bengaluru.

BROWSER

The Menstrual Coupé

Shahina K. Rafiq,
trs Priya K. Nair
Hachette
₹499
A celebration of the spirit of womanhood and the constant fight against patriarchy, the writer, a winner of the Kamala Suraiyya Award for Fiction, has put forth a bold and perceptive book that gives women the power to create their own realities.



Godzilla and the Songbird

Manzu Islam
Speaking Tiger
₹599
A story about divisions of religion, caste and ethnicity set in the tumultuous period of India's Independence, the book follows the life of an orphan who flees with his grandparents to East Pakistan, and goes on to become a journalist.



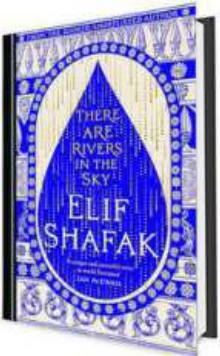
Our Bones In Your Throat

Megha Rao
Simon & Schuster
₹699
The poet and author writes about navigating the quiet truths of life, the fragility of friendships and the aftermath of passion in this sweeping tale set on an imposing college campus that also houses a mysterious forest.



There are Rivers in the Sky

Elif Shafak
Penguin
₹899
The new novel from the Booker-shortlisted author known for her feminist and romantic plotlines, takes the reader to times and places far apart yet connected through the Epic of Gilgamesh and the ancient city of Mesopotamia.



Fire fighter

In a candid memoir, former RBI Governor Duvvuri Subbarao takes readers through the highs and lows of a life in service

Anand Srinivasan

Duvvuri Subbarao is one of the Reserve Bank of India governors (2008-2013) who was tested as soon as he entered office. He had to navigate the Indian macroeconomy through the 2008 financial crisis, which had set off halfway across the globe but tremors threatened to reach domestic shores. Most agree that through a combination of prudent fiscal and monetary policymaking, India came out of the financial crisis relatively unscathed. He was tested again in 2013 when India had to deal with the infamous “taper tantrum” originating in the U.S. With a rapidly falling rupee and skyrocketing import costs, his tenure saw the dollar appreciate by over 19% against the rupee within a year. To add to the chaos, he oversaw the clamping down on inflation, which had surged during the same period. Nevertheless, it must be said that India showed remarkable growth over this period, for which at least some credit is owed to the RBI’s efforts and its ability to put out fires as they came up.

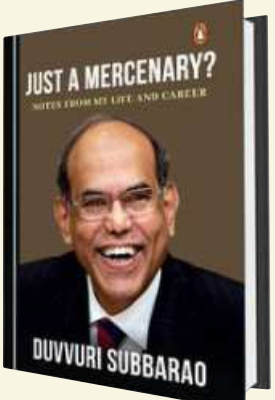
Frank admissions

His illustrious career as a member of the civil service, in tandem with his competence as an RBI governor, starkly contrasts with his frank admission of not knowing whether he ever served a higher purpose or did what was expected of him in the role assigned to him, as he writes in *Just a Mercenary? Notes from my Life and Career*. In loosely chronological order, we see the author contemplate whether he had merely acted as a mercenary rather than serving ambitions larger than just doing justice to the job assigned to him.

Subbarao cautions us at the beginning of the book to not expect any overarching structure as such but rather a series of notes and recollections. However, he invites readers to be more than mere observers but adjudicators of his professional career. The author’s narration and writing style give off an air of authentic candidness not commonly found. Subbarao does not shy away from crediting a part of his success to being at the right place at the right time.

Stumped at UPSC interview

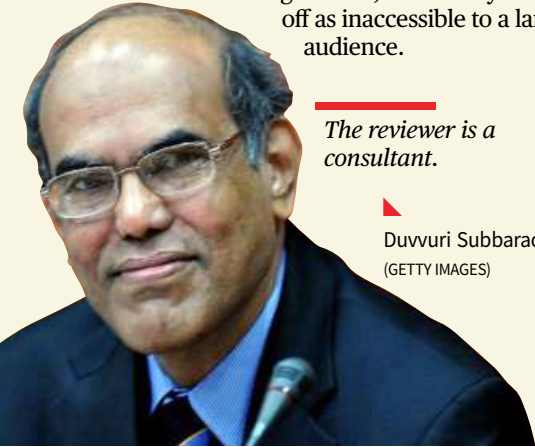
Moreover, it is amusing and even fascinating to witness an individual who had led India’s central bank through economic turmoil admit that he was stumped during his UPSC interview by some of the questions and had wanted to churn out an excuse for his inability to answer instinctively. Subbarao successfully brings a sense of humanness and humour through his refreshingly vulnerable and matter-of-fact narration. His wit, sometimes even sardonic, adds to the readability of the topic at hand, be it in the civil service or as the RBI governor, which may come off as inaccessible to a larger audience.



Just a Mercenary? Notes from my Life and Career
Duvvuri Subbarao
Penguin
₹799

The reviewer is a consultant.

Duvvuri Subbarao
(GETTY IMAGES)



Jacob Koshy
jacob.koshy@thehindu.co.in

It isn’t every day that one is in the middle of an earthquake and grateful for it. Arch Johnston, a seismologist with the University of Memphis, and a team of other specialists were in the Rann of Kutch, studying the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake in Bhuj, Gujarat, when another quake struck. “We saw Arch struggling to balance his tall frame, yet clapping his hands and laughing aloud and shouting ‘thank you,’” recount the scientists C.P. Rajendran and Kusala Rajendran in their book, *The Rumbling Earth: The Story of Indian Earthquakes*. Such anecdotes pepper this accessible, concise history of earthquakes, which is exceptional in that it comes from an Indian vantage.

Combining their decades-long scholarship, the book attempts to demystify earthquakes: What makes them hard to predict? Why are some regions more likely to be jolted than others? Is the loss of life and property inevitable in the wake of a tremor? Can knowing the history of earthquakes in a region make forecasts of future ones more accurate? What are aftershocks, foreshocks, plate tectonics, P-waves and S-waves?

Mysterious ways

Answers to these questions are the meat of the book, dispelling some of the intrigue surrounding earthquakes. The basic principles of astronomy, biology, chemistry can be comprehended as their dramatis personae – the sun, moon, stars, plants animals, metals – are visible. The earth sciences are relatively mysterious because the action is underground and invisible and involves gargantuan bodies moving incrementally over aeons and prodding cataclysmic changes.

The unexpected jolt that can strike anytime, accompanied sometimes by death and devastation, is linked to the same forces that slowly nudged a large independent island near Antarctica, that we know today as the Indian subcontinent, to eventually ram into Eurasia and create the Himalayas.

Only in the decade that men landed on the moon did earth scientists conclusively establish the theory explaining these links. Continents and the oceans weren’t immobile and rested on ‘plates’ which were in constant motion and floating on a layer of molten rock.

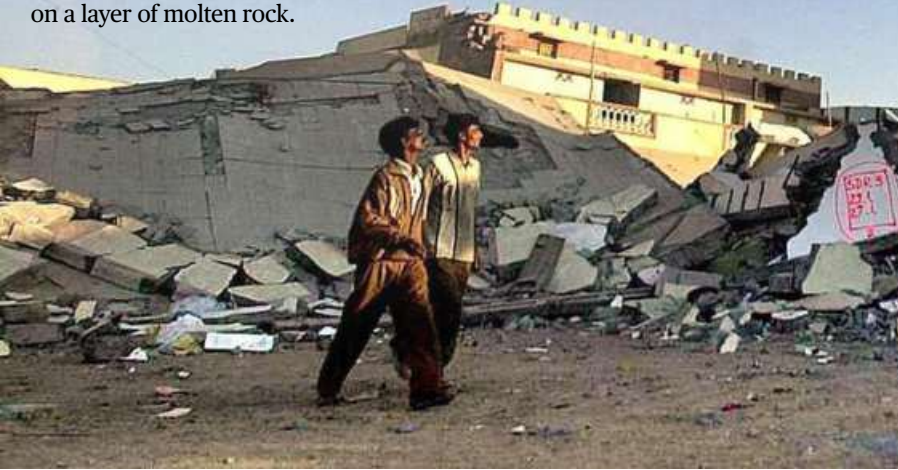


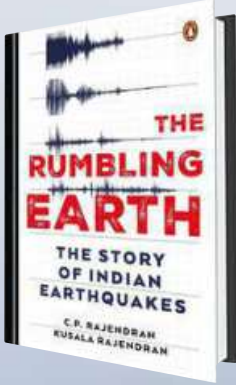
Plate tectonics, as this theory is called, also explains the formation of continents, volcanic activity, tsunamis and the intensity and timing of earthquakes. It is due to plate tectonics that India expects, with a sense of dread, a massive, Himalayan earthquake (or a couple of them) but whose exact timing and location unfortunately cannot be predicted. This was after a 2001 paper in the journal ‘Science’ by scientists Roger Bilham, Vinod Gaur and Peter Molnar calculated that there is a long 700 km segment along the Himalayan plate boundary that hasn’t produced a major earthquake in the last 500 years. Therefore, all the strain accumulated over the centuries will inevitably result in a displacement that will wreak “unparalleled damage” in several parts of north India, particularly the Gangetic plains. The Rajendrans describe their own excursions into the Himalayas to decipher evidence of past earthquakes.

