THE HINDU
Sunday, July 27, 2025

magazine

backpage
55 designers and *The Great Elephant Migration*
GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
How Lhasa has been reshaped, and rewritten
GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW
Adman Ambi Parameswaran's *mantras* for marketing
GO TO » PAGE 3

Track the latest stories via #ThMagazine on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) Get connected » www.thehindu.com

Olimita Roy

ILLUSTRATION: SRISHTI RAMAKRISHNAN

ADULTHOOD, EDITED: HOW YOUNG INDIA (STILL) LIVES

They are fluent in memes, active on dating apps, and more independent than ever before. But at home, nothing's changed. Caught between agency and the need for approval, youngsters edit their truth and live a life of negotiation

At a recent wedding in Delhi, the bride and groom told everyone they met through mutual friends. What the couple in their late 20s didn't mention was that those "mutual friends" were the algorithm on Bumble, or that they had been living together in Bengaluru for nearly two years. At the *sangeet*, there were no photos from their apartment, no jokes about the IKEA couch they had painstakingly assembled together. Instead, their friends nodded along as the family described a sweet, serendipitous meeting at a birthday party. The past was not erased; it was simply rewritten to fit the room.

This quiet rewriting of personal history captures something of an essential tension that defines much of modern India. In many ways, young Indians today are global citizens fluent in memes, trends, and aspirations that stretch across time zones. Their cultural references toggle effortlessly between a Brooklyn podcast and a Bollywood romcom. They swipe, stream, and dream like their peers anywhere else in the world. But the shape of adulthood in India remains unmistakably its own.

In the West, turning 18 often signals a rite of passage: you move out, claim your independence, and are recognised both legally and emotionally as an adult. In India, that moment is far more ambiguous. You might live alone, earn well, and build a life with someone. But at home, you're still a child. Being an adult in the country is less a celebrated departure and more a lifelong negotiation – where the boundary between child and adult remains fluid, and both generations hesitate to fully acknowledge the separation.

A quiet contradiction

In India's cities, young people are caught in a curious balancing act. On the one hand, they absorb the promise of freedom and self-invention sold to them by western media as their own version of the American Dream, filled with dating apps, late-night parties, and endless possibilities. On the other hand, they return each evening to a world where family expectations and "good behaviour" remain rewarded. It's a double life lived quietly, out of necessity.

That tension, that clash, is where the real story lies. JNU professor and sociologist Surinder S. Jodhka calls this landscape a zone of "negotiated freedom" – the space to explore, but within limits. The ability to be yourself, but only in parts. "This is not uniform across genders. Young men often enjoy a greater degree of latitude than women, especially in conservative families," he says.

But even this is beginning to shift. As women increasingly outperform men in education and enter white-collar jobs, their negotiating power within families is changing, as observed by the higher average age of marriage. This expanding autonomy, however, does not unfold in a vacuum. It intersects with class, geography, caste, and community norms, all of which shape how much freedom a woman can actually claim. Recent tragic cases, such as that of a young tennis player and coach killed by her father in the name of "honour" in Gurugram earlier this month, are brutal reminders that agency can still provoke violent backlash.

Dr. Jodhka warns that "while India has become more educated, it has not necessarily become more liberal. Education, once rooted in collective ideals of nation-building, social upliftment, and the promise of progress, has increasingly become a vehicle for individual ambition". Young Indians today pursue degrees not to transform society, but to secure personal advancement: a job abroad, a sea-facing apartment, a passport full of stamps, a life that feels self-made. But this shift towards self-actualisation, he argues, "hasn't loosened the grip of family or community". You can major in gender studies and still be expected to marry within your caste. You can earn in dollars and still fear disappointing your parents. In India, success may look modern, but it often runs on traditional terms. The result is a quiet contradiction: rising education levels without a corresponding rise in liberal values.

For many, this in-between state isn't temporary; it's the cost of modern life. Comedian Aditi Mittal sees this double existence as less of a new phenomenon and more a digital amplification of something old. "We've always been different people in different settings," she says. "Only now, the audience is bigger and the stakes are higher." She compares it to the comedy-drama *The Marvellous Mrs. Maisel*, where the protagonist is a woman fearless on stage but careful at home. The pressure to be palatable, to be just enough and never too much, shapes how many young Indians move through both real and virtual life.

Rohit Biswas, a 33-year-old tech consultant from Gurugram, explains this tension. "Sometimes I feel like my parents and I live in two different worlds. They grew up in a time when life was about duty and survival with no room for questions. I grew up with the Internet, social media, and a thousand voices telling me to find my true self," says the millennial. "We talk, yes, but it feels like they're trying to hold onto a past I'm trying to move beyond. I want to be authentic, but I'm also constantly aware of what would upset them. That tension is exhausting."

His father, 62, a retired government official, adds, reflecting on his own upbringing, "My own father was strict; obedience and respect were everything. He never explained why; you just followed the rules. Being your true self with your parents wasn't something you thought about back then. That created a distance between us. When I had Rohit, I wanted things to be different – to listen more, to be open, but sometimes I wonder if the gap between us is even wider now. With social media and all the influences from outside, it feels like we're living in different worlds, and bridging that feels harder than ever."

Things aren't too different with Gen Z – a generation one might expect to rebel against the status quo or at least take steps towards rewriting the rules. "I do see my parents trying to be more like friends now, and I appreciate that," says Arpit Palod, 27. But the Mumbai-based data analyst adds, "there's still this filter I have to keep on. I catch myself editing what I say, holding back details I know they wouldn't approve of."

Across the country in Chennai, Tamma Moksha, a 24-year-old journalist, is of a similar bent of mind. "There are incremental changes. You will have that one friend who drinks with her parents or gives them her dating life updates.

I do see my parents trying to be more like friends now, but there's still this filter I have to keep on. I catch myself editing what I say, holding back details I know they wouldn't approve of

ARPIT PALOD
Data analyst

But that's not all of us," she says. "We have got comfortable living a double life, and not rocking the boat. Living away from your parents helps you to edit certain portions of your life. I live on my own, so I don't have to share everything with them."

Romance in the time of swipe culture

Nowhere is this self-editing more fraught than in the realm of romance. Swipe culture may have redefined how young Indians explore relationships, but the shadow of tradition has coded its own algorithm. Dating apps such as Bumble and Tinder have exploded in popularity. India is now the fifth-largest market globally, with over 82 million users as of 2023, according to a report by German data gathering platform Statista.

But just a swipe away, Shaadi.com tells a different story. With 40 to 60 lakh new users registering each year, most of them between 25 and 30, it remains the country's preferred portal to socially sanctioned love. The most-used filters remain unchanged: caste, income, and mother tongue. What has shifted is how some of these profiles are managed. While many men run their own accounts, women often do not – profiles are created and controlled by parents or relatives, who upload pictures, answer queries, and sometimes proceed with matchmaking without the woman's full knowledge or consent. The gender imbalance remains glaring: four men for every woman, according to a data analyst at the matchmaking platform, underscoring a systemic skew that shapes the entire matrimonial landscape.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4

There is a profound conflict between duty and desire, a tension that many young Indians carry quietly. Parents often remain unaware or unwilling to acknowledge the complexity of their children's emotional lives

JAI RANJAN RAM
Psychiatrist

Author Sanjena Sathian calls her new book a social novel.

IN CONVERSATION

INSIDE THE EVERYWOMAN'S HEAD

With her new novel *Goddess Complex*, author Sanjena Sathian wants society to understand womanhood outside of motherhood

Nandini Bhatia

What would you do if you found that there is an imposter out there living the life once prescribed to you? That there are questions about identity that need to be answered and choices that need to be made. You will probably feel lost (and perhaps even a little provoked), like Sanjana, the narrator in author Sanjena Sathian's latest novel, *Goddess Complex* (HarperCollins India). At once psychological thriller and feminist satire, the story delves into the personal and the political behind women's freedom and their right to choose. Edited excerpts from an interview with Sathian:

Question: *How much of your own life in the U.S. is reflected in your narrator Sanjana's dissonance – between being a "bad brown girl" and feeling "insufficiently" white?*
Answer: I will politely disagree with your characterisation of the novel. I don't think this book is about "white versus brown identity". Insofar as it is about a demographic identity category, it is about gender. That said, race is not something you can ignore in America, and so race comes up – often in comic ways that frustrate Sanjana. But I also have to say that neither the narrator nor I are torn between whiteness and brownness; we are both brown and neither of us has any desire to be white. I think it's important not to reduce Indian American storytelling.

> **Even as we walk around** thinking of ourselves as full humans, with desires and secrets and darkness, there are people out there looking at us as wombs with legs. That's uncanny

Q: *The protagonist reaches a point in the story where she feels "divorced from [her] body". What was capturing that like?*
A: At the start of the novel, [Sanjana] tells us that she's recently had an abortion, and she then spends the first half of the novel being harangued by people who inexplicably think she's pregnant. I chose this somewhat darkly absurd situation to literalise what many women feel every day: even as we walk around thinking of ourselves as full humans, with desires and secrets and darkness, there are people out there looking at us as wombs with legs. That's uncanny.

Q: *The novel employs inner dialogue, retrospection and reflection as tools of storytelling; where the idea of the self constantly disperses and re-emerges. Did you choose this format or did it evolve with the story?*
A: I think you're talking about the novel's internal quality: we spend a lot of time in Sanjana's head. She's a first-person narrator, and an unreliable one. For much of the first half, we watch her decline and disintegrate in her own mind. Eventually, we see some of her inner messiness spill over into external messiness, i.e., the character's internal dramas become external plot points. I wrote it that way because that was how I got to know the character. I knew that she was going to be trapped in herself and that in order for the novel to have the alchemical effect on the reader, which novels can and should have, I would need [that to happen] at some point.

Q: *Between the Shout Your Abortion Movement and the recent shift in U.S. reproductive policy, where does Goddess Complex fit in, in defining a woman's right to choose?*
A: *Goddess Complex* is a social novel; it's cognisant of social movements around reproductive rights, and the narrator is often reacting to those social movements and finds that some of the brave, social justice language of social media doesn't exactly work for her real life. [While] I do have characters talking about [these] social and political issues, the novel is set pre-*Dobbs* (the overruling of the fundamental right to abortion by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022).

Ultimately, it's a really personal story about one woman having a breakdown and going through some really weird stuff. It's not a book that can or should have to define a person's right to choose, because novels are not about defining rights. Novels are these radically hopeful objects that have to take for granted certain freedoms – freedom of thought, freedom of choice. Novels are too subtle, politically, to win rights for us. They can only give us insight into the private selfhood that political rights are there to preserve.

