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Upamanyu Chatterjee and the Italian monk

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LIT FEST NATION

Jaipur Literature Festival set the tone, but the mushrooming of literary gatherings since has proved that the market is strong for events that unite books, stars, and life experiences — screen addiction notwithstanding | **Cover story** pages 4-5

Readers on the rise

Jaipur Literature Festival was launched in 2006 with just **18 authors**

Down south, The Hindu Lit Fest debuted in 2010 as a **one-day event**

In Arunachal Pradesh, the Ziro Literary Festival runs parallel to the popular music extravaganza, **Ziro Festival**

Kerala Literature Festival takes the love of books to the **beach**, in Kozhikode

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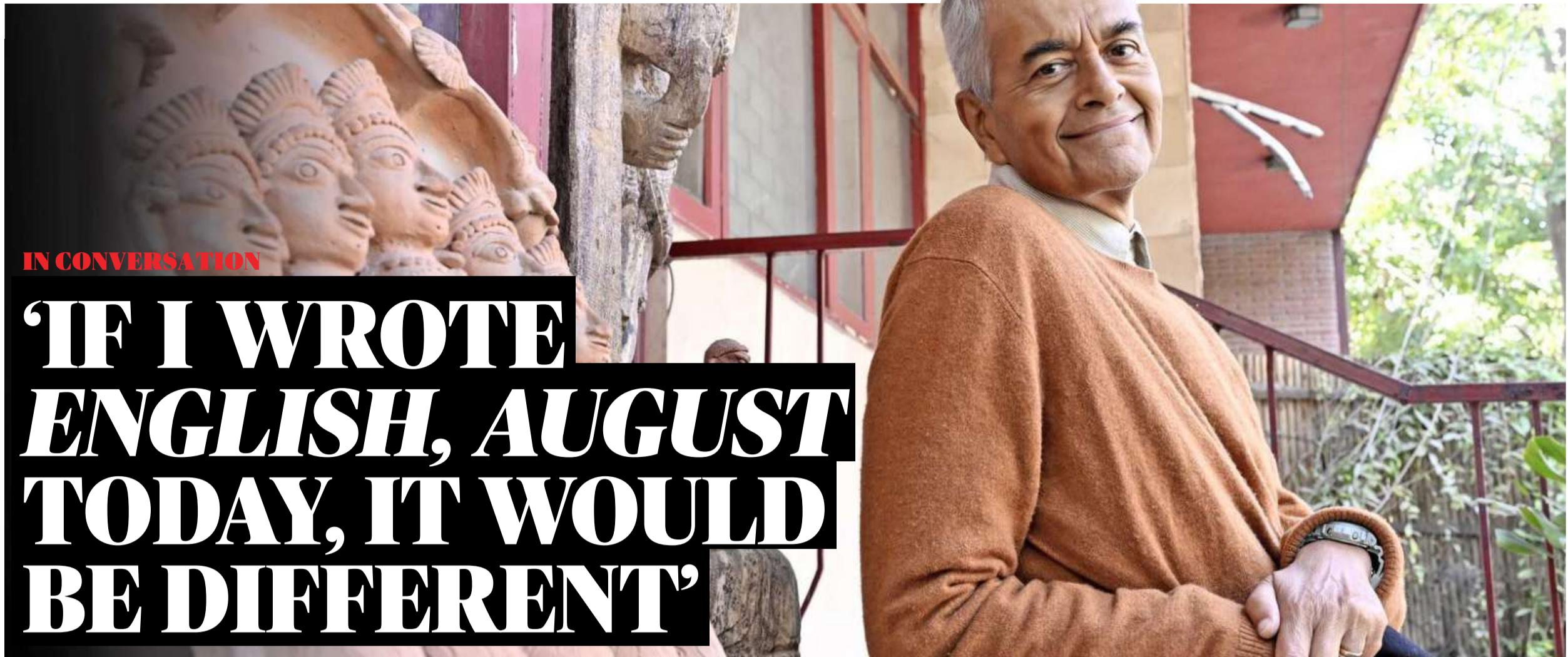
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IN CONVERSATION

'IF I WROTE ENGLISH, AUGUST TODAY, IT WOULD BE DIFFERENT'

Retired civil servant and author Upamanyu Chatterjee on how India has changed and on his new novel that tells the true story of an Italian monk

Stanley Carvalho

Retired civil servant and author of nine books that include his famous debut novel *English, August* (1989), Upamanyu Chatterjee blazes a new trail with his latest, *Lorenzo Searches for the Meaning of Life*. It is a true story based on the life of Italian Fabrizio Senesi, an acquaintance of Chatterjee in Sri Lanka for the last few years.

As he states in his foreword, "It is a true story, that is to say, like many true stories, it is a work of fiction." At the core of this novel is Lorenzo Senesi, who, as a Benedictine monk, is on a spiritual quest to find the meaning of life. Chatterjee's tour-de-force is his storytelling and imaginative prose combined with his trademark wit and attention to detail. Edited excerpts from a phone interview:

Question: How did this book about an Italian monk who travels to London and Bangladesh come about?

A: We stay in Colombo; this Italian was a neighbour over the last five to six years. I met him, he was eager, willing to have his story told by someone. When I learnt he was moving to Phnom Penh, I said why don't we sit and write a book.

Q: What compelled you to tell the story of an ordinary man in search of life's meaning?

A: Because it is very simple and interesting. It is also important. Here's a man, in his early 20s, who begins to search. As I say in the end, life lived anti-clockwise, he seems to start at the wrong end, with a spiritual search rather than physical wandering. It is also life that is drawing him back. With children, his responsibilities increase, he cannot go his own way. Money, which never mattered to him, is needed to give his children a future. These simple, yet extremely important, issues in every life are in the book.

In the end, he is convinced and so am I that he is still a Benedictine at heart. He still has that quotation

from the priest that a monk is what every human being should be. That's what keeps him going. I thought that's a fruitful, enriching way of looking at things.

Q: You literally get into the skin of the protagonist, Lorenzo?

A: I am glad it worked. We did a lot of back and forth even after Fabrizio left Colombo. I bombarded him with questions and there was healthy cooperation between us. He saw the first and final drafts, suggested changes, and I accepted almost all of them.

Q: So, the book is largely biographical. How much of it is fiction?

A: In essence, it is Fabrizio's story; it is equally true I couldn't bother him with delineation of minor characters, almost all minor characters are creators of fiction. Fabrizio was particular that I do not fictionalise too much. So, the central story is true to life with embellishments of fiction.

Q: How easy or difficult was it to write

of foreign locales sitting elsewhere?

A: It is possible if you have enough signposts to guide you – the weather, Wikipedia, Google Maps, and Fabrizio, with whom you could cross-check.

Q: After three decades and eight books, you've gone beyond India-centric books. Is it a new phase in your literary journey?

A: No, I don't think so. This book is truly exceptional. Bangladesh is a lot like India, feels a lot like home. Hopefully, if I write more books, they will be India-centric.

Q: English, August and its sequel, *The Mammaries of Welfare State*, were a satire on India's bureaucracy. Would you have escaped reprimand in today's India?

A: English, August belongs to the 80s. Things have changed, the civil

service itself has changed, small towns in India are not at all like Madras in the 80s, everything has changed. I'm not sure if *English, August* would work in 2024 because his [protagonist Agastya Sen] feeling of being out of place in his own country gives it its spurt. If I wrote it today, it would be a different book.

Q: With more time post-retirement, can we expect books faster than the typical once in four or five years?

A: I've been very productive in Colombo; it is our sixth year and I've done three books. I must say, washing dishes and writing, there's

Meaning of life Author Upamanyu Chatterjee's new book is about a young man's spiritual quest. (R.V. MOORTHY)

nothing else; it suits me fine, this life.

Q: How do you see contemporary Indian fiction in English?

A: You're asking the wrong person. I'm still ill-read, I have a long list of books to read but haven't yet read them. I haven't read any contemporary Indian books recently. I've been reading all kinds of things connected with work-in-progress, I also read in Bengali to keep in touch. While I read a lot, I read slowly.