Archaeoseismology, as this endeavour is called, involves studying ancient structures such as old temples or land formations that may reveal signs of past earthquakes and help estimate the probability of future ones.

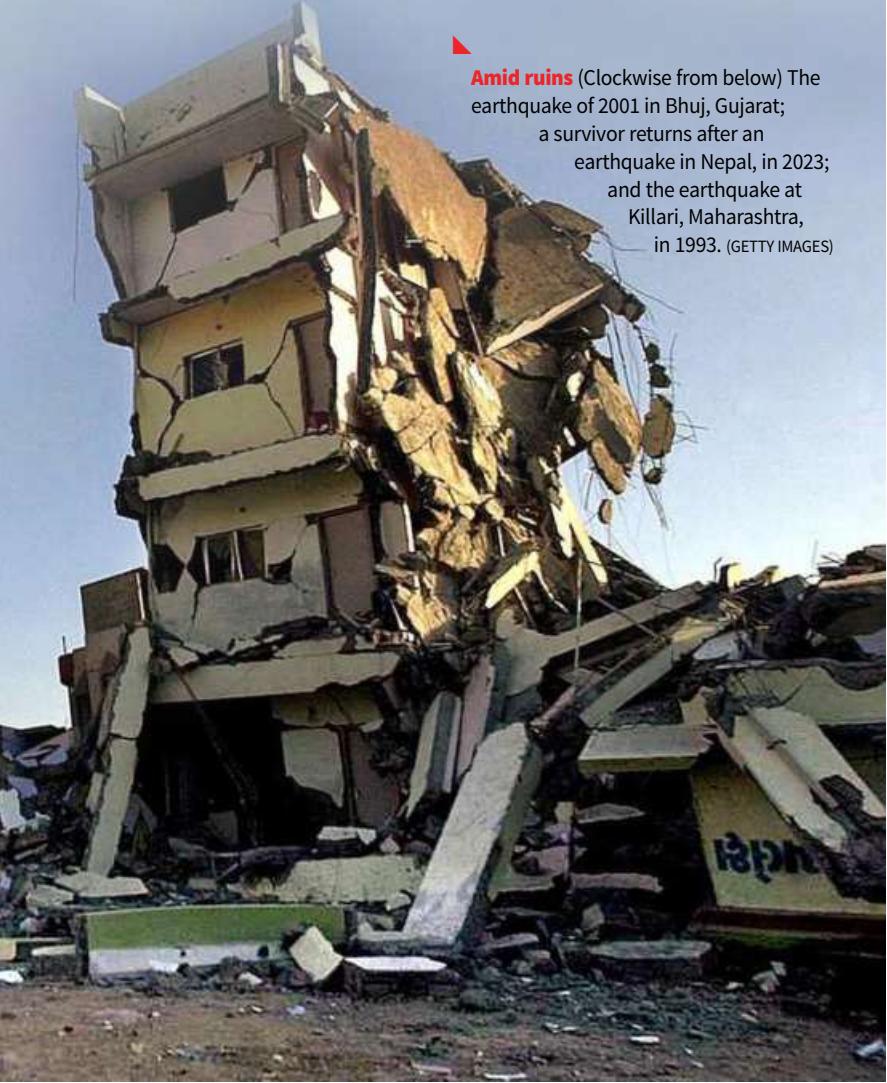
‘All the strain accumulated over the centuries will inevitably result in a displacement that will wreak ‘unparalleled damage’ in several parts of north India, particularly the Gangetic plains’

GROUND BENEATH INDIA’S FEET

A new book attempts to demystify earthquakes and explains why it’s so difficult to predict the next tremor



The Rumbling Earth: The Story of Indian Earthquakes
C.P. Rajendran and Kusala Rajendran
Vintage/Penguin
₹699



Amid ruins (Clockwise from below) The earthquake of 2001 in Bhuj, Gujarat; a survivor returns after an earthquake in Nepal, in 2023; and the earthquake at Killari, Maharashtra, in 1993. (GETTY IMAGES)

Alarm bells

Why the mega development plan for the Great Nicobar island is a disaster in the making

Shekar Dattatri

Situated over a thousand kilometres off India’s east coast, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands may be out of sight and out of mind for most of us. But clearly, not for officials at the Niti Aayog in Delhi, who are pushing an ambitious infrastructure project that will thoroughly desecrate the remote and biodiversity-rich Great Nicobar island.

The *Great Nicobar Betrayal*, curated by Pankaj Sekhsaria, is a chronicle of this devastation

foretold, narrated in 13 essays on various aspects of the project and the island’s biodiversity, with tables and annexures. The ‘betrayal’ refers to the undermining of all environmental regulations to ram the project through. Inexplicably, the massive infrastructure will come up in one of the most seismically active regions on earth, which was pummeled by the 2004 earthquake and tsunami.

A home for rare species
Among other things, the book points out that Great Nicobar, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve



since 2013, is host to one of the most important nesting populations of the giant, leatherback sea turtle in the northern Indian Ocean. The Nicobar megapode, a bird found only on these islands, makes its mound nests in the forests along the coast. And two indigenous tribes,

the Nicobarese, and the forest-dwelling Shompen, designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, have lived here peacefully for millennia. Cloaked in verdant rainforest, fringed by pristine white beaches, and surrounded by clear blue



The Great Nicobar Betrayal
Curated by Pankaj Sekhsaria
A Frontline Publication
₹499

waters abounding with sea life, the natural treasure that is Great Nicobar, the book argues, will be irreparably harmed by the ₹72,000 crore project that will include a transshipment port, an airport, a power plant, and a township spread over 160 sq km. Great Nicobar’s

Fragile ecosystem (From far left) The canopy of the forest of tree ferns in the Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve; and the Shompen, an indigenous community of the island, who are primarily fishers and hunter-gatherers. (PANKAJ SEKHSARIA AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA)

population, presently about 8,000, is projected to swell to a staggering 3,50,000 as a result.

If you want a glimpse of what Great Nicobar is today and what horrors lie in store for this fragile island, this book is the best place to start.

The reviewer is a former member of the National Board for Wildlife.

ON THE 2024 TRAVEL ITINERARY: SEXUAL WELLNESS

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

"Sex had a very clear place in ancient Indian healing systems and we never shied away from it," he explained. "I've seen cases concerning libido, vigour and pelvic pain where we've been able to make a marked difference through Ayurveda, yoga and other holistic healing therapies." He handed me my itinerary, which included personalised yoga and *pranayama* sessions, an Ayurvedic diet, and specific therapies such as *kostha abhyadhara* (abdominal massage) and *kashyadhara* (where warm herbal decoctions are poured on the body after a gentle massage).

Four years ago, Ananda first started addressing hormonal imbalances in women as a remedy for lifestyle diseases such as PCOS and endometriosis. This led to them working on fertility enhancement programmes, and sexual well-being issues were a related field. They now have a sexual reawakening programme (approx. \$50,000 per day – accommodation, consultation and treatments included) that is independent from their fertility enhancement.

Over the course of my stay, I began to dig a little deeper. I paid special attention to what was going on in my body, mind and soul. I woke early to jog through the verdant grounds, relaxed during my massages and



therapies, and enjoyed their healthy food. However, the cornerstone of my experience was the yoga and *pranayama* I did with Malti Mehrish, who heads yoga at Ananda. She hypothesised that my C-section delivery had resulted in a pranic or energy block in my pelvis, and used breathwork to overcome it. The scientific explanation would be that the nerves cut during the surgery caused numbness around the scar. "The vagina has a very different connotation in English and contemporary culture, but in yoga, the *yoni* is considered sacred because



Treatments at Ananda in the Himalayas; and (below) SHA Wellness.

it produces life," she said. "That's a very different way of looking at it. Sexuality had its rightful place in ancient Indian culture, the shame we associate with bodies and sex today is actually very western and only came with the culture of the colonisers."