Q: *At what point do you feel womanhood becomes synonymous with motherhood?*
A: I don't think womanhood and motherhood are synonymous, but if you live in a society where the assumption is that all women are either potential mothers or people who should have been mothers but failed to be, then you lose the ability to understand womanhood outside of motherhood. Personally, I'm not even that interested in defining "womanhood" at all. I'm interested in the self, and all the ways that our arbitrary social stories interfere with knowing our true selves.

The interviewer is a freelance writer. Instagram @read.dream.repeat

ONE FOR THE ROAD

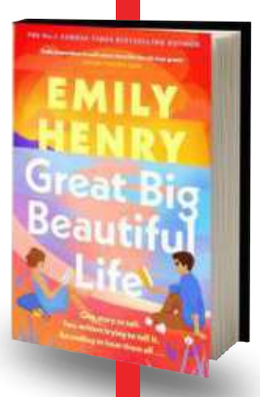
Of true crime and bestsellers

A new column on popular fiction for the month, with room for thrillers and romance

Swati Daftuar

Not every book needs to change your life. Some (at least the good ones) can simply hold your attention and keep you turning the pages. These are the books that remind you why stories matter, or the ones that pull you out of a reading slump.

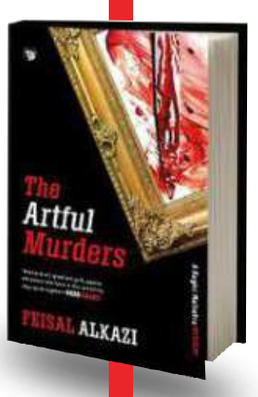
This column is about the thrillers that don't cheat, the romances that actually charm, whodunits that surprise, and more.



Great Big Beautiful Life | Emily Henry

The bestselling romance author and TikTok sensation (who's not on TikTok) has produced five hit novels, all of which have been optioned for the screen. Her latest is about two writers, Alice and Hayden, vying for the book coup of the century – by telling the story of an elusive socialite called Margaret Ives. This slow-burn romance brings to mind early Marian Keyes and Jojo Moyes, and like them, Henry explores big themes and ideas woven around love. And to write the character of Ives, Henry drew from several sources, including the real-life socialite Rebekah Harkness, who inspired Taylor Swift's 2020 song 'The Last Great American Dynasty'.

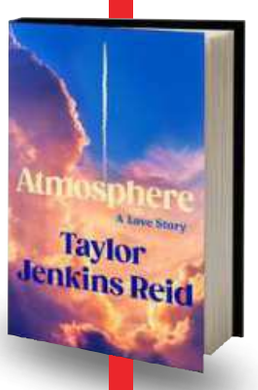
(Penguin India; ₹899)



The Artful Murders | Feisal Alkazi

A missing M.F. Husain is already a compelling plot. Add a few murders, and you're hooked. This is a dramatic book, and its amateur sleuth – "housewife-turned-Sherlock Holmes" Ragini Malhotra – is suitably dramatic too. Theatrical energy runs through the thriller, and Alkazi, who wrote it during the pandemic lockdown, draws on his stage background with good effect. The plot echoes yesteryear mysteries – *Murder, She Wrote*, *Miss Marple*, *Agatha Raisin*... Expect dry humour, intrigue, and plenty of red herrings but mind you, this is no psychological thriller. Nevertheless, the cosy mystery will keep you engaged.

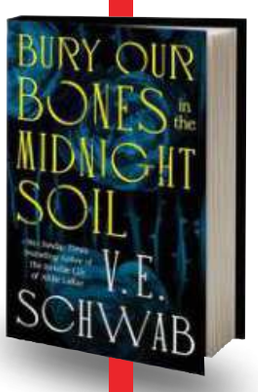
(Speaking Tiger; ₹499)



Atmosphere | Taylor Jenkins Reid

This might be Reid's most ambitious book yet: a sweeping story set amid NASA's shuttle programme in the 1980s. We meet astronomer Joan Goodwin, selected to train a new batch of astronauts, and with her, we embark on a heartwarming and eventually heartbreaking journey. Reid excels at building flawed, layered characters and finding emotional truth in extraordinary moments. We might soon see this sweeping, cinematic canvas on screen – Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, the filmmakers behind *Captain Marvel*, are adapting *Atmosphere* for theatrical release.

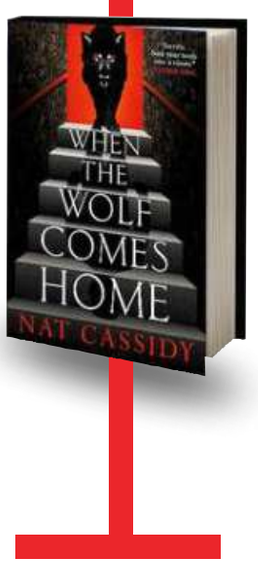
(Hutchinson Heinemann; ₹899)



Bury Our Bones in the Midnight Soil | V.E. Schwab

For long-time fans of V.E. Schwab, here's a fun detail: her new book is set in the same universe – which Schwab calls "the garden" – as her last book, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*. Calling it a vampire novel feels limiting, although we've seen how the genre can get a new lease of life in the hands of a skiller writer – think *Sinners*, or *Interview with the Vampire* and its latest, beautiful, rage-filled adaptation. A sapphic, immersive story about three women told through the lashes of time, this is a story about more than just blood.

(Tor Books; ₹999)



When the Wolf Comes Home | Nat Cassidy

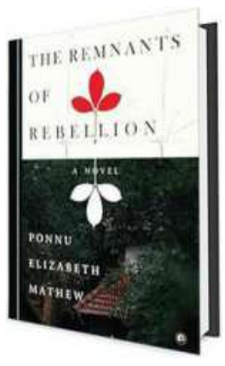
This is how horror transforms when it breaks free of ghosts and jump scares. And Cassidy has long been a master of the form. With *Mary* and *Nestlings*, he gave us genre-defining stories. But *When the Wolf Comes Home* may be his best yet, with Cassidy's attempts at creating a literary universe, not unlike the author he feels a deep kinship with – Stephen King. In the novel, a boy, running from monsters both real and imagined, is rescued by Jess, an out-of-work actor barely holding herself together. Every scene tightens the noose, and what's more, the novel has a landing that truly sticks.

(Titan Books; ₹1,351)

The writer is an independent journalist, editor, and literary curator.

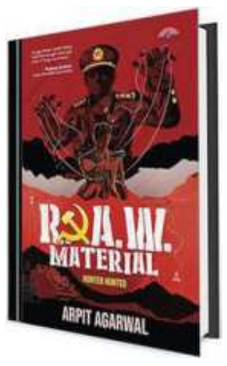
BROWSER

The Remnants of Rebellion



Ponnu Elizabeth Mathew
Aleph
₹899
This debut novel is inspired by events that took place in Kerala at the height of the Naxal movement in the 1960s. The author delves into themes of caste, class and colonialism against the history of the Malayali Syrian Christian community.

RAW Material



Arpit Agarwal
Paper Towns
₹449
Set against the geopolitical tensions in India, China and Tibet, this spy thriller presents a "what if" scenario about how the COVID-19 virus could have leaked from a lab in China. The narrative moves across geography and time, diving deep into the world of spycraft.

A Stone Thrown in a Pond

Ed. Ritu Menon
Women Unlimited
₹699
This anthology of poems and essays by 15 writers, including Geeta Patel, Jerry Pinto, Sabyn Javeri and Stephen Alter, "explores the many registers of leaving, as well as the paradox that we never truly leave anything behind".

The Scratch and Sniff Chronicles

Hemangini Dutt Majumder
Niyogi Books
₹495
'Murder mysteries are my happy place,' says the author who suffers from a condition that makes her hypersensitive to smells. She flips the script by turning her affliction into her heroine's superpower in this whodunit set in an ancestral Bengali estate.

The soul of work

An anthology offers a panoramic view of the Indian experience at the workplace, across generations, professions and value systems

Prathmesh Kher
prathmesh.kher@thehindu.co.in

Work, Wisdom, Legacy is an intellectually stimulating anthology that gathers reflections from 31 prominent Indian figures, offering a panoramic view of what work means in the Indian context–across generations, professions, and value systems. Compiled by former RBI Governor Y.V. Reddy alongside Ravi Menon, Shaji Vikraman, and Kavi Yaga, the book is as much about personal journeys as it is about societal evolution through the lens of work.

Each essay, distinct in voice and perspective, forms part of a larger tapestry that explores the ethics, purpose, and transformation of work. What makes the collection powerful is not just the stature of its contributors–which includes policymakers like Yashwant Sinha and P. Chidambaram, business leaders like N.R. Narayana Murthy and K.V. Kamath, and thinkers like Arun Shourie–but the honesty and nuance they bring to their experiences.

Reflections on the journey

Rather than reducing work to a matter of efficiency or economic necessity, the essays reflect on its moral and emotional dimensions. For instance, many authors examine how early family values, personal mentors, or pivotal career moments shaped their philosophies. There's a recurring emphasis on integrity, humility, and the pursuit of excellence, not merely for material reward, but for fulfilment and legacy.

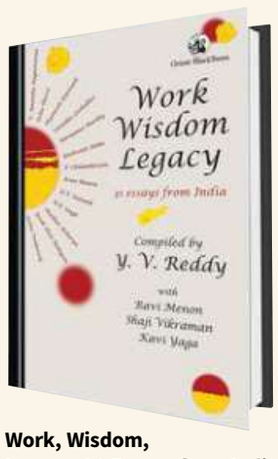
Y.V. Reddy's essay, "God Laughs and Other Reflections," provides a foundational tone for the book. Drawing on personal anecdotes, he articulates the importance of what he calls the three Is: intellect, industry, and integrity. His reflections suggest that the people we choose to work with–and the values they uphold–are as significant as the work itself. This sentiment is echoed across the anthology, making a subtle but strong case for ethics in public and private life.

What also emerges is Reddy's broader philosophical stance, captured in his emphasis on "assessing, not judging" others, an approach that encourages empathy and perspective over prescriptive thinking. At the book's launch, fellow contributors echoed how this mindset shaped their professional ethos, adding that the essays offer not just inspiration but introspection.

The volume's strength also lies in its diversity. The authors span various domains, governance, law, banking, entrepreneurship, media, and each brings a distinct outlook. For example, some grapple with the shift from state-led development to liberalisation, while others discuss the challenges of leadership in a corporate environment undergoing rapid technological change. The essays are not instructional; they're contemplative. They do not prescribe a single definition of success but invite readers to define it for themselves.

Contemporary relevance

The editors skilfully avoid making the book feel nostalgic or dated. Instead, the essays collectively offer a timeless relevance. As India's young workforce navigates a volatile, competitive, and digitised job landscape, this book becomes a quiet guide, urging readers to look inward even as they strive outward.



