



magazine

backpage

Inside Nilaya Anthology in Mumbai's mill district

[GO TO » PAGE 8](#)

INSIDE

Can Kerala set the stage for a discourse on the arts?

[GO TO » PAGE 5](#)

LITERARY REVIEW

Vaadivaasal (1949) gets a graphic novel makeover

[GO TO » PAGE 2](#)

Track the latest stories via #ThMagazine on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter)

Get connected » www.thehindu.com



Jaideep Umuduri and
Surya Praphulla Kumar
surya.kumar@thehindu.co.in

When Sanid Asif Ali was invited to a library in Kochi a few years ago to give a talk on comics, he was introduced as an artist who would take the audience into a 'world of laughter'. Ali gets it. "One of the first comics that most people in Kerala enjoyed is the classic *Boban & Molly* by the artist Toms, which is filled with humour and satire," says the comics creator, who co-founded Studio Niyet, an independent comics publishing house in the city, with his wife. "So, people have this association between comics and comedy."

Last December, when he and Tony Davis, one of the organisers of Indie Comix Fest, went on a radio show to promote the event in Kochi, the radio jockey was fascinated that her guests were not stand-up comics. "This is the first time I'm listening to two people talking very seriously about comics," the RJ told them. "We then talked about books like *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* [about a Jewish survivor of Hitler's Europe] and *Persepolis* [a graphic memoir of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution] that deal with serious themes," he says.

This realisation that comics are not for laughs, but deal with strong, sometimes heavy, themes such as sociopolitical satire, feminism, queer identity, sexual abuse, biography and more, is slowly percolating. And that comics can go beyond just superheroes, especially those from the Marvel and DC multiverse. Independent comic book festivals are playing a large part in this.

Indie Comix Fest (ICF), an annual creator-run festival of self-published comics begun by a small group of enthusiasts from Mumbai in 2017, has now grown into a nationwide phenomenon – with editions in Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kochi, Kozhikode and Ahmedabad. The cognoscenti and the curious drop by in equal measure, and each is distinct. For instance, Kochi attracts a lot of young IT professionals and people from film and advertising; Delhi has more students walking in, and a younger set with a budget in mind.

INKING NEW NARRATIVES

There's a sequential art renaissance happening across the country, with indie festivals creating democratic, artist-first platforms and bold new voices emerging from India's comic scene

"Bengaluru has some good creators now like Sumit Kumar of Bakarmax and Rachita Taneja of Sanitary Panels, so it gives the city some heft," says Bengaluru-based graphic novelist George Mathen, popularly known as Appu. "But Kerala is suddenly picking up. For instance, a community called Indy Comics Commune has 24-hour marathons and comic farms [two-day events where artists get together to create a 12-page comic.] I hear ICF is also expanding to Thiruvananthapuram. I am expecting some nice things from Kerala."

Buzzing creator scene
When I arrive in Kochi a little before Christmas of 2024, the Party Congress has just concluded, and there are red sashes everywhere, tied to posts and around the trunks of coconut trees. Stars of both denominations – Communist and Christian – light up the evening sky. They seem to break up the city into a series of precise compositions, a sequence of panels, defined by gutter spaces and boundaries, like a page in a comic.

As a creator, I am drawn as much by curiosity to see how the market has evolved as the desire to present my own work. As I look at the teeming crowds at the venue, Ali tells me that there has been a drop in numbers since the 2023 edition (which had over 46 creators participating). One possible reason: the rule that no merchandise can be sold. "We began the fest to promote



Visitors at the Indie Comix Fest in New Delhi; and (top) Mohith O.'s accordion-style comic. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Tracking its history

Historically, India hasn't enjoyed a strong comic culture – despite syndicated strips like *The Phantom*, *Mandrake*, and *Flash Gordon* being translated to Indian languages in the 50s, and the homegrown book series, *Indrajal Comics*, launching in the mid 60s. And though Indian comics enjoyed their heyday in the 80s and 90s, with the likes of the popular *Tinkle*, *Chandamama*, and *Amar Chitra Katha*, technology such as television, video games and the internet scuttled interest.

its universe of endlessly repeatable catchphrases. The idea that we could make comics ourselves was remote, though there were examples such as *Tinkle* and *Bahadur*. Then came the wave of Indian graphic novels, the modern canon of Sarnath Bannerjee, Appu, and Amrutha Patil. But now there is this subterranean current fuelled by exchanges between the online and offline world. Ali, for instance, started off by putting up comic strips on Instagram. When Davis invited him to participate in Kochi's first ICF, these Instagram strips were printed and compiled.

At the fest, I set up my stock with friend and fellow artist Kishore Mohan, with whom I'm collaborating on a graphic novel. At the next table is artist Roshan Kurichiyanil, an animation director and Kerala state award winning children's book artist, who has worked with clients across

the world. Soon parents with kids in tow are snapping up his *Taara of the Stars*, a series featuring children embarking on fantastical adventures. My other neighbour is selling a graphic novel written by stand-up comedian Varun Grover called *Karejwa*; I take advantage of our proximity to read it – a rollicking ride about black holes and *gulab jamuns* converging in Varanasi.

The artists at the fest are of every stripe: veterans with a slightly jaded air, first-timers showing their work with a mix of pride and shyness. At one table, two teenagers are racking up brisk sales with their hand-drawn, stapled 'minis' – 'remakes' of OTT shows like *The Penguin* or video games such as the *Mafia*, into which one of the artists has drawn himself as a character.

At another table, visual designer Aparna Thankaraj shows *MissAndroid*, with its iridescent pages, set in "a world where all the women are robots". Mohith O., an architect, shows his accordion-like construction; the two sides have the same story but with differing POVs. The highly idiosyncratic nature of the fest means that non-standard formats are the norm.

Platforms for all ages
Creators agree that a sequential art renaissance is happening across the country. "It's a compound effect," feels Tina Thomas, who co-founded Studio Kokaachi, a visual storytelling studio in Kochi, with her husband Prateek Thomas. "When I was growing up, engineering and medicine were the only preferred choices. Now, education is diversifying and design is a big thing. Students graduating from the many design schools in India are finding lucrative career opportunities [in corporates, animation studios and the like]."

Movies, film festivals, and art biennales are also adding to the conversation, and changing mindsets. "The Kochi-Muziris Biennale, for one, has changed the way people perceive art and artists in the city. While earlier, they thought an artist had no future, now parents are recognising talent in their children and encouraging them to nurture it."

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4



A CLASSIC FOR THE AGES

Perumal Murugan's minimalist text and Appupen's striking sketches bring to life C.S. Chellappa's 1949 jallikattu novel *Vaadivaasal*, a meditation on masculinity and caste hierarchies

Menaka Raman

The cover and end pages of Perumal Murugan and Appupen's graphic adaptation of C.S. Chellappa's classic novel *Vaadivaasal* are blood-red. It's a visceral invitation, one that contrasts sharply with the pages within, rendered in stark black and white.

Considered a modern literary classic in Tamil, Chellappa's novel, published in 1949, is about the spectacle of jallikattu and the social dynamics around it.

I'll admit, I read the book with little knowledge of jallikattu, apart from hazy recollections of scenes depicting it in Tamil movies while growing up, and the more recent protests across Tamil Nadu in response to attempts to ban it. But the beauty of this graphic adaptation is that one can read it with little to no context about the traditional cultural sport.

Writer and illustrator Appupen's initial frames set the story in Chellayipuram, a village famed for its bulls and bull fights. Panel by panel, with deliberate pacing, we are introduced to the place and its people. Amongst the visitors are Pichi and Maruthan, two young men from Uislanor who have arrived amidst the throng. They have their own agenda: to tame the Zamindar's Kaari bull and avenge Pichi's father Ambuli who died at the hands of the very same animal two years ago.

Vaadivaasal has all the elements of the best kind of potboiler: a high stakes event, a hero set on avenging his father's death, a rival in the form of a Chellayi local, and the dark, sinister presence of the Kaari.

Peeling back the layers

Appupen brings each character to life in striking detail. Pichi is a balance of inner rage and outer calm, Maruthan his affable foil. But it is the old, nameless man who captured my attention from the get go. Appupen has captured each of his expressions with exquisite and almost tender detailing: the missing teeth, the bushy eyebrows raised in shock, a spittle of saliva, and his myriad expressions from admonishment to avuncular teasing to concern.

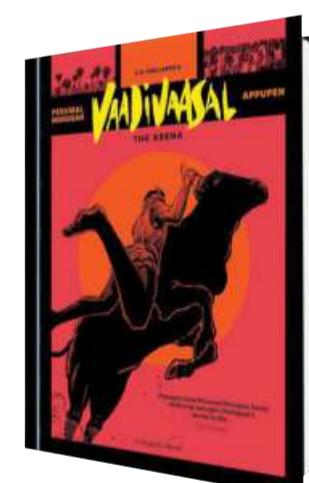
The Kaari is dark and brooding and Appupen uses silhouettes beautifully to capture its imposing presence. Appupen's art conveys the brutal physicality of the event, a foil for Perumal Murugan's minimalist adaptation of the text, which almost instinctively my mind read in Tamil.

At its core, *Vaadivaasal* is a meditation on masculinity and the rigid social and caste hierarchies that underpin it. But the story peels back the layers of muscle, brawn, and, in the case of the Zamindar, pride to reveal a fragile masculinity at its core. When the Kaari runs amok after being subdued by Pichi, the Zamindar chooses to get rid of this living, breathing extension of his pride.

"Who would risk their lives for two pieces of gold?" the old man asks early on in the story,



(Clockwise from above) Authors C.S. Chellappa; Appupen; and Perumal Murugan; and a few panels from *Vaadivaasal: The Arena*.



Vaadivaasal:
The Arena
C.S. Chellappa,
Perumal Murugan
and Appupen
Simon & Schuster
₹699

referring to the prize on offer for besting the Kaari. In the end, it is the bull who pays that price.

The graphic novel adaptation of *Vaadivaasal* will be available in Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, and English, and I found myself thinking it would take the story to more young-adult and adult readers with little exposure to jallikattu in non-Tamil speaking and reading spaces.