Q: You've been compared with Rabelais, Swift, Heller. Have they influenced you?

A: That is not fair, these are giants. *Catch-22* was and is still a *Bible*, and it is true that in my list of eternal books, *Gulliver's Travels* will find a place. I don't imitate anyone consciously but when you read something, that triggers off something in your head and off you go.

The interviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist and writer.

Suresh Menon

Few novels begin more dramatically than Benjamin Labatut's *The Maniac*. "On the morning of the twenty-fifth of September 1933, the Austrian physicist Paul Ehrenfest walked into Professor Jan Waterink's Pedagogical Institute for Afflicted Children in Amsterdam, shot his fifteen-year-old son, Vassily, in the head, then turned the gun on himself."

That owes nothing to Labatut's febrile imagination, for every word is true. The year is significant. Hitler had come to power in Germany. Classical physics was being challenged by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle which stated that the position and the velocity of an object cannot both be measured simultaneously. In mathematics, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem said that in any system there will always be true statements that cannot be proved. In the new world, reason seemed to have abdicated.

The merely intelligent found this exciting. The overly sensitive, like Ehrenfest, a Jew who had to flee Germany, and whose son had Down Syndrome, found it unbearable. Ehrenfest speaks of a "strange new rationality" as the old certainties crumbled around him. He describes it as "a spectre haunting the soul of science... both logic-driven and utterly irrational... preparing to thrust itself into our lives through technology by enrapturing the cleverest men and women with whispered promises of superhuman power and godlike control".

The Maniac isn't about Ehrenfest, though. He merely sets the stage for John von Neumann, mathematical genius, around whom this beautiful, stimulating, unsettling, provocative, novel revolves.

von Neumann, Hungary-born



Man like a cubist painting

In reimagining the life of a genius like John von Neumann, author Benjamin Labatut gives the real a touch of the fantastical

polymath, established the mathematical framework for quantum mechanics, founded the field of game theory, played a crucial role in the building of the nuclear bomb, and took the initial steps to creating artificial intelligence. Our three biggest modern concerns – nuclear war, climate change and artificial intelligence – are tied up with his work.

In a recent biography, Ananya Bhattacharya writes, "As a child, von Neumann absorbed ancient Greek and Latin, and spoke French, German and English as well as his native Hungarian. He devoured a 45-volume history of the world and was able to recite whole chapters verbatim decades later. A professor of Byzantine history who was invited to one of von Neumann's

parties said he would come only if it was agreed they would not discuss the subject. 'Everybody thinks I am the world's greatest expert in it,' he told von Neumann's wife, 'and I want them to keep on thinking that.'

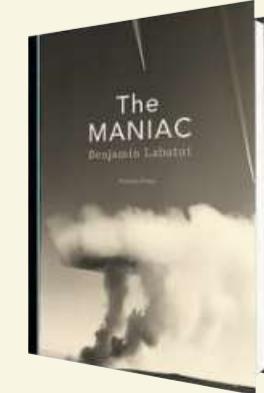
One man's ambition
The first programmable digital computer was called MANIAC (Mathematical Analyzer Numerical Integrator and Automatic Computer), a word that fits its architect von Neumann rather well, implies Labatut. "So much of the high-tech world we live in today, with its conquest of space and extraordinary advances in biology and medicine, were spurred on by one man's monomania," he explains.

Chilean writer Labatut, 43, born

Mind-bending Mathematician John von Neumann; and (below) author Benjamin Labatut. (GETTY IMAGES)

in the Netherlands, once said that anything that comes out of a writer is fiction. To find another person's phrase is more important to him, he has said, than to come up with one himself. That tells you what you need to know about Labatut's approach – if every person's inner life is a mix of fiction and fact, why should a description of it not be so? This genre-defying novel is diminished by attempts at describing it.

Labatut doesn't do magic realism. Instead he is the master of realistic magic, filling his novels with real people and real events, and making it all seem fantastical and relevant. *The Maniac*, his first book in English, deals with the issues of his previous, *When We Cease to Understand the World* (2020), written in Spanish and shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. It moves at great pace, propelled by enchanting sentences.



The Maniac
Benjamin Labatut
Pushkin Press
₹699



non-fiction, picking up just what's necessary.

Reason and madness, chance and determinism, the accidental and the inevitable, chaos and order, all bubble away underneath. Labatut's brilliance brings them to the surface periodically with chilling inevitability. Our problems are not created by a shortage of rationality, he suggests, but from an excess of it.

The final section highlights the match between the Korean Go champion Lee Sedol and the computer AlphaGo. Artificial Intelligence beat the real thing 4-1. Sedol won the last game when "AlphaGo had become delusional," writes Labatut.

Is that the future of the self-replicating machine von Neumann had been conceptualising? Or a sly suggestion that the circle of life exists among machines? Had we built a creative mind more brilliant than von Neumann's only to discover that machines are human too? "All processes that are stable we shall predict," said von Neumann, and "all processes that are unstable we shall control." It is a stunning assertion, gaining in relevance in our AI world.

In the final chapter of *When We Cease to Understand the World*, the night gardener, a former mathematician, says, "It was mathematics – not nuclear weapons, computers, biological warfare or our climate Armageddon – which was changing our world to the point where, in a couple of decades at most, we would simply not be able to grasp what being human really meant."

It is a thought that animates *The Maniac* too, leaving us somewhat disturbed at the end.

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

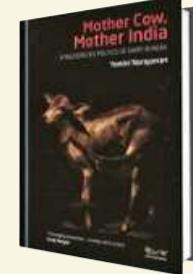
INTERVIEW

'The cow's status doesn't protect her'

Yamini Narayanan argues that the cow and the Ganga have both been harmed, in the name of being sacred

Sudhirendar Sharma

A senior lecturer at Deakin University in Australia, Yamini Narayanan exposes how the cow has been exploited to promote casteism and communalism. In an interview, she responds to questions that emerge from her ground-breaking book *Mother Cow, Mother India*. Edited excerpts.



blurs the cold reality that the cow is a milk-producing resource and economics demands that the unproductive resources be treated – and disposed of – as such. In masking this reality, the cow's sacred status intensifies her vulnerability to being used for dairy – it does not protect her or her calf.

Question: Its political connotation notwithstanding, does cow vigilanism hold the 'cow' as a cultural symbol to promote vegetarianism? Why is she vulnerable to being a dairy or milch cow?

Answer: India is overwhelmingly and emphatically a non-vegetarian country, and cow vigilantes are not to be confused with animal activism whose overarching priority is usually veganism, a rejection of the consumption of all animal-derived products, including dairy and eggs, which are part of a vegetarian diet. Cow vigilanism is a mode of remaking the cow as a 'Hindu' body, and more specifically, as representing a Hindu state. And it is precisely the sacrality imposed on the cow that makes her vulnerable to being a 'dairy' or a 'milch' cow. The need is to understand the politics of cow protectionism differently when we place the *lived realities of cows and their infants* at the centre. Cows are bred for dairy in India, but the extreme and unfathomable violence inherent in dairy is linked with slaughter. Cows who are infertile, diseased, male etc. must be necessarily sent to slaughter.

The public meta-narrative is that cows are either abandoned on the road or sent to gaushalas, but the cold reality of dairy economics is animals bred and exploited for dairy must be eventually slaughtered when no longer producing lactate. This happens underground in India. However, framing the cow as 'mother' or 'goddess' is basically a gaslighting tactic that



The interviewer is an independent writer, researcher and academic.

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In Camouflaged – Forgotten Stories from Battlefields, Probal DasGupta looks at India's history from the lens of war stories. In an interview, DasGupta says the stories explore intriguing relationships between mates, adversaries and covers intrigue, loss, valour, victory and sacrifices that recount real experiences. Edited excerpts:

Question: What inspired you to write this book?