Malti guided me through a practice of psychic breathing in my lower body, and we did *bandhas* (kegel-like contractions of different muscles in the pelvis). My yoga practice with her reactivated and resensitised my pelvic region. I went from feeling helpless to being more in control of my body.

Travelling for better sex
Travelling for sexual wellness – like my trip to the mountains – is resonating with people in a big way. And with the global sexual wellness market expected to reach \$64.3 billion by 2030 (according to market research firm SkyQuest Technology), big players in the travel industry are getting on board.

Hotels around the world are building programmes and hosting retreats with experts such as sexuality educators, physiotherapists and yoga teachers to help guests improve their sex

Holistic help and a change in mindset

It is natural for couples in their 50s to need help with being sexually active, but Issac Mathai, medical director at Soukya International Holistic Health Centre in Bengaluru, shares that they are "seeing many in their 30s and 40s having low libidos and less enthusiasm for intimacy. The reasons could be hormonal, stress-related, lack of interpersonal relationships, poor nutrition, too much time spent on smartphones. At Soukya, we use Ayurveda, yoga and homeopathy and have managed to help many people struggling with sexual wellness [programmes start from \$40,000 per day]." The number of people asking for sexual wellness programmes at the centre has gone up over the last few years.

While getting away from the daily grind can help people tap into their sexuality, a luxury resort may not always be the right place to seek help. "These are serious medical conditions that need doctors with the appropriate knowledge and experience," states Dr. Mathai. The best way to evaluate is to contact the properties directly and ask for a rundown of what's included in the programme and confirm that they have qualified doctors.

What about those who can't afford the time or money to travel or commit to such holistic treatments? "All it takes is a change in mindset," assures Chennai-based psychiatrist Vijay Nagaswami. "People need to understand that the cause of low libido could well be their lifestyle, and know that these are fixable issues. [I advise my patients] to set apart some time for each other. Enhancing your emotional intimacy and sexual experimentation within the boundaries of a monogamous relationship would be the right way to go."

lives. For instance, in 2022, Six Senses Ibiza and St. Regis Punta Mita in Mexico held sexual wellness retreats, and W Brisbane ran a sexologist concierge service; and in 2023, Miraval Arizona in the U.S. started three different programmes geared toward sexual wellness. IntimacyMoons, an outfit created over eight years ago in the U.S. by sex therapist Marissa Nelson, is now in great demand, with business executives, entrepreneurs, same-sex couples and singles signing up for their retreats.

"Going by the number of retreats that are investing in sexual wellness programmes, there is a demand," says Salli Deshpande, head of editorial content for *Condé Nast Traveller* India. "There is a definite increase with people signing up for self-care of all kinds, and sexual wellness is a small but significant part of that shift. From consultations with sexologists to physiotherapy and counselling, these programmes can get quite elaborate and diverse. I do know that some Indian brands are planning these experiences, but when they will roll out is anyone's guess. Meanwhile, even smaller, thoughtful gestures can go a long way. Many hotels now offer complimentary intimacy kits in their rooms. My favourite is a family resort in Austria that offers 12-hour childcare from 9 to 9. Ask any stressed-out parent how exciting that is!"

I couldn't agree with him more. I've come away from my time at Ananda with more awareness. In the last couple of months, I have started paying attention to my own pleasure and communicating it without hesitation to my husband. We are exploring new things together and while the changes are small, they've certainly improved the quality of our relationship.

The writer is a Mumbai-based author and travel journalist.

Saibal Chatterjee

Two films by one director are rarely as unlike each other as *The Fall* (2006), a free-flowing fable that celebrates storytelling and vivid imagery, and *Dear Jassi* (2023), an unflinching tale of doomed love. Tarsem Singh Dhandwar, the Jalandhar-born globe-trotting director of the two films, insists, however, that the only difference between them is that one is a fairytale and the other is not. Speaking from Montreal, he says: "*The Fall* is visual and fantastical. *Dear Jassi* is visual but not fantastical."

The two films, made 17 years apart, are concomitantly in the news. A 4K restoration of *The Fall*, which Tarsem self-produced, is set to premiere at the 77th Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland on August 8 before it streams on Mubi from

September 27. *Dear Jassi*, winner of the Platform prize at the Toronto International Film Festival last year, is now exploring a theatrical run in India. The film is produced by T-Series Films and Wakao Films.

Tarsem, 63, has made numerous commercials and a few music videos since the early 1990s, besides helming six narrative features. He debuted with *The Cell* (2000), a sci-fi psychological thriller starring Jennifer Lopez. *Dear Jassi*, understated but gut-wrenching, is about an Indo-Canadian girl who was killed in Punjab in 2000 for falling in love with a poor, unlettered auto-rickshaw driver.

"The story came first," says the filmmaker who shuttles between Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. "Before we started shooting, I had decided on the style. I shot only what was required. I told the writer [Amit Rai] what I needed and that is how he wrote the screenplay."

True crime

Dear Jassi, he suggests, is a real-life version of *Romeo and Juliet*, made in the 1950s neo-realist style that influenced Satyajit Ray. "It is a small, personal film," Tarsem says. "I did not want to show the violence. The writer wondered if that would have



TARSEM RETURNS

The Indian-origin filmmaker is back with two past projects – one a cult film premiering at Locarno this week with a 4K restoration and another awaiting theatrical release in India

an impact. I said it would because you will imagine your worst kind of nightmare."

The film is bookended by a Sufi musician (Kanwar Grewal) who introduces and closes the Punjabi film with a song and a

narration contextualising the tragic story. The singer was filmed in a single 18-minute take. The horrific incident happened 24 years ago. "It was the kind of

subject matter that I knew would never date in our lifetime," says Tarsem. "I told my brother we could make a movie about it right now or two decades later." He opted for the latter.

Tarsem made *The Fall* and other movies (*Immortals*, 2011 –

loosely based on Greek mythology – and *Mirror Mirror*, 2012, an interpretation of *Snow White*, among them) before turning to *Dear Jassi*, his first film shot in India. "I thought of it as a script written by Haneke and directed by an Iranian – Shirin Neshat, even Farhadi," says Tarsem. They, he observes, can take a divorce and make it "the end of the universe". Haneke can take the end of the universe and do the opposite too, he adds. "That is how I set up *Dear Jassi*."

The film draws its strength from its detached approach to the disquieting material. The two principal roles are played by Pavia Sidhu, a Canadian *blangra* group dancer studying law at UCLA, and debutant Yugam Sood, picked from a rural *kabaddi* ground. The film has no background score or close-ups. What triggered the story was a

telephone call that the girl's mother made to the kidnappers. (She told them they could do whatever they wanted with her daughter.) Says Tarsem: "In what universe is it even believable that a conversation like this happened? I reverse-engineered the rest of the film from this."

Anything but average

The Fall, which was filmed in 20-odd countries, is a project Tarsem holds dear. Understandably so. "I call it my baby. All my money was gone. But I would do it again in two seconds if I had to," he says. "Somebody thinks it is the worst film in the world.

Somebody feels it is the best thing since sliced bread. When people say *comme ci, comme ça*, it is terrifying," he says. But he adds that he did not expect *The Fall* to be so polarising.

The story centres on an eight-year-old Romanian immigrant



Varying styles (Clockwise from far left) Stills from *Dear Jassi*; *The Fall*; and Lady Gaga's '911'; director Tarsem Singh Dhandwar. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & GETTY IMAGES)

girl who picks oranges in 1920s Los Angeles. She is hospitalised with a broken arm. A silent-era Hollywood stuntman, bedridden in the same hospital after a fall from a bridge, tells her a story about five heroes out to avenge injustices meted out to them by an evil governor. A tale told by an adult with suicide on his mind is interpreted through the lens of an innocent and hopeful child's unsullied imagination, yielding a riot of colours and exhilarating adventures.

'Nobody like Lady Gaga'

Tarsem, whose work on R.E.M.'s 'Losing My Religion' fetched a Grammy, does not consider himself a great music video director. "I do not write treatments. I do not know what I am going to do. Give me a song and if it fits, I'll put a visceral experience into it. Occasionally, a song comes and I know what to do with it and I do it," he says, admitting that his music video for Lady Gaga's '911' was "a freak one". "She got in touch during COVID-19. I've loved Sergei Parajanov. I showed her an image from a film by the Armenian director [*The Colour of Pomegranates*, 1969]. She said she knew the image and needed to see nothing else," he recalls. "There is nobody like Lady Gaga."