I handed the book to my 17-year-old son who had no prior knowledge of the protests, the ban, and has most certainly never watched the Rajinikanth-starrer *Murattu Kaalai* (1980). Yet, his engagement with the story and the art was immediate.

An on-screen adaptation of the book, steered by director Vetrimaran and starring Suriya, is said to be in the making and will no doubt take the story to an even wider audience. But I'm glad my first brush with *Vaadivaasal* was through this graphic novel, its frames conveying barely contained rage, frenetic chaos and redemption.

The reviewer is a poet and writer based in Bengaluru.

IN CONVERSATION

Three gay men walk into a book

Santanu Bhattacharya on handing over the storytelling reins to the characters of his new novel, *Deviants*, to escape the burden of history

Joshua Muyiwa

In an Indiranagar coffee-shop blasting Dua Lipa hits, even before our double-shots of espresso arrive, the 43-year-old London-based author Santanu Bhattacharya quickly tells us that he has a fond history with Bengaluru. "Coming to this city feels a bit like a homecoming, each time," he says.

He admits he's changed along with this crazy city but "it still has a very strong place" in his personal history as well as his family's stories. "It's our happy decade before the nasty surprises of life hit us." On moving to Kolkata, he remembers having to "very quickly reconfigure himself" to "an old, big, brash city" which was quite the departure from the "softness, kindness and inclusivity" of Bengaluru back then.

It's perhaps for this reason, the 'garden city' finds itself sweetly slipped into the pages of Bhattacharya's new novel *Deviants* (published by Tranquebar), which invites us into the lives of three gay men in the same family. The central character, Vivaan, a 17-year-old, lives in Bengaluru. He's the one literally telling his story through voice notes on his smartphone. Then, there's his mother's brother, Mambro, who grew up in the mid-90s; and finally, Sukumar, the great-uncle, or Mambro's uncle, who is studying commerce and falling in love with a sculptor in Kolkata of the 70s.

Shifting between these two cities – Bengaluru and Kolkata, explicitly unnamed but honoured in the novel – mirrors Bhattacharya's own trajectory. For him, through the process of writing fiction, "the lines start blurring so quickly" that it allows for the "taking of liberties" to tell a story that can't "lay a claim to any truth" either.

Developing an organic voice
While he sees the merit in "reading books around a particular theme, period or place" to try and reflect a similar quality of a time, for *Deviants*, "the idea itself was building inside" of him for a long time. And, he always knew he wanted to employ three different voices to chronicle the negotiations with sexuality and identity over different generations.

For Bhattacharya, it was important that the characters themselves guide the storytelling and the world-building. And it is this very environment the reader steps into. It isn't the result of "the author sitting in 2025 and using Google or doing a bunch of reading in the library to create the life or knowledge of the characters". Bhattacharya says he had to stay in their lane without bringing his "own knowledge and wisdom" to them.

For example, in arriving at Vivaan's voice – "a mix of sass and vulnerability" – he found inspiration and took courage from the adolescent

Santanu Bhattacharya
(BEHRIN ISMAILOV)

protagonist's tone in Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* (2022). Channelling Vivaan in his own words, through voice notes, was always part of the novel's initial idea because, "I wanted to hear directly from this character," says Bhattacharya.

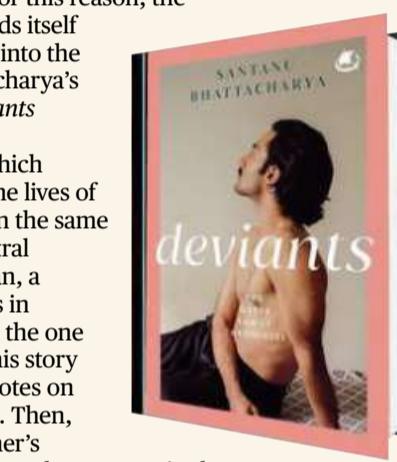
"The portrayal of kids, teenagers or young adults in literary fiction is quite wanting. Because there's always an adult's lens to writing them. So, either they are dismissed as snowflakes, unpredictable and 'tantrummy' or they [the authors] are patronising towards these younger characters." Bhattacharya wanted to avoid these pitfalls by "handing the mic to Vivaan and saying, you talk to us".

A hundred hidden things
In following through with Vivaan's voice, Bhattacharya found that he couldn't bring his own "cares and worries" into the telling. It allowed him to contrast Vivaan's ease with his sexuality and identity with the restrictions of the two older gay characters "who aren't in positions to tell us their stories themselves".

There are liberties granted to the teenage character that project the experiences that Mambro or Sukumar might have wanted to have but, either they didn't have the law or the language for their desires. "I'm from a queer generation that couldn't wait to grow up, that avoids reminiscing, and felt like it didn't fit into groups – our stories are being told in retrospect," says Bhattacharya, speaking to the sharpening of his own queerness over time. "We act out in ways that our straight peers don't because we weren't the youth they were; we were hiding a hundred things about ourselves," he adds.

In *Deviants*, Bhattacharya senses his way through these 'hundred hidden things' buried within three gay men across three generations, without letting his own histories burden them too.

The reviewer is a poet and writer based in Bengaluru.



BROWSER

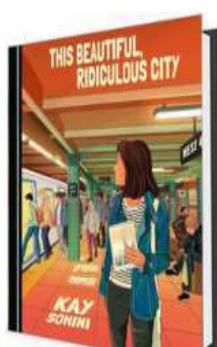
This Beautiful, Ridiculous City

Kay Sohini

Jonathan Cape

₹1,299

The New York-based illustrator's graphic memoir is a tribute to the city she now calls home, interspersed with accounts of the life she left behind in Kolkata. With a mix of textbook diagrams, maps and Polaroid photographs, Sohini etches a moving portrait of her life in the Big Apple.



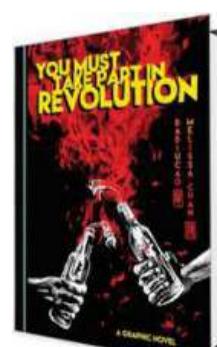
You Must Take Part in Revolution

Badiucao and Melissa Chan

Street Noise Books

₹2,489

The dystopian graphic novel by Emmy-nominated journalist Chan and artist-activist Badiucao, China's Banksy, is set in the year 2035 with the U.S. and China at war. The authors are known for their work being critical of authoritarian regimes.



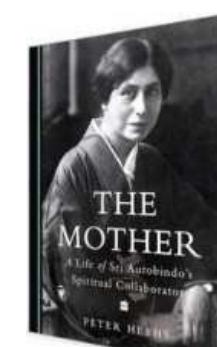
The Mother

Peter Heehs

HarperCollins

₹799

Known as 'the Mother', Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa made India her home, and her biography is written by a scholar who is an authority on the life and works of Alfassa's mentor, Sri Aurobindo. Heehs chronicles her spiritual journey and how she guided disciples at the Puducherry ashram.



Rajatarangini

Prof. Y. Subbarayalu,

Dr. R.N. Kumaran

& Dr. V.P. Yathee Kumar

Heritage India Trust

₹2,000

Published in two volumes, this title is a festschrift for Professor K. Rajan, noted archaeologist from Tamil Nadu. Each book is a compilation of scholarly articles on prehistory, marine archaeology, and the late medieval period.



Making sense of reality

With stories, anecdotes and pages from a diary, Amitav Ghosh's new book illustrates the causes close to his heart

Ramya Kannan

ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in

It is now a widely-acknowledged opinion that Amitav Ghosh has contributed tremendously to the world's understanding of climate change and colonialism and neo-imperialism, with his immaculate understanding of both, and his ability to establish the roots of one in another. His writings, over a period of time, both fiction and non-fiction, have enriched literature on the very complex issues, raised our consciousness for our environments, and see things, as they should be, within the appropriate historical backdrop that his erudition provides us, in every story, every fable, every essay that he writes.

Decades of research

As such, *Wild Fictions: Essays*, which is a collection of his writings on the subjects that he has spent decades researching, is simply a great idea. It's surprising, in fact, given his body of work that it took this long to gather his writings in one volume. But after publication, it immediately becomes yet another book that needs to be in your collection, among the books you will not want to part with.

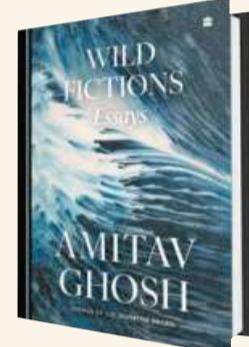
Divided into chapters, it's quite like the glossary of an encyclopaedia that lets you travel at your own pace, and whim. It predictably begins with Climate Change and Environment – six articles outline the havoc created by natural disasters in recent times, the Indian Ocean tsunami, hurricane Katrina, cyclone Nargis, the lethal combination of forest fires and lack of rain in a tiny island that is part of Indonesia, and also, of how anthropometric causes, mimetic migration or grand plans for promoting tourism, accelerate environmental degradation.

Voice of Deeti

The most interesting chapter, personally, is the second one on Witnesses. This is classic Amitav Ghosh, the same voice which narrates the story of Deeti, the young woman who managed to escape sati at her husband's funeral pyre and boards the slave ship to make a long voyage across the seas, in his *Ibis Trilogy*. She appears through the entire series, her position in the novels shifts from prominence to a position in the shadows, but the fact that she lingers throughout is masterly craftsmanship. She emerges as a sort of anchor, giving the reader a sense of familiarity, and of continuity. The narration is personal, touching and somehow fully aware of several contexts that have led to the exact set of circumstances protagonists now find themselves in. Here, additionally, he also uses other people's voices and words, quoting directly from letters, personal diaries or conversations, to clarify our understanding of the situation.

The other divisions in the book are categorised Travel and Discovery (which takes the reader on rides from a small village on the banks of the Nile, and naturally the Indian Ocean region); a generalised Narratives; Conversations (as the title indicates, they are a bunch of articles that record discussions and reviews) and; Presentations (originally blogposts or presentations, which includes a fascinating discussion of the writing of *In an Antique Land*, quoting from the diaries saved from his actual stay in Egypt).

It's not merely the way Ghosh brings together his vast, awe-inspiring array of experiences across the world, articulating them with his concerns for people and the environment, but also his literary elegance that makes his writing feel as if the author is a dear friend whose friendship you treasure. Ghosh's words inspire you and serve as a guide, while we grapple with the catastrophic realities of the world we currently occupy.



