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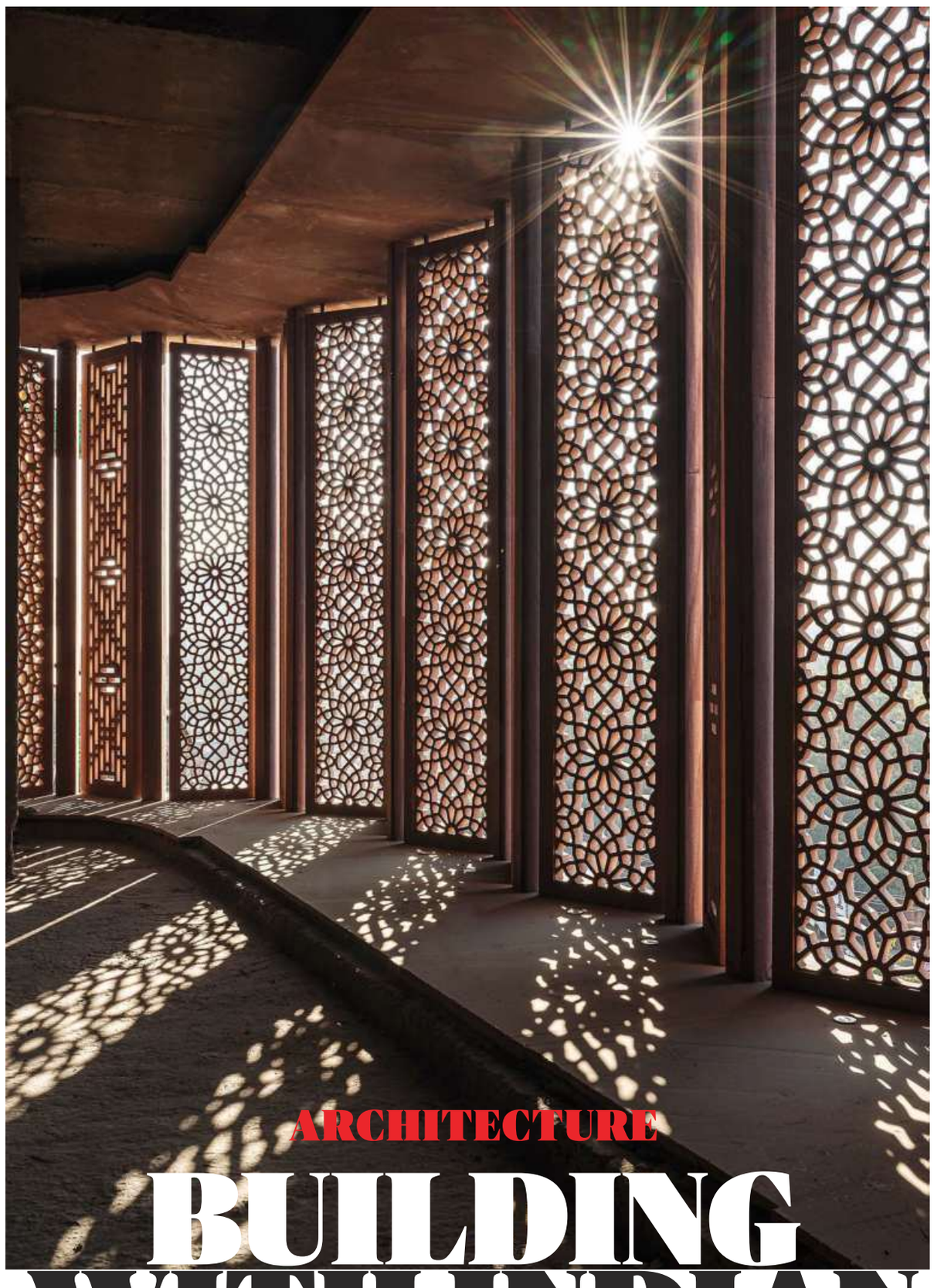

ARCHITECTURE

BUILDING WITH INDIAN CRAFTSMEN

Local architecture, hugely influenced by the West, is now finding its way back to its roots — with *jaalis*, lime plastering, stone and ironwork popping up on large, prestigious projects

Nidhi Gupta

To paint the Chand Baori stepwell of Jaipur in the traditional miniature style cannot be an easy thing to do. For Jaipur-based painter Rajnish Nimbark, to paint it upside down onto a semi-vaulted ceiling, was downright Escherian in complexity. "Even the trees were upside down," he exclaims. Nimbark was tasked with bringing alive the walls and ceilings of the recently-opened Museum of Meenakari Heritage with frescoes depicting scenes of Indian festivals such as Diwali, Holi and *patangbaazi* (kite-fighting). "I've been doing this for 30 years, but I had never done that before."

Over 1,800 km away in Bhubaneswar, Krushi Bhawan, the five-year-old office building for the state department of agriculture (and a pet project of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik), boasts an equally distinct visual identity. One hundred artisans from Odisha wove farmland folklore and mythology into *dhokra*-style light fixtures, *pattachitra*-style carvings on laterite walls, and a brick facade inspired by *ikat* textile patterns. "We did not know we could do anything different," says Sesha, one of the craftspeople in a promotional video. "Earlier, we did carvings for temples. It was only after this project that we realised our skills could be applied in other architectural projects."

The idea for the frescoes came from Nisha Vikram, founder of CraftCanvas, an outfit that has been connecting craft communities focused on painting with urban customers since 2011, while Sibanand Bhol's Collective Craft, an organisation that drives innovation among artisan communities, worked with the Odisha craftspeople. Both are frequent collaborators of New Delhi-based design firm Studio Lotus, who spearheaded the two projects.

"What many don't know is that [jewellery designer] Sunita Shekhawat was unhappy with the building that was originally constructed," says Studio Lotus co-founder Ankur Choksi, talking about the flagship *meenakari* store and museum. "Instead of tearing it down, we suggested dressing it up inspired by the many architectural movements – Rajput, Mughal and Art Deco – seen in Jaipur and Jodhpur to give it a sense of place." This is evident in the red sandstone facade, hand-carved *jaalis* and *araish* lime stucco.

Since it opened, the museum has been hailed for proudly staking claim to an Indian craft that denotes luxury. And in its design, it also signals a rising trend in commercial and public architecture, where traditional craft meets contemporary design in new and exciting ways.

Return of *swadeshi* architecture

This is remarkable considering the history of crafts in India – crafts that are as diverse in material and expression as the regions to which they belong. "Before 1850, there was a burst of creative output," explains Siddhartha Das, an artist, curator and designer who has worked with craft communities for over 20 years. "There were lots of princely kingdoms with an incredible amount of individualism, and a great fervour for making." As the British took over, a lot of these forms of making either died out or mutated to meet the needs and desires of a distant market.

Post-Independence, he says, there was a different kind of fervour – for khadi and *swadeshi*, driven by a very specific sense of euphoria and purpose to build something new.

In those decades, legendary architects such as Charles Correa (Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur), B.V. Doshi (JD Centre of Art, Ahmedabad), Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri of Abhikram (The Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur), and Vasant and Revathi Kamath (Museum of Tribal Heritage, Bhopal), among others, tapped into India's abundant and diverse craft-based resources and knowledge to create buildings that were at once contextual, rooted in the vernacular, and sustainable.

It is a practice that has somewhat waned in the 21st century, says Mumbai-based architect Sanjay Puri. As designers and clients looked to the West for inspiration, and aspired to sketch cityscapes strung with glass skyscrapers, this search for a new idiom took a backseat. But working with craft communities is "becoming a priority again now", he says, especially for site-specific architecture.

The last few years have seen several examples across the country, from the new Parliament building, with its *jaalis* and red sandstone cladding, to Bengaluru's Kempegowda Terminal 2, which has used bamboo and traditional rattan weaving to great effect.

Why is craft largely missing in the public sector?

Recently, in the Nokha district of Rajasthan, Puri convinced his clients to expand their vision for a memorial for the family patriarch into something that serves the community. While for their home, he integrated crafts, including *meenakari*, miniature painting, lime plastering, marble carving and tile laying, for the accompanying open-access community centre, his firm employed local craftspeople and materials from the 114 villages of the district (such as sandstone and its carvers), to line the corridors and the facade of the building. "We had forward-thinking clients, but it's not necessarily a spike in demand," shares Puri, when asked if there is a greater call to integrate craft in their briefs. A majority of these requests come from the private sector, as government involvement in this field is fairly low at present.

It's not a lack of opportunity that is stopping the public sector from adopting craft, either. "There is plenty of scope for craft in public spaces – for instance, at railway stations. But what have we done? We have FRP murals instead of stonework. Somewhere, there is a lapse in understanding in the people involved," says Bhol. Lack of time is another deterrent. "Iconic public buildings using craft are fewer in number today because we are constructing at a much faster pace. Everything has a short deadline, so the engagement is not there. If the government could develop a framework or an SOP for engaging with craftspeople, with terms and conditions that reflect the true on-ground realities, that would help."

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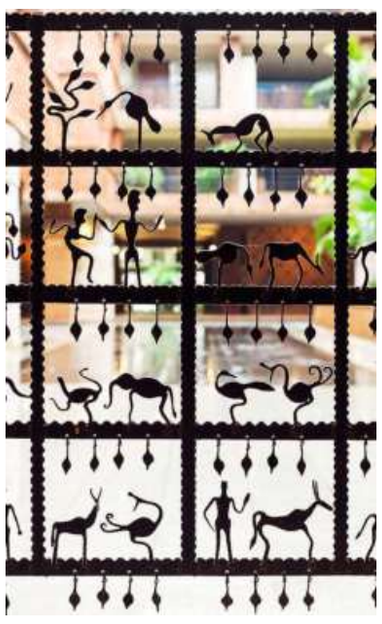

Back to roots (Clockwise from left) Inside the Museum of Meenakari Heritage; Gallery House in West Bengal; an artist working on the Chand Baori ceiling; and panels at Krushi Bhawan. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Other side of the picture

"What we need today is an intervention with craft," says Vinu Daniel, a climate-responsive architect from Kerala who uses local knowledge and resources in his builds. "I don't believe in craft continuing the way it has for thousands of years. We need architects and builders to learn about these crafts, and research, tweak, and adapt them so that they can be used for another 1,000 years."

Daniel also feels that monopolising craft knowledge is hastening its death. Instead of working exclusively with artisans, his team learns the techniques so that they can adapt them. "Currently, I'm building a bridge house [a closed bridge that can serve as a house] in Karjat, Maharashtra. We are constructing the roof from thatched grass, a technique that is almost dead today. An old Maharashtrian man — partially blind, but who can still distinguish between different grasses — is imparting his knowledge to us and we are tweaking it." He is reinforcing the grass with a new type of waterproofing and giving it a layer of ferrocement to ensure longevity and no leakages. "The biggest threat to crafts is their own puritanism" and this needs to change.

The primary challenge is a lack of awareness about traditional crafts on the architect's side. The reason for this is that our education system does not focus on it at all. There is a treasure trove right in our backyard, yet most architects are likely to choose a Scandinavian aesthetic. A long-term solution has to be at the policy level, by introducing crafts in the curriculum itself

NISHA VIKRAM
Founder, CraftCanvas

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TRANSLATIONS IN FOCUS

The restless raconteur

The essays in this volume, some of them translated for the first time, give us a sense of the milieu from which Urdu writer Qurratulain Hyder drew inspiration for her fiction

Anusua Mukherjee
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Qurratulain Hyder's fictional world is populated by a cast of recognisable character types – the existentialist uncle, the useless dreamer (usually Marxist), the Bombay fashionista, the scholar-professor, the kindly woman (usually poor cousin) who labours silently in the household of the rich. They are surrounded by a bevy of working-class characters like street singers, cooks, ayahs, bearers, and beyond that, by nature, as manifested in expansive fields, rivers, fireflies.