Answer: I felt India's history needs to be told from the lens of war stories, since they help contextualise our history. A narrative account of protagonists helps understand the bigger picture. For instance, in a story from the 1962 war, a protagonist was ordered to withdraw from a battle he was winning – a classic irony of an inept political and military senior leadership overruling a brave young leader on ground. Then there was a story from the 1971 India-Pakistan war that reflects a confident nation.

One of the things that powers an army is its belief in traditions and the inspiration it takes from the past. The Chetwode Motto that places the honour and safety of the country and subordinates above that of the leader is retained as a gold standard. In Kargil, the nation lost one officer for every 15 soldiers killed, the highest casualty rate ever, which validates the

IN CONVERSATION

In the forces, a happy mix

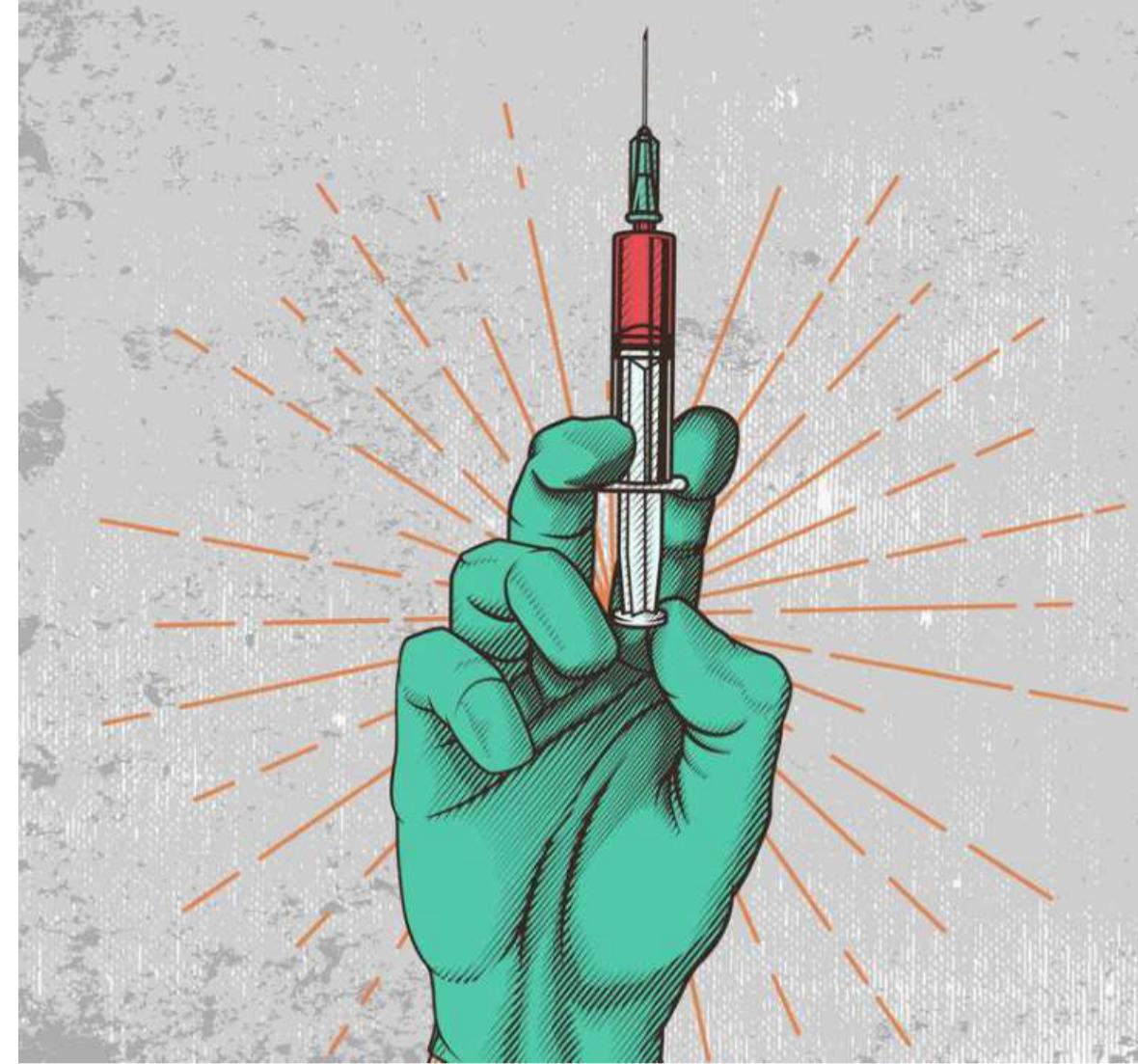
The Indian Army, says Probal DasGupta, has embraced change and forged a balance between tradition and modernity

tradition of leading from the front.

Q: Why do these stories need to be told?
A: We need to tell these stories because we haven't recorded them. In 1915, Indian soldiers registered the only Allied victory in the Gallipoli campaign. Today, ANZAC day is commemorated each year.

Australia and New Zealand whose troops fought in Gallipoli and other wars. Sikh, Punjabi and Gurkha troops who recorded the victory are forgotten. There is no mention of Indian soldiers in Hollywood war films, despite over two million Indian soldiers having fought them.

We don't even have official



Sandip Roy

Q: Hasn't the 'cow' been consciously used as a political tool to promote identity? Is the idea of a nation-state (around 'cow') aimed at political control over the population at the cost of perpetuating social and economic inequality?

A: In India, cows have been made a 'Hindu animal' – and as ostensibly representing a Hindu state. Cows are of course, not naturally Hindu (or of any other religion), which are anthropocentric identifiers of the human self and human others. However, making cows Hindu and banning their slaughter as protection for 'Hindu animals', serves a divisive purpose in an aspirational Hindu state. My book, however, exposes the inherent contradiction – and impossibility – of banning cow slaughter in a state that heavily promotes and subsidises dairy. Dairy is a slaughter industry so a cow slaughter ban is a plain economic impossibility.

Animal slaughter in any country is usually undertaken by some of the poorest, and most socially vulnerable communities. In India, it is some of the poorest engaging in slaughter, usually of the Dalit and Muslim communities, and who are at enormous risk of getting lynched, raped and killed, for essentially supporting the dairy industry which is both state-supported, and indeed, constitutive of the Hindu identity itself. No Hindu ritual is conducted without milk, ghee and butter, which all require cow slaughter.

Morrison, who now lives in Brooklyn, didn't set out to investigate a murder from 1930s Calcutta. It was, he says, "a tangent of a tangent of a tangent." A story he was working on about ultraviruses and bacteriophages led him to the Haffkine Institute in India, the plague research laboratory set up by the Russian-French bacteriologist Waldemar Haffkine and he discovered a tiny news item about how the plague virus had been used to kill someone. That led him down the rabbit hole that was the Pakur murder case. "It made tremendous news in India but also beyond," says Morrison. "It reached the front page of *The New York Times*."

A 'juicy' story
It was a 'juicy' story says Morrison. The accused Benoyendra fancied himself as a film producer, had a long-suffering wife, "dancing girl" mistresses and an entourage of shady characters. The who's who

MURDER MOST FOUL

Dan Morrison digs up a fratricidal killing with a plague virus in Calcutta of the 1930s and its eerie connect to a Sherlock Holmes story

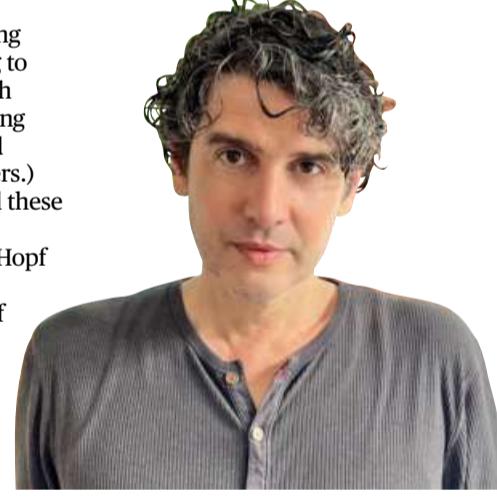
of the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine were involved as was a former medical student pretending to be a vaccine researcher.