Tarsem's next could be another leap – a stab at a Hindi action film. "The best thing about *Dear Jassi*," he says, "was the experience of shooting in India. I'd love to go back. Give me the right project, the right story."

The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Art and the artist (Clockwise from bottom) Gieve Patel's *Madman in the Street*; Embrace the artist with Ranjit Hoskote Patel's *The Letter Home*; and the book cover featuring his painting, *Off Lamington Road*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & RANJANA STEINRUECKE)



Chintan Girish Modi

Looking back at a friendship that spans almost four decades is no mean task but art critic, cultural theorist and poet Ranjit Hoskote has managed to do so with his trademark finesse in *To Break and To Branch: Six Essays on Gieve Patel*. Published by Seagull Books, it is a celebration of Hoskote's long and deep engagement with the artistic oeuvre of Patel who was a painter, sculptor, translator, poet, teacher, playwright and a practising physician. Patel passed away last November at the age of 83. Hoskote recalls some fond memories. Edited excerpts:

Question: What were your first impressions of Gieve Patel when Nissim Ezekiel introduced you?

Answer: I was in my late teens when I first met Gieve, was introduced to him by Nissim at his famous PEN All-India Centre office on the ground floor of Theosophy Hall in Mumbai, long a place of happy meetings, lively gatherings, and deep conversations. I'd read some of Gieve's poems at that point, and he was already a name to conjure with, for me. Like so many of us, I'd studied his poem, 'On Killing a Tree', at school, and immediately found him congenial. He was a warm presence, friendly, engaging. We connected at once.

Q: In your mid-20s, Gieve told you: "To write truly meaningful poetry, you have to go deep down, to where things



are broken." How has that advice helped you?

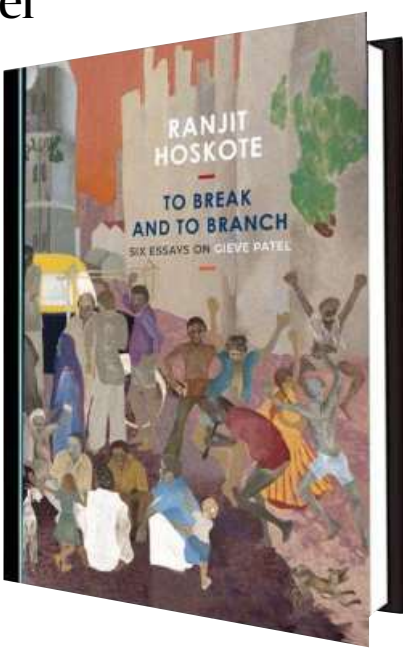
A: I must confess that, at the time Gieve gave me this advice, I found myself rebelling against it. It was a time when I was surging out of myself to engage with the larger things, the causes and urgencies. I was talking on big themes – myth, epic, history – and developing a rather baroque poetry. As I settled down – and, presumably, grew up – the large things and big themes began, increasingly, to find resonance and visceral reality in smaller, more intimate, everyday contexts. At this level, and as life and time began to impart their sad wisdom, Gieve's advice assumed key importance and resonance for me. I believe – at least, I hope and trust –



INTERVIEW

A GIFT FOR STRADDLING PARADOXES

Poet and critic Ranjit Hoskote on his new book of essays that celebrates his long association with the multifaceted painter, poet and playwright Gieve Patel



that my poetry has benefited greatly from his advice.

Q: How did Gieve's encounter with J. Krishnamurti's work and his time at the Mirrola Ashram in the Himalayan foothills influence the way he saw things, people and life itself?

A: Gieve's acceptance of the reality of spiritual experience was part of a gradual process, during which he saw clearly the limitations of a scepticism that enshrined rationality above all other modes of approaching the world. Through his encounters with devotion and spiritualism, Gieve began to find ways of being in the world that allowed him to combine scepticism with wonderment, stoicism with joy in the beauty of the present

moment, to think about belonging in a larger context of interrelationships among sentient beings and with the cosmos.

Q: Gieve translated the Gujarati poet Akho. You translated Lal Ded. What were the overlapping themes that you found in the poetry of these mystics?

A: Despite belonging to different places, periods and spiritual affiliations, both Lal Ded and Akho were impatient with organised religion, with the cant of conspicuous piety. They sought to liberate the soul from ritualist conceptions of the religious life. They expanded the range of emotional expression available to the questor.



Q: Gieve's painting *Off Lamington Road* is on the cover of your book. What does it represent to you?

A: Gieve's *Off Lamington Road* embodies that memorable combination of the everyday and the phantasmagoric that imparted a distinctive quality to his paintings. At one level, it is meant to represent, quite literally, the view from Gieve's clinic, which was situated on Lamington Road, round the corner from Mumbai Central station. But look closely, and mysterious elements announce themselves: a giant parrot hangs upside down in the top right-hand corner of this large work, above a group of revellers dancing and drumming up a storm in the street.

On the far side, a harnessed but riderless horse appears from behind a wall – we take a moment to register that a carriage may be following, but in itself, the horse strikes us as an omen, an augury. Everywhere, the currents and eddies of human life carry us along or bring us to a pause – and even as we settle into this evocation of a busy street in the middle of Mumbai, we recognise that the painting is in fact a visionary homage to the Siamese painters whose work Gieve loved – for instance, to the vastly populated civic panoramas of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's multi-part fresco programme, *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*.

Q: You've acted in plays written by Gieve and directed by his wife Antoinette. Their daughter Avaan has directed plays written by you. How did this friendship grow to embrace other

family members?

A: Both Nancy [cultural theorist and curator Nancy Adajania, who is married to Hoskote] and I were close to Gieve, and were embraced early into the family circle. We collaborated on cultural events in different ways with Gieve, Toni and Avaan; we would all attend the same screenings of parallel-cinema films in the late 1980s and through the 90s, participated both in the visual arts and in the literary arts together over the decades. Also, Gieve and Nancy had a connection of their own, independent of me, based on the strong links that both of them shared with the specific lifeworld of rural Parsis in Gujarat. This gave both of them a very strong awareness – from the position of privilege but with a deep awareness of the need for reform – of the rural subaltern classes, especially those belonging to the tribal communities, encountered as help, or workers, or cultivators.

In Gieve's case, this led to such compelling works as his play, *Mister Behram*, where one of its protagonists is a Warli boy adopted by a Parsi lawyer, and to the figure of Eklavya, the tribal prince cruelly wronged by his Brahmin teacher, in his late paintings. With Nancy, this has sustained a lifelong commitment to artists of rural, tribal or otherwise subaltern heritage – to situating them at the cutting edge of contemporary cultural expression.

The interviewer lives in Mumbai, and writes on books, art, gender, films, education, and peace initiatives.

BINGE WATCH

Workplace friction

The newest comedy special to drop on OTT trains its scathing jokes on bosses and discontent at the office

Disney+ Hotstar recently released a pre-taped comedy special called *Hardly Working* by Naukri (sponsored by naukri.com), wherein five Indian comedians performed 15-minute sets based around their previous work-lives in sales, IT, business management, investment banking, and so on. During her set, comedian and former category head Prashasti Singh said that after watching her

colleague string together a 10-point summary of an indecipherable work meeting, she became convinced that the unlikely things in life could still happen: she could, for example, find romance. "There will come a person in your life who will need you day and night, who'll keep calling you and texting you," said Singh. "Of course, that person will be your manager."

Nishant Suri, who worked as an investment banker before embracing comedy full-time, joked that his job satisfaction was directly proportional to how happy his boss's marriage was. "Now I have to manage my job as well as my boss' marital bliss!"

It's instructive that for these comedians, the figure of the corporate boss – irate, irrational and wrathful – has replaced the idiosyncratic (and/or demanding) spouse as comedic target-in-chief. The latter was the mainstay of every aspiring Indian comedian, not to mention some established comics who have been quite happy to rattle

off 'my wife' jokes one after the other. This shift is indicative of the fact that young Indians, especially professionals working in corporate spaces, are increasingly dissatisfied with their work lives.

Earlier, jokes around the workplace would be quaint observations on, say, the neologisms periodically churned out by the corporate world: 'core competencies', 'blue sky thinking' and so on.



