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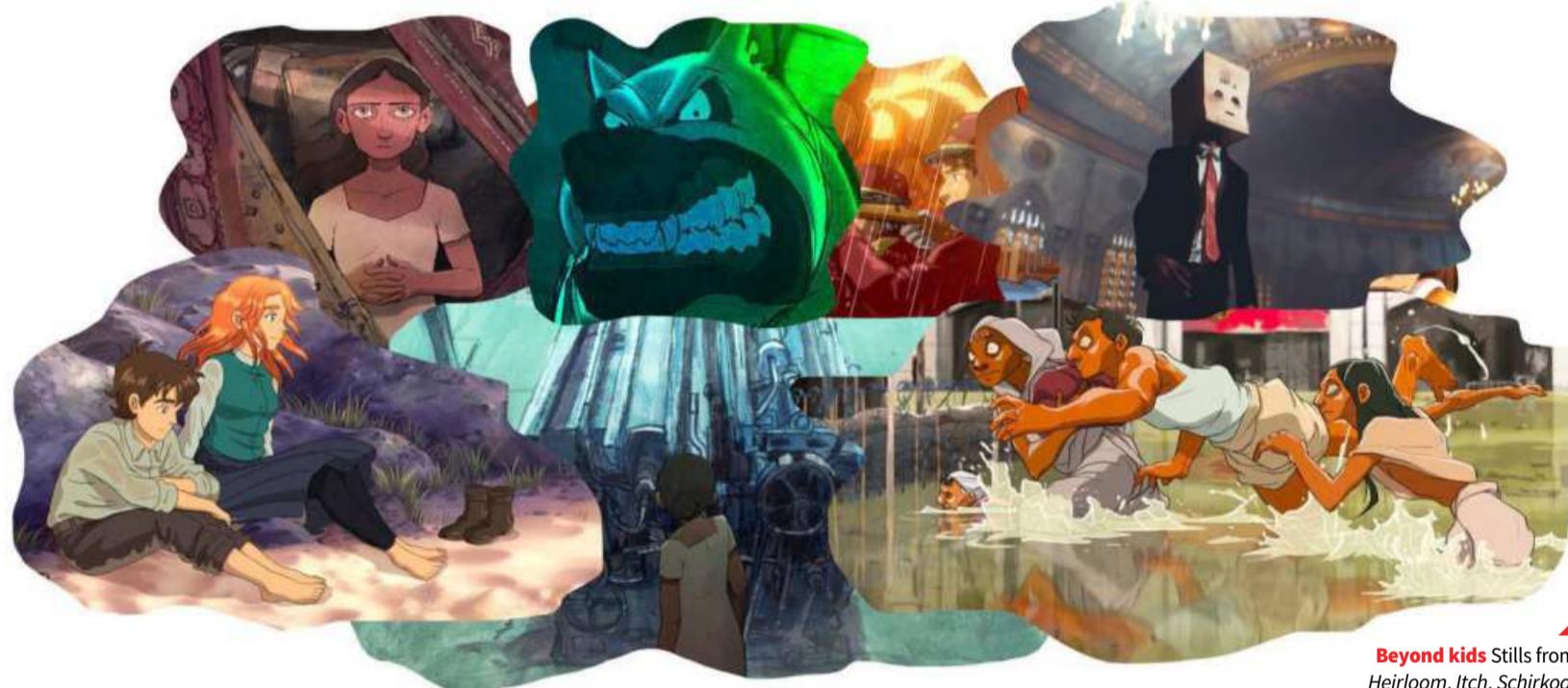
Cambridge scholar Mary Beard on ancient Romans

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INDIA'S EXPANDING ANIMATION SLATE



Beyond kids Stills from *Heirloom*, *Itch*, *Schirkoa*, *Wade*, and *The Glassworker*.

International backing and adult themes are helping young animators – as Ishan Shukla proves with *Schirkoa*'s premiere at the Rotterdam film festival



Saibal Chatterjee

Animation in South Asia could be eyeing a game-changing leap led by filmmakers working in partnership with international producers, film festivals and funding agencies. A film premiering at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam, a couple of debut projects in development and a proposed web series helmed by a veteran, among others, represent an exciting range of new ventures with a global outlook. These films represent a clean break from children's cartoons and mythological yarns.

debut feature, *The Glassworker*, is slated for release this year – have found a way out.

One of them is Vadodara-based Ishan Shukla, whose first feature *Schirkoa* is premiering today at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam. Produced by the director with Bich-Quân Tran (France's Dissidentz Films), Stephan Holl (Germany's Rapid Eye Movies) and India's Samir Sarkar, the film is set in a near-perfect city where citizens cover their heads with paper bags to dissolve differences. Tensions rise when whispers of a mythical land without the bags start to float and a fresh council member sparks an accidental revolution.

How have international producers impacted the project? "Bich-Quân pushed the film further in terms of ambition and scale," says Shukla. "She understood that we were creating cinema, not just animation." She brought Golshifteh Farahani, Gaspar Noé, Soko and the Filipino auteur Lav Diaz into the voice cast. "She also set up the motion capture shoot in Angoulême [from where a large percentage of France's animation production emerges]," he adds.

Shukla, who honed his animation

A key reason for filmmakers increasingly looking for backers abroad is the reluctance of domestic producers to fund animation features. "Our animators have been ready for many years, but there just was no funding available," says Mumbai-based producer-director Soumitra Ranade. "I read many animation scripts when young directors approach me for my suggestions. It breaks my heart to ask them: who is funding this?" Happily, at least three young men – four, if we count Karachi's Usman Riaz, whose

Animation is time consuming. Right now, it's a closed loop where we don't have a precedent of a successful feature. Hopefully, that will happen now [with the new crop of films], and the more it happens the easier it will become for the next lot of projects and directors. To have a diversity of voices, you need to have a large number of people making their short films in the next five years, so that they can graduate to a good batch of features in the next 10 years

UPAMANYU BHATTACHARYYA
Filmmaker

Design (NID), Ahmedabad alumnus. The residency helped him think global. He also worked closely for many years with Spanish animation director Isabel Herguera on *Sultana's Dream*, which premiered at the 71st San Sebastian Film Festival last September.

"I would not be attempting a feature of my own without that experience," says Bhattacharyya, whose association with Annecy began in 2020, the year his 10-minute animated short, *Wade*, premiered at the festival and won the City of Annecy Award. "Herguera's artistic vision and her determination to stick to a project like this for so many years are my main inspiration," he says. "At Annecy, developing the film was all I had to worry about. We had script and artistic mentorship."

Heirloom, set in 1960s Ahmedabad, is a fantasy family story about a couple engaged in the textiles industry. A man is intent on creating a handloom museum. But his wife, with an eye on financial stability, wants to enter the power loom business.

CONTINUED ON
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skills in Singapore, made a 14-minute short, *Schirkoa*, in 2016, on his return to India. It went to numerous festivals and sold to channels across the globe besides being longlisted for the Academy Awards. "I made a bit of money and realised that such projects could be pitched internationally," he says. While he has five to six people in his core technical team, he also works with talent from across the world. "My character designer is from China, my storyboard artist from Iran, and my sound designer from France."

Mentorship and direction
Kolkata animator Upamanyu Bhattacharyya, too, has gone international for his feature debut, *Heirloom*. "I'd never have conceived the project had it not been for the Annecy Festival Residency's call for applications," says the National Institute of

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ENNUI AS THE HEROINE

Hindi writer Usha Priyamvada's feminist novel finds new readers with the International Booker-winning Daisy Rockwell's translation

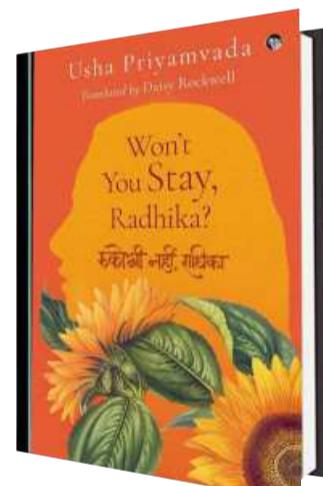
Latha Anantharaman

It may not be auspicious for a book to begin with an introduction about ennui. But Daisy Rockwell gives the subject the same light touch she brings to the translation of Usha Priyamvada's *Won't You Stay, Radhika?*, framing it within the broader tradition of bourgeois languor as well as all the ennui-adjacent varieties of female melancholy that exist in literature and in life.

The reader stands warned, prepared to examine the young protagonist with an attitude of forbearance. From such a candid and wry presenter, we expect a good translation, and that is just what we get. The novel itself is best experienced as a product of its time. First published in Hindi as *Rukogi*

Nahi Radhika in 1967, the story is about a young woman who returns to India after some years studying, and living with a man, in the United States. What drove her out of her father's home in the first place was the arrival of a stepmother, and Radhika comes home to find the bitterness of their parting remains.