The essays from Hyder's family saga, *Kar-e Jahan Daraz Hai* (translated as *As the World Turns* in this volume), presented in English translation for the first time here, give us an inkling of the original people and places that lent themselves to her fictional universe. Since Hyder was markedly averse to discussing her literary works, letting them speak for themselves, these essays are invaluable in giving us a sense of the milieu from which Hyder drew her inspiration.

While Hyder was honoured with a number of awards in her lifetime, including the Jnanpith, Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, she is not discussed as much as her elder contemporaries such as Ismat Chughtai. One reason behind this is the fact that much of her work – Hyder was a prolific writer – still remains untranslated. And Hyder is difficult to translate: her writing follows no rules – while being realistic, it can unexpectedly take a magic realist turn; it can take a sudden dip in history and legends; it can be solemn and tongue-in-cheek, clipped and flowery. It flows like a wild river, taking along everything that comes its way.

Considering this, translators Fatima Rizvi and Sufia Kidwai have done a superb job in *At Home in India*. Besides the essays from *As the World Turns*, the volume has two autobiographical pieces, 'Memories of an Indian Childhood' and 'The Magic Mountain', short stories, pen portraits, and interviews. If the language seems convoluted at times, this may have something to do with the original. Even *Fireflies in the Mist*, Hyder's own transcreation of her Urdu novel, *Akhir-e-Shab ke Humsafar*, is confusing at places. Carrying nuances of Urdu, Hindi, English, her prose has a shifting register, making a smooth translation difficult.

At Home in India
Qurratulain Hyder,
ed. and trs. Fatima Rizvi and Sufia Kidwai
Women Unlimited
₹750

Frozen in time

Another reason why she is not read as much as she should be is the fact that her non-fiction, and some of her fiction, is anchored to its time. Most of the personalities she refers to in *Kar-e Jahan*... must have been well-known in their days, but are just names now. They gesture at an era when the finest minds were imbued with an idealism – a belief in art, education, social equality – which might seem old-fashioned to a reader from our jaded times.

Hyder was born to a literary, progressive family in 1927. Her father, Sajjad Haider Yildirim, registrar of Aligarh Muslim University at the time of her birth, was a poet, critic, essayist and fiction-writer. Her mother, Nazar Sajjad Haider, also a writer, worked for women's reform. It is about such liberal, learned, eccentric personalities that Hyder writes in *Kar-e Jahan*.

While the narrative can be chaotic, it has its moments of sharp insight, for instance, when Hyder says with reference to the migration that started with Partition: "But if these migrations had not taken place human civilisation would not have developed. History has its own determinism and its own logic." Hyder is also clear-sighted about the things that do not change no matter what upheavals take place: most notably, the condition of the working class.

Servants and masters both

In her time, Hyder was accused of being nostalgic for a feudal past. She did belong to an old, aristocratic family but she did not live an entitled life: a single woman throughout, Hyder earned her living as a journalist and a writer. The two shorter autobiographical essays mentioned earlier, about the time she spent in Dalanwala in Dehradun as a child, paint the picture of a storied world of *koi hai* and *chhota hazri*.

But servants and masters are mentioned in the same breath, and the tales of house help such as Faqira and Jaldhara are more delightful than those of their employers. It is individuals like these who give life to her fictional pieces such as 'The Street Singers of Lucknow', or the novel, *Chandni Begum*. By giving these characters, whose lives usually go unremarked, their rightful stories, she ensures their place in the great churn of history.

Those 'ill-fated' Partition months

This translation of Punjabi author Nanak Singh's 1948 novel urges readers to see past divisive forces

Mini Kapoor

In the space of eight months, from February and September of 1948, Nanak Singh signed off on forewords to two novels that chronicled the cataclysms that shattered the social equilibrium of Punjab in the run-up to Independence/ Partition. Singh is regarded as the 'Father of the Punjabi novel', counting 38 novels among his 59 books, and went on to win the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1962 for the novel *Ik Mian Do Talwaraan*.

Over the last few years, his grandson, the now-retired diplomat Navdeep Suri, has been translating his works and bringing them to a wider readership.

Two years ago, Suri published the English translation of the first of the 1948 novels, *Hymns in Blood* (*Khoon de Sohile*). This new book, *A Game of Fire* (*Agg di Khed*), is its sequel. Ideally they would be read in sequence, but it's a measure of Singh's mastery as a storyteller that *A Game of Fire* can be read as a standalone novel, with the backstory lightly filled in.

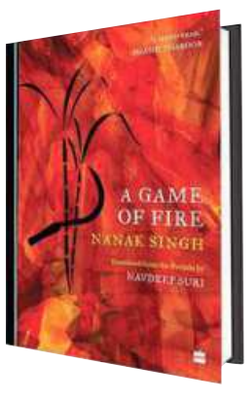
In *Tomb of Sand*, her International Booker Prize-winning Hindi novel, Geetanjali Shree had pivoted her story at Wagah on the India-Pakistan border, and asked, "...is every story really a Partition tale – love romance longing courage pain-in-separation bloodshed?" Maybe, or not, but Singh's two novels were written on the run, as the consequences of Partition were still unfolding. They are a first draft of the story of "five-and-a-half ill-fated months" from March 5, 1947, when violence took Punjab in its grip.

Historical narrative

Singh writes in the Foreword: "In my earlier novels, the plot was usually a creation of my own imagination, but that is not the case with these two books. The characters depicted in them may not be real but the events I've narrated are entirely true... I can assure my readers that my account of the incidents related to Pothohar (where the first novel is set) and Amritsar (where the second is set) is authentic, accurate and recounted with all the honesty that I could muster." He thus beseeches the reader to take the book "as a historical narrative and not as a work of fiction".

At the novel's start, it is early March, the occasion is a meeting in Amritsar of a Unity Council formed a couple of months ago to be a "force of peace" in the face of communal strife. Satnam Singh, 25, is watching in dismay as the number of active members dips, and many among those who do attend are becoming polarised and advocating vengeance. City life is changing too – "the Hindus and Sikhs tended to move together, and the Muslims also stayed close to their own community". The city's police force, as elsewhere, has mostly melted away and in some instances become complicit in the rioting.

History lessons Children look at a Partition photograph at an exhibition in Lahore. (GETTY IMAGES)



A Game of Fire
Nanak Singh,
trs Navdeep Suri
Harper Perennial
₹499

Trying times

Satnam's family continues to abide by Amritsar's ethos of community service, and food is cooked and taken to the camps housing refugees and those suddenly homeless in their own city. In the course of his survey, rescue and relief expeditions, he makes acquaintance with an elderly man and his niece Krishna, refugees from Pothohar. Their heroism draws as much from acts of bravery, as from their everyday allegiance to basic principles. In time they become part of Satnam's household.

Against the backdrop of violence and reprisal, even Satnam's moral compass threatens to go awry, but the young woman's counsel stabilises it. Her reunion with loved ones and subsequent tragedies are unflinchingly recounted.

In the Afterword, translator Suri recovers from the novel some of Nanak Singh's life story and literary evolution. For instance, Singh himself later regretted that the women in his novels of the 1920s and 30s were not sufficiently strong and assertive. Suri finds instances of Singh's personal experience in Satnam's actions.

In effect, the grandson's Afterword serves as a bookend to the author's Foreword. If Singh uttered the hope that his books would nudge readers to see themselves as a part of "a single creed of humanity", Suri urges them to keep heeding history's caution against religious divisions.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based journalist and critic.

Translator Jayasree Kalathil; and (bottom) author Sandhya Mary.

INTERVIEW

'I'm partial to books with child protagonists'

Jayasree Kalathil on translating Malayalam writer Sandhya Mary's novel *Maria, Just Maria*

Vidhya Anand

Sandhya Mary's *Maria, Just Maria*, translated from the Malayalam by the award-winning Jayasree Kalathil, is a witty and insightful investigation into contemporary society's binary ideas such as normal and abnormal. A moving and humorous novel written from the perspective of a child, it is the story of a girl born in Kerala, into a Syrian Christian family. Sharing her experience of translating this book, Kalathil delves into ideas of storytelling, writing children's points-of-view, and the experiences of women in society. Edited excerpts:

Question: *What inspired you to translate* Maria, Just Maria*?*
Answer: I usually only translate books I like as a reader myself. I don't go by literary importance, or if the writer is well-known. The books that I like must also sit well with my personal politics. When it came to *Maria, Just Maria*, I'm quite partial to books that have children as the protagonists. I like books narrated from their point-of-view, or books that have one or two children as the main characters. In the hands of good writers, I think that does something to the way in which you can write a book. It's about writers who don't condescend children or writers who don't see children as lesser human beings.

Q: *The humour in* Maria, Just Maria *is particularly tender, witty, and endearing. How did you work through that in the translation?*
A: Sandhya Mary has a very specific kind of humour. As it is, humour is difficult to translate. But the positive thing for me as a translator is that I get Sandhya's humour. It's the kind of humour that I like and one that makes sense to me. That helped. I did have to pay attention to the fact that I didn't lose that humour through the translation.

Q: *As a translator, how do you preserve powerful dialogues spoken by the characters?*
A: The dialogues are reflective of what we've gone through as women in my generation. They also denote a certain time in history. The story, while being about Maria, is also set in context to the land, the history, and the social and political aspects of that time.

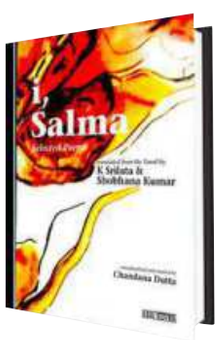
The power that's in the original somehow has to be conveyed in a translation. You can't lose the intensity. Sometimes, you must work carefully to bring that intensity into the story. It helps that the time the story is set in is one I connect with completely. It is our generation; it is our childhood in some ways, and that really comes through.

Read the full interview on magazine.thehindu.com

The interviewer is a poet and consulting editor exploring stories on books, culture and art.

POETRY AND BODY POLITICS

K. Srilata and Shobhana Kumar on translating Tamil writer Salma's poems in i, Salma (published by Red River)



Salma's poetry is known for its boldness, its mapping of female sexuality, body politics and interiority. It wasn't easy to preserve her signature boldness, her aesthetic and her voice in our translations. As poets and translators, what we were struck by is the manner in which Salma fashions a radically new language, a women's language which leans into the body, which does not hesitate to sing the female body and to mourn the ways in which it is marked by suffering and violence. Our attempt has been to match – as closely as possible – the pace and the musicality of the original poems.