Now, even a cursory look at *Hardly Working* tells you what's on the minds of these young professionals: unnecessary meetings, salaries that have barely increased in a decade or more, bosses abusing their juniors in broad daylight, no hopes for career progression, hectic work lives killing off any chance these people had at a social life. The list of complaints is long and damning.

The humour is no longer gentle
Hardly Working is the latest manifestation, but things have been on a simmer for many years now. The Indian adaptation of *The Office*, despite

being not particularly well-written, struck a chord with audiences. Workplace comedies such as *Mr. Das* (2019), *Cubicles* (2019), *Pitchers* (2015-) and *Better Life Foundation* (2016-) all mined the workplace for humour – gentle humour, it has to be said, but the tone of these shows has been getting darker and darker with time. And it's a phenomenon that one can observe in other Indian TV

office, before chucking his ID card at the now-whimpering manager and declaring 'I quit!' I can tell you that I have watched this scene one or 17 times, and plenty of my peers (ie, film critics) have described it as a visceral, standout moment for the show. It's pertinent to note that none of us feels bad for the man who has just been thrashed in his own office. This kind of consensus is seldom reached among any group of critics, let alone

belonging to a whole spread of languages, cultures, and so on. Proof of discontent When I was chucking at some of the jokes from *Hardly Working*, I was mindful of the extent of our discontent. If you think about it, just the mere existence of so many ex-corporate honchos among Indian comedians tells you that hundreds of thousands of our countrymen are in jobs that they have no interest in or commitment to. They're doing so out of dire circumstances because they know the bleakness of the job market in India right now.

By this itself should scare anybody who wants to see us shaking off India's perennial 'developing country' tag anytime soon. Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

MODERN TIMES

GUEST OF HONOUR

From Cannes Film Festival to the Ambani wedding to Paris Olympics 2024, the call sheet of influencers is only expanding

Look, I know you are tired of hearing about that wedding, yes the Ambani one, but it was a seminal event. Not (just) because of the number of events they managed to create and brand, or the emeralds the size of chunky chocolate bars, or the number of private flights that flew into and out of the various venues.

The Ambani wedding was a seminal event because it successfully heralded the arrival of influencers into the mainstream. While Orry, who is so famous that he neither needs a second name nor indeed a proper first, has for long been a feature at Ambani events, by the time the wedding caravan rolled into Mumbai for the big day, the call sheet of influencers attending the

wedding expanded to dozens, if not hundreds.

If you followed them (or even if you didn't, they popped up on your feed anyway), you could clearly see the agenda of the day. For example, one day was about the jewellery Ambani women re-wore, the second was about a dupatta made with flowers, the third was about the respect shown to a nanny who had helped raise the groom, and so on.

As the proceedings wore on, the organisers doubled down on influencers, finally bringing in the OG, the person who, for all practical purposes, created this industry of influencers – Kim Kardashian. The moment the visuals of Kim K, dressed in a deep red lehenga, holding hands and walking into the venue with Nita Ambani were

released marked the point where influencers moved out of our phone screens and into the centrestage of our lives. I can predict with reasonable certainty that influencers will now be a part of most weddings, starting with the elite and quickly cascading down the class lines.

At the Olympics now

None of this is surprising. The last few years have seen a steady rise in the value, relevance, and well, influence, of influencers. The social media feed of the ongoing Olympic Games is predominantly created by influencers. The official Olympics site itself has a section on influencers, plus the big brands have brought in their own arsenal of sport-fluencers. If a decade ago, someone would have said the rapper

Snoop Dogg would one day be goofing around with an Olympic torch, we would have laughed. Well, that's exactly what happened last week.

Earlier this year at the Cannes Film festival, all one could see on the red carpet were influencers. It did not matter that they weren't film stars or movie makers or related to cinema in any way. A chunk was from that allied business, fashion, but there were several whose link to a film festival was so tenuous that it was comical. I watched a video of an Indian fin-tech influencer, a stock market tipster, twirling around a promenade in the French Riviera, before tying himself into knots explaining what he was doing there. If a movie star can be paid millions to promote a sportswear brand, why

can't a regular Joe who once made a funny video that went viral be paid a million to act like a movie star at a film festival? Whoever gets the most eyeballs, wins.

Corporate brands were the first to hire influencers as paid spokespeople, thereby guaranteeing the "authenticity" of a user review that has reach and is not authentic at all. The simplicity of this business proposition – money in exchange of praise – ensured that the model spread quite quickly, so much so that an influencer who one day was extolling the virtues of taking probiotic supplements for gut health found himself, within the matter of a year, interviewing Cabinet ministers on the country's plans for digital leadership.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

who has cast himself as a kind of a political influencer, was quick to understand the value of this. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, he granted interviews only to favourable mediapersons and influencers.

Slaves to our screens

Nobody in this chain of communication owes any fealty to the truth, only to money, and everybody is happy, including the end consumers – people like us – who have, whether we like it or not, become indolent slaves to our screens. In fact, in most social circles, anyone who stands up and states an opinion that is counter to this culture is immediately classified a luddite. "Sit down, boomer," is the usual manner of shutting them up.

In the past, I too have made the mistake of rolling my eyes at these bizarre new events, and then felt foolish when they became trends that everyone adopted. Which is why I feel comfortable now predicting that influencers will be on the guest list at most future weddings. As is their wont, the Ambanis were the first to lean into this lucrative new business, and the rest of us will follow. Because there are only two kinds of people in the world now. Those who are influencers and those who can't get enough of them.



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

GOREN BRIDGE

Your choice?

Both vulnerable.
East deals

Bob Jones

Would you open the bidding with the East hand? If so, what bid would you choose? The choice made all the difference in a recent team match.

At one table, East opened two spades, drawing a two no trump bid from South. North carried on to three no trump and there was no defense on this lie of the cards. Contract

made. At this table, East opened one spade and South bid one no trump. West raised, and North did not have enough to invite game in no trump. He did have enough to compete, however, and he ventured a negative double. South might have passed, but instead he took out his partner's take-out double – usually a good idea.

West led a spade to East's ace. East shifted to his singleton club and declarer's queen lost to the king. East

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

The bidding:
EAST SOUTH WEST NORTH
1♠ 1NT 2♠ Dbl*
Pass 3♦ All pass
*Negative

Opening lead: Six of ♠

ruffed the club continuation and cashed the ace of hearts. South now needed to find the king of diamonds for his contract. West had shown up with four points in clubs, so

South played East, who opened the bidding, for the other 12 points. He led a diamond to the ace, hoping for the king to drop, and finished down one. What did you open?

Easy like Sunday morning

What has August 4 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 August 4, 1693, is the date that has been traditionally ascribed to a monk called Dom Perignon inventing a certain celebratory beverage. Though it is doubtful whether he actually invented it, he did however innovate the techniques used to perfect this version of sparkling wine. What drink is this that one usually sees being popped open with a smile?

2 Retired British cavalry officer Philip Astley opened his riding school with performances of 'feats on horsemanship' on August 4, 1777. He had even trained a small horse to add and subtract numbers, act dead and do 'mind-reading'. He made the performance space circular so that the centrifugal force generated by galloping in circles made it easier for riders to stand on the back of their mounts. This eventually led to what new form of entertainment that still comes to our cities now and then?

3 The 'Hinomaru' was established as the official flag to be flown from ships of a certain country on this date in 1854. One of the most easily recognisable flags, the theme of the flag has been central to this country for thousands of years. If 'Hinomaru' means 'ball of the sun', which country's flag is this?

4 Born on August 4, 1898, Ernesto Maserati was an Italian race-car driver and engineer who, along with his brothers, founded an automobile



Winner takes it all The Olympic rings, representing the union of the five continents, on a wall. (GETTY IMAGES)

company in the family name. Now known for their sporty and stylish cars, they have had a logo which shows a trident, inspired from a statue in Bologna of the Roman god of the sea. Which god's trident is the Maserati logo?

5 This legendary American trumpet player and singer, nicknamed 'Satchmo', a short form for 'Satchel Mouth', a reference to his extraordinary trumpeting abilities, was born on this day in 1901. Known all over the world for his song 'What a wonderful world', who is this iconic musician?

6 Born this date in 1929, this iconic Indian singer was celebrated for his dynamic stage

presence and influential singing style. He was also responsible for introducing the larger population to the alpine singing style of yodelling. Who is this singer who holds the record for the most number of Filmfare Best Male Playback Singer awards (eight)?