The fact that her father no longer lives with his second wife, and instead sits brooding and solitary in one of his other bungalows, makes no difference. Radhika is unable to connect with any of her family, or her old friends. Each encounter seems to leave her exactly in the state of suspension that she experienced on her return home, if she can still call it home. Her conversations are exchanges of rote civilities and dutiful, joyless laughter, and the silences mean more than any words that are spoken. Her inner life is what drives the story onward.



Won't You Stay, Radhika?
Usha Priyamvada, trs Daisy Rockwell
Speaking Tiger
₹350

Fighting their way in

The novel belongs to the body of retro-feminist literature that is being revived by one publishing house after another. Many Indian novels of the post-Independence era were written by authors of a particular pedigree, with the requisite time and wherewithal to explore the inner lives of urban women.

Six decades on, publishers continue to favour queenly writers of the leisured classes who look good in soft-focus black-and-white photographs, and works like Priyamvada's still seem to have a robust chance of appearing in print.

A compelling case can be made that the revolution, such as it is, was actually achieved by those women who shouldered their rexine handbags and fought their way into packed trains to work in schools, banks, offices and thrumming factories. That it was their economic output and financial clout that have transformed the Indian woman of the 21st century, not the rarefied reasonings of their more privileged sisters. Whether those voices will be heard remains to be seen.

All that history is perhaps too weighty to rest on the shoulders of this slim work. Wearing her ennui day after day, Radhika wends her way back to her beloved Papa, only to wonder whether she might flee again. The star of Priyamvada's novel may not be one character or another, but ennui itself.

The reviewer is the author of Three Seasons: Notes from a Country Year.

A memory palace for loss

In Geet Chaturvedi's prose, a library becomes a place of refuge for displaced Sindhis

Percy Bharucha

The voices that mainly inhabit *Simsim* – Hindi poet and author Geet Chaturvedi's new translation, in the longlist for the JCB Prize for Literature 2023 – belong to Basar Mal Jetharam Purswani, the aged proprietor of a library that has seen better days, and the unnamed student who often walks through the tiny lane where the library is located.

On most days, doddering Basar Mal fights damp, dust, the land mafia that threatens to destroy his library, and the ravages of age which continually efface memories of his beloved and his homeland. Meanwhile, his wife, for want of a child, adopts a doll and devotes the remainder of her days to its care. The unnamed student who walks by the library begins to imagine a young girl who appears at a specific window and vows to make her his beloved. He imagines their life together while escaping arguments with his father on how to build his career. The other prominent voice in the story is that of a book that talks about the politics of language and gender while revealing why book burnings have existed throughout history.

What Chaturvedi manages to accomplish through *Simsim* is a capturing of the essence of space and time. Basar Mal's childhood in Sindh, the horrors of Partition, migrating to a foreign land, each is evoked not through narration or description but through the lightness of everyday prose and interactions.

Chaturvedi manages to make the reader feel what his characters are going through. To achieve this wonderful effect, he uses a variety of literary forms, including poetry, philosophical ruminations, even magical realism. But in doing so, he also rather subtly further blurs the lines between reality and memory, not just for his characters but his readers as well.

Proof of pain

The author builds his characters through the most commonplace interactions in everyday situations. When Basar Mal is asked to show proof of being a Sindhi refugee, he simply states the only proof he has is that he can speak Sindhi. When he goes around looking for jobs, he's told to seek employment from Jinnah. Basar Mal's library becomes a memory palace for displaced Sindhis. It is through their sharing of loss that we truly understand the horror of what has befallen them. In Chaturvedi's prose, the everyday ordinary becomes extraordinary.

In the deft hands of Anita Gopalan, the translation carries through the author's intentions of being revelatory, prophetic and yet always mellifluous. There is a lightness that mirrors the sensory triggers of memory for Basar Mal, and once the memories fade, all that remain are their smells. Chaturvedi and Gopalan's work is indelible, in that it cannot be truly forgotten.

The reviewer is a freelance writer and illustrator.

IN CONVERSATION

Curse of the South African writer

Booker-winning author Damon Galgut on feeling the weight of history and on his long-standing connection with India

Swati Daftuar

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Damon Galgut is in India for the first time since his book, *The Promise*, won The Booker Prize in 2021. But the 60-year-old South African playwright and author is no stranger to the country and had once described his relationship with India as an "ongoing" one. Ahead of the 17th edition of the Jaipur Literature Festival, where he will be a speaker, Galgut discusses how India has changed for him, his dislike of the term "political", and his craft as a South African writer. Excerpts from an email interview:

Question: You've said that you knew from a very young age that you were a writer. Were the act of writing and the awareness of the world and its political ramifications connected in any way?

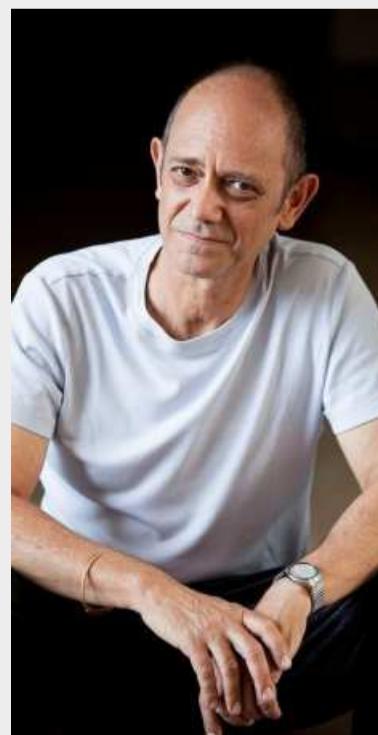
Answer: I did indeed feel from an early age that writing was my destiny, but I only developed a

political awareness in my 20s, specifically when I went to University during the State of Emergency in the late 1980s. My first and second books had nothing to do with South African political realities. As a young person I believed that literature (and 'art' in general) was above such tawdry stuff. It took me some time to realise that the tawdry stuff is precisely what our human world is made of.

Q: So many of your books explore themes of identity and loneliness, and the human condition. What draws you to these ideas?

A: There's a mystery to why certain subjects pull you as a writer. These are questions that preoccupy me personally, so it's perhaps natural that I'd want to look at them on the page. Sorry not to be more forthcoming, but it's maybe best not to examine your own motives too closely. That mystery is an essential element of the process.

Q: To keep both, the emotional

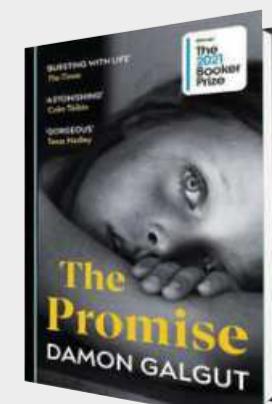


Damon Galgut won The Booker Prize in 2021 for his book *The Promise*.

(GETTY IMAGES)

depth and the exploration of the larger, more political, themes – is that something that poses a challenge?

A: I don't like terms such as 'political', because they suggest something separate from human life. Perhaps it makes more sense to think of ourselves as creatures of history, because we're all products of our time and place. To look at any person – their situation and being – you are also in some sense looking at when and where they live. That's



unavoidable. Even novels that aren't aware of their larger historical context are taking it into account, perhaps unconsciously.

So, I guess I'm trying to write about people as fully and as accurately as I can. That means I also try to account for the moment in which they're living. In South Africa, the presence of history is very palpable. As William Faulkner observed, the past isn't past yet.

Q: You've described your connection with India as an "ongoing, kind of obsessive relationship" – something that inspired you and led you to write *Arctic Summer* (2014). What draws you to this country?

A: Honestly, I don't really understand my connection to India. For many years I kept returning, and I spent many happy months writing two novels (*The Good Doctor* and *The Impostor*) in Goa. I have some close friends too and have tried to understand the history of India a little. I have always been dazzled and amazed by the inventiveness

and warmth and openness of its people. And I love the food!

But I have to say that my relationship with India has cooled in recent years. This is my first visit in a long while. Part of what always drew me was its inclusiveness and tolerance, a broad and accepting vision that has, alas, considerably dimmed and narrowed, at least in my perception. I grew up under white nationalism and I know that any kind of nationalism promises to take you forward while it actually carries you backward. But I have faith that India will outlast this current moment and find its generous heart again.

Q: The *Promise* is so much about the passage of time and its impact on both the land and people. Do you feel the weight of responsibility; to pick subjects, ideas that need a voice? Or is there not one without the other?

A: This is the curse of the South African writer, I suppose. Most of us would like to write without that sense of responsibility weighing us down. But... history makes itself felt. I don't go around trying to speak for the voiceless, but it's impossible to create a South African character without thinking about their race and class. And of course many people don't have a voice precisely because of those factors. You can't turn away from them.

Historic display (clockwise from below) A marble map, measuring 18X13 metres, created by Roman Emperor Septimius Severus in 203 A.D., at the Forma Urbis museum, Rome; Mary Beard; 'The Roses of Heligobalos', a 1888 painting depicting Roman emperor Elagabalus hosting a banquet; and massive walls on the Palatine at the Imperial building complex. (REUTERS, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND WIKI COMMONS)

**INTERVIEW****Sudipta Datta**

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Professor Emerita of Classics at Cambridge, the 69-year-old Mary Beard has been interested in the Romans all her life: and her books, podcasts and TV series have helped explore the fact and fiction of that ancient world. Ahead of the Jaipur Literature Festival where she is a speaker, Beard talks to *Magazine* about busting myths around the early civilisation and more. Edited excerpts:

Question: Why should the world engage with the Romans?

