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Varun Rana

EESHAAN KASHYAP: Master of the tablescape

Last month, for art collector Tarana Sawhney's India Art Fair party, Eeshaan Kashyap served an innovative 'pun-tea' – kicking things off with a 12-foot banana on the roof of the Sawhneys' Lutyens bungalow. "I was inspired by the conceptual art of Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (2019), the infamous banana taped to the wall, as well as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), the porcelain urinals, which we used to serve a green pea salad," says Kashyap with a laugh, recalling how he injected the humour of the pea/pee pun into conversations. "We plastered the walls with fake currency to denote the idea of 'more is more', and the ability to have bad taste celebrated as good taste. We also placed pop artworks made of fibreglass next to Tarana's own Gandhara and Deccan sculptures, to create a contrast between the new and the old, between art and not-art."

A day earlier, for the gala dinner for Asia Art Society's Game Changer Awards, he meditated on the idea of sharing – portraying the inclusivity in art through the sharing of flavour, history, literature, and poetry. "It gave me the freedom to bring dishes from Nepal and Sri Lanka into the menu. Even the décor took its cue from three ideas, 'words, roots, and threads', which formed a narrative of sharing." And just last week, he created a tablescape for Asian Paints at India Design ID where he played with salt. "I called it Table Play, creating lab-grown salt crystal candlesticks, which took around four months of experiments to realise."

A chef by training but a tastemaker above all else, Kashyap's work defies classifications – is he a designer, an artist, a forecaster, a stylist, a chef, or something else entirely? He combines food with design, art, and performance to narrate stories.

Table jewellery and edible wallpaper

It is his prolific approach that allows him to ask interesting questions. For example: if a table has legs and is covered with cloth, why can't it be accessorised with jewellery? Why can't it – like a person – have a personality? Kashyap, 38, calls it tablescaping; bringing in disparate elements that defy classical strictures to create visual and sensory narratives.

"Gone are the days of calla lilies being flown in, or opulent chandeliers, or pretty things that say nothing," he says. Gatherings have become more intimate (though not necessarily in numbers), and the table has emerged as a medium to display creative ideas. He should know, having worked for the Ambani wedding's Jamnagar spell, and with brands such as Good Earth, Nicobar, Pottery Barn, and The House of Things in the past year alone.

2025 is also looking exciting for Kashyap in terms of playing around with objects that don't necessarily belong on a table, especially concepts

like 'table jewellery'. Unlike tableware, it is designed to be more opulent, desirable, and whimsical. "Like a butter knife made with rock crystal; you don't really need it, it's very difficult to create, but to have it placed on the table is definitely a statement." Handling requests for solid jade *thalis* for a client, to creating a tablescape for Jaipur Rugs strewn with actual emeralds and rubies, only strengthens his idea of its future in entertaining.

And his experiments don't stop at jewels. There's edible wallpaper you can lick right off the walls, for one. "We did this for the Asian Paints Experience Centre in Chennai, working with the design team to create these cool, crazy wallpapers that you can lick and taste, and even rip off and eat." For a private client, he recently created an installation inspired by the works of American artist Alexander Calder, where his signature kinetic sculpture was reimagined with pieces of edible *khakhra* [thin wheat crackers] hanging as counterbalances in an edible, artistic chandelier.

Unfettering imaginations

Kashyap takes anywhere from five days to six months to turn ideas into reality, with his compact five-member team. "For a wedding in Bali last June, I created a life-size marble fountain that dispensed a delicious elderflower-and-gin cocktail. This took about three months to make, as we had to ensure that it had airtight, food-grade copper pipe," he says. "We've also done cupboards that

guests opened to find chilled cocktails inside, negating the need for a single bar. The ideas are endless, and can become fascinating when done well."

Next week, his ideas will take centrestage in an exhibition titled 'PLAY' at The Stands in Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium. Showcasing tableware, decor items, and objets d'art, he hopes to create "tonal, tactile, and terrific experiences for visitors", and unfetter imaginations when it comes to creating experiences that spark conversations.

The writer is a fashion commentator, creative director, and brand consultant based in New Delhi.



From tablescapes and unique concert concepts to brand launches that double as art interventions, these creatives are changing the way events are being designed today

WORLD BUILDING IS THEIR FORTE

The lines are blurring when it comes to brand events, fashion shows, gala dinners, and even exhibitions. Sophisticated décor and great food no longer make the cut; instead, styling and choreography are taking centrestage. A mixed tribe of design people – from varied backgrounds such as art, music, culinary, fashion, and retail – are helping raise the bar, crafting stunning spaces and curating unforgettable experiences that are not necessarily weddings. Think fashion runways with art interventions, or art parties with puns, table jewellery and 12-foot bananas. Meet the mavericks who are on speed dials across the country.



Aatish Nath

TAHIR SULTAN: An eye for the unusual

The half-Kuwaiti, half-Indian aesthete is known for many things: his house parties, love of Champagne and the gym, his design store Makaan, and his eye for the unusual. So, when jeweller Sunita Shekhawat asked Tahir Sultan to do the visual merchandising for the store at the new Museum of Meenakari Heritage last year, he tried to break the mould of how fine jewellery can be presented. His displays saw glorious strands of emeralds juxtaposed with green metal food storage boxes, aluminium pails with *meenakari*, and colourful firecracker *dabbas* with lustrous pearls. "It wasn't anything run of the mill," he says.

I caught him shortly after the Jaipur-based designer wrapped up a hectic weekend at India Design ID, where he catered the food for the event's honorees – a "high-end grazing table" with Middle

Eastern and Arabian food. As we chat, he shares details of some of his other projects, including art curator Noelle Kadar's office at the newly opened Jaipur Centre for Art, in the City Palace. "I used the *arais* [lime plaster] technique and created a backgammon inspired office."