Germ murders were not unknown. In the 1917 Sherlock Holmes mystery, 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective', a greedy planter kills his nephew by a pinprick as well – from the pointed tip of a steel spring, infected by an unnamed germ from Sumatra. No one knows if Benoyendra had read that story or seen the film based on it, but the Pakur murder eerily echoes the Dying Detective. It went beyond fiction.

Karl Hopf, a German fencing master, was accused of trying to spike his third wife's food with cholera and typhus after having poisoned the earlier two (and assorted other family members.) He was beheaded in 1914. "All these stories were covered with sweaty-palmed glee but Karl Hopf was not called a Teutonic horror," says Morrison. "Hopf was an aberration. The Pakur case was an Asian horror." In the 1930s, the freedom movement was in full swing and the case, says Morrison, likely "fed into

the need to show the Asiatics as beyond the beyond."

However, it did not fit the colonial stereotype of Indians as barbaric savages who needed the civilising touch of the British. The accused, says Morrison, was a "bona fide 20th century man looking to remake himself, taking a hammer to centuries of tradition." But as he followed the paper trail of the case, Morrison found himself empathising more with Kalidas Gupta, the lawyer-turned-sleuth, "a small bespectacled man who does



The reviewer is the author of *Don't Let Him Know*.

Millions of Indian soldiers in world wars shaped the world and India's political history.

Post 1947, a tussle to find geographical footing was followed by a tormenting India-China war of 1962. 1971 witnessed India's turnaround scripted by a humanitarian victory against Pakistan. Issues confronting the nation in these times and later are reflected in the war stories of that period.

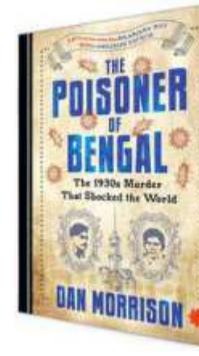
Q: The Indian Army has changed a lot since independence. Yet, it still remains colonial in many ways. Can you reflect on this dichotomy?

A: Despite colonial beginnings, it has undergone shake-ups after spells of sluggishness. For instance, Gen. Sundarji shook up the armed forces in Operation Brasstacks; the demands of counter-insurgency in the 1990s created a soldier, who ably made the change to fit into low-intensity conflict environments or in civil-military assignments. The prospect of Integrated Battle Groups (IBG) could demand a new role in future. The Indian and Pakistani armies were born out of the same womb. After 1971, religion and politics became de rigueur in Pakistan's army, sending the army down a dangerous, slippery slope. On the other hand, the Indian army has maintained its apolitical and secular credentials. One may mention colonial leanings, but I believe the army has embraced change and forged a happy mix between tradition and modernity.

Q: Can you briefly encapsulate the categorisation of the book? Why the choice of the 100-year period?

A: The last hundred years shaped the destinies of modern nation-states. At the turn of the previous century, the invention of aircraft, tanks and modern weaponry changed warfare.

(GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)



The Poisoner of Bengal
Dan Morrison
Juggernaut
₹499

the shoe-leather work that cracks the case open. He does it not for money but because he cannot stand the injustice." Gupta figured out how Benoyendra and his associate bribed and lied their way to the highly protected virus.

The seven-and-a-half month trial offered much tabloid fodder. The prosecutor alleged without proof Benoyendra shared his mistress with his associates. "They probably hoped the upright middle class jury would think such a man was capable of anything," says Morrison. One of the jurors was a school teacher. Filmmaker Satyajit Ray was his student and remembered his teacher giving them thrilling updates even though the jury was sworn to secrecy. The judge was determined to get a conviction out of the jury at a time when British authority was being tested by the freedom movement. Though a High Court bench later took the judge apart for his zeal, they still concluded what remained was enough to hang Benoyendra and his associate. But they commuted it to life imprisonment.

The 'bhadralok' club

Benoyendra never showed remorse even after his release post-Independence when he had a fiery stand-off with the government. He never covered his tracks because he was arrogantly confident his half-brother would just die quietly in faraway Pakur. Morrison was struck by how "passive" everyone was despite their suspicions about Benoyendra. "These people were not active verbs," says Morrison. "Benoyendra was an independent actor. The rest of his family were not." But Amarendra somehow shook off the family's inertia, its paranoia about protecting its name and came back to Calcutta to get his blood tested. Though Benoyendra had him hastily cremated, the laboratory results came back to damn him.

Looking back at the case now, Morrison is struck by something else. "There was no curiosity in the press about the doctors involved in small and mid-sized sins of omission and at least one fat sin of commission. The head of the Bombay hospital clearly appears to have taken a bribe." In the end, the establishment protected its old bhadralok's club.

The reviewer is the author of *Don't Let Him Know*.



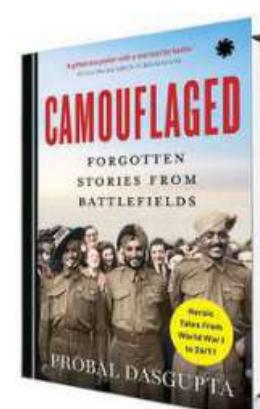
Looking back Australian military veterans fire into the air during the Anzac Day dawn service at Elephant Rock in Currumbin on the Gold Coast; and (below) Probal DasGupta. (AP AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



histories of the 1962 and 1971 wars. My previous book *Watershed 1967* was the first book about India's victory over China in 1967 – it took us 53 years to write about our victory and its impact on history. We need to record our past but it's important that stories are written with objectivity and candour to lend credibility.

Q: Can you briefly encapsulate the categorisation of the book? Why the choice of the 100-year period?

A: The last hundred years shaped the destinies of modern nation-states. At the turn of the previous century, the invention of aircraft, tanks and modern weaponry changed warfare.



The Indian Army, says Probal DasGupta, has embraced change and forged a balance between tradition and modernity

tradition of leading from the front. We need to tell these stories because we haven't recorded them. In 1915, Indian soldiers registered the only Allied victory in the Gallipoli campaign. Today, ANZAC day is commemorated each year.

Australia and New Zealand whose troops fought in Gallipoli and other wars. Sikh, Punjabi and Gurkha troops who recorded the victory are forgotten. There is no mention of Indian soldiers in Hollywood war films, despite over two million Indian soldiers having fought them.

We don't even have official

LIT FEST NATION

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Jitil, the auto driver I meet outside Hotel Clarks Amer, isn't entirely sure what the big event that has taken over his city is about. If he's to guess, he says, it would be something to do with celebrities. He's noticed the heavy security outside the main gates of the venue of the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) and knows that this is an annual affair, whatever this is. But he keeps track of the dates and plans to be back at the hotel's gates next year too. "I get five times my usual business during this *mela*," he says.

There are many in Jaipur like Jitil who track the dates of this festival, knowing that it will boost their business. Prep for JLF, often called "the greatest literary show on earth", starts early and involves a large number of individuals and organisations. At a glance, the numbers for the festival's 17th edition are impressive: 400 volunteers selected from over 1,400 applications, around 4,000 vendors, more than 500 speakers over 200 sessions, and over 4,00,000 visitors from across the world. JLF debuted in 2006 with 18 authors and some 100 visitors.

At this year's inaugural session, Rajasthan's Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari, who has been associated with the festival since its inception, spoke of its impact on the city it calls home. "Five days of the JLF do more for tourism than what the State government does for attracting visitors during the entire year," she said,



Swati Daftuar



Swati Daftuar



Beyond books Scenes from literature festivals across the country that are seeing a mix of formats, speakers and outreach efforts. (PTI, AKHILASIVARAN, SRINATH M., SWATI DAFTUAR, JLF AND GALLE LITERATURE FESTIVAL)

anticipation of the festival dates. Vidhi Mittal, owner of Beads & Beyond, a jewellery brand, has been a part of JLF's "Festival Bazaar" for three years now, and designs a line especially for the event. Tarang Arora, creative director of the popular Amrapali Jewels, says his business sees a "30% spurt just in these five days". At his cocktail party held to coincide with JLF, the eclectic crowd includes designers, film stars, authors and politicians, all gathered to "celebrate Jaipur, its art and culture, and JLF", says Arora.