Soviet leadership
N.A. Bulganin, Prime Minister of the USSR, and (right) N.S. Khrushchev, Member, Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, in New Delhi, in December 1955. (PIB)

When Khrushchev came calling

How a diplomat showcased India's spectacular diversity during a superpower leader's first official visit

Kallol Bhattacherjee
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Decades ago, at the Centre for West Asian Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, it was a well-established practice to invite serving and retired diplomats to speak to students and researchers. The writer first met the diplomats he writes about in his new book, Nehru's First Recruits*, at the JNU seminars. One of the "first recruits" was Mirza Rashid Ali Baig who had to plan New Delhi's welcome to visiting Soviet dignitaries Premier Bulganin and General Secretary Khrushchev in 1955. An edited excerpt:*

1955 was the year of Indian diplomacy; it's when New Delhi emerged as one of the most-visited capitals of the postcolonial world. This was also the year of a turnaround in India-Soviet relations. In June that year, Prime Minister Nehru had visited the Soviet Union for the first time. He had allowed the Soviet Union to open a diplomatic mission in Delhi years ago, but bilateral relations between the two were far from what it could have been because of Joseph Stalin's sceptical attitude towards India. That year, General Secretary Khrushchev, successor to Stalin, was to visit India along with Premier Bulganin. The Soviets had given a grand welcome to Nehru, and the understanding was that the Indian welcome would have to match that of Moscow.

Nehru's First Recruits
Kallol Bhattacherjee
HarperCollins
₹699

Difficult task

This was a difficult task. India had been hosting big foreign visitors since at least the Asian Relations Conference of 1947, but the visit by Soviet leadership was another matter. Nehru was the first major non-communist leader to visit Moscow and his successful tour proved that Winston Churchill was wrong in saying that the Soviet Union was behind an 'iron curtain'. The visit of the Soviet leadership to India was therefore going to be a momentous occasion.

The protocol division of the Ministry of External Affairs drew up plans for welcoming official guests. But the division needed to be revitalised to welcome leaders from a superpower. The task of drawing up the hosting plans thus fell on the second head of the protocol division – Mirza Rashid Ali Baig. The challenge before Baig was of a different order. The scale of the welcome often indicated the importance of the visit, and the leader of the Soviet bloc could not just be welcomed through official ceremonies – that would be insufficient. The entire capital of India had to be worked up to a festive spirit to make the effort worthwhile. M.R.A. Baig began planning the visit that would begin a festival.

Tribal and classical show

A major challenge before the Indian hosts was the fact that Indians did not have a unitary culture to showcase. Soviets paid a great deal of emphasis on cultural shows for foreign delegates, and the Indians felt it was necessary to showcase something spectacular to impress the Soviet guests. The problem was, however, that India did not have one form of art, as every part of the country had something unique to offer. The responsibility of planning for the cultural show thus fell on Baig's wife, Tara.

She chose a spacious part of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, which was not hitherto used, and a large stage was erected for the performance. Earthen lamps were lit, and two performances depicted the dance forms of tribal India and classical Indian dance forms. The performance took place in the backdrop of thousands of diyas, and the atmosphere turned ecstatic as Mrinalini Sarabhai took the stage.

India was a newly independent country, and public enthusiasm was high because of the popularity of the Soviet Union; hundreds of thousands of people lined the roads across the city – from the airport in Palam to the central part of the city in Connaught Circus. People sat on the roads as they waited for the Soviet leaders and threw flowers on the way. This was the first visit to a non-Soviet Asian country by the Soviet leaders, and it was spectacular.

Support on Kashmir

It was during this time that the Protocol Division and the PWD came up with the idea of floral designs to welcome the guests. Among the many ideas was one to create the flags of the guest country with flowers. Gigantic floral flags of India and the USSR were placed on prime roundabouts in the Lutyen's zone of New Delhi so that the motorcade carrying Khrushchev and Bulganin could see them. The high point of the visit was the public welcome, which was led by PM Nehru at the Ramlila Maidan, the meeting point of Old and New Delhi.

Most importantly, during his stay in India, Khrushchev spent two days in Kashmir, where he declared that Jammu and Kashmir belonged to India. The Kashmir dispute had caused a great deal of embarrassment for India since the beginning, and the support from Khrushchev came at a crucial moment for the Nehru government. If the purpose behind the spectacular hospitality was to impress the Soviet guests and get them to sway to the Indian tune, then Baig had succeeded in achieving his goal.

Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins.

IN CONVERSATION

CAUGHT BETWEEN BIG FOOD AND BIG PHARMA

Writer-journalist Johann Hari brings himself into the Ozempic conversation, taking readers through the risks of obesity, its causes and effects, and what the drug does

Sunalini Mathew
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Did you take Ozempic?" entertainer Barbra Streisand asked actor Melissa McCarthy, on an Instagram post, now deleted, revealing two things about the world we live in (besides her boomer self still figuring out the tiresome everyone-sees-everything nature of social media). Her comment, in late April, revealed that a) irrespective of body-positive movements "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" as model Kate Moss said once, and that b) Ozempic, a drug used to treat diabetes for 18 years, is now being prescribed for weight loss. Several celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey and Elon Musk, have spoken about taking meds to lose weight (not just Ozempic).

It is in this context, and in a world that's getting fatter – 1 billion people lived with obesity in 2022 as per a *Lancet* study – that *Magic Pill: The Extraordinary Benefits and Disturbing Risks of the New Weight-Loss Drugs*, has been researched and written. Writer-journalist Johann Hari has this way of bringing out a book on an idea whose time has arrived. But it's not just his timing that's right – share prices of companies developing drugs to curb obesity are rising – it's also his style of looking at both the big and the little picture. "This is a mass experiment, carried out on millions of people, and I am one of the guinea pigs," he says on page 20.

Balanced formula

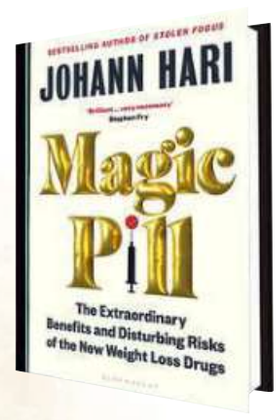
It is hard for a writer to put themselves into the story and not succumb to preening as the lead character. It is harder to bring in family and friends without over-emotionality, but Hari does all of this without boring the reader. Perhaps the balance comes from his journalistic training. "I'm not an expert," he says a few times, while talking about the book to *The Hindu*. "I'm a journalist who goes on a journey to speak to the experts, to speak to all kinds of different people, to try to get to the bottom of what's going on and with these drugs."

> **I lost a stone and a half** [on Ozempic]…. My body fat percentage fell from 32% to 22%. It was the fastest and most dramatic weight loss of my life…. I felt lighter and quicker on my feet, and that boosted my confidence enough that I started to strut a little…. But I was surprised to notice that, at the same time, I also felt disconcerted and out of sorts

There is a formula to his books, of course. He brings himself into the narrative (he is on Ozempic here), along with people he is close to, visits experts (he's travelled the world doing that) and takes readers through the science, simple enough for someone with a class 10 understanding of it. "The drug seemed to change more than the patients' bodies. It seemed to change their minds," he says at the beginning of the book, not weighing people down with complex knowledge on the brain-gut axis immediately, but introducing it later.

There's a similar style with *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions and Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*.

In the 323-page *Magic Pill*, Hari remains endearingly vulnerable through his admissions and conversations with friends: "I had dinner with a friend one night, and as he shovelled some breaded chicken schnitzel into his mouth, he said to me: 'I don't get it. Why don't you lose weight the normal way? Why don't you go on a diet and exercise instead?' He was only asking what I had been thinking at the back of my own mind." This openness makes the drug companies' responses sound all the more stilted, like they'd been put through several hawk-eyed lawyers.



Magic Pill: The Extraordinary Benefits and Disturbing Risks of the New Weight Loss Drugs
Johann Hari
Bloomsbury
₹699

Going beyond science

Through the 12 chapters, an introduction and conclusion, Hari uses the bio-psycho-social transdisciplinary model of interconnectedness to look at various aspects of the drug, including what it could do to those with eating disorders. He takes the reader through the physical risks of obesity and what the drugs do: positively, "cause the people who use them to lose between 5 and 24 per cent of their body weight"; neutrally, that the effects "were coming from manipulating a tiny hormone named GLP-1 that exists in my gut and brain"; negatively, "scientists disagree on even basic aspects of it."

He also goes beyond science, to why we're becoming fatter in the first place, why we aren't able to take the weight off (and it's not about greed or the lack of willpower), and why we may need obesity drugs after all. He talks about an experiment done by a scientist, involving rats. The rats were first fed regular, healthy food, and then introduced to an American diet of very-sweet-very-salty "manufactured food". Their "natural nutritional wisdom" crashed, he says, over a call from London: "They no longer knew when to stop. They just compulsively overate and quite rapidly became obese." Then the professor withdrew what we call 'junk food'. "He thought, well, they'll eat more of the healthy food than they used to, and that'll prove that it expands your appetite. That's not what happened. What happened was much weirder. Once they've had the American food and it was taken away, they refused to eat the healthy food at all. It was like they no longer recognised it as food. They preferred to starve. It was only when they were literally starving that they went back to eating it."

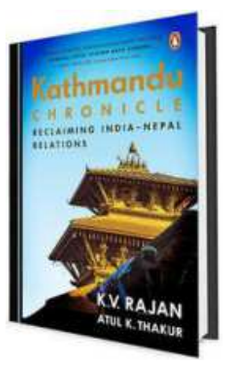
Everyone should read Hari's book, especially those who determine whether a cart selling fruit be 'allowed' at the street corner or a supermarket selling ultra-processed packaged foods.

Magic Pill is an honest look at a complex situation, where changing food systems meet burgeoning medical companies, and people are crushed in between.

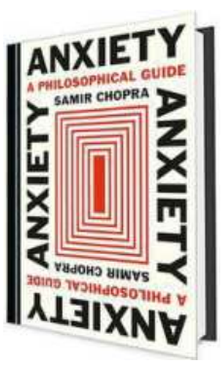
Johann Hari (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

BROWSER

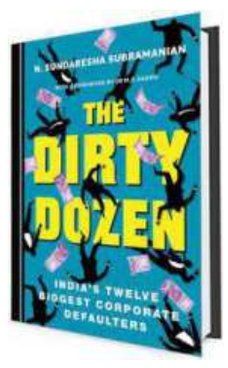
Kathmandu Chronicle: Reclaiming India-Nepal Relations
K.V. Rajan, Atul K. Thakur
Penguin/Vintage
₹499
Nepal's history in recent decades has been marked by tumultuous events and transformations. Two writers, a diplomat and a scholar, explain why there have been "sharp fluctuations". They argue that India needs to make a fresh beginning in Nepal.



Anxiety: A Philosophical Guide
Samir Chopra
Princeton University Press
₹1,191 (Kindle price)
Why do people feel anxious? Chopra, who teaches philosophy, argues that anxiety isn't always or only a medical condition. He provides insights from many philosophies, including Buddhism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory.



The Dirty Dozen: India's Twelve Biggest Corporate Defaulters
N. Sundaresha Subramanian
Pan Macmillan
₹499
In June 2017, the RBI disclosed a list of the country's 12 biggest defaulters, responsible for about a quarter of bad loans. A journalist investigates its impact on the banking system, recording the misadventures of Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi, Jatin Mehta, and others.



The Final Farewell: Understanding the Last Rites and Rituals of India's Major Faiths
Minakshi Dewan
HarperCollins
₹499
This volume explores how major faiths treat the dead, believed by some to be spiritual pollutants; the worship of bodies at the pyre; professional mourners hired to wail for the dead; and musicians celebrating life at funerals.

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

BUILDING WITH INDIAN CRAFTSMEN

At the moment, as Puri puts it, "it's designers and architects who've become more aware of the need to work with crafts". Moving away from western ideas of building, he feels a new understanding is taking shape, especially in the private sector, but that "it's also a bit of a chain reaction".