Wild Fictions: Essays
Amitav Ghosh
Fourth Estate
₹799



Far from the frenzy (Clockwise from left) New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur, California; two monks at a monastery; the seaview from New Camaldoli Hermitage; Etty Hillesum in 1940; and Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1929. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK, AND WIKI COMMONS)



STILLNESS THAT SINGS

Pico Iyer pays ode to silence in his new book in a world which is uncertain and disconnected

Natasha Badhwar

I did not know how difficult it is to write about a book that one likes too much, till I found myself reading Pico Iyer's new book, *Learning from Silence*. I have carried it everywhere with me for two weeks now. I borrowed a very small pencil from my daughter's stationery pouch and began to mark lines in the book.

Iyer's minimal, elegant prose is enchanting. "Only the brightness of the blue above and below," he writes to describe the sky meeting the Pacific Ocean from the catholic monastery in Big Sur, California. "That red-tailed hawk circling, the bees busy in the lavender. It's as if a lens cap has come off and once the self is gone, the world can come flooding in, in all its wild immediacy."

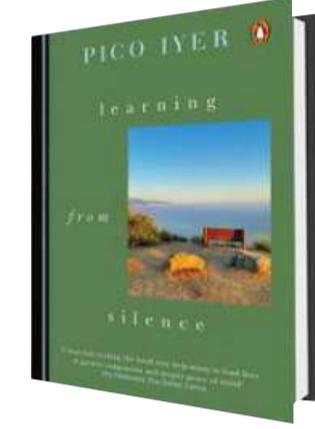
Mary Oliver's poetry comes to mind. Surrendering oneself to become one with the elements of nature. Becoming alert to the secret patterns of the world.

Best known for his exploratory travel writing and reflections on religious and spiritual systems across diverse cultures, Iyer has devoted this book to being still. It is an ode to silence. Silence that he describes as active and thrumming, almost palpable. Stillness that sings.

A retreat as home

Born and raised by Indian parents in England, Iyer lives in the U.S. and travels frequently to Japan. He has described his experience of home as a process of "taking pieces of many different places and putting them together in a stained glass whole."

This book begins with literal homelessness. Iyer goes back to the time in his early thirties, when he was single and living in his mother's home in California. A wildfire engulfs the house suddenly. Iyer manages to escape with his mother's cat as



Learning From Silence
Pico Iyer
Hamish Hamilton
₹599



everything else is reduced to ashes. A friend recommends a Catholic hermitage at the top of a mountain, overlooking the ocean, as a temporary refuge. Thus Iyer discovers a retreat that he will visit repeatedly, more than a 100 times for the next 30 years.

"In an age of speed, I began to think nothing could be more invigorating than going slow," he writes, suggesting that we must resist distraction by paying attention. Balance constant movement by practising stillness.

Iyer quotes Emily Dickinson and

Franz Kafka making a case for stillness and silence in their own writings. On the cover is an endorsement by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The thirteenth century teacher Dogen's learnings are distilled in the line: All I know is the sound of black rain on the tiles of the roof.

The reader is introduced to Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch woman who found meaning and purpose in the service of others as the Nazis drew closer, taking away thousands every week on trains to concentration camps

in Auschwitz. We are reminded of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the influential Austrian philosopher, who spent his life trying to shed the privilege of his birth.

Towards companionship

In a recent conversation with writer Anne Lamott on Facebook, Iyer said that he sent the manuscript of the completed book first to the two monks who he has written about, to ask if they wanted him to edit anything he had written. "No, it's our brokenness that is the main thing we have to share," one of them replied the next morning. "That's the gift we have to offer. That we are imperfect and mortal and scared; that's what brings us close to everybody else."

Solitude can be a training in community and companionship. Silence creates space for clear communication. Abiding clarity and calm can be found in quiet retreat. It is illustrations of these truths that makes *Learning from Silence* a perfect book for the uncertain and disconnected times we live in.

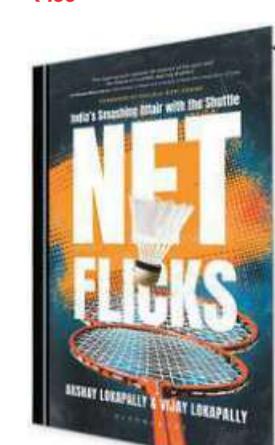
The reviewer is an author, teacher and filmmaker.

Shuttle play

A deep dive into the history of Indian badminton



Net Flicks: India's Smashing Affair with the Shuttle
Akshay Lokapally and Vijay Lokapally
Bloomsbury India
₹499



partition, is heartbreaking. The story of multiple-time women's national champion Damayanti Tambay stirs nationalistic fervour. Just a year into marriage, Damayanti's husband Flight Lieutenant Vijay Vasant Tambay went missing in the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Damayanti gave up the sport to

search for her husband, but a lack of political will meant that no progress was made.

The authors boldly explored the darkest chapter in Indian badminton – the 1988 murder of eight-time national champion Syed Modi. A star in his own right, Modi was shot dead in Lucknow, leading the police to file charges against his wife Ameeta Singh and politician Sanjay Singh. In a compelling chapter, Ameeta speaks of her innocence, an undying love for Modi, and political conspiracy. History will note that both Ameeta and Sanjay were acquitted of all charges, and they later got married.

No chronicle of Indian badminton is complete without a mention of Prakash Padukone. The first Indian to win the All England Championships, Padukone's formula for success was a combination of exceptional talent and a stoic drive to make best use of limited facilities. As the pages eventually turn to the exploits of Saina and Sindhu, it becomes clear that these modern celebrities stand on the shoulders of giants.

Ashwin Achal

achal.ashwin@thehindu.co.in

For a recreational player, booking a badminton court in most Indian cities is a tough task. Demand is high, as courts are usually sold out even on weekdays. For children inclined towards making a career in sports, badminton stands out as a viable option. Academies are full, as young wards dream of emerging as the next superstar.

On all levels, badminton has captured the heart of the nation. The stellar achievements of Saina Nehwal and P.V. Sindhu have no doubt inspired a generation to take up the sport.

Net Flicks, written by the father-son duo of Vijay Lokapally and Akshay Lokapally, seeks to inform readers that Rome was not built in a day. The book takes a deep dive into the history of Indian badminton, with detailed accounts of past champions and trendsetters.

Prakash Nath's story

Tales of Prakash Nath playing the 1947 All England Championships while his hometown, Lahore, was in flames due to the

INKING NEW NARRATIVES

CONTINUED FROM
PAGE 1

A sense of democracy is one of the foundations of indie festivals. For instance, last year saw a trio of Class V students exhibiting their comic alongside a 62-year-old creator at ICF Kochi, while their youngest has been a nine-year-old. "Such spaces are much-needed," says Tina.

She recalls when her husband Pratheek had taken *Hush*, a comic about child sexual abuse, to the first edition of Comic Con in New Delhi in 2011. It had sold out. "We had such high hopes [for the festival], but then it evolved into something else. Comic Con isn't really helping comic creators, but promoting merchandise and the like."

Stall costs are high, with premium places in the front going for ₹70,000. "The small stalls at the back are what Indian comic companies can afford. By the time people reach there, they would have already spent all their money on merch, with nothing left for comics."

While Comic Con does offer free stalls, it is only for those who can participate in all five cities. A publisher can afford the deal, but not an indie creator – with flight tickets and accommodation adding to the budget. "At ICF, you can choose the city you want to show at, and at ₹750 for a stall, it's affordable," she says.

Mainstream vs. indie
Today, comics open plenty of doors. "I write for films now, and my first screenplay was announced a year ago. It's all because of our comics. In fact, [director] Mani Ratnam got in touch



Guide for creators

Mathen is hoping to bolster the market and encourage creators with a new venture: an online platform called Comix Canal where anyone can sign up and sell their comics. "Festivals happen for a single day, but what about the rest of the year?" he asks. A post on the platform's Instagram page breaks down why comic artists don't get paid much, the pitfalls of mainstream publishing, and why they don't plan to scale up, ever. "It's when it scales up that it will become a Comic Con. I don't want the con, just the comic," he laughs. On the platform, he is hoping to encourage creators to pay as much attention to the text as they do to the images, and help new creators.



(Clockwise from left) Sanid Asif Ali, Tony Davis and Sreeram KV; Joshy Benedict; Tina and Pratheek; Varun Grover, and creators at ICF. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

with us to do the animation for *OK Kanmani* because one of our Matchbox Comix creators recommended our work," Tina says.

But the door remains closed when it comes to mainstream publishers. "Most don't want to invest in graphic novels because they believe it is a niche medium, and will not attract too many readers. The cost of production is high, and books will be priced higher because they have to factor in the cost of drawing," she says. Small zines aren't picked because these would get lost in big stores such as Crossword. "Working with mainstream publishers on a graphic novel, your advance will be abysmal. They won't do any marketing for you," adds Delhi-based writer-illustrator Joshy Benedict, an animator and

comic book creator from Kozhikode – whose film *A Coconut Tree* won the National Award for Best Animated Short Film last year – got a book deal with Harper Collins after he participated in ICF. He wrote and hand-illustrated *The Pig Flip* in 2013, but once done no publisher wanted it. "In 2018, ICF asked me to bring the book to the festival. When I told them I didn't have a physical copy, they asked me to bring two digital prints. So many people showed interest that I had to get their addresses, print more copies, and send it to them," he says with a laugh. As interest picked up, someone suggested he get the book translated into English and approach publishers again. This time, HarperCollins picked it up. "Things are changing today, but it is slow," says Benedict. "People have to see comics and graphic novels like they would regular novels. In Japan, everybody reads manga; that should happen here too. And more festivals like ICF will help in that."

The writer is a freelance journalist and graphic novelist.

Back in Kochi

In the week before ICF, the handful of good printers in the city are flooded with work. "All the creators are there; it almost becomes like a meeting place," says Tina. She talks about artists gathering around offset printers, swapping stories, and staying well past midnight to get their books ready. And at the festival, where books are priced between ₹100 and ₹600, they sell quickly, artists' e-pay apps beeping with notifications.