The place to be

According to Sanjjoy Roy, Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, the entertainment company that produces and organises JLF, perhaps the biggest success of the event is the fact that since it began, over 60 literary festivals have sprung up in the country, with many of them pushing the format, trying new things, experimenting with scale, style and ideas. "Today, every city in India hopes to have a festival like JLF," he says. But how much sway do books and reading hold in the face of ever-diminishing attention spans and screen addiction?

Ananth Padmanabhan, CEO, HarperCollins India, says the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a "forced tipping point" for literature festivals in India. "People were forced to stay home, and many of them turned to books," he says. With the number of readers growing, the pull of lit fests is stronger than ever. "People go to meet their favourite authors, watch some of the biggest stars perform, and in the age of social media, it becomes a place to be seen at," says Ananth Padmanabhan. Evidently, this change is also reflected in the programming of literature festivals, which now includes life coaches and chefs, performing artists and actors. "We think about the curation a lot, and we ensure that everything is connected. It doesn't necessarily have to be about a book, but it shouldn't become just a *tamasha*," says

Nirmala Lakshman, Chairperson, *The Hindu* Group, and Director and Curator, *The Hindu* Lit Fest.

While a handful of these are large-scale festivals (two, for instance, are run by media groups – *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, several others are smaller events exploring specific themes – for instance, the Crime Literature Festival in Dehradun, which debuted last year, or the Bengaluru-based Neev Literature Festival for children, which is very popular with young parents. The Ooty Literature Festival, last October, put the spotlight on the ecological importance of the Nilgiri Biosphere and diverse communities. For some like the Shillong Literary Festival (SLF), the State and its issues become the foundation of both the festival and its curations.

Every such festival adds to the personality of the host city. "From the intimacy of *The Hindu* Lit Fest and the Hyderabadi Literature Festival, which makes it easy to meet people, to the buzzing and active JLF to the well-organised Kolkata Literary Meet, which has the stunning Victoria Memorial as its backdrop, each festival has a character that is unique and must be retained," says Mukund Padmanabhan.

And while there's no comparison with the footfall of an event like JLF, most of the other festivals too have found their target audience. Just like authors, literature enthusiasts too complete their "festival circuit". "We have people coming from Bengaluru, Coimbatore and other places regularly. At this year's festival, a woman from Madurai came up to me and said that she has attended seven editions of *The Hindu* Lit Fest," says Lakshman. "And visitors are okay with the fact that the sessions are not necessarily only about books – it's about ideas and about putting in words life's experiences. We are looking at a wider understanding of what the literature festival is all about."

Of course, running a literature festival is not without its challenges. Roy speaks about how, once the footfall at JLF grew, ticketing the event became a necessity to manage the numbers. And then, so did moving the venue from heritage property Digg Palace to Clarks Amer. "One of the basic agendas we started with was to create value for built heritage," he says. Post its 11 years, Digg Palace is a 4-star luxury heritage hotel with room rates starting at roughly ₹7,000 for a night's stay. It was once a hostelry letting out rooms and beds for ₹70 per night. "Many heritage hotels have taken from the success story of Digg Palace," says Roy.

Doing the circuit

Increasingly, it's not unusual for an author to do the "festival circuit" – plan their trip around one big stop, usually the JLF, and catch, before and after it, the other literary events during what is often referred to as "festival season" (October to February).

Mukund Padmanabhan, former editor of

QQ

Keep the issues, the concerns, the aspirations of the city and the State's populace in mind to ensure that the festival is not disconnected from the people

MARY THERESE KURKALANG
Curator, Shillong Literary Festival



BOOKS, SELFIES AND GELATO IN GALLE

Sri Lanka's popular destination literary festival signalled an openness to spotlighting sensitive issues of the day

Meera Srinivasan
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If anyone visiting Sri Lanka's Galle city this January needed a reality check on the extent of the island's recovery after its crippling 2022 crisis, the *thaenbilli* (king coconut) offered it. The popular thirst quencher that would have cost a few dozens of rupees a couple of years ago, is now priced at LKR 200 (approx. ₹54).

"Is anything reasonably priced in this country now?" the middle-aged seller asks me, shutting down any bargaining attempt. While scores of citizens like him grapple with the after-effects of dramatic inflation, the country is desperate to welcome more tourists this year to boost its foreign exchange reserves.

The Galle Literary Festival, held from January 25 to 28 in the charming city located on Sri Lanka's southwestern coast, drew many visitors who had missed both, the country's calming beaches and its vibrant literary scene. The timing got even better with Sri Lankan writer Shehan Karunatilaka winning the Booker Prize in 2022. The coveted award brought much-needed cheer to a country reeling under a crushing financial meltdown, while turning the international spotlight on Sri Lankan writing again.

"Galle Fort is alive, the sun is out, and we have been having very stimulating conversations," says Karunatilaka, who attended the festival that has resumed after a break, owing to the pandemic and Sri Lanka's economic crisis. "What a

turbulent history we have had in the last few years... the constitutional crisis [2018], Easter Sunday attacks [2019], the pandemic, then the economic collapse and everything that followed. I think this is a positive sign that Sri Lanka is slowly rebuilding, there is a lot of rebuilding to be done," he says.

Date with history
The centuries-old – and delightfully functional – fort city and its ramparts had scores of tourists, both foreign and local, during the weekend of the literary festival. While some visitors were busy session-hopping, others were simply walking around, as one does around Galle Fort, taking frequent gelato breaks and more frequent selfies.

Built by the Portuguese in the 16th century, and fortified by the Dutch in the 17th century – they preceded British colonialism on the island – the fort has remained a favourite tourist hotspot. In this cosy city down south, Sri Lanka's colonial history, a diehard Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist

political base, and foreign visitors co-exist peacefully, in the confines of their respective bubbles. In its eclectic itinerary, this edition of the festival sought to showcase the island's history, not only in the literary space, but also in food and the arts, featuring prominent speakers from the region and elsewhere.

A sense of community
Notably, it included screenings of films on themes such as mass graves in Sri Lanka, and the people's movement that dislodged President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2022, signalling the event's openness to featuring politically sensitive topics, in its ambit of prose, verse, food, heritage and art trials. In a powerful collaboration, local theatre groups Mind Adventures and Stages presented *Letters from Gaza* in a poetry reading session, reminding the audience of the most compelling humanitarian question of our times.

Putting together a literary festival, that too after a break, is not easy. Many from the past organising teams – the festival began in 2007 – have moved on and some of the key partners and sponsors are no more involved, says festival director Giselle Harding. "But we are not starting from scratch on all fronts. We know we have a fabulous reputation and people are very excited to have us

back." It is the "best of both worlds", in her view, as the festival, while retaining a captive audience, is also drawing new voices. "I see this edition as a new beginning after the break stalled the festival's momentum. Each literary festival is unique and as far as GLF is concerned, the location adds so much character – there are so many venues within and around the fort that come alive with various events," says Ameena Hussein, writer and co-founder of the Colombo-based Perera Hussein Publishing House. Having been to literature festivals in Pakistan, Malaysia,

Fresh views Visitors to Galle Literary Festival on a tour of the 16th century Galle Fort; and (above) guests taking a breather. (GALLE LITERATURE FESTIVAL)



Watch Authors and visitors share their experience at the Galle Literary Festival on magazine.thehindu.com