Work, Wisdom, Legacy: 31 Essays from India
Compiled by Y.V. Reddy, with Ravi Menon, Shaji Vikraman, Kavi Yaga
Orient BlackSwan
₹850

Work, Wisdom, Legacy does not just celebrate achievements. It honours the long, often winding road to meaningful work. In doing so, it urges the reader to consider legacy not as the residue of power or wealth, but as the impact one has on others, through decisions, actions, and values.

In a time when conversations about work are often framed around burnout, hustle, and metrics, this book is a welcome change. It's reflective, rooted, and deeply human.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

A FEDERATION OF MANY MARKETS

Ambi Parameswaran hands out a masterclass on what firms need to do to succeed in India

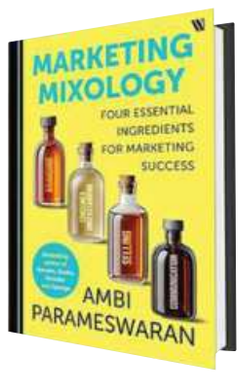
Sanjay Vijayakumar
sanjay.v@thehindu.co.in

"A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him," said Mahatma Gandhi. Advertising and marketing veteran Ambi Parameswaran's book, *Marketing Mixology*, captures the essence of understanding consumers and three other skills–brand building, selling and negotiation, and communication–as being crucial to successful marketing.

Parameswaran, founder of brand-building.com and who has worked with popular brands/companies like Tata Motors, Wipro, ITC, Amul and Pepsico, draws on his professional and teaching experience to share a masterclass in marketing, which acts as a guide for both seasoned professionals and aspiring marketers, amid changing marketing dynamics.

Reading the weather

Pointing out that consumer analysis is probably the most important step in the brand building exercise, he says with the country around us changing, an analysis of macro socio-economic factors may throw up interesting trends. A company, for instance, spotted an opportunity when it noticed girls keen on having a good education and pursuing a career. The company began setting up creches in housing societies and IT parks.



Marketing Mixology
Ambi Parameswaran
Westland Books
₹350

He urges companies to think what other opportunities will open up because of increasing incomes and working couples. "There will be an explosion in the demand for gadgets that save time and effort," he points out.

Successful marketing hinges on understanding consumers and from the smallest of organisations to the biggest, good marketing mixology cannot happen without a deep knowledge of consumers, says Parameswaran.

He dismisses myths that brand building is very expensive and only big companies can do it. Parameswaran also debunks the theory that brand building is very complicated in India because of factors like large population, multiple States etc., and discusses various elements of brand building.

"One of the myths is that you need a person with an MBA degree from an IIM to do your branding for you. Not true at all. Some of the most successful Indian brands have been built by our own entrepreneurs," he writes, citing examples like Ramraj Cotton, Moov Balm, MTR Masalas, Nirma, among others.

Pointing out that consumer analysis is probably the most important step in the brand building exercise, he says with the country around us changing, an analysis of macro socio-economic factors may throw up interesting trends

The chapter on negotiation begins with a quote of John F. Kennedy's: "Let us never negotiate out of fear; but let us never fear to negotiate."

Parameswaran elucidates various tools and techniques for negotiation and drives home the point that core principles, like don't react out of anger, always put yourself in the other person's shoes, attack the problem not the person, and make it easy for the other side to say yes, are still relevant.

Communication is key

The last chapter deals with communication and its various aspects, including one-on-one oral communication, one-to-many oral communication, written communication. More importantly, it touches on the concept of integrated marketing communications, which is using various marketing communication platforms aligning with the overall brand message.

Parameswaran notes that one of the big pitfalls affecting brands is to see India as a single market. "In reality, India is a federation of many markets. Several brands have been able to achieve success by not going all-India, but into regional market after market," he adds.

INTERVIEW

A survival story

How Pralav Dhyani sailed away from a hostage crisis off the Horn of Africa

Uday Balakrishnan

Pralav Dhyani was a 21-year-old cadet on his first sea duty on board the cargo ship MV *RAK Afrikana* when it was hijacked off the Horn of Africa by Somali pirates in 2010. Together with 23 shipmates, he was held hostage on board the ship in Somali waters before being ransomed 331 days later. It was a harrowing time, during which their redoubtable Captain nearly died of a stroke, and the ship's chief cook expired closer to their release. Dhyani recounts the ordeal in his book *Hijacked* (HarperCollins). Excerpts from an interview:

Question: *What inspired you to write this book so long after the event?*
Answer: During the COVID-19 lockdown, I noticed how many people were frustrated about staying indoors, even though it was for their own safety. What struck me was how little we appreciated the peace and rejuvenation that can exist within four walls. Despite the restrictions, we still had access to our families, loved ones, and the freedom to connect. It was a very different kind of lockdown I experienced in 2010 where isolation wasn't a choice, and freedom was truly out of reach. That is when I decided this survival story needs to be shared.

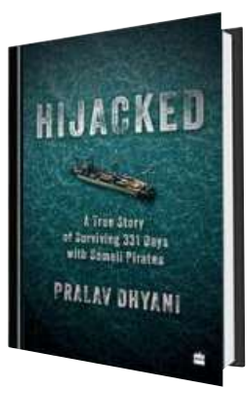
Q: *Clearly, you and others were held together by the courage and wisdom of your captain. Could you have survived the ordeal without him?*
A: The phrase 'With great power comes great responsibility' has stayed with me ever since I first heard it in 2002, watching *Spider Man* for the first time. During the 11 months starting April 2010, our captain embodied that principle better than anyone I've ever known. It was humbling and deeply moving to witness someone burdened with immense responsibility, carrying the weight of his own worries and a family waiting for him back home, placing the safety and survival of his team above himself. It wasn't just leadership; it was selflessness in its truest form. That kind of leadership leaves a mark that no words can fully capture.

Pralav Dhyani was a cadet on his first sea duty on board the cargo ship MV *RAK Afrikana* when it was hijacked off the Horn of Africa by Somali pirates in 2010.

Q: *How did you cope with a long incarceration seemingly without end?*
A: At the time, it was deeply disheartening and frustrating. Time slows down in the worst way. There was no clear timeline, no certainty, and that made it all the more difficult. But in the midst of that darkness, I realised how powerful hope can be. When it's combined with positive thoughts, it gives you the strength to endure. Survival, I've learned, isn't always loud or dramatic –sometimes, it's just quietly holding on, one moment at a time.

Q: *How do you rate your rescue by the Italian Navy?*
A: They were truly our saviours – without a doubt. But even they had protocols to follow. When we established radio communication with them, one of their first questions was whether we were in a position to self-abandon the ship. They did everything they could, in the safest and most secure way possible, to get us onboard their warship. Ultimately, the only way off a disabled *RAK Afrikana* was through our own life rafts. The rescue had to be quick and safe from the moment we abandoned our ship.

Q: *Are you haunted by your experience?*
A: To be honest, no. Back then, yes, I was terrified every time a gun was put to my head and let's be real, if it ever happened again (God forbid), I'd probably feel the same. I made a conscious choice to only share the humorous side of the experience. And maybe that's what helped me move on, by turning the trauma into something lighter, something survivable. That's what helped me sail away from those memories.



Q: *Your book is forgiving to all, including the pirates. Were you always so forgiving?*
A: I believe that with time, and having lived through and overcome so much, I've become more forgiving. If you had asked me this in 2012 or 2013, my answer might have been very different – maybe more aggressive. But now, I see life as a series of challenges we must face and overcome to survive and grow. Life isn't meant to be perfect, and perhaps it shouldn't be, because perfection can lead us to take things for granted. Those 331 days taught me patience and calm – and that's what I carry with me the most from that experience.

Q: *Did you sail again after your release?*
A: I never returned to sailing after coming home in 2011. Building a career in the maritime industry after quitting sailing at such an early stage presented its own unique challenges. In 2017, I founded ARC Continental FZE, which focuses on commercial and ship management aspects of maritime vessels.

The writer teaches public policy and contemporary history at IISc-Bengaluru.

ADULTHOOD, EDITED: HOW YOUNG INDIA (STILL) LIVES

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Anthropologist Dinah Hannaford's study, *Opting Out: Women Messing with Marriage Around the World*, reveals a global shift that resonates deeply in urban India: more women are choosing to forego marriage, no longer viewing it as central to their identity or security. They are subtly rewriting the age-old script, challenging the roles tradition has long prescribed.

Take Ananya Singh, 32, a software engineer in Bengaluru, who manages her own Bumble profile, swiping and chatting freely to explore who she wants to be with. For many urban women like her, dating apps are not about marriage right away – they are spaces for choice and self-discovery. Yet, this freedom exists alongside the quiet understanding that marriage remains an eventual expectation, adding another layer to the double lives they lead balancing independence online with tradition just beyond the screen.

Meanwhile, her parents handle her Shaadi.com account. "I'm open to it because I know it's important to them," she explains. "Honestly, I'd prefer a love marriage, but if things work out through an arranged one, that's okay too." For Ananya, these profiles are not contradictory but complementary, a way to honour her family's hopes while carving out her own path. "It's a balancing act, but it feels like I'm keeping all my options open. I think a lot of us are just trying to avoid conflict and not disappoint the people who raised us."

Yet, this search for selfhood can be emotionally exhausting. Psychiatrist Jai Ranjan Ram, who lent his expertise to the film *Dear Zindagi*, encounters this silent struggle every day in his Kolkata clinic. He describes it as "a profound conflict between duty and desire, a tension that many young Indians carry quietly. Parents often remain unaware or unwilling to acknowledge the complexity of their children's emotional lives". There is no shared language for these unspoken burdens. As a result, the stress of hiding one's true self can manifest in deep anxiety, profound alienation, and sometimes, even social ostracisation. According to Dr. Ram, a shared language can be built – one that starts with listening without judgment. It means making space for vulnerability, both at home and in public life. The goal isn't to reject tradition, but to evolve it.

"Social media has amplified this dissonance. Though it has brought mental health into public discourse, providing vocabulary and visibility for struggles that were once invisible, it has also encouraged widespread self-diagnosis and the adoption of half-formed coping mechanisms, often without professional guidance," he says. The result is a complex landscape where young people are left to navigate their emotional turmoil largely on their own, sometimes worsening their sense of isolation.

This [zone of negotiated freedom] is not uniform across genders. Young men often enjoy a greater degree of latitude than women, especially in conservative families

SURINDER S. JODHKA
Sociologist

This double existence is less of a new phenomenon and more a digital amplification of something old. We've always been different people in different settings. Only now, the audience is bigger and the stakes are higher

ADITI MITTAL
Comedian

Identities lived in translation

India is, at this moment, a country defined by its youth. More than half of its billion-plus population is under 30. That fact alone feels both enormous and impossible to grasp. But what does it mean for so many to come of age at once in a society racing towards modernity, yet held in place by tradition.