The versatile designer – who once worked under fashion designers Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, and set up his own clothing label – has carved a niche for himself today with work that stretches across interiors, product design, food, and art installations. "A lot of clients that approach me have already bought into my ethos. So, I'm given a lot of leeway to do what I want to do," says Sultan, who briefly studied architecture before pursuing arts at London's Central Saint Martin's. Given his skill to bring together objects as varied as Naga tables with Rajasthan's love of colour, it's no surprise that at Makaan, and in his other projects – his ongoing collaboration with Jaipur and Kuwait-based lifestyle brand Ecrú – there are "no design limitations".

The writer is based in Mumbai.

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IN CONVERSATION

SILICON AND SPY CRAFT

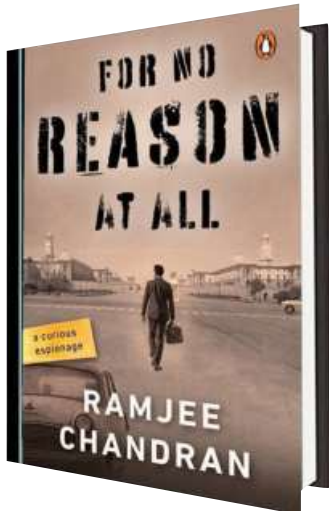
Journalist Ramjee Chandran brings to life an important episode from India’s business legacy in his pacy debut novel

Stanley Carvalho

Bengaluru-based journalist and podcast host Ramjee Chandran’s debut novel *For No Reason at All* (Penguin Random House) is an engaging tale based on true events around the silicon metal controversy of the 80s. Politics, power play, lobbying, skullduggery, espionage and the hubris of a bureaucratic overlord, combine to create a quandary for the Indian prime minister and his advisers. Should they champion indigenous technology or rely on U.S. imports? Set largely in New Delhi, the pacy narrative is suffused with elegant prose, wit and a curious mix of characters. Edited excerpts from a conversation with Chandran:

Question: What compelled you to tell this story?
Answer: The book is a record of true events that occurred from 1984-88. It is significant because it captured something that doesn’t easily happen in India – a product

of scientific research actually made it to commercial production. When two professors from the Indian Institute of Science went to Mettur to get a jar of hydrogen, a chance meeting with my former boss R.V. Ramani, the managing director of Mettur Chemicals, led to them figuring out they both had the same goals – to make silicon metal to meet the country’s photovoltaic needs.



Q: And you were Ramani’s lobbyist?
A: Yes, I was. Mettur Chemicals was part of the Seshasayee Group, Chennai.
Q: In the prologue, you have said: “All of this is true, except the parts that aren’t.” Can you elaborate?
A: For certain things that I have said in the book, I need deniability. I need to deny that they were facts, mere fiction. None of the skeletal part of the story is untrue. I may have exaggerated a few parts, I’ve dramatised certain facial expressions, ambience, and coloured between the lines; but the narrative I have threaded together is pretty much true. I have fictionalised a bit, given voices to characters to say some things. The story itself, undeniably, is of national and international importance; the foreign intelligence and spying by the Russians, French and Americans is true. This story was on the front and edit pages of newspapers for the better part of two years, and was also subject to Parliamentary and CBI enquiries.

Q: So, the fictional element is small?
A: Very little. The novel is largely based on what happened.
Q: When did you get started on the book?
A: After I left Delhi and returned 13 years ago, I took a stab at it, but discarded my first draft. I got busy editing a magazine for a decade but later sat down to write the book and got the momentum. I wrote it entirely from memory; it burned deep in my head; I could recollect it like a movie in my head. I tend not to write from my gut, all my writing is constructed; it takes a lot of effort to be spontaneous. I live by the principle that one’s craft is important.

Q: You have captured the nuances of Delhi’s politics and bureaucracy brilliantly despite the long gap?
A: I was very curious and took my job seriously. I was a fly on the wall, many conversations were playing in front of me and I was listening to a lot of stuff while waiting for top central government officials, even the prime minister. I had friends in RAW [Research and Analysis Wing] and met them to understand what their spy craft was. As far as research is concerned, it was all what I saw and lived.
Q: In hindsight, what’s your view on the silicon metal controversy and how it slowed India’s progress in this field?
A: India was never at the forefront of making silicon chips and taking on the world; but, had the Mettur silicon project moved ahead without getting sucked into politics and bureaucratic power plays, India would have been 30 years ahead of the rest of the world in the use of silicon in photovoltaics. We would have been leaders in electric vehicles and ahead on so many applications. In the nonsense that was going on, the country lost in this area. At that point in time, many young people felt the country was being held back; viscerally, I felt that my own future was being held back.
Q: Should writers be responsive to contemporary happenings in society and write about them even as fictional stories?
A: I think it is stupendously important to be able to tell these kinds of stories because one way or the other, it is part of our heritage, business heritage, if you like.
Q: What’s next?
A: I’m writing a scholarly book on the history of Bengaluru.

The interviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist.

From the streets of Havana

A journalist pays tribute to the fighting spirit of Cubans and also points at problems that still need to be addressed

S.R. Praveen
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In travel writing, the personal account often overwhelms everything else, but journalist Ullekh N.P.’s *Mad About Cuba: A Malayali Revisits the Revolution* takes the less common approach of interspersing the wide-eyed traveller’s account with doses of history, contemporary politics and voices from the ground that reveal the contradictions in Cuban society. It is a mix that is hard to get right, but comes together almost seamlessly in this work.

On the streets of Havana, he encounters vintage cars, in which the drivers double up as expert mechanics out of necessity than anything else. He enjoys his share of Cuban cigars, music and rum-drowned reveries in the watering holes frequented by legendary writers and political leaders, while engaging in conversations with a cross-section of the Cuban population of all ages. Holding a journalist visa also facilitates meetings with prominent leaders, scientists and experts.