As the fest winds down, with empty tables denoting sold-out artists, I wonder if the saturation of digital media today has led to a kind of backlash – a need for the physicality of things. "Absolutely," says Alli. "People came to my stall and just smelled the book for a minute. They just crave that, the look and feel of a book."

The writer is a freelance journalist and graphic novelist.

Kunal Ray

I recently returned after attending the 15th edition of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK) in Thrissur. More than the plays on show, several of which were remarkable, such as *Anal* (Iraq) and *Dear Children, Sincerely* (Sri Lanka), I came back most deeply moved by the inclusive and nurturing character of the festival, which has resulted in the creation of an engaged audience and an egalitarian and democratic social space. I say this after attending hordes of public arts festivals at several locations across the country but my experience in Kerala was unique.

The festival spread over a week featured plays from the country and abroad through a selection process that demonstrates its focus on diversity and curating contemporary practices. This edition of ITFOK, themed around cultures of resistance, presented plays that dealt with same-sex desire (*Be-Loved* by Tamasha Theatre, Mumbai), development vs. community (*Aboriginal Cry* by Akhoka Theatre, Manipur), and female sexuality

(*Project Darling* by Dramanon, Bengaluru).

Opinions differed about the quality of plays performed at the festival and I found these debates enriching. There was no dearth of conversation and the credit for creating such an active public space goes entirely to the audience which came in large numbers from all over Kerala, patiently waited in long queues, and saw every show,

sometimes second and third iterations of the same performance. All this in the sweltering heat, and they returned the following day to listen to the artist interaction sessions.

When diversity is under threat

The audience members did not shy away from asking tough questions, often registering their polite disagreement with the speaker or

creator of the play. They hung around long after the performances were over, discussing what they had seen and forming impromptu groups inviting strangers like yours truly to join the discussion. Language barriers were breached and ideas exchanged freely. Isn't that what an arts festival aims for? Most of the viewers I encountered were not necessarily from a theatre or arts background. Yet, they were full of curiosity and felt encouraged to participate in this non-hierarchical space that the festival had successfully created.

Good teachers shape us out of mud and bruised grass and then send us out into the world. But they stay back.

When I would visit Father Bouche on annual trips home, I found him in the priest's cloisters, sweating in his vest, the cassock hanging from a hook in the wall. Now he was an old man, with twinkling eyes, and his old students were his bossy guardians, ferrying him to doctor's appointments and scolding him for smoking too much.

I do not know if the world-view of the man I became would match his. We were from different worlds and generations. But that is of no matter. For the great teacher's objective is not to create clones. Instead, it is to build citizens. When I see my social media feed after the death of a beloved teacher, I am struck by how many disparate lives one teacher touched. The tributes reflect a shadow of the ring but one that spans generations.

Lessons for life
Not all teachers are great, or even good. Many are petty tyrants or only interested in extra income from tuition classes. In fact, the greatest scholars are not always the best teachers. The best teachers are the ones whose lessons resound in us long after what they taught in the classroom has faded away.

Over a decade ago, Sajini-d wrote about bereavement and the rituals of mourning for her column 'Autumn Flush' in *The Telegraph*. She advised friends and family to make a list of the things they enjoyed together: 'adda', music, books, wine, food, flowers and a great deal of laughter'. And she said, 'I would like them to go home from the crematorium or the doorway of the hospital and to behave completely normally as if I were in the next room.'

That is not easy to do but it is indeed a lesson for life.

Sandip Roy, the author of *Don't Let Him Know*, likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

PRESIDENT LULA WHEN HE CAME TO POWER:



Sumana Mukherjee

The bamboo poles stop just short of grazing the walls of the 17th century structure that, for 10 days, housed *Pampa: Textiles of Karnataka* – presented by the Abheraj Baldota Foundation, in collaboration with Karnataka's department of tourism and the Archaeological Survey of India.

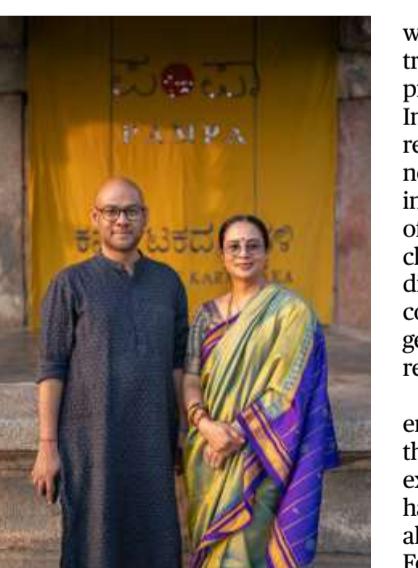
A careful matrix of similar poles, held together sturdy with jute ropes, criss-cross the aged ceiling of the Mantapa Photo Exhibition Centre and hold the magnificent textiles.

In a way, the exhibition design is an apt metaphor for the intent behind *Pampa*: one of building connections between the old and the new, each showing off the other to their best advantage to revive interest in the textiles of the state. "What we need is a synergy," says Lavina Baldota, who made her curatorial presence felt as the patron of *Sut Santati: Then, Now, Next*, a celebration of Indian textiles in 2022. *Pampa* is her sixth presentation, an ode to her marital home of Karnataka.

The state is not the first to be associated with a strong or storied textile legacy, especially when it comes to fine fabrics – in comparison to, say, Bengal or Gujarat or closer home, to Tamil Nadu – but *Pampa* (an ancient name for the mighty Tungabhadra), she hopes, will help it claim its

IN HAMPI'S RUINS, A TEXTILE TEMPLATE EMERGES

The ancient stones were the backdrop for a survey exhibition of Karnataka's heritage weaves, led by crafts crusader Lavina Baldota



weavers, dyers, traders, transporters that existed in the pre-colonial heydays of handwoven Indian textiles. Today's set-up still requires all of them, but it also needs champions who can take intellectual ownership, in a manner of speaking, of particular textile clusters to create documentation, disseminate information, forge connections, design for new generations and help build respectful markets.

That is no isolated endeavour evident from the fact that *Pampa* is the 20th textile exhibition Mayank Mansingh Kaul has curated in the past 10 years; it's also his fourth for the Baldota Foundation. By any standards, that's an impressive number, given the months of research each of them must have required. But it is as impressive as an indicator for the increased appetite for textile knowledge among the cognoscent and the curious.

Saris and their stories
Featuring 108 textiles in nine sections, the exhibition (March 1-10) hits all the right notes, including an early Kalamkari reworking of the Shiva-Parvati wedding mural on the central *ranga mantapa* ceiling of the 7th century Virupaksha temple.

rightful place in the sun. "As a survey exhibition, the first iteration of *Pampa* sets the framework for further work that the Baldota Foundation intends to take up in the region," she adds. "The research will deepen, followed by documentation, revivals, and new commissions leading to exhibitions in other cities in Karnataka and beyond."

Crafting an ecosystem
It's a formidable ambition but there are few better placed than Baldota to realise it. As custodian of the 54-year-old Abheraj Baldota Foundation, an affiliate of the diversified Baldota Group, with businesses in mining, power, steel and similar core industrial areas, she is uniquely positioned to pull together discrete work on crafts

and textiles – her core interest areas, building on education in fashion and textiles – and provide them a powerful platform. Like the bamboo poles in the historical structure, Baldota enables weavers, designers, practitioners to get in touch with their desired audiences, including market-facing counterparts, so as to build a complete ecosystem.

Born from the old

The most striking part of the exhibition, for this writer at least, is



Must-visit theatre festivals

- Bharat Rang Mahotsav (Delhi): The country's largest theatre festival organised by the National School of Drama
- Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival (Bengaluru): Annual festival based on a central theme, held at the well-known Ranga Shankara Theatre space
- Under the Saal Tree (Assam): Held inside a forest in Golparia, this festival has a unique focus on contemporary theatre practices



Space for all At ITFOK, people came from all walks of life to celebrate and participate in conversations around the performing arts.

K.K. NAJEEB

KERALA SETS THE STAGE

Ahead of World Theatre Day on March 27, a look at how the International Theatre Festival of Kerala can serve as a framework for an inclusive discourse on the arts

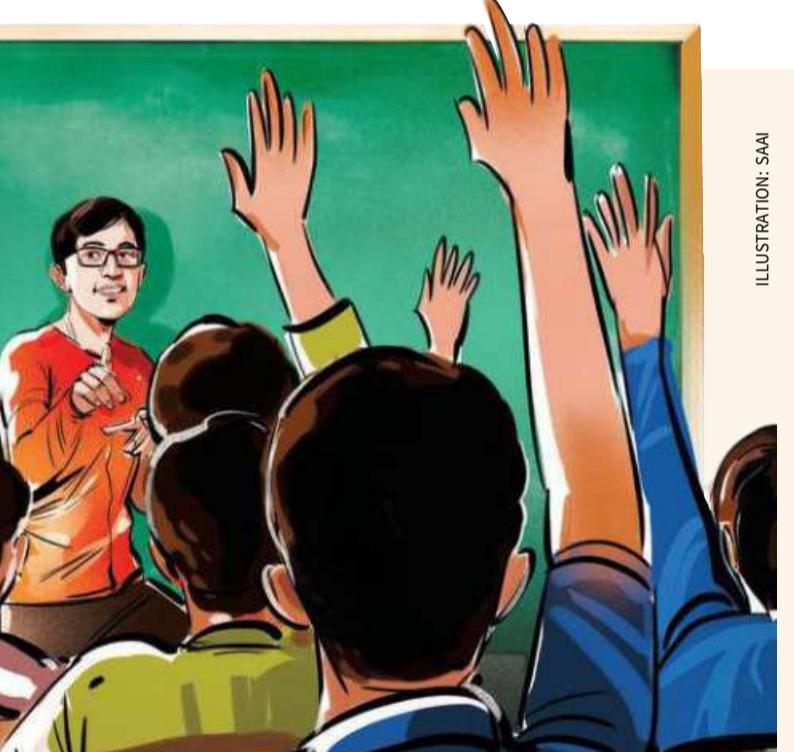


ILLUSTRATION: SANJAY

Good teachers shape us out of mud and bruised grass and then send us out into the world. But they stay back.