Answer: The way they thought, and how they argued, gave us for better or worse, the tools of the trade with which we think about the modern world, [and issues] such as empire, citizenship, what it is to be a citizen. Their phrases are still on our lips; when, in the middle of the Cold War, Kennedy went to Berlin, he quoted Cicero. I think the Romans are extremely interesting – and they are also unavoidable.

Q: When did you decide to make the classics not only about elite white men?

A: I'm quite interested in those elite white men, but they're not all the story. It developed over my career, teaching in Cambridge. Initially, I taught my students rather gloomily that we can't ever see the position of a woman or slave in Rome. As I went on teaching, into my thirties and forties, I realised that

Don't do as the Romans did

Roman writers had an anxiety about one-man rule. But there was little opposition to the system, says Mary Beard

the non-elites, the slaves, the women, have left an extraordinary mark on Roman history. Though we don't have the shelves of literature from them that we have for those elite white blokes, we have their tombstones. We have what they scratched on the walls. We have papyrus documents from Roman Egypt. I went recently to the Palatine Hill in Rome, to an establishment of the slaves of the imperial palace. There the walls were covered with graffiti, written by slaves telling us where they came from. There was one signing his name, saying he'd originally come from Kherson in Ukraine. And I thought, that is part of our geopolitics, too.

Q: Mindsets haven't changed... **A:** When I was younger I used to think that equality for women was very close, and that what you needed were some practical changes – proper nurseries, proper contraception and equal pay, and so forth. We still don't have equal pay, but you can do most of that. But still it's how people think about women's authority in their heads that counts as much as all those practical things. And that mindset, it's still a long way to go to change that.

Q: In your latest book, 'Emperor of Rome', you bust several myths about the Roman world. What do the stories tell us about the imperial court? **A:** I tried to take a new look at how ancient writers discuss the Roman Empire, and I decided not to do it through telling one biography of one emperor after the next. I thought let's just take them all together and study the broad spectrum between so-called

good and bad emperors. You could take some of the kind of very flamboyant anecdotes, things like an emperor who murdered his dinner guests by showering them with rose petals. The kind of stuff emperors got up to doing, terrible things, wicked sex things in the swimming pool. It's pointless to try to decide whether they're true. But what you can see is that they're repeatedly coming back to the same themes about imperial power and its dangers – that the emperor can kill you when he's being kind; you can never believe what he says. It's a dystopian world in which the emperor overturns the very nature of what it is to be true and what it is to be false.

There's a wonderful story that looks terribly trivial to start with, of an emperor in the third century, who, we're told, never ate fish by the sea. He only ate fish on land. You think that's a silly story, but then you see that what we are being told is that he doesn't operate by the laws of what is natural. And then you see the anxiety that many Roman writers have about the nature of one-man rule. But what's interesting is that there is so little opposition in Rome to the system.

Q: So there were more collaborators than dissidents.

A: A vast majority of them were collaborators or co-operators. For most of them it was the only system they knew. They kept their heads down, and it was business as usual and that is where I see the big lesson for us. There are places in the world where aspects of democracy are now very much under threat and the lesson of Rome is you have to stand up and object, because if you don't, you will be like the Romans.

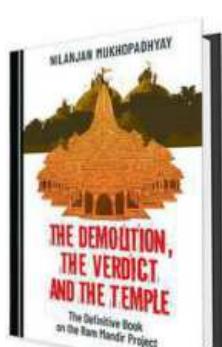
**BROWSER****The Demolition, the Verdict and the Temple**

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

Speaking Tiger Books

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The writer has updated his earlier book, *The Demolition and the Verdict*, exploring the question whether the opening of the Ram Mandir will be a new chapter in the Ayodhya saga. Will those who wield political power be mindful of the sensitivities of minorities, he asks.

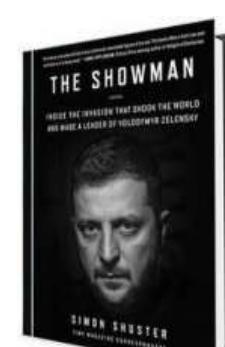
**The Showman**

Simon Shuster

HarperCollins

₹799

After four years of reporting, travels with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky to the front, interviews with him, his wife, his friends and enemies, his ministers and military commanders, a journalist tells the story of how the President rallied the world behind his cause.

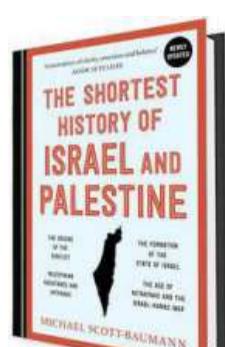
**The Shortest History of Israel and Palestine**

Michael Scott-Baumann

Pan Macmillan

₹599

The ongoing struggle between Israel and Palestine is one of the most protracted conflicts in history. In this book, West Asian expert Michael Scott-Baumann traces its origins and charts its evolution from civil war to the present day, and how violence overshadows life.

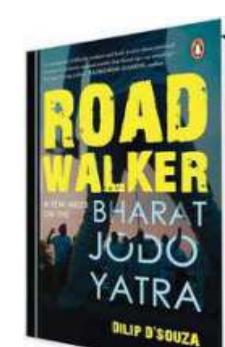
**Roadwalker: A Few Miles on the Bharat Jodo Yatra**

Dilip D'Souza

Penguin

₹250

The writer joined Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra four times, and he says it gave him hope. As the yatra passed through Tamil Nadu and Kerala, it kindled memories of India's past challenges and he decided to walk along for a part of the way.

**IN CONVERSATION**

'Assamese identity has historically been secular'

As the government searches for a definition, Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty unpacks the composite culture of the people by the Brahmaputra

Abdus Salam

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As Assam hurtles from the National Register of Citizens to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and an ongoing Supreme Court hearing on provisions facilitating the 1985 Accord, author and journalist Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty tackles the fundamental question of what defines its people in her second book, *The Assamese: A Portrait of a Community*. Edited excerpts from an interview.

Question: Just who is an Assamese is a question that has evaded political consensus for decades. Do you see an expansive administrative definition ultimately or one that excludes several communities that comprise your portrait?

Answer: The Assamese community is a rare instance of the government setting up a high-level committee to decide who comprise it rather than the people. There is of course a protracted history to it. That's why I had to deal with the issue even though the book pertains more to the socio-cultural aspect of the community. What I'd like to particularly highlight though is that the book ends with not my definition of Assamese but with people who identify themselves as such. For instance, well-known actor Victor Banerjee, who is born Bengali, grew up in Assam, and calls himself

**Right to identify** Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Bengalis at a time Assamese sub-nationalism is being pulled towards the crossroads of religion?

A: We're seeing the tilting of the Assamese identity towards a Hindu identity. But when it comes to Assamese and the Bengali [illegal immigration] question, the religion goes into the backdrop. We saw that in the anti-CAA protests. Ethnicity became more important.

Q: A recurring theme in the book is the patriarchy and caste hierarchies that have afflicted Assamese society, even in the Sankari tradition. Why, as you say, is it something that we don't care to talk about?

A: Patriarchy is something we don't talk about not just in Assam but the Northeast. I see it among the Nagas, even in the matrilineal Khasi society. There is a tendency in mainland India to airbrush this and talk about the rights women enjoy in the Northeast. Yes, we have more rights but within the four walls of the house. Look at the political space – so many north-eastern States are terrible in terms of giving political rights to women. At the bottom of it is unsaid, inherent patriarchy. I wanted to highlight it.

The Northeast, class, community are more important than caste. But caste plays a role... in politics, and even in societal functioning. I now see a lot of intermarriages in Assam between tribals and non-tribals, upper classes and lower classes, castes... I feel very hopeful.

Q: Assam and the Assamese are no longer unknown entities in the mainstream imagination. Does the diaspora increasingly play a role in shaping the community identity?

A: Historically, Assam and the Northeast have been a migrant-attracting region, but now they're a migrant-producing one. The educated lot want to settle down outside, but there's a fluid migrant population that's a product of a lot of mismanagement... poor governance, plus so many bandhs and unrest. They are also representatives of Assam and the region. Most of these migrants I meet want to come back after earning some money. Somewhere, at some point, it will make a dent within the whole definition of the identity.