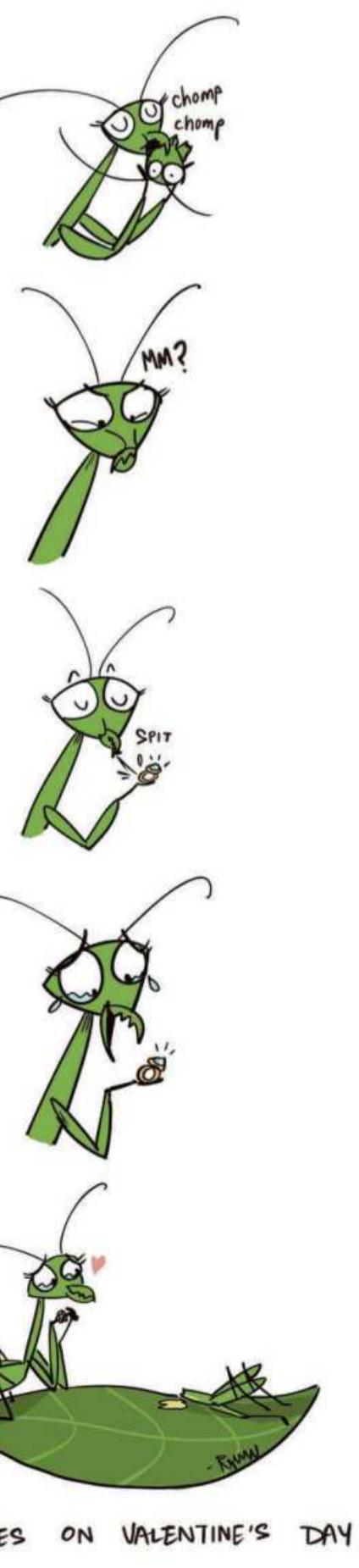


Meera Srinivasan
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GREEN HUMOUR

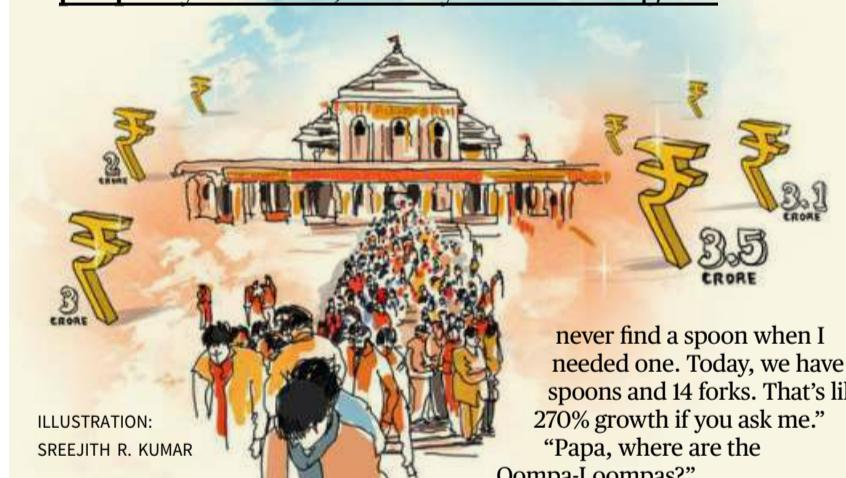
Rohan Chakravarty



ALLEGEDLY

Missed the Ayodhya bus?

Going to Kashi next week to invest in prime property. After all, money is also a religion'



never find a spoon when I needed one. Today, we have 13 spoons and 14 forks. That's like 270% growth if you ask me."

"Papa, where are the Oompa-Loompas?"

"Just getting to them," I said. "If only your mother would stop interrupting."

"Go on," she said. "I won't interrupt."

"The Indian economy," I resumed, "is better placed than ever. Average real income of the people has increased by 50%."

"So your income increased by 50% and you never told me?" Wife lowered her book again. "Where is all the money?"

"Chacha Choudhury?" he asked. "No, the Interim Budget," I said. "Does it have Oompa-Loompas?" "Absolutely," I said. "Shall we start?" He nodded, and I began reading.

"People are living better and earning better, with even greater aspirations for the future. Net Financial Assets of households increased from 52.8% of GDP in December 2019 to 65.5% of GDP in March 2023. The..."

"Wait a minute," Wife said, looking up from her Margaret Atwood. "Net household assets increased? Are you kidding?"

"It's not me, it's our PM," I said. "And she is right. I don't like anyone contradicting her, and neither does she."

"Tell me how our household assets have increased in the last 10 years," she said.

"They have," I said. "In 2014, I clearly remember our kitchen had only five spoons and seven forks. I could

"I told you 10 years ago, when Modiji won election. I said 'Buy a plot

in Ayodhya'. Did you listen? Sonna petchi kettiy?"

"Really, Amma?" Wife asked. "You told him that in 2014?"

"Ask your husband," Amma said.

"You know what he said to me? He said one should not mix religion with personal finance."

"Haaww!" Wife said, one hand over her mouth, exactly like emoji.

"Now all those fellows who mixed religion with personal finance are laughing their way to the bank," Amma went on. "While you are sitting here crying that you are below average."

Amma's advice was not the only time fortune knocked on my door. Some years ago, a couple of our RWA uncles, Mishraji and Vermaji, had asked me if I'd like to join them on a trip to Ayodhya. I didn't show much interest, thinking it was a pilgrimage tour. Only later did I learn they had gone to buy property.

"It was a religious pilgrimage only," Mishraji insisted, when I asked him about it last week. "Money is also a religion, no?"

Mishraji proudly informed me that a piece of land he had purchased in February 2019 for ₹15 lakh was now worth ₹3.5 crore.

"You are joking," I said. Then he showed me a screenshot of the sale deed, and all my hair fell off in envy.

"If I go to Ayodhya tomorrow," I said, "will I find anything affordable to invest, or is it too late?"

"Prices have shot up by 900% in the last few months," said Vermaji, who owns a plot right next to Amitabh Bachchan's in a 7-star enclave that's under development.

"Especially after consecration, prices have gone up like shooting stars," Mishraji said.

"Shooting stars generally go down," I pointed out, but he didn't hear me.

"We were the first," Mishraji went on. "But we are every Ganpat, Bhoopat and Sampath wants to buy land in Ayodhya."

"Have I missed the Ayodhya bus then?"

"Don't worry," Mishraji said. "If one comes."

"Forget Ayodhya," Vermaji said.

"What do you mean?"

"We are going to Kashi next week to offer prayers," Mishraji said. "Like to join us?"

"Bet your Oompa-Loompas I do!"

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

Premiering on Valentine's Day, *Love Storiyaan* began as an Instagram page to celebrate relationships outside the norm; and is now an OTT series

Karishma Upadhyay

Rahul Banerjee first saw Subhadra Khaperde at a Narmada Bachao Andolan rally in 1991. It was love at first sight for the IIT (Kharagpur) graduate, who had decided to work for the rights of the Adivasi community in Madhya Pradesh. After months of wooing, Subhadra too fell in love with Rahul. Two years later, when the couple decided to tie the knot, neither of their families approved because she is a Dalit Neo-Buddhist activist and he, a Hindu Brahmin.

Subhadra and Rahul's story is one of six that features on Amazon Prime Video's Valentine's Day offering, *Love Storiyaan*. Produced by Dharmatic Entertainment, this anthology is inspired by India Love Project, a social media initiative by journalists Priya Ramani, Samar Halarnkar and Niloufer Venkatraman that celebrates love outside the shackles of religion, caste, ethnicity and gender.

Somen Mishra, who heads Dharmatic's creative development and has conceptualised the show, briefly toyed with the idea of *Love*



SIX LESSONS IN LOVE

Storiyaan being a fictional show but then decided against it. "There have been quite a few anthologies already, and I think it's more exciting to feature real people who have fought against the odds," he says. It was an inspired choice for Mishra, given how impactful and heart-warming the final product has turned out to be.

Not adding the razzle-dazzle of fictional storytelling has allowed *Love Storiyaan* to stay true to its emotional core. It's not just the narrative choice though, it's also the selection of storytellers. The six directors – Akshay Indikar, Archana Phadke, Collin D'Cunha, Hardik Mehta, Shazia Iqbal and Vivek Soni – all share something in common with the real-life protagonists. "We wanted the stories to resonate with

each of them," says Mishra. Marathi filmmaker Akshay Indikar, for instance, had an intercaste marriage and is from the Dalit community. For him, Subhadra and Rahul's story is not just about them finding each other, it also highlights their passion for a cause. "They have dedicated their lives to the upliftment of others. I wanted to document their struggles and strength," says Indikar, whose last film *Sthalpuran*, a tender tale of an eight-year-old coping with change, premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2020.

