THE HINDU
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MONSOON TALES

SONG OF THE SUNDARBANS' FISHERFOLK

How dwindling incomes from fishing and the resultant migration of fishermen is taking a toll on the folk music and theatre traditions of West Bengal

Snigdhendu Bhattacharya

In the Sundarbans, which hosts the world's largest mangrove forest, monsoon used to be different. Not the weather itself so much as the activities connected to it. Even in the first decade of the century, fisherman Swapan Kumar Mandal used to have his evenings packed with rehearsals. He used to manage Bishnupriya Opera, a *jatra pala* (folk theatre) troupe that specialised in Bonbibir Pala, a folk theatre form based on the legend of Bonbibi, the Sundarbans' guardian deity who protects fishers and honey gatherers from tiger attacks.

This year, however, among the members of the troupe, lead singers Shreemonto Sheet and Khokon Sana are in Andhra Pradesh, working as agricultural labourers. Once the fishing season begins, they are engaged in marine fishing. Some of the other musicians and actors will also soon travel to Kerala to work in the fishing trawlers.

"Dwindling income from fishing in West Bengal has left the state's fishers in dire straits. Folk music and drama troupes are disintegrating due to migrations. Besides, television and smartphones are taking away the space for traditional outdoor entertainment," says Mandal, in his 50s. A farmer-cum-carpenter, he lives in Sonaga village, Gosaba, the largest island in the Indian part of the Sundarbans deltaic landscape.

The Sundarbans, West Bengal's prime fishing hub, made up of mangrove forests, islands and criss-crossing rivers, creeks and channels, is home to about 250 fish species. It serves as the biggest supplier of fish to the capital city of Kolkata, which has a population of six million, and where fish is an essential part of the daily diet.

Yet, small and marginal fishers of Sundarbans are struggling to survive. With reduction in fish hauls, income is dwindling. This year, the mood is additionally sombre, with the *hilsa*, the golden crop of Bengal's waters, largely eluding the nets.

"Only about 10% of the boats got *hilsa* in mid-to-end-June. There was absolutely nothing for about a month. At the end of July, roughly 10-15% boats had some *hilsa* hauls. The rest returned with other fish," says Narayan Das, the South 24-Parganas district unit president of Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), an organisation of small and marginal fishers.

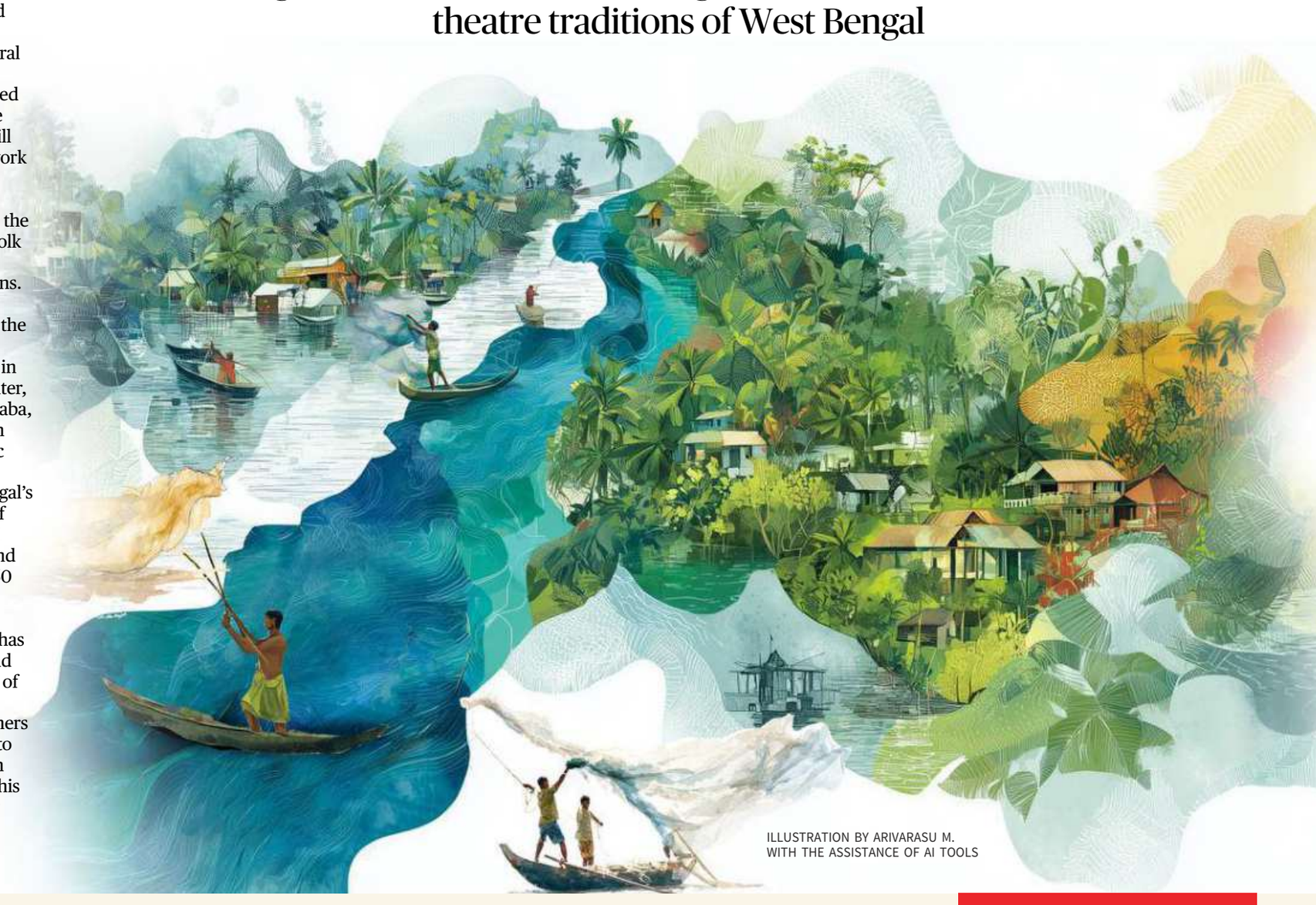


ILLUSTRATION BY ARIVARASU M. WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF AI TOOLS

Migrating South

Das cites decreasing fish haul to be the impact of trawling, increasing pollution, and rising water salinity in the rivers, among other reasons.

He says that laws prohibit bottom trawling – wherein fishing nets go up to the floor of the sea – as it destroys the seabed ecosystem. Besides, trawling is only allowed 12 nautical miles away from the coast, as the coastal waters are reserved for traditional fishers. However, there is no mechanism to monitor or implement these regulations and, therefore, there are rampant violations.

"We have seen trawlers engaging in bottom trawling within the prohibited zone of 12 nautical miles. As a result, the seabed ecosystem is damaged and inland fishing has been badly hurt," says Das.

Migration of fisherfolk from the Sundarbans began on a large scale after Cyclone Aila, in 2009, devastated the region, especially by increasing soil salinity in thousands of acres of farmland and filling freshwater ponds with saline water. While land fertility has recovered over time, decreasing fish haul has kept up the out-migration momentum.

Take the case of Krishna Das, a 45-year-old resident of Shibpur Paschim village in Kakdwip block. Starting this month, Krishna and his two brothers, Chaitanya and Prabir, will be working in Kerala for the next 10 months, with occasional visits back home.

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4-5

History of flavours Snapshots from photographer Assavri Kulkarni's *Recipes of the River* project as a part of the Serendipity Arts Festival 2024. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The fish know best

A documentary project looks at the ancient wisdom of the Goan river-fishing community and why we need to preserve it

Joanna Lobo

Pimples? There's a fish for it. Eye infections? Another fish. Need a face pack? Try some scales. There's a fish for every reason, and season.

This is the biggest takeaway from fashion photographer Assavri Kulkarni's recent project, *Recipes of the River*. "It's a documentary on the fishing communities who live by the river and sustain their livelihood, and a compilation of their traditional knowledge," she says.

It is a conversation about fish with her daughter that set Kulkarni on the path to the documentary. "The whole community's knowledge is getting lost," she says. Kulkarni belongs to the fishing community, and her knowledge was obtained by just following her family to the fish market and listening to them speak. "It was not taught... they just spoke about it and we could absorb what we wanted." As a part of the research, she's been focusing on documenting the seasons as "everything is done according to the season".

Kulkarni has been researching for two years, speaking to elders in the community. "They don't know English and haven't studied, but they have so much knowledge to share. It's as if they've done a Ph.D on fish. They know the tides and the waters, which fish are migrating and which haven't come," she says. For instance, certain fish are not consumed during the breeding season, allowing them time to propagate. Shellfish aren't eaten during the monsoon as they can affect the stomach. "Everything is related to the moon cycles. They follow what fish to eat as per it." It is why they don't harvest crab during the full moon as the crabs will be empty (they are moulting at the time).

- **Goa has 41 fishing villages and a fisherfolk population of 12,651 (Marine Fisheries Census 2016)**
- **84 species of freshwater fish are found across Goa's rivers and four of its seven notified wetlands**

A feast for the senses

Kulkarni's father has been an invaluable resource in her research, and she has even followed him to sea. "My father says in the next 10 years, there will be no oysters or clams. The water is changing, the sea bed is dying because it is getting covered with waste and cannot breathe," she says. Climate change and pollution have changed the industry.

"Our community worships the sea, and Vetal, the god of wind and sea. On Nariyal Poornima, we offer a coconut to the sea before starting the fishing season. It is our way of giving gratitude and asking for a good year and business," says Kulkarni. She shares more such tidbits with participants during her hour-long session at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa last December.

Bringing a basket with different river fish, Kulkarni speaks in detail about each one. "The more scales on the fish, the healthier it is for you... it is why river fish is widely eaten here. My grandmother would use the scales of the *xevto* [striped grey mullet] on the eyelids when we had a stye, and on pimples, and it worked like magic. A handful of dried prawns taken daily can help aid the recovery of sprains or ligament tears," she says.

At the end of the session, Kulkarni serves up a feast – fish mayonnaise (the salad is a staple at Goan Catholic weddings and is served shaped like a fish), *karela kismur* (bitter gourd with coconut and chilli), pumpkin and dried prawns *bhaji*, and a fish curry.

Kulkarni's project is even more important at a time when fish is being eaten out of season. Varieties such as *chonak* (barramundi) are now farmed because of their popularity, and the catch is typically frozen and not eaten fresh. "This [her art/photography] is the weapon I have to showcase what Goa has and what Goa needs to preserve," she signs off.

The writer is a freelance journalist and editor from Goa.

THE TRANS EXPERIENCE

If all of us could choose, what gender would we be, asks Torrey Peters through her four novellas

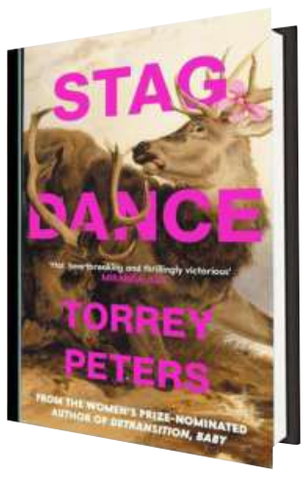
Torrey Peters (below) pushes the boundaries with her writing.
(GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

Kavya Murthy

Torrey Peters came into the spotlight with the tender and entertaining debut novel *Detransition Baby* (2021), in which three people – cis and trans – consider being parents in a queer domestic arrangement.

This was one of the first novels by an out transperson released by one of the big publishing houses (Penguin Random House), and the novel was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction.