Q: What do you make of the complicated historical relationship with Bengal and

INDIA'S EXPANDING ANIMATION SLATE

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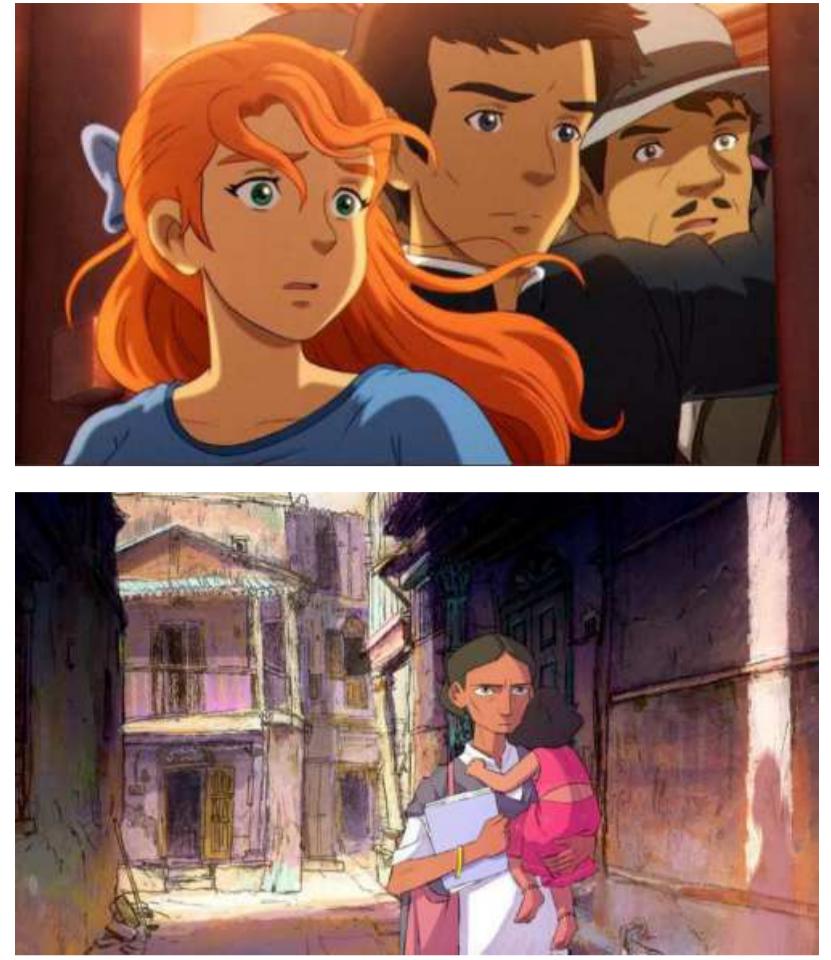
Among Bhattacharya's mentors was Reza Riahi, the Paris-based Iranian animation filmmaker who was the art director of Nora Twomey's *The Breadwinner*, French-Irish animator Adrien Merigeau, and Elea Gobbe-Mevellec, director of *The Swallows of Kabul* (2019). "It was great to have such experienced directors to bounce ideas off," he says. Because when he first got into animation, there wasn't a lot of information available to him – "about where I could go for funding, what residencies and grants I could apply for, which festivals have markets and how they worked. It took a long time to learn. If people had that information as a ready resource, I feel they would be able to make better decisions. It should be open source and that's something we hope to do after *Heirloom* releases in 2026."

Across the border
Also nearing release (this April, to coincide with Eid) is Pakistan's first-ever hand-drawn 2D animation film, *The Glassworker*. Directed by the Karachi animator Usman Riaz, the 92-minute Ghibli-style film has India's Apoorva Bakshi (Emmy Award-winning producer of Netflix's



Our animators have been ready for many years, but there just was no funding available. I read many animation scripts when young directors approach me for my suggestions. It breaks my heart to ask them: who is funding this?

SOUMITRA RANADE
Producer-director



Delhi Crime and *The Hunt* for Veerappan on board as executive producer.

The Glassworker is about a father-son duo that runs Pakistan's finest glass workshop. An impending war throws them off gear. The arrival in town of an army colonel and his daughter, an aspiring violinist, alters the relationship between father and son. Produced by Riaz's Mane Animation Studios, Spanish animation film producer Manuel Cristobal (*Bunuel in the Labyrinth of Turtles*, 2019) is also on board, and Paris-based sales agency Charades has picked up the international rights.

Ranade, meanwhile, is developing *Itch*, a 10-part animated web show set in 10 megacities of the world. Proposed to be delivered as two seasons of five 22-minute episodes each, it "is about what the city does to an individual," says the producer who also backed Ganjali Rao's critically-acclaimed *Bombay Rose*.

Power of 2D Stills from *The Glassworker* and *Heirloom*.

engine, the filmmaker can accurately gauge the final look of the film and experiment with different styles.

Schirkao was developed entirely in a game engine: "what you see on the screen is a living, breathing, immersive world. Technically, it is something new," says Shukla. This, he feels, could be the future of animation filmmaking.

Bhattacharya's *Heirloom* combines embroidery and digital animation. It was an "organic choice. The characters interact with a woven tapestry, so it felt right to make those scenes using the embroidery technique". His NID years exposed Bhattacharya to Ahmedabad's textile heritage, and he also got textile designer Maitri Ravishankar, also from NID, to work on the embroidery. While mixed-media animation features exist, as do films using frame-by-frame embroidery or even hand-drawn influences, won Best Animated Short at the Oscars qualifying LA Short Fest.

Later, he applied for and secured grants – from France, Germany and the U.S. – to develop it into a feature.

Remarkably, *Schirkao* is among the few animated features to be developed entirely on a game engine.

"I submitted the script for Epic Games' Epic MegaGrant," Shukla shares over a Zoom call. "They are the creators of Fortnite and Gears of War. Their Unreal Engine is one of the most successful game engines in the world. Unlike a traditional 3D software from five years ago, game engines allow you to preview the results in real-time. This allowed me to experiment with diverse art styles while moving the camera around."

Shukla's film draws on the best traditions of dystopian fiction. In a game

reasons, for sheer survival."

Bhattacharya places himself firmly in the optimists column, too. "It's [animation] India a very vibrant space, and there are a lot of people doing very good work. The challenge is to get more of them to think that filmmaking is a good idea," he says. "Before we think of features, we must have a robust system in place to help get first- and second-time directors' short films off the ground – give them a festival life, a distribution channel, and opportunities to experiment with their techniques and storytelling. If they know they can make a living in animation, the main gap will be filled."

The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.

Striking out on his own

Kolkata-based filmmaker and graphic designer Abhinandan Banerjee, too, is striving for cultural fidelity in his Bengali-English-German feature, *Just Another Billboard*, a supernatural-horror period story set in WW-II Calcutta. "It has been in development for a year-and-a-half now," he reveals. "I was waiting to understand animation in the context of international cinema before taking the plunge." Banerjee, whose live-action feature *Manikubarr Megh (The Man & the Cloud)*, 2021) premiered at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, hopes to have his self-produced *Just Another Billboard* ready by Christmas 2025. "Devising the diverse animation styles for the different periods and settings of the film is taking time," he says.

Shilajit Mitra
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Whether or not India at large has embraced dystopia, its cinema hasn't. Barring some valiant blips, dystopian narratives haven't caught on in our films. One hindrance could be the practical limitations of live-action filmmaking, not to mention censorship. There is, on account of this, a thrilling workaround: indie animation. With so much freeware and fancy tools floating around, and the call to subversive inherent in the genre, the horizons lie wide for the resourceful animation auteur.

A trill, in fact, has already been blazed. If you swear by *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell* – or enjoyed the glitchy distortions of *Love, Death & Robots* – then wait for Ishan Shukla's *Schirkao*, *In Lies We Trust*.

Premiering at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR) today, *Schirkao* took flight as an epromys short film Shukla created in 2016. The 14-minute film, combining 3D computer graphics with hand-drawn influences, won

Best Animated Short at the Oscars qualifying LA Short Fest.

Later, he applied for and secured grants – from France, Germany and the U.S. – to develop it into a feature.

Remarkably, *Schirkao* is among the few animated features to be developed entirely on a game engine.

"I submitted the script for Epic Games' Epic MegaGrant," Shukla shares over a Zoom call. "They are the creators of Fortnite and Gears of War. Their Unreal Engine is one of the most successful game engines in the world. Unlike a traditional 3D software from five years ago, game engines allow you to preview the results in real-time. This allowed me to experiment with diverse art styles while moving the camera around."

Shukla's film draws on the best

neon-lit megapolis – the titular "Schirkao" – citizens defer to an authoritarian 1984-like regime. Social barriers are rigid, predicated on the tenets of Safety, Sanity, and Sanctity', and immigration is discouraged.

People wear bags over their heads to facilitate uniformity. The protagonist, much like the one in Terry Gilliam's

Brasil, is a cog in the bureaucratic machine. There are murmurings of a war and an underground uprising.

Avoiding the trap of topicality

Shukla, a BITS Pilani dropout who worked for some years as a CG artist in Singapore, first conceived the world of *Schirkao* as a graphic novel. The political turmoil of the last decade – Arab Spring, Syria, Trump, Iran, Hong Kong, Modi – inevitably fed into the project, though he was wary of falling into the trap of topicality. "I wanted to create something with lasting civilizational value," says Shukla, who grew up reading Tolstoy and Kahlil Gibran. "The pushback against immigrants, for instance, is nothing new in human history. It's been happening since

times the Neanderthals and the *Homo sapiens* would have a fight because someone crossed over into their territory. I wanted people to relate to these themes irrespective of their culture, nationality or ethnicity."