Crossing borders
Having experienced the 'othering' that follows when someone marries



New frontiers Stills from *Love Storiyaan*; (below) directors Collin D'Cunha and Hardik Mehta. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



out of their religion, both in her immediate and extended families, award-winning director Shazia Iqbal immediately gravitated towards the Sahas, a Kolkata-based couple in their 70s, who met and fell in love during the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in 1971. "They had to cross borders and leave behind their families just to be together and yet they aren't bitter. That's what fascinated me about them," she says. "We travelled with them to Bangladesh, where they were returning after years to meet their



families. Farida's brother Bachu was still very angry with her [for having married a Hindu] and didn't want to meet her." Understandably, there was a lot of apprehension about visiting Bachu's home but once the brother-sister started talking, there wasn't a dry eye in the room.

What Archana Phadke, an alumna of the Berlinale Talent campus and a National Award winner, came away with after telling the story of Dhanya Ravindran and Homayon Khoram was that 'love is strength'. Dhanya is from Kerala, while Homayon is from Afghanistan, and they fell in love when studying in Moscow. "Most love stories we see on screen end with marriage. Sustaining a marriage takes a lot of work and resilience, even when it's within the same community," says Phadke. Through their marriage spanning two decades, the couple has overcome many obstacles, including eking out a living in war-torn Afghanistan.

On the surface, Aekta Kapoor and Ullekh N.P.'s life is a typical North Indian-meets-South Indian story. And, director Hardik Mehta knew a thing or two about marriage that crosses borders. "Mine is also a love marriage that involved a bunch of Gujaratis travelling for two days in the Sabarmati Express to Lucknow," he says. What was different was that Mehta had his family's approval. "In India, marriages aren't just about two people wanting to spend the rest of their lives together. It's about families coming together." In Aekta and Ullekh's case, the antagonists were the former's two daughters

from an earlier marriage. "It was interesting how the couple won over the young girls," says Mehta.

Rivals to lovers

Chronicling the love story of Nicholas J. Kharmani and Rajani K. Chhetri was emotional for Vivek Soni, who co-wrote and directed the Sanya Malhotra-starrer *Meenakshi Sundareswar* (2021). Nicholas and Rajani are Shillong-based radio jockeys who first spoke to each other over an on-air prank. "They used to work at rival stations and an avid listener brought them together," says Soni. Spending days with the crew meant that when Rajani and Nicholas finally sat down in front of the camera, no subject – commitment-phobia, disapproving parents, different religions and even addiction – was off the table. "They just opened up. There was so much that I hadn't even thought of that came up in our conversations," says Soni.

Kolkata residents Tista Das and Dipan first met in 2017 at a helpline for trans persons in Kolkata. Dipan had travelled from his home in Assam seeking help with a gender reassignment surgery. Three years later, their union made history-ofsorts as the first rainbow marriage between two transgender individuals in West Bengal. "So much of Tista and Dipan's early life went in finding themselves and learning to love who they are. Finding someone who'd love them was a very distant dream for both. Theirs is a story that is so life-affirming and transformative," says director Collin D'Cunha.

The film journalist is the author of *Parveen Babi: A Life*.

GOREN BRIDGE

Thinking man's play

North-South vulnerable,
North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a team competition. Both tables reached this excellent four-heart contract. The only thing required for success was to hold the trump suit to one loser. That would be routine if the trumps split 3-2 and would be no problem on a 4-1 split if the queen or the nine were

singleton, or if East held the trump length. The only real danger was the unlikely possibility that West started with the Q-9-x-x of hearts. That is exactly what the two declarers had to deal with. Could either declarer overcome it?

At both tables, West cashed two high diamonds and shifted to his singleton club, which both declarers won with dummy's ace. The first declarer led the

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

The bidding:

NORTH 1♣
EAST Pass
SOUTH 1♥
WEST 2♦
3♣ All pass

Opening lead: Ace of ♦

ace, king and jack of hearts to West's queen. West exited with a spade to dummy's ace and declarer had to find a way back to his hand. He tried ruffing a club with the eight of

hearts, but West over-ruffed with the nine to defeat the contract. The second declarer gave it a bit more thought. He took the time to cash the ace of spades before

leading the ace, king and jack of hearts to West's queen. Instead of discarding clubs, declarer discarded the king and queen of spades from dummy. Now when West won with the queen of hearts, he could not prevent declarer from getting back to his hand. Either a spade or a diamond would allow South to win the trick in his hand and draw the last trump. Nicely played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

February 11 | The International Day of Women and Girls in Science

Betty Ashley

1 Caroline Herschel was born in 1750, got immersed in astronomy and recorded observations meticulously. This was the basis for the New General Catalogue, by which celestial bodies are identified to this day. She discovered 14 new nebulas, 8 comets and 561 new stars. This prompted King George III to employ her. Herschel became the first of what in the history of science?

2 This woman grew up in a part of Poland controlled by Russia, where women were not allowed to have a higher education. She eventually moved to Paris, where she and her lab mate Pierre carried out their research. She eventually became the first person to win two Nobel Prizes, in two different fields, married Pierre and had a daughter with him, who also won a Nobel prize. Who was this path-breaking woman?

3 Rosalind Franklin was a British chemist who took a series of diffraction images in May 1952. Two Cambridge scientists took one of these images, and published it in a research



Brilliant mind Hedy Lamarr was one of the most famous actresses of the 'Golden Age' of Hollywood. (GETTY IMAGES)

Unfortunately, he passed away in 10 days. This tragic incident led Joshi to pursue a degree that eventually led to her becoming the first Indian woman in a certain profession. What profession did Joshi take up?

7 The 'Scully Effect' refers to the influence of a 90s fictional TV character on young girls. A scientific study showed that 68% of the girls who watched the show went on to have a career in Science (STEM). Even parents who viewed the show encouraged their daughters to take up STEM. In what television series did these girls see Scully in action?

8 In 1931, Janaki Ammal arguably became the first Indian woman to obtain a PhD in botany in the U.S. At that time, India was importing *Saccharum officinarum* from Papua New Guinea. Being a cytogeneticist, she crossbred hybrids till she created a high yielding strain of *Saccharum officinarum* that would thrive in Indian conditions. What commercially viable plant is she responsible for?

9 Fleeing a forced marriage with an

article without her consent. They won a Nobel prize, but failed to give her credit. This was responsible for the birth of biotechnology as we know it. What was this image of?

4 Isabella Bird was a Victorian adventurer who climbed mountains in Hawaii, rode through the Rocky Mountains in North America on horseback, took pictures of the countryside in Persia, Armenia and Turkey, and sailed a boat across China, Korea and Japan. She eventually came to India, where she founded a hospital in Srinagar, Kashmir. Subsequently, she had been fiercely male since 1830 had no option

but to elect her as a fellow. What society was this?

5 Mae C. Jemison did chemical engineering from Stanford University, before going on to get a medical degree from Cornell University. She subsequently served as a mission specialist on the Space Shuttle Endeavour in 1992, making her the first African-American woman to travel into space. She is also the only actual astronaut to have appeared on a highly popular science fiction show on TV. What show was this?