7 This American athlete won his second gold medal at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. In the preliminary round, German Luz Long had set the Olympic record, and after two fouls, the American advanced. Eventually winning and setting an Olympic record, the two of them later became good friends, which became controversial in the eyes of the Germans. Who was this extraordinary American athlete?

8 Renowned for his excellent adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies, Vishal Bhardwaj is an acclaimed Indian film director and music composer who was born on August 4, 1965. As a composer, he has won two National Film awards for Best Music Direction and was the composer of the theme tune for a highly successful 1989 anime adaptation of a children's classic book. Which book was this?

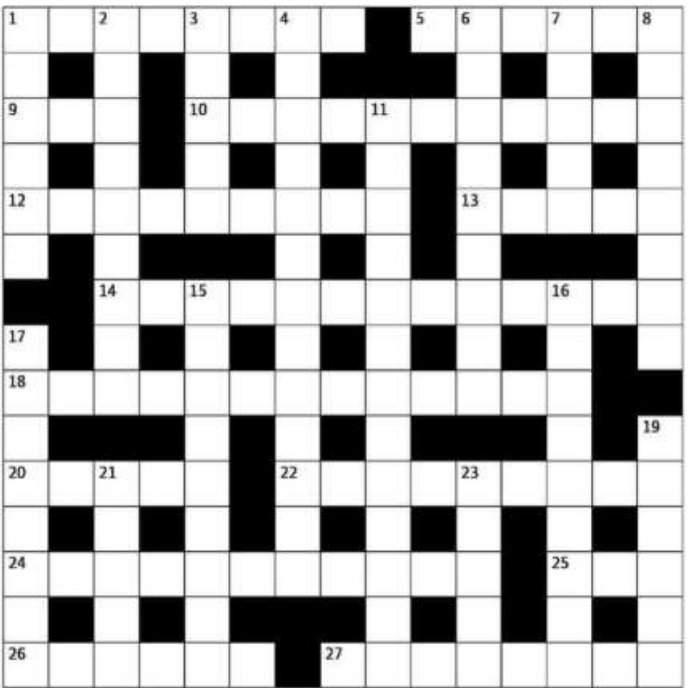
9 This iconic English band released their first album titled 'The Piper at the Gates Of Dawn' in 1967. Made under the leadership of Syd Barrett, it has a combination of short peppy numbers with witty lyrics and long psychedelic instrumental pieces. This was the debut of which band that eventually stayed on the charts for decades?

10 This sport made its debut at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992. The singles gold medals were both won by Indonesian athletes, while both men's and women's doubles went to South Korea. What sport is this that has given us three Olympic medals and four World #1 rankings?

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

1. Chormpeigne	6. Kishore Kumar	11. Badminton
2. Circus	7. Jesse Owens	12. Pink Floyd
3. Japan	8. The Jungle Book	13. The Jungle Book
4. Neptune	9. The Jungle Book	14. The Jungle Book
5. Louis Armstrong	10. Badminton	15. Badminton

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3318



Across

1 Is no longer interested in row, abandoned with gusto (8)

5 Amateur scales back, being more than dozy (6)

9 Starts to figure out problem? Dandy! (3)

10 Falling apart with bile, pair of unionists: slow down there! (5-2,4)

12 One observes small tattoo put on part of chest as an alternative (9)

13 Again performed piece of theatre didactically (5)

14 Agitated, caused queasy feelings in the main (6,3,4)

18 Often the alias is deployed to appear insincere (3,1,5,4)

20 One of our feathered friends who travelled around the world? (5)

22 Rebooted downloads that may include many boxes (9)

24 Husband wearing band, constant love token, beginning to sigh soft sounds (11)

25 Sense of self, such as love (3)

26 Understand IT's 1s and 0s? (6)

27 Demonstrations in favour of taxes (8)

Down

1 Clumsy pronouncement by easily surprised patron of seafood restaurant (6)

2 Location up by Crete in resort for privileged (3-6)

3 Discredit potato, on reflection? (5)

4 Kettle, perhaps one that'll leak (7-6)

6 Wonderful sandwich one found in Cape (9)

7 At first, Everyman's rattled, then embarrassed, having made mistakes (5)

8 Theatrical work, sweet thing in which children have fun (8)

11 Pick up and convert this particular set piece (4,3,6)

15 Supplier of stimulant high after cocaine, ecstasy (twice) and weed (6,3)

16 Flowers sourced here, from Cole and Erskine (9)

17 Dogged son had borrowed money (8)

19 A Caledonian's fancy neckwear (6)

21 Imitating sound of mobile phone alert? (5)

23 In sound, tip for composer (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3317



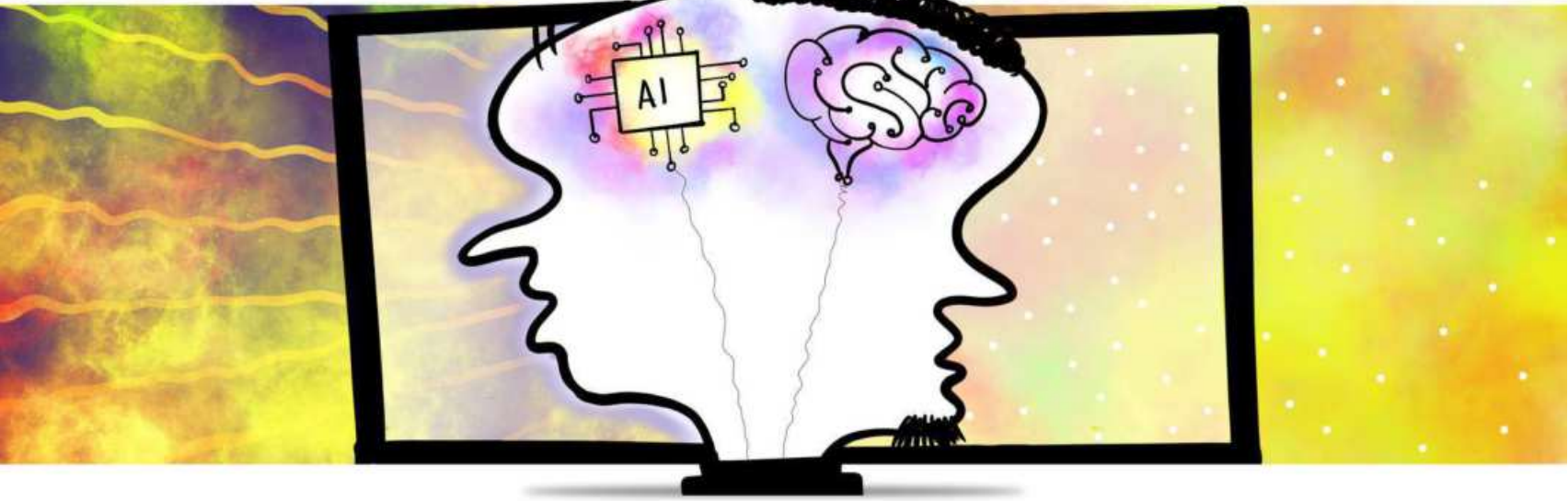


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Sudheer K.J.
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As a person working in the legal domain of my employer, my professional life has always been rooted in the realms of laws – legislation, legal intricacies, and research into legal matters. Technology, for me, was a tool that served basic functions: communication, documentation, and research. The complex algorithms and intricate mechanisms of artificial intelligence (AI) seemed like a distant world, far removed from the pragmatic and text-heavy environment of legal work. However, an unexpected journey into the fascinating world of AI has not only reshaped my perception of technology but has also significantly enhanced my work and life.

My initial foray into the world of AI was driven by a blend of curiosity and necessity. The burgeoning discourse around AI’s potential and its transformative impact on various sectors piqued my interest. Despite my limited technical background, I was eager to understand how AI could streamline my work and perhaps even bring about a paradigm shift in how legal tasks are approached.

I started with the basics, reading about AI applications in different fields and gradually exploring AI tools and platforms. My journey was filled with moments of awe and wonder. The idea that machines could analyse data, recognise

Rewarding journey into AI world

It’s not just a tech tool but also a powerful resource for anyone willing to explore its potential

patterns, and even make predictions based on vast datasets was both intriguing and intimidating. As I delved deeper, I realised that AI is not just a tool for tech-savvy individuals but a powerful resource that can be harnessed by anyone willing to explore its potential.

The integration of AI into my legal work was a revelation. The legal field is often characterised by extensive documentation, rigorous analysis, and meticulous attention to detail. AI, with its

capabilities to process large volumes of data and identify relevant information quickly, proved to be a boon.