Though he's happy to discuss Orwell or the *Spider-Verse* with equal zest, Shukla traces his primary influences to video games, not books or films. The iconic BioShock series opened his mind to dystopian world-building; games like

Borderlands and *Dishonored* got his

aesthetic juices flowing. "In

Borderlands, they added these

outlines to 3D characters that made

them look almost hand-drawn. It was

a unique style when it first came out in 2010."

Game animators also rely heavily

on motion capture (mo-cap) for

realistic movements and

performances, something Shukla has

experimented with in *Schirkao*.

"My father was a theatre artist and

director, and I have assisted him on

his stage plays. With mo-cap, I finally

got the opportunity to direct real

actors and feed that data onto the

characters residing inside my

animation." The motion capture for

the film was done over three weeks in

Angoulême, France.

Visionary bent of mind

One of the first voice actors to come

on board was poet-lyricist Piyush Mishra; it escalated from there to

Gasper Noé and French-singer

songwriter Soko via Shekhar Kapur,

Anurag Kashyap and Karan Johar.

Shukla works out of his studio in

Vadodara, Gujarat. His company, Red

Cigarette Media, is developing

another adult-oriented animation

feature in the sci-fi space. He

collaborates frequently with

Tehran-based illustrator and

storyboard artist Shahab Serwah;

his character designer, Yaning Feng, is

Chinese. Shukla says there's no dearth

of skilled animators and technicians in

India; what's lacking, perhaps, is a

visionary bent of mind. "Animation in

India is still sadly a service industry.

There are very few indigenous

creators who can write and produce

animation films from scratch.

Compared to a country like Chile,

India's indie animation scene is just

not catching up. It's all the more

baffling because the technology is

getting cheaper by the day."



"We needed a voice for a flamboyant television host in *Schirkao*. It had to be charming but also ironic, for a dystopia. It was unbelievable when Karan agreed to do it."

Neha Khanwalkar has composed the film's score, one of her most expansive projects in recent years. "We worked with a lot of synth and jazz elements... I wanted this out-of-tune quality to the soundscape. For the second half of the film, we used tracks by German psychadelic soul group King Khan and the Shirkas."

years, and like me, they too got pummelled in the penultimate round, listening comprehension. It's impossible to keep up with the aural cascade of footnotes; all the street names, phone numbers, and how many dollars and cents Jane had paid back for the frappuccino at the Starbucks on Trudeau Square.

Insane paperwork

Of course, your emigration chances improve slightly if,

unlike a journalist, you actually possessed a skill useful to society.

Like knowing how to repair an AC, build a dining table, or install a western toilet. Had I had Vision 2020, like so many CEOs used to until 2019, I would have become an electrician, carpenter or plumber, and had I done so, today I would be happily enjoying Amrit Kalal in Alberta. Alas, it's too late for an old dog like me to learn new tricks.

In any case, I don't think I'll try the legal route anymore; the paperwork is insane. I've decided that the next time I'm filled with enough courage (or desperation) to join the multitudes fleeing the Mother of Democracy, I would aim not for the misleadingly named 'Express Entry Program' but the 'donkey route'. It's also the more scenic route. On the way, you get to see Dubai, Nicaragua, Mexico, and if you're lucky, even France, the country that gave the world Liberty, Equality and Paris Hilton. Those of you into adventure sports would love the trek across the desert from Mexico to the US, or alternately, the challenges of frostbite, hunger and sub-Arctic temperatures as you trudge across the beautiful snowscapes of the Canada-U.S. border.

There's only one hitch with the donkey route to paradise: it's expensive, and I can't afford it unless, by some sort of miracle, an instrument of god transfers 315 lakh to my account, not once but four-five times. Well, miracles do happen. Who knows, by this time next year, in answer to the question, 'Where are you?' both you and I might be able to answer, 'Where the mind is willing, fear and economy is full of jobs.' Just kidding. There are no miracles.

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

A DARING DYSTOPIAN WORLD

As *Schirkao* premieres at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam, director Ishan Shukla discusses game engines and animation in India

BAGGED (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

NEANDERTHALS (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

SHIRKAO (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

ALLEGEDLY (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

WHERE ARE YOU? (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

YOU ARE GUILTY (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

WE HOPE CHILDREN ON CLIMATE CHANGE (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

SHOREWALK (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

YUVAN AVES (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

YUVANTA DA CUNHA (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

PRITI KURIYAN (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

ROBERT MACFARLANE (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

THE MIRACLE ON SUNDERBARD STREET (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

WHEN FAIRYLAND LOST ITS MAGIC (Clockwise) A still from the movie *Schirkao*; and (below) Shukla;

PERSON OF INTEREST

Tanuja Chandra: the sisterhood of stories

One of Hindi cinema's first female directors tells a key wedding tale

Director Tanuja Chandra gently nudges her subject to introspect. She asks her why she thinks she ignored her fatigue, uneasiness and embarrassment and continued in a relationship with a man who turned out to be a con artist. "I have to. I had no option. I don't want to hurt my loved ones. In order to make them happy, I have to do what they want," the young woman replies.

In a country that only looks at the shiny side of weddings, the critically acclaimed series *Wedding.con* on Prime Video, takes a deep dive into the marriage con industry and what drives it. Answer: the crushing weight of expectations on women to get married. There was a 13% rise in matrimonial fraud from 2020 to 2021, indicative of the larger trend of rising cyber crimes against women. These climbed 153% between 2017 and 2021, the series informs you.

When producers from BBC approached Chandra, one of Hindi cinema's first women directors, to



helm a documentary about the horrifying tales of matrimonial fraud, she agreed instantly. In *Wedding.con*, a mix of interviews and recreations, five women share their stories.

Sheen of sexiness
Chandra says that society's framing of questions to survivors always carries condemnation of how they could 'let' something bad happen.

The present-day hyper-

masculinity of Bollywood's biggest films is not something she identifies with. "It's the opposite of what I'm interested in personally. The thing that bothers me is the sheen of sexiness over something that is violent," she says, adding that OTT platforms have made it possible for filmmakers to tell a broader variety of stories.

Chandra's heart beats for women's stories. She shares her love for stories and her infectious laugh



Weight of expectations A still from the OTT series *Wedding.con*; and (left) Tanuja Chandra. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

with her mother and her sister Anupama Chopra, founder of entertainment journalism venture *Film Companion*. At the recent all-women premiere of *Wedding.con*, the three women were posing when a photographer asked them to "smile the same way". The laugh echoed loudly.

The film sisterhood showed their support at the premiere. There were actors, writers, producers, editors, production designers, graphic artists, lyricists, a cinematographer, and at least 10 women directors.

Chandra, who raised a glass of cold mocha with old friend Pooja Bhatt a few months ago to mark 25 years of directing Hindi films, recalled on Instagram how the two of them waited anxiously to see how audiences would respond to her first directorial venture. Chandra was then in a club of few female colleagues. Aparna Sen and Sai Paranjpye led the way and Hema Malini had directed a couple of films.

35% female

Twenty five years later, progress has been slow. The Amazon O Womaniya! 2023 survey that tracks gender diversity in the entertainment industry found that only 7 per cent of directors were women in 2023. "The numbers are

dismal, I don't even think there's 15 per cent representation in most departments," says Chandra. "I've been doing the same *bak bak*, saying the same thing for 25 years." Chandra does her bit by ensuring women are well-represented on her crew: *Wedding.con's* team was 35 per cent female.

Some of the stories Chandra's mother told her were handed down to her, in turn, by her mother, who was widowed early and lived alone. "I've been surrounded by very interesting, intelligent, sharp, funny women who are filled with opinions and who have faced struggles in their life," Chandra says. Everyone in this sisterhood tells great stories.

Like the one about the woman who was reluctantly married and whose in-laws thought she was lazy. The woman was listless and depressed and eventually, the complaints reached her parents who came to take her back. That's when she suddenly fell and hit her head hard on a grinding stone, causing it to split open. Thousands of black worms spilled out of her brain. That was what had been making her feel unwell and unable to do her daily chores.

"I felt if I didn't make a record of these stories they would be lost forever," Chandra says. She

immortalised them in her 2019 documentary on her favourite aunts, her father's sisters Sudha and Radha, and through a book she authored in 2017, *Bijnis Woman: Stories Of Uttar Pradesh I Heard from My Parents, Mausis and Buas*.

Unlike some of the unforgiving Indian parents depicted in *Wedding.con* (one mother says her daughter should 'pay the price for her mistake'), Chandra's parents were nurturing and put no pressure on the three siblings. If they felt apprehensive about their progeny's career choices – director, film journalist, author (her brother Vikram Chandra) – they never voiced it. "It was only after my mother saw my first film *Tamanna*, which I co-wrote, that she told me, 'Now I'm feeling good, I feel that you can take care of yourself.'" Chandra did her share of mothering with her sister's two children, and now that they have left home, she fills her days with friends and films.