Their double lives are not contradictions but quiet negotiations, shaped by everything from matcha lattes and pickleball to Shaadi.com filters and family WhatsApp groups. A young woman might listen to *Pod Save America*, a conversation on politics, on her commute to a temple visit. A student in Mumbai might follow the New York City mayor's race closely, cheering for candidates like Zohran Mamdani even while avoiding political debates at home.

What emerges is not a clean break from the past but a layered, shifting mosaic of identities lived in translation. Of compromises made in motion.

The author works in consulting by day and writes about culture, business, and modern life.

Insta-worthy photo ops, endless music and dance, and hair and make-up sessions are some of the attractions on offer at fake wedding events. (COURTESY CORNELL SAC, JUMMA KI RAAT AND SADDI GALLI)

Lesley Simeon

THE GREAT INDIAN FAKE WEDDING

With more people hopping on this new 'party' trend, organisers are looking to curate more meaningful experiences and collaborations

What's not to like about weddings? The food, the dance, the music, the gossip... But for those seeking a more relaxed experience without perhaps the unpleasant bump-ins, forced conversations or long queues for food, there's a new trend on the block – fake wedding events. It's quite simply a wedding without the bride and groom or the attendant stress and pressures of the ceremony.

"People want to dress up and go to a wedding. And at our parties, we don't want folks to simply turn up, have a few drinks, dance and leave. We want to give them the entire wedding experience – family-like bonding, great food, Insta-worthy photo-ops, and so on," says Ayaan Vaid, co-founder of Delhi-based events company, Jumma Ki Raat. The company is one of the first to organise ticketed wedding-themed parties in India. Since its launch in October 2024, Jumma Ki Raat has organised two fake *sangeet* parties, the recent one held just last week.

New age partying?

Earlier this month, an invite to one such 'fake wedding' in Noida went viral on social media. The artfully designed invitation promised 'live band and *dhol*' and a complimentary alcoholic beverage while asking guests to be attired in traditional wear. Entry prices ranged from ₹999 to ₹1,499.

The idea seems to have takers across India – bar and restaurant chain Lord of the Drinks organised fake *sangeet* nights at some of its outlets in Madhya Pradesh recently, as did Bengaluru's Raahi Neo Kitchen & Bar with a 'Big Fat Fake Indian Sangeet'. Bengaluru-based Third Place, Kolkata-based event organiser Blackout, and Auckland-based BollySphere have welcomed guests to similar events as well.

Time to collab

When you walk into a faux wedding event (with an average runtime of four to five hours), there's everything you need to make it seem real – elaborate decorations, marigold flowers, live bands, *mehendi* artists, photo booths and even an 'astro' parrot picking out fun cards to determine the romantic fate of the party-goers.

"Pinterest and social media pages of wedding planners are my go-to places for research when it comes to décor ideas. I even picked up the idea for *gol-gappa* shots online," says Alisha Chouri, one of the founders of Mumbai-based Saddi Galli. The two-month-old brand has so far hosted three 'Scam Sangeet' events in Nagpur and Mumbai. Goa, Kolkata and Miami are their next stops. One of Saddi Galli's fake *sangeet* events, which was attended by nearly 800 guests, says Chouri, saw the company bring cosmetics brand Lakmé on board as a hairstyling and make-up partner. Tickets for such events can start at ₹299 and go up to ₹7,000.

At Third Place's Sangeet Socials, collaborations take a musical turn. "A songwriter friend of mine, actually released his original at our first Sangeet Social last week. It was a nice addition to the programme, to set the overall vibe of the event," says Anurag Pandey, founder and CEO. He says that these events, while being all about fun and partying, must also result in a curated, thoughtful and meaningful experience. And to achieve that, the Sangeet Social isn't an 'open for all event'.

Once the guests (capped at 40) sign up to attend the event (tickets are priced at ₹1,911 inclusive of food, drinks, games, and activities), they're expected to take a personality test, after which they are added to a waiting list. "We organise the events in a way people can truly connect. We use an algorithm to thoughtfully curate groups and maintain diversity and confirm the guest's participation a day before the event," says Pandey. It's also perhaps why the first Sangeet Social event, which included games like *antakshari* and a *mehendi* corner, kept things sober. "At our event, people aren't just dancing at a bar and heading home drunk," adds Pandey. Guests also walked out with a *shagun ka lifaafa* (gift envelope) that contained coupons to Barmen, the official drinks partner of the event.

Not just a Gen Z affair

It isn't just Gen Z flocking to such events for the promise of a good time. Vaid says their fake *sangeet* events (tickets priced between ₹800 and ₹3,000) have had encouraging participation from people in their 30s as well as early 40s. "Honestly, we all want an excuse to dress up and dance to Bollywood music. We don't really get that opportunity often, especially in a safe space," says 29-year-old Delhi-based businessman Anant Gupta, who has attended all of Jumma Ki Raat's events so far.

Mumbai-based businessman Stanley Lawrence, 55, made a group outing out of Saddi Galli's Scam Sangeet event with his friends and colleagues. "I was just curious to know what this fake *sangeet* was all about. But I didn't feel out of place. Not once did we see any of the kids there look at us and wonder why people of our age were at the party," he says.

Adds founder Chouri, "One of the slightly older guests we hosted even told us he had more fun at our scam *sangeet* than he did at his own *sangeet* years ago.

But are we trivialising tradition for the sake of a good time on the dance floor? It's the exact opposite, argues Vaid. "We are in no way disrespecting our culture. If something like this was done abroad, people would've praised it for promoting Indian culture," he says.

For Chouri, who has other wedding-related event ideas in the pipeline already, there's so much the theme can do to quench the party-goer's appetite.

But Pandey says that the trend might run its course soon, unless thoughtful curation draws focus. "If you just host events, you won't be able to sustain it. But if you curate it and add nice themes to it, it will stick around."

The writer and theatre artist is based between Bengaluru and Delhi.

A window into culture

The fake wedding trend probably began in the U.S., where South Asian student bodies across campuses such as University of Washington Bothell and Cornell University have been organising mock wedding events for years. "It's a way for students to experience South Asia beyond classrooms and textbooks," says Avneet Mehr, a third-year student of biology and sociology at Cornell. This year's annual *shaadi* extravaganza (around two to three days long), complete with a mock bride and groom, organised by Cornell's South Asian Council, was attended by nearly 500 students, adds Mehr.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

(Clockwise from right) The Dalai Lama during his 90th birthday celebrations in Dharamshala earlier this month; a Tibetan family in Lhasa; and tourists shopping for souvenirs on Barkhor Street. (REUTERS, SUHASINI HAIDAR & GETTY IMAGES)

TIBET IN TRANSLATION

Markets moved, languages lost, and the Dalai Lama mentioned only in whispers — the capital city of Lhasa has been reshaped, and rewritten

Suhasini Haidar
suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

The changes in Tibet's Lhasa are perhaps most evident in the heart of the old city, Barkhor Square, where the revered Jokhang Temple stands. Built in 639 CE by the "first king of unified Tibet", Songtsen Gampo, the deities of the Buddha were brought by his two wives, Tang Dynasty's Princess Wencheng and Princess Bhrikuti from Nepal.

Built around this temple, where Buddhists would do a daily *parikrama*, was a bustling market. In 2007, it was packed with stalls selling jewellery, handicrafts, wooden bowls, prayer flags, incense and food. Today, Barkhor stands as an empty piazza, with shops at the far ends of the square.

Tibetans sidelined

In 2012, as part of a drive to give Lhasa a facelift, the stalls were cleared, and street vendors moved from outside the Jokhang temple, and along the main Youthok Lam (street) that leads to the Potala Palace. The signage is now almost entirely in Chinese, and the shopkeepers belong to China's Han ethnic majority unlike in the past, when they were mostly Tibetan.

Many of those moved out are now housed in a multi-story concrete mall, Tibet Market. On the ground floor, the main corridor has more Han shopkeepers, with Tibetans relegated to the lines behind or floors above.

Inside the Jokhang Temple, and at the opera, *Princess Wencheng*, which has been performed in Lhasa and other parts of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) for more than a decade, the Chinese queen, and link to Buddhism are played up over the ties to Nepal and India. This summer, Lhasa hosted another opera – a combination of a local epic, *King Gesar*, with the Confucian *Shi Jing* (*Book of Poems*).

The three most visible changes at Barkhor Square – infrastructural, demographic and cultural – represent the transformation of Tibet over the past few decades. As a member of three Indian journalist delegations invited to Lhasa by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I have witnessed these changes during visits in 2007, 2014 and June 2025.

Infrastructural changes

After annexing Tibet in 1950, most of the Chinese government's planning focused on security, especially concerning Tibetan Buddhism and monks. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Jokhang Temple was closed for worship. But, by the turn of the century, there was a shift towards controlling the region through a blitzkrieg of investment. China's 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) allocated over $4 billion for infrastructure development in Tibet, which rose to $21 billion in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-10), for developing expressways, a high-speed rail project, and more than 300 key projects.

The launch of the Beijing-Lhasa train in 2006, which defied the steep climb to the Qinghai plateau, was hailed as an engineering marvel but speeded the influx of mainland Chinese to the region. The drive from the airport to Lhasa city, which once took almost three hours, now takes just 45 minutes due to tunnels bored through the mountains, and solar panels everywhere indicate a renewable energy transition. Experts and Tibetan activists say that the rapid construction of roads, tunnels, airports, and concrete cities like New Lhasa, across the Kyichu (Lhasa River) from Old Lhasa, has caused environmental damage, speeded global warming, and melted glaciers in a land that cradles the world's highest mountains and is the source of many of Asia's rivers.

The construction, mining and malls mandated by the Chinese government's development plans have brought many workers and mainland Chinese seeking jobs. From 2010 to 2020, the population of Tibet – or Xizang, as the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) mandated the region's six prefectures be called in official documents – grew from about 2.7 million to 3.1 million. But the percentage of Tibetans or ethnic minorities dropped from nearly 90% to 86%, indicating a demographic change.

Linguistic politics

The language in Lhasa has shifted – Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) is taught in schools to inculcate "national unification and strengthen ethnic unity" through a "modern education" according to a 2023 CPC paper. All official documents and signage now use the Chinese name 'Xizang' and not Tibet.

At Lhasa's School Number 8, the main language of instruction appears to be Mandarin, though we were taken to a class where students were chanting in Tibetan, and another where a scholar was practising the Tibetan script. This is a sensitive subject for the Chinese government, amid UN Special Rapporteurs' criticism that about 1 million Tibetan children had been "separated from families" and pushed into schools that sought to "assimilate Tibetans into majority Han culture".