From all these interactions, what we get is a balanced perspective on Cuba, much in divergence from the typical reportage of the western press which downplays the harsh effects of American sanctions on the Cuban people. Ullekh documents the egregious manner in which the U.S. cripples the Cuban economy by blocking trade and aid even by other countries, because “allowing an experiment with socialism to flourish and succeed is not in American interests”. Ullekh, who grew up in a

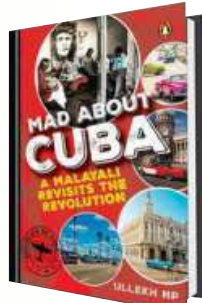


Students of Havana University pay tribute to Cuba’s late president Fidel Castro as they march to Revolution Square in Havana. (REUTERS)

Marxist household in Kerala, recalls his early memories of hearing about the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and the very Malayali way in which the latter’s name is pronounced in the State. At every other turn in Cuba, the writer notices many similarities to Kerala, where the first Communist government was democratically elected to power in 1957, just two years before Communist revolutionaries seized power in Cuba by overthrowing Fulgencio Batista’s band of elites amply supported by the U.S.

The Kerala connection Other than the similarities in high social indicators, one of the interesting connections he mentions is how young students were once hired to read books and newspapers aloud to the workers at the Kerala Dinesh Beedi factory as well as at Cuban cigar factories. Then there is this fascinating account of how Castro sent out Cuban scientists to bring different varieties of moringa seeds from across the world,

including Kerala, as part of a project to popularise the “superfood”. The aspirational younger lot the author encounters during his journey, the people with no memory or direct connection to the revolution, is restless. Through social media, these youngsters witness the life their peers are having in other countries and want a lifestyle better than their underpaid parents. While they take pride in the benefits the revolution gave them, like free healthcare or education and high social indices, discontent is brewing from the awareness of what they are also missing out on. Despite the lower incomes, even for the highly skilled, the situation of the



Mad About Cuba
Ullekh N.P.
Penguin
₹399

economically disadvantaged in Cuba is not comparable to those in other countries, thanks to a host of subsidies that the government provides. The book offers a nuanced take on the stories of victimisation propagated by Cuban exiles in Miami. He closely examines their role in violent attacks, from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 to the terror strike on a Cuban flight in 1976 which killed 73 people. In the end, what shines through in Ullekh’s account is the resilience and fighting spirit of the Cuban people, exemplified in the rapid strides made by the Cuban biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. It indigenously developed medicines to prevent the spread of lung cancer and arrest Alzheimer’s as well as mastered the use of interferons to treat viral diseases, which came in handy during COVID-19 amid the embargo. The book serves as a tribute to that fighting spirit and a pointer to the problems that still need to be addressed.



Angst and ennui

In her attempt to feature the whole spectrum of socio-political issues, the author sadly compromises on plot depth

Kinshuk Gupta

Post the chest-thumping success of Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (2018), novels with self-indulgent, acutely self-aware millennial women protagonists, who make all the right kinds of noises and use “politics more as a setting than as a subject”, are on the rise. They are lonely, chaotic, irreverent and searching for meaning in life, which pushes them often into the rabbit holes of drugs and desire. They move through a vortex of hash and heartbreaks while trying to launch their careers. This genre, popularly referred to as Künstlerroman – stepbrother of the Bildungsroman – has emerged as a millennial favourite. Alina Gufran’s 28-something protagonist



No Place to Call My Own
Alina Gufran
Tranquebar
₹499

Sophia – a Muslim with interfaith parents and a lesbian best friend – ticks all the boxes of a soul-annihilating, self-deprecating narrator. An aspiring filmmaker, men and booze give her constant company as she tries to drown the elitism, casual misogyny, and performative

wokeism that working in such an industry entails. An interesting plot point could have been when the fellowship offered to Sophia to make her debut documentary gets suddenly canned. Even more exciting are copyright issues of intellectual property, but unfortunately, the author remains reluctant to tap into them. Gufran compromises with depth in favour of the breadth of socio-political issues. Portions depicting the agonies of the anti-CAA protests, the traumatic growing-up years in a disintegrating marriage, and the online existence of lockdown, though skillfully written, lack necessary complexity.

Human rights and female solidarity The most enjoyable parts are when the writer makes slight jabs at the ‘political correctness’ of elite liberals. But she doesn’t remain immune to such digressions herself: she refers to a mechanic’s white vest as a “wifebeater”, a pejorative term for lower-class men; a gaggle of intercontinental teens discusses human rights violations over arak and bonfire in pithy one-liners. The use of a first-person narrator is definitely a daring one – and must be appreciated. Vivid expressions of female solidarity between the narrator, her friend, and her mother create a rich sensorial atmosphere. The question, though, remains: do we get to really know our protagonist as a constantly morphing mass of history and hopes as she carries on with her learnt behaviours and clichéd responses, holding a constant grouse for lack of money even as she sleeps on her King Koil mattress?

The reviewer is the author of the Hindi short story collection Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chor Darwaja (2023).

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Amurag Tagat

AAQUIB WANI: From Lollapalooza to Ambani weddings

Preparations are on in full swing at Mumbai's Mahalaxmi Racecourse for next weekend's musical extravaganza, Lollapalooza India. Expect installations of the city's iconic Kaali Peeli taxi, a kinetic garden, interactive photo-ops plus crowd favourites like inflatables, including one of the festival mascot, Shaman. "Every element is designed to spark excitement and capture that unmistakable 'Lolla magic'," says Creative Director Aaqub Wani about the India edition of the largest music festival in the world.

"The idea is to blend Lollapalooza's global identity with a local flavour," says Wani, the brain behind Lollapalooza India's spatial design since its inception in 2023.

For the inaugural edition, Wani and his team at Aaqub Wani Design created black and yellow cabs, a cat playing a guitar, UFOs and a host of other kooky, surreal yet cartoony motifs that won praise from all quarters. "It was obviously inspired by the brand's signature colours, iconography, and so on, but we ended up creating our own version of the American music festival."

Back in December, Wani also worked on a 200-ft. ocean-inspired immersive stage design called "The Underwater Symphony" for Sunburn Goa, another hot-ticket music festival. The self-learned design maverick is today the go-to person sought after by brands when it comes to spatial design – the art and science of creating functional and aesthetic spaces.