When she posted about her celebratory coffee, Chandra thanked Bhattacharya for appreciating her work and also asked in her post: "I've always wondered why we as a culture don't compliment each other more? Why don't we seek people out to tell them when we've noticed a single thing beautiful about them?"

After *Wedding.con*, the compliments are flowing freely. "I've never received such good reviews in my entire career," Chandra says. And then laughs loudly.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Running and hiding

Neither vulnerable,
West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a tournament in The Netherlands some years ago that attracted a strong international field. South was Meike Wartel, who was quite young at the time, but today is recognized as one of the world's top female players.

The auction and the

opening lead gave Wartel a good idea about where the missing high cards were located. She won the opening diamond lead with dummy's ace and ruffed a diamond. She led a heart to the queen, cashed the ace of hearts, and ruffed another diamond. She was trying to remove all of West's diamonds. Mission accomplished! She led a low club

NORTH

♠ Q J 4
♥ A Q
♦ A 8 6 3
♣ Q 10 8 4

WEST

♠ K 10 9 8
♥ K 10 7 2
♦ Q 10 5
♣ A 7

EAST

♠ 7 6 5 3
♥ 5
♦ K J 9 7 2
♣ J 6 3

SOUTH

♠ A 2
♥ J 9 8 6 4 3
♦ 4
♣ K 9 5 2

The bidding:

WEST 1♦ **NORTH** 1NT **EAST** 3♦ **SOUTH** 4♦
All pass

Opening lead: Queen of ♦

toward the dummy. She might have gone wrong here by playing West for the jack, but West rose with his ace. He was

worried that Wartel would play the queen of clubs and another club to end-play him. West exited with his last club

to the 10, jack, and king. Wartel led the nine of clubs and West discarded a spade rather than ruffing. West was doing a good job of running, but he could not hide. Wartel exited with a heart to West's 10. West cashed the king of hearts but then had to lead a spade from his king and Wartel could claim her contract. Nicely played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Where do words come from?



Sweet victory
Some accounts suggest Theseus stabbed the Minotaur in the throat with his sword, while other accounts say he strangled it with his bare hands. (WIKI COMMONS)

coin that pays tribute to the humble cow?

6 This word became popular thanks to Sake Dean Mahomed, an entrepreneur who went from India to Britain, and set up a commercial bath. He introduced an extract of amla and soapberry to use in the bath, and referred to his services using the English version of the Hindi word 'champo', which means to massage. What word thus entered the English language?

7 The name for this popular beverage comes from the ancient Gaelic word 'usquebaugh', which means 'water of life' and referred to a drink made in the Scottish highlands for hundreds of years. What drink is this, whose darker, malt-containing form still refers to Scotland?

8 Many of the words used in this particular game come

from Persian, the most important one coming from the phrase 'shāh māt'. This is a reference to a point in the game, where the 'shāh' is forced into a position from which he cannot escape, i.e., a position of 'mat' or 'loss'. What term is this, that signals the end of the game? And what is the name of the game?

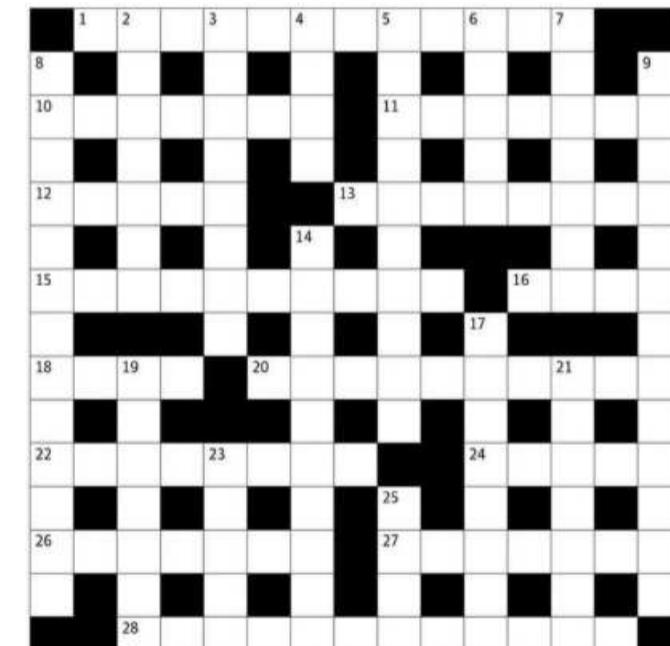
9 This word has been used since the 15th century to refer to anyone who works on lead items. Since early Roman times, lead had been used for civil projects of different kinds, as it is easily malleable. What is this profession known as, that is a reference to the Latin word for lead?

10 In the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, the hero Theseus has to find his way out of a maze after killing the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull monster. King Minos' daughter, Ariadne, who has fallen in love with Theseus, decides to help him: she gives him a ball of string called 'clew', using which he escapes the maze and comes out victorious. What word in English (now slightly altered) comes from this myth?

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

@bertyashley

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3291

**Across**

- 1 Excellent timing's provided by such sozzled comic at bars? (6,6)
- 10 Top spy is key (7)
- 11 Girl to have crush on is different (7)
- 12 Minimal cutting of purple aster (5)
- 13 Irrelevant fellow? (8)
- 15 Editor flipped about paper's covering unreal spectacle (10)
- 16 Pronounced virtuous, married off (4)
- 18 As they say it, man-to-man combat's involving a pair (4)
- 20 One that's intended to be good moving to end of game room (10)
- 22 Unaware, as session's incomplete? Have second thoughts (8)
- 24 Newspaper not paying for articles? (5)
- 26 Technology adopted by one born in retreat somewhere in Kenya (7)
- 27 Jazz fan with period of time in retirement for restful moments (7)
- 28 Book is describing a set heading west (towards town famous for cake) (12)

Down

- 2 In temper, find fault with weight (7)
- 3 Make minimal progress with book, magazine (4,4)
- 4 Mobile market's announced (4)
- 5 Eats stuff including starter of arugula with son in places you'll find rocket, etc. (6,4)
- 6 Leafy greens. Cold. Tough. (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3290

**Berty Ashley**

1 On this day in 1754, Sir Horace Walpole coined this word in a letter to a friend, when talking about how he had unexpectedly discovered a lost painting. The word comes from a Persian fairytale about three princes who make accidental discoveries. More specifically, it is derived from the name of their country, which is also the old name for Sri Lanka. What word is this?

2 This word refers to someone who does something, not for money, but simply because they love it. The root comes from the Latin word 'amare', which means 'to love'. What word is this?

3 This word can be traced to the Arabic word 'yasara', which means 'the one who rolled the dice'. It also relates to the

Spanish word 'azar', which means 'an unfortunate dice roll'. This eventually became an English word, which roughly translates to 'a source of danger, loss or harm'. What is this word that is also the title of a song by Richard Marx?

4 The original version of this condiment is a fish sauce made by the Chinese community, known as 'koe-cheup', meaning 'brine of fish'. By the 1720s, a version of this dish had emerged in English cookbooks, but it now had mushrooms, walnut, vinegar and tomato in it. What is this item, that every fast food outlet inevitably has in huge quantities?

5 The origin of this word comes from the cowpox virus, particularly the Latin word for cow: 'vacca'. It was English physician Edward Jenner who discovered that infecting a person with the virus made them immune to it. What word did he

coin that pays tribute to the humble cow?

6 This word became popular thanks to Sake Dean Mahomed, an entrepreneur who went from India to Britain, and set up a commercial bath. He introduced an extract of amla and soapberry to use in the bath, and referred to his services using the English version of the Hindi word 'champo', which means to massage. What word thus entered the English language?

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8 Many of the words used in this particular game come

10. Clue
6. Plumber
8. Cheekmate; Scottish whisky
6. Shampoo
5. Acne
3. Hazel
2. Amateur
1. Seendipity
Answers

1. Weight
3. Progress
4. Magazine
5. Arugula
6. Leafy greens. Cold. Tough. (5)



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The bliss of a morning constitutional

Walk on for the sheer pleasure of it, through heavenly gardens, crowded streets and even narrow bylanes

Thayil Sethumadhavan

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I succumbed to the pleasure of morning walks rather late in life, in my fifties, when I was staying in a government flat close to the Lodhi Gardens in New Delhi. The Lodhi Gardens is a haven for walkers, with the tastefully laid flowerbeds on each side of the walking tracks and the wide expanse of the carefully nurtured legacy garden with wonderful fresh air.

In the 1990s, Delhi was not as polluted as it is now; and during winter, walkers could be seen enjoying the sun and nature even late in the day. The only problem used to be the fairly large number of keen walkers walking in opposite directions, forcing one to give space from time to time.

But the garden was a pleasure to walk, and I enjoyed most days walking in its luxuriant expanses. One could spot not only colleagues and friends sharing the pleasure of walking but also well-known political figures and Ministers enjoying their time in the garden, closely followed by their security staff.

The cardinal rule was that you never stop and break your walk to exchange pleasantries or gossip if you meet a friend or colleague; just raise your hand and walk ahead. Everyone understood it.

