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Paris Olympics 2024 | Inside the radical transformation in Indian sports and
the making of a medal-winning champion

Rudraneil Sengupta

Vinesh Phogat is not one to dwell on self-pity. But in August last year, she came close to it. India’s most decorated female wrestler – she has medalled at world championships, Asian championships, Asian Games and Commonwealth Games – needed surgery to reconstruct a ligament in her knee.

It would mean a minimum of six months off from wrestling. The national championships were five months away. If she did not compete there, she would not get a chance to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics, the one medal that has eluded her. (At the 2016 Rio Olympics, Phogat, a medal favourite, ruptured the same ligament during a bout, leaving the competition sobbing and inconsolable.)

There were other things happening in her life around the same time. She was one of the leaders of the group of wrestlers who had taken to the streets in January 2023, protesting against the then Wrestling Federation of India president and Lok Sabha member Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who was accused of sexually abusing women wrestlers. She had spent night after night at New Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, sleeping on the pavement, wrestling forgotten, training and diet out of the window. She had been at the receiving end of severe online harassment, and police action that saw the protesters forcibly evicted and locked up.

Now, there was this. The thought of an impending surgery naturally compounded her worries. “I had just one question for my surgeon, and for my trainers,” says Phogat. “Can I come back on the mat in five months? I was not going to let my Olympic dream slip away.”

The answer was: maybe; though there was only one other instance of an athlete getting back to the playing field after an ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) procedure – South African rugby captain Siya Kolisi, who did it in under four months in 2023. “I told them, I believe in myself,” Phogat says. “I can do it, too.”

One of the four major ligaments in the knee joint, the ACL is a thick band that runs diagonally through the interior of the knee, joining the thigh bone to the shin bone. Its primary job is to stabilise the rotation of the knee, which is why an ACL tear is the most common major injury in sports such as football, American football, and wrestling. When the ACL is reconstructed using grafts in surgery, the time required for the ligament to regain its full function is between six and nine months.

But Phogat was on the mat in five months. She swept the national championship. Then she won a trial to determine which wrestlers would fight in the Olympic qualifiers. She won those too and is headed to Paris for one last shot at that most coveted of sporting medals.

How did she do it? The first step was to call in South African strength and conditioning specialist Wayne Lombard, who had helped her recover from a knee surgery in 2016.

Phogat and Lombard cloistered themselves at Lakshyan Academy of Sports in Bengaluru, a state-of-the-art

FASTER. HIGHER.
STRONGER.
GETTING
THE INDIAN
ATHLETE
OLYMPICS-READY

multi-sport facility, to begin their gruelling journey back to optimal fitness. “The way the body gets stronger is by putting it under more and more stress – heavier loads, more repetitions of an exercise,” says Lombard. “The tricky problem in rehabilitation is, how do you get that strength adaptation without putting the injured ligament or joint under so much stress?” Lombard knew exactly how to get around that problem.

For athletes in India, long used to poor infrastructure, outdated training methods, and little to no input from

sports science, a radical transformation has taken place. “During our time, we were lucky if we got a decent wrestling mat,” says Sakshi Malik, the only woman wrestler from India to win a medal at the Olympics – a bronze at Rio 2016. “We had bare minimum equipment, and no experts helping us.”

Slowly, over the last decade, driven by not-for-profit organisations such as Olympic Gold Quest (which sponsored Phogat’s surgery and subsequent rehabilitation work with Lombard), Go Sports Foundation, and JSW Sports, as well as private academies and training centres – Lakshyan Academy, the Padukone-Dravid Centre for Sports Excellence, Inspire Institute of Sports, and the Abhinav Bindra Targeting Performance Centres (ABTP) – that aid Olympic athletes, the sporting infrastructure in India is, for the first time, on a par with global standards. The Union sports ministry, on its part, has increased funding for top



I don’t know too many people who have Vinesh Phogat’s fighting spirit. Physically, mentally, she can keep pushing herself when you’d think it’s not possible to push any more. But it also means that we had to be extra careful that she doesn’t injure herself in recovery

WAYNE LOMBARD
South African strength and conditioning specialist

athletes, thus allowing them to determine their own training programmes with the help of these specialised agencies.

The change, says John Gloster, who heads sports science for IPL franchise Rajasthan Royals, as well as for Go Sports, “is enormous”. “For India’s elite athletes, the problem of infrastructure and expertise does not exist any more. Now it’s a question of spreading this more and more at all levels.”

To be sure, these facilities are far fewer than what’s needed for a country the size of India, and available only to top-tier athletes and the few promising youngsters who are on the rosters of the not-for-profit organisations. Most of the expertise is brought in from Europe, the U.S., Australia or South Africa.

“Sports science is very new for India, so most of the expertise has to be imported,” Gloster says. “The next step is to train and educate aspiring sports scientists in the country.” Go Sports Foundation,

ABTP, and IIS all conduct courses in sports science for aspiring coaches. Science-based training protocols and the equipment needed to implement them, says Gloster, is “now a necessity in elite sports”. “Without this, it is very difficult – nearly impossible – to be competitive.” For each athlete sponsored by Go Sports, 12 of whom are headed to the Paris Games, training is a personalised, finely calibrated, data-and-knowledge- driven operation. “What are the energy system demands for a particular athlete in a particular sport, what does it mean for nutrition, for recovery, how are they sleeping... everything is being continuously monitored through wearable devices,” adds Gloster.

Chameleons in training

American strength and conditioning expert Caleb Linn, who has charge of the badminton players under Go Sports, gives an insight into the training of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, the No.1 ranked men’s doubles pair in the world.

“For badminton players, one of the things that happens with playing the game is that one side of the body becomes much stronger than the other,” Linn says. “But that also brings with it injury risks. So, when we are in the early training phase and building strength, mobility and agility, a lot of my work is to get more symmetry from side to side.”

One of the ways Linn tests for strength asymmetry is with the help of an isokinetic machine, an exercise device costing around ₹5 lakh, meant for isolated movements using only one arm or one leg. “Every training session is also an assessment session,” says Linn. “I am always making observations and managing the loads. For instance, Chirag is naturally lean and responds well to heavy strength training, while Satwik is naturally muscular and needs moderate strength training and more cardiovascular focus.”

CONTINUED ON
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India at the 2024 Olympics

● So far, 111 athletes (65 men, 46 women) have booked their berths for the Paris Olympics (qualifications are still on).

● The men’s hockey team, which won bronze at Tokyo 2020, qualified for Paris after winning gold at the 2022 Asian Games in Huangzhou, China.

● For the first time, Indian shooters have secured a quota in every category of the sport.

● Race walkers Priyanka Goswami and Akshdeep Singh were the first Indians to qualify for athletics events.


● Long jumper Murali Sreeshankar, who made the cut for Paris 2024, will not be participating due to a knee injury.

● Swimmer Dhinidhi Desinghu, 14, will be the youngest Indian competitor at Paris.

● This will be 42-year-old paddler Achanta Sharath Kamal’s fifth and final appearance at the Olympics. He is India’s flagbearer this edition.



ILLUSTRATION:
SOUMYADIP SINHA



IN CONVERSATION

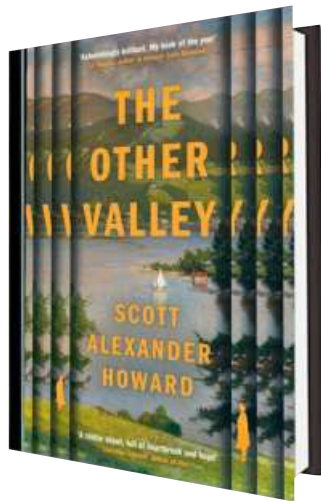
A TWIST ON TIME TRAVEL

In his debut novel, *The Other Valley*, Scott Alexander Howard bends the rules of reality without taking on the burden of explanation

Jaideep Unadurti

I wanted the novel to feel like an extremely vivid dream,” says Scott Alexander Howard, talking to me from his home in Vancouver, about his first novel *The Other Valley* (Atlantic Books). The premise of the book is simple yet evocative: we are introduced to a picture-postcard of a town, ringed by high mountains and pine forests, with a lake that “stretched like a finger”; a bucolic vista like something from a Bradbury or a Narayan. Soon however we realise that something is off – there are strange visitors wearing grotesque masks. And we see a map with the same valley repeated in a longitudinal endlessness. Except, the valley to the east is 20 years in the future, and the valley in the west is 20 years in the past. The same valley, the same people, but separated by time. To prevent people from wandering back and forth, altering reality at will, the border between the valleys is policed by a brutal paramilitary force, given to on-the-spot executions. And overseeing this is the Conseil, a sort of mofussil guardian of the timestreams. They decide visitation – who gets to go back, for instance, parents catching a

final glimpse of a lost child; or go forward, a grandfather wanting to find out how his grandchild turned out. You can see, but you can’t change. The story is told by Odile Ozanne, a shy 16-year-old girl, “never spoken to and seldom spoken of”, at the moment when she blooms and makes a doomed bid to be a part of the ‘cool kids’ clique. I ask Howard, a first-time novelist, whether taking on the voice of a teenage girl was a challenge. “I was confident early on that she was a believable character regardless of our gender difference,” he says. “I based a lot of Odile on myself and my personality, so I actually feel closer to her than the men in the novel.” Howard did make some oversights in some scenes (“small



Author Scott Alexander Howard

physical details, not big psychological ones”) but his wife helped improve the first drafts, he says. Odile falls in love with a classmate, a violin virtuoso, while also applying for admission into the Conseil, and sets up a situation for a lifetime of regrets. We would have nothing but the empty phrase “to move on”; but Odile, as she grows older, is permanently haunted by the thought that the past is just there, in the other valley, waiting to be changed.