Last year, he designed Team India jerseys for the Paris Olympics and the T20 Men's Cricket World Cup, conceptualised the launch of MG Motors' Comet EV, styled musician Prateek Kuhad's Silhouettes tour, and designed a festive edition Apple Beats Solo Buds. In the past, Wani has also been a part of Ambani siblings Isha and Akash's weddings in Mumbai.

Wani, 33, hails from a business family dealing with Kashmiri handicrafts, and has a flair about him, with his long hair and unconventional sartorial choices. But he is old-school when it comes to the research and inspiration behind each of his designs. He likes to explore the cities that host the events and takes cues from its various elements – be it the architecture or the flora and fauna. "It's always important to have a narrative. The idea is to celebrate the city and not just throw in some pretty graphics, because I feel it's very important to have a connect," says Wani.

It began with a poster

Wani started out in a metal band when he was 17, making concert posters on MS Paint before teaching himself to use Adobe Photoshop. "I didn't know anything about royalty-free images or licensing. I was just putting together visuals I liked so that I could promote our band," he recalls.

After failing high school and dropping out, he decided to follow his passion for music full-time. Soon, he was getting asked by bands and festival organisers to design their posters. From 2010 to 2014, Wani worked at cult magazine *Rock Street Journal*, a period he describes as "formative" because of the exposure to India's growing music ecosystem. "I come from that time when all of this [the music festival industry] was still fresh and being experimental. I got to understand it all from the audience's point of view," he says.

In 2014, he moved out of *Rock Street Journal* to work with designer Sumant Jaykrishnan at the latter's Delhi studio. It was there, Wani says, that he moved from 2D to 3D work and began to understand the concept of spatial design. Going beyond merely creating a poster, he got involved in stage design, backdrops, décor and installations. Today, he works with a team of 12 on projects that take anywhere from 4 to 12 weeks, sometimes longer, from conception to sourcing to execution. Designing products like the Beats Solo Buds, for instance, takes him two to eight weeks. At Lollapalooza India this year, Wani is also inviting college-level designers to create spaces at the festival, an attempt to give back to society perhaps.

Aaqub's playlist

- Poppy
- 'Jannat' by Shye Ben-Tzur, Johnny Greenwood and The Rajasthan Express
- Delftones
- Raf-Saperra
- Chappell Roan
- A dash of 90s pop

ads, and flex banners. We didn't have any of the installations we have today. There's been a big shift." Where there was just one stage and a bar at music events, there are now multiple stages, brand installations, photo booths and more. "It's all about instant gratification. Every touch point matters, from the gate design to the stage," he says. On the digital front, there are templates to create for artist announcements, videos and more.

But, Wani says, his "ADHD mind" loves working on as much as possible and thrives on challenges that come with exploring varied interest areas. "We're working on 20-odd projects right now. I can't be doing the same thing over and over again," says the design maven, who is busy with a new interior decoration project.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based independent music journalist.



WORLD BUILDING IS THEIR FORTE

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Red like love 30,000 flowers, made from reused fabric, were installed at the Hermès Mumbai and New Delhi stores for Diwali.

NAYANTARA KOTIAN:

Interactive staging, replete with mise en scène

The Mumbai collective, Crow began as an immersive theatre company 10 years ago and has been creating unusual experiences that involve the performing arts, be it at India Art Fair in the capital recently or for Almond House in Hyderabad. Co-founder Nayantara Kotian, who signs off as Boss Lady in her emails, explains that the Art Fair project, *The Dichotomy of Delhi*, "was an installation that revelled in the process of creation". The inner sanctum of the installation welcomed visitors to paint alongside artists, while the finished canvases were mounted on the outer walls of the installation in choreographed performances every day. The installation was by Studio Lotus, with visual art by XXL Collective, and experience and performance design by Crow. "We create an entire world for audiences to walk into and they have agency inside that world," says Kotian. "In the past, we have created large-scale shows in Delhi, where we took over entire abandoned buildings and redesigned them to these worlds that also involved storytelling." For HSBC, the team created a six-voice symphony called *The Song of the Cosmos* at NMACC in Mumbai, where each voice played elements, from dark energy to the sun and the ocean. Kotian, a film graduate of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, who pursued performance design at Central Saint Martins, London, also teaches at design schools across India.



We create an entire world for audiences to walk into and they have agency inside that world. In the past, we have created large-scale shows in Delhi, where we took over entire abandoned buildings and redesigned them, and these worlds also involved detailed storytelling

DOYEL JOSHI AND NEIL GHOSE BALSER: Constantly pushing boundaries

At the India Art Fair last month, a large 12x12 foot red ice installation was a popular stop. Made with over 120 slabs, each icy block weighing around 200 kg, the massive sculpture was also one of the only things that visitors couldn't buy at the commercial art event.

"It was funny as people would look at it from afar and be like 'that's really beautiful', and ask if they could buy it. So, it kind of became a commentary on the setting that we were in," Doyel Joshi, 33, says with a laugh. "And yet, it was a very visceral sculpture as many people were emotionally affected by it. They would touch it and get their hands red by doing so, collect the dripping water or even have their children play in it."

The sculpture has its origin story in Mumbai, at IF BE, the cultural centre housed in one of South Asia's oldest ice factories. Joshi and her husband Neil Ghose Balsar's creative studio, HowAreYouFeeling.Studio, was commissioned to create an installation for an event for Dewar Whisky. "We walked around to see how the context could inform our perception. It still has the machinery used to make ice, such as these small canals for the water to come in. Then, when we ducked behind it, we discovered that the original owners of the factory have a small window there, where they still produce and sell ice," says Joshi.

As the duo spoke to them, something sparked. "We thought of the idea of 'rented ownership'; they would collaborate with us and bring the expertise and practical know-how but also bear the history," she shares, adding that the erstwhile owners made the ice blocks and stacked them. Joshi and Balsar's intervention: the colour red – an emotive hue that's resonated with them since their wedding.