Relocation projects for poorer and rural Tibetans resemble Beijing *hutongs* (alleyways lined with houses) rather than smaller, colourful Tibetan homes seen in the countryside. There, we meet Tibetan families in a room where photographs of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Chairman Mao are prominently displayed. Security forces, that we saw regularly in 2007, patrolling Lhasa streets with riot control gear and cattle-prongs to deal with self-immolation protests, are less visible. In busy areas, we see high-tech police surveillance vans, however.

The disappearance of links to India, a regular travel destination for Tibetans now more restricted by a heavily controlled Nepal-Tibet border, is evident. In 2007, stalls at Barkhor sold Bollywood DVDs, shops stocked Indian products, and monks at Jokhang and the Potala Palace spoke to us in Hindi. Two decades later, very few speak the language.

Erasing the Dalai Lama

The biggest change centres on erasing any reference to the 14th Dalai Lama, now 90 years old. He escaped from Lhasa 65 years ago, but his influence remains a concern for the Chinese government. All photographs of him are banned, and worshipping him is illegal. However, in 2007, I met Tibetans who, recognising me as an Indian, asked about him and showed photos concealed in their jackets, or behind shop counters.

In 2014, during a brief period of openness following Chinese government talks with Dalai Lama representatives, we visited his summer home in Norbulingka, where Tibetans thronged to offer *khadas* (silk scarves) to his belongings – furniture, a radio set, even a towel rack.

This time, we are told Norbulingka is closed. I ask a young man in Barkhor if he is following the Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations in Dharamshala. "Yes," he says, pointing to his chest as he looks around furtively, and adds, "but only inside my heart."

How to reach Lhasa

With an opening in India-China ties, Indian tourists may find it easier to get visas to China, but visiting Lhasa requires a special Tibet permit. This can be obtained through the official Tibet Vista tour operator (tibettravel.org), or a Nepali tour agency. Flights to Lhasa operate from Kathmandu, with new routes launched recently from Pokhara, Singapore and Hong Kong.

To participate in the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra organised by the MEA and Chinese MFA, register at kmy.gov.in.

Where to eat

TIBETAN FOOD: Dishes like *thukpa* and momos are blander, and flavoured with yak broth. The soups with vegetables and meats are a hearty meal, with staples like barley porridge, washed down with butter tea or *chhang* (barley/rice wine). Kyichu Restaurant near Jokhang Temple, and the Tibetan Family Kitchen are great outdoor garden restaurants.

FOR VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS: DK Cafe along the main Jiangsu Road has a spectacular view of the old city and Potala Palace. It serves a number of fabulous dishes from the wider region — Tibetan, Nepali and North Indian. The Nepali *thali* deserves a special mention.

Scan the QR code for a view of Lhasa on magazine.thehindu.com

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Indian vs. American morality

Evolved over a period of 50,000 years, our values and judgment are far more sophisticated than those of the Americans

I know it's Sunday morning for you but I am sorry to say I am devoting this column to a serious matter – one involving complex questions of morality and jurisprudence. I can't help it – I got so disturbed after watching that video I haven't slept since.

Yes, I am talking about that poor Indian woman who was criminally charged for merely walking out of a Target store in the U.S. with some items. I understand she was leaving the shop with items worth $1,300 (₹1,11,994) she hadn't paid for. But does that mean you brand her a thief? There are so many things wrong with the way she was treated, I'm amazed patriotic NRIs still continue to patronise American retail instead of buying all their groceries on visits to India.

This tragic miscarriage of justice can be traced to three factors: no clear warning or messaging that the shop was under CCTV surveillance; no option given to the woman to bribe the police officer and settle the matter; and complete mismatch between a state-of-the-art Indian morality and an American system based on a crude assumption of equality before the law, with no allowance made for nuances such as class and caste of the accused.

Privacy lost

The first one alone sealed her fate. The entire incident is attributable to a simple cultural difference between India and the U.S. with regard to CCTV cameras. In India, any shop that deploys CCTV cameras warns customers they are under surveillance. You will see a sign saying, 'Smile, you are on camera' or 'Weep, Big Brother is watching you'. So you know the shop expects you to pay for the things you put in your shopping cart.

This Target store in Illinois did have cameras, but they were all hidden from view. It also had no signs alerting customers they were under watch. Seriously, is this kind of clandestine surveillance even permitted anymore in civilised society? What about privacy?

Anyway, faced with acres of goodies and no cameras, the lady naturally assumed it was okay to leave the shop with some items. If she was indeed required to pay for them, some staffer would surely come and remind her, or at least there would be a security beep at the exit alerting her that the goods were not 'complimentary'. But when she walked out with her cartful of items, there was no beep. So imagine her shock when all of a sudden a guard jumps out of nowhere, calls her a thief, and takes her to the police.

Clear case of entrapment

One may still condone the guard's over-enthusiasm. But what about the American police? The Indian woman graciously offers to pay for all the merchandise in her cart. But the policewoman would simply not let her pay and close the matter.

It was heart-breaking to see the woman repeatedly plead with the police saying, "The best thing would be for me to pay and finish this." The cop's stone-hearted reply: "The best thing would be to not steal in the first place." Seriously, how can you call it stealing when the so-called thief is literally begging to pay for everything she took?

This is where the primitiveness of American morality stands exposed. It sees everything in black and white – as right or wrong, with no shades of grey. Indian morality, evolved over a period of 50,000 years, is a far more sophisticated system. It makes allowances for the complexities and mysteries of human nature. It knows that a person may walk out of a shop with unpaid goods but without any intention to steal – just to see whether they get caught, or purely as a social experiment. This is not accidental. Our sense of right and wrong comes from an ancient truth summed up in a proverb we all learnt as children: 'The crime is not the crime; getting caught is the crime.' This is why withholding information about the presence of CCTV cameras is the real crime in this entire saga, for it duped the poor Indian woman into thinking she wouldn't be caught – a really egregious case of entrapment if you think about it.

People often ask me, "You are bright, talented, and a South Indian. What are you doing in India? Why aren't you settled in the U.S. like Sundar Pichai?" I always tell them, "America is a backward country. No predictability when it comes to rule of law. Anything can happen to anyone." People would laugh at my answer. They thought I was joking. Now everyone is realising I was dead serious.

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

Shazia Iqbal on the sets of her upcoming film *Dhadak 2*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

SHAZIA IQBAL: IN CINEMA AS IN LIFE

The filmmaker challenges casteism and gender norms in her debut feature *Dhadak 2*, which releases this week

Shazia Iqbal, 41, wants trolls to know she's from Bihar, not Bandra. She gets what it's like to live outside the bubble of privileged India and yes, she has felt the crippling weight of identity. We speak a week before the release of her first feature film *Dhadak 2*, headlined by Triptii Dimri and Siddhant Chaturvedi.

It's uncommon for debut filmmakers to get theatrical releases these days as commercial stakes are high. Iqbal also had a long and tricky dance with the censor board and has had to fend off fans who are annoyed that Karan Johar's Dharma Productions is remaking *Pariyerum Perumal*, Mari Selvaraj's cult anti-caste Tamil hit, produced by Pa. Ranjith in 2018.

But if reviewers called the first *Dhadak* a watered-down version of Marathi film *Sairat*, *Dhadak 2* is an amped up cry against casteism in higher education and love. "Don't treat a film or book like religion," says Iqbal. "You're emotionally attached and that is fine, but a remake won't hurt the original and it's a chance for more people to watch it."

Dhadak 2 is not an exact copy of Selvaraj's film. "I felt we needed to talk about both caste and gender," Iqbal says, adding that she wanted the female lead to have more agency than in the original. "People can be flawed and ignorant and yet they can have a voice." It's an important film for an age when young Indians still don't have the right to choose their life partner.

Full circle moment

Iqbal's award-winning 2018 short film *Bebaak* (meaning defiance) was about a young woman being told that she would only get a scholarship from a religious trust if she wore the *hijab* and behaved more 'Muslim'. It's based on something the director, once a quota student in a Muslim-run college, faced when she went to ask for financial assistance with untied hair and her unblinking attitude. Only, unlike the girl in *Bebaak*, Iqbal complied. "It rattled me so much," she says. "I began looking critically at how patriarchy functions in my own community and family."

After she graduated as an architect, Iqbal opted for production design. She worked in advertising but was drawn to the Hindi film industry, and has worked on half a dozen movies and web series such as *Sacred Games*, *Lust Stories* and *Love Storiyaan*. Telling her story in *Bebaak* was healing. "I overcame that guilt or trauma of being in such a vulnerable position that I had to take that money," she says.

Iqbal was born in Patna, one of four siblings. Her father Zahid, an RJ who wrote radio plays, was a man with emancipated ideas and he told her, when she was eight, that life was about more than getting married. The idea stuck. It was the age of Salim-Javed and someone suggested that Zahid try his hand at writing for Hindi films, so he moved to Mumbai in the 1970s. At one point, he worked with director Ramanand Sagar on the TV series *Ramayan*. "I love to tell people that my father cast Ram and Sita," Iqbal says. The family followed him in 1988 and lived on the "fringes of the metro" in Vasai. Iqbal's father never made it as an independent writer and years later, his daughter felt like she had to "complete that circle" for him.

The personal is political

The issue of identity and marriage is one Iqbal has engaged with since 2008, when her brother informed the family that he was in love with a Hindu woman. "It was very shocking for my parents and I also thought my brother was doing the wrong thing," she says. "Back then, we believed that whatever parents say is right."

A year later, her second brother announced he was seeing a Malayali woman and then, her sister fell in love with a Gujarati man. All three siblings are in interfaith marriages. "My mom used to think her children are behaving like this because we are not upper middle class or rich," says Iqbal. "I told her Anil Ambani also married someone against his parents' wishes. Being with someone you chose is not about money or disrespecting parents."

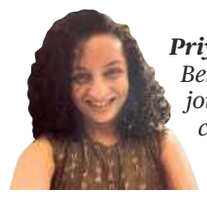
After chaos and cancellations, the family emerged stronger. "My extended family have become better people because my siblings took a stand," she says. "In their way, they made the world a better place." In an industry that rushes to label itself 'apolitical', Iqbal practises that feminist maxim – the personal is political.

Representation matters

Her expertise in production design means Iqbal is adept at building worlds and backstories. At some point during the making of *Dhadak 2*, the costume team wanted to know how authentic the film would look. "It has to look as real as possible," Iqbal told them. "We have to buy a ₹100 shirt, not a ₹2,500 shirt and then age it to look like a cheaper shirt."

She cites the example of Anurag Kashyap's 2018 film *Mukkabaaz*, about a Varanasi-based boxer, on which she was production designer. "We would never shoot with new things," she says. "We would buy stuff and request the neighbours to give us their old stuff to build a lived-in environment."