When I would visit Father Bouche on annual trips home, I found him in the priest's cloisters, sweating in his vest, the cassock hanging from a hook in the wall. Now he was an old man, with twinkling eyes, and his old students were his bossy guardians, ferrying him to doctor's appointments and scolding him for smoking too much.

I do not know if the world-view of the man I became would match his. We were from different worlds and generations. But that is of no matter. For the great teacher's objective is not to create clones. Instead, it is to build citizens. When I see my social media feed after the death of a beloved teacher, I am struck by how many disparate lives one teacher touched. The tributes reflect a shadow of the ring but one that spans generations.

Lessons for life
Not all teachers are great, or even good. Many are petty tyrants or only interested in extra income from tuition classes. In fact, the greatest scholars are not always the best teachers. The best teachers are the ones whose lessons resound in us long after what they taught in the classroom has faded away.

Over a decade ago, Sajini-d wrote about bereavement and the rituals of mourning for her column 'Autumn Flush' in *The Telegraph*. She advised friends and family to make a list of the things they enjoyed together: 'adda', music, books, wine, food, flowers and a great deal of laughter'. And she said, 'I would like them to go home from the crematorium or the doorway of the hospital and to behave completely normally as if I were in the next room.'

That is not easy to do but it is indeed a lesson for life.

POP-A-RAZZI

When teachers become legends

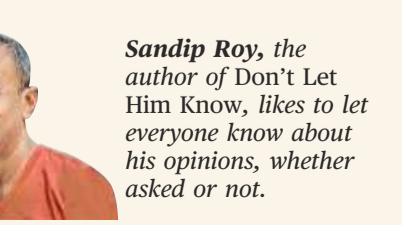
The best teachers teach us how to think, not what to think, and their lessons go beyond trigonometry, economics or

The Canterbury Tales

become legends because they don't stay confined within those borders. Sajini Kripalani Mukherji was rooted in Kolkata but at home in the world. The death of a teacher is different from the death of a beloved family member. Families rear us, take care of us, impart values. We are bound to our teachers by something ineffable, something most of us do not realise until we leave our schools and colleges. The best of them teach us how to think, not what to think. We are tied to them in ways that have little to do with trigonometry, economics or *The Canterbury Tales*.

One day while I was in America, my sister sent an email. "Father Bouche died Tuesday in Calcutta. Funeral on Thursday in Thakurpuruk." He had returned to Europe after retirement but when he discovered he had been diagnosed with cancer, he returned "home" to Kolkata.

Building citizens
Father Camille Bouche was a pink-faced Jesuit priest from



Dear readers, what is the point of education these days? Please don't answer. I am just making a rhetorical point to start this edition of our linguistic discourse. Also even if you answer I cannot hear.

But really what is the point of, more specifically, going to a college and getting a degree in something? Let me analyse.

We go to university so that we can spend a lot of time and money reading unbearably obsolete textbooks so that we can clear exams. We clear these exams so that we can get degrees in subjects that we have absolutely zero interest in. Have you ever met anyone in your life who is passionate about 'Instrumentation Engineering' or 'Geophysics'?

But we get these degrees so that we may finally get jobs in companies that will inevitably disappoint our parents. And we join these companies so we will take home a monthly salary that is suspiciously lower than what we thought we were going to get during the interview process.

And we use this hard-earned salary so that we can buy overpriced cars to take us through under-regulated traffic to our semi-finished apartment building in our semi-posh suburb, which has footpaths but only in the brochures.

And then we go home and eat food that we shouldn't be eating, to gain weight we will not be losing, and therefore join a gym that we'll never visit after January 17.

Eventually, we have children who like their grandparents more. Then we start paying fees for schools that aren't worth the fees, so that our children can get degrees that won't get them employed because



apparently Artificial Intelligence is going to do all the jobs.

Unbearable discussions

But who cares for any of this nonsense. The real reason we graduate, the absolutely, only worthwhile motive behind all this effort, is so that we can join the alumni WhatsApp group and spend

the few free moments we get between conference calls and parent teacher meetings and Silk Board junction on delicious repartee with the timeless friendships we made on campus.

No? Don't agree? Shaking your head in disappointment?

Yes. I know. It is because of 'Jiopolitical analysis'.

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 8

NO FREEDOM TO CHITCHAT

Random WhatsApp conversations are increasingly at risk of being hijacked by 'Jiopolitical analysis'

By the way, that is this edition's suggested addition to the English lexicon: jiopolitical analysis.

Friends, I speak for all of us when I say that your college WhatsApp groups are a vast wasteland of unbearable political analysis.

It will all start with someone saying something innocent such as: 'Good morning' or 'Merry Christmas' or 'Emraan Hashmi is a fantastic actor who just keeps getting bad roles' or some such.

And then there will be a brief, lively tête-à-tête on the above mentioned topic. At this point, lulled by a false sense of conviviality, someone will share a photo of a beach holiday, or a tourist trek in Cambodia, or a spa resort in Vietnam.

Like that scene in American horror films where the youth says "let me just go into the garden and pick some apples from the tree next to the incinerator" – things seem idyllic but violence is imminent.

Around this point, someone will say, "Wow. These pictures are so nice. Are there any nice resorts like this in India?" And that is the point,

Jiopolitical analysis

/dʒi:əpolɪtɪkəl ə'næləsɪs/

noun

Definition: The annoying tendency for casual online conversations in group chats to transform into discussions about political, historical, or national topics, typically initiated by a small number of extremely online participants.

my friend, when the youth falls into the incinerator. This is when the Jiopolitical analysis will be unleashed.

Why only one idea?

Energised by always-on, never-off, nearly-free unlimited access to the delights of the Internet, social media and YouTube, the WhatsApp chat will be completely monopolised by some 3 to 7 people, who will proceed to discuss the entirety of Indian history from Mohenjodaro (the place) to Mohenjo Daro (the

2016 film) and everything in between.

Why did Nehru not start spas?

What is stopping Modi from opening a spa?

Even if a spa is opened, will it be in Hindi or Tamil?

Should a Ukrainian spa be open to Russia?

In China, you can enjoy a spa on a bullet train!

Now friends, I can imagine your reactions. "Sidin, has freedom of speech died? Why are you complaining about the marketplace of ideas?"

My friend. This marketplace only has one idea, and every day I have to consume the same idea over and over and over again?

People of India, why have we sacrificed all civil discourse to the plague of Jiopolitical analysis? Sometimes, I just want a nice recommendation for a discount spa in Vietnam.

Marketplace of ideas is good. But marketplace of just talking about random things is also an idea. We can give it a shot for the betterment of the nation.

What are your thoughts? And are these thoughts in English because of Macaulay?

Example sentence:
"I asked for PUNE restaurant recommendations in our college WhatsApp group and inadvertently created three hours of Jiopolitical analysis regarding colonial origins of Shrewsbury biscuit."

Sidin Vadukut
is head of talent at Clarisights. He lives in London and is currently working on a new novel.

GOREN BRIDGE

Precious overtrick

Both vulnerable,
North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal was played some years ago in Marbella, Spain. South was Sydney Mathews, an American who had lived in Marbella for many years. Mathews was 100 years old at the time this deal was played, starting his second century of life. The deal was played in a pairs competition

where overtricks are very important. Mathews saw that 10 tricks would be easy enough if the suits split normally. There were two chances for an overtrick. One was a successful spade finesse, a 50% proposition, and the other was to find the missing diamonds splitting 4-3, a 62% chance. He did not have the entries to try both. Showing that his internal

NORTH
♠ 4 2
♡ A K
♢ A 8 7 5 2
♣ K 6 4 2

WEST
♠ K 9 8 3
♡ 10 2
♢ Q 10 4 3
♣ Q J 10

EAST
♠ 10 7 6
♡ Q J 5
♢ K J 6
♣ 8 7 5 3

SOUTH
♠ A Q J 5
♡ 9 8 7 6 4 3
♢ 9
♣ A 9

The bidding:
NORTH 1♦
EAST Pass
SOUTH 1♥
WEST Pass
3♦
Pass
4♦
All pass

Opening lead: Queen of ♣

computer was working just fine, he went after the diamond suit. He won the opening club lead in hand with the ace and led a diamond to dummy's ace. He ruffed a diamond and led a heart to dummy's ace. He ruffed another diamond and led a heart to dummy's king, pleased to see both red suits behaving normally.

Mathews ruffed another diamond, establishing the long diamond in dummy, and led the queen of spades from his hand. The defence took one spade and one trump, but Mathews had his precious overtrick.

As Somerset Maugham once said, bridge can remain a comfort and a solace for our entire lifetimes. Beautifully played, Mr. Mathews!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has March 23 ever given us?



'Ever Given' sailing near a felucca along Egypt's central city of Ismailia. What happened to the 2,000-tonne container vessel during a sandstorm on March 23, 2021? (AFP)

Berty Ashley

1 On March 23, 1857, American inventor Elisha Otis installed his latest invention at E.V.Haughton & Co., a store at 488 Broadway New York City. He had come up with the idea while working out a way to hoist heavy equipment to the upper floor at a bedstead factory. What invention was this that is now found everywhere?

2 Born this day in 1881, Hermann Staudinger was a German chemist who won the Nobel Prize in 1953. He was the first to propose that rubber and starch were actually long chains of repeating molecules. What did he call these, which meant 'many parts' in Greek?

3 Born this day in 1893, Cedric Gibbons was an art director who was nominated a record 39 times for the Academy

Award for Best Production Design, of which he won 11. In 1928, he was responsible for designing something that is now immediately recognisable the world over. What did he design, which made his wins fitting?

4 Born this day in 1893, Gopalswamy Doraiswamy Naidu was an engineer and businessman who is credited with manufacturing the first electric motor in India and

his own version of the internal combustion engine. Starting out as a server in a hotel he went on to be responsible for the growth of the city he called home. Which city is this, now the second largest in Tamil Nadu?

5 Born this day in 1910, Akira Kurosawa became one of the most influential filmmakers of all time. In his movie, *Rashomon*, he had a shot, which was the first of its kind in history. It had never been done before for fear of the celluloid film catching fire. What did he point the camera at?