A rather amusing experience which I had once was when on my way to the Gardens early in the morning, I was stopped by a roadside constable on duty and asked to look away from the road because the Prime Minister's convoy was about to pass that way. The feeling of insecurity after the assassination of a former Prime Minister was so high that the VVIP security arrangements, sometimes, extended to a comical level.

The Central Park in New York is another great place not only for walks but also to unwind. Since it was some distance away from where we lived, it was only a weekend refuge. But walking was a pleasure on the side of the East River close to the apartment where we lived, thanks to the multiple postings one had while being in public service.

As the saying goes, New York City never sleeps, and even at five in the morning, vehicles will be zooming on the riverside roads. But the city had thoughtfully provided nice walking tracks on the side of the river, and one can walk happily among the many avid morning walkers who thump a cheerful "hi" and pass on.

After I retired and settled down in Bengaluru, the practice continued with a vengeance. Now, that one had a lot of time on hand, walking for an hour every morning became a routine and passion. Happily, the apartment complex where we chose to stay has

adequate space for walking, though perambulating through the blocks of buildings makes it somewhat monotonous. More like the circumambulation which we perform while visiting temples. But the limited number of keen walkers in the residential complex makes you feel comfortable, with no jostling crowds as in a park since the younger age group have their eyes (and feet) focused on the in-house gym rather than on what makes the elderly happy.

Most of the co-walkers, as would have it, are those who have imbibed the spirit of walking not only for health reasons but also for pleasure. Except that one has to be watchful for the occasional crow touting your hair or a child cyclist honing his skill.

The occasional boredom in going round and round the building complex would sometimes force one to look for the parks nearby. Fortunately, there are a few at a walking distance. One of them fairly large, but no comparison to the 60 acres of Lodhi Gardens though, has a large pond, a mini-lake so to say, which offers an alluring view and invites you to walk around it. The vacant area where the park is located was about to be converted into a legislature complex some years ago; but the vigilance of the residents' association saved the day for us morning walkers, and it now offers a wonderful walking area.

Books on elder healthcare advocate the benefits of walking for at least 30 minutes a day. But it is not just the health factor that motivates most of us, the community of morning walkers to trudge along. So, what makes one an avid morning walker? The compulsions of mandatory exercise surely motivate, with the fond hope to reduce the calorie build-up. But more than that, it is the pleasure of imbibing the nature's beauty all around that one sees and enjoys when walking, the feeling of life in its many throngs, that make us ponder over the blessing of life itself.

Ability to walk is a god-given gift. One can only imagine the pain felt by those who are not fortunate to be able to walk freely. The pleasure of a walk in the garden or a preferred track is something to be experienced and enjoyed.

The warmth of winter

Mansi Tripathi

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For many, winter means fun with shorter days, layers of clothing and the warmth of blankets, but not everyone feels the same. It is a hard-to-digest fact for many that winter is not my favourite season. The overwhelming frustration of putting on layers of clothing that hinder free movement, the absence of sunshine that slows down my mental processes, cold extremities and the widespread lethargy in people around me, all contribute to my grievance with winter. However, when I see others, it becomes apparent that many cherish the season. Perhaps, there is an unnoticed art of enjoying winter which I am ignorant of.

One of the primary reasons people seem to cherish winter is the feeling of cosiness it brings. As the temperature drops, individuals find comfort in curling up in warm blankets, sipping hot coffee, and staying indoors. This embrace of stillness and comfort during the colder months can be linked to a psychological phenomenon known as "hygge", a Danish concept that encompasses a feeling of cosiness, contentment and tranquillity. For many, winter serves as a perfect time to practise "hygge", which creates a sense of warmth and security in the chilly weather.

Moreover, the absence of sunlight in winter can impact individuals differently. While I find myself mentally slowing down and emotionally confused, others may find decreased light as an opportunity to relax and calm them. A vast body of psychological experiments and studies suggest that exposure to natural light plays a vital role in regulating mood and sleep.

The widespread fondness for the winter's pause may be deeply rooted in the need for comfort, relaxation, and psychological healing.

When the compass of kindness stalls

The capacity for being humane and caring can brighten any relationship

Mini Krishnan

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When a film star-turned-politician died last month, nearly every tribute commended him for his personal warmth. It was remarkable that he had raised enough awareness to build a political party; but that is not what he was fondly remembered for. It was his generosity and empathy.

"He was always kind," is not a bad epithet to have in a ferociously competitive environment.

Are we, as a society, condoning public rudeness? People even want to overtake you in a queue while boarding a flight on which everyone's seat is assured! As you collect a precariously balanced tray of snacks or coffee, a brash neighbour cannot wait 10 seconds for hers; she thinks nothing of jostling your arm or



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

stepping on your foot. So much so, that a polite word from a stranger or a show of consideration in a supermarket comes as a pleasant shock!

This insensitivity to others, deepened by self-preoccupation, is a symptom of a dangerous lack of innate kindness. Not a moment can be spared for the person seated inches away!

Whither plain old-fashioned kindness, a golden virtue? One might call it the gift of caring enough. A case in point is a girl I know, Nandini, 13, who was watching her teacher fumbling for the answer. Other students could have helped, but they simply watched their teacher's discomfiture.

Nandini quickly e-mailed the solution and saved her teacher from an awkward moment. That's empathy. That's kindness.

The capacity for kindness and caring can brighten any relationship: family, friends, staff, tradespersons, not to mention passing strangers. Plant and animal lovers know that it also strengthens their connection with animals, birds and plants. Kindness is free; let's pass on!

For the love of books

How to continue the affair with ink and paper through the stages of life

Sebastian Valiakala

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By reading, seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and even kissing books, I grew up. The journey has continued through the different stages of life and now, basking in the warm rays of the setting sun as a septuagenarian. For me, libraries are where books are worshipped, and book stores are where they are celebrated.

I joined a library in my village at the age of 10. But my initiation into reading



happened when I was just four. At 72, books still excite and enthrall me. As a reader, writer, editor and publisher, I spend most of my day and night among

books even now. My grandfather gifted me a book, written in beautiful English and printed in glossy art paper, with so many awesome pictures showing the Christian missionary works in an African country. That was my first book other than a class text. I kept that book close to my heart for many years and read it over and over again until I wanted to become a missionary and write, print and publish books in high production quality. But my parents did not approve of mine becoming a priest. So leaving aside my desire to work among the poor and downtrodden, I began to learn more and more on the various aspects of creative writing and the art and science of book production.

The SMSM public library at Ettumannor was my first library. Now I have memberships in 60 well-stocked libraries in India and abroad. Books are an undying passion for me. But many of my dear and near ones can't quite appreciate it always.

Recently, my wife and I were returning home after a 20-week literary tour of the U.K. I had purchased 30 or so books, some of them huge volumes. At the time of packing, we had minor arguments on what all books were to be left behind to adjust the weight limitations on the flight.

I could not bring myself to make any compromise about my books and she, partly in protest, had to discard some of the gifts she got from friends and relatives.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Protesting in creative ways is always an acceptable way of expressing dissent in a civilised society. ('The many creative shades of protest'; Jan. 21)

In recent months, the colour black has gained much notoriety in Kerala as the ruling government has been irked by opposition parties using black flags to protest. The past month too witnessed several arrests and FIRs. The panic-stricken government has virtually banned black in public places.

T.N. Venugopal

Traditional forms of protest have clearly lost their sting, and novel forms have taken their place. The subtle connotations of creative art often ensure that the might of the law does not descend on those who dabble in it. Various organisations like the Fearless Collective and Bahutva Karnataka have been creating awareness on issues of public interest. With a government at the centre cracking the whip, protesters have to be on their guard.

C.V. Aravind

It is true that the last great Mughal was a much misunderstood character. ('In the spirit of Aurangzeb'; Jan. 21) But according to some historians, Aurangzeb was an accomplished veena player and music lover. He was hailed as a master war strategist, and expanded his kingdom from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. It is interesting to know that he was a complex

personality.

P.H. Hema Sagar



MORE ON THE WEB

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Teaching all children, improving all lives

Meaningful inclusion in schools can be achieved when teachers reclaim their role as caregivers and innovators

Gauthami K.S.

Handling student emotions

Academic pressure do have serious physical and mental consequences which should not be ignored

S.A. Thameemul Ansari

Exploring Jharkhand

Awesome waterfalls and a rich heritage of temples and religious sites make it a must-see destination

Shikha Bhatnagar

Dreaming big

The bigger the dreams, the bigger the sacrifices required to achieve them

Aisna Pradhan

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Finding meaning (Clockwise from below) Julien Lombrail and Loïc Le Gaillard of Carpenters Workshop Gallery; Abhijit Deb's *Odyssey*; Vincent Dubourg's *Commode Inner Vortex Alu*; Harsha Durugadda's *Nimbus*; and Amba Sayal Bennett's *Dioptrique*.



Soumya Mukerji

It's the time of the year when art thaws the cold, grey landscape of Delhi with colour, conversation and commerce. Observing the India Art Fair evolve over 15 years with changing titles, investors, directors, participants and even its fair share of controversy, the celebration seems to have come a long way, and yet the sight is a familiar one.