Weddings and inflatable red balls

It wouldn't be amiss to say that their palace wedding in Rajasthan was pivotal – not only in kickstarting their lives together, but also that of their studio. "We'd been

living in New York, and [in November 2022] we'd moved to India where we got married. After a nine-page article came out in *Vogue India*, the number of brands that reached out to us and the amount of people that started recognising us and our work was quite incredible," says Balsar, explaining how the wedding was their first canvas, where they created different installations.

For example, a 10-foot inflatable red ball was conceived while exploring the nuances of what a wedding is and its more archetypal and archaic ideas. For instance, how the bride is given away to the groom. "So, we decided to put this red ball in the groom's balcony, almost like a location pin, but also an emotive form – to point out that we were doing all this 'drama', as it were, for the bride to end up there," says Joshi.

Two months later, when fashion brand Lovebirds, gave them their first commission, they expanded the idea of the ball. "The bride had reached the destination, and in a typical love story, it's a happy ending. But is it really? The story doesn't end there," Joshi explains. For the

show, they created a large runway with the ball in between. It was called 'Space in Between', and during the show Neil and I got up and pushed the ball out of the runway, rolled it along the audience and out of the space. What was left was almost like a cavity, conceptually exploring what happens after." Sonically, they set it to music and dialogue – a mundane exchange between partners about soup for dinner and day-to-day life.

Through all their work, Joshi and Balsar's goal is to have people interact with their ideas on a very basic human level, and to take something away from it.

Yearning for diverse experiences

Today, the two-year-old interdisciplinary practice creates art installations, sound design and creative concepts with brands, fashion labels, and events for clients, including Hermès, Gucci, Mercedes, and most recently British-American *sitar* player Anoushka Shankar.

"We've been commissioned by Anoushka Shankar and the Brighton Festival in the U.K. to do the principal installation and the brochure cover. With her album and idea of a 'New Dawn' as the departure point, we worked with a concept that will be shown throughout May in a travelling installation, and an exhibition at the end of the festival," says Balsar.

For the two, now "feels like the moment to be in India". "You can create; there are collaborators who are willing to push the boundaries. It's not easy to explain what we do, but I think [the fact] that such a multidisciplinary, multi-hyphenated approach works is a testament to really how open everyone is," says Joshi, adding, "I also think there's money in India."

The last three days, they've been in Delhi, working on a 4,000 square foot architectural project. "We are looking at the intersection between architecture and sculpture. While on the one hand, it's a store for selling clothes, on the other, it's conceptually an installation, too." What they haven't designed so far are weddings. At least, not yet.

With inputs from Rosella Stephen and Surya Praphulla Kumar



ANEETH ARORA:

Behind the wonderland that is 'péroland'

While she works only for her fashion label, péro, designer and founder Aneeth Arora is one of the names that pops up when discussing immersive wonderlands. "It's about inviting people into our world," says Arora, whose strong design vocabulary, seen at her atelier in Patparganj, Delhi, is also visible at her brand events. Take, for instance, péro's 10th anniversary celebrations in 2020 or their collaboration with Hello Kitty last year. Both of them were staged at the same colonial-era building in Delhi where Arora and team transported attendees to another world but with a distinctly different treatment. For the Hello Kitty event, there were make-up counters at the entrance for the application of tattoos and apples hanging from the trees. "We knew that Hello Kitty loves apples, so we created an apple orchard featuring fruit designed from all the waste red fabric we had in our studio," she explains. Arora believes in measured drawings for these experiences and that everything must be sampled before execution. Not ruling out the use of AI in the future, this NID (Ahmedabad) alumna prefers to share her scribbles with her craftsmen for better results. "This way, we pay attention to the minutest details," she says.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

One unicorn whisperer coming up

Here are some killer start-up ideas to push India to the forefront of the global AI revolution

India is falling behind in the AI race. America has ChatGPT, China has DeepSeek and 10,000 sq. km. of our territory, and India still has only what it discovered sons ago: zero. So, to encourage AI innovation, our government is giving away thousands of chips to anyone claiming to be an AI developer. As someone who's grown up (and grown bigger) on all kinds of chips, including Uncle Chips, I got super-motivated, and quickly jotted down ideas for AI start-ups. My plan is to convert those ideas into unicorns and push India to the forefront of the global AI revolution. To motivate my fellow Indians, I am sharing a small sample of the several AI tools I am working on.

Cover-Up Machi

Function: content erasure and editing
Cover-Up Machi transforms simple delete commands into cosmic wipe-outs. Suppose you want all references to the New Delhi Railway Station stamped erased from X, you don't need to send a government order or threaten people or file FIRs in Guwahati. Instead, a simple voice prompt, "Cover-up the New Delhi stamped, machi" would be enough. It would unleash trillions of nanobots that would scour every nook of the Internet and eliminate all references to the mishap. Not only that, using its advanced machi-ne learning capabilities, Cover-Up Machi would proactively wipe out all references to all stampedes, including the Maha Kumbh, mahat-stampede of January 29 that would have never happened if people had never come to know about it through videos that would have never reached that there had been an efficient AI to cover it up.

Apology Mama

Function: chatbot-cum-crisis manager
Apology Mama has been trained



GETTY IMAGES

intensely on the works of the world's greatest apologisers, including our own legend Mr. Savarkar. Apology Mama's advanced learning models are versatile enough to produce an apology for every kind of misdeed, including sick non-jokes at a non-talent show. Some of you may have witnessed the pseudo-apology put out by a human being who goes by the name of VodkaTriceps. "I'm just here to say sorry," it says. Obviously you're not here to say Merry Christmas. Also, VodkaTriceps released only two apologies in seven days – a limitation of relying on natural intelligence. Apology Mama will post an apology an hour, day after day, from every one of your social media handles until you (the offender) can resume normal life or exit the country or get anticipatory bail, whichever comes first.