Encouraging community engagement

For Kolkata-based architect Abin Chaudhuri, the ongoing shift "acknowledges craft's potential, revitalising tradition and deepening connections to India's heritage". Case in point: his recent project, Gallery House – a community centre that would serve the neighbourhood with a multipurpose room, a sitting area and a pantry for tuition classes and yoga sessions – in the small West Bengal town of Bansberia.

To reflect a sense of ownership, Chaudhuri took cues from Bengal's terracotta temples and worked with ceramic artist Partha Dasgupta. They combined rejected ceramic blocks produced for industrial use, and terracotta bricks procured from a riverside brick field nearby, for the walls and facade of the building. Local brickwork artisans were also roped in for the Bandhan Residential School of Business in Bolpur – for whose design, Chaudhuri was keen to borrow from and showcase the context in which the campus sits. "Craft, as both material and process, is a potent tool for encouraging community engagement and sustainable practices in making."

Across the country, hotels, retail shopfronts and airports have been canvases for showcasing India's artisanal expertise, too. Das helped *kalamkari* artisans create stunning vermilion-coloured textile ceilings for the Lotus House at Bengaluru airport. For menswear designer Rajesh Pratap Singh's flagship store in Delhi, Studio Lotus employed artisans to create a white metal mesh of scissors and loops, which stands on a grey sandstone floor, textured using shot blasting and brushing techniques. And for French luxury brand Hermes' new store at the Jio World Plaza, Mumbai, Vikram worked with 50-60 female *chikankari* embroiderers from Lucknow for over six months to create a 2,200 sq. ft. of embroidery for the walls.

IIT Bhilai's new campus is another example of how traditional craft and contemporary architecture can be in sync. Delhi architects Sanjay and Tanuja Kanvinde hired Bhol of Collective Craft to create an environment in a technology institution that evoked culture, nature and local mythology. He worked with wrought iron craftsmen to translate Gond artist Ram Singh Urveti's drawings – telling stories like the birth of the river Narmada, the forest as a fount of nourishment – into eye-catching metal panels.

Incentivising the crafts sector

Over two decades of doing this, Bhol is well-versed with the challenges that come with integrating craft in contemporary architecture. "We've realised that senior craftsmen often come with a lot of rigidity. It's the young artisans who want answers. 'When everybody is rejecting this traditional craft, where do we fit in?' they ask. Our challenge has been to take them along and demonstrate that their work can also be contemporary, meaningful and vastly different from what they've understood it to be."

Worryingly, "today, craft is the fourth largest employing sector in the country, and it has the highest attrition rate after agriculture", says Das. Still, they all agree that when done right, craft in contemporary architecture can be tremendously rewarding, especially for the craftspeople. "Employing artisans from craft communities [in projects like IIT Bhilai] is important because it not only honours their expertise, but also gives them a livelihood and different ways of looking at what they did traditionally," adds Tanuja, explaining that bringing them on board isn't a budget challenge either.

(Clockwise from top left) Nokha Village Community Centre; Krushi Bhawan; and Odisha artisans at work.

Give them respect

"Many of my buildings have woodwork, for which I use local craftsmen from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. What matters is that we give them consistent work, not just a handful of projects, and the status of them doing artists' work," says Chennai architect Benny Kuriakose. "During the initial years of Chennai's DakshinaChitra [the heritage museum with over 18 authentic historical houses], visitors would come with their grandchildren to show them how they used to live back in the day. Now, more than 27 years later, we have people borrowing inspiration from these houses and introducing verandahs and terracotta structures to their own buildings. Traditional crafts like lime plastering are getting popular, even if the labour costs five times more than conventional plaster. It takes research to bring down costs, and it will help if our scientific institutions do some studies on this."

All government projects are supposed to spend 10% of their budget on art and craft – to be context specific, using local resources. But to achieve this, you have to spend time right from the beginning, ideating and researching. Very few do this. Today, the need is for more reliable interfaces between craftspeople and architects [like Collective Crafts] who can help bring craft into the built form

TANUJA KANVINDE
Architect

"The base material being used is still the same. And with the labour cost, you are able to provide somebody a living." Vikram has witnessed lives changed, artisans who've been able to swap their tin roof houses for *pucca* ones. Choksi mentions a craft community that worked with Studio Lotus on the Raas Hotel in Jodhpur in 2013, who are now so overworked, they are turning away commissions.

They all also mention the desire for more government incentive in this domain. Jaipur-based painter Nimbark is critical of the PM Vishwakarma Yojana, a ₹13,000-crore scheme announced last September to cover 18 handicrafts and artisans across India. "Miniature painting and many others aren't on the list. Colleges don't teach it anymore, and people now make art on computers. We need all the support we can get," he says. "If projects like these museums can be encouraged, if the government could mandate that a corner for Indian crafts be reserved in all new buildings – that will be a start."

Judging by Instagram Reels that show off paintings, Chandigarh-style chairs and rugs under hashtags like "Indian modern", maybe that day is not far away. "What we are realising is that the world is becoming an increasingly homogenous place," observes Choksi. "This idea of everything looking identical, whether I'm sitting in Mumbai or New York, is not speaking to everyone anymore. Craft is contextual to our country because we have a lot of it, and we have access to it. It's something that elevates our everyday experience. Why not infuse it?"

The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, writing on culture, lifestyle and technology.

WILD IN THE CITY

PEREGRINES IN A SKYSCRAPER

Loss of habitat has led to the falcons moving into our highrises. And abundant food and safe shelter mean these urban hunters are thriving now

Sunil Rajagopal

Aura is perched at the edge of an overhang 29 dizzying storeys above ground, like a Marvel superhero. Overlooking a dominion of wetland hemmed in by the city and a road rolling southwest, threatening more development. She drowsily scratches her chin, eyes closed to the burgeoning March sun. Aura is a female peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus calidus*). Her distinctive dark hood, white cheek patches and slate blue back contrasts with a light underbelly marked with horizontal bars and arrowheads. A faint peach fades over her shoulders and breast.

I am here with members of the raptor study group of the Madras Naturalist's Society (MNS). The MNS has been tracking peregrines in Chennai for almost two years, one of the first such studies in India. The study has revealed >35 individuals in the city; including a few shaheens during the southwest monsoon months. Shaheens (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*) are a smaller, brighter plumaged sub-species resident in India that makes local movements. Unlike Aura, whose breeding grounds are far north, somewhere between the Eurasian Tundra and eastern Siberia.

Dozing on another precipitous ledge to our right is a tiercel (male, smaller as is typical of bird-hunting raptors), Minion. He is occasionally woken from his trance by some feral rock pigeons, irreverently cavorting a few feet from him. They may share a penthouse today, but peregrines and rock pigeons evolved together on their traditional homesteads – steep crags and cliffs. Both are designed for speed; bulky bodies and deep, muscular chests powered by pointed pinions and shortish tails. Pitted against prey with a specific skill set, peregrines evolved to kill birds in rapid flight mid-air.

Successful conservation

They hunt from high perches or soaring at great heights. Once a target is locked, they simply fall out of the sky. Wings folded back in a searing nosedive ("stoop") to smite their prey with giant clenched talons as they whoosh past. Most birds are stunned or killed on impact, with the peregrine zooming back up to grasp the dropping bird. If they miss, the falcon will give chase in horizontal pursuit where zigzagging pigeons, plovers and swifts are more evenly matched in terms of sheer speed. Peregrines have been recorded performing stoops at an eye-watering 389 kmph!

Peregrines are symbols of both successful conservation efforts and sheer adaptability. By the late 1970s, they were in precipitous decline worldwide, with many local populations going extinct; decimated by overuse of pesticides like DDT that weakened their eggshells. Phasing out of DDT and painstaking breeding programmes pulled them back from the brink. When populations slowly recovered, a new trend was observed in the 1990s. Peregrines began moving into cities.

Mighty wings (Clockwise from above) Auro; and peregrines spotted around Tamil Nadu. (GNANASKANDAN, PRW, AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Where do living beings thrive?

Wherever there is abundant food and safe shelter. The peregrines simply sought out places that were the best approximations of their natural cliff habitats: skyscrapers and apartments with ledges and overhangs, tall bridges and spires, and electrical pylons. Not just as vantage points but as nesting sites.

A survey by the British Trust for Ornithology in 2014, covering 1,769 breeding pairs in the U.K., found that urban peregrines were doing better than in their traditional homes. With cities getting better lit, some peregrines became partially nocturnal, targeting flocks migrating at night. From personal experience, most prefer west-facing highrises with shady ledges at least 15 to 16 floors high. Many choose pylons, especially near wetlands. Like the dark tiercel I saw last week, streaking after a flickering flock of plovers at Kelambakkam.

Breeding pairs and pigeon hunters

This movement also coincided with exploding feral pigeon populations. In India, their numbers went up by 150% in the last two decades, consequent to cities growing taller, astrology-fuelled feeding and loss of green spaces. Some of the pigeons' other predators, like the *shikra* which depends on tree cover, suddenly became less relevant.

Pigeons negatively affect local biodiversity by depressing the numbers of birds such as sparrows and mynahs (by sheer numbers and direct competition for food sources), and even food plants (they tend to attack saplings and grains). Worse still, they carry the threat of disease – there is an increasing trend of hypersensitive pneumonia among people overly exposed to pigeons. Making the presence of urban peregrines important; at places, pigeons form 80% of their diet.

What also helped is that people took kindly to having this charismatic hunter as a nesting neighbour. London has 30 breeding pairs, some with a live telecast of the nest! Shaheens have sporadically been reported nesting in Mumbai, our tallest city. But relatively little is known of peregrine numbers, movements and habits in Indian cities.

In Delhi, a handful of birds are known to frequent the same highrises annually. But most other sightings are from wetlands and individuals are not tracked. What about the jungle of vertigo-inducing highrises spawning across the NCR? This is where dedicated and technically-grounded citizen science programmes like the MNS come in, bridging the divide between the wild and us. Long may the peregrines rule our lonely, concrete sky islands.

The second in a series that looks at urban spaces as havens for biodiversity and often overlooked species.

The author is a birder and writer based in Chennai.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Dreams to reality Santosh Sivan (right) with actor Mohanlal on the location of Priyadarshan's *Olavum Theeravum*, a remake of the 1970 film by the same name. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

IN CONVERSATION

SANTOSH SIVAN'S CANNES GLORY

The cinematographer-filmmaker will be conferred with the Pierre Angénieux Tribute at Cannes Film Festival this month

Aswathy Gopalakrishnan

Santosh Sivan is first a forager, of stories and sensations, spanning different places and times. Everything he has made thus far, he asserts, is drawn from what he encountered and experienced as a child. The changing colours of the monsoon sky of Thiruvananthapuram, his native town, are pressed into his memory.

He recalls the shafts of light that seeped into the attic and the central courtyard of his ancestral home, bringing into ghostly life the portrait of a grandfather. One is reminded of the ribbons of sunlight leaking into Thilakan's carpentry workshop in *Perumthachan (1990)*, like rainwater through a thatched roof.

At 60, Sivan is a masterful raconteur, his stories chiselled and refined through years of reflection and narration. He has meticulously catalogued his art – every image and film now pinned to a memory. He traces the roots of *Asoka* (2001), an epic period drama starring Shah Rukh Khan, back to a post-lunch class in school when his teacher narrated the story of the Kalinga emperor to keep the class from sliding into a siesta.

"We were disappointed at Asoka's decision to abstain from war," he recalls. "But the teacher said: 'One day, you would stop throwing stones at the stray dogs on the way home, and then you would understand why he did what he did.' I just couldn't forget what he said."