Iqbal makes films because she wants to make a difference. She wants a student in Kota who is feeling bullied in college to see themselves represented in her film. The power of mainstream cinema lies in its reach, and when people watch her film, she hopes they will think: "I saw myself on screen."



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

GOREN BRIDGE

The right play at the right time

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

South held up his ace on the opening king of clubs lead but won the club queen continuation. East playing the eight and the 10 made it a certainty that West held the missing clubs. South had opened the bidding one club and West would need a pretty good suit to lead and then continue clubs. South cashed the ace of spades and led a spade to dummy's king, then cashed the queen of spades, West discarding a low diamond.

South had eight top tricks and took a moment to decide which redsuit finesse to take for his ninth, knowing that if he lost the finesse, West would cash enough club tricks to defeat him. South decided not to take either finesse and led dummy's remaining club instead. West won and cashed two more club tricks, South discarding a low heart and a low diamond.

NORTH
♠ K Q J 5
♡ A 8 6
◇ 8 5 2
♣ 7 5 4

WEST
♠ 10 7
♡ Q 9 3
◇ K 4 3
♣ K Q J 9 3

EAST
♠ 8 6 4 3
♡ 10 7 4
◇ J 10 9 7
♣ 10 8

SOUTH
♠ A 9 2
♡ K J 5 2
◇ A Q 6
♣ A 6 2

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♣	Pass	1♠	Pass
2NT	Pass	3NT	All pass

Opening lead: King of ♣

West now had the unhappy choice of leading a red suit and there was no winning choice. South had nine tricks regardless of which suit West led. Nicely played!

Note that cashing a fourth spade before exiting dummy with a club would have been fatal to the contract. South would have no good discard on the last club and West would then have a winning choice. Try it for yourself.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about proteins

Berty Ashley

What fibrous protein is the main structural material in many animals? (GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

1 On July 27, 1921, researchers at the University of Toronto, led by biochemist Frederick Banting, discovered the first hormone and proved that it regulates blood sugar. It was eventually also the first protein to be sequenced. Which hormone is this?

2 Myosin is a protein that acts as a molecular motor. It is responsible for converting chemical energy in the body into force used for important processes. Which tissues in our body are dependent on these proteins for their movement?

3 These are fibrous proteins, which are the main structural material in many animals. It is responsible for scales, horns, claws and hooves. In humans, it is in nails and hair. What protein is this that some shampoos come enriched with?

4 Collagen is a structural protein that makes up almost a quarter of all proteins in the body, found mostly in cartilage, bones and skin. Ascorbate plays an important role in its synthesis; hence, a lot of skin care products have it. By what name is ascorbate better known as, something we get from citrus fruits?

5 Human serum albumin is produced in the liver and plays a huge role in the transport of hormones around the body. It binds to the sodium, calcium and potassium ions to carry them around. Hence, it makes up 50% of what important system in your body?

6 Fibrinogen is a complex protein that flows freely through the body. At certain instances, it becomes fibrin, which forms long strands and binds to platelets. It then hardens and contracts, ensuring a seal. What event causes this chain reaction?

7 Ferritin is a protein that is found in all animals, including the earliest in evolution. Its main role is to store a certain element and release it in a controlled fashion so that it doesn't become toxic. Having got its name from the Latin name of the element, what does it store?

8 Amylase is an enzyme that acts as a catalyst for the breakdown of starch into sugars. It is the first step in the process of digestion. Responsible for the sweet taste of starchy food, where is this protein found?

9 Immunoglobulins are Y-shaped proteins that are the front line of defence in the body. They identify and take out antigens such as bacteria and learn from the incidents to act faster the next time. By what name are they known thanks to this work they do?

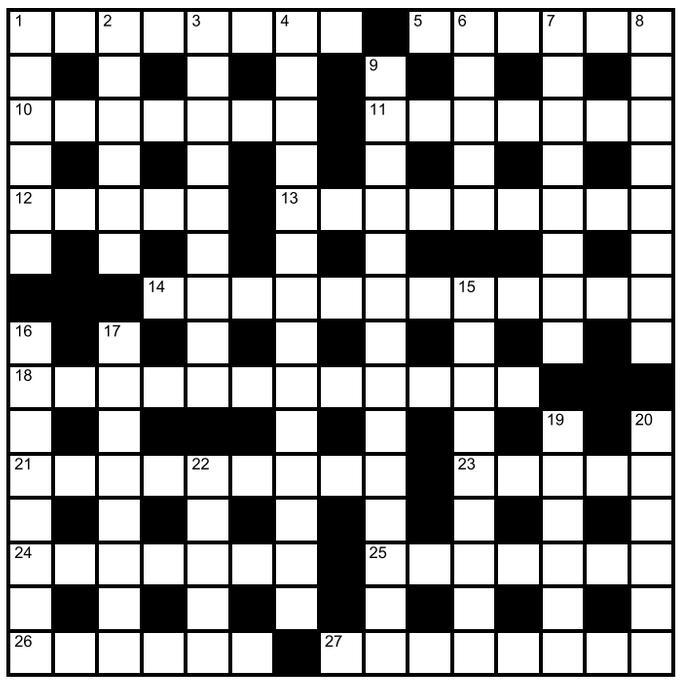
10 DNA polymerases are enzymes that play an important role in the formation of DNA. The proteins are responsible for creating two identical DNA duplexes from a single original DNA. Since 1983, they have played a major role in a laboratory method used to study DNA. What method which we now are all familiar with thanks to the pandemic?

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. Insulin
2. Muscles
3. Keratin
4. Vitamin C
5. Blood
6. An injury (this is blood clot formation)
7. Iron
8. In saliva
9. Antibody
10. PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction)

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD #14 (Set by Dr. X)



Across

1 Deleting old, bad quality picture (8)
5 Blunders with boastful talk after consuming very strong drug (6)
10 Lady falling for Romeo, audacious rogue (7)
11 Slim European men captivating girl (7)
12 Belief in alternate netherworld (5)
13 Giant mice all over the place? That's mysterious (9)
14 Flawed individual's crazy about ancient ring, possessed by spirits (7,5)
18 Fixing fracture in his leg after taking incision (12)
21 Fail completely to perform backstroke perhaps (2,5,2)
23 Leader's measure (5)
24 Fictional character in short story by a British amateur (3,4)
25 Lights up and smokes, losing head after misfortune (7)
26 Alleges angrily - student killed birds (6)
27 One on schooner is tense, communicates about trouble (8)

Down

1 Turns, reacts to vipers around bags (6)
2 Enthusiastic group hosting a party at centre (6)
3 Knocking back whiskies in bar, start to order exotic dish of meat (5,4)
4 Expecting onset of adversity, while Nifty may crash (2,3,6,3)
6 Beverage in morning for elite group (1-4)
7 Cheat having sex in retreat after lively party (8)
8 Smartest tip from solicitor upset scoundrel in trial (8)
9 Bit stoned, I pee foolishly outside hotel - that's impertinent (6,3,5)
15 Usually perk up after dope and ecstasy (9)
16 Live close to central station in capital city (8)
17 Slashing con tackling sailor boy (8)
19 Female graduate edited manual (6)
20 Bad cold sore releasing a little dark, oily liquid (6)
22 Rent large facility (5)

SOLUTION NO. 13

	G	E	C	A	A		M		F					
V	A	M	P		L	E	G	A	L		A	G	R	A
	L		I		A		A		H		N		E	
T	E	N	D	E	R		I	M	A	G	I	N	E	D
			E		E		N		M		A			
C	R	E	M	A	T	E	S		B	I	C	E	P	S
	E		I				T		R				I	
O	B	S	C	U	R	E		C	A	R	B	I	N	E
	U				E		B				O		E	
E	S	P	I	E	D			A	N	A	C	O	N	D	A
			R		C		G		L		K			
G	O	M	O	R	R	A	H		B	O	S	T	O	N
	B		N		O		D		A		H		I	
R	O	M	E		S	T	A	I	N		O	S	L	O
	E		D		S		D		Y		P		S	

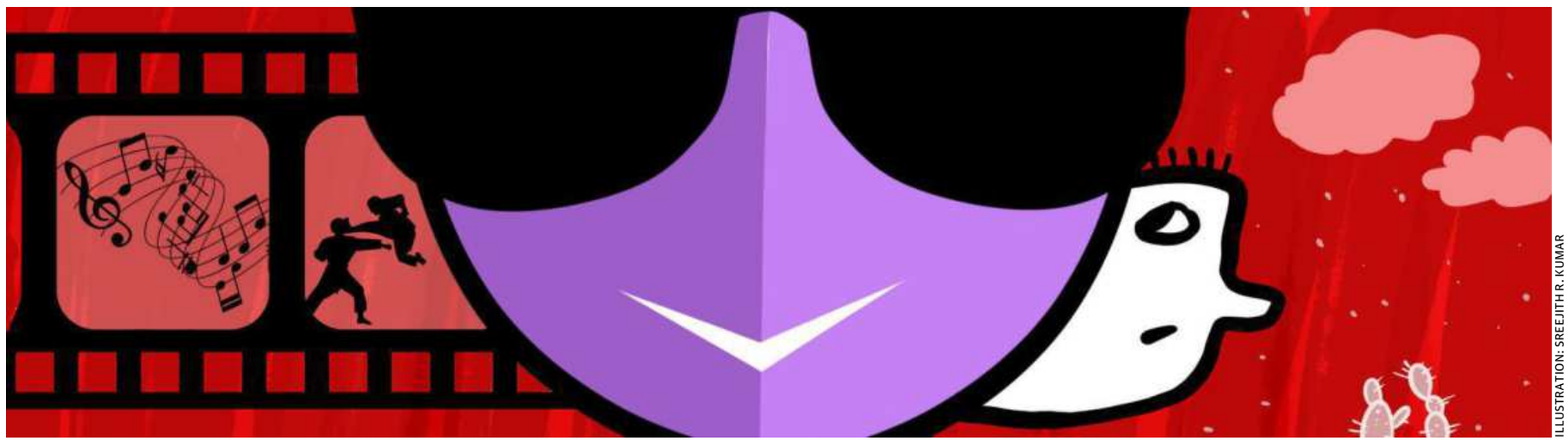


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

The fading mirror

Disconnected from reality, many films fail to tackle the complexities of real-world problems

Magesh Kesavapillai
magesh_kesav@rediffmail.com

Art serves as a vibrant mirror to society, capturing the essence of human existence across time. It's a living document, meticulously detailing everything from our behaviours – the good, the bad, and the mundane – to our fashion choices, culinary customs, social interactions, and the intricate tapestry of family values and relationships, including the preservation and evolution of our cultural heritage and the challenges of social and domestic life.