Equation Chacha

Function: virtual assistant
If you are a jet-setting world leader, you never know when you might need an emergency equation. Equation Chacha can instantly generate one for every occasion. The beta version of Equation Chacha has already

produced some classics, including MEGA minus MAGA = MIGA. I intend to offer Equation Chacha for free so that even the poorest can use it to generate equations they can use to understand the universe. For instance, when a farmer fed Equation Chacha with details of India's rural infrastructure, it came up with this gem: (mass ignorance x poverty) x religion = poor governance + zero accountability.

Gnamechanger

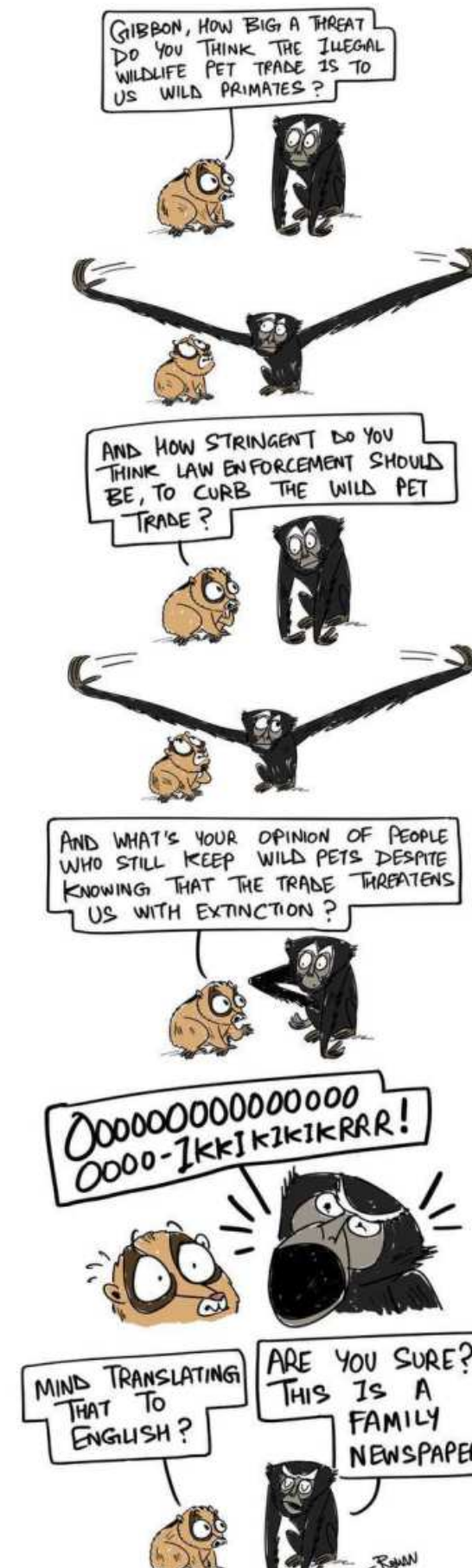
Function: naming assistant
This name-changer tool is a gamechanger. After OTPs and propaganda, name-changing is the fastest growing sector in Indian manufacturing. Be it cities, towns, schools, roads, hospitals, institutions, welfare schemes, airports, railway stations or just your neighbourhood park whose total area is smaller than its total name – all of them will need a name change at some point. That's where Gnamechanger comes in. Input the current name, it will recommend the perfect new name. A UP MLA was thrilled when he typed 'Taj Mahal' and got 'Tejo Mahalaya' – such a beautiful classical name!

There is so much demand for this app from politicians that I already have 56,000 pre-booked subscriptions.

Fibber

Function: chatbot
This is a reality-to-fantasy converter that comes complimentary with a three-year-subscription to Cover-Up Machi. Feed reality to Fibber and say "Go Fib!" It will spit out a heady cocktail of propaganda, lies and wishful thinking – an invaluable resource for political elites who need a steady supply of fodder for the influencers on their payroll. For instance, an economist friend wrote on Fibber, "The rupee breached an all-time low of 87 against the dollar. Go Fib!" Fibber's response: "By 2029, when India will be a \$75 trillion economy, every Indian will get three buffaloes and 24 gold coins under the Garib Kalyan Buffalo Gold Coin Yojana."

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



ISLA MARIA VAN DAMME:

Multitasker with a dash of masala

Better known as Loulou, Isla Maria Van Damme is a stylist, hotelier, model and passionate gardener. She turns 80 this May and is an inspiration to the Indian design community that knows her. An integral part of the styling at the Raw Mango stores in Delhi, Chennai and Hyderabad, she has worked on several design projects, including jewellery designer Hanut Singh's pop-ups. Born to Belgian parents in Kodaikanal, Loulou lived and worked in Europe for decades before returning to India "to retire" in 2000. "Well it hasn't worked that way," she laughs, over a morning phone call. "My friends say you are working too hard but I am meeting extraordinary people all the time. I say yes to crazy things sometimes but it's such fun." Recently, she was part of artist and filmmaker Sarah Singh's "moving tableau", an art salon featuring sopranos and over 40 artists, at Gwalior Fort. It was a performance that blended heritage with contemporary relevance and Loulou joined in as "a prop, dressed like a bird of paradise". For Singh's pop-up at Soho House, she showcased his spectacular jewellery against "strange and quirky, broken antiques, be it vases, plates or statues". Known for her inimitable personal style, she has been part of campaigns for fashion label Injiri and jewellery brand Outhouse (in pic).

This year, she is busy styling houses in Delhi and Goa, another in Jaipur for Injiri's Chinara Paroqui, as well as designer Vikram Goyal's atelier. There are also plans to design a salon of sorts at the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai. "I am a masala. I cannot do one style, whether it is homes or other projects or when dressing up. I like creating a look by mixing different things, and it's with items of character that you get style," she explains. Very organised, Loulou suggests that her mindful lifestyle helps her stay positive and sharp. At home in the foothills of the Western Ghats, her office is her dining table in her verandah, overlooking the Palani Hills. Despite the view, it appears she can work on multiple projects and yet sign up for more. "India has embraced me, I don't know why. I feel loved," she concludes.