This month, at the 77th Cannes Film Festival, the cinematographer-filmmaker will be conferred with the Pierre Angénieux Tribute, awarded annually to honour an exceptional cinematographer. For Sivan, the winner of five national awards for best cinematography, and numerous national and international recognitions for the films he directed, the Cannes tribute comes as a crowning glory. "It is only conferred on decorated individuals. You feel special," he says. He is particularly thrilled as the award includes an Angénieux zoom lens engraved with his name. Sivan will also deliver a masterclass for Cannes delegates on May 23 as part of the honour.

Varying visual styles

A Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) graduate, and son of a renowned photographer and film producer, Sivan burst onto the Indian cinema scene in 1992 with *Roja*, directed by Mani Ratnam. Their renowned collaboration began a year before, in *Thalapathy* (1991), after the filmmaker watched his work in *Raakh* (1988), Aditya Bhattacharya's gangster film starring a yet-to-be-discovered Aamir Khan. The three films bear uniquely different visual styles.

"His win feels like a personal triumph," says Siva Ananth, the executive producer of Ratnam's *Madras Talkies*. Ananth first worked with Santosh in *Dil Se..* (1998) where he was an assistant director, followed by *Raavan* (2010), and most recently in *Chekka Chivantha Vaanam* (2018), which he also co-wrote. "The strength of Santosh's image is strongly married to the strength of the actor in the frame," he notes. "Even in the jazziest and most colourful sets, where he has to direct a large crew of lighting technicians and grips, he never misses that key moment in the scene and the magic in the performance." He cites the intercuts of the song 'Narumugaye' from *Iruvar (1997)*, where Sivan's camera vividly captures the romance that flashes in the actors' eyes.

Iruvar and *Dil Se..*, both big-budget mainstream projects, fetched Sivan his third and fourth national awards for cinematography. "Everyone thinks that commercial cinema is all about glamour, where there is no scope for adventure. But I think it's in commercial films that you should showcase your talent," he says. "It's possible to look at the commercial format differently. Do not take anything for granted."

What do awards mean at this stage of his career? His answer is rather straightforward: "Power and immediate attention. When you are at workshops, students will want to listen to you." The sweetest was the first one – the national award in 1990 for *Perumthachan*, he recounts. "During that time, I was doing only action films. My mother asked me, slightly concerned, why I was not getting an award, and suddenly I wanted one. After the first couple of awards, it didn't mean much."

Three decades later, Sivan remains in the top tier of his field. His involvement in a project often receives the same media attention as a superstar's. Alongside expensive studio-backed films, he pursues his passion projects – he's just returned from Kashmir where he is directing a feature film on the 16th-century poet Habba Khatoon.

His last directorial in Malayalam, *Jack N Jill (2022)*, turned out to be a misfire, but he has moved on. "Filmmaking is like being in a boxing ring. You must get hit once or twice," he reflects. "The project didn't begin well. The script wasn't right there. It was mired in production issues..."

Fondness for nature

Sivan's early experiences in documentaries gave him a strong foundation in observing and documenting people, their work, the land, and its nature, observes cinematographer-filmmaker Rajiv Menon, his close friend and colleague. "This also meant he shot in natural light in different geographies in India. When he transitioned to feature films, his cinematic canvas expanded. He worked fast and adapted to working with a wide range of directors." Menon holds Sivan's work as a director in *The Terrorist* (1998) in high regard. "It had a unique visual language – minimal yet gut wrenching."

The Terrorist, the small-budget Tamil-language film that Sivan wrote, directed and shot, led to his induction into the prestigious American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) in 2012, making him the society's first member from the Asia-Pacific region.

Santosh Sivan's early experience in documentaries gave him a strong foundation in observing and documenting people, their work, the land, and its nature. This also meant he shot in natural light in different geographies in India

RAJIV MENON
Filmmaker

The film, described by Roger Ebert as "visually breathtaking", impressed renowned cinematographer Michael Chapman so much that he included it in his student workshops and recommended Sivan's name to the ASC.

"I *always* wanted that honorific," says Sivan, who regards the ASC recognition as a validation of the authenticity he has been practising in his work. "They invited me because my work is so unlike theirs. Indian visual art, like its music, is ornamental and colourful. I try to keep it that way, finding inspiration from my surroundings. It's important to stay authentic."

It must be this connection to the natural world that keeps Sivan tethered to Indian cinema. "An ASC recognition naturally prompts cinematographers to shift base to Hollywood. I feel I am past the age when one wants to move continents for a career," he says. "My home and people are more important to me." He is, admittedly, a man of nostalgia. "Aren't most filmmakers and artists so? We like to think and remember."

Does he feel worried that technology is taking over the field of visual art, I ask. It is not the tool but the practice that makes good art, he replies. "Everybody is making images nowadays. If in the analogue times, children liked to sketch, now they prefer to take pictures on the phone. But most people who take photos don't develop it, in the same way as most people who read and write only use language for passing information, not writing poems."

The interviewer is a film critic and independent researcher.

BINGE WATCH

The art of disagreement

New podcast *A Muslim and a Jew Go There* tackles the idea of people on the opposing ends of the table coming together

One of the things that has fallen by the wayside in Indian politics over the last decade or so is the idea of respectful disagreement, of civilly conducted debates about the issues that matter in the lives of the people. Admittedly, this is one of the smaller casualties in the larger, state-of-democracy scheme of things, but it does matter. Which is why, I quite enjoyed listening to a recent podcast, *A Muslim and a Jew Go There*, produced by Jemima Khan's Instinct Productions.

The 'Muslim' part of the title is represented by British lawyer and former Conservative Party minister Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, and she is joined by her compatriot, the Jewish writer and comedian David Baddiel.

In the podcast, Warsi and Baddiel talk about Israel-Palestine, anti-semitism and Islamophobia, the similarities and differences between Islam and Judaism, the English public's perception of the Israeli government, and so on. Basically, there are issues that bring Muslims and Jews together and there are those that divide them. Warsi and Baddiel frequently disagree, but always with impeccable manners and with a sense of genuine warmth and curiosity about the other person's point of view. As Warsi says in the first episode, "There are so many conversations happening behind closed doors and we want to bring them out in the open. The kind of things about which people say, 'don't touch that, don't go there!'. Well, we are going to go there."

Life as a minority

You can see the areas where Warsi's and Baddiel's experiences converge, and they shine an important light on the lives of minorities in the U.K. Baddiel recalls going to one of the few public schools in his hometown that had a sizeable Jewish student populace, where he wouldn't be teased for, say, wearing a yarmulke. Warsi, on the other hand, pointed out that while the yarmulke was a visual marker of Jewishness, in most other situations, Baddiel would be "just another white person". Whereas Warsi, like a lot of other brown kids growing up in the U.K., was never far from random people calling her "Paki" (a British slur aimed at Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis et al) in the street.

"I'll have to challenge you on that" is an oft-used line on the podcast by both Baddiel and Warsi – it's their way of expressing dissent, of pushing back against the other person's ideas. And to their credit, they have often shifted their stances during the course of an episode, too, swayed by the other person's testimony, the texture of their lived reality.

The second episode, where the duo discusses the victory of independent candidate George Galloway in the Rochdale by-election, is a masterpiece in miniature. Galloway won a shock landslide victory over Labour candidate Azhar Ali recently, mostly because of the former's strident criticism of Israel. Now, Galloway's sudden re-emergence into electoral relevance is surprising also because in the past, he has made a number of xenophobic, anti-immigrant statements. How, then, did he win this election on the backs of votes by people of colour? Warsi and Baddiel explain the background to this issue: the Islamophobia of the Conservatives and the anti-semitism of the Labour Party are both brilliantly explained. There are some lighter moments as well, when Warsi and Baddiel are in splits discussing Galloway's infamous appearance on the reality show *Celebrity Big Brother*, where the politician wore a cat-like leotard, purred and lapped up milk from a saucer at one point.

Pressing issues

This segment also shows how well-chosen the two people at the centre of this podcast are. Warsi resigned from her position as Minister of State for Faith and Communities in 2014, citing the Conservative government's Gaza policy. To that extent, she is ahead of the curve by about a decade. Baddiel is the writer of the hilarious British film *The Infidel* (2010), about a British Muslim man who goes through an identity crisis after discovering he was adopted and was actually born into a Jewish family. In the climax of the movie, the man reconciles his dual identities by reading the *Talmud* and the *Quran* and realising the similarities between the two (Baddiel talking about his film's making is a delight on the podcast). Clearly, these are issues that both Warsi and Baddiel have thought long and hard about, and it shows.

Moreover, as the two of them admit during the podcast, there's no shame in accepting one's mistakes, saying 'sorry' and letting oneself be educated on the finer points of a matter. Warsi has, in the past, apologised for homophobic remarks she made in her early career.

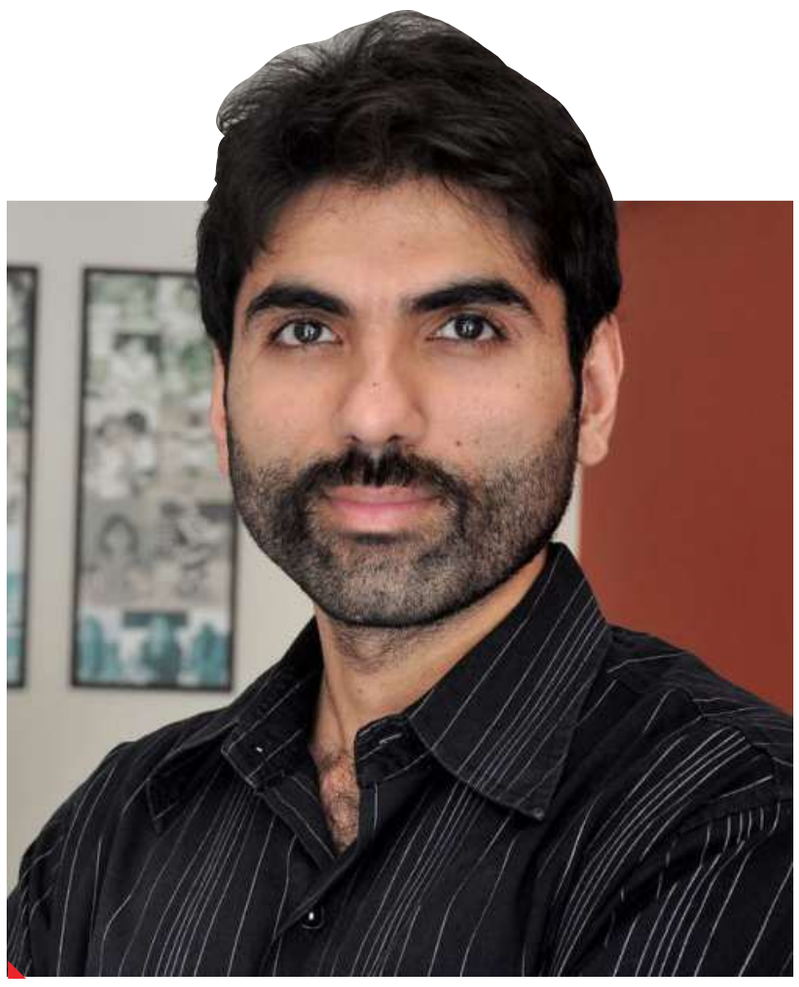
Baddiel, similarly, has apologised for using blackface in one of his comedy skits. These are regular, flawed human beings who accept their limitations and want to find common, broadly progressive ground at a time when polarisation and knee-jerk reductionism is the norm. And for that reason alone, I would highly recommend *A Muslim and a Jew Go There*.