Mysteries of the universe Mathematician Kurt Gödel conceived of a strange rotating universe, with regions in space so curved that you will meet yourself on the same path, walking the other way. Howard reduces this to a simpler equation – hike across a pass in the mountains and you will step into the same valley, but 20 years displaced in time. Time travel through mere ambulation is not too common. I can only recall ‘Palely Loitering’ by Christopher Priest, which features a park with two bridges, one into the past and another into the future. Howard explains: “...because most time travel stories tend to be futuristic sci-fi, it was appealing to give this novel a rustic, almost rural, setting. I wanted to experience hiking across the mountains to the past and the future with my characters. I wanted to explore how they would feel the first time they physically entered the valley where they’re a child again”. As a conceit, Howard however realises the implications fully. As the Conseil states, “Risk is asymmetric and depends on the direction of the movement.” A traveller going to the west, into the past, puts the “home” valley at risk by changing the foundations of the past that led to their present. Howard, whose day job is a philosopher, also almost does away with an omniscient Almighty. “The concept of god is teleological: god gives a singular purpose to our lives. The Conseil believes the opposite: there’s no such thing as purpose or destiny. In their view, the timeline is fragile and could easily be otherwise, which is why they grant themselves the authority to protect it.”

Creating a vibe Critics like Gary Wolfe have pointed out that time-travel, once the prize jewel of science fiction, has now been assimilated by the literary mainstream. Do the devices of speculative fiction offer more possibilities? “Personally, I would categorise *The Other Valley* as literary fiction,” says Howard, going for an approach “which bends the rules of reality but refuses the burden of explanation in favour of evoking an atmosphere”. Early on, a character feels a kind of “thrilling sadness”, an “emotion that lives on the desolate edge of the known”. This mood predominates throughout the novel, intensifying in the third act. Paradoxes in time travel stories are like Chekhov’s gun, they must go off. And it does, with a device that is not technological but literary. The outcome is a simultaneously low- and high-stakes narrative, where just the chance to have a better life will also completely alter the reality of the character’s universe. *The Other Valley* is one of those novels that leaves a pleasant afterglow, where you are buzzing with questions and replay the scenes in your head to figure out what exactly happened.

The writer is a freelance journalist and graphic novelist.

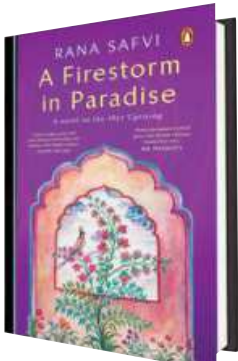
From the depths of Shahjahanabad

Through the fictional character of a daughter of Bahadur Shah Zafar, historian Rana Safvi tells a compelling tale of events leading up to the 1857 uprising



Abdullah Khan

The American Civil War was a defining moment in the history of the United States. It has inspired numerous novels by American authors, *Gone with the Wind* being one example. Similarly, India’s First War of Independence in 1857 holds great historical importance. However, the literary exploration of this period, particularly in English fiction by Indian authors, remains limited. While Ruskin Bond’s *The Flight of Pigeons* provides an Indian perspective, other notable narratives such as J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* predominantly reflect British viewpoints. Recent years have seen Indian writers try their hand at fiction set against the backdrop of the 1857 uprising. In 2021, Raza Mir captivated readers with *Murder at the Mushaira*, a period thriller offering a detailed portrayal of Shahjahanabad (modern-day Old Delhi). And now, renowned historian Rana Safvi makes her fiction debut with *A Firestorm in Paradise*, set in the period leading up to 1857. Safvi introduces Falak Ara, a fictional daughter of Bahadur Shah Zafar, as the central character of her novel. While some characters are real historical figures, most of the minor characters are



A Firestorm in Paradise
Rana Safvi
Penguin
₹699

products of the author’s imagination. As for other details, the novel intricately weaves major events and developments of the time into its narrative, providing an authentic backdrop to this historical tale. Falak, distinguished from other princesses, finds herself in a unique position due to her late mother’s status as a concubine to the emperor rather than a queen. She does not command the respect and attention that other



Invoking the past This is Rana Safvi’s first work of fiction. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

princesses typically do. Raised by a devoted maid, Falak navigates a complex existence within the fort walls, hidden from her father until a dramatic incident gives her the opportunity to meet him for the first time. Emotions run high during their encounter. Later, her life takes a pleasant turn when she meets a prince and falls in love, promising a brighter future. However, the escalating rebellion against the East India Company and subsequent violence shatter her dream of a happily-ever-after.

Life before breakfast As we follow Falak’s life and delve into her backstory, we encounter numerous characters with their own narratives. Through them, we gain insight into the events unfolding beyond the fort walls, including the brutal suppression of rebellion by the British. The First War of Independence itself becomes a major character in the novel, occupying a significant portion of the book. Additionally, the author meticulously details the social customs, traditions, food, clothing, political administration, social classes, and royal behaviour of the times in an authentic manner. We thus discover some interesting facts about Indian

society back then. For instance, there was no concept of breakfast, and people ate only twice in 24 hours. They believed that breakfast was an alien tradition brought by the British, and this practice continued well into the middle of the 20th century. If you’ve watched Rajesh Khanna’s *Bawarchi*, you might recall one of his dialogues in the movie: “*Hum Angrez thode hain ki breakfast karenge*. (We are not English people to indulge in breakfast.)” This is why Hindi/ Urdu has idiomatic phrases like ‘*do joon ki roti*’ or ‘two square meals’. Even the emperors followed the two-meal formula. Another interesting piece of information is that transpersons were treated with great respect by the Mughals and referred to as ‘*Khwajasarah*’, often employed as guards in women’s quarters.

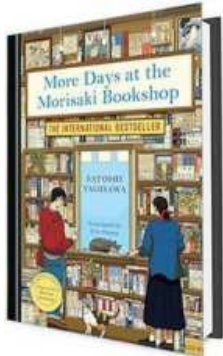
More of Falak, please In contrast to today’s Delhi, the novel heartwarmingly portrays Shahjahanabad of 1857 as an oasis of communal harmony. People from different communities worked together for the Badshah, and princes and princesses took pride in their Rajput ancestry passed down through their mothers and grandmothers. The author adeptly handles dialogue, capturing the lilt and melody of the language spoken at the time. One wishes the author had allocated more space to Falak and her stories because she is a lovely character; her innocence is infectious, yet at times, she fades into the backdrop of the political upheaval of the period. We hope Safvi will consider writing another novel that delves deeper into Falak and her mother’s stories, possibly a prequel. The novel makes for a compelling read, and there is abundant source material for a screen adaptation, though that would be a significant undertaking, to authentically capture 19th-century Delhi for modern-day viewers.

The reviewer is an author, most recently of *A Man from Motihari*.

BROWSER

More Days At The Morisaki Bookshop
Satoshi Yagisawa
Bonnier UK
₹399

The sequel to *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop* is also set in Tokyo’s book district of Jinbocho, and explores the everyday ties between people who share a love for stories. But with time, there are changes and difficult decisions to be made.



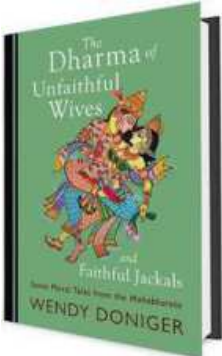
Secrets Within
Mushtaq Shiekh
Penguin
₹299

The story follows Aakash, an ambitious architect, who has the chance of a lifetime to build a mansion for the mysterious Mr. Khanna. But he must first contend with his feelings for the client’s equally enigmatic wife. What treasures and troubles await our daring protagonist?



The Dharma of Unfaithful Wives and Faithful Jackals
Wendy Doniger
Speaking Tiger
₹499

Encompassing discourses on dharma, and filled with intrigue and insight about women, sons and fathers, kings and gods, this book of stories by the renowned Indologist offers a fresh perspective of the *Mahabharata*.



Tara
Koral Dasgupta
Pan Macmillan
₹399

The final book in the author’s Sati series based on the Pancha Kanyas from the epics, *Tara* is the story of the queen of the forest kingdom of Kishkindh. She skillfully negotiates for peace and creates a legacy amidst love and chaos after the Vanara king’s tragic death.



Water woes

A bird’s eye view of the challenges triggered by water scarcity



Parched earth A view of River Ter running dry near Vilanova de Sau, Catalonia, Spain. (AP)

Jacob Koshy
jacob.koshy@thehindu.co.in

During the scorching summer months from March to July, large parts of India battle some sort of a water crisis. There is no other natural resource that animates politics in India as water. Think the Mullaperiyar dam dispute, or the sharing of Cauvery river waters, to give just two examples.

Despite the intensity of passions they provoke, they have a way of slipping out of the public consciousness as soon as the rains arrive. This refusal to address water sharing in a comprehensive manner, and beyond egoistical territorial disputes, is an important theme in *The Watershed Moment* by Aniket Ghanashyam, a water-policy consultant to several States.

‘Day Zero’ crises
Ghanashyam’s most impressive achievement is in giving a bird’s eye view of the challenges triggered by water scarcity the world over. So we have succinct summaries of the ‘Day Zero’ water crisis in 2018, which the author witnessed as a student in

Cape Town, South Africa where citizens waited with dread for a day that water would run out. Though ‘Day Zero’ never came, Ghanashyam says that it rocked citizens “to the core” and it gave them a “new found respect for water and its value to society.”

He also discusses near-‘Day Zero’ crises in Barcelona, drought woes in Australia and brewing discontent over water-sharing arrangements between Singapore and Malaysia. He discusses the history and civilisational connect of dams, their environmental consequences and how they may have promoted extreme water use inefficiency. Ghanashyam lists a host of technological solutions – waste water treatment, biofiltration, drip irrigation – that are all aimed at increasing water-use efficiency. But a discussion on the true cost of implementing them, especially in poor countries, is missing. As an introductory primer to multiple dimensions of the global water crisis, this book is a valuable addition to the literature.