But before the publication of this novel, Peters was part of the erstwhile trans literary scene of Topside Press – an indie press publishing stories written by trans authors for trans readers – where she self-published two novellas. As she says in the podcast *Between the Covers*, the press created a 'Topside test' like the Bechdel test: was there literature where two trans people talked to each other about something other than their medical transition? Peters' interest was in writing about what trans people did in each other's company, rather than seeking empathy and acceptance from cisgender readers.



Stag Dance
Torrey Peters
Serpent's Tail
₹499

The four novellas of her new book, *Stag Dance*, emerge from this era and decade of Peters' life, written, as she says in the acknowledgement, "to puzzle out, through genre, the inconvenient aspects of my never-ending transition – otherwise known as ongoing trans life".

Experimenting with genres
The novellas are of different lengths and genres – horror, coming-of-age romance, a Western and a short story. In 'The Masker', a young sissy joins a trans meet-up in Las Vegas to cruise, befriended by an older transwoman, Sally, and pursued by a fetishist who wears latex masks. The story shows us the messy, uncomfortable social dynamics of sissy culture, cross-dressing and feminisation, exploring boundaries and taboos around sexuality, and the fears, vulnerability and insecurities that come with them.

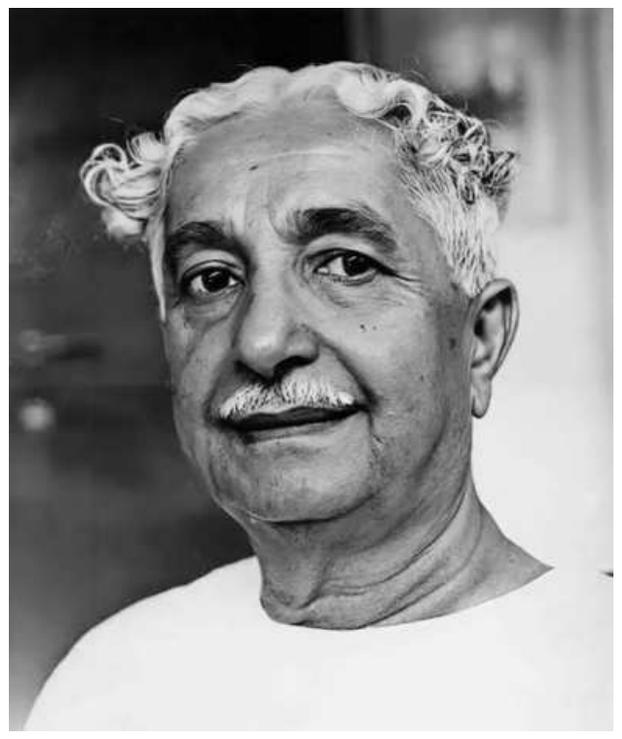
In 'The Chaser', teenage roommates at a boys' boarding school get entangled in confused and lusty desire for one another, working out how to be boys or girls in a gendered world. Humans can no longer produce sex hormones in the post-apocalyptic science fiction story 'Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones', and are forced to choose their gender each time they inject themselves with hormones (in a transpocalypse).

Flawed people
In the titular novella, we meet a lonely hulk of a lumberjack, Babe Bunyan, who works and lives at an illegal logging operation in wintry Montana in the early 20th century. He wants to be courted as a woman in a ritual stag dance that takes place at the camp, where men can vie for the attention of other men by pinning a cloth triangle to their groins. Bunyan wishes to be courted as a woman, "a desire unbidden by me... a desire that, without my desiring it to, made itself manifest", struggling with himself and ridiculed by others as he has a profoundly trans experience.

The stories in *Stag Dance* are astonishing in their range and craft, heartbreaking, provocative, acid and funny. They are full of flawed and intense human connections, and crackle with the possibilities of gender and performance.

Peters pushes the boundaries of what trans writing can mean, showing us how people try to understand who they are to themselves, and what they can become. It is a book that refuses to pigeonhole trans people, asking, if all of us could choose, what gender would we be?

The Mysuru-based writer and editor covers books, queerness, and mental health.



Kuvempu continues to remain a great literary figure, akin to Tagore, in the Kannada cultural imagination.
(THE HINDU ARCHIVES)

A Kuvempu magnum opus for the English reader

Set in the late 19th-century, this recent translation of the legendary Kannada writer's 1967 novel is an exemplary work of social realism

N.S. Gundur

Celebrated Kannada writer K.V. Puttappa (1904-94), known by his pen name Kuvempu, continues to remain a great literary figure akin to Rabindranath Tagore in the Kannada cultural imagination. His monumental novel *Malegalalli Madumagalu* (1967) re-enters the world via the hands of veteran translator Vanamala Viswanatha as *Bride in the Hills*. It was preceded by an earlier attempt as *Bride in the Rainy Mountains* (2020) by K.M. Srinivasa Gowda and G.K. Srikanta Murthy.

In the Afterword to this new translation, prominent Kannada writer Devanoora Mahadeva hails it as the novel of the century. Mahadeva's observation not only testifies this work's influence on his sensibilities as a writer but also its achievement as a literary classic. Like a steady masterpiece, this work with frequent reprints goes on earning more readership. It has been successful as a play on stage and has been made into a TV series, besides readers revisiting it as pilgrimage.

Before completing the novel in 1967, Kuvempu's prolific output across genres – including another great novel *Kanuru Heggadati* (1936), later translated into English by B.C. Ramachandra Sharma and Padma Sharma as *The House of Kanooru* (2000), and the epic *Shri Ramayana Darshanam* (1949) – must have sharpened his literary ambitions.

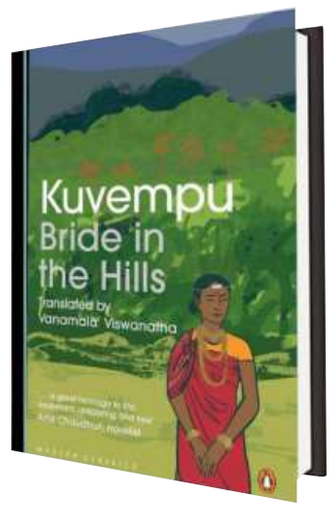
Struggles of young people
Set in the late 19th-century Western Ghats, a region of dense forests teeming with animals, birds, and diverse communities, *Bride in the Hills* explores the lives of ordinary folks "far away from the grand mainstream of the historical flow of civilisation". However, colonial modernity later enters this lifeworld with a bicycle, Christian missionaries and schools.

Gutthi, an untouchable bonded servant, sets forth to bring his lady-love, Thimmi, who was supposed to marry the man her *zamindar* ordered. Refusing to be mere pawns in the hands of social power structures, Gutthi and Thimmi elope. The story, much like a stream on the Sahyadri, is joined by different lives brimming with desires and despairs.

While the orthodox mindset refuses to see Gutthi and Thimmi as human beings, let alone consider their love, the Vokkaliga young man, Mukundayya, too must swim against a different set of social currents to wed Chinnamma, whose marriage is arranged with an ailing Heggade, much against her will. Of course, there are no qualms about a *zamindar* getting on with a concubine, as happens in the case of Devayya and Kaveri, but the courtship of young people is a struggle.

In the spirit of the original
This novel without a hero is an exemplary work of social realism. The narrator not only provides a solid description of objects, people and their customs with an anthropologist's eye for detail but also comments on social practices. The novel's ability to immerse readers in its cultural world, more than its exploration of a society's moral fabric, makes it a unique work of art. The extraordinary literary talent of Kuvempu turns documentary realism into *rasanubhava*, an aesthetic experience. The tempo of the narrative transfers the Joycean movement of most characters, especially Gutthi's rhythmic errands with his dog Huliya, to readers.

Of all the portraits in the novel, it is the subaltern characters – Gutthi, Aita, Pinchalu, Akkani and Pijina – who win our hearts in tune with the novel's epigraph: 'No one is unimportant/ Nothing is insignificant'. The title of the novel, which opens a perspective for eco-feminist readings, connotes the complex play of passion and desire in a man-woman relationship, explored against the backdrop of jungle life more than the social function of a bride. Read in a particular way, even a widow occupies the subject position of a bride, thus making it 'brides in the hills'.



Bride in the Hills
Kuvempu, trs Vanamala Viswanatha
Penguin
₹799

While a large part of Kuvempu's works awaits translation, early English renderings of his two novels – *The House of Kanooru* and *Bride in the Rainy Mountains* – do not seem to have made him reach a wider audience. One has to wait and see how Vanamala Viswanatha's deservingly excellent translation fares in the literary sphere.

Most of all, Viswanatha needs to be congratulated on this colossal work, shaped by her creative choices in transferring the Kannada ethos to English readers. Indeed, it is difficult to do complete justice to a work that breathes the spirit of regional nuances. Though classics invite multiple translations, Viswanatha's confidence in choosing an already translated work should not be underestimated.

The reviewer teaches English literature at Tumkur University. His translation of D.R. Nagaraj's Allamaprabhu and the Shaiva Imagination *will soon be published.*

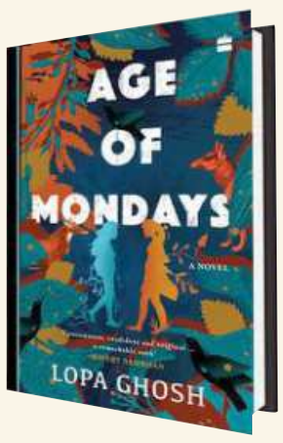
Not a child's world

The author lends heft to a 10-year-old's attempt at making sense of her troubled surroundings

Preeti Zachariah
preeti.zachariah@thehindu.co.in

The inner world of Vera Narois, the 10-year-old protagonist of Lopa Ghosh's new novel *Age of Mondays*, is surprisingly grim, shaped by the turbulence she is living through. She must deal with a mother going away every Monday to "a cold, cruel place", her parents' marriage unravelling at the seams, flailing friendships, and a class teacher who is very uncomfortable with her overactive imagination and worldview. "Sadness is not a bicycle that you learn to ride, and once you have learnt it, you cross over to the other side and become a sadcyclist... (it) is a smell, a colour, a person," she thinks.

Narois's childhood is hardly idyllic. It is one in which time is calculated in "mega-annums and giga-annums", parents' fights that grow from sounding like the "low hum of a helicopter" to "a mini-earthquake", and "like fireflies, cancer stories gleamed and glowed". To escape all this, Narois begins creeping into the Jahanpanah Forest in South Delhi, a patch of wilderness "that has existed for centuries, rustling, shedding, lurking", overlooking her "house with limestone walls (that) can be spotted from an aeroplane if you have the eyes for it." Here, she meets a strange, almost otherworldly bunch of people, the Jahanpanah Jugnus, led by the handsome Silver Samir, an encounter that will have momentous consequences for little Narois and her family.



Age of Mondays
Lopa Ghosh
HarperCollins India
₹499

Shadows of the past
Ghosh's attempt to write in a child's voice – despite the unmistakably adult phrases often clashing with Narois's somewhat more ingenuous perspective – gives the novel remarkable depth and profundity. One cannot help but be moved by the thoughts and feelings of this very young person who is forced to constantly grapple with a dystopian present, filled with inequity, disease, drug abuse, depression, the rise of right-wing nationalism, the threat of war, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the unshakeable shadow of the past, whether it be the 2002 Gujarat riots, the Holocaust or the Iranian Revolution.