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

PERSON OF INTEREST

VIVEK GILANI: CITIZEN WITHOUT A CAR

The founder of the Informed Voter Project on politicians' promises, performance and a vacation reminder he hopes will go viral



Man on a mission Vivek Gilani (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Anyone who emails climate solutions engineer Vivek Gilani gets an out-of-office notice. It informs you that Gilani, 47, hasn't fled the heat for cooler climes. He's paused all else for three months to work full-time on his Informed Voter Project, an initiative he launched four general elections ago and one that has since seen many iterations.

His message arrives in your inbox "with the hope that this becomes a normal thing to do – for anyone who considers our democracy a privilege that was earned through immense struggle and that needs unrelenting vigilance, that this becomes a regular 'vacation responder' that springs like a hope-regenerating fountain from all our emails before elections". He's poetic that way, even though, as Joseph Vessaokar, his trumpet teacher in Bandra informs him, he is tone deaf. "I never thought I had a musical bone in my body and he has confirmed I don't," Gilani says.

The out-of-office note is partly responsible for bringing together, for the first time, his life as the founder of cBalance, his firm that helps businesses become sustainable, and his long-standing passion for civic activism. A policy researcher from a non-profit with whom he previously worked on air pollution and the head of sustainability at one of cBalance's largest corporate clients signed on as volunteers.

Registered as a trust in Mumbai, the Informed Voter Project has five city chapters (if you're in cities that vote tomorrow, head to hyderabadvotes.org and punevotes.org) and tracks the performance of elected representatives against promises they made before they were voted in. It builds a permanent record of their actions, red-flagging the severity of the criminal cases against them and the growth in their personal wealth. "The personal wealth of incumbents, adjusted for inflation, has grown 250% in five years for NDA candidates and 50% for INDIA. The median assets owned by an ordinary Indian in this time have grown 0.7%," he says. This election, Informed Voter analysed 98 promises of the government across seven key ministries.

Beginnings of accountability

Gilani's work first got attention in 2008, after the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. He had already been working on the project for four years, archiving news about Indian elected representatives, even from the U.S., where he studied environmental engineering. He lived in Harlem for four years, soaking in the cultural heft of the neighbourhood and the alienation of the area's citizens.

After the terrorist attacks, Mumbaikars were eager to reinvent themselves and someone discovered Gilani's website. "Suddenly everyone in Mumbai wanted to do something about accountability," he says. "People were ridden with guilt. All the coffee shops were filled with people trying to work for change."

Registered as a trust in Mumbai, the Informed Voter Project has five city chapters and tracks the performance of elected representatives against promises they made before they were voted in.

Rich Mumbaikars saw Gilani as an 'entrepreneur' and gave him money to build a five-year archive of candidates seeking to be elected in the 2009 election. Informed Voter worked with bigger civic organisations such as Bengaluru-based Janaagraha and Delhi-based Association for Democratic Reforms, but in a year-and-a-half, 'investors' had lost patience. "Questions about growth, return on investment all started kicking in," Gilani says. "They thought accountability meant access. And they were mystified that the issues were not all about the economy and potholes but about justice and employment. 'These are not the issues of this area,' they said."

By 2010, Gilani was self-funding his project, pouring his savings into Informed Voter. In addition to professionals who volunteer, his team members include a law student, a former domestic worker, and someone who works as an office odd-jobs man for a builder and analyses hate speech in his free time.

Gilani began engaging with the idea of accountability as a teenager after a civic group visited his school. "I saw that environmental degradation, social exploitation and the undermining of democracy all have the same root causes," he says. As a climate activist, he quickly realised that "a small population of Indians was hiding behind the footprint of a billion Indians who have no footprint, conflating Indianness with being environmentally-friendly" – and then being sanctimonious about the carbon footprint of western nations.

Thoughts on train journeys

In those days, Gilani says, he was a Gandhian who found western civilisation "abhorrent". Going abroad to study had never occurred to him until his mother died in a car crash on the eve of his IIT entrance exam. This loss exacerbated his anti-car politics, adding a personal dimension to his anger against the systemic crisis of automobile emissions and the capture of public space by cars. Gilani's preferred mode of transport is cycle or train and some years, he makes up to 30 long-distance train journeys.

Train travel is increasingly a window to the stark inequality that prevails in this country. As he was returning from Hyderabad recently, even as travellers in his train were complaining about the AC not functioning properly, across the platform stood the train to Darbhanga. "Cheeks were pressed hard against the window grill in the unreserved compartment as people continued to pour in. Forget about two Indias, there were two realities on the same platform," he says.

Since 2014, he has often been stopped by the police who ask him the same question: where are you from? His middle name, Mustafa, and last name often lead them to believe Gilani is Kashmiri. Gilani is a Mumbaikar, he tells them. They still want to know his 'origin'. Gilani, someone should tell them, is the citizen more of us should be.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Reverse cheating

Both vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

The bridge world has been rocked in recent years with accusations of cheating by some of the world's top pairs. Today's deal, from a World Championship team match, shows the game being played the right way.

North opened two diamonds multi, one of the world's most popular conventions outside of North America. It showed one major and South's four-club bid asked which one. North's four-diamond bid showed hearts and South made the obvious bid. West, Sweden's Fredrik Nystrom, found the only lead to threaten the contract - a spade. South could not take the time to get a club ruff in hand or the defense would negotiate a spade ruff to go with their three aces. East made the necessary play of ducking his ace at trick one, but it took East some time to make his play.

South tried to muddy the waters for the defense by leading the 10 of hearts to dummy's ace and then cashing the king of hearts. He led a low diamond from dummy, but East rose with his ace and cashed the ace of clubs. Nystrom encouraged clubs, so East continued with a club, ruffed by South. South cashed the king of diamonds and ruffed a diamond in dummy. He drew the last trump and conceded a spade to the defense. Making four! Why had Nystrom encouraged clubs? Had he discouraged, East would have shifted to the ace of spades and defeated the contract with a spade ruff. Nystrom felt that he knew that his partner held the ace of spades from East's deliberate tempo at trick one. He refused to take advantage of that and therefore encouraged a second club lead. Really well done!

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

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
2◇*	Pass	4♣	Pass
4◇	Pass	4♡	All pass

*Multi, weak two-bid in either major

Opening lead: Eight of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about nicknames!

Berty Ashley

1 Born this day in 1820, this lady was a social reformer, statistician and the founder of modern nursing. She was tending to the wounded during the Crimean War when it was discovered that some medicine had been locked away in storage. Her act of breaking it open earned her the nickname 'lady with the hammer'. Writer William Russell changed it to refer to her act of checking on soldiers in the night. Who was this nurse, and what was the nickname Russell gave her?

2 Born this day in 1910, Dorothy Hodgkin is the only British woman to have been awarded a Nobel Prize for science. One of her chemistry students eventually became the longest-serving British prime minister. This divisive politician was given the nickname 'Iron Lady' for her uncompromising authoritative style. Who was this chemist turned PM?

3 Known as the 'Maid of Orleans', this girl is regarded as a saviour of France, who transcended gender roles to be remembered as one of the greatest military leaders of all time. Who is this girl, who eventually became the patron saint of France?

4 'The Mad Monk' was the nickname given to a Russian mystic who was a friend of the family of the last emperor of Russia. A group of noblemen decided to kill him on December 30, 1916. They first fed him cyanide-laced cakes and then poisoned wine, but it didn't affect him. Then they shot him and eventually drowned him. Who was this mystic, who is immortalised in a song by Boney M?

Puck up Pittsburgh Penguins forward, Mario Lemieux, in a game against the NJ Devils, 1995. (GETTY IMAGES)

5 This leader of an empire from 434 AD to 453 AD was nicknamed 'the Scourge of God' because of the fear the Romans had of him. He ruled all of Central and Eastern Europe, invaded Italy, and most probably died due to excessive drinking. Who was this fearsome leader, who came from the nomadic tribe of the 'Huns'?

6 This action film star started his career as a bodybuilder, having won Mr. Universe seven times. After finding fame in Hollywood, he became a politician, eventually serving as Governor of California for nine years. This led to him being called the 'Governator', a reference to his post and his most famous movie. Who is this popular actor?

7 Mario Lemieux is a Canadian ice hockey player who led the Pittsburgh Penguins to two consecutive Stanley Cup titles and then three more titles as owner. His strength and athleticism earned him a nickname that refers to a popular video game, where the main character keeps running and jumping. What is Lemieux's nickname?

8 Alain Prost is a French four-time F1 Champion who had the most race victories in the 20th century. He was known for his intellectual approach to the sport, having thought out many strategies and having set up the car to perform better towards the end of the race. What nickname did he earn thanks to this academic approach?

9 Karl Malone is considered one of the greatest power forwards in NBA history, playing for 18 seasons with the Utah Jazz. He still holds the record for the most free-throws made (9,787), and earned his nickname because he 'always delivered'. What is this nickname that refers to a professional in the USA who always delivers, come what may?

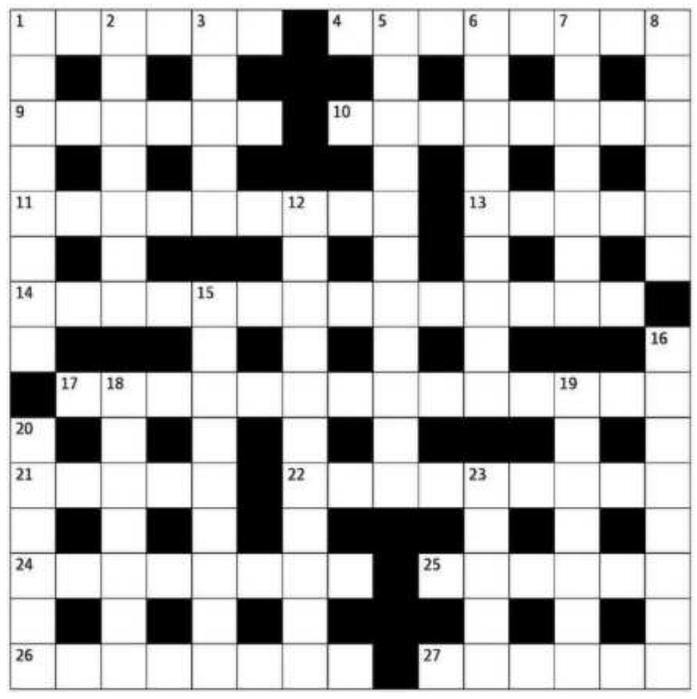
10 In 2003, this cricketer played a pivotal role in India's first Test win in Australia in 22 years. He batted for 800 minutes against a formidable bowling attack, facing 466 balls and scoring 233. His unwavering concentration, immense patience and determination cemented his nickname, which eventually became a literal phenomenon at the entrance of the M. Chinnaswamy stadium in Bengaluru. Who was this resolute batsman and what was his nickname?

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.