The Watershed Moment
Aniket Ghanashyam
Manipal Universal Press
₹650



Tense ties (Left) Kashmiris shout slogans during a protest against the abrogation of Article 370, in Srinagar; and (below) Then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the Wagah border, in 1999. (AP)

LANGUAGE OF PEACEMAKING

Two former spy chiefs on why India and Pakistan need to restart talks

Suhasini Haidar
suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

When dealing with contentious issues between neighbours and arch enemies as India and Pakistan have grown to be, can established practices in counselling and mediation, like those used for unhappy married couples, be applied? More importantly, does the setting, venue and language of discourse matter?

During Narendra Modi’s visit to Lahore in December 2015, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif asked External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar why he preferred to speak in English. Jaishankar allegedly replied that it was because Sharif was a “foreign head of state to him”, indicating a stern formality and distance in tone. This, and other anecdotes, are cited in a new book, *Covert: The Psychology of War and Peace*, in which psychologist Neil Aggarwal talks to former R&AW chief A.S. Dulat and former ISI chief Asad Durrani. It’s a sequel to the 2018 *Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace*.

In that, journalist Aditya Sinha had conducted the conversation, and he dwelled for a considerable amount on how the language, religion, familial ties and personal aspects of the interlocutors affect their ability to engage each other.

Cultural links

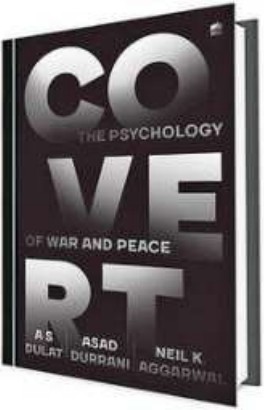
The question on whether a common local language and personal links work should be further analysed, however. Both Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee used Urdu in conversations with Nawaz Sharif, forging personal ties and embracing him publicly during their respective visits to Lahore in 1999 and 2015, for example. In contrast, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who was Punjabi and born in Pakistan, seldom spoke in anything but



English during meetings with the Pakistani leadership, nor did he visit Pakistan during his entire tenure. Singh’s government, however, maintained a longer span of unbroken formal engagement with Pakistan (2004-2008 and 2010-2014), compared to attempts by Vajpayee (1999-2001 and 2003-2004) and Modi (2015-2016 and 2018-2019).

As a sequel, *Covert* is quite different from *Spy Chronicles*, as the earlier book

The publication of *Spy Chronicles*, the first-of-its-kind collaboration between spy chiefs of two warring nations, had set off storms in both Delhi and Islamabad. Dulat faced a barrage of criticism from officials in Delhi



Covert: The Psychology of War and Peace
A.S. Dulat, Asad Durrani, Neil K. Aggarwal
HarperCollins
₹699

probed events and dialogues between Dulat and Durrani while they were in positions of power, and for years after when they remained “in the know” of the India-Pakistan official dialogue process. The latest version dwells more

on the “Track-II” initiatives the two men have been a part of for two decades. It looks at how non-formal dialogue works, and what could provide a breakthrough to take talks to the Track-I level. The format of both volumes are Q&A transcripts of hours of mediated, unedited conversations, and is sometimes tedious, and should have been re-framed; the editors may even consider a third work distilling the content of the first two books into a more reader-friendly format.

Government action

Dulat and Durrani engage warmly like before, but the narrative in *Covert* seems far less anecdotal and newsworthy – they may both be playing safe, given their experience with the previous book. The publication of *Spy Chronicles*, the first-of-its-kind collaboration between spy chiefs of two warring nations, had set off storms in both Delhi and Islamabad. Dulat faced a barrage of criticism from officials in Delhi and, after his memoir *A Life in the Shadows* was published, the Modi government amended its Service Pension rules forbidding officers from the IB, R&AW and 24 security services from writing books without official permission. In Islamabad, the Pakistan Army ordered a court of inquiry into Durrani’s comments in the book and put him on the Exit Control List in order to prevent him from leaving the country for a period.

Push for engagement

The Dulat-Durrani conversations reveal that the refusal to talk is ideological and emotion-led, whereas the need for engagement is more rational and ‘realpolitik’. In a separate clinical paper titled, ‘How Psychoanalytic Theory and Track II Diplomacy Can Inform Each Other: A Dialogue with the Former Heads of India and Pakistan’s Foreign Intelligence Agencies’, Dr. Aggarwal concludes that there is a need to learn to continue talks “even when intense emotional effects such as rage threaten to interrupt dialogue”. The “ground rules” of the dialogue are simple: that the two discussants would interact civilly, listen and not interrupt the other, speak freely and empathise. Having exhausted so many avenues of engagement without much to show for it, perhaps what the two countries really need, is not more leaders, diplomats and generals, but counselling and therapy.

INTERVIEW

‘There’s no pure European culture’

Josephine Quinn argues that the West is a product of links with a much larger network of societies



Josephine Quinn
(SUKANT DEEPAK)

are being shortchanged by the focus solely on the Greeks and Romans to the exclusion of other cultures and peoples. I wanted to tell a bigger story, about the connections they had with other people and civilisations. My own guides in this are the Greek and Roman authors themselves because they were so interested in these connections. Plato, for

example, writes that astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, and history all go back to other cultures. The Greeks imported law codes and literature from Mesopotamia, stone sculpture from Egypt, irrigation from Assyria and the alphabet from the Levant.

Q: Why have these millennia of

interaction largely been forgotten?

A: In Europe, particularly, there is a strong focus on the Greeks and Romans alone. I trace it back to the 18th century when the concept of civilisation first came into being. Ideas developed in the Victorian period then organised the world into ‘civilisations’, separate and often mutually opposed, and it has been extremely damaging to the way people think of the world they are living in, and of the past.

Q: Did the concept of civilisation provide useful support for western European imperialism?
A: The European idea of

civilisation was first born as an excuse and cover for imperialism. It began with the belief that civilised societies had a duty to help less developed ones gain freedom and sovereignty, and that despotism was a legitimate form of government in dealing with “barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.” By the 1820s, French historians like Francois Guizot began to use civilisation in the plural, to refer to civilisations that preceded the European civilisation, showing particular interest in the Indians, Etruscans, Romans and Greeks, among others. But the problem was that it created an idea that the civilisations were cut off from each other, separate. Their focus was on identifying and ranking individual societies’ inherent cultural traits rather than on their progress towards a shared human ideal. Cultures in this view were not only quite separate from one another, but had natural ceilings to their development. Over time, this helped to

justify harsher forms of imperial rule.

Q: So, you argue that civilisational thinking misrepresents history...

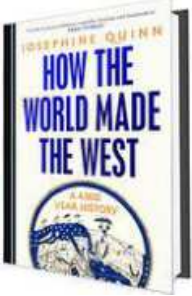
A: Yes, because it is not peoples that make history, but people, and the connections that they create with one other. Human society is not a forest full of trees, with subcultures branching out from single trunks. It is more like a bed of flowers, in need of regular pollination to reseed and grow anew, as ecologist Eric Sanderson told me. Distinctive local cultures come and go, but they are created and sustained by interaction – and once contact is made, no land is an island. There has never been a single, pure Western or European culture. So called western values like freedom, rationality, justice and tolerance are not originally western, and the West itself is in large part a product of long-standing links with a much larger network of societies, to south and north as well as east.

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

An eye emergency led historian Josephine Quinn to ponder over what she wanted to say in her next book. “I thought what if I lose my vision... and decided to summarise my learning from teaching history for two decades.” *How the World Made the West* is an ambitious book, which moves away from a narrative focused solely on the Greeks and Romans, to conclude that their histories

are rooted in other places and even older people. On the sidelines of the Jaipur Literature Festival earlier this year, Quinn explained why connections, not civilisations, drive historical change. Edited excerpts:

Question: Why are you convinced that a narrative of the past focussed only on the Greeks and Romans impoverishes an understanding of the world?
Answer: After teaching about Greece and Rome for 20 years, I was convinced that everyone, and particularly my students,



How the World Made the West
Josephine Quinn
Bloomsbury
₹699

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

At the elite level, all physical sports have one thing in common: the athlete is pushing her or his body to its limits. Whether that's by biomechanical (the way joints, tendons, ligaments and muscle groups work together to create movement patterns), neuromuscular (the ability to generate force through muscular contraction), aerobic (the ability to use oxygen as fuel), or anaerobic means (using the body's stored source of fuel, glycogen). In other words, an athlete is training not for one thing, but for all things – speed, power, strength, stamina, agility, and mobility.

"Before he is a great javelin thrower, he is a great athlete," says Klaus Bartonietz, biomechanical expert from Germany, about his star trainee – Olympics gold medal winner Neeraj Chopra. "Neeraj could have been a great decathlete [a decathlon is made of a 100m sprint, a long jump, a shot-put throw, a pole vault, a 1,500m run, and a javelin throw]."

Chopra's training, Bartonietz says, is obsessively planned and monitored, and involves a vast library of exercises. And like most elite athletes, Chopra is a chameleon in training – in the weight room, he squats twice his body weight and does Olympic lifts like the snatch with 100 kg on the bar; in the gymnastics area, he turns into a gymnast. On the track, he is a sprinter.

"That awareness and creativity involved in gymnastics training is what we call 'movement intelligence'," Bartonietz says, "and Neeraj is very good at that. It's what makes him a great thrower."

Earthquake bars and water tubes This holistic approach to training applies just as well to Tokyo Games silver medalist Mirabai Chanu, even if her sport, weightlifting, gives the impression of being simply about muscular power.

"To be able to lift more than twice her bodyweight in an Olympic lift is an incredibly hard thing to do," says Chandani Parsania, head

physiotherapist at Inspire Institute of Sport in Bellary, Karnataka. "If you have any weak links – a small stabiliser muscle that's not firing properly, or a slight lack of mobility in one shoulder – it will immediately prevent you from lifting as heavy as you can."