The biggies in the art world belong here; the Gen Z talent is outspoken; the trench coats and boots re-emerge with latest fashions thrown in. Even as each year presents new creativity and experimental showcases, one can't avoid a certain red-carpeted *déjà vu*. It's home to art of a certain pedigree after all, and as the country's largest commercial art fair, it is perhaps only understandable that the popular and the predictable be given its due. The buzzwords – sustainability, technology, AI, accessibility, inclusivity and diversity – are all in place, but it's natural to wonder what's really distinctive and compelling this time.

Powerful debuts

It is the debutants, for one, that pique interest, especially in the new *Design* section that expands the discourse. The global Carpenters Workshop Gallery sets foot in the country with celebrated works such as Karl Lagerfeld's water fountain and Maarten Baas' single-edition coloured clocks. British co-founder Loïc Le Gaillard is excited: "We consistently assess how the perspectives and artistic expressions of our core artists align with a specific location or capture a unique moment in time. We're always driven by the work itself, as well as the narratives that our artists build into their creative process and how that will resonate with the audiences that will encounter it."

In the same section, another first, and an important reminder in these times, is an ode to 50 years of the Jawaharlal Nehru University through its architectural design by C.P. Kukreja. "The exhibition brings into discussion the role of the architect in nation building. Where most major universities of the world define their presence through the regimental and the classical forms of imposition, JNU's *Masterplan*

INDIA ART FAIR: TRIED, TESTED AND THE NEW

As the commercial art fair returns for its 15th edition, will the curation push the norm?

expresses an absence of the built. Like water, the built finds its way into the landscape," shares Vishal K Dar, the exhibit designer, in his curatorial note.

Meanwhile, underrepresented landscapes meet the mainland in distilled forms. A welcome window to India's Northeast is the photography and film of Tripura-based collective, Egaro Photo Festival. Abhijit Deb's *Odyssey* weaves folktales into an ethereal story. Millo Ankha from Arunachal Pradesh brings alive the deities of her hometown Ziro in performance, and Kunga Tashi from Sikkim crafts silent, tender photographs in nature. "Our hope from this debut is for people to recognise art from our region that often goes unnoticed," says co-founder Diptanil Das.

"Commercial art fairs can be a great platform for sharing the stories of the Northeast with people who might not have encountered it otherwise, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of our artistic and cultural heritage."

One hopes this plural playground widens, especially as leading art events across the world tone down the tedium of the mainstream and make room for important ideas. It was intense, for instance, to witness how the German Pavilion at the La Biennale in Venice (2022) commemorated anti-fascist resistance by tearing down the ground (*Relocating a Structure*, Maria Eichhorn), and to experience Art Week Tokyo x Art Basel's talks on interwar radical art movements or wade through teamLab's body-immersive floods to feel a closer impact of climatic catastrophe.

What about Ukraine, Syria and Palestine?

Meanwhile, the strokes are bright and bold in Delhi, and so are the speculated numbers, considering the robust business last year. For

instance, one of the works (by a living artist) yielded approximately \$900,000. But how does the fair strategy plan to tackle the apprehensions posed by the economic slowdown? "While there has been a global slowdown, India has been faring better, with many auction sales records in the past year," says Jaya Asokan, fair director. "We have been seeing gradual growth ever since, which bodes well not only for this year but also for the long-term future."

Given the expanse of

international participation, one wishes the line-up also had some voices from countries such as Ukraine, Syria and Palestine in the spirit of empowerment. The need of the hour for art is not just to reflect but to rethink, reimagine and reshape minds, to subvert the powers that prevail, to respond to the important issues through collaborative participatory action.

When one steps in, one looks to experience healing beauty, fantasy and fun, but also the poetry of pain, the stark truths and investigations in

the realities and conflicts that plague the world today. One hopes that once this edition commences, it will offer myriad mirrors so that humanity may look itself in the eye and say, yes, art can stand for change and growth.

IAF takes place from February 1-4 at the NSIC Okhla Grounds in New Delhi.

The senior writer-editor's practice straddles convergent cultures, global literature, and multidisciplinary arts.



Small changes

Senior artists who have been regulars observe what is, and what can be. Mithu Sen, whose work, *A Prayer Unanswered*, draws on themes of violence and ceasefire, says, "Life already has a corporate structure, so even the smallest change, like a new fair entrance from a different direction, or a crazy commission — not an object or sculpture — but simple poetry fliers in local languages distributed in unassuming places, can prove a powerful initiative. Such interventions with no propaganda but in the spirit of humanity and empathy have great potential in times when art practices face fear and compromise."



— As told to Surya Praphulla Kumar



Changing narratives (L-R) *Entwined* at Apparao Galleries; Sooraja K.S.'s art, and Smriti Dixit's coat.



TEXTILE, AN EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM

Capes made from fishing nets to paintings that engage with the idea of fibre, this exhibition brings fabric to the centrestage

Sweta Akundi

Velvet brown roots have taken over a corner of the Apparao Galleries in Chennai. They go up to the ceiling, spreading across the air conditioning unit until a single finger snakes out, curling around a pillar. Rakhi Peswani's creation of metal encased in velvet is earthy, and reminiscent of a fungi that grows despite its environment.

"To me, it stands for expanding your horizons," says Sharan Apparao,

who has displayed Haryana-based Peswani's creation as part of *Entwined*, a curation of contemporary artworks from around 40 artists that use textile as both medium and narrative – to explore the relation they have with the human body and the Earth. "We have seen a revival in the interest in textiles around the world," adds the gallerist. "Today, there is a huge repertoire of not just traditional artisans, but also artists interpreting traditional textiles. [It is] this aspect that spoke to me."

Form meets design

Entwined is divided into three categories, the first of which features artworks that use textiles either as medium or as the theme in their narrative. For instance, in her set of paintings, Kochi-based Sooraja K.S. highlights two kinds of 'fibres': the long hair that women wear proudly, and their clothes. The two often merge into one another with clothes pins holding up the hair and plaits emerging from a pile of clothes, exploring both mental and the physical.

A 'female armour' by Mumbai-based artist Shakuntala Kulkarni catches the eye. Part of the

Heading to Delhi

At the India Art Fair, Apparao Galleries will be working with the idea of the cosmos and what lies beyond it – with works by artists such as Bengaluru-based A. Balasubramanian, with his geometric forms; and Chennai-based R.M. Palaniappan's study of the abstract journey of the line. "In the past few editions, I have explored the idea of mixing maths, geometry and aesthetics. This takes the idea further," says Apparao.



second category – which plays with form, emphasising the relationship between the human body and textiles – it is crafted from cane.

The final segment delves into the world of fashion, highlighting the works of designers that may not traditionally fall under the realm of art, but is creative nonetheless. "Finding contemporary artists who work with textile was not the challenge; identifying designers who are also artists was the bigger task," says Apparao.

Smriti Dixit's works are a study in contrast. A bright red and orange coat that meshes khadi and Manchester cotton, is a commentary on how exports from steam-powered textile mills in the U.K. hampered the development of Indian khadi factories. Her other work, which resembles a royal cape, is made of fishing net and the plastic waste that comes with modern clothing.

Does this speak to a trend of increased collaborations between artists and the fashion industry? "Collaborations are still rare," says Apparao, but the lines are blurring. *Entwined* is on till March 20.

The writer is based in Chennai.

Designer speak
Exhibits that blur the boundaries of art, design and fashion



Chanakya School of Craft's Belong

"Collaborating with artisans, artists, craft practitioners, and institutions often blurs presumed boundaries, making them fluid and subjective," says Karishma Swali, the creative director. "Belong is a spontaneous immersion into the eternal connection between man and the natural world. The interplay of hand-spun yarns and layering techniques, along with micro-variations of needlepoint techniques, bring to life a narrative that honours craft and its role in culture, community and preserving our collective identities."

Raw Mango's Common Nouns

"We've always looked at these disciplines [art, design and fashion] as connected and affecting each other. The presence of these overlaps is one of the aspects that *Common Nouns* – an exhibition of digital works by 15 contemporary designers/artists exploring the timelessness of Raw Mango's diverse inspirations, on the occasion of the brand's 15th anniversary – addresses," says founder designer Sanjay Garg. "Raw Mango looks at itself as a design brand and a part of cultural movements happening in its time and, as their creative partners, we feel it allows us to look at things more broadly."

Tarun Tahiliani's The Embroidered Wall

"This intersection [of art and design] always existed, it is just that now our lens has adjusted to see it. I do believe, however, that now it goes beyond aesthetics, as designers and artists alike are exploring emotions and depth through their collaborative endeavours," says couturier Tarun Tahiliani. "Driven by the purpose of paying homage to our traditional techniques and keeping generational crafts alive by contemporising them, the Tarun Tahiliani Design Studio entered the space of wall art in 2020. We began experimenting with storytelling through craft on formless textiles, and this culminated into works such as our rendition of *pichwais* and embroidered walls."

— As told to Surya Praphulla Kumar

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