Crammed with rich imagery, wry observations, interesting similes and metaphors, forays into synaesthesia and onomatopoeia and some clever dialogue, *Age of Mondays* is also a reminder that the world our children are likely to inherit is a doomed one, unless something changes and fast.

After Joan

Does the couch-side view of a great writer deserve to be published posthumously?

Suresh Menon

These notes – summaries of sessions with a psychiatrist – were found in Joan Didion's desk after her death in 2021, addressed to her husband John Gregory Dunne. There are two questions here: a) should such notes have been published? and b) what is the quality of the book itself? Questions of ethics and aesthetics.

The couch-side view of a great author might provide some voyeuristic gratification; the thought that people who are not like us suffer like us might satisfy some, but this was not Didion writing polished prose, merely a grocery list of issues with her family. You won't find clunky sentences like "She had said that absolutely she agreed that depression could be a motivating agent for people..." in any of her finely-chiselled novels.

No easy answers

She could have simply thrown the lot away or burnt them, so the fact that they are now in the public domain means she wanted it that way. This is usually the publishers' justification. But she was 87 when she died, and might have simply forgotten they were there. However, she had once told an interviewer, "I've never written anything that wasn't for a reader. I cannot imagine writing not for a reader." Clearly, there are no easy answers; you react to the book on feel and emotion.

When Gabriel Garcia Marquez's last novel *Until August* was published (he could have thrown it away too), I argued in these columns that his sons might have served the cause of fiction. With the publication of *Notes* I find my position has clarified somewhat. Yes, for fiction (Kafka, Nabokov, Marquez), no to psychiatrist notes. There is an ethical question here that cannot be avoided even if the main subjects – Didion, Dunne, their daughter Quintana, their parents, Joan's brother, the psychiatrists – are all dead.

Didion's cancer, her abuse as a young woman, her daughter's alcoholism and hospitalisations and other personal details are unlikely to hurt anyone. The public's right to know is usually inviolable, but reading about "romantic degradation" as Didion calls physical abuse at the hands of an early boyfriend, about alcoholism in the family, especially that of her daughter, can be painful.

The entries are extremely personal and share confidential information, particularly about her daughter who died within a couple of years of the final entry. Maybe it is the commercial exploitation of a family's trauma that provokes that painful feeling. I am uncomfortable about watching someone die in a car crash.

There are flashes of the writer Didion is, of course. When Didion and Dunne consider giving their daughter a substantial sum of money, her psychiatrist suggests holding off if they decide they do not trust her values. "I said I did trust her values," Didion reports. "I just didn't trust her common sense."

Amazing fortitude

You can't help admiring the amazing fortitude of a writer, a candidate for the Nobel, who crafted some of the finest essays and novels of our times, even if *Notes* isn't one of them.

Didion's own response to posthumous publication was laid out in a brilliant *New Yorker* essay in 1998. On the Ernest Hemingway estate's decision to publish from notes and treatments left behind after the author killed himself, she wrote: "This was a man to whom words mattered. He worked at them, he understood them, he got inside them...", and that "there is a substantive difference between writing a book and making notes for it."

Does *Notes* stand on its own as an offering from a major writer? There is too much disorganised prose, too many similar thoughts being bounced around, too many pages that feel repetitive. And strangely, for what is an intimate memoir, it does not always draw the reader into the world of Didion the writer. Presumably, she has left that to critics and revisionists of the future with the message: This is what happened, you decide what it means.

Perhaps this book is meant for them, and for the pop psychologists who see a grain in a world of sand. For me, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, about the year following her husband's death, a grief observed and translated into literature, tells us more about Didion and her unfortunate family.

Notes to John
Joan Didion
HarperCollins
₹499

The reviewer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?.

GETTY IMAGES

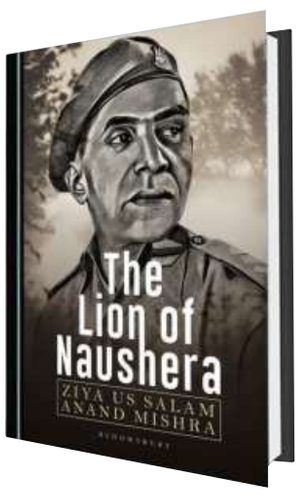
(Clockwise from left) Brigadier Mohammed Usman; at the Royal Military Academy; Brig. Usman leads a parade at Multan, 1938; and Maulana Azad, C. Rajagopalachari, Indira Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru at Brig. Usman's funeral in 1948.
(THE NAUSHARA BRIGADE OF INDIAN ARMY, JAVED ANSARI)

EXCERPT

THE RECAPTURE OF NAUSHERA

A new book by Ziya Us Salam and Anand Mishra recounts the valiant efforts of Brigadier Mohammed Usman in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1948

Brigadier Mohammed Usman was touching 36 when he led a contingent to wrest two strategic locations in Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistan in 1948. Given a choice to move to Pakistan after Partition, he chose India. Brigadier Usman died in combat, and was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra posthumously for his valour. An extract from a new book, The Lion of Naushera *(Bloomsbury):*



*The eyes of the world are on us/The hopes and aspirations of our countrymen are based upon our efforts./We must not falter, we must not fail them...*The brief extract from a Special Order issued by Brigadier Mohammed Usman, a hero who was not often in the limelight, gives a peek into the personality of the man popularly remembered as the 'Lion of Naushera'. Brigadier Usman wrote these lines before the combat which helped the Indian army recapture Jhangar and Naushera—two strategic locations in Jammu and Kashmir located 18 kilometres apart—from Pakistan in 1948. At that time, Brigadier Usman was 12 days short of his 36th birthday. He laid down his life in service to India, and it is important to recall his stirring sacrifice. He repulsed the Pakistan forces at a time when the newly born nation was coveting Kashmir due to its Muslim-majority population. Pakistan's top officials had promised Brigadier Usman the highest rank in the army, money and power, but they could not offer him the unalloyed joy of patriotism. Love for India burned bright in Brigadier Usman's heart, and everything Pakistan offered appeared to pale in comparison. It was out of this love for the nation that the story of Naushera was born, and Kashmir remained an integral part of India.

In the early days after Independence, Jammu and Kashmir was far from being a land of bliss. While there had been unprecedented communal violence in Jammu, resulting in a change in the demographic profile with the massacre of a large number of Muslims, Kashmir had to bear the brunt of Pakistan's repeated incursions. The Pakistani forces used the kabaili tribal raiders to devastating effect. After they captured Jhangar in Jammu and Kashmir in December 1947, Brigadier Usman, who was then commanding the 50th Parachute Brigade, took a vow not to sleep on a bed till he recaptured Jhangar. Three months later, he did so, after successfully thwarting fierce attacks on Naushera and Jhangar, and earned the sobriquet 'Lion of Naushera'.

Supreme sacrifice

Usman again foiled Pakistani attempts to capture Jhangar in May 1948, but lost his life in a 25-pounder shell attack on July 3, 1948. When he died, the nation slipped into mourning. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru sent condolence messages, as did the governor general through personal letters to his family. When he was given a state funeral, the prime minister attended it, along with his cabinet, in Jamia Millia Islamia University's cemetery in Delhi—his last resting place being close to that of his family elder and India's freedom fighter, Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari. The three chiefs of the armed forces were in attendance as well. Usman remains the highest-ranking military officer to be killed in combat. He was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra posthumously for his valour.

Given a choice to move to Pakistan after Partition, Brigadier Usman chose India. He died in combat, and was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra posthumously for his valour

Icon of secularism

He went on to become an abiding icon of secularism for a nation often questioning its own identity. Those who swore by the idea of India and regarded the Constitution as the touchstone of all actions in a pluralist country took pride in his life, often holding him up as an example of an India that belongs to all Indians, and where every Indian belongs to India. There were others who used his sterling sacrifice to counter those who called a section of Indians 'Babur ki aulad' (Babur's progeny) or 'Aurangzeb ki aulad' (Aurangzeb's progeny); the former was regarded merely as an invader by a section of right-wing politicians and their followers, the latter reduced to a destroyer of temples. The fans and followers of Brigadier Usman reminded the divisive elements they would be better off calling other Indians 'Usman ki aulad' (Usman's progeny). Incidentally, Brigadier Usman himself had no children.

Usman was born on July 15, 1912 in Bibipur in Mau district of Azamgarh division in Uttar Pradesh, a region which is derided by some hard-line Hindutva proponents as 'mini Pakistan'. Soon after the Batla House encounter in Delhi in 2008, in which Delhi Police officer Mohan Chand Sharma lost his life while attempting to nab two alleged terrorists of the Indian Mujahideen, a large section of the media labelled all of Azamgarh as a hub of terrorism as the two alleged terrorists hailed from there. Not one television channel brought up the fact that the region also produced for independent India a martyr who laid down his life fighting Pakistan.

Usman's father was a high-ranking police officer in Benares. And young Usman would divide his time between Benares, where his father was posted, and Bibipur, where he went along with his parents to spend time with the extended family on the weekends. Usman was meant for great things in life.

A civil services career would have offered stability, respect and a regular income, while a career in the army came replete with dangers to life and limb, but also the opportunity to serve the motherland. Death would bring the ultimate honour, of being celebrated as a true son of the soil. Usman scripted a tale of valour and commitment to the country that continues to inspire succeeding generations.

Excerpted with permission from Bloomsbury.

BROWSER

Song of India: A Study of the National Anthem
Rudrangshu Mukherjee
Aleph
₹399
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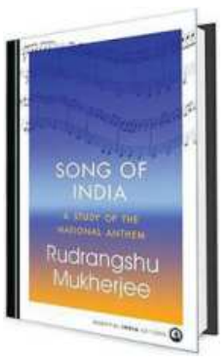

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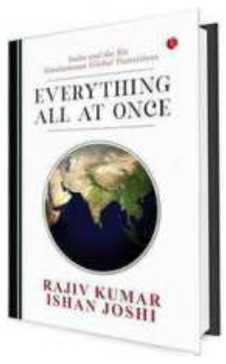

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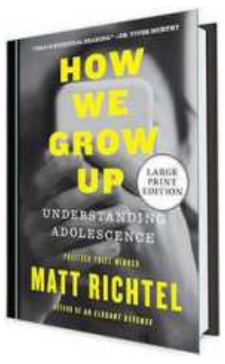

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Since the last four years, they have been spending time in their Sundarbans home – where their parents, wives and children live – only in the months of June and July, when Kerala implements the annual trawling ban. "By mid-August, more than 200 men from our village will be in Kerala," says Krishna.

There is another section of migrant workers who fish in the Sundarbans till September, but move to Kerala during the drier months (October-March/April), the lean period for fishing in West Bengal.

In Kerala, migrant workers who work on larger vessels that go on fishing trips lasting one or more weeks usually live on the boat itself when it's docked at shore. Some also live in cheap lodging facilities, sharing small rooms among three to four persons.

A 2023 working paper that focused on migration of traditional fishers from Sundarbans to the harbours of Ponnani and Beypore in Kerala – a migration corridor has developed over the past couple of decades – says that continuous in-migration of workers from other states has been a major factor that seems to have helped boat owners in Kerala increase their fleet size.

However, the migrant workers have to deal with "informal work arrangements, non-standard forms of wage payment, lack of proper amenities like housing and sanitation, and a near absence of state initiatives to protect their rights and entitlements", says the paper, co-authored by Roshan Menon, Tara Nair and Atanu Ghosh.

Disappearing community

A 2024 Jadavpur University research paper, titled 'Ma Bonbibi: A Goddess in the Folk Culture of Sundarbans Region in India & Bangladesh', says that migration from Sundarbans to other parts of India "is not only affecting the population of the region, but also has a significant impact on local perception and attachment to the deltaic landscape".