One of the many innovative ways in which Chanu trains to ensure that the small muscles that stabilise or help joints move are in prime condition is by using "earthquake bars". These are made of flexible wood and resin, so, while they can safely hold a huge amount of weight, are not rigid by themselves. Chanu hangs weights using rubber resistance bands on both ends of this bendy bar and performs slow lifts. The hanging weights, the movement of the bands, and the wavering bar make the whole set-up extremely unstable, requiring all of Chanu's strength, especially from the core, to keep things even.

Phogat also does a version of this, using a large tube half-filled with water as a weight. As she lifts it above her head and does various exercises, the water sloshes from side to side, forcing her to use her



FASTER. HIGHER. STRONGER. GETTING THE INDIAN ATHLETE OLYMPICS-READY



In top form (Clockwise from far left) Wrestler Vinesh Phogat; shuttlers Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty; weightlifter Mirabai Chanu; and javelin throw champion Neeraj Chopra. (GETTY IMAGES AND SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP)

core and other stabilising muscles to keep the weight level.

In team sports like hockey, while the strength and conditioning of individual players follows the same science-based protocols, technology offers critical insights into the game itself. When the Indian hockey team is in training, each player's individual moves are captured on camera and by wearable GPS devices (which also measure heart rate, acceleration, deceleration, speed and so on).

"We are looking at how they function as a group, as well as individually," says the team's Belgian analyst Artur Lucas. "We record all training drills and games. Then we cut the game into tactical situations and study them." The video analysis software has layers upon layers – breaking the play into its constituent elements, revealing the relationships between player movement and action and outcomes.

Hockey India, the game's governing body, is the only sports federation in the country that is sponsored by a State government – Odisha. This has helped the federation offer world-class facilities

to its players, the only team sport, barring cricket, to do so. Odisha is also one of the only examples of a State government managing to significantly improve their sporting infrastructure. The refurbished Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar is now a gold standard multi-sport facility, with academics and facilities run in public-private partnerships with JSW, Reliance Foundation, ABTP, and others.

The patient, meticulous and single-minded work that's needed to build world-class athletes, keep them healthy and injury-free, and steer them towards their peak abilities will be put to an all-too-tangible test soon – can they win a medal at the Paris Olympics?

"Obviously, you cannot predict what will happen at the tournament," says Lombard. "But is Vinesh ready for it? Yes. She is."

The writer is a journalist based in New Delhi and the author of Enter The Dargah: Travels through India's Wrestling Landscape.

Ziya Us Salam
ziya.salam@thehindu.co.in

Listening to Arundhati Roy is unfailingly illuminating. She instills in you the belief that however steep the odds, they can be surmounted. Like when she stepped out of her comfort zone of conversing in English to address the anti-CAA protesters at Shaheen Bagh, a little over four years ago. Speaking in a mix of halting Urdu and Hindi, she still managed to present a strong case to her audience: "If we fight for ourselves it is not a fight for justice. It is when we fight for each other that it is a fight for justice."

It said much about life and its purpose for Roy. The writer believes the most important battles are fought not on literature festival circuits, but on the streets of life with all its skulduggery and bigotry. Of course, it helps if you can transport some of those challenges to the pages of a book. As she told me shortly after the release of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in 2017, "There's no such thing as the 'voiceless', there's only the deliberately silenced. I have never considered myself an activist. I'm a writer. I write about the world I live in. In the old days, that used to be considered normal writerly activity. That's why, once upon a time, writers used to be considered dangerous people. Today, the definition of a 'writer' seems to have shrunk; they are expected to be entertainers, to pitch their tents somewhere between literature festivals and bestseller lists. So today, with this new, reduced definition, when you are faced with writers who do what writers of yore used to do, you have to hyphenate their job description."

It is a sentiment that has been lauded yet again, through the announcement of the PEN Pinter Award for Roy. As the jury said, she casts an "unflinching, unswerving" gaze on the world and shows a "fierce intellectual determination... to define



ARUNDHATI ROY WON'T BE SILENCED

The writer believes important battles are fought not on literature festival circuits, but on the streets of life

the real truth of our lives and our societies".

Of course, Roy was happy to accept the award, stating, "I wish Harold Pinter were with us today to write about the almost incomprehensible turn the world is taking. Since he isn't, some of us must do our utmost to try to fill his shoes."

Not short on support The "almost incomprehensible turn" she mentioned was, in fact, quite comprehensible. The award came barely two weeks after Delhi Lieutenant Governor V.K. Saxena granted the police permission to prosecute her, along with the academic Sheikh Showkat Hussain, under the Unlawful Activities

Prevention Act (UAPA) for remarks made on Kashmir at a seminar in 2010.

But like with her other social causes, Roy was not short on support. It came from over 200 academics and journalists who signed an open letter, deploring the action and appealing "that no infringement of the fundamental

Doing what writers must Arundhati Roy at Jamia Millia Islamia during the 2020 anti-CAA protests in New Delhi; and (below) people protesting against the order to prosecute Roy and Sheikh Showkat Hussain under the UAPA. (GETTY IMAGES)



right to freely and fearlessly express views on any subject" takes place in India. Pune's National Commission for Safai Karamchari and the Samyukt Kisan Morcha also made favourable noises. Their support meant Roy had succeeded in stepping beyond the perceived limitations of a writer.

This popularity is hard earned. I remember watching Roy on a chilly December evening in 2019, mingling with the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia on the lawns of India Gate.

They were protesting against the amendments to the CAA, and while she had no direct stake in it, she stuck it out with the youngsters. There were no airs of being a Booker Prize winner, no whims of a writer. She posed for photos, and distributed pamphlets.

She repeated the act a week later when she went to Delhi University and alerted students that the "NPR [National Population Register] will become database for the NRC [National Register of Citizens]", "We are not born to face *lathis* and

bullets," she roared, and the students responded, "*Inqilab zindabad*". The writer and the activist merged into one.

'We speak from a position of love' Never guilty of manipulating language to suit her ends, Roy has used her words – measured and scathing – to call out the triumphalism of phoney liberalism, to alert the State about the unwitting consequences of development, and the subjugation of the minorities, the Dalits.

Happy to stand beside Medha Patkar during the Narmada Bachao Andolan, willing to risk it all for the rights of Adivasis in Chhattisgarh, the rights of Kashmiris, and those of the Shaheen Bagh women, Roy has relentlessly strived to show a mirror to a nation often witness to private deprivation amidst public affluence, and vice-versa. Not for her the refuge in silence or the ambiguity in stance. As she once said, "We don't speak from a position of hate, we speak from a position of absolute love. And that is why we fight so hard."

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Jacob Koshy
jacob.koshy@thehindu.co.in

This November, the city of Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, will host the 29th edition of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 29), the annual conclave of heads of state, diplomats, business delegations, and activists, who amidst a media blitz, will wrangle an incremental deal to tarry the climate crisis.

The tradition, as far as these conferences go, is that the host country also assumes the presidency of the Conference of Parties (COP), and as such, must work towards steering country-delegations with differing positions to consensus. This includes getting countries to take steps to transition their economies away from fossil fuels and lay out plans to curb their use of coal, oil and gas. It, however, will be a delicate balancing act for COP 29 president Mukhtar Babayev, who is Minister of Ecology and was once a senior executive for SOCAR, Azerbaijan's national oil company.

Last year, Sultan Ahmed Al Jabar – the COP 28 president and head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) – waded into considerable controversy over his conflicting responsibilities. It is quite likely that Babayev will face similar heat but what makes this even more tricky is that in Baku, oil and gas aren't things to be ashamed of. They are visibly venerated in the city's public spaces and, unlike in the UAE, deeply linked to the country's heritage and cultural fabric.

Underground blazes

The name Azerbaijan, in popular history, translates to 'land of fire', in reference to the geological deposits of naphtha and gas that have through history nursed the striking phenomenon of 'natural fires', or blazes that erupt spontaneously from underground. These have, for millennia, fired the popular religious imagination.

Zoroastrianism, believed to have its origins in the region, has held these natural fires as sacred, and they are today memorialised in structures such as the Ateshgah near Surakhani town, and the Maiden Tower, situated on the outskirts of what is today the old Baku.

The Ateshgah, which derives from Farsi and alludes to a 'fire temple', has been a holy spot for at least a millennia because of the presence of natural fires. Indian travellers and traders have visited the place over centuries – in sojourns along the Silk Route – and contributed to the construction of the structure as it stands today. There are inscriptions in Sanskrit, as well as Punjabi and Devanagari. 'The Maiden Tower in Baku city, though ascribed to different



WILL BAKU SEE FIRES OF CHANGE?

As the Azerbaijani capital readies to host the UN climate conference, COP 29, in November, it also negotiates the country's history as the birthplace of oil

legends, is a 30-metre-high tower completed in the 12th century, and was also once a fire temple and linked to the region's Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic heritage.

Visitors to the Ateshgah will still see the flames, but these are no longer natural. Instead, they are fuelled artificially by piped gas from Baku. Pipelines inveigled themselves into the region's landscape from the mid-19th century. Azerbaijan was the home of the world's first 'oil boom', after European and American industrialists discovered the region's vast oil resources as a source for extracting natural gas and distilling kerosene – a replacement for whale oil

that was the pre-electric world's fuel of choice for heating and lighting.

The Nobel Brothers – Robert and Ludwig – were the first European prospectors to set up an oil extraction industry in and around Baku, helped by their brother, Alfred – of dynamite- and Nobel Prize-fame. In the early 20th century, their establishment, Branobel, was the largest oil company in Europe and responsible for nearly half the world's oil production. Their house in Baku, now preserved as 'the Nobel Brothers Museum' is part-museum and part-club, where oil magnates, who are members, still host get-togethers, business meetings and entertain heads of



state in its plush halls resplendent in 19th century European decor.

Ode to fossil fuel

In the 21st century, some of the city's most prominent landmarks are an ode to its fossil fuel wealth. From nearly anywhere in mainland Baku, it is impossible to miss a group of three skyscrapers – collectively known as the Flame Towers. While megaltiths of steel and glass, and a luxury commercial-residential complex that is 180 metres high and illuminated, they are shaped like flames, alluding to the city's heritage.