While the journey into the AI world has been rewarding, it has not been without challenges. The initial learning curve was steep, given my non-technical background. Understanding the fundamentals of AI, its terminology, and its functionalities required patience and persistence. There were moments of frustration when AI tools produced erroneous results or when their outputs did not align with my expectations.

However, these challenges were outweighed by the immense benefits that AI brought to my work and life. The key was to approach AI not as a perfect solution but as a powerful assistant that complements human intelligence. By acknowledging its limitations and learning to navigate its intricacies, I was able to harness its potential effectively.

AI has introduced a level of efficiency and innovation into my work that was previously unimaginable. It has allowed me to focus more on strategic thinking and policy formulation, areas where human expertise and judgment are indispensable. The ability to leverage AI for routine tasks and data analysis has made my work more impactful and fulfilling. Now, I think for a second if I use AI for a particular scenario, including while enjoying the reading newspaper articles. Overall, it has been a mesmerising journey.

A rooster for a haircut

V.V. Vaidyanathan
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It was a cool Sunday early morning. All of a sudden, my wife said, “Don’t you want to go for a haircut?” True, I had not visited the barber for over two months. Like any service, haircut has become costly and I was postponing the visit to the salon to delay the expense. The salon was bit far away, not at a walking distance for a senior citizen, and I had to take an autorickshaw, adding to the cost.

When I reached, as expected, the salon was crowded. The hairdressers were happily busy, attending to special requests from youngsters for beard trimming, fancy haircuts and facials, middle-aged men waiting to get hair and moustache coloured, and seniors like me waiting for a normal haircut. While I was waiting for my turn, the mind wandered to my childhood days when haircuts were a simple affair.

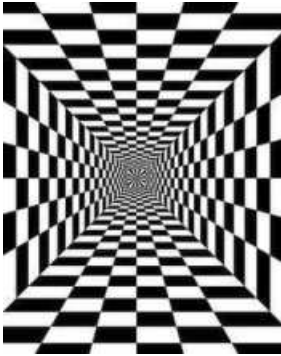
We were a joint family with several boys and girls, living in my grandfather’s house in Thrissur. The house had a large garden abundant with flowering and fruit-bearing trees. My grandfather was particular that boys should get regular haircuts and the first Sunday of every month would ask Neelakandan, the town barber, to come home. A tall, dark person with a gentle smile, Neelakandan would set up his workshop under the big mango tree at the entrance of the house. He carried a cloth pouch that he would unwrap and neatly display tools of the trade – a worn-out comb, scissors and a sharp blade. One by one, we boys will silently walk and sit next to him, bending our head for the haircut. Being the youngest, I was so scared of this ritual, mostly because Neelakandan’s scissors often plucked the hair painfully instead of making a clean cut. To cheer me up, he would say, “Samikutty, don’t cry, I will give you a rooster. It has colourful tail feathers and a red flower on the head.” Neelakandan would continue building the story keeping me amused. After his work, he will walk to the rear of the house, where my grandmother would give him food and some money. As he walked out of the house, I would run behind him to remind to bring the rooster next time. This continued for the few years I got the haircut but never a rooster. “Sirjee, please come.” The hairdresser called me and I took my seat. In no time, the haircut was done and I was on my way back home thinking about Neelakandan and the imaginary rooster.

Jazzing up the 64 squares

If chess is to get prime-time glitz, enlist cheekiest cheerleaders, break staid rules!

Jairam N. Menon
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Any sport in which Indians do well automatically zooms up the popularity charts. If this young man with chiselled face and Samson’s locks can throw a spear and find global glory, so can my Sadgopan. And if belting leather ball with wooden willow can lead to mind-boggling, mouth-watering fortunes, why should our children settle for meagre middle-class ambitions? Promptly then, eager beavers feel they are not performing their parental duty well enough unless they locate appropriate coaching facilities and force-fit another training session into the hapless



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

child’s crammed timetable. In all this, does the game with 64 squares find a place? Alas, chess players would call it a stalemate. We have in our midst serrated ranks of accomplished players. But no ticker-tape parade awaits them, no 24x7 cameras cover their every breath and no social media keep us updated on their weekend getaways and tells us what they had for breakfast. The inconvenient truth is that chess players are champions of a lesser god. Although the game is all about strategy, chess in India is clearly not making

the right moves. This game has everything going for it. In the eternal toss-up between brain and brawn, chess stands firmly on the side of the brain. It is also an equal opportunity sport, allowing for enough diversity and inclusion. Ironically, though it deals with attack and defence, thrust and parry in one epic battle, chess is actually doing its bit for world peace. You don’t hurl a missile with the express, if unstated intent, to decapitate your opponent and you don’t get your nose broken in a scrum. All you do is push pieces on a patterned board. How saintly! But don’t forget, we are living in the age of IPL. If you think it is high time chess got its due, the first things you need to do is to enlist the cheekiest cheerleaders in the land. At the next FIDE match, get them to inject life and colour by swishing pom poms and pirouetting daringly after every castle, every move. The players themselves

could lend a hand by being a bit more demonstrative. Sitting stoically in your seats as if waiting your turn at the dentist’s clinic impresses nobody. Instead, sledge your opponents with the ribald vocabulary of an Aussie who has just been hit over the fence. When you do get your opponent in a vice, punch the air, glare menacingly, and if you are in good voice, let loose a blood-curdling war whoop. Ah, that’s the way to prime-time glory! Pay no heed to purists who will tell you that rules are sacrosanct. Nothing really is. Chess has already made plenty of allowances by accommodating faster variants such as blitz chess. If you can have blitz, why not glitz? The Bard has said the course of true love never runs smooth. Well, neither does chess. There are infinite variations, unexpected twists, artful gambits and sudden deaths. While being unpredictable, there is yet an air of ultimate inevitability, for it all ends with what ought to be seen as a term of endearment: “Check mate”.

The great flood

The impact of the deluge of 1924 on Kerala was deep and disturbing

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A few decades ago, on a rainy afternoon, my mother told me the story of the great flood of 1924 while I was making paper boats to float in the rainwater. “Long ago, during a monsoon season like this,” she began, “Kerala was hit by a great flood that transformed the entire State into a water world.” I listened with rapt attention, my eyes wide open with the curiosity of a seven year old. According to her recollection, it was the

year 1099 in the Malayalam calendar, and the month was mid-Edavam (June). The rains had been heavy for days, but she still went to her school at Palluruthy in Kochi, a mile from her home. By noon, the rain intensified, and the downpour continued. By evening, the school ground and surrounding areas were submerged in deep water, resembling a swollen river. Her father came to take her home in a small canoe, and she was enthralled by the cruise through the submerged village paths. When they reached their ancestral home, an old



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

double-storey building, looked like a tiny island in the vast expanse of water. She remembered taking refuge in the loft with her neighbours for three days and two nights without food or water. When the rain finally subsided and the floodwaters receded, they emerged to find their village devastated, with carcasses, damaged buildings, and destroyed crops. Many were dead

and an equal number lost their livelihoods. My father shared similar experiences from his childhood years. Though we experienced a similar flood in 2018, advance weather warning and relief and rescue operations helped us avoid a catastrophe. The 1924 flood even affected Munnar, a hill station. The flood destroyed the Kundala Valley Railways, the first monorail system in India. The waters erased much of Kerala’s history in government records. Karinthirimala, a mountain in Munnar, had vanished. As I write this, the rain shows no signs of relenting. This July marked the centenary of the great flood. The flood’s impact was so profound that it remains etched in the collective memory of Keralites.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The Olympics dress code of Indian athletes essentially showcases the cultural ethos of our country. (‘Dressed to represent India’; July 28) From silks to handloom, India has a rich tapestry of fabrics that are also emotionally intertwined with its cultural and social life. The government and the other stakeholders could promote galleries and exhibitions in the Games Village to give publicity to our native fabrics and dress designs as part of global outreach initiatives.

G. Ramasubramanyam

Social impact

The initiative taken by Mitti Cafe founder Alina Alam, in fighting against the injustice and discrimination meted out to disabled persons by providing them gainful employment, is exemplary and deserves all-round applause. (‘Power of magical thinking’; July 28) To encourage more of such efforts, the new income tax regime should extend exemptions for donations made towards subscription to zero coupon and zero principal instruments offered by charitable trusts and social ventures on social stock exchanges under section 80G of the Act.