6 Born this day in 1924, Bette Nesmith Graham was a typist whose son became the guitarist of the band The Monkees. Drawing inspiration from watching painters covering up imperfections with a fresh layer of paint, she came up with a white, water-based tempera paint. What had she invented, which soon became a huge hit?

7 Born this day in 1929, Roger Bannister was an athlete, later neurologist, who was the first to achieve a certain record. What did he achieve by running at an average speed of 15 miles per hour at Oxford University?

8 Born this day in 1953, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw started off her life as a student of Zoology and studied to be a brewmaster. She eventually went on to

found a biotech company based in Bengaluru, which became the first worldwide to develop human insulin on a bacterial system. Which company is this, that crossed \$1 billion on the first day of issuing an IPO?

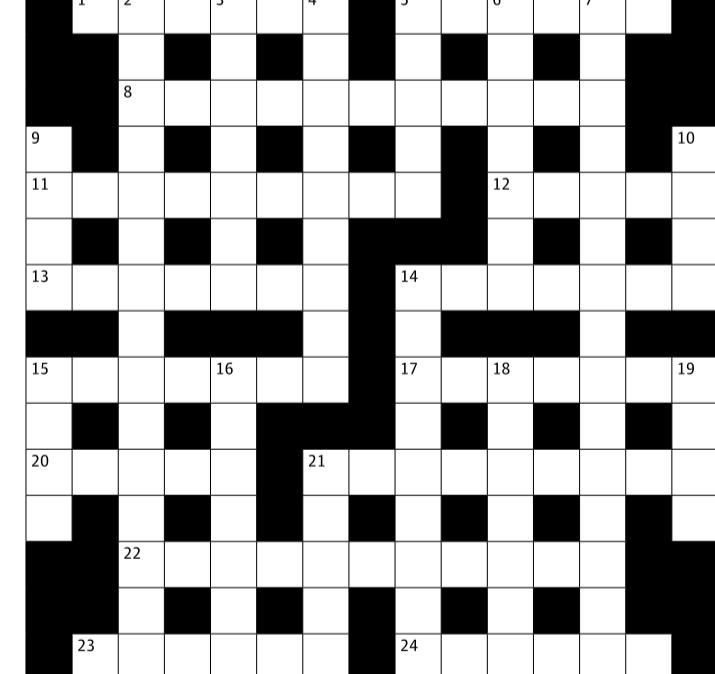
9 Born this day in 1962, Steve Redgrave was an English athlete who was the only man to have won gold medals at five consecutive Olympic Games in an endurance sport. His sport is the only one where athletes move backwards. Which sport is this?

10 On this day in 2021, container ship Ever Given ran aground and held up traffic for six days. The estimated loss was around US\$9 billion per day. Following this event, the Egyptian government has started work to ensure the issue doesn't happen again. Where did this take place?

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

10. Suez Canal
9. Rowing
8. Bioclean
7. Minutes
6. Correction fluid
5. The Sun
4. Colmabrate
3. Sesame
2. Elevator
1. Polyester
Answers

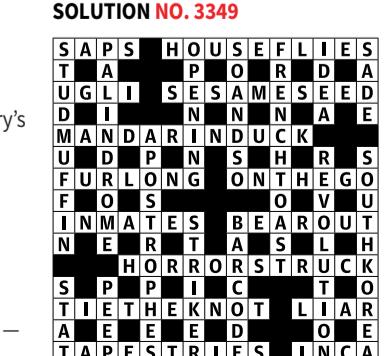
THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3350



Across

- 1 The Fairy King in Borneo resort (6)
- 5 Craving for drink, son moves eastward in short-sleeved top (6)
- 6 Advice regarding no-fly zone? Let's change subject (4,2,5)
- 7 Keeps thick jeans out for cold-weather clothing (9,6)
- 9 Desist from throwing up cooking vessels (4)
- 10 Bean containers rejected in a mood (4)
- 14 Mechanic's nasty accident (9)
- 15 Shocked exclamation: Geel! Venomous reptile! (4)
- 16 What the competent come up to score (7)
- 18 What a patient needs is occasional sipping (7)
- 19 Everyman's standing up with very loud resentment (4)
- 21 Darts players' limits discovered in Rochester (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3349



- 2 Ink in sketch representing where to find washers (7,4)
- 23 Cuts some sweet chestnuts (6)
- 24 According to Cockney, Caribbean country's having decentish innings? (6)
- 25 Word for word? (7)
- 26 Step one — to be embraced by celebrity (5)
- 27 Hubby explaining what happens after teams change ends? (5,4)
- 28 Ink in sketch representing where to find washers (7,4)
- 29 Cuts some sweet chestnuts (6)
- 30 According to Cockney, Caribbean country's having decentish innings? (6)
- 31 Word for word? (7)
- 32 Dirty money's source, concerning fraud in sports equipment (9,6)
- 33 Burmese city developed ladders? Tell me more (7)
- 34 Bedtime booze coming — drop of tequila — tops! (9)

Pebbling to keep the conversation going on end

Maithri Venkat

maithri.venkat@omegaschools.org

It is one of those usual nights with a steaming cup of coffee to keep me up through the long night of work to meet the deadline. "Ding," my phone chimes interrupting the frantic symphony of the buttons on the keyboard. Annoyed, I pick up my phone to silence it only to be hauled into a sea of nostalgia at the sight of the sender's name – the memories of a friend buried among the core memories in almost an irretrievably safe place came rushing back. Thanks to pebbling.

What is pebbling, you wonder?

Among a barrage of lexically repurposed words such as mouse, cloud, bug, and tablet, pebbling got its makeover from the proliferation of technology and social media. In social media lingo, pebbling is sending loved ones a meme, GIF, reel or text letting them know that they are on your mind. This simple yet heartfelt gesture to slow down and connect with people that matter in a perpetually on-the-go world goes a long way.

The word originates from a peculiar practice of courting among the Adelie and Gentoo penguins. A male penguin painstakingly picks a pebble it perceives as perfect in shape, size, weight, sheen, and other factors. The pebble is presented to a potential mate to express its interest – in short, a love language. Once accepted, the female penguin uses it to build a nest, symbolically, a home, a place of love, warmth and security.

Much like a fire that can devour anything on the one hand and give warmth and comfort on the other, social media, through pebbling, becomes a potential antidote to combat its ability to distance people and isolate individuals.

Making the best out of any challenge was never new to our species and in today's digitised era where everything is changing at a breakneck speed, we adapt and embrace new ways to connect and sustain relationships.

Remember, what made the world a village is what makes our neighbours strangers. Whether you are hitting a 300-day snap streak or sharing a YouTube short or Instagram story on the go, you are attempting to connect. While pebbling can never replace enjoying hearty laughter, sharing a cup of coffee or taking a walk with your loved ones, it is a simple yet profound gesture to say you care.

K. Kunhikrishnan
kkunhikrishnan@gmail.com

Prapoyil is a verdant village near Cherupuzha, a small town 64 km from Kannur, Kerala. In Prapoyil is an exceptional temple, perhaps the only one of its kind in the world, the *Navapuram Mathaathetha Devaalayam* (Secular House of God). The deity in the temple is the sculpted image of a book.

The temple opened on March 4, 2021, and the installation of the idol, sculpted by Santhosh Manasam from nearby Kamballor village in Kasaragod district, was completed in October 2021. Devotees can pray in the *sanctum sanctorum* and offer books to the deity, and the *prasadam* in return is a book. There are no priests nor a *hundi* and anyone, irrespective of caste or religion, can pray in the temple. The idol-book is perched on a giant natural stone.

The vision of the temple is rooted in the belief that knowledge is divine. The temple promotes and nurtures the philosophy of knowledge, fostering universal love and humility.

Its entrance hall is an impressive library of a few thousand books. Through the hall, adorned with sculptures on the walls, one ascends the steps to reach the idol – a concrete book installed atop a 30-foot-high stone. Three sentences are etched in its pages: "God is knowledge. Religion is broad thinking. Humble wisdom is the path." The sculptures in the entrance hall are of Cherusseri, the north Malabar poet who wrote the Malayalam epic *Krishnagadha*, Sri Buddha and a stone lamp, the symbol of knowledge. The two-acre complex in sylvan surroundings houses a few cottages, called *Ezuthupura* (a cottage for writing) where writers can stay and write. Three of the cottages are complete and the target is 10.

Chasing a dream

This distinctive temple is a dream come true for Prapoyil Narayanan, who has been aspiring to create it for 35 years. He is the only son of his mother. His father, Kokkodan Raman, a landlord, died when he was nine. All that Narayanan inherited was two acres. At the age of 15, he started shouldering the responsibility of his family. In his early twenties, he started thinking about the idea of the book temple and began setting aside a nominal amount for his dream project. He published many articles in different periodicals and became a reputable writer. Narayanan has authored 26 books. His initial education was in medical lab technology and after that, he started tutoring students. Sheer grit enabled him to own a

Where a book is worshipped | The deity in a temple near Kannur in Kerala is a tome



Divine knowledge The Secular House of God at Prapoyil near Kannur, in Kerala. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

flourishing parallel college in Cherupuzha town. The institution teaches degree and postgraduate courses in politics, sociology, history, commerce, Hindi, and philosophy. Narayanan himself is a postgraduate in five subjects and is currently studying for an MA degree in English literature. Income from his parallel college helped him save lakhs for the temple. The land development, sculptures, cottages and the festivals the temple organises are expensive and so far, he has spent a whopping amount of more than ₹60 lakh. Of late, he has received donations, but that does not even suffice for one-tenth of the expenses.

The temple conducts two annual cultural festivals, during April and

the Puja holidays. Literary debates, classical and folk-dance performances, book releases, seminars and debates, and dramatic performances mark the festivals with large audiences. Awards are presented to writers in four Dravidian languages. Narayanan is supported in his noble endeavour by his friend Sabu Maliyekkal and the villagers. Narayanan's ambition is to develop the temple into a self-sustaining institution. He has already initiated conversations with favourably inclined persons.

To Narayanan, a truly rare individual who has dedicated his life to literature and books, the unwavering support of his wife, Shyla, is immeasurable.

beloved brood and friends, gallivanting in the field, trekking through the forests of India, and tracking mammals to his last breath.