In the past century, its fossil fuel

economy has seen the country traverse the extremes of economic transformation from being incorporated into the former Soviet Union and then, since 1991, becoming an independent Muslim-majority but secular country where its broad roads are lined by European luxury fashion stores. Formula 1 cars have been zipping around the city since 2016. Electricity is gas-based and Azerbaijan has twice more installed electric capacity than what its population needs – the rest is exported. Orkhan Zeynalov, Azerbaijan's Deputy Minister of Energy, said in an interview that while the country had set up, and planned on expanding, its solar farms, it

New direction (Clockwise from left) Burning gas in the mud volcanoes of Azerbaijan; Flame Towers in Baku; and vehicles in traffic as the capital city readies for the UN Climate Conference in November. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)



Our history is very deeply rooted in oil. But of course, like the rest of the world, we are fully aware of the climate crisis and the need to move away from fossil fuel

HIKMET HAJIYEV
Top foreign policy advisor to Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev

would be "challenging" to convince the population – used to cheap oil and electricity – to adopt the more-expensive version from renewable sources.

As COP 29 hosts, the country is committed to its responsibilities, said Hikmet Hajiyev, top foreign policy advisor to Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev. And it will highlight the steps it is taking to effect both "medium- and long-term plans" to transition to renewable energy. Baku's position as a port on the western end of the Caspian Sea – the world's largest lake – means it is prone to howling gales nearly all year. "People often curse the wind here, but this might now turn out to be a blessing as we will hopefully be able to set up offshore wind turbines and supply renewable electricity to our [Central Asian] neighbours," he said.

The writer was part of a South Asia media delegation invited to Baku.



BINGE WATCH

Why Kelley falters

It is no mystery that many of TV man David E. Kelley's shows have not aged well. His latest, *Presumed Innocent*, seems headed the same way

Watching *Presumed Innocent*, David E. Kelley's new legal drama for Apple TV+, has brought up complicated feelings. The show stars Jake Gyllenhaal as Rusty Sabich, a prosecutor accused of murdering a younger colleague, Carolyn Polhemus (Renate Reinse), with whom he was having an extramarital relationship with.

It is based on Scott Turow's bestselling 1987 novel, the source for an earlier big-screen adaptation in 1990, starring Harrison Ford. *Presumed Innocent* is full of the familiar Kelley hallmarks: lurid, sensationalist subject matter, an emphasis on psychology over materialist concerns, and rapid-fire, emotionally-charged dialogues spouted by unerringly self-righteous characters.

When he's operating at peak potential, a Kelley show makes agreeable genre fare out of these ingredients. When he's not, though, a lot of Kelley protagonists begin to sound like each other:

over-confident motormouths with a streak of moral obstinacy and, of course, American exceptionalism. So when *Presumed Innocent* is functioning as a strict whodunnit or a police/court procedural, it does really well. Turow has been credited as an executive producer on the show and both Kelley and he were practising lawyers before entering showbiz. No surprises, then, that they are good writers of legal procedures.

Old, sexist tropes

However, the show falters by giving way too much screen time to the pedestrian family drama surrounding Babich, not to mention his own crippling guilt over cheating on his wife. Ruth Negga does an excellent job as Babich's long-suffering wife, Barbara. Her performance in the Rebecca

Hall-directed *Passing* a couple of years ago was monumental. She does a competent job with a poorly written character in *Presumed Innocent*. Both the women in Babich's life, his wife Barbara and his late colleague/ex-girlfriend Carolyn, have been written stereotypically. Carolyn's only narrative function seems to be hackneyed sex scenes with Babich in flashback sequences, and reminding him that he's unambitious. Conversely, Barbara only seems to exist to remind Babich every now and then that he's not the 'family man' she thought he'd be. We are told that Carolyn only initiated the affair with Babich because she thought he was a rising star in the DA's office. This 'gold digger' narrative of a career woman leading the morally-upright protagonist astray – it just has to die. The trope is not even executed that well in *Presumed Innocent*.

Kelley started off as head writer for *L.A. Law* before creating landmark shows through the 90s and 2000s, including *The Practice*, *Boston Legal* and *Ally McBeal*. More recently, he has enjoyed a triumphant return to mainstream TV with *The Lincoln Lawyer*, *Big Little Lies* and *The Undoing*, the last two of which star Nicole Kidman. However, many of his biggest successes, including *Boston Legal* and *The Practice*,

Old-fashioned Jake Gyllenhaal (centre) as Rusty Sabich in *Presumed Innocent*; and (below) director David E. Kelley. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND GETTY IMAGES)

have not necessarily aged all that well. Kelley essentially has the same problem as another star showrunner from the 90s and 2000s: Aaron Sorkin.

Relying on politicking Kelley and Sorkin are basically Clinton liberals who cut their teeth on a brand of progressivism that depended heavily on political theatre and placing token black and brown spokespeople in charge of status-quoist government agencies.

As a result, a lot of their best works have aged terribly. Sorkin's *The Newsroom*, with its open contempt for young people (especially young Democrats), comes across as unbearably smug today, as do several episodes of *The West Wing*. Kelley's *Boston Legal*, in seasons three and four, made no secret of its preference for Hillary Clinton, even going as far as to create a caricature of Barack Obama supporters.

Clinton, of course, went on to lose the easiest election in American history and has since spent the last five to six years grumbling about young men preferring Bernie Sanders over her. Joe Biden seems to have embarked on a similar trajectory, his approval rating plummeting every week. After his disastrous performance in CNN's presidential debate last week, the Biden campaign sent out a panicky email to Democratic voters, insisting that Biden would still win. "This is not an Aaron Sorkin fever dream," the email said, underlining how closely Sorkin's politics tally with that of Biden's in particular and Boomer liberals in general. The likes of Kelley and Sorkin must either reinvent themselves wholesale, or accept the reality of their ongoing obsolescence. On the evidence of *Presumed Innocent*, though, that day remains out of sight.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

Childhood love harks back to a time when life did not demand much from you, nor you from it; time stretched infinitely and hope was a real thing. It has an otherworldly sheen, and it is tempting to imagine that you can return to that

Like most significant things, this too started as a joke. A couple of weeks ago, fittingly as you'll see, in one of my school groups, someone mentioned that an official, school-organised alumni meet was scheduled for the weekend. To which another friend joked that his wife has banned him from attending any school reunions, because of the new trend of people eloping with their childhood sweethearts after reconnecting with them at these meets. Since I hadn't heard about this "trend", I was both excited and amused and because that is a combination of emotions that I am unable to keep to myself, I promptly tweeted about it. What I did not anticipate was the wave of wistful thinking it would set off in people who read it. Turns out, a lot of you are still fantasising about life with your class IX crushes.

Facebook tracking Younger millennials quoted my tweet saying, "me and who" in current social media speak, wondering who they will run into and run away with at a future alumni event. Some people replied that my tweet has motivated them to attend the next alumni meet. And quite a few sent me private messages about the current status of their old love

affair. "I sort of stalk her on Instagram," one person wrote, "and the more I see of her everyday life, the more I fall in love with her." When I asked, this person said he was in his early 40s. Social media was keeping his love alive. Meanwhile, it was utterly ruining someone else's life. "I unfriended her from my Facebook," this other person wrote, "I was going crazy watching her post photos with her husband and kids. In fact, a couple of years ago, I deleted Facebook altogether, because the temptation to peep into her account was too much."

Keeping it simple What is it about first love that makes it almost impossible to completely recover from? My guess is that a lot of it has to do with its simplicity. Often, your crush is selected for you by friends. "I saw her look at you". Or "he insisted on guarding you for basketball". Or, in my case, "you're the tallest girl in class, he's the tallest boy". Once your crush has been

picked for you, then all that the romance takes is a few stolen looks, maybe a chocolate that is smuggled between the pages of a chemistry textbook, a few words exchanged when no one is looking and an obscure message scrawled with the sharp end of a compass into the grain of the desk (I might be speaking from experience here). For some people, it's perhaps a

MODERN TIMES

FIRST LOVE, SECOND CHANCE

Unpacking the allure of the childhood sweetheart at alumni meets

little bit more, a full-blown relationship flaunted in front of aunts and uncles, throwing caution to the winds, daring the principal to call your parents in (I am absolutely not speaking from experience here). But eventually life forces your hand and you are pulled away by the call of higher education or parental transfers. In my time, that meant the possibility of never seeing the

person again. (Now, of course, with Facebook and Instagram, it is almost impossible to never see a living person again.) Cut to the present then. Some two decades have gone by. Life has wrung you out. The spouse, even when good, is familiar and boring. Work is hectic and often unrewarding. The kids are demanding. You are stretched thin.

And then you run into this person you knew from 25 years ago, and suddenly, (foolishly), it seems that you could make a grab for that pure, unblemished love that you imagine you felt all those many years ago.

Happy ending? The allure of the childhood sweetheart in adulthood lies in its simplicity and innocence. It harks back to a time when life did not demand much from you, nor you from it; time stretched infinitely and hope was a real thing, not an embarrassment you laugh away as an adult. It has an otherworldly sheen, an ephemeral quality, and it is tempting to imagine that you can return to that. I have no data to suggest how things turn out, but if I had to guess, I'd say not very well. I searched for news reports and could only find one story about two 50-year-olds from Ernakulam who eloped after a school reunion last year. Their families filed missing persons' complaints, it said, "following this, the police summoned the lovers, who later arrived at the station". It's a tantalising end to the report, the real story only starts subsequently. But no one I checked with wanted to know how this story ended. Real life is messy and flawed. Who would choose that over the dream of an escape? As for me, I sent a copy of my tweet to the school group and cc-ed my tall boy. He did not respond.