Sitaram Popuri

Wise words

Just like her delicious dishes, Phuphee’s innate talent for solving problems with wisdom garnished with a dose of common sense is praiseworthy. (‘Lesson in a quince apple’; July 28) Imposing on the child a parent’s likes, dislikes and thinking regarding education, marriage or other such issues is always counterproductive. Just as right ingredients added and mixed at the right time, while cooking, makes a dish scrumptious, right advice at the right time can help realise a dream or make a life-changing decision.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Like the writer, all of us try to contemplate life’s vagaries, in our own way. Phuphee’s amazing talent for bumtchoont ti maaz apart, her ability to influence a patriarchal mindset with just a simple talk is a perfect recipe for these times.

Deepak Taak



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Varun Joshi

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NATIONAL HANDLOOM DAY | AUGUST 7

MADE FROM SCRAPS AND OFFCUTS

Indian designers are fashioning jackets and quilts from cutting waste and yardage rags, meeting zero waste goals that are key today

Sohini Dey

It takes a village, and then some, to craft Tilla's Kabira and Rosa jackets. The one-of-a-kind pieces feature thread and metallic embroidery, reversible designs, and multiple colourways. The patchworked base is a highlight, stitched by women from Pindharada village near Gandhinagar, using leftover fabrics and off-cuts from the Ahmedabad-based label's archives.

"As a clothing design studio, we generate a lot of cutting waste," says Aratrik Dev Varman, designer and founder of Tilla. "I have, over the years, very consciously collected every bit of scrap hoping that we could make something of it." A conversation with Jaai Kakani, who runs the NGO Soach, on upskilling rural women, led to a project where Dev Varman and his team created a training module for sewing. The collaboration has culminated in the label's 'Recycle' collection, comprising jackets and dresses. Dev Varman continues to work in Pindharada, and plans to extend to quilts and textile art.

As conscious craft and zero waste goals take over design thinking, fashion labels are becoming more mindful of waste. A decade ago, the number of garments produced in the world exceeded 100 billion, and a 2017 Global Fashion Agenda report estimated an annual figure of 92 million tonnes of textile waste globally. These numbers are still cited, though the volume of both production and waste has likely increased since then. India is among the world's top regions for sourcing apparel and textiles, and according to a 2022 report by Fashion for Good, it accounts for 8.5% of global textile waste – with approximately 7,793 kilo-tonnes generated every year.

Designers and upcycled patchwork
The process of making garments yields plenty of leftovers, from fabrics to trimmings. A number of homegrown labels – both big

and small – are repurposing this production waste using methods that range from traditional techniques to material experiments. Take for instance, the House of Anita Dongre, which generates 2,000 kg of textile waste every month (as per estimates on its website). The company, known for its mindful designs and sustainability initiatives, works with organisations such as Goonj, an NGO that undertakes disaster relief and humanitarian aid, and NEPRA (National Electric Power Regulatory Authority), and its own tailoring unit to create *godharis* (quilts), bags and other items.

Designers such as Amit



Aggarwal, Urvashi Kaur and Bodice by Ruchika Sachdeva have collaborated with Paiwand Studio to make capsule collections from their production excesses. At the Noida-headquartered studio, upcycling waste is a multi-layered operation. Textile scraps sourced from the industry and craft clusters are handwoven into new fabrics and made into garments.

Last week, Aggarwal showcased his ANTEVORTA collection at the Hyundai India Couture Week, conflating polymers with handlooms. Couturier Varun Bahl has developed a patchwork



(Clockwise from above) Patchwork outfit from Bahl; a Tilla 'Recycle' jacket; a Graine outfit; and a quilt from Studio Medium.

signature from his archival pieces, incorporated in *lehengas*, *sherwanis*, jackets, and saris. "We use the same embroideries to create upcycled fashion, as well as older threads and buttons," says Bahl. "This year it [upcycled patchwork] has become 30% of our collection and very soon it will be 50%."

Quilts for the win

Production leftovers are inevitable, even in conscious studios. "There is little wastage in the way we design garments," says Chinara Farooqui, founder of the clothing label Injiri. "What is left over is yardage, which usually comes in 11-metre lengths from handloom weavers. After a garment is constructed, the last 10 to 20 inches tend to remain."

At Injiri's Jaipur headquarters, the team upcycles leftovers for up to a year following a collection. "Quilts and mattresses are the best application because they consume a lot of textiles – a quilt requires 9-10 metres of textiles, and mattresses can take up 5-6 metres," she says. "We also add value to the designs, with cutworks and appliqué." The label's recycled quilts stand out for their eclectic mashups – one quilt is colour-blocked with



fabrics in over a dozen shades, while appliquéd botanical shapes in dark colours offset an ivory base on another.

Injiri's choice to make quilts and mattresses is rooted in tradition. Communities across India, from Gujarat to Bengal, recycle old clothes and stray patches into household items. And the singularity of such textiles is both a selling point and a challenge. "We have to consider logistics such as space and organisation of fabrics," says Farooqui. "Since no two pieces are alike, it takes energy and time to conceive of products that work." Injiri patches new yardages from these leftovers too, and has recently created a line of jackets.

Working with leftovers

Designers also integrate leftovers into new apparel. For Harshna Kandhari and Mannat Sethi, co-founders of Delhi-based emerging label Graine, the key lies in introducing subtle details and modular elements such as detachable layers. "There's a satisfaction we feel, being able to pick waste from the brand and reimagine them," says Sethi. One of Graine's signatures is the River jacket, which the label introduced



We worked with pre-loved Benarasi saris [for ANTEVORTA]; our signature cording techniques reinforced the fabric and breathed new life into these age-old textiles. We also employ techniques like fusing, melting, and stitching to merge contrasting materials, such as polythene with chanderi

AMIT AGGARWAL
Fashion designer



Upcycled, recycled and loved (Clockwise from far left) Designs from Graine; Injiri; and Studio Medium; designer Varun Bahl; Chinara Farooqui of Injiri; Aratrik Dev Varman of Tilla; and Ashita Singhal of Paiwand Studio. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

two years ago, stitching together organza leftovers to create textured patterns. Most recently, in their Spring/Summer 2024 collection's Sublime Jacket Dress, "we also made pockets with waste fabrics to which we have added *chikankari*," says Sethi, who is now reusing metal parts and waste embellishments.

Jebin Johny, founder of the label Jebbispar, draws attention to another kind of production waste: defective printed fabrics. "I once received a batch of saris that couldn't be used because of printing issues," he recalls. These included the label's signature St. Thomas prints from their 'Nasrani' collection and motifs from the 'Kathakabuki' line, among others. Johny has gradually incorporated elements from those saris as statement motifs using appliquéd techniques on dresses and separates as part of the 'Kintsugi' collection, which are now among Jebbispar's bestsellers. "I am also working on a new collection using all our scraps and leftovers," he says.

Labour intensive

Setting up upcycling infrastructure requires time and resources. Paiwand Studio aims to serve this need, consulting designers, brands, and export houses on waste management and creating upcycled textiles and capsule collections using their waste. Founder and creative director Ashita Singhal notes that developing new textiles can be an expensive process for brands; in her studio, the process involves cleaning and sorting waste based on colour and raw materials, creating strips and bobbins which are then handwoven or embroidered to create new raw materials for garments.

Additional man-hours and intensive production raises manufacturing cost to as much as producing a regular collection; this in turn affects retail pricing. "But if everyone uses and upcycles their scraps, it will drastically change material consumption patterns," she says. "It can save costs, generate employment, and impact the environment positively. Small efforts bring big changes."

The writer and editor is based in Delhi.

Reusing bandhani thread

At the Delhi-headquartered label Studio Medium, material innovations from waste are offered under their Future Tense initiative. Its most distinctive offering is a material created from the threads used to make bandhani and tie-dye fabrics, and usually discarded after. "The [thread waste] attains a form and texture due to the way it is used," says founder Riddhi Jain, who first developed these textiles as a student at National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) over a decade ago. "It carries a memory of the process it has been through, and that has always been exciting to us."

Jain has applied the material to create apparel, furniture, upholstery, small goods, and textile art. According to the brand, each textile or garment from discards uses an average of 1.5 kg pre-consumer waste; the team has used over 300 kg yarns and off-cuts so far.

"It has taken time and experimentation to figure out scalability and means of reusing on a regular basis," she says. This included making new blueprints and training artisans to undertake the operations. "We are now working very hard on a collection that's entirely monochromatic." A Future Tense website is also in the works.