This profound connection between art and society should ideally be reflected in all its forms, especially in a popular and influential medium such as cinema. Indeed, there is a timeless adage that perfectly encapsulates this relationship: "Show me a movie, and I will tell you what kind of society it is." It speaks to the profound power of cinema not just as entertainment but as a cultural barometer, reflecting the values, struggles, and aspirations of its creators and audience.

Only fantasy

Yet, it's disheartening to witness a significant disconnect in contemporary Indian cinema. Over 90% of our films, in their relentless pursuit of the "1,000-crore club", have veered sharply into the realm of fantasy. This trend is not confined to Bollywood; even South Indian filmmakers, driven by similar ambitions, are increasingly crafting "pan-India" blockbusters that, ironically, lose touch with their roots and neglect to tell the compelling stories of real society. While rare regional gems occasionally break through, the prevailing narrative glorifies larger-than-life heroes and often stereotypes heroines. Our screens are flooded with protagonists performing gravity-defying stunts.

This raises a crucial question: What will future generations truly glean from such portrayals? Will they believe their ancestors were all superheroes, performing incredible feats and perpetually dancing in shimmering costumes? This only offers a distorted lens for future generations. If their understanding of the past is dominated by characters who defy gravity and solve all problems with superhuman strength, they might find it incredibly difficult to relate to the actual challenges, resilience, and ingenuity of people throughout history. Real historical figures, with their inherent flaws and remarkable triumphs, might seem less compelling by comparison. Given that cinema profoundly reflects and shapes culture, if future generations are only exposed to a narrow, exaggerated version of their cultural past, they risk missing the rich nuances, complexities, and diverse experiences that truly define their heritage.

This trend of unrealistic portrayals carries another significant downside: the example these star heroes set for their followers. It's a well-known fact, especially in many South Indian States, that the line between "reel" and "real" often blurs. These matinee idols are more than just actors; they become an integral part of their fans' lives.

One frequently sees autorickshaws and taxis proudly displaying images of these stars. But what kind of images are these? Far too often, they depict the hero wielding a blood-stained dagger, promoting a disturbing aesthetic of violence. This constant exposure to their heroes engaging in such acts undoubtedly etches itself into the memory of their devoted fans, potentially normalising or even glorifying aggression. The fans might develop an unrealistic expectation of what "heroism" or "success" looks like, viewing everyday struggles and achievements as less significant than the grand, impossible feats of their heroes. We have been witnessing such incidents of fans indulging in such acts imitating their heroes. This is not a call to abandon fantasy or superhero narratives altogether. However, there is an urgent need for balance. Film connoisseurs implore filmmakers to dedicate at least a portion of their craft to creating realistic movies that genuinely reflect society and bravely tackle the complexities of real-world problems.

There is a common, yet often misguided, opinion circulating in the film industry: that audiences like such movies, thus justifying their prevalent production. However, this masks an inherent inability or lack of commitment to compelling storytelling from the filmmakers themselves.

Consider it a powerful, but unproductive, drug. When filmmakers consistently offer up such movies, audiences become engrossed in them. Yet, this doesn't imply an inability to appreciate depth. If creators were to instead hone their storytelling skills and craft narratives that reflect society, delve into real experiences, audiences would embrace them with equal, if not greater, enthusiasm.

On a tight leash in Mumbai

Muraleedharan Menon
muralee6@yahoo.com

After the charm and quiet of Chandigarh, Mumbai seemed to me sheer madness. Looking out of the 18th floor flat, I made out everything below to be rows of ants crawling out in all directions – why all this rush and bustle so early in the morning?

The sight of the majestic Shivaliks in Chandigarh has given way to miniature parks and slides in Mumbai. As I commence my morning walk, with my gentle Pomeranian trotting beside me, I shut my eyes and try to form a mental picture of peace and quiet. I hold Sheru on a leash, but with enough leeway for him to gently roll on, on his own rhythm.

Peace and quiet are, however, not much in demand here. The moment I step on to the potholed road, the streetlights fade out (too much of a coincidence). Boldly, we march on, taking the middle of the road where potholes are at least more visible. Many middle-age and elderly persons are up early, shuffling along the road, in what passes for regular morning exercise in Mumbai.

Once you reach the Bandstand promenade, a stiff warning greets you, "Dogs not allowed." Beside the side entrance, even wiser dictum is made available: "Dogs and other eatables not allowed!" However, with all these signs around, the first thing that meets you once you enter is a pack of stray dogs. They come in batches, bark, snipe, and leave, just as chaperoned and well-behaved dogs have to make do by trotting outside the periphery.

Sheru is such a quiet and well-behaved dog that I sometimes forget that he is tailing me along. Usually, he stops once-in-a-while to sniff at some vegetation; or simply look up, admiring the scenery around. When we conclude the morning walk, normally Sheru is more refreshed than me.

Not any more. At the end of two weeks in Mumbai, we encountered aggressive and well-knit groups of strays seemingly waiting at street corners, before dimly lit societies, and suddenly pouncing on passing dogs, with furious barks.

The scene is reminiscent of old horror films.

Weary summer once upon a time

Water scarcity was the norm, everyone had to fetch water from the village well early in the morning

Rajesh Sharma
kumarr5803@gmail.com

Summer has played truant in many parts of northern India this year. In the first week of June, the mountain ranges of Dhauladhar that landscape Dharamshala received a good amount of snow, injecting a chill in the air. Paradoxically, it brought back memories of the summer seasons once lived.

Returning home from school in a hot summer afternoon was an ordeal. Water was stored in earthen pitchers under tree shade and at the closing bell, all of us would leave the school after gulping down large volumes of it with cupped hands.

After about a mile of walking, we would halt at a charitable water station under the shade of a banyan tree on a hillock for the weary travellers. After a few minutes of rest, we would walk to the next such station in the hope of getting colder water there.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Such places serving thirsty travellers exist even today.

Sweetened cold water was served to the village folk going to annual fairs in June. The fairs had their own charm, but equally inviting was the sweetened water. Fairs offered jalebis, aloo chhole, pakodas, and candy floss as also some other sweetmeats. Kulfis were sold for five paise a piece.

Clandestine sale of alcohol in the fair announced itself when a few inebriated souls reeled around. Toys apart, scaffolds for handheld fans that women would frill and weave to their own fancy would be on sale.

Cold drinks had not reached the villages then. A joint selling tea would shut shop during summer, there being no takers. The common refrain was that tea "consumed" the liver. Water scarcity was the norm.

Every family member had to fetch water from the village well early in the morning. At the place of a relative, a little gorge in the shade of trees was a hidden treasure of freshwater where naturally filtered water dripped through moist clay; a drop at a time that was guided into a pail by a fresh lemon leaf.

Fire in the desert

Recounting the sudden takeover of Kuwait by Saddam's forces in 1990

George Thomas
george.tom@gmail.com

At the peak of summer, August is extremely hot in the desert kingdom of Kuwait. August 2, 1990 fell on a weekend. I, all of 16 years old, was sleeping soundly. A loud explosion had me bolting up from bed, but I dropped back to sleep thinking it was all a dream.

In the other room, my dad, hearing the sound, jumped up from bed, parted the curtains, and looked at the refinery complex in the horizon where he works. Just as he was about to draw back the curtains, he spotted a tiny dark flying object coming in fast from the east. It fired a projectile which hit a tower. Later, on our way back from my extra classes, we stopped at a petrol station. "Something is wrong," he said. "There are lots of people queuing, especially on a weekend morning."

Wanton destruction The Parliament building in Kuwait destroyed by Iraqi troops in August 1990. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

When we reached home, the local TV channel was broadcasting visuals of war. Saddam Hussain had invaded Kuwait. Overnight, we became residents of Iraq.

We shifted to our uncle's house. Occasionally, we came back to check on our home. We had to go through several checkpoints. When we got home, we heard several gunshots being fired. It was from an apartment in front of ours. There were several military trenches and bunks set up in the desert facing the beach.

A band of heroic resistance fighters had fired a few rounds at the Iraqis. In a matter of minutes, several truck loads of soldiers descended on the apartments. The combing operations began, starting with the one immediately facing the beach. I was at the window when the shots were first fired. I immediately ducked and my parents, who were in the other room, quickly took me away.

A few minutes later when all was quiet, my parents made hasty preparation to leave. At the distance, I watched the soldiers entering an apartment while some exited from another.

A lone soldier was scanning our apartment through his visor. We quickly took the elevator, got into our car and left. As we drove past the boom barriers and took the turn, two truck loads of soldiers drove into our group of apartments. Moving on, I also caught sight of that soldier with the RPG, his aim still at our apartment, his fingers still at the trigger.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The cover story makes for interesting historical reading. ('The Art Deco style book at 100'; July 20) There are numerous heritages sites that we must preserve for future generations.
N.R. Ramachandran

Conserving architectural heritage helps maintain the cultural identity and history of a place. It also provides valuable insights into bygone architecture styles that can inform and engage the current and future generations. These heritage sites can also boost tourism.
K.M.K. Murthy

The cover story has candidly presented a ringside view of India's architectural heritage deeply embedded in the art deco structures. Many of these buildings across rural India are not adequately maintained due to the migration of younger generations to urban areas. These traditionally built homes are slowly vanishing and making way for modern apartments.
G. Ramasubramanyam

Poignant and poetic

This article is a beautifully crafted ode to Delhi's contradictions, where chaos meets charm, and memory intertwines with myth. ('City of Stories'; July 20) The writer's vivid storytelling has captured the pulse of the city and transformed Delhi from a backdrop into a living and breathing character.
Swalih Mirshad

Notwithstanding its numerous shortcomings, Delhi does not cease to charm a newcomer, thanks to its rich history and shared culture. The city evokes a sense of curiosity among travellers. A whole band of modern writers is finding stories scattered in every nook and corner of Delhi, and thus creating a new genre of storytelling.
Samiul Hassan Quadri

Pharma fraud

Unfortunately, many medical practitioners in India remain unaware of the ongoing controversies and regulatory lapses in the West, whether concerning metal-on-metal hip implants or anti-Parkinson's medications. ('The great pharma hustle'; July 20) Investigative journalism in medicine is indispensable yet fraught with danger.
Kattamreddy Ananth Rupesh

Fascinating read

It is fascinating to hear the stories of interplay among the various schools of thought in ancient times and how they have shaped our present religious beliefs. ('Shiva the teacher'; July 20) Buddhism with its remarkable ideas failed to alter the rigid social order and patriarchy that was pervasive.
Rohith Varon S.S.