OUTHOUSE



The case for curiosity-driven science

Scientific enquiry requires an environment that values imagination, intellectual freedom; a hyper-utilitarian view driven by market forces risks stifling creativity

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National Science Day is observed on February 28 every year to commemorate the discovery of the Raman Effect by C.V. Raman. The Raman Effect describes the scattering of light by molecules, leading to a shift in wavelength. It was a major breakthrough in understanding the interaction between light and matter. This discovery earned Raman the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1930, marking a significant milestone in Indian scientific achievements. However, what was Raman's original goal? Was he motivated by the prospect of solving immediate societal problems, or was his pursuit of science driven by something deeper?

His discovery was not driven by commercial interests or immediate application; it was born out of an innate human curiosity and imagination. Yet today, the very nature of scientific inquiry is being reshaped by economic and market considerations. Scientific enterprise is often viewed through the lens of market

value, economic return, and immediate technological application. Funding agencies worldwide, including in India, are prioritising solution-oriented and commercially driven research. As a result, research outcomes are increasingly evaluated based on patents, entrepreneurship, and consultancy and industry partnerships. Applied research has become the dominant paradigm, with scientists expected to deliver tangible products or solutions.

Eroding the essence
While the practical application of science is undeniably important, this utilitarian approach risks eroding the true essence of scientific enquiry. If scientific research becomes entirely dictated by market forces, we risk constraining free exploration and diminishing the potential for paradigm-shifting discoveries. The true spirit of scientific enquiry must be nurtured not by external pressures but by an environment that values curiosity, imagination, and intellectual freedom. There is an increasing tendency to equate scientific progress solely

with technological innovation, often overlooking the deeper intellectual and exploratory aspects of science. Over the past two decades, science and technology have witnessed unprecedented breakthroughs, with the artificial intelligence revolution now unfolding at an extraordinary pace. Science has played a vital role in addressing many challenges, from healthcare advancements to renewable energy solutions. While these innovations hold practical value, they should not become ends in themselves. This also brings us to a crucial question: is science being steered towards genuine problem-solving and sustainable development, or is it merely reinforcing a culture of excess and fuelling endless cycles of consumption?

Scientific pursuit is driven by more than just technological advancement and short-term gains. Curiosity, the quest for a deeper understanding, and the desire to address fundamental questions about nature and existence are equally important. When innovation is pursued for its own sake, it risks becoming a hollow exercise, detached from the broader intellectual and societal aspirations that make

scientific enterprise truly meaningful.

Science, much like music, literature, or art, is a creative endeavour. It seeks to explore fundamental questions about reality, often without straightforward or immediate answers. Many of the greatest discoveries in science – whether Einstein's theories of relativity or Raman's own work on light scattering – were not driven by the demand for practical solutions but by an insatiable curiosity about the physical universe. In many cases, these discoveries found practical usage only years or even decades later. The story of quantum mechanics, which now underpins modern electronics and computing, or the principles of general relativity, which enable precise GPS navigation, exemplifies this delayed but profound impact of basic sciences.

The mind that calculates profit and loss remains trapped in the narrow corridors of necessity. It is the creative mind that seeks without a reason that has always led humanity forward. The moment we reduce existence to function, we reduce humans to machines. A rainbow stretching across the sky holds no pragmatic value

for a busy city dweller rushing through the vagaries of life, but to a child or a poet, its beauty is inescapable. Imagine a world without astronomy where human beings never looked up, never questioned, never dreamed. It would be a world of dead practicality or mere survival without wonder. To a utilitarian, the stars are distant and irrelevant. But in the eyes of a stargazer, they are a mirror, reflecting our deepest questions. Who are we? Where do we come from? What is our place in this cosmos? These are not questions that can be answered by a balance sheet or a ledger. They are the questions that define us as human beings, as seekers of truth, beauty and exploration. The poet, the painter, the musician, the mystic, or the scientist, they are all seekers of the infinite. It is an opening to something beyond the mundane – a rebellion against the trivialities of daily existence.

A hyper-utilitarian view of science and innovation, driven solely by market forces, risks stifling creativity and innovation. Throughout history, many scientific breakthroughs have emerged from open-ended exploration rather than rigidly

goal-oriented research. Michael Faraday, one of the greatest experimental scientists, once demonstrated his discoveries in electromagnetism to a high-ranking British official. After showing how moving a magnet through a coil of wire could generate an electric current, the official, unimpressed, reportedly asked, "What practical good will this experiment in electricity bring to the nation?" To this, Faraday's answer was, "Sir, I do not know. But I do know that one day the government may tax it."

As we commemorate Raman's pioneering work on National Science Day, we must remember that his discovery was not motivated by

commercial ambitions but by unbounded curiosity fuelling creativity. To truly honour his legacy, we must reaffirm our commitment to curiosity-driven research and foster a culture where discovery is cherished not for its immediate utility but for its power to expand the horizons of human knowledge. This requires universities and institutions to uphold their role as guardians of free inquiry and debate, where asking "why" and "what if" is valued as much as finding answers.

The author is a scientist at the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru. The views expressed are his own.



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Sustaining dignity in old age
The most effective way is to prepare for it rather than relying entirely on others
Jyothi S.

Not so quiet flow the rivers
They are no longer part of lives, or people have detached them from their lives
Muhsin Mutteth

All for sorority
These connections offer women a safe space to celebrate joys and seek comfort during hardships
Sandra Joseph

Labelling children
It creates a boundary which limits their inner potential
Reina Sri

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Feedback column will continue next week. Mail your letters to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

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Gayatri Sinha

In a way, it is a transaction between two terminals. Arriving at the King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, the plane-loads of white-clad pilgrims, preparing for the visit to Mecca, follow a distinct route that is largely closed to non-Muslims.