Traditional folk art forms are mostly kept alive by amateurs, who do other work to earn a living. In the Sundarbans, the folk singers, dancers and theatre actors usually depend on fishing, farming or honey gathering.

Puranjan Mandal, a Gosaba resident who works with the Kolkata-based Banglanatak Dot Com, a social enterprise to conserve intangible cultural heritage, says that migration is one of the key reasons behind the disintegration of folk art groups in the region. "A decade ago, there were about 20 Bonbibir Pala teams in our locality. Now, there are only five," he says.

● The Sundarbans, West Bengal's prime fishing hub, is home to about 250 fish species.

● It serves as the biggest supplier of fish to the capital city of Kolkata, which has a population of six million, and where fish is an essential part of the daily diet.

The organisation has been working towards documentation and promotion of the art form, including using it for awareness campaigns on human trafficking. Migration-prone areas are also trafficking-prone, say experts.

Sanjoy Ganguly helms the theatre group Jana Sanskriti, which has been working in the Sundarbans region for over two decades. Their activities among the adolescents in Patharpratima block of Sundarbans mostly get female participants today. "Teen boys are migrating for work. Besides, screen addiction keeps many young adults away from group social activities," says Ganguly. Resultantly, community-oriented folk art practices are disappearing.

Bonbibir Pala is not the sole folk art form impacted by migration. Local musical genres such as Jari, Sari and Bhatiyali also have a decreasing number of practitioners. Sourav Moni, a Bhatiyali singer from Sundarban's Hingalganj block, says that Majhi Malla, a music troupe he formed seven years ago, lost 70% of its regular participants due to work-related migration.

Blame game

Locals say that governments and politicians prefer to blame climatic changes for the migration of fisherfolk, but avoid discussing how the river waters are highly polluted due to unchecked discharge of industrial waste from Kolkata and its outskirts. The rivers have also lost their natural flow due to human interventions. For instance, the Farakka barrage in northern West Bengal is one of the major impediments in the course of the Hooghly river.

Fisherfolk see no immediate change of the situation. However, Das of the DMF believes that strictly monitoring and implementing trawling guidelines and easing prohibitions in the core areas of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve, among other moves, can prevent immediate further acceleration of the migration trend.

SONG OF THE SUNDARBANS' FISHERFOLK

A vendor with the much-loved *hilsa* in a Kolkata market; and (far left) a Bonbibi temple in the Sundarbans. (RITU RAJ KONWAR, SNIGDHENDU BHATTACHARYA)

The Kolkata-based author and independent journalist writes on politics, policy, environment, human rights, history and culture in South Asia.

Notes from the banks

BANISH THE GHOST

In the time of ghost gear (abandoned plastic fishing nets and gear), indigenous communities can teach us how it should be done — if we only listen. The nomadic Santhal and Nishad tribes, found along the Ganges, have historically relied on biodegradable gear. Think nets made from bamboo and rope, traps that use the sap of the ficus plant, and iron-tipped spears. While some have transitioned to modern gear, there's now a push to revive and promote these sustainable practices.

MEET ASSAM'S HARPOON FISHERMEN

Members of a dying way of life, only a few continue the tradition today. They fish on dark nights in the Brahmaputra, when it is the dry season. The fishermen set out in low-slung dinghys that won't run aground on sandy shoals, and use a six-pronged harpoon. Author and photographer Arati Kumar-Rao, who documented them in her book *Marginlands: A Journey into India's Vanishing Landscapes*, talks about how they work alongside the Gangetic dolphins — catching fish that flee the mammals. The very best of teamwork.

6,327 AND COUNTING

Speaking of dolphins, India's first-ever comprehensive riverine dolphin estimation (2021-23) saw a total of 6,327 dolphins across eight states — Uttar Pradesh with 2,397, Bihar with 2,220, West Bengal with 815, and Assam with 635. The survey, part of Project Dolphin, covered over 8,500 km across 28 rivers.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF CHAMBAL RIVER

The Ganga, India's holiest river, is also its filthiest. In sharp contrast, the Chambal — a river with a terrible reputation, replete with stories of bandits, murder and curses (the *Mahabharata*, for instance, talks of its water running red with the blood of slaughtered cows) — is clean. Getting a 250-mile stretch of the river declared a national sanctuary in the '70s did it a favour, too. Goes to show that everything unholy isn't bad.

IN KASHMIR, BENEATH THE ICE SHEATHS

Adept with harpoons in winter and nets in summer, the fishing communities here are relying on the government to save their lakes

Fishermen at work in Srinagar's Anchar Lake. (IMRAN NISSAR)

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The blinding winter sunlight and sub-zero temperatures of the 40-day harsh winter spell, locally known as 'Chilai Kalan', can turn the surfaces of Srinagar's Anchar Lake and Bandipora's Wular Lake into translucent ice sheaths. They make strolls around the freshwater lakes quite unbearable, especially in the mornings or evenings.

Abid Dar, 35, a fisherman, reaches the shores of Anchar Lake at 10.30 a.m. "This is the time it becomes a little easy to break the ice and navigate the lake in the *shikara* [a small, narrow wooden boat]. I have tried starting my day earlier but the oar gets damaged by the thick layer of ice," he explains. *Tchay gaadi* or shadow fishing, a traditional form of fishing in Kashmir is specifically associated with Anchar Lake in the Soura area of Srinagar. "The fishing method borrows its name from shadows created from a moored boat at designated points in the lake where fish make their way in winters. The identification of these pools amidst willows and reeds is a matter of experience," Dar says.

His colony that resides on the banks of this lake is dependent on it not just for the fish – the lake is home to 15 species that include mirror carp, western mosquitofish and Chirruh snowtrout – but also water chestnuts, reeds and lotus stems. Many like Dar pile up reeds on their *shikaras*, as the oar breaks the ice to reach marshy patches. They recite certain *Koranic* verses in Arabic, which fishermen consider powerful enough to ward off evil spells from the fish. The piles of reeds offer small, temporary shelter and camouflage the *shikara*. "You position yourself near the pool and hide in the dark chamber of reeds. As the dark pools attract fish, a harpoon or spear is thrown to capture them," explains Dar, adding that the light beneath the water helps identify the movement of fish. It is an activity that requires immense patience and skill.

Chasing snow trout

Around 66 km away from Anchar, Manzoor Din, 42, is among approximately 3,000 fishermen living on the shores of the Wular Lake. The lake is home to fish that is relished across the Valley for its taste and size. The lake is home to the common carp and snow trout, which breathes freely in flowing freshwater. At the foothills of Harmukh Mountain, the lake is mainly fed by the Jhelum river, which starts its journey south of Kashmir to reach the northern part of the Valley after covering over 100 km.

Shrinking reality

Unfortunately, the twin lakes of Anchar and Wular tell a tale of neglect and human greed. The lakes, which continue to shrink due to encroachment for habitation and the creation of farm land, pose a threat to fish farming and the livelihood of these communities. While the Anchar Lake saw its size coming down from 19.4 sq.km. to just 6.8 sq.km. over the past century, the Wular lake has shrunk from 217.8 sq.km. to 58 sq.km. in the same period. The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in several communications to the J&K government has stressed on measures to safeguard the lake. Officials say that with the joint action of the government and the Centre, the thrust will be on diversion and treatment of wastewater, shoreline protection, lake front development, de-silting and de-weeding, bio-fencing and creating awareness among the locals. But the implementation is so slow that the lakes stare at worsening water quality, harming the fish species.

Journey to Jammu

Meanwhile, fishermen such as Din continue their daily trips with faint optimism. "I offer my morning prayers before I start fishing with smaller nets. There are places that offer warmer pools and the fish tend to move towards it. The real challenge is to find these small pools in the lake in winters," Din says. The fish from this lake makes its way to upmarket dinner tables across the Valley. Shazia Shuaib runs an all-women enterprise in Bandipora's Madar area, where they cook traditional fish delicacies. "We still prepare fish with a mix of collard green, white radish and lotus stem. It has been a delicacy of Kashmiris for centuries. Another popular recipe is fish in thick tomato gravy," Shuaib says.

The brand, Wular Fish for All, delivers across the region in earthen pots, which carries one to two kilos of fish. "Last January, we sent fish delicacies to Jammu as well, which is 300 km away. We have customers in most districts of the Valley. Pandits as well as Muslims from Jammu have started ordering fish delicacies in winters," says Shuaib, adding that these fish preparations can be time-consuming. The Wular fish is still prepared on firewood with mostly sundried local spices, including red chilli and the cockscomb flower or *mawal*. Today, no matter how specific or whimsical your ask is, chances are you will find a streamer willing to fulfil it.

The end of an era

In the last two to three years, we have been witnessing several manifestations of this programming impasse. In 2023, it was reported that James Corden's *The Late Late Show* was losing CBS $20 million annually prior to its cancellation. Before that, in 2022, Trevor Noah left *The Daily Show* after seven years at the helm. Of the survivors in this circuit, Jimmy Fallon has been reduced to a kind of parody of himself, resorting to increasingly over-the-top gags. Jimmy Kimmel is second in the ratings behind Colbert, but his jokes have definitely been wearing thin in recent years. Post-Colbert, Seth Meyers' show is perhaps now the go-to venue for smart political comedy and off-kilter humour.

How are the late-night shows meeting the challenges of this new era? One thing that they all seem to be doing is inviting more Gen-Z guests, especially people who are popular on the Internet.

In India, for instance, Kapil Sharma's Netflix show (the closest equivalent, format-wise) had a group of young podcasters and influencers as guests recently. Of course, this move doesn't always work smoothly; Colbert himself had a supremely awkward interview with the 22-year-old actor Jenna Ortega (from *Wednesday* and the *Scream* horror-movie franchise) earlier this year where it was quite obvious neither of them knew or cared much about the other.

The other option, of course, is to go "gloves off", as Colbert declared last week on his show. Chances are that until May 2026, we are in for a far more aggressive, scathing, no-quarter-given version of Stephen Colbert – not bad for a last hurrah.

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

Hope in Wular

● The Department of Wildlife Protection, Jammu & Kashmir, has already pushed for a comprehensive management action plan for the lake, following a survey in 2022 and this year. The government has identified 30 villages to manage waste and is working on addressing the treatment of 23 major inlets.

● The proposed ₹386.39 crore plan aims at lake rejuvenation and catchment conservation. Wular lake is home to a total of 12 fish species, including *Schizothorax labiatus* or the Kunar snow trout, which is in the endangered category.

THE RIVER'S BOUNTY

In Southern and Western Tamil Nadu, inland fisherfolk use simple tools and a work ethic that does not exploit nature's resources

Akila Kannadasan
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Six decades ago, little boys would scoop out sand from the dry riverbed of the Vaigai in Madurai during summer, to see water rising from below. They would wait until the water was clear, and then drink to their heart's content.

The river originates in the Periyar Plateau of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu, flowing southeast near Madurai on its way to empty itself into the Palk Bay. Along its course, the river enriches not just the landscape, but the lives of the people dwelling nearby.

The districts of Madurai, Tiruchi, Viluppuram, and Krishnagiri account for the highest number of inland fisherfolk in Tamil Nadu. "Among these, Madurai leads with 6,000 families, followed by 4,000 in Dindigul, and 2,000 each in Theni and Palani," says R. Rajaguru, an overseer with the Tamil Nadu Government's Department of Fisheries and Fishermen Welfare posted in Kodaikanal. The Vaigai fills up around 1,500 manmade ponds and irrigation tanks in Madurai, he explains. Many of these, along with the Vaigai dam in Theni district, are chief fishing resources.