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

GOREN BRIDGE

High or low

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Assuming you choose to lead a heart, which heart would you lead from the West hand? Traditional wisdom is to lead high against no trump from a three-card sequence and low from a two-card sequence unless the third card in the suit is very close to the sequence, such as J-10-8. That's fine against three no trump, but most players, we

believe, would lead top of a sequence against a slam. That was West's unfortunate choice in today's deal, but it took perfect card reading to make him pay. South won the opening jack of hearts lead in hand with the ace and cashed the king and queen of diamonds. West's spade discard was a disappointment, but South continued with three high clubs, ending in dummy, as East shed a low spade. Two

more clubs followed, with East discarding one more spade and the eight of hearts. South shed his two lowest spades and West two more spades. The ace of diamonds forced West to part with his last low spade. Reading the position beautifully, South led a heart to his king, drawing East's nine, and exited with the king of spades to West's ace. West had to lead a heart from the 10-four into declarer's queen-seven. Lovely play!

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

The bidding:
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
2♣ Pass 2♦ Pass
2NT Pass 3♠* Pass
3NT Pass 4♠** Pass
6NT All pass
*Both minors
**Spade shortness, at least 5-5 in the minors
Opening lead: Jack of ♥

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has July 7 ever given us!

Berty Ashley

1 According to a legend, July 7, 1550 was the traditional date that this important food item was thought to have been introduced to Europe. Native to Mexico, it has been cultivated since 1250 BC in Central America with the Aztecs drinking it as Xocoatl. What item, which is one of the world's most popular gifts, is this?

2 On this day in 1928, on the 48th birthday of Otto Rohwedder, his invention was sold for the first time by the Chillicothe Baking Company in Missouri. When it was first sold there were rumours that it wouldn't last as the item was frail and would spoil easily. Soon it became so popular that every invention since is compared to it. What did Rohwedder sell on his birthday?

3 On this day in 1930, construction began on the Boulder Canyon Dam project. It became one of the largest engineering projects in humanity, creating a city for the 5000 workers. The dam formed Lake Mead that held almost 30 million acre-feet of water. It was announced by a politician that it would be named after the then US president, who was blamed by many for the Great Depression. Which monumental dam is this?

4 On this day in 1936, American businessman Henry F. Phillips received a patent for a new tool he had invented. He had invented a "cross-recessed" screw, and the



Adventure track Thomas the Tank Engine on Strasburg Rail Road in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

required tool needed to make it work. The difference of this screw being its self-centering property. What now popular tool did he invent?

5 Born on this day in 1940, Richard Starkey is an English musician who achieved global fame by playing drums in one of the most famous bands of all time. He took on a stage name, making a reference to the habit of wearing many rings and eventually made it legal. Who is this icon whose drumming you would have heard or his voice as the narrator of "Thomas the Tank Engine"?

6 Born on this day in 1944, Ian Wilmut was a Scottish embryologist who headed a research group who in 1996 oversaw the birth of a lamb at the

University of Edinburgh. Named Dolly, the sheep lived for 6 years, and after its death was preserved at the National Museum of Scotland. What is special about the lamb Dr. Wilmut grew?

7 On this day in 1953, this iconic person set out on a bike trip through Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. During his travel he was appalled by the poverty, hunger, and disease he encountered. This led him to become a guerrilla leader who eventually became the face of revolution and counter culture. Who was this iconic biker?

8 On this day in 1969, the Official Languages Act was passed in this country's House of Commons. This act approved

equality of French-English language. Recently it has been proposed that every single indigenous languages still spoken today become an official language. This would amount to more than 70 languages spoken by First Nations people, Metis and Inuit. Which country is this?

9 Born this day in 1981, this gentleman was an avid footballer and the team's goalkeeper, but his coach needed someone to fill a position in the cricket team, and that's how his journey started. Who is this sportsperson who has played the most number of international matches as captain across formats?

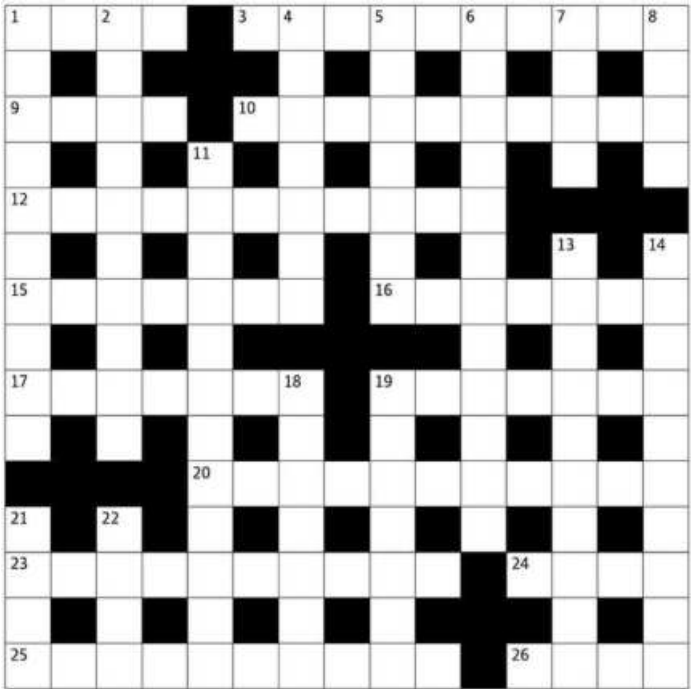
10 On this day in 2017, Silicon Valley Motor Club produced its first mass-market electric car, the Model 3. Started by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning, the company was set up to prove that an electric car could outperform a car run on fossil fuel by being much faster, for a much lesser cost on the long run. The name of the company was changed to honour a famous electrical engineer. Which company is this?

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

- 1. Choccolate
- 2. Sliced bread
- 3. Hoover Dam
- 4. Phillips screwdriver
- 5. Ringo Starr
- 6. First cloned mammal
- 7. Che Guevara
- 8. Canada
- 9. M.S. Dhoni
- 10. Tesla

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3314



- Across**
- 1 Frustrate fly (4)
 - 3 Piano music, as can be picked up in Chinatown (10)
 - 9 Diligent pupil trails back (4)
 - 10 Supports chain restaurants (10)
 - 12 Does an impresario's job - or just pretends (4,2,2,3)
 - 15 Speech's missing opening - making allowances? (7)
 - 16 Cordate, styled in '20s fashion (3,4)
 - 17 Artist's questionable offering welcomed by deviate (7)
 - 19 Announced what you may do to a flat singer (4-3)
 - 20 Certain kids jostled for favourable position (6,5)
 - 23 Devise alien people, ones who'll do the dirty work (7,3)
 - 24 Row when Mr Woods ditches golf (4)
 - 25 What you do in spare time, finding charger: it's an obsession (5,5)
 - 26 Wager on a character coming from Athens (4)

- Down**
- 1 Dad's come up, popping in to contradict and censure (10)
 - 2 Summer clothing, blue: a brief distraction (5,5)
 - 4 Harry's getting drunk with us: cheers! (7)
 - 5 Ingredients of tapas, satay and Italian

- sauce (7)
- 6 Perfect scores (6-6)
 - 7 Canonically, Abel's iniquitous nemesis, primarily? (4)
 - 8 Band's appeal? Not a sound (4)
 - 11 Party top substantial woman's lost: turn around (2,1,3-6)
 - 13 Interlaces ornately to bring everything to one place (10)
 - 14 Country's down on job that's announced (5,5)
 - 18 Piece belonging to collector is Ottoman dish (7)
 - 19 Everyman would get stuck in to vacuous words and devices (7)
 - 21 With derisive remarks, sent up old king (4)
 - 22 End of U-boat? About time! (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3313



Stay at home is a choice

Society should stop being judgmental about those who take up house work

Mythili Srinivasan
contactmythilic@yahoo.co.in

I am a homemaker, and I am “genuinely” busy. Despite numerous advancements in the 21st century, society continues to be judgmental and narrow-minded when it comes to women.

One common misconception is that a homemaker is always free, has “loads and loads” of free time, and is thoroughly occupied throughout the day in one of the two “vices” – watching soaps and gossiping with neighbours and friends.

My mother was a homemaker, and I had never seen her “free” any time during the day. Those were the days when families rarely took the services of domestic helps, and hence my mother was occupied with her chores from dawn to dusk. An excellent cook, she laid out a different menu every day, painstakingly choosing vegetables and greens. Thankfully for her, my father was an expert in cutting vegetables and used to help her out as much as possible.

I feel her active lifestyle is the sole reason for her being healthy in her late seventies.

Yes, I have a domestic help, and I do watch TV (more of a movie-buff though, was never a fan of daily soaps), but that does not mean I am free all through the day. I do have chores, repairs and maintenance (plumbing, electronic gadgets, two-wheeler and so on), doctor visits for parents-in-law and child, a daily walking routine, hobbies, and so on, keeping me busy most of the day.

One day, I was discussing my son’s 10th grade marks with an old acquaintance of mine, an elderly woman. As the grades were not extraordinary, she



was quick to point out: “You are at home all the time.. why don’t you concentrate more on his studies... are you sitting beside him when he studies? Do you give him regular tests?”

So, the final verdict is: If the mother is a homemaker, then the children ought to get outstanding grades; else, she is obviously not doing her job well enough (which implicitly means she is idling away her time, doing insignificant things).

The other day, my neighbour came up with a request. She needed someone to help her out (free of cost, of course) in building new software for some “influential” (politically well-connected) friend of hers. At once, I politely refused stating I don’t have time. Her reply was: “Oh come on, you are at home, right (meaning you are jobless)? Why don’t you take it as an opportunity to revisit your programming skills (else, what is the use of studying anyway)? You can put your free time (that is all day) to some good use...”

The bottom line was I am financially insecure (means I live off my husband’s earnings), and I am a homemaker (I am bound to be free all the time) and hence I should be doing “something” worthwhile (at no charge) rather than wasting my talent.