In a field of inspiring conservationists having strong personalities, with tempers often running high, rife with splintered opinionated factions, Ajith sir was that rare hero who was universally loved. An *Ajatasatru*, one without enemies, disarming everyone with his good sense, sensibility, and smile. Never letting things get out of hand, even when dealing with two dozen temperaments and personalities, he would manage frayed emotions with his grace, humour, and smile intact.

There is an outpouring of collective grief from the legion of conservationists and wildlife biologists he had inspired. Colleagues and friends spanning more than four decades, from the Western Ghats to the hallowed halls of Cambridge where he did his doctorate, have shared numerous anecdotes, images, videos, and archival information. This precious vault of memories has gone a long way in accepting that while he will no longer be there in person, he will always be around, unparalleled in his impact on the global wildlife community. And even in his death, he has brought the community together. Unifying us in our anguish with his passing but also the weight of his everlasting legacy.

An unparalleled conservationist

Ajith Kumar was an institution builder, primatologist, and wildlife biologist



In the field Educator and mentor Ajith Kumar, who passed away on March 1. (DIVYA MUDAPPA)

There were very few things that could dissuade Ajith sir from getting his boots muddy. There was no mountain high enough, no valley deep enough, no river wide enough to keep him from his beloved students in the field. He was a seasoned veteran of the forests, undeterred by leeches and ticks, and a man of all seasons.

One had to be truly unlucky not to have him join even briefly at one's field site, as he clucked over the brood of wildlife enthusiasts like a mother hen. I was one of those unfortunate few.

Disappointed about not being able to join me, he earnestly explained why: "As much as I would like to, Gujarat is a dry State." I countered optimistically: "You will be well taken care of. Leave that to me." He smiled sadly and said: "But in Kutch, you cannot guarantee fresh fish." And indeed I couldn't. Not to his satisfaction in any case. He promised to make it up to me, feeling particularly remorseful about seeing me so crestfallen, especially since this was my first field season after going into remission, just a few months after my cancer diagnosis.

Outside my family, he was one of the first people I spoke to after my diagnosis. His optimism at seeing me back in the field, finishing what I started, kept me going

through my treatment. And I did return to finish the project. He supported me every inch of the way. He was so proud to see me defend my thesis. To make up for not visiting me in Kutch, he came and spent a few days with me in Mumbai a few years ago.

Dr. Ajith Kumar, a pioneering primatologist, wildlife biologist, conservationist, educator, and mentor, passed away at the age of 72 on March 1.

Dehradun and Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History in Coimbatore before joining the Wildlife Conservation Society-India in 2003. He was the founding course director of the Master's programme in wildlife biology and conservation at the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bengaluru from its inception in 2004 until 2020. A member of the IUCN Primate Specialist Group, he continued to be associated with the Master's programme and the Centre for Wildlife Studies in Bengaluru.

Source of inspiration

Despite all his travel, teaching, research, administration, mentoring, and a thousand little things that would fill up his day, he would always make time to talk. He was there, whenever I needed advice, guidance, or just a chat. With undivided attention. Never judging, forever calm, sometimes goofy, ever humorous, invariably smiling with twinkling eyes that missed nothing. Even when chiding me, even when earnestly telling me off for something, he could not hold a serious expression for long.

We have lost an incredible institution builder, primatologist and wildlife biologist par excellence, and an extraordinary human being way too early. I take solace that Ajith Kumar left us, perhaps, in the best way possible. Doing what he loved, not in too much pain, surrounded by some of his

beloved brood and friends, gallivanting in the field, trekking through the forests of India, and tracking mammals to his last breath.

In a field of inspiring conservationists having strong personalities, with tempers often running high, rife with splintered opinionated factions, Ajith sir was that rare hero who was universally loved. An *Ajatasatru*, one without enemies, disarming everyone with his good sense, sensibility, and smile. Never letting things get out of hand, even when dealing with two dozen temperaments and personalities, he would manage frayed emotions with his grace, humour, and smile intact.

There is an outpouring of collective grief from the legion of conservationists and wildlife biologists he had inspired. Colleagues and friends spanning more than four decades, from the Western Ghats to the hallowed halls of Cambridge where he did his doctorate, have shared numerous anecdotes, images, videos, and archival information. This precious vault of memories has gone a long way in accepting that while he will no longer be there in person, he will always be around, unparalleled in his impact on the global wildlife community. And even in his death, he has brought the community together. Unifying us in our anguish with his passing but also the weight of his everlasting legacy.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

It is heartening to learn that the tourism industry is bursting at the seams in Assam. (*Assam in summer*, Mar. 16) One hopes that the State government will continue to give importance to the safety of tourists and infrastructural facilities. It should keep the momentum going.

Needless to say, increasing investment in the sector which has enhanced employment, output and income in the State should never affect the ecological balance of the place.

S. Ramakrishnasayee

Community effort

Purnima Devi Barman's perseverance and commitment to saving the greater adjutant stork have rightly won her encomiums from around the world. (*'The stork sister and her 'hargila army'*; Mar. 16) The success of conservation efforts is inextricably linked to community involvement. Her efforts exemplify American biologist Barry Commoner's words: 'The proper use of science is not to conquer nature, but to live in it.'

Anusha Pillay

Chronicler of tragedy Sudipta Datta has beautifully captured the personality of Nobel laureate author Han Kang. ('Han Kang's imagery of pain'; Mar. 16) The novelist seems to have a special skill for capturing the emotional heft of human tragedies and stirring the conscience of readers across the globe. To call her literary exercise an 'act of resistance against forgetting' is just apt.

M.N. Saraswathi Devi

Lives in conflict

Both books highlight the human psyche of the victim and victimiser, and the horrific tyranny going on in the laboratory of superpowers. (Cost of war; Mar. 16) What's in it to be proud of for Israel and the U.S.? They have conquered nothing.

Buddha Jagdish Rao

Language of satire G. Sampath, the Art Buchwald of *The Hindu*, takes a swipe at the ongoing 3-language row by suggesting 14 languages as the solution. ('Why not a 14-language formula?'; Mar. 16) I suggest 'Sampathan' language as the 15th one.

K. Pradeep

Evil practice The rip-roaring satirical suggestion of G. Sampath was a treat to read. There cannot be a better way of whipping the Hindi fanatics. The last line was indeed a masterstroke.

C.K. Prem Kumar

Evil practice To those who might be wondering whether the practice of Sati in ancient days was just or objectionable, the answer lies in Devdutt Pattanaik's article. ('Fire, fidelity and an inhuman heritage'; Mar. 16) The concept is barbaric and its execution, gruesome. It is appalling to learn certain ancient texts endorsed the evil practice.

Sanath Kumar T.S.

We are indebted to reformists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule and William Bentinck who played a key role in abolishing Sati and saving the lives of countless women.

Ratna Naidu



MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Fraudsters making hay

Data leaks, digital arrests, money doubling schemes, fake job offerings have left everyone on shaky ground

Ashok Balakrishna

The annoyance of honking

The relentless, maddening sound is an assault on the senses and a constant irritation

K.S. Venkatachalam

Music on call

Reminiscences about the Binaca Geetmala programme in the early 1970s

Satish Kumar Sharma

Second time is steady

Returning to anything is not about discovering something new, but about settling into it

Annapurna Sinharay

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.



Gayatri Rangachari Shah

Nilaya Anthology is our version of the NCPA or NMACC," explains Pavitra Rajaram, design director of Asian Paints, referencing Mumbai's two major cultural institutions as a point of comparison to the company's newly opened luxury design mecca in the heart of the city. It is being called the most ambitious interior design showroom in the country, and is spread across 100,000 sq.ft., functioning as a cavernous one-stop shop for décor. Its scale alone, bang in the city centre, in a metropolis starved for space, is awe-inspiring.

Currently home to 92 makers from India and around the world, it has celebrated Indian brands such as Vikram Goyal Studio, Jaipur Rugs and Kashmir Loom alongside reputed international ones from Europe, Asia and Africa.

Also debuting in India is pioneering design curator Nina Yasher, who heads Milan's storied Nilufar gallery, with a mix of vintage and contemporary furniture pieces. Visitors are already flocking to this address in Mumbai's mill district, for everything from kitchen and bath inspiration to art, lighting, carpets, furniture and plants.

"This is a first for India," says designer Goyal, who has successfully updated Indian brass and metalwork heritage for contemporary living. "It is an incredible opportunity to present the evolving narrative of Indian craftsmanship on home ground since we aim to highlight how centuries-old techniques can hold their place in modern spaces while continuing to innovate," he adds.

Museum of design

Architect Rooshad Shroff, who created the vast space, juxtaposing large open areas with smaller rooms spread across two floors, tied together with a sweeping ramp and replete with a conservatory, says he was keen on not creating a mall experience. "I was keen to push the idea of a museum where you go from one room to the other and yet there is a linkage to allow individual brands to represent themselves within the space," he says.