While fishing techniques may differ depending on the depth of these waterbodies, Rajaguru says most fisherfolk use simple tools and a work ethic that does not exploit nature's bounty. "They take what nature gives, and nothing more," he says.

In Dindigul district, several families in Anaipatti and Mettupatti villages are inland fishers. Anaipatti is home to the Peranai regulator that was constructed across the Vaigai in 1918 by the British. It is here that fisherman C. Vijayalingam spreads out his *weechu valai* – a fishing net variety – in a graceful throw that lands in the water in a perfect circle. It is almost noon and the sun beats down on his head that he has turbaned with a checkered towel. He is not having much luck today, and after a few throws, decides to come out of the water.

The 28-year-old is among the 50 people in Anaipatti, home to around 800 families, that depend on fishing for a living. "My father is a fisherman, and so was my grandfather," says Vijayalingam. He goes fishing through the year, staying away only on days the river is flooded during the monsoon.

Back-breaking work

A typical river fisherman's workday starts at midnight. "I leave for the Vaigai dam in Theni around that time," explains Vijayalingam. He travels by bike, joined by his team of five, reaching the river in two hours. Once there, he trudges through shallow waters with his net slung across his shoulder. Another man – they mostly work in teams of two – with a net-like basket called the *aappa valai* secured at his hip, follows. Vijayalingam casts his net, that can weigh up to 5 kg owing to the iron pellets tied to its ends, gathers it, and empties the catch into his assistant's *aappa valai*.

"We repeat the process until we've caught enough, and start back at dawn," he says. The catch is displayed in a basket on their bikes, and the men sell it at the many towns and villages along the way. "We get sold out by the time we are home in the afternoon," says Vijayalingam. After a quick meal and a short nap, he prepares to set out all over again at midnight.

It's backbreaking work that leaves him sleep-deprived, but Vijayalingam is happy doing it. "This is my *parambarai thozhil* [family occupation] and it gives me freedom. I am able to earn up to ₹500 a day and if I plan well, I can also save some," he says. Some men choose to go fishing at the irrigation tanks, for which they employ coracles. "They use a net variety called the *ari valai*," says Vijayalingam. The tanks and ponds, though, are not full through the year. "When there is no water, these men work as drivers, farmhands, and cooks," he adds. Despite these challenges, the river keeps the fisherfolk rooted to the village, and they do not move to the bigger cities for better opportunities. "We prefer this life," says Vijayalingam.

Another fisherman, S. Surya, explains that when the river is in full flow, they also use the *kattu valai* across certain stretches. "This is a net that is tied across the water like a curtain, weighed down by iron pellets at the bottom," he says. They leave the arrangement for about an hour or so after which the men retrieve the catch.

The fish varieties caught include *salli kendai* (carnatic carp), *viraal* (murrel), *pallu kendai* (grass carp), and *jalebi* (tilapia). "The smaller kinds sell for ₹100 to ₹150 a kg, while the *viraal* goes for ₹300," says Vijayalingam.

Staying afloat

The Noyyal river runs through Coimbatore, originating from the Vellingiri hills in the Western Ghats. Although the city gets a steady supply of marine fish from nearby Kerala, apart from Rameswaram, it does have a demand for freshwater fish. Here, fish are reared by fishermen who buy juveniles from the Fisheries Department's fish farms in places such as Bhavanisagar, Mettur, Thanjavur, and Manimutharu.

"We produce 2,000 lakh three-day-old juveniles a year that fisherfolk buy from us to rear in ponds and lakes across Tamil Nadu," says S. Thillairajan, Deputy Director of Fisheries, Bhavanisagar. Varieties include catla, rohu, and mrigal.

(Clockwise from below) Anaipatti fisherman C. Vijayalingam with the day's catch; fish from Vedapatti lake in Coimbatore; and the Vaigai river in Madurai. (G. MOORTHY AND M. PERIASAMY)

● The districts of Madurai, Tiruchi, Viluppuram, and Krishnagiri account for the highest number of inland fisherfolk in Tamil Nadu.

● Among these, Madurai leads with 6,000 families, followed by 4,000 in Dindigul, and 2,000 each in Theni and Palani.

One Sunday morning, we see fisherman N. Rajkumar coming out of the Valankulam, a lake fed by the Noyyal in the heart of the city. He has a good haul of tilapia that he offers for just ₹100. "I'm going home, may as well give this away," says the 40-year-old. Most river fisherfolk families live in the Five Corner neighbourhood in the city, and according to Rajkumar, are from the Siviyar community.

"We chiefly use the *nattu valai*," Rajkumar points out, adding that they hold on to sacks filled with polystyrene cubes to stay afloat in the water while fishing. Here, too, some fishermen use coracles.

Thillairajan explains that inland fishermen are members of district-level fisheries cooperative societies that take waterbodies on lease for fishing rights. He adds that in Western Tamil Nadu, Erode has the highest number of inland fishers due to the presence of the Bhavanisagar dam.

Like a mother

Anaipatti has several restaurants selling 'fish meals': there is rice, fish curry, and a slice or two of fried fish. We sit down for a meal at one of them.

The curry is delicious: although river fish have plenty of bones, what sets them apart is the defining earthy smell of freshwater, and a sweetish flavour profile as opposed to the bold flavours of sea fish. Locals say that once you develop a liking for freshwater catch, there is no going back to sea fish.

River fisherfolk lead a relatively risk-free life when compared to their counterparts in the seas. "But we do encounter risks," says Vijayalingam. "Broken glass on the riverbed has cut into my feet, and once, there was a sudden surge in the dam when we were inside," he adds. Luckily for his team, they made it out safe.

There are some rituals these fisherfolk have been following for generations. In Coimbatore, when the fish have matured and it is time for harvest, the men do not enter the water without visiting the Ayyasamy temple by the hills at Theethipalayam. "We sprinkle *theertham* [holy water] from the temple into the lake before fishing," says Rajkumar.

At Anaipatti, fisherfolk worship the Vaigai on Ayudha Puja day every year, standing in knee-high water, offering puffed rice, bananas, betel leaves, and coconut on a platter. "Vaigai is like our mother," says Vijayalingam. "We live by her banks, and she offers us a livelihood. She is our everything."

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

BINGE WATCH

Colbert's last stand

Late-night television in the age of 'financial fear', streaming and strongmen

A couple of weeks ago, viewers of CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* were surprised by the host returning from vacation with a wispy black-and-white moustache. Like many, I initially thought it might be a prop, until the host said otherwise. "That's right, it's me underneath this salt-and-pepper cookie-pusher," Colbert quipped. "For tonight, my upper lip is home to what many in the beauty industry are calling 'technically a moustache'".

Later in the same episode, Colbert criticised CBS's parent company Paramount for settling a lawsuit with President Donald Trump for $16 million, calling it "a big fat bribe". Trump had alleged that CBS "deceptively edited" an interview with Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, a claim that Paramount said was "entirely without merit" in their reply. Yet they coughed up $16 million anyway. Colbert finished the segment about Paramount by joking that even if the network decides to discontinue *The Late Show* to placate Trump, he could "always sneak into the building with this moustache".

Three nights later, Colbert announced on the show that the cancellation fears were real; Paramount had decided to discontinue the show in May 2026 for "financial reasons". He's not being replaced by a different host – the entire *Late Show* franchise (David Letterman was at the helm from 1993-2015) will simply cease to exist.

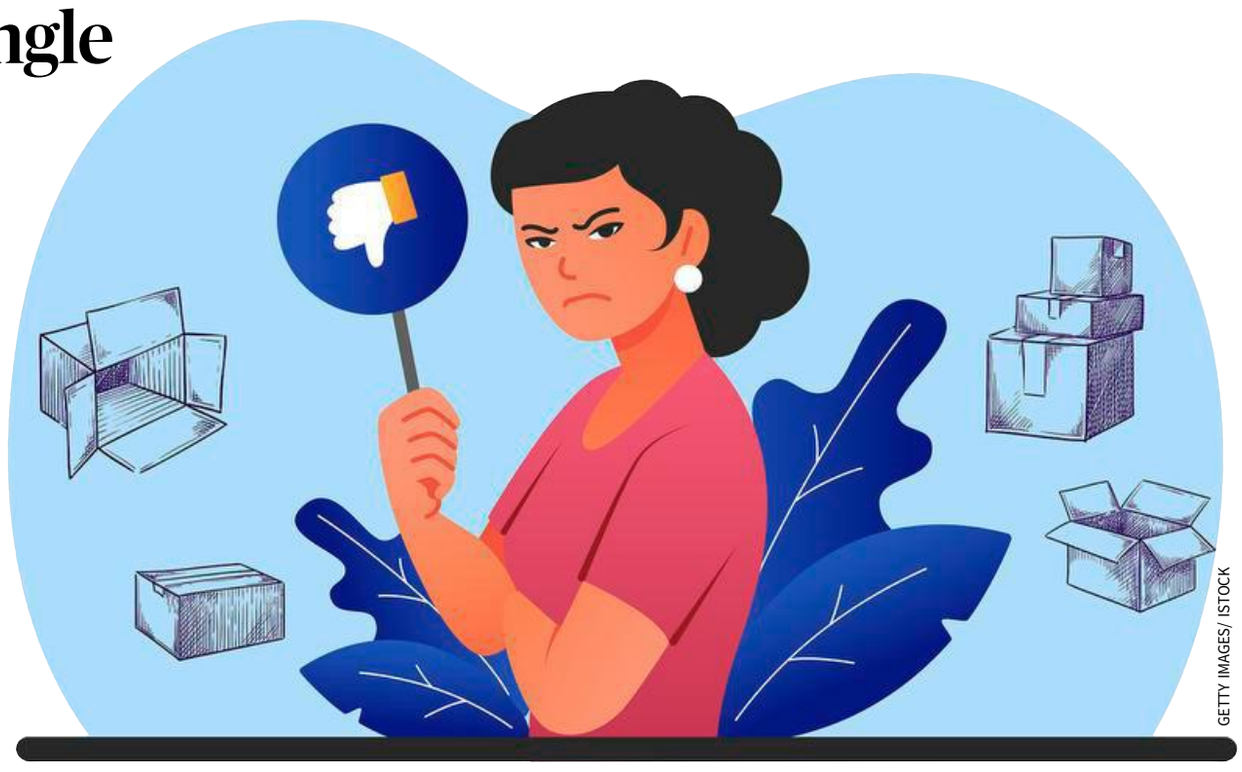
Colbert's former colleague and fellow satirist Jon Stewart pointed out another crucial piece of the puzzle. "The fact that CBS wouldn't save its own number-one-rated network late-night franchise," Stewart said, "that's been on the air for over three decades, is part of what's making everybody wonder was this purely financial? Or maybe the path of least resistance for your 8-billion-dollar merger?" Stewart was referring to Paramount's impending $8 billion merger with the firm Skydance – a deal that Trump had previously indicated he would block as payback for his perceived grievance about the Harris interview.

What happens to satire?

As one of the most-loved and followed talk show hosts and political satirists in the world, Colbert surely deserved a better farewell – to go out on his own terms rather than becoming a political football between Paramount and Donald Trump. But the *Late Show*'s cancellation does place another question mark over the future of the late-night talk show format.