Answers

1. Florence Nightingale, 'Lady with the Lamp'
2. Margaret Thatcher
3. Joan of Arc
4. Rasputin
5. Attila the Hun
6. Arnold Schwarzenegger
7. Super Mario
8. The Professor
9. The Mailman
10. Rahul Dravid, The Wall

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3306



Across

1 A serving of ice cream and a lot of champagne (6)
4 No longer popular, helped in the kitchen (6-2)
9 Pest is banished in shade (6)
10 Courses of dried fruit announced (8)
11 'Exotic' millionaire Cher cherished – to some extent (9)
13 Warning signal, with skill, sounded (5)
14 Yanked hair back rudely: this should stop (9,5)
17 'Because the greatest pleasure is wine'? Dear me! (3,7,4)
21 Some shout down to overcome ... (5)
22 ... rioting, perhaps without consideration (3,2,4)
24 Anti-royalist not about to be one serving? (8)
25 Prison officer to make another sketch after reflection (6)
26 Everyman, wanting reverse gear, turns over fancy car(8)
27 Star pugilist's memento? (6)

Down

1 Hams and corn prepared for emperors (8)
2 Took a quick look and bounced off (7)
3 Only 5/7ths vague? That's relative (5)
5 Extra line for one of central characters in Amélie? (5,6)
6 Cattle in this place, crosses (9)
7 Study old money in European kingdom (7)
8 Picture someone using Twitter? (6)
12 Work together, masking nasty smell in part of shirt that's put away (11)
15 Ancient, passionately heated, romantically omnipotent deity inducing tremendous eroticism, primarily? (9)
16 One offering to be more gentle (8)
18 In absence of judge, objector banged up for 31 days (7)
19 A boy with djinn regularly seen? (7)
20 Ornamentation, ceremony and ponderous pronouncement(3-3)
23 Vulgar moment (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3305

Preserving summer in a jar

Have you been bitten by the pickling bug? It is a job easier said than done

Sravanthi Challapalli
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ILLUSTRATION: SATHEESH VELLINEZHI

My friend and I have been discussing mango pickle. The pickling bug has bit her and she thinks I would know more about it – I don't – because I am from *avakaya* (traditional Andhra pickle) land. She is sure I have made it myself.

My shame at failing at pickling is proportionate to its legendary long shelf life –the humiliation of flopping two years in a row has not left me. Nor has the pickle bug. All this messaging with my friend is drawing me even more to pickling, but I have told her that I am resisting the temptation.

Preserving summer in a jar is easier said than done. Look at the amount of advice available. The juiciest mangoes are the best. Look for fibrous ones. Wipe, air-dry. Sun-dry everything. Get the smallest mustard seeds. The big seeds make the best mustard powder. Roast. Don't roast. Powder. Don't buy from the store. Ensure the cleanest, driest hands, utensils, and accessories. Soak, dry, cut, dry. Mix oil and spices using hands, not ladles. Add salt. Do not add too much salt, you can always add it later. Rest (the pickle, not you) for three days. Stir once each day. Leave it alone for four days.

In the absence of omniscient and cherished grandmothers, like all modern women, I turned to YouTube.

I do not have the special knife that can cut through the mango's endocarp, the hard portion that contains the seed. For the classic *avakaya*, each piece has to have a bit of it attached for the pickle to last. I tried the *maagai,* which involves curing long, salted pieces of mango for a few days; a grated variety; and the *chhundo*, a sweet-spicy jammy affair that needed to be sunned for days.

The results were varied. In one, the flavours did not meld. Another did not yield pickling liquor, remaining dry even on the third day. One even smelt yeasty.

Firefighting measures: Add more oil. Lower expectations. Foresee fungus. (And voilà, snow-white fungus raises its hairy head!)

Buy more mangoes. Hold on to curtailed expectations. The bug is alive and kicking, but now there is the heroic resolve to never say die, while battling low self-esteem and unsettling introspection about why I failed even at such light challenges. Why was I taking them on? Because I was refusing to face bigger ones? Never mind all that, I could not wait to see the end result.

The *maagai* turned out salty and inedible. With my weak head for maths, I had probably messed up the proportions while adapting the recipe to a smaller number of raw mangoes. The blazing sun refused to reduce the sugar in the *chhundo* to the promised one-string consistency even after a week. Tired of trudging up to the terrace, I began sunning it on my shady window sill, telling myself I really needed to relax. The third pickle made of grated mango died, desiccated and sun-stroked. After a week, I reclaimed the *chhundo* from the window and cooked it down in my kitchen. It was good enough. But it being sugar and all, I rarely ate it. When I opened it recently, it was smelling distinctly of spirit.

Never again, I told myself. Why do I need all this mess when I never run short of family-made pickle? And I stuck to my resolve. Till my friend messaged and sent videos. Nope, I told her, I have lots to get through.

Then I got on to the Internet and ordered some more from some home business. Then I bought some white sesame to try a version I had spotted on YouTube last year. I really should try my hand at it.

Longing for home in a distant land

The constant search for a sense of belonging in the lives of expatriates

Truong Hai Ha
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It was 4 p.m. on a Saturday when I received a short message from Amma, my mother-in-law, which read: "*Molu*, *ammama* has passed." I called my husband, booked the earliest flight to Kochi, and rushed to Noi Bai Airport in Hanoi. At 10 a.m. on Sunday, we entered our home in Cheruthuruthy. Throughout the 14-hour journey, my husband barely uttered a word, lost in his thoughts.

My husband is a Malayali, who has spent the better part of the past 10 years working in Vietnam. He has been married to me, a Vietnamese woman, for five years. This was not the first time that he has been through a rough time like this, while being alone in a foreign land.

Over the years, he has missed countless family gatherings, rarely being able to celebrate Onam, Vishu, Pooram, or even follow cricket tournaments from Vietnam. Vietnamese do not celebrate the same festivals, and I doubt whether our TV channels even know what cricket is, let alone broadcast it.

While in Vietnam, he diligently maintains his routine – going to work, exercising at the gym, and calling home every night. Sometimes I feel as though he is merely surviving 345 days a year, living only during his 20-day stay in India.

When he is finally home, however, I see my husband getting restless, unable to fully embrace the precious time that he has with loved ones. He is always finding himself catching up on paperwork, servicing our long-abandoned vehicles, worrying about his job back in Vietnam, or as is the case at the moment, searching for the next job assignment.

There is practically nothing that I can do to help, being unable to speak the language or understand the way things work here. I can only silently watch him struggle and try not to be an added nuisance to him.

According to a UN report, India has the largest diaspora in the world. From my husband's State of Kerala, somewhere around six million Malayalis are working in a foreign country.

I can't help but think about the lives of these six million Malayalis who are working their lives away abroad, diligently sending home whatever pay they receive, leaving a minimal amount to sustain themselves. Are they constantly yearning for the next leave entitlement? Do they find themselves strangers in the very homes that they have been working so hard for?

I hope for a day when my husband can feel at peace and completely enjoy himself, whether it be in Cheruthuruthy, Vietnam, or another work location. I hope for a day when he no longer feels neither here nor there. I hope for a day when he can finally feel at home.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

A mother's words of wisdom

She taught us to overcome the daily stressors of life by finding joy in small things and spending quality time with our loved ones

Naveen Khajanchi
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Being happy is the desired state for most of us, yet it remains to be fulfilled as we are possibly not making an effort daily.

"Feeling better?" my late mother would ask me after giving attention to my pains and aches. If I replied in the negative, she would say, "That's not true. Maybe it is just 10% better, otherwise there is no point in my sitting with you." I would smile, agree, and my journey to being a bit happier would start. My mother seeded the concept of my "ATM for Happiness".

I feel true happiness is intricately linked to our internal responses and reactions to external circumstances and context. How we react to situations defines our happiness quotient to manage the daily stressors of life. When nothing else works, I simply say a thank you prayer with faith and, that moment, there is a bit of change. "ATM for Happiness" delves into the intricacies of finding joy within ourselves.

Often, we see people with limited material wealth finding happiness and contentment. In this world of disparity, a tiny bit of chocolate could mean the world to someone whereas another could be unhappy about it not being a limited-edition Swiss chocolate.

My mother taught us to enjoy the simplicity of daily life and not seek happiness from worldly possessions. Dedicating time to work and earning a living are very important as a basic income and meaningful use of time are important. My mother would say, "Do not sit idle to allow the demons to take over your mind." She encouraged us to prioritise good health and wisdom if we wanted to enjoy wealth.

I advocate for cherishing moments of joy, urging individuals to embrace and capture these fleeting instances fully. For instance, the time spent with loved ones is invaluable. We often take our near and dear ones for granted – it is better to care for and love people when they are there, rather than crying once they are dead. Time spent in nature, expressing gratitude and sharing with others also helps us.

In a world where loneliness seems to be an escalating concern, I feel practising kindness is a powerful remedy.

At times, overcommitting to work can lead to burnout. Instead, I encourage individuals to foster deeper social connections and avoid becoming victims of their routines or comfort zones.

We must strive to cultivate groups where mutual respect and love prevail even after heated arguments. Whether it is a morning walk group, an office tea group, or a weekend social service group, these are examples of how one can extend the social circle. When I started taking interest in the lives of others, I made deeper conversations and connections.

Here, I present the principles of the "ATM for Happiness".

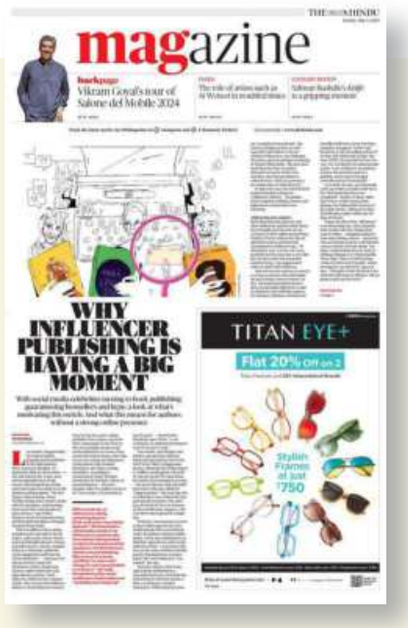
Acceptance versus Expectation: Embrace acceptance over expectations, choosing to align with reality rather than fixating on specific outcomes. Keeping assumptions at a minimum allows for a more grounded and peaceful existence.

Take charge: I advocate for taking control of one's thoughts, finances, and digital devices. This empowerment enables individuals to make informed decisions and strive for personal balance. Keeping commitments is emphasised as a key aspect of this self-directed approach.

Make the most of what you already have: I advise optimising existing resources to their fullest potential to extract maximum advantage and satisfaction. By doing one's best with what is available, individuals can cultivate a sense of fulfilment and gratitude.

Scheduling downtime to disconnect from mobile devices and other distractions is incredibly valuable, allowing us to dedicate time to ourselves. Finding joy with family members and within the community can be like a soothing balm we often need. Personally, the highlight of my weekends is enjoying a cup of tea with my parents, children, and extended family every Sunday. It is a cherished tradition where there is no pressure on anyone; each person contributes in his or her own way, and we ensure that everyone leaves without carrying any emotional baggage.