Shared experience

The article beautifully captures how a seemingly ordinary space — the ladies compartment in Mumbai local trains — becomes a powerful symbol of shared female experience, resilience, and quiet resistance. ('Inside the Mumbai local'; July 20) In a world of fast content and bold statements, this show reminds us of the strength found in silence, softness, and everyday acts of care.
Muhammed Nizamudheen

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The power of pink
Is feminine energy the new feminism?
Asma Afreen

Take life as a totality
It isn't about giving up; it's a shift in how we engage with the world
Akhand Pratap Singh

Fragile relations
Rising personal expectations, financial pressures, emotional incompatibility are to blame
Swaraj Manchanda

Hurt by unthinking remarks
Obsession with lighter skin, slimmer bodies, and idealised beauty leads to scarring comments
Purnima Sharma

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, July 27, 2025



One of a kind 1. Ida Yellowman of INDIgenous Led; 2. Heirloom Naga; 3. The House of Angadi; 4. Lovebirds; 5. Weavers Studio Resource Centre; 6. Bibhu Mohapatra; 7. Joanna Ortiz; 8. Masaba Gupta; 9. Ashdeen Lilaowala; and 10. Raw Mango (RONNIE DAI)

100 ELEPHANTS AND THEIR DESIGNER BLANKETS

Featuring 55 designers from across the globe, *The Great Elephant Migration* embodies artistry, sustainability and the need for human-wildlife coexistence

Vinita Makhija

Last Sunday, 100 elephants entered Beverly Hills' palm-lined streets, home to many Hollywood stars. No one backed away in fear, though – because the large beasts were handcrafted from the invasive *Lantana camara* plant, and travelled on trucks decorated with vibrant Indian lorry art.

It was the last leg of *The Great Elephant Migration*, a 5,000-mile installation art journey across the United States, through cities, national parks, and tribal lands, supported by over 20 conservation organisations. The life-size pachyderms were draped in ceremonial blankets created by 55 renowned designers and indigenous communities from around the world.

On the grand trunk road

The story began decades ago when Mark Shand, author, conservationist, and brother to Britain's Queen Camilla, experienced the emotional bond between elephants and people in India. He adopted an Asian elephant named Tara in 1988, traversed 600 miles with her across the country, and later founded the non-profit Elephant Family in 2002, which he led until his death in 2016. His legacy continues today through cultural conservationist Ruth Ganesh, principal trustee of the Family, and the work of The Real Elephant Collective, based in Tamil Nadu. The two collectives often collaborate on projects, such as the *Migration*, to raise funds to restore coexistence between people and elephants.

The Collective is a sustainable, community-owned enterprise that employs 200 indigenous artisans from the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Over five years, the craftspeople have replicated 160 elephants – all identified and named – making each piece a sculptural echo of a living animal.

In the past two years, the herd has appeared at Rewild, designer Anita Dongre's showcase at the City Palace in support of the Nature Conservation Foundation, and at designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee's 25th anniversary exhibition at NMACC this January.

In the U.S., the elephants have journeyed from Newport through New York, Miami Beach and the Blackfeet Nation in Montana, to Los Angeles. The artisans joined the convoy in the final 1,000-mile leg. And the culmination is *Wrapped in History*, the series of ceremonial blankets curated by product designer Vikram Goyal, being auctioned on Artsy (till August 1).

Living monuments

The idea for the bespoke blankets was born at All Night Smoke, an event hosted by their partner INDIgenous Led. "What struck me was the powerful presence of blankets," reminisces Ganesh. "Members of the community explained that they are symbolic – given to mark the end of something meaningful, or as a gesture of honour."

The sentiment is echoed by Elephant Family's first-ever curator, Goyal. "Blankets hold cultural weight across indigenous communities globally," he says. "They signify protection, memory, belonging."

Ganesh had worked with Goyal during the Elephant Parade in Mumbai in 2018, and roped him in to curate the series. "He has a rare ability to bridge Indian craftsmanship with global aesthetics."

Goyal, whose studio Viya collaborates with master artisans, epecially in metalwork, brings a designer's touch to the project. His blanket draws on *A Book of Dreams*, his own repoussé artwork – inspired by an eponymous manuscript featuring mythical animals such as the *gajasimha* (half-lion, half-elephant) and black geese, which are symbols of fertility, prosperity and protection.

The blankets feature marquee creators, including Sabyasachi, Elie Saab, Ralph Lauren, Diane von Furstenberg, Tarun Tahiliani, Raw Mango, Ozwald Boateng, and younger labels such as Lovebirds and Dhruv Kapoor. Indigenous representation comes from communities, including the Navajo Nation, Maasai, Snoqualmie, and India's Soliga and Betta Kurumba tribes.

Of *kantha*, *gara* and flamenco

Zardozi, *himroo*, *ajrakh*, patchwork – numerous Indian crafts find their rightful place amidst the weaves. Among the standout pieces is a design from Heirloom Naga, a creative platform that supports loin-loom weaving. Founder-designer Jesmina Zeliang, who lives near the elephant corridors in India's Northeast, was inspired by *thupikhu*, or elephant cloth, of the Chakhesang tribe in Nagaland – a garment worn by men who had hosted feasts of merit. Woven on loin looms, it is vivid and symbolically rich. "The elephant motifs signify not only the wearer's strength but also his community stature," Zeliang tells me.

Textile designer Ashdeen Lilaowala's contribution bridges continents. His piece draws from Spanish flamenco shawls, beloved in old Parsi homes where they are often used to cover grand pianos. His blanket blends embroidered birds and floral patterns from the Parsi *gara* vocabulary with flamenco-style tassels.

Meanwhile, Weavers Studio Resource Centre, an active textile archive led by Darshan Shah, was inspired by an old Oxfam calendar featuring *nakshi kantha*, a type of embroidered quilt, as well as appliqué, batik, and cotton *gamcha* lining. "The centre [of the blanket] is a dreamlike world – elephants, tigers, paisleys, and vines bursting across handwoven tussar silk. But the true magic lies in the margins. You'll see women, mid-stitch, caught in the act of creation. It's a *kantha* about women making a *kantha*."

What began as a herd of lantana elephants now carries a heavier load – stitched stories of land, memory, and shared futures. The migration may end here, but the message continues. "Once that elephant tusk tugs at you strong," says Ganesh, "it doesn't let go."

The writer is a Mumbai-based fashion stylist.




Behind the lantana

Tarsh Thekaekara, co-founder of The Real Elephant Collective, grew up in the Nilgiris. He was shaped by two forces that he saw around him daily: elephants and the aggressive spread of lantana. A conservationist and researcher, he has previously consulted for the Elephant Family and this time around proposed the idea of using the wood of the invasive plant to construct life-size elephant sculptures. (Earlier editions used materials such as fibreglass.) His wife, Shubhra Nayar, a theatre production designer from Cardiff, helped model the sculptures. Each of the elephants is based on a real animal from the coffee and tea plantations surrounding their home.



ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

Losing perfection

Phuphee has a mantra for when life gets too much and you are sitting on a pile of laundry

I grew up in an environment where perfection was expected – all the time, and in all aspects of my life. You had to wake up at a certain time, get dressed for school without being reminded, be a straight A student, have only 'good girls' as friends, walk to school but pretend you have blinkers on, come straight home, and spend the rest of your time buried in your school books. If you didn't do everything that was expected from you, you were met with 'what will she do tomorrow when she goes to her in-laws place?'

It seemed to me that growing up was a military operation and all roads ultimately led to the biggest battlefield of all: marriage. Surprisingly, these rules didn't irk me too much as I had grown accustomed to them. But what really got under my skin was that none of these regulations applied to my male counterparts. They were expected, at most, to be perfect at their studies.

It is no surprise that I became somewhat of a perfectionist, and while the people around me have always appreciated the end results of this attribute, no one except me has had to deal with the crippling anxiety and self-doubt that came with it.

For most of my life, I seemed to pull off one miracle after another. Until one day, when I unravelled. It was after the birth of my baby in my late 30s that life handed me more tasks than time. Having a baby is wonderful, but nothing prepares you for how many things you have to get done despite having little to no time to do them in, let alone get them done perfectly.

Once I had muddled out of the post-partum fog, I realised to my utter shock that I was still expected to function as an adult and continue to do other things apart from just caring for my baby. Now, that wasn't the problem – or at least it wasn't the entire problem. The problem was that I couldn't understand why I couldn't do everything the way I did them before I had the baby.

Why did the house seem to run away from me despite having wrestled with it just yesterday? Why was it impossible to keep making good home cooked meals every day? Why did I look like a train wreck? Where has my perfection gone? How would I go about getting it back?

One day, drowning in these thoughts and tears, and trying to get a baby to sleep on his own but who loved contact naps, I sat on the floor – well, I sat on a pile of laundry because I couldn't see the floor – when my phone rang. It was Phuphee.

I told her everything about how the mighty had fallen. She listened patiently, with only the sound of her inhaling her cigarette smoke assuring me of her presence.

'You know, when I had my first baby and I came back home after six months, I realised my brain felt like it had stopped working. I thought I was ill, but Aapa [maternal grandmother] said it was normal and that in due time it would start working again,' Phuphee said.

'You know what is funny,' she continued, 'everyone around me behaved as if I hadn't had a baby. They expected me to function just like I did before. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that I expected myself to function like that. One day I remember I had swept the entire house, only to find that there were parts that were not done properly. I wept. All day I cursed my inability to do things normally, but then a thought suddenly hit me. I realised I was being unkind to myself. This body and mind had carried me through everything in life so far and, had it been another person, I would have washed their feet and made them a meal and said thank you. But here I was being ungracious to myself.'

'So I got up and because I had missed the evening meal while drowning in my misery, I went to the *daan* and made *doade thool* [fried egg cooked in a milky gravy seasoned with turmeric, cumin and green chillies]. I realised while making it that though *doade thool* was the simplest thing I could make for myself, it was nourishing. It wasn't grand, but it was *goadnyik khoat asel* [better than before] – before when my stomach had been empty. The next morning when I completed any task, I simply told myself '*goadnyik khoat chu asel*' and carried on.'

'*Boaz myoan shoosh* [listen to me, my lungs],' said Phuphee, 'when a baby is born, it is like it is another country, and you have to learn its new customs, language, and laws. This idea that women are meant to go back to being who they were before giving birth comes from idiots and men, and it is never a good idea to take advice from either. You know, had men been given the ability to bear children, we would have an entire branch of medicine dedicated to its alleviation and an entire industry, too.'

It was this simple phrase '*goadnyik khoat asel*' that saved my life. It taught me how to slow down in a world that is constantly pushing mothers to strive for perfection, but is instead pushing them deeper into depression, anxiety and self-loathing.

I understood that it was possible to do many things while taking care of a baby, but it wasn't possible to do everything. So, whenever I was faced with a hurdle, I told myself my effort was enough and it was '*goadnyik khoat asel*', and carried on because truly there are times in your life when surviving is the same as thriving.

***Saba Mahjoor**, a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life's vagaries.*