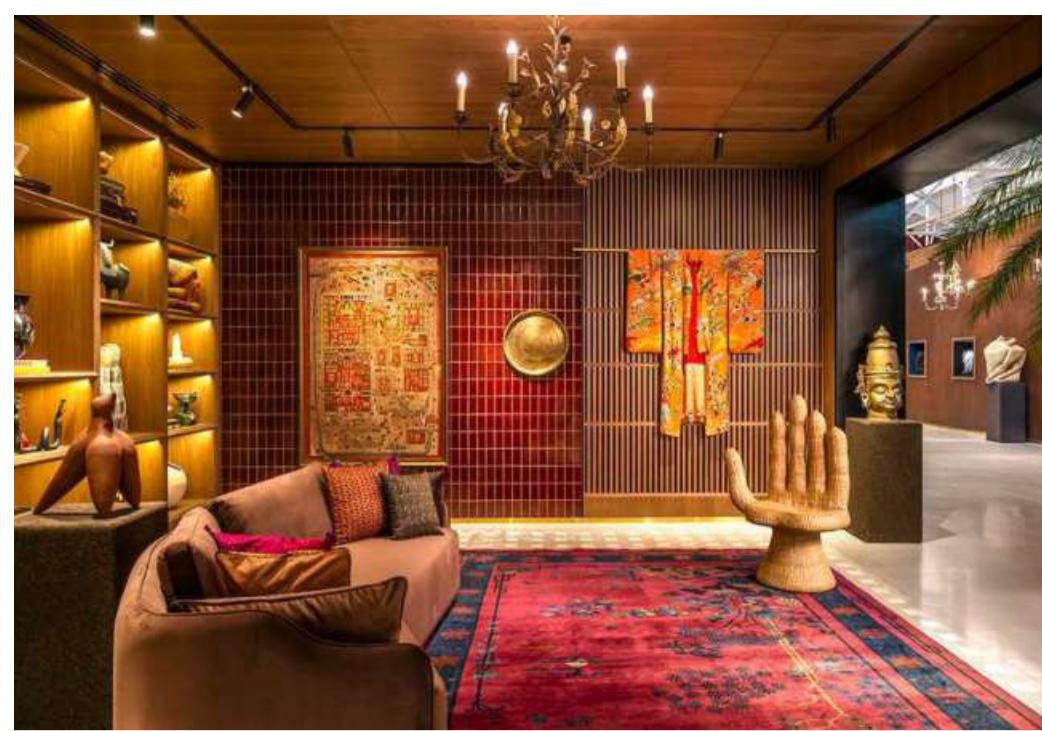
As one wanders through the space, rooms filled with tableware to objects to carpets to candles to textiles unveil themselves. "It's like you're transported into a dramatic Grand Bazaar-like space in Istanbul and Mumbai's answer to the legendary luxury home furnishings store ABC Carpet and Home in New York City," observes Gaurav Bhatia, luxury specialist and founder of Art-chives India. Where else will one find pieces by Hida Sangyo, a century-old Japanese wood furniture maker, or art from Sabayachi Art

Foundation, which is debuting at Nilaya and will be permanently ensconced here. At the launch, works by artist-in-residence Atish Mukherjee – priced from ₹13.5 lakh to ₹52 lakh – were showcased and all the paintings sold out in a day.

Hub for architects

"It's not just a retail space, it is a cultural catalyst and a storytelling experience," explains Amit Syngle, MD and CEO of Asian Paints. He has been expanding the brand's footprint to include design and cultural experiments.

Meanwhile, Rajaram describes Nilaya (meaning dwelling in Sanskrit) Anthology as "a destination for design" and



Beyond square footage (From far left) The Orangery and other rooms and collectibles at Nilaya Anthology. (HASHIM BADANI AND REMA CHAUDHARY)



DESTINATION DESIGN

Inside Nilaya Anthology, located in the heart of Mumbai's mill district and arguably the most ambitious interior design showroom in the country



hopes it will become a space for the community to experience art, design and culture. Plans include a co-working space for architects and interior designers to meet clients, a material library containing over 100 materials curated by Rajaram and her team, including Tanish Malji and Maithili Goradia, and a café and a restaurant run by Indian Accent. Cultural events including music, dance and theatre will be hosted throughout the year.

Construction surge

As Indian cities experience a building boom – Mumbai alone saw 154 new skyscrapers over 40 floors built between 2019 and 2023, which is expected to

rise by 34% over the next five years – the interior design trade is set to explode. Research by IMARC estimates that the interiors market size will grow at a compounded annual growth rate of 8.5%, to reach US \$71 billion by 2033. And while a recent report by U.S. venture capital firm Blume Venture stated that a billion Indians have no discretionary spending power, 140 million Indians are consuming, and within that group, the wealthy are getting wealthier. Just look at the Indian art auction market, for example, which has doubled in the past five years. Asian Paints hopes to tap into that segment, as it transforms increasingly into a luxury design company,

supporting, among other things, consumer design shows across the country.

Under one expansive roof

Post the pandemic, the company recognised a gap in the super premium home design space. "It was so fragmented, you had to go somewhere to get a beautiful light, and somewhere for a chair, or a carpet elsewhere," she explains. Rajaram has been curating and commissioning pieces for Nilaya since the project's inception two years ago, but in her head she's been doing it all her life. Previously lead designer at luxury retail brand Good Earth, her mind is a veritable filing cabinet for notable crafts and product

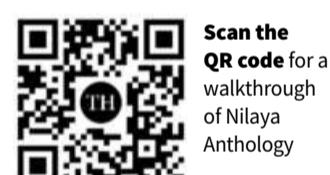
makers from around the world. Of the many items she loves are the ceramics from Cristabel McGreevy, whose works she first saw in London, and the upcycled Shalini quilts made from leftover silk yarns in Maheshwar, a place she first visited 25 years ago with Sally Holkar of Rehwa and Women's Weave collective.

Why not fully Indian?

Notably, in the era of digital shopping and growing AI-enabled technology, Nilaya is betting that such a large physical space offers a unique value proposition. But couldn't Nilaya have been a completely Indian brand destination? Bengaluru-based interior decorator Vinita Chaitanya observes that while the concept of a design destination is much-needed, it could easily have been full of Indian design and craft alone. "When one goes to European fairs like Salone del Mobile, it is a platform for European brands," she says, and continues, "Why could this have not been a platform and a completely Indian design destination because we have incredible craftsmanship and product designers and so much to choose from?" Rajaram says Nilaya consciously wanted to offer an equal platform to show

international and Indian designers working side by side to foster a language of design transcending geographic division. "I wanted to bring people together who are grouped by philosophy rather than where they come from, to showcase global craft at the very highest level of quality and of experience. Everything is small batch and artisanal. We have ceramic artists from the U.K., basket weavers from Ghana, works from Indonesia to within India, from Nagaland and Manipur. It's the coming together of ideas," she adds. Her advice to shoppers is to slow down, not just come in and transact. "Luxury is about the ability to pause and experience, and what is more luxurious than entering through a beautiful garden in the middle of this busy metropolis?"

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.



Dancing with fire and spirits

While *theyyam* performances are captivating, it is the human aspects of the mystic ritual from Kerala's north that are fascinating

Sheila Kumar

It's still dark at 4.20 a.m. and the crowds are slowly building. The atmosphere is akin to a carnival, underpinned by stalls selling plastic toys and hard-boiled eggs. Friends are greeting each other; one of our set is busy trying to buy a baby's friendship with biscuits. As the *chenda* beats start to gather steam, the air slowly turns electric.

We are at the Thee (fire) Chamundi or Ottakolam *theyyam*, and the *merli* (sacred pyre) is slowly being prepped to become a mass of glowing embers into which the *koladhari* (practitioner) will repeatedly fling himself. As with all *theyyams*, this too has a back-story, of Agni, the fire god, aggressively challenging all the other gods. Vishnu takes up the challenge, throws himself into the fire 108 times and of course, emerges unscathed each time, thoroughly extinguishing Agni's boastful pride.

Our 'storyteller', the splendid performing artist Sangeeth Bhaskar, has managed to steer us to a vantage point. But here's the thing: wherever we stand, people shuffle along to give us a better view, sometimes giving up their own spots quite happily. We meet with this Malabar brand of graciousness all through the trip, and realise that the old cliché is actually true: the north Keralite is really the nicest in all of the tiny strip that makes up God's Own Country.

A 2,000-year-old ritual
We are on a 'Theyyam Lite' trip, trying to take in as many performances as we can in a packed schedule in Kasargode, in northernmost Kerala. The north is the birthplace of the ritualistic art form that typically runs from the tenth day of the Malayalam month of Thulam (in mid-October) till the middle of Edavam (in late May/early June). The ceremony – where the performers represent deities, local heroes and ancestral spirits through



elaborate costumes, make-up, and dance – takes place in temples and sacred groves.

The 2,000-year-old ritual of *theyyam* has its roots firmly planted in religion. The moment the intricate and fascinating face-writing of the *koladhari* is finished and the *mudi* (headgear) is put on, the transformation is complete; it is the deity – Shiva, mother goddess Chamundi, Bhadrakali, Gulikan (a fierce form of Shiva), forest deity, tiger, monkey, snake – who is now

controlling the *theyyam*. There is complete faith evident in the locals, but they carry it lightly, watching the ritual with characteristic impassivity, chatting, casually going up to get blessings from the *koladhari* afterwards. I watch slack-jawed as quite a few women make a monetary offering to the *koladhari*, then have his assistant give them change for the large notes they proffer!

The *thee theyyam* is hard to watch. The *koladhari* has a protective skirt of *ola* (palm fronds)

From the flames (Clockwise from left) Kandanan Kelan *theyyam*; and the *koladhari* enters a roaring fire and at times, stands in the middle of it, too.



around him, but I notice the edges of the skirt are glowing, tiny embers sticking to them. His two assistants, who have mastered the angle at which they must enable him to fall on the fire mound, are glowing with the sweat of their efforts.

Sangeeth tells us of an even more dramatic *theyyam*, that of Kandanan

Kelan, a legendary warrior who survived a forest fire with help from the divine, where the *koladhari* enters a roaring fire and at times, stands in the middle of it, too.

We decide we do not have the stomach for that; as it is, I am gasping every time this *koladhari* flings himself on the live coals. And he does it 14 times.

Muthappan and a pup

At the famous Parassini Madappura Sree Muthappan Temple, which is 20 km from Kannur town, we watch the Muthappan (a personification of Vishnu and Shiva) *koladhari* interact with devotees. Since he is a canine-friendly deity whose familiar is a dog, he blesses a pup too, incongruously dressed in a crimson skirt and blouse.

The casual, almost festive, air is a direct counterpoint to the intensity of the *theyyams* being performed. At the Adot Moothedath Kuthire Pazhayasthanam Sree Padarkulangara Bhagavathi Devasthanam in Kanhangad – just 12 km from the medieval Bekal Fort, the largest fort in the state – we are given ringside seats by Raghavan, a temple committee member, and repeatedly urged to eat the food prepared at the temple. It's a community effort, with everyone pitching in to produce a wholesome *sadya*, topped by a simply divine *paruppu payasam*.

For me, the best moment of all comes when a young Muslim man in a skull cap comes up to the Poomaruthan *theyyam* for advice, a befitting smile on his face. Truly, *theyyam* is for all. And all avail of it, too.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based author, journalist and manuscript editor.