Self-care is crucial. My mother often said, "You do what is good for you and let others do what is good for them." For me, it is simply a daily ritual of helping myself and others in small ways, without expecting anything in return. Sharing candy, smelling a rose, watching a one-minute clip of old films, talking to my loved ones, or just having a cup of tea helps me distract myself easily from worries. These little actions ensure that the half-full glass of happiness is quickly refilled. Happiness booster shots become part of life with regular practice.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

There is no doubt that influencer authors and publishers are able to quickly publicise their new books with the help of their social media presence. ('Why influencer publishing is having a big moment'; May 5) They may get immediate orders also. But unless they come out with content that is inspiring and interesting, a wider readership and continued sales can't be ensured.
N.S. Reddy

Influencers are chosen by publishers due to their large following and the consequent guaranteed profit. There are any number of good writers who find it next to impossible to get a publishing deal. As a writer myself, I believe publishers should help discover talent by focusing their attention on lesser-known individuals, who may be in the process of establishing their audiences.
N. Rama Rao

Writer and artist

Salman Rushdie's calibre is in his pen. ('Rushdie, Weiwei and a knife in the eye'; May 5) His *Midnight's Children* is a bestseller even today. *Satanic Verses* brought him infamy, due to which he has become all the more famous. With his one eye, he is the cynosure of all eyes in the literary world. He minces no words in his speech or writing, and calls a spade a spade.
K. Pradeep

Not rocket science

Satire of some people makes one laugh and forget, but satire of some others makes one introspect. ('Whose wealth is it'; May 5) G. Sampath's belongs to the second category. The manner in which he has handled the redistribution of wealth controversy is brilliant and gives food for thought. How I wish all who read his piece get the point he is trying to make, brood over the same and make informed decisions.
Tharcius S. Fernando

Sign of the times

Indrani Mukerjea is the latest in a line of celebrities, around whom media houses have created cults. ('The cult of fame'; May 5) Stylish criminals have always been candy for the unversed, who fall for the taste, but remain ignorant of the harmful effects of sugar. It is a sorry commentary on not just the times we live in, but also the torn social fabric.
Deepak Taak

Although media attention is inevitable in a high-profile case like this, it is quite uncommon for someone in Mukerjea's position to become a source of inspiration. In today's society, where fame and notoriety are so closely connected, one can gain thousands of followers, even if one is a murder suspect out on bail in a case that shook the nation.
Parinitha Chowdary V.

I am a part of the minority that the writer has mentioned. It is painful to see a person on bail invited to colleges and TEDx talks. From whatever I read and saw, I don't see her success being linked to her education or hard work. Soon, we may even see her joining politics and contesting. Anything can happen these days.
Sujatha K.

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Art as therapy
It speaks to us from places that we least expect, and gladdens our heart and soul
Nalin Kumar

Playgrounds and policies
There is much to be done to achieve the true potential of sports in India
Arnav Anshuman

Lighting up the darkness
Find romance in the gentle glow of candles and kerosene lamps during power cuts
Mohan Das

What kind of writer are you?
Impulsive or disciplined, driven or reflective, there are many categories indeed
Fayezah Iqbal

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.

THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, May 12, 2024

A new anthology brings together an eclectic mix of writers and their personal stories, to document the food of a region that has more to it than bamboo shoots

CAN WE STOP TYPECASTING NORTHEAST CUISINE?

Diverse food systems (Clockwise from left) Arunachalee food of rice and meat served on an *okam* leaf; cooking Naga fermented bamboo shoot and fish; millet beer is offered to the deity during hunter rituals in Sikkim; *galho* (rice with vegetables); foraging for food is a common practice; farmers bringing home foraged food. (COURTESY ZUBAAN BOOKS)

Vikram Doctor

A leading Mumbai hotel once catered a corporate banquet with a dish from every Indian state. It was strictly vegetarian and for the Northeastern states the chef was clearly at a loss. He ended up offering six bamboo shoot dishes, and boiled rice for Tripura. No banquet has ever used so much bamboo shoot.

The edible shoots are undeniably important in the region of lush hills and river valleys casually marginalised as the 'Northeast'. It is a place with complex histories and very diverse communities, crossroads for trade, war and displacements and a reservoir for remarkable biodiversity. A wide variety of plants and animals are foraged and hunted there, and fermented, smoked and processed in multiple ways. There is much more than bamboo shoots.

Journalist Hoihnu Hauzel was one of the first to try to cover the Northeast's food diversity. In an acknowledgement of past efforts, her memory of the project is the first essay in *Food Journeys - Stories from the Heart*, a deeply impressive anthology edited by Dolly Kikon and Joel Rodrigues. Hauzel was a cub reporter in Delhi covering food events that celebrated the traditions and ingredients of places around the world, which made her wonder about doing it for the Northeast.

She sent a proposal to a publisher and was immediately accepted, which was when the enormity of the task dawned on her: "Nagaland has over 16 tribes. Manipur has over 29 tribes. How would I include all of them?" *The Essential Northeast Cookbook*, which she produced, was revelatory for its time, but also hinted at how much more there was, and how difficult it would be to do it all justice.

Books which followed, such as Purabi Shridhar and Sangitha Singh's *The Seven Sisters: Kitchen Tales from the Northeast*, and Aiyushman Dutta's *Food Trail: Discovering Food Culture of Northeast India*, helped illuminate the subject, while struggling to cover such diversity from inevitably limited perspectives. Which is where Kikon and Rodrigues' anthology scores. They embrace and give voices to the diversity, allowing us to hear directly from the people of the region.

Patchwork of memories

Kikon and Rodrigues are anthropologists, as are several writers in the collection. Others include academics, a singer, a dancer, a novelist, photographers and documentary filmmakers. Their subjects include a Muslim widow who makes puffed rice, tea plantation workers, market vendors, a chef trying to keep her food traditions alive in Delhi (she notes, ironically, how it was easier to find ingredients like offal while working in the UK), and many older women relatives of writers, whose food lives on in their memories.

This patchwork project works so well it should be considered for other attempts to capture the diversity of food systems in different parts of India. Any lack of cohesiveness is more than made up by the sense that this is how we actually cook today, with all the realities of unreliable food supplies, packaged products, struggles for identity expressed through food, and the influences of the Internet.

Cookbooks often try to capture idealised versions of cuisine, passed on from grandmothers and untouched by current concerns, but *Food Journeys* acknowledges that real life is different. Academic Juliana Phaomei recalls her grandmother through the fermented mustard leaves she used to make, but when she tries to recreate it, her mother tells Phaomei that she's learned part of the method from Chinese YouTubers. Performing artist Babina Chabungbam notes the importance of the Machal's spice mix brand for Manipuri food, both in and, increasingly, outside the state.

Raising uncomfortable questions

A larger theme is whether the foods documented will survive. Tourism plays a complex role. Professor R.K. Debbarma's homestay host in Khonoma, a village in Nagaland, tells him visitors from Guwahati come with lists of what they won't eat. Debbarma writes that he avoids three types of Northeastern restaurants: those "with bold claims to being for families, or authentic, or pure vegetarian". Independent writer Rini Barman's study of the Haflong market in Assam notes how Indo-Chinese food is becoming more popular at food stalls.

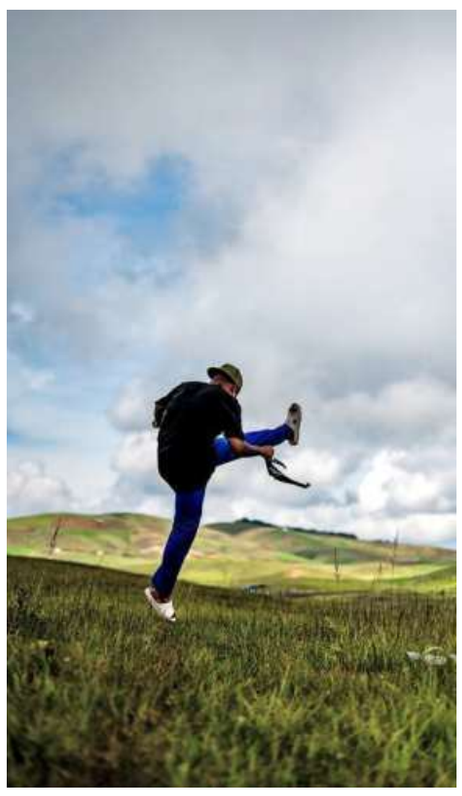
Neivikhotso Chaya's essay on rice beer captures many of the ambiguities around the past and future of foods of the Northeast. In a Naga restaurant in Bengaluru he's surprised to find rice beer for sale. "Back in Nagaland it would only be available in poor neighbourhoods, from families struggling to make a living." His family was one of them and he recalls the eternal presence in their homes of the rough rice used for brewing, which they also ate when money for other foods was scarce. They would unmould a large pot of rice and pretend it was a cake.

But Chaya was also acutely aware of the shame attached to rice beer sale. Neighbours made rude remarks about them and people coming to buy would enter from the back door so as not to be seen. Today rice beer is on sale at the Hornbill Festival and those selling it are seen as promoting Naga culture. But has this really changed the status of poor people who make it to survive?

Food writing in India often avoids uncomfortable questions like this, and it is to the credit of Kikon and Rodrigues, and Zubaan Books as publishers, that they allow the writers in *Food Journeys* to raise them.

The journalist writes on the role of food in Indian society.

Haunting notes (Clockwise from left) Meghalayan band Ka Sur Na Nongkyndong; Banrap Lyngdoh; Katta Nisa, a musician from the Garo tribe; and Nangsan Lyngwa, frontman of Plague Throat. (ANURAG BANERJEE)



WHEN MEGHALAYA SINGS

Photographer Anurag Banerjee's *The Songs of Our People* attempts to capture the state's history and vibrancy through its musicians — urban and indigenous

Sanjukta Sharma

The best documentary photographers can make sounds and smells come alive in their frames. Anurag Banerjee, 32, is an eloquent cultural chronicler, and his latest book, *The Songs of Our People*, is a visual cornucopia of sounds.

A Shillong boy, the Mumbai-based photographer grew up listening to Meghalaya's diverse musical traditions – from indigenous stories to rock, reggae and rap. The book chronicles his State's musicians, and how their music reflects identities, histories, grief as well as hope and the power of community and belonging.

Made with a grant from Meghalaya Age Limited, an initiative by the state government to support and mobilise projects about the State's culture and society, Banerjee's choice to shoot, write and produce this book arose out of a desire to know his home state better. "In the years I have spent outside Shillong, the first comment that people would make upon finding out where I was from would invariably revolve around music," he says. So, when he wanted to immerse himself in the place he knew as home, he chose to do so through Shillong's musicians – who sing in English as well as a variety of local dialects such as Khasi, Garo and Pnar.

Shillong beyond its Bob Dylan fandom

"The idea for the book coincided with people across the country taking to the streets at the end of 2019 for what has now come to be known as 'the citizenship protests'. Since genres like hip-hop and R&B have their roots in protest and people's movements, I gravitated to the same in my hometown," Banerjee says. It took him eight months to finish the many photshoots, and he wrote the book over the next few years.

Banerjee covers a swathe of musicians with a similar dedication to Meghalaya's creative language and identity. He hung out with them at gigs, practice and even in their homes, before choosing 19 (curated on the basis of access and individual points of view) for the book.

Not knowing the local dialects well was a limitation, but employing translators helped. And while he agrees the representation of artistes isn't exhaustive, he sees "this as a first of many books" – the subsequent volumes including more musicians and stories from culturally-rich Meghalaya.

The selected musicians illuminate not only musical talent, but also a staggering diversity of voices, stories and genres – Maya Lyngdoh's love for her roots, Banrap Lyngdoh's investigations of grief, and Praiseley Lyngskor's faith in the redemptive powers of community.

This is Shillong beyond Bob Dylan fandom, its legends like Lou Majaw and its only mainstream culture entrant, the Shillong Chamber Choir. This is musical Meghalaya at its most earthy and sublime.

The self-published book, priced at ₹799, is yet to be officially launched. It can be ordered through Banerjee's Instagram (@banrjee.anurag).

The writer and critic is based in Mumbai.