In the ongoing streaming epoch, where "appointment viewing" is becoming increasingly dominated by live sports, the late-night talk show is one of the last surviving templates from TV's original golden era (the 1950s and 60s). Some news, a few topical jokes, some interviews with coiffed-up celebrities, and a live performance or two – this basic outline has served successive generations of American TV hosts, starting with Ed Sullivan (who began in the late 1940s and was on the air until the early 70s).

At the end of a long day at the office, you can often enter a state of 'decision paralysis' while fiddling with the TV remote – do you watch trashy fun things or more sophisticated, cerebral fare? The late-night show drew inspiration from its cousin, the 'variety show', and took this indecision out of the equation. There's something for everyone in this format, the celeb-obsessed gossip-column reader as well as the serious-minded consumer of 'hard news' and political satire. However, in the streaming era, the competitive advantage offered by this format has depleted significantly.



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 14

EPIDEMIC OF SELF-PITY

What is this trend of people wilfully buying things and then complaining about the same on social media?

The year is 1997. The modern masterpiece film *Air Force One* has just released. Another modern masterpiece, myself the columnist, is at the time pursuing his graduation in metallurgical engineering from the esteemed Regional Engineering College in Tiruchi.

One day, your columnist and his dear friend, who is now a logistics magnate in Dubai, decided to go and watch an evening show of the film. This incident is almost 30 years old at this point. I do not exactly recall which theatre in Tiruchi was playing this film. Was it Kalaiarangam? Perhaps.

After thoroughly enjoying the film, we decided to partake of dinner from one of the roadside eatries nearby. My friend, who was yet to develop the business acumen he is famous for today, spotted one outlet that was serving freshly made idiyappams with a variety of curries.

"Shall we go for the idiyappam?" he asked.

"Okay," I said, "but the entire restaurant is two tables and four chairs by the side of the road. Looks a bit shady?"

"Shady means cheaper, Sidin!" he said, with a confidence that had clearly transferred to him from Harrison Ford in the film.

"GET OFF MY PLANE AND TWO PLATES IDIYAPPAM!"

We sat down, ate our food, and then asked the gentleman manning the restaurant for the bill. Now please keep in mind that this man has been a delight so far. Good service. Tasty food. Polite conversation. And so on.

But now his demeanour suddenly changed, much like a health insurance company when you have fallen off the balcony on to some motorcycles and have to make a claim.

Readers, once again, this happened in 1997. So the exact number escapes me. But it was something like 76 guineas and 10 *annas* or something.

My friend and I were flabbergasted. This was an absurd sum of money. We could have gone to an actual restaurant in Tiruchi with actual walls and cement floors and plaster of Paris ceiling, and eaten for much less.

Sadly for us, we had not even thought to ask the price before ordering and consuming the comestibles.

"Would you mind giving us a discount," I asked.

Suddenly, three more men emerged from the shadows. "Would you mind if we dislocated all the four shoulders between the two of you?" the fiend asked.

We paid in silent humiliation. And then, in order to cope with the shameful shenanigans, we went back and saw *Air Force One* again for the second time.

Modern masterpiece.

Friends, I tell you this story as a long prelude, only to accept the fact that people can and do get defrauded by commercial establishments. This is a reality.

However, what has very much got this columnist's tail in a twist recently is the trend of people wilfully purchasing things and then complaining on social media and WhatsApp and whatnot. It is an epidemic of self-pity. And it deserves a word of its own.

So this is what happens. And it usually happens at an airport. Someone will go to an airport and then go to the South Indian restaurant inside the airport. It will have some extremely original name such as 'Dosa Corner' or 'Filter Fantasy' or 'Banana Leaf' or 'Runway Ramakrishnan' et cetera.

Then they will look at the very obviously placed menu on the wall. Then they will choose an item from this very apparent menu that also has prices on it. (Usually these prices will be written on masking tape with marker pen, and applied on top of previous masking tape, which is then applied on top of the menu itself. Due to inflation.)

Then they will go to the counter and order the item. At which point, the staff will repeat the order, and the price, and then ask you to pay. You will pay. Then you will wait outside for the food. Then you will take the food. Sit down. Eat the food.

And then, in that moment, you will suddenly... REALISE THAT THE FOOD AT THE AIRPORT IS SO EXPENSIVE AND HOW IS THE GOVERNMENT ALLOWING THIS KIND OF NONSENSE IT IS A CRIME AND I WILL NOW BE UNBEARABLE ABOUT THIS ON THE INTERNET AND WITH MY FAMILY AND MY COLLEAGUES.

My friend, Runway Ramakrishan did not secretly come and put *uthappam* in your mouth when you were looking at the departures board, and then steal your money. You did this to yourself, no?

So why are you creating a scene? Why are you behaving like a 'kashtamer'? Oh yes, that is the word I would like to introduce today. Please use it everywhere. Especially if you are a kashtamer.

Example sentence: "I watched Karunesh become a complete kashtamer at the airport – he stared at the menu for five minutes, paid ₹450 for a paneer burger, ate the entire thing, and then spent the next hour posting on Facebook about how expensive airport food is. Afterwards, he ordered one more, parcelled for the flight."

Kashtamer

/ˈkʌʃtəmər/

noun

Plural: kashtamers

Definition: A customer who voluntarily makes a purchase with full knowledge of the price and circumstances, then publicly complains about the very conditions they willingly accepted.

Etymology: From Hindi/ Tamil '*kashtam*' (trouble, difficulty) + 'customer'

Related forms:

Kashtamering (*verb*)**:** The act of creating self-inflicted consumer drama.

Sidin Vadukut *lives in London and is currently working on a new novel. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

All in good time

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

The vulnerability kept East from making a pre-emptive heart raise. Just as well, for him, as a heart contract by East-West can be held to five tricks. Assuming they were doubled, that would have been a bloody result against non-vulnerable opponents.

South won the opening heart lead in hand with the king and counted only six top tricks. Two more might come from the club suit, but he would have to give up the lead in clubs to one of the opponents. Hearts would be continued, and the defense would wait for South to try and build a spade trick. The ace of spades and three heart tricks, in addition to the club, would defeat him. After some thought, South found a solution. West, for his overcall, almost certainly held the ace of spades. At trick two, South led the nine of spades from his hand! West could not rise with his ace or

NORTH
♠ Q J 8 2
♡ A 7
◇ A 9 3 2
♣ K 9 7

WEST
♠ A 10 6
♡ Q J 10 6 4
◇ Q J 10
♣ 10 5

EAST
♠ 7 5 4 3
♡ 9 8 5 2
◇ 6 5
♣ Q J 4

SOUTH
♠ K 9
♡ K 3
◇ K 8 7 4
♣ A 8 6 3 2

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♣	1♡	Dbl*	Pass
1NT	Pass	3NT	All pass

*Negative

Opening lead: Queen of ♡

South would have three spade tricks - enough to make his contract. West ducked and dummy's queen won the trick.

South next led dummy's king of clubs, in case West started with a singleton club honor, and then ducked a club. The 3-2 club split gave South nine tricks and his contract. Very nicely played.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about the North and South poles

What common firefighting resource is not used at Antarctica's McMurdo Station? (GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

Berty Ashley

1 On August 3, 1946, the world's first themed amusement park opened in Indiana, United States. The town it was built in was named after a fictional character who was supposed to live in the North Pole. The park had a toy store and a deer farm. What was the name of the town?

2 On August 3, 1958, the world's first nuclear submarine, the USS Nautilus, became the first vessel to complete a submerged transit of the geographical North Pole. The year before, it had travelled 1,10,000 km, matching the distance travelled by the fictional submarine in a Jules Verne book, after which it was named. What book is this?

3 There are no permanent settlers in the North Pole; hence, even though it has an area of 14 million sq.km. it does not have a particular standard. On the other side of the world, the South Pole has 24 of them. Scientists can choose which one works for them and stick with it. What is this important standard?

4 Geographically, it is considered that there are seven continents on our planet. The seven big landmasses are Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe and Australia. Why isn't the Arctic in this list?

5 Over the last 30 years, the average rainfall in the Antarctic has been 10mm. The extreme cold temperatures and high atmospheric pressure mean the air has a very low capacity to hold moisture. This means that technically, it is the largest example of a certain terrain in the world and not the one in Africa, which one would normally think of. What record is this?

6 McMurdo Station has the only full-time fire department in Antarctica. It has 21 firefighters who usually handle emergencies in the many labs and research stations. It is a unique fire station with regard to how they put out fires due to a lack of a particular resource. What do they not use which all other fire stations are known for?

7 There is a certain medical requirement for all researchers and long-term personnel heading to Antarctica. This is due to the isolation of the place and limited medical resources. What are adults recommended to remove in case it could become infected and cause pain?

8 Visitors to the South Pole on arriving find it very hard to do daily tasks, as breathing becomes hard. The air is very thin, and the body finds it difficult to take in oxygen. Though we imagine the continent to be like others, what is the reason for this?

9 The world's greatest migration happens every day in the frigid waters around the Antarctic. More than 10 billion tons of a certain animal vertically migrate more than 100 meters from the depths of the ocean to the surface. What are these animals that whales from all around the world come to feed on?

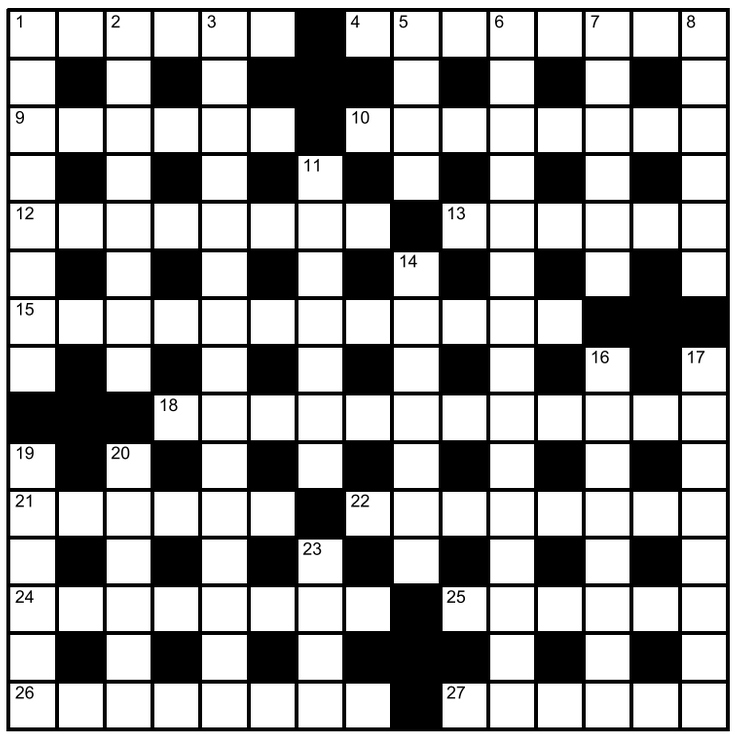
10 In 1987, Shinji Kazama travelled more than 2000 km over 44 days to reach the North Pole. In 1992, he reached the South Pole in 24 days, becoming the first person to reach both poles using this particular method of transport. If he had earlier won the 500cc class of the Dakar Rally, what had he used to get to the poles?