In a parallel trajectory, visitors to the airport's Western Hajj Terminal enter an entirely different world of the Aga Khan award-winning space – of tent-like canopies that lead to a state-of-the-art museum. The ground of Jeddah, deemed holy, allows both these spaces to reflect on the Islamic faith and the extraordinary artefacts it has produced over the centuries.

The second Islamic Arts Biennale, titled *And All That Is In Between*, is a biennale like no other. In manuscripts, architectural elements, religious symbols like the *kiswah* which covers the holy Kaaba, arms and armour, and objects of luxury and beauty, an entire world seems to unfold. The exhibition derives its distinction not only from its elegant staging, but also in its unabashedly religious assertion. Historians and scholars note that as compared to western art, the Islamic arts have not received the same degree of critical or theoretical analysis. Perhaps, this series of events, led by the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, can initiate a new bout of scholarship.

At a time when the Arab world is under pressure to resolve its regional crisis and unitedly resist the U.S.' intentions for Gaza, the focus on Saudi Arabia is intense. Against a background of human rights concerns and investigations led by western agencies, the current



ART FROM THE CENTRE OF ISLAM

The 2nd edition of the Islamic Arts Biennale at the Jeddah airport establishes a new category of the religious within the art circuit, featuring precious manuscripts, astrolabes and artefacts from across the Muslim world

geopolitical crisis casts the kingdom in a new role, as the centre of gravity in the Arab world. As a cosmopolitan enterprise that posits medieval arts with contemporary installations, the biennale marks a clearly articulated ambition within the region. In the last two decades, the Arab world has transformed its profile as a centre for education and the arts.

World's oldest diamond
With Julian Raby, the affable former director of the National Museum of Asian Art at the

Smithsonian, as lead curator, the biennale inevitably throws up some important questions. Perhaps the principal one is about how Islamic art can be separated from its producers, artisans and makers, who often belong to other faiths and cultures, bringing their own motifs, weaves and colour palettes to use.

Nonetheless, the exhibition, with open and closed spaces, engages the mind and the eye with its dazzling display. Amin Jaffer, one of the biennale's artistic directors and director also of the Al Thani Collection,

creates one of the highlights in a section titled 'Al Mukhtani', that features precious objects from Qatar's ruling family. A Mughal ruby-encrusted water sprinkler, engraved spinels and huge emeralds, a plate depicting life on the Nile from the 8th century, the early decades of the Muslim calendar, and gold coins from Byzantium are some of the precious objects on view. The fabulous Briollette of India diamond that weighs 90 carats (believed to have been acquired by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine in the 12th century, making it the oldest diamond in the world), royal robes and Mughal paintings by masters of Jahangir's atelier all enrich this viewing.

An unusual section named 'Al Madar' or the Orbit takes a sweeping view of the science of heavenly constellations, and analyses the genius of mathematics and its uses in astronomy. Curated by Abdul Rahman Azzam, it introduces the astrolabe (*al-asturb* in Arabic) that helped calculate the movement of stars and navigate ship voyages.

Art at the airport (Clockwise from left) *Melon Mahallah* by the Berlin-based Slavs and Tatars; a staircase from Chennai, presented to Mecca by the Nawab of Arcot in the early 19th century; garments and other artefacts from the Al Madar component of the biennale. (MARCO CAPPELLETTI, DIRIYAH BIENNALE FOUNDATION)



Kaaba as a miniature
At the heart of the exhibition are the centres of Mecca and Medina, to which a pavilion each has been dedicated, and also the material presence of the *Quran*. The House of God

as a symbol and presence has manifold representations in the show. There is on view the key to the Kaaba – from the time of the Prophet, this has been given to the Bani Shaiba family, who have historically served as gatekeepers to the holy site.

Two interesting contemporary insertions making use of Islamic symbols include Asif Khan's *Glass Quran*, a highly delicate sculpture composed of 604 inscribed glass pieces placed one upon the other, rendering the holy book iconic. The various copies of the Quran on view represent an extraordinary variety of calligraphic styles and texts, and reaffirm how the holy book has time and again served as an inspiration for art.

There is also the evocative work *Magnetism* by Ahmed Mater, which uses the simplicity of the Kaaba as a miniature black cube. As it rotates slowly, its magnetic field sets into vibration thousands of small black iron particles, placed in circles, to suggest the movement of pilgrims during the Hajj.

A careful calculus of the exhibits reveals a fine confluence of aesthetics and knowledge. Different figures from the Islamic world come to

light, such as the influential 10th-century Persian astronomer, Abd al-Rahman. Other displays of interest include signs of the Arabic constellations, or the globe made by Mohd. Asturlabi Humayun Lahuri in Mughal India in 1639, which dispel the western hegemony over alchemy, science and mathematics.

Regional artists and beyond
Beyond the hoary treasure trove of Islamic manuscripts, arms and armour, votive and luxury objects on view, the biennale has a contemporary section curated by leading artist Mohannad Shono that draws on artists of the region and beyond.

From the subcontinent, Mohd. Imran Qureshi creates a space for rest with hundreds of Pakistani woven mats, called *Zubaida's Trail*, after the Abbasid queen who built a rest-house for pilgrims travelling between Kufa and Mecca, more than a thousand years ago. Works by Indian artists can be found in the 'Al Midhallah' or the Canopy, that invokes the Islamic garden as a tented roof-like structure.

Another important artefact, from the 'Al Bidayah' (The Beginning) section, is a *madraj* or staircase with Baroque motifs, sent by the Nawab of Arcot Azam Jah Bahadur from Chepaik in Chennai to Mecca in the early 19th century.

This biennale owes its significance not only to the wonder and antiquity of the objects on display or the sophistication of the installations. Even as it affirms a new category of the religious within the biennale circuit, it offers a novel paradigm for the reading and exhibiting of art, and speaks of newer power equations within the art world.

Islamic Arts Biennale 2025 is on till May 25.

The art critic and curator is based in New Delhi.



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