Another big challenge comes when attending

social gatherings. I inadvertently bump into some elderly folks who are ever ready to shower free advice: “Oh.. You quit your job... good... take rest (meaning sleep and watch TV all day)... you know jobs are very stressful nowadays (which means homemakers are stress-free)... why don’t you start taking tuitions during the evenings... you know it is very profitable.. you know Mrs. so-and-so from so-and-so place (his distant relative)... she is earning in thousands every month... She handles tuitions for children up to 12th standard. She is a very smart woman (that is, someone who has a good income)...”

I cordially replied that there is no room to accommodate many children at my place. Pat comes the reply: “Why don’t you try taking online tuitions... I know Ms. so-and-so who does that... it seems the pay is very good nowadays...”

To summarise, only those who earn are smart and talented, and the rest are dumb and unfortunate.

A person (man or woman) chooses to be at home for various reasons: adverse health issues, family circumstances or simply to escape the rat-race. It is high time society respected their decision and allows them to live in peace. Live and let live.

A much-loved treasure hunt

S. Srividhya
shiyashreevidhya@gmail.com

An exploration of the kitchen and the adjacent storeroom at our home was always akin to a treasure hunt. The storeroom was poorly lit and low-roofed, and looked like a mini cellar. It was the place where Amma stored her “black money”, her own little piggy bank. It was hard-earned money she made selling coconut husk, mangoes, and discarded newspapers. The ones and twos she got as balance on payments to roadside vendors would chip in too.

When we ventured into the room, we never knew what we would stumble upon. A hundred rupee note would reveal itself from inside an abandoned flower vase, or a small bulky purse would peep out from a tiffin box. At times, we would literally strike gold – an old golden stud meant to be given to someone’s daughter on her wedding would reside slyly in a porcelain cup. A colourful sari gifted by someone that Amma never ever used, would await its new owner. It was not just money; food and fruit too would be hidden in small bags and given away. The ones who water the plants should get a share of the produce, she would say. Since my father was not open to these ideas, they would inevitably find their way to the store.

Amma’s black money was her nest egg which was always spent towards helping someone in need or at times to get gifts for her near and dear, when father’s budget allotment was inadequate.

I starkly remember one incident when a poor tomato vendor gave her savings to Amma so that her drunkard husband could not access it. It was a sort of micro-banking, and the interest would be phenomenal since Amma would return the principal with an extra thousand or so. As a daughter, I always adored this naughty yet empathetic side of Amma and was a partner in her crime.

As age progressed, father did mellow down a tad bit. After retirement, it slowly dawned upon him that the volume of work she did every day at home was stupendous.

It’s not that Amma was uneducated. She was a B.Sc. graduate back in the 1960s. She just opted not to work, so that she could take care of her husband and children.

But not having financial freedom would remain one of her lifelong regrets.

Of French exotica

Fashion, food, tennis... France has an outsize influence on great many things that make the good life

Rishi Kanna
rishiorho@gmail.com

The French have had an important influence with their manifold contributions in modern world history. Though a small country matching only up to the size of South India, its burgeoning influence during the European scientific and cultural revolution in the 14th century elevated its stance on the world map. The French’s contributions are wide and versatile. The English language is replete with French words which add a certain degree of gravitas to proficient English speakers. Words such as entrepreneur, ballet, café, genre, bon appetit and bon voyage have French provenance.

Apart from literary contributions, the French have had significant other

additions to our mundane lives. The French kiss (a passionate lip lock of a loving couple), French door and windows (a door with glass panes extending its whole length), French fries (sliced crispy potato fries, though first originated from Belgium), French toast (a bread toasted after soaking in eggs and milk), French leave (sneaking out without permission) and the lip-smacking French cuisine springs up in the mind immediately.

Often missed, I would like to add one more to this enticing list – the French Open. One of the four coveted grand slam tournaments usually happens in the first week of June, coinciding with the start of the academic year. As I glanced through the opening round matches of this year’s tournament, I had nostalgic memories of my childhood where the



fragrance of new school books with their brown wrappers, the excitement of having new bags and boxes, and the apprehension of meeting unfamiliar, new teachers and friends, all interspersed with the 14 days of the French Open. Those were the days when Doordarshan would telecast only the semi-finals and finals, which kept us glued to the television screen over the evening on weekends. While the reddish-brown turf, eye-catching fluorescent yellow balls and the skilled muscular players offered a psychedelic delight, the thumping sound as the racquet meets the racing ball, the crowd’s cheers, boos and roars, and the players’ grunts and groans

were auditory ecstasies.

The French Open is a different ball game because of its unique clay court. The ball takes some time to reach the racquet and the surface is completely different from Wimbledon’s grass and the synthetic turfs of U.S. and Australian Opens. Naturally, the trophy has eluded even much-exalted all-time greats such as Pete Sampras and Boris Becker. Contrarily, there were a few stalwarts such as Rafael Nadal and Carlos Moya who shot to the Hall of Fame with expertise on clay courts.

French Open has had unique winners who cakedwalked through the Open while coming a cropper in other courts. These included the mercurial Michael Chang, the swanky Gustavo Kuerton, the lanky Sergei Bruguera, the sleek Jim Courier and the reverse-flicking Alberto Berstategui.

The view of the crimson centre court with its precise white lines, green side boards, and the red dust that rises up as the racing serve hits the turf are delights to watch and I am sure you will fall in love with it. Au revoir.

Waste not, want not

Use every product to the last bit, and be a paragon of thrift, frugality

Vathsala Jayaraman
vathsalaj@yahoo.com

My uncle gets immense satisfaction in stretching the life of his razor. After every use, he just air-dries the blade and keeps it in the same pack. After final use, he uses the blade for cutting packing threads, opening medicine bottles and so on.

Whenever the toothpaste tube is about to become empty, he puts it



between the door and the hinges and just pushes. Lo! There is enough paste for four days.

My aunt puts warm water in the milk sachet to use the ultimate drop. She cuts plastic bags into

rectangles or squares and dries them, and preserves the rubber bands from medical packs and sweet shops. Even an aluminium foil pack will be no match for the elegant lunch pack done by her.

She knows exactly how many days’ newspapers weigh 1 kg. When the person comes to buy the old bundles, she inspects the scales. But he has his own ways of taking the so-called brilliant customers for a ride. A maximum of 1 kg may be involved in this warfare, but it is matter of frugality.

Pleading for discounts in the shop and free curry leaves is a real thrill. Even a small brinjal that comes free gives immense satisfaction.

Nothing seems to be as interesting as gulping the last smear from a jam

bottle or licking the ice cream sticking to the cover of the cup.

Pasting the last bit of soap to the new cake, reusing stapler pins by straightening them, and using torn slippers with a safety pin were common back then. I have seen someone using a string in place of his broken spectacle frame.

The younger generation have their own frugal ways of simple pleasures. They know how to get reward points by using credit and debit cards, how to take advantage of free Wi-Fi, and where to buy home needs with discounts. They car-pool and save travel expenses.

You might have earned the title of paragon of thrift in your days. Now it is for you to be ‘frugal’ in advice.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The predictably unpredictable situations of extremities in climate call for sustained efforts to cope with the weather. (Living with extreme weather; June 30) The dual strategies of adaptation and mitigation could, and should, find a way to put a break in its speedy track. Informed choices by individuals in behavioural and practical fields will definitely do their bits to slow down the crisis.

A. Raveendranath

As the most populated and developing country, we confront major challenges from adverse weather conditions. Ad hoc mitigation measures such as curbing construction activity during the scorching summers may remain on paper due to practical constraints. Only mobilising region-specific heat action plans for the short-term, and nature-based solutions provide long-term hope.

Kamal Laddha

It is disheartening that extreme weather is causing distress, particularly on vulnerable populations. While the government bears the responsibility to safeguard these populations, I believe we can achieve greater good if individuals embrace climate-friendly habits such as afforestation, conserving water and waste minimization.

Ranjith Kumar R.

Brave womankind
Nico Slate deserves kudos for his biography of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay that offers

a different perspective. (Ahead of her time; June 30) Such an exercise is essential to bring out the various facets of the woman freedom fighter. It may help Indian women get rid of their reluctance and inertia to enter public life.

Atheerath Naineni

Testing times

While it has to be admitted that the NEET fiasco is no laughing matter, columnist G. Sampath has endeavoured to make light of the situation in his own inimitable style. (Ideas to improve NEET; June 30) Desperate situations call for emergent measures and the onus is on the government to assure the student community that their interests would be safeguarded and that all impediments would be cleared on a war footing.

C.V. Aravind

G. Sampath’s rip-roaring suggestions on improving NEET must be translated into Hindi and other languages. The concluding paragraph clearing the confusion over the awarding of grace marks by releasing a standardised rate card is a master stroke among all his other suggestions.

C.K. Prem Kumar

Comforting words

Saba Mahjoor’s column is simple yet so appealing in our day-to-day lives. (Spells and a reluctant bride; June 30) It reminded me of the beauty in simplicity and the importance of cherishing these moments in life. I curiously look forward to the last Sunday of every month just to read her stories.

Vishakha Kulkarni



MORE ON THE WEB
www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Compulsory voting: Are we ready for it?

Some countries have gone as far as to impose sanctions or fines on non-voters

Vivek K. Agnihotri

Preaching and practice

Every religion asks people to conquer hatred, but still it prevails in the world

Sukumaran C.V.

Chronicles of a steed

A scooter gradually became an integral part of the family, giving years of happy rides

N.D. George

Limits of liberty in relations

How much freedom one can give to others in life?

G. Swaminathan

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

Celebrating Kashmiriyat (Clockwise from below) An artisan laying out strips of felt to start a *namda* rug; a coppersmith at work; the start of a copper *surahi*; Jan Mohammad block printing in his loft; and hand embroidery. (LAILA TYABJI AND GETTY IMAGES)



Laila Tyabji

How lovely, how obvious, how appropriate that Srinagar be named a World Craft City. Every lane, every home, every street corner is full of the sights, sounds and presence of weavers and spinners, shawl makers and embroiderers, papier-mâché painters, walnut wood carvers, brass and copper workers, jewellers, *namda* rug felters, wicker workers, dyers, and printers. The pattern maker’s sing-song chant of the *talim* echo as the carpet *karigars* deftly tie knots in time with its beat. Kashmiri craft is an important means of employment and earning; it is also a form of self-expression and identity. In a population of just over 10 million, nearly 3.50 lakh people are directly engaged in craft. In recent decades, even women have turned to embroidery, long a male preserve, as their husbands and fathers were absent – dead, in jail, or in an Indian metro eking out a living.