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. Santa Claus
2. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*
3. Time zones
4. There is no land, it's only ice
5. Largest desert in the world (bigger than Sahara)
6. Water; they primarily use chemicals to extinguish fires.
7. Wisdom teeth
8. High altitude (the entire continent is 2,800 metres above sea level)
9. Krill
10. A motorcycle (Yamaha TW200)

THE HINDU **SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 15** (Set by Arden)



Across

1 One in pieces returned to governor (6)
4 Ancient treatise represented last game (8)
9 High and mighty couple - at heart showing compassion (6)
10 Can sign for those representing two categories (8)
12 Performed around that place? Wasn't sure (8)
13 Red maid regularly gets income (6)
15 Bomb burst - it's half on the surface (2,5,5)
18 Sharing and copying hidden part (12)
21 Agree to fish eating - fit to return (6)
22 Graveyard shift to follow - keep an eye (8)
24 Scoundrel born to start a fire (8)
25 Armature winding about to go - giving shock (6)
26 Perhaps a setter retains love for a marine creature (3,5)
27 Returning part of the deposit is allowed at present (2,2,2)

Down

1 DC current passes through straight briefly in a police vehicle (5,3)
2 Court official's past it - moving with forces (8)
3 Father had potato salad without hesitation (2,3,4,2,1,3)
5 Ex-PM gets no British accommodation (4)
6 Shot *Star Wars* - fools do become dumbfounded (2,1,4,3,5)
7 Puzzle over extortion involving mafia films (6)
8 Looks less attractive - taking up some ornamentation... (6)
11 Use soft one to make it attractive (7)
14 Police station unreliable - cities perhaps need a military unit (7)
16 Film on decay creates suspicion (8)
17 Leader in clutch of intellectuals (8)
19 Agreed to be inside, rising with darkness (6)
20 Loft above a place in Greece (6)
23 Asked to start grant (4)

SOLUTION NO. 14

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

Carefree splashes, careworn fears

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Most of us have a favourite season – summer with its holidays or winter with its cosy charm. But the rainy season rarely tops anyone's list. It's often overlooked, seen more as a disruption than a delight. Yet, for many, it holds some of the most vivid memories of childhood such as jumping in puddles, getting soaked on purpose, and laughing without a care in the world.

Today, people often dislike the monsoon, because of its inconvenience. Wet clothes, muddy shoes, traffic snarls, and the constant fear of catching a cold make many hide under umbrellas and shut windows tightly. But weren't these the very rains we once longed to play in?

In those younger days, puddles were more than just water on the road – they were playgrounds. Getting drenched was never an accident, it was the plan. We would sneak outside during a downpour, ignoring our parents' warnings, just to feel the cool raindrops hit our faces. We would run and jump until our school uniforms turned brown with mud, our laughter echoing in the wind.

Who can forget those school afternoons when the sky darkened during the last period and thunder rolled across the heavens? We would beg our teachers to turn off the lights and narrate ghost stories while the sound of rain drummed on the windows. As soon as the bell rang, we would race out into the rain, some of us deliberately leaving umbrellas behind so we had a reason to get wet. We knew we would face scoldings at home, but even that seemed like a small price for all that joy.

Now, though no one stops us, we choose to avoid the rain. We watch it fall from the safety of glass windows in our homes or offices, sipping coffee and worrying about wet clothes or messy hair. We check our phones and fix our umbrellas, all the while ignoring the simple beauty unfolding just outside. "What will people think if they see me standing in the rain," we ask ourselves. And that one question is enough to bury the carefree child inside us. And then there is the excuse: "You'll catch a cold." Getting wet in the rain doesn't causes cold. Cold is caused by viruses, not water. In fact, some health experts say a bit of exposure to rain might even strengthen our immune system. Still, it's not science that holds us back, it's our own hesitation. Somewhere along the way, society trained us to be polished, composed, and always in control.

Rain is messy. It drips, it splashes, it surprises. But that's what makes it so human, so real. It invites us to pause, to feel, and to be present – things that have become rare in our fast-paced lives.

Justice's SHRINE

Legal edifice The Madras High Court has witnessed epochal changes, landmark judgments, passionate debates, and the evolution of law itself. FILE PHOTO

Reflections on a court building that beckons one with the promise of stories of justice, struggle, and triumph

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Today, I found myself once again drawn to the majestic embrace of the Madras High Court, joining the heritage walk for the fourth time. Yet, as I approached its grand red facade, my heart fluttered with anticipation and awe as if I were beholding this architectural marvel for the very first time.

Each visit, no matter how many times I have walked these corridors, feels like a pilgrimage, an intimate journey into the soul of a building that has been both a silent witness and a guiding force through the chapters of my life.

My first encounter with this venerable edifice was in 1991, as a wide-eyed student, eager and anxious, stepping into a world that would soon become my second home. The Madras High Court, with its soaring domes and intricate Indo-Saracenic details, seemed to beckon me, promising stories of justice, struggle, and triumph. Over the years, it watched me grow from a tentative apprentice, absorbing the wisdom of seasoned advocates, to a junior lawyer, finding my footing amid the hallowed halls. It saw my struggles as a first-generation lawyer, striving to carve a niche, my moments of self-doubt, and the gradual blossoming of confidence as I began to establish myself in the legal fraternity.

Living, breathing companion

But the journey did not end there. This red building, steadfast and dignified, bore witness as I donned the robes of a judge, entrusted with the solemn responsibility of upholding justice in this great chartered High Court. For nearly 35 years, the Madras High Court has been more than a place of work – it has been a living, breathing companion. Every morning, as I walk through its arched corridors towards my courtroom, I am enveloped by a sense of reverence and humility. The very walls seem to murmur tales of the past, echoing the footsteps of legal luminaries who shaped the destiny of law and society. Their voices, though silent, resonate through time, reminding me that I am but a humble custodian in a long, unbroken chain of justice.

There is a peculiar magic in these corridors, an energy that is palpable to those who pause and listen. The Madras High Court has witnessed epochal changes, landmark judgments, passionate debates, and the evolution of law itself. It has been a silent spectator to the ebb and flow of history, to the struggles for justice that have shaped the conscience of our society. Every brick, every pillar, every ornate archway carries the imprint of those who have walked before me, their ideals and convictions woven into the very fabric of this building.

To the uninitiated, the High Court may appear as a mere structure of bricks and mortar, a relic of colonial grandeur. But to me, it is a sanctum, a temple of justice that evokes a sense of piety far deeper than any shrine. Within these walls, I find a communion with something greater than myself, a spirit that transcends time, binding generations of seekers, advocates, and judges in a shared quest for truth. It is here that I have experienced moments of profound clarity, where the weight of responsibility is balanced by the quiet assurance that I am part of a noble tradition.

Today, as I mingled with the throngs of heritage enthusiasts and young aspirants, many were surprised to see a sitting judge among them on a holiday. Perhaps they wondered what draws me back, time and again, to a place where I spend most of my waking hours. How could they know the depth of my attachment, the overwhelming surge of emotion that wells up each time I step into this building? To walk these corridors is to converse with history, to feel the pulse of justice that beats through every chamber. Listening to N.L. Raja, senior advocate, recount the storied past of the High Court, I felt a tide of emotions rise within me – gratitude, humility, and an inexplicable joy. I found myself struggling to hold back tears, grateful for the anonymity afforded by my dark glasses.

There are moments when words fail to capture the intensity of what I feel. How does one articulate the sense of belonging, the gratitude for having been chosen by this building, for having been allowed to serve within its sacred precincts? The Madras High Court has given me more than a career – it has given me purpose, identity, and a profound sense of fulfilment. It has witnessed my victories and my failures, my hopes and my fears. It has seen me at my most vulnerable and my most resolute. In its silent companionship, I have found solace, inspiration, and the courage to persevere.

As I sit alone in my office, searching for words to express the depth of my emotions, I am acutely aware of the tears streaming down my cheeks. Yet, in this solitude, I am grateful for the chance to reflect, to honour the building that has shaped the very core of my being. I am blessed, truly blessed, to have been woven into the tapestry of this great institution. If I were to be born a thousand times, I would choose, again and again, to walk these corridors, to serve this red building, to be a humble part of its enduring legacy.

The Madras High Court is not just a monument of stone and history – it is a living entity, a guardian of justice, a silent mentor. It has given me everything, and in return, I have given it my devotion, my labour, and my love. As I wipe away my tears, I know that my journey with this building is far from over. It is a bond that transcends time, a relationship that will endure for eternity. And so, with a heart full of gratitude and eyes brimming with emotion, I offer this humble tribute to the great red building that has been, and will always be, my home.

> The Madras High Court is not just a monument of stone and history – it is a living entity, a guardian of justice, and a silent mentor

New light on a powerhouse

Mitochondria turn out to be where ideas evolve and plans and strategies are laid out

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My mother was very possessive and finicky about her kitchen; she always left it sparkling clean and locked it at night before going to bed, perhaps to prevent unauthorised access to leftover ice-cream in the refrigerator. A year after my marriage, she handed over the kitchen keys to my wife.

"It is now for you," she said.

By then, she was convinced that my wife understood the harms of night-time coffee and took it seriously. The kitchen continues to be securely locked at night, with the access code unavailable.

By the time of the handover, the tremor in mom's hands was becoming more difficult to hide, her drooling speech more obvious. In the next six months, she needed help to walk, and by the year-end, she was confined to bed and unable to recall my name. A rapidly progressive type of Parkinson's disease was eating up my mom's brain from the inside. She died on July 1, 2010, Doctor's Day.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Some 1.5 billion years ago, a free-floating single unicellular anaerobic organism (a single-cell life form that lived out of fermented product, not oxygen) accidentally engulfed a passing-by aerobic (oxygen-living) bacterium. For some unusual reasons, the "gentleman" organism did not kill or digest the bacterium, and instead, let it live and thrive inside its cytoplasm. The thankful bacterium continued to produce nutrients using oxygen and supplied it to the organism in return for a safe habitat. This endosymbiosis turned the bacterium into a modern-day "mitochondrium". The mitochondrium is the powerhouse (the kitchen) of the cell. It produces ATP (energy) by taking in nutrients and oxygen. It also carries its own 37-gene DNA that gives it a degree of autonomy. Interestingly, the mitochondrial DNA comes entirely from the mother. This acquisition of mitochondria is the biggest evolutionary jump in the development of complex multicellular life. New research indicates that mitochondria are not just a "battery pack", but a cellular motherboard.

Dopamine deficit

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disease thought to be the result of a reduction of a neurotransmitter called dopamine in specific areas of the brain. Present-day treatment aims at increasing the amount of dopamine while treating associated disabilities. New research now points to a possible defect in the mitochondria.

The brain claims only 2% of our body weight but uses 20% of our total energy expenditure. This is the reason the energy-hungry brain neurons carry over 2 million mitochondria per cell (compared with hundreds in a liver cell, and thousands in a hard-working muscle cell). In an article and an interview published in *Scientific American* in May, researcher Martin Picard from Columbia University suggested that a defect in mitochondria might be a key driver of Parkinson's disease. Already, researchers have identified abnormal mitochondrial function in PINK1 and PRKN, two types of genetic Parkinson's disease. The disease has no known treatment. A recent update from the University of Michigan indicates that regular exercise, a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, and reduction of mental stress can contribute to its prevention.

Early treatment of hypertension, diabetes and lipids helps. Interestingly, caffeinated drinks (coffee) seem to be beneficial too.

The cellular kitchen (aka mitochondria) turns out to be so much more than a powerhouse; it is an HQ where ideas evolve, and plans are drawn and strategies laid out. The mitochondrial gene passed from mother to childen ensures that the coffee-addict father or the ice-cream crazy child has to obey the rules, both at home and in biology. The mitochondria seem to have a profound effect on cellular function and survival. Mitochondria-directed therapy might be the key to hitherto non-curable neurodegenerative and cardiovascular diseases.