Block printing amid gunfire As I read the happy news, my mind flashes back to 2005. I’m in Jan Mohammad’s tiny loft in the old city, getting fabric block-printed for embroidery. The scene is untouched by the years: shelves stretched to the ceiling with intricately carved mulberry wood blocks, some over a 100 years old. Their motifs of *chinar* leaves, paisleys, kingfishers and iris are inspired by the flora and fauna of the Valley. Jan Mohammad kneels at a low table, his *pheran* and long fingers equally impregnated with colour. A

LET SRINAGAR THRIVE AGAIN

Here’s hoping that being named World Craft City will bring back international tourists and buyers, and recharge the region’s skills and makers

samovar of salt tea by his side, a hookah bubbling nearby. The sound of the block, coated with rice flour and resin, a rhythmic counterpoint to the wheezing music of his ancient transistor. His austere face is intense, with the concentration of an artist. A muezzin chants, and other calls to prayer resonate in the quiet air. A couple of women sit embroidering. The regular *puk-puk* of their *ari* needles puncturing the taut cloth on their embroidery frames has a soothing quality – a sound familiar in the Valley over the centuries. But sadly, the tranquillity is an illusion. A sudden crack of gunfire bizarrely echoes Jan Mohammad’s fist banging on his block. Smoke fills the air. A stone smashes the window. Peering out, we see a mob hurling rocks, a gun battle with armoured jeeps and police, shops being set afire. They are protesting the death of two young boys killed in a raid. We are prisoners for the day. A curfew is announced – there will be no more work this week. Naid Kadal, where we are, is a hub of insurgency. People live in fear: of getting drawn



into confrontation, of armed reprisals, of almost daily *bandhs*. The economy of the Valley, long dependent on centuries-old rhythms of tourism and craft, is in decline. **Craft is a part of domestic life** The Central Government’s 2019 abrogation of Article 370 and subsequent harsh military lockdown changed things. It drove dissent underground, and restored an

uneasy calm. It also saw Indian tourists slowly returning to the Valley. Nevertheless, craft in Kashmir, like much else, remains threatened. Not by the loss of skill, or lack of craftspeople, but by the absence of enlightened patronage to keep creativity alive. Trippers on cut-price package tours, the main visitors today, want cheap souvenirs, not expensive masterpieces. Kashmiris themselves



are selling lurid machine-made Ludhiana imitations of *jamawar* shawls. Papier-mâché, which crafted imperial thrones, is piled everywhere, as Christmas tree baubles, tawdry pillboxes and napkin rings. Jan Mohammad, with whom I began this piece, is now a watchman in the PWD. Luckily, craft still remains a part of domestic life – as interior décor, clothing and artefacts. Families sit, work and sleep on Kashmiri carpets, women wear embroidered shawls and *pherans*. Khwaja Naqshband’s tomb near the Jama Masjid is the supreme example of *khatamband* (wood working), but ceilings of homes and houseboats remain ornamented with similar panels of intricately carved pinewood. Lanes in the old city abound with shops lined with *naqashi* copperware made for local consumption – samovars, platters and trays, engraved and embossed with stylised paisleys or calligraphy.

Need for discerning buyers Hopefully, this new recognition of Srinagar will result in renewed awareness of its unique quality, bringing back international tourists and buyers. Materials, skills and makers remain in abundance. What makes Kashmiris such consummate craftspeople? Craftsmanship is not simply commerce, but a creative response to the environment and life. Kashmiri craft is an echo of its landscape; it also expresses the Sufi philosophy at its heart. Kashmiriyat, though suffering the wounds of violence and insurgency, is essentially a civilisation in itself. As the media celebrated the announcement of Srinagar as a World Craft City, side by side, in one of our national dailies, was a report on suicides of handloom weavers in Telangana. It was an unconscious snapshot of our craft sector. One story highlighted the potential of craft in a world that is otherwise increasingly mass-produced; the other, paradoxically, the tragedy that craftspeople, our great Indian asset, are not valued and supported. Let’s send some love, not just to Srinagar and Kashmiriyat, but to craftspeople everywhere. While we cherish their handiwork, we often ignore the people making it.

The writer is founder member of Dastkar, and has worked with crafts in Kashmir since the 1980s.

It takes a ‘Bicester village’

After West Asia, North Africa, and Latin America — where seaweed textile picked up the top prize — the newest initiative empowering women entrepreneurs is heading to South Asia

Akanksha Kamath

Thamires Pontes has configured how to turn seaweed into a tenable textile fibre. The alternative to petrochemicals in clothing is the Brazil-based textile designer’s attempt at negating fashion’s waste and carbon emission problems (currently, the fashion industry is responsible for 10% of the world’s global carbon emissions according to the United Nations). Last month, Pontes’ timely innovation also won her the Unlock Her Future Prize of \$100,000 by retail experiences brand, The Bicester Collection. Increasingly, awards and prizes are becoming a gateway for women to have their ideas vetted, validated

and made visible in a highly male-dominated entrepreneurial ecosystem. For instance, in May, Asan, a new-age menstrual cup that is aiming to eradicate period poverty in India, won its founder Ira Guha a Cartier Women’s Initiative fellowship. In June, Kenyan entrepreneur Beth Koigi’s atmospheric water generators – which draw clean water from the air – won her the 2023 Rolex Award for Enterprise. Such initiatives are put in perspective when you consider that, according to Harvard Business School, fewer than 3% of women-led businesses receive venture capital today. Yet, it is proven that if men and women were equally represented in entrepreneurship, global GDP

could rise by 3%-6%, equivalent to up to \$5 trillion. “Gender parity is literally good for business and the economy,” says Maria-Noel Vaeza, the UN Women’s regional director for the Americas and Caribbean, and jury member for this year’s Prize. “Only 30% of Parliament globally is represented by women. Today, 15% of mayors are women and only 6% of women are CEOs. Also, only 17% of women hold the position of board of directors in the private sector. There is so much work to be done.” **Supporting women-led initiatives** Whittled down from 954 applicants with early-stage start-up ideas (less than three years in operation) that align with the United Nations

(Clockwise from left) Seaweed textile; Thamires Pontes; and Unlock Her Future Prize 2024 finalists on stage.



Going behind the Collection

Modelled on the American outlet stripmall concept, The Bicester Collection is made up of 11 luxury lifestyle and shopping destinations. The destinations, which are becoming increasingly popular among Indian tourists and those celebrating weddings abroad, draw in crowds for their curation of international luxury brands such as Loewe, Saint Laurent, Prada, and Gucci at deeply discounted rates. Last month, the Ambanis were rumoured to have planned a day at the Las Rozas Village near Madrid for their guests during their multiple-city wedding celebrations.

Sustainable Development Goals, only 108 were selected. Eight finalists shared their ideas in the days leading up to the finale. Valentina Agudelo from Colombia, for instance, started Salva Health that develops portable devices with AI to help detect breast cancer early, making it accessible to women in remote areas. Bluekali by Mexico-based Annie Rosas uses technology to clean oceans and rivers. Her app can take a picture of a discarded item and scan its make and plastic to help segregate waste correctly. Think of it as a Google image search for waste disposal. Four women entrepreneurs were finally anointed the winners. But is a start-up competition really the solution to empowering women entrepreneurs? “These prizes certainly encourage and inspire more women and girls to come forward. But a competition environment runs the risk of not clearly being able to test the validity of ideas beyond the competition. For instance, is their capacity to deliver on the idea being considered? After all, the real test of entrepreneurship is in real life conditions,” says Upma Chawdhry, treasurer of Plan (India) International and board member of the organisation focused on children’s rights and equality for girls in over 80 countries. As an industry veteran, Chawdhry cautions against investing in fledgling ideas that haven’t had the time to grow their roots. Some prizes are addressing this in their programme frameworks. For example, for the Cartier Women’s Initiative, an eligible criteria for application is a proven business model and revenue generation from its products for at least one year. Others such as the Unlock Her Future Prize see investing in early stage ideas as a prospective incubation journey. “It’s not just about giving them that cheque and leaving them,”

says Chantal Khoueiry, chief culture officer of The Bicester Collection. “We are trying to integrate them into our business.” Noor Jaber, last year’s winner, is a case in point. The founder of Dubai-based Nawat Health, a platform that provides secure sexual and reproductive expert information to women and girls, hosted their first ever educational programme for The Bicester Collection’s female employees. **South Asia enters the picture** As the next edition of the prize travels closer to home, to South Asia, Khoueiry notes its potential in the region. “Encouragingly, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have seen a rise in social businesses over the last few decades. However, in 2023, the World Bank reported the rate of female ownership of firms was just 18%, significantly lower than the global average of 34%. It is indicative of systemic challenges such as limited access to finance, market opportunities, and societal support. This is where we can make a difference.” According to Chawdhry, while the expansion into South Asia is crucial, it is still an ambitious undertaking. “The biggest challenge will be outreach. How can they tap talent wherever it exists? Because there is no dearth of it,” she says. Overall, Chawdhry and others see such awards as a positive in a male-dominant start-up structure. “It will be a trigger within the system and inspire other women to come forward. These are credible brands to be associated with, and with it comes visibility.” And isn’t that the need of the hour?

The writer is an independent journalist based in London, writing on fashion, luxury and lifestyle.

The Do Good global philanthropic programme empowering women and children launched the Unlock Her Future Prize last year. After a successful West Asia and North Africa edition, 2024 spotlighted the Latin America region.