But our present kitchen admin is yet to be convinced about the protective effects of coffee. Our kitchen continues to be locked at night.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The growing gap between the old and new generations can be bridged with open communication and mutual understanding. ('Adulthood, edited: How young India (still) lives'; July 27) Instead of laying emphasis on the differences, the common values need to be celebrated.
N.S. Reddy

A technology-driven life and forces of globalisation have significantly shaped the world that Gen Z inhabits. This shift away from the traditional family calls for greater resilience and adaptability from parents in order to maintain a harmonious household.
G. Ramasubramanyam

Marketing maven

Ambi Parameswaran's attempts at guiding marketing managers of companies to identify the needs of different people in a vast country of our size are commendable. ('A federation of many markets'; July 27) It requires a microscopic approach and the right attitude.
N. Sri Vrinda

What's the point?

At a wedding, you get to meet your distant family, or your childhood love, or even your irritating relatives. ('The great Indian fake wedding'; July 27) It's both emotional and exciting. But this fake wedding trend seems shallow.
Rohith Varon S.S.

Time for action

Every week, Rohan Chakravarty comes up with informative and relevant environmental tidbits that make us sit up and take notice. ('Green humour'; July 27) It's time we did our bit to save Mother Earth.
A.V. Muralidhara Acharya

Rapidly changing

The transformation of Tibet reveals a systematic effort to reshape Tibet's heritage in the guise of development and national unity. ('Tibet in translation'; July 27)
Avinashiappan Myilsami

Fearless narratives

Caste and class remain enduring forces that shape — and often stunt — the nation's social progress. ('Shazia Iqbal: in cinema as in life'; July 27) Portraying these realities on screen is no easy feat. Yet, Shazia Iqbal's fearless gaze reclaims the narrative. *Dhadak 2* is not just a film; it is a landmark in socially conscious cinema where storytelling meets truth.
Vijay Singh Adhikari

Wisdom in the wild

The Great Elephant Migration, much like *The Elephant Whisperers*, showcases the coexistence of indigenous communities and wildlife in India. ('100 elephants and their designer blankets'; July 27) The skill and ingenuity of the creators enables forest restoration and livelihood generation.
Anusha Pillay

Lessons for life

Phuphee's wisdom helps to uplift mundane family life with a pointed thrust on women's empowerment. ('Losing perfection'; July 27) The column gets '*goadnyik khoat asel*' (better than before) with each issue.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

India's climate challenge
The northeastern floods, the Wayanad landslides, the slow but steady sea level rise are all climate alarms
Rohan Qurashi

Masculinity in transition
Traditional masculinity appears to be struggling to regain its relevance in contemporary expectations
Ashwani Kumar

Where does disciplining end and abuse begin?
Cultural justifications can no longer mask the harms of corporal punishment
Manickam Vishnu

When passion becomes obsession
One motivates you to get started, while the other carries you through rough patches, failures, moments of doubt
Khushi Bedmutha

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.

Passionate and colourful 1. The women sport handmade *gajras* made with flowers picked from their backyards; 2. starting work, their *nauvari* sari tied firmly; 3. taking a break during the day; 4. fresh catch; 5. intricate gold jewellery is a favourite with the fisherwomen; 6. enjoying some ice cream at the end of the day; 7. many of the fisherwomen who wear the *nauvari* today are in their 50s and 60s. (INDRAJIT KHAMBE)

SILVER FINS AND A FLASH OF GOLD

Meet the women of Harnai's fish market who shout, fight, laugh loudly, and keep their traditions alive

Indrajit Khambe

My first impression of the Harnai fish market is *always* chaos. The smell of fish, the sound of fisherwomen shouting and buffaloes lowing, and the sight of brightly coloured *nauvari* saris, chunky gold jewellery, and heaps of freshly-caught fish. I never know which of my senses to follow first.

It's also a chaos that I've never got tired of – ever since I first visited the town in Dapoli, in the south of Maharashtra, in 2012. Every visit is a discovery. But what I keep coming back to photograph are the fisherwomen, under whose strong leadership the market thrives.

They are a fascinating blend of traits: from their distinctive attire, the yards of bright oranges, deep greens and bright yellows tucked functionally tight around their legs, to the fresh *gajras* of *mogra*, roses and *champa* in their hair.

Their jewellery reflects the sea, with motifs of fish and other creatures. The women's style is their own unique form of marketing; it helps them attract customers and stand out in the bustling marketplace to their regulars. Fights are normal, laughter follows soon after, and it's a common sight to see them enjoy a well-deserved ice cream at the end of a long day.

What is most fascinating, however, is how they continue traditions that are fast dying out elsewhere. Especially bartering. Fishing communities typically live close to the sea, and their houses are clustered together, leaving limited space for cultivating.

So, they barter with women from neighbouring villages, who visit with heaping baskets of seasonal vegetables and fruits such as *tendli* (ivy gourd), aubergines, mangoes, cashewnuts, and *jamun*.

Daily life at the fish market is full of energy, hard work, and excitement. But change is coming. The younger generation no longer favours *nauvari* saris; so, the well-dressed women I see today are all in their 50s and 60s. A jetty is also being constructed, which means I will miss seeing buffaloes waiting patiently knee deep in water, as men load fish into the bullock carts.

Change isn't always bad; it will make life at the market easier for its denizens. It will also make for less interesting photos.

The documentary photographer is based in Sindhudurg, near the Goa-Maharashtra border.

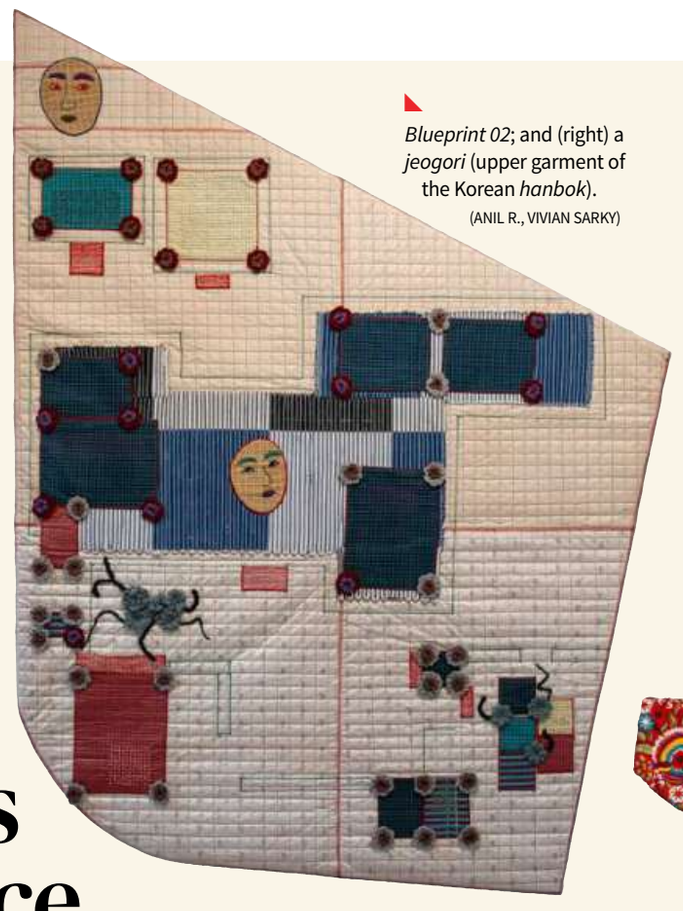
As a fashion designer, he favoured the anti-fit; as an artist, he unpicks the politics of clothing

Kallol Datta's act of defiance

Aastha D.

The body is first taught obedience through fabric. The swaddle before speech, the school uniform before dissent, shame before skin. Clothing is behavioural before – and because – it is cultural.

In *Volume IV: Truths, Half-Truths, Half-Lies, Lies*, Kolkata-based artist and fashion designer Kallol Datta invites us to look at clothing as a long and loaded manual of social instruction. Drawing from *Lessons for Women*, a 2,000-year-old guidebook written by Chinese historian Ban Zhao for her daughters, Datta unpacks how garments have told people, especially women, how to sit, stand, move, behave, belong, and be excluded.



Blueprint 02; and (right) a *jeogori* (upper garment of the Korean *hanbok*). (ANIL R., VIVIAN SARKY)

Rules written in thread

Zhao's book may have been written as a way for mothers to prepare daughters for survival in a rigid society, but its advice – on how to be modest, obedient, restrained – has stuck around for millennia. It keeps surfacing in new forms: in 16th-century Confucian revivalism, in the 'values' taught to girls across cultures today, in viral videos preaching 'feminine behaviour' and the new aspirational 'trad wife'. All markers of neo-fascism and an imminent recession.

Datta was stunned by how familiar the text felt. "While feminist movements and ideologies have evolved," they say, "the dominant forces... continue to subscribe to antiquated notions of social and behavioural propriety." Even today, lessons dressed up as care – especially from mother to daughter – can quietly reinforce control.

Clothing is political

Datta, with his kohl-rimmed eyes and love of all things black, was a significant figure on the Indian fashion scene – until the Central Saint Martins-trained "clothes maker" made the switch a few years ago from mainstream fashion to art. Since then he's tapped into textile, craft and his connections, but this time to explore clothing as sites of tension. Like his 2022 showcase of textile sculptures, titled *Volume 3, ISSUE 2*, which looked at the role of imperial edicts in Japan's late Shōwa period.

Volume IV is structured like a story in four parts: *Truths*, *Half-Truths*, *Half-Lies*, and *Lies Our Clothes Have Told Us*. It travels across Asian garments – from the Japanese kimono to the Manipuri *phanek* – to show how fashion has long been used to signal status, enforce gender roles, and mark caste. The sari, often seen as a timeless symbol of Indian femininity, is one of the most revealing examples. The blouse and petticoat, though they now seem inseparable from the unstitched garment, were introduced during colonial rule, shaped by British-Victorian ideas of modesty. These facts, often tucked away from public memory, are central to Datta's work.

Their pieces – textile posters, sculptural forms, and layered fabric compositions – are built from donated clothes and stitched with history. In these collages of cloth, Datta asks: who gets to be comfortable? Who gets to move freely? Who gets to be seen?

Unbuilding the home

One of the most striking parts of the show features two textile floor plans. The first maps out a Korean *hanok* (a traditional house), where the design reflects rigid gender roles: male quarters in front, female quarters at the back, separate doors for servants and labourers. The second plan reimagines the house with only women living in it. Now, there are wide corridors, shared rooms, spaces for leisure and ease.

In Datta's vision, just as clothing teaches us how to shrink ourselves, architecture teaches us to shrink our movement; where we're allowed to go and where we're not. By redrawing these spaces, they ask: what if homes were built around freedom instead of discipline?

Slow resistance

Where the state uses surveillance and laws to discipline, Datta uses slowness. Stitching, assembling, disassembling, their process becomes a kind of quiet refusal.

"There are recurring motifs in the works that are markers of small acts of resistance, of dissent, lack of access to economic activity... Clothes, and by extension, cloth, will always remain our first line of defence," says Datta, who collaborated with Kolkata-based Ek Tara Creates, which employs women from vulnerable backgrounds, for the series.

In *Volume IV*, the garment is not precious or sacred, it is strange. Datta, however, doesn't aim to shock. They ask us to look again. At the folds of our garments. At the rules we've absorbed.

The exhibition is rife with silences that are full of questions. If every stitch is a sentence, then maybe the clothes we wear are trying to tell us something. If only we'd listen.

Volume IV is on till August 20 at Experimenter in Mumbai.

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