6 Anandi Gopal Joshi was just 14 years of age when she gave birth to her first child.

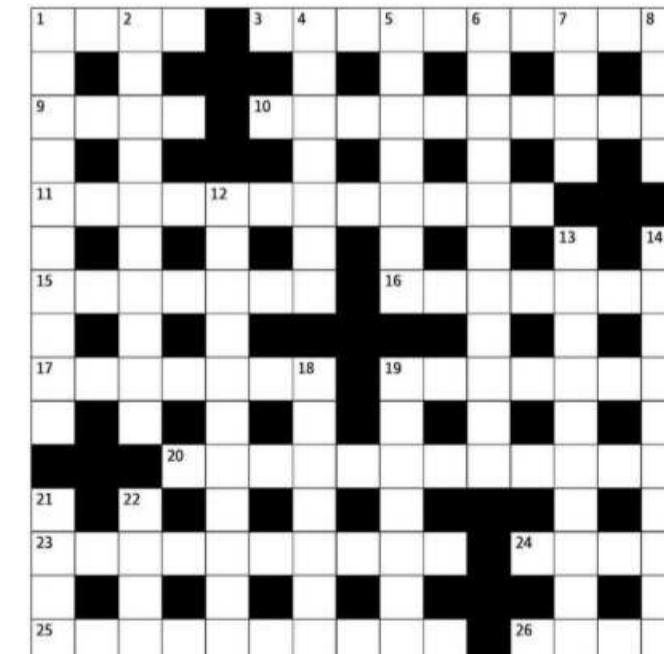
Austrian ammunition manufacturer, Hedy Lamarr became a famous actress in Hollywood. Subsequently, she helped develop a revolutionary frequency hopping technology that helped circumvent radio jamming by the Axis powers during World War II. This directly led to what communication technologies found in all our phones today?

10 Judith Love Cohen was an electrical engineer working on an important computer program called the 'Abort Guidance System'. She was pregnant at the time, but she kept working on the program, solved the issue and was subsequently taken to the hospital, where she delivered a baby boy: the actor and musician Jack Black. If Black was born on August 28, 1969, what was the name of the project Cohen was working on?

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'. @bettyashley

10. Apollo 11 moon landing systems
9. Bluetooth, WiFi and GPS com.
8. Sugarcane
7. The X-Files
6. First woman doctor in India
5. Star Trek
4. Royal Geographical Society
3. Marie Curie astrophysicist
2. First professional female
1. First professional female

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3293



Across

- 5 Contemptible sort oversees conveniences for motorists (but not residents) (3,4)
- 6 What may be seen all around Lancashire? (11)
- 7 Everyman had to take on assistant, one dealing with email etc (4)
- 8 Nightingale's wings in site of literary murder (4)
- 12 Fidgety recluse agog, seeing Hollywood big-shot (6,5)
- 13 Had fun? Noted (10)
- 14 Gentle swab for treatment somewhere in India (4,6)
- 18 Guide is glib, high-flying type (7)
- 19 A printmaker has these urges (7)
- 21 Lamb and Teddy regularly tucked up (4)
- 22 Sport unleashing mammoth opponents, primarily? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3292



Down

- 1 Dresses cut outrageously – for this one? (10)
- 2 Duke included in inquiry about health? The nerve! (3,4,3)
- 4 Carries out belongings (7)

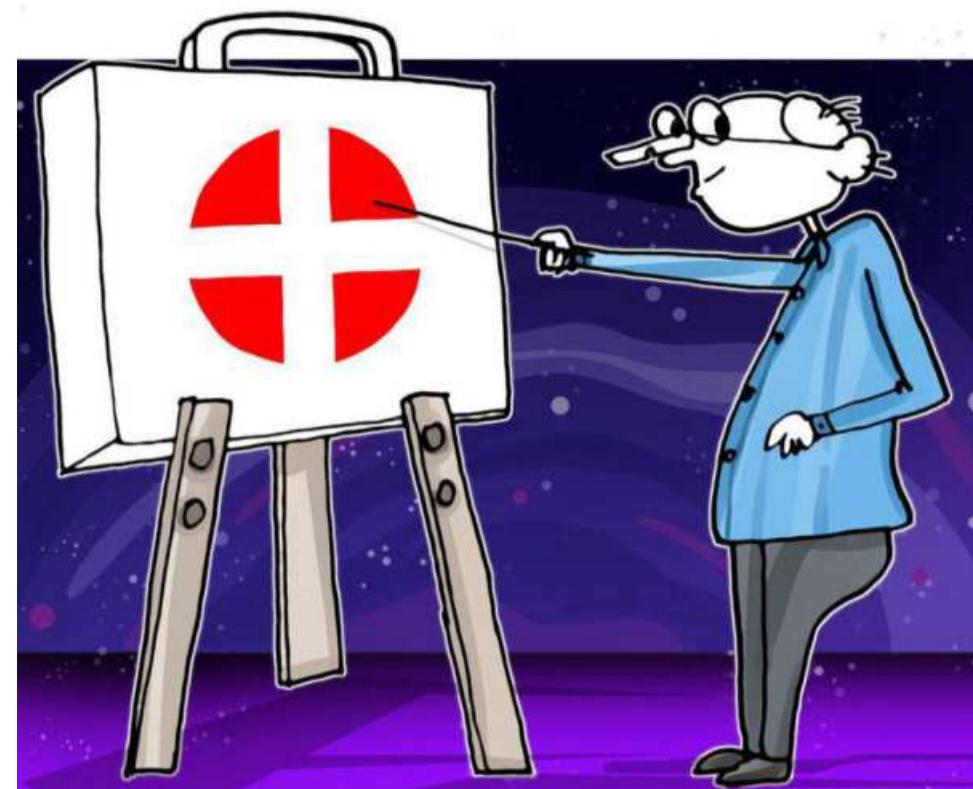


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R KUMAR

**Tharsni M.**
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In a bustling market scene, envision a middle-aged man suddenly collapsing due to a heart attack, leaving the surrounding crowd in shock. While onlookers suggest administering CPR, the harsh reality is that no one in the vicinity really knows this life-saving technique.

The knowledge of basic first aid is present, but the practical application is lacking, highlighting a critical gap in our education system.

According to the 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India' report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a staggering 32,457 individuals succumbed to heart attacks in 2022, marking a significant increase from the 28,413 deaths recorded the previous year. Accidental deaths are on the rise in India, with snakebites alone claiming 45,000–50,000 lives annually, as reported by the Journal of the Association of Physicians of India (JAPI). With such alarming statistics, the question arises: isn't it time to incorporate life-saving lessons into the school curriculum?

The argument is not to undermine traditional subjects like mathematics, science, or humanities but to emphasise that education should extend beyond theoretical knowledge. What purpose does education serve if it fails to equip individuals with the skills to save lives in critical situations? Introducing emergency first aid lessons in schools, covering topics such as first aid for snakebites, identifying strokes, and performing CPR, can play a

Mobile distress

As new gadgets and technology have brought on an age of hyper-connectivity, we should strive to be safe while driving

Viji Narayan

These days every time I go out, I see someone or the other driving a motorbike while talking on the mobile phone, balancing it between the face and shoulder. What is there to communicate that cannot wait a few minutes?

I have great admiration for all the techies in this world, which includes our dear Alexander Graham Bell who invented the phone. How connected we are today in every sense of the word! Distances have shrunk. My children living in European lands hardly seem away from me. London rains and Swedish snow have become very normal these days. I experience their weather sitting in my cozy Coimbatore home with the sun beaming on me. For someone in her 60s, who grew up without a television or a computer, these technological developments are indeed magical. The telegram used to be the fastest mode of communication those days. My father who was a businessman used to get an average of 15 telegrams a day!

We always had a telephone at home. But making a long distance call was not easy. You had to book a call and wait in queue till the people from the telephone exchange would connect your call. As a businessman who had his associates in African countries, my father used to get calls from those countries after 2 a.m., and it would continue till the wee hours. My mother had named our phone her black villain that regularly disrupted her sleep. Later came the STD days, when one could make a call to any place by dialing its code, followed by the phone number. Yes, we have come a long way. But this doesn't mean you should attempt those juggling tricks with your mobile phone while driving. Better civic sense will make for safer roads.

My small wonder

How a two-week holiday seemed like a day with my precocious little granddaughter

S.V. Raman
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When our three-year-old granddaughter (GD) from overseas came to spend a fortnight with my wife and me, we had no clue about its impact, such as the drastic changes to our daily routine. Our daily chores, afternoon nap, badminton time and a whole lot of other things went for a toss. She also made us think on many things that we ignored or never questioned.

For example, one of my routines included drying washed clothes on the terrace. This used to take about half an hour. With GD tagging along with me, hiding the clips, and demanding that the many

pillars should be put into use to play hide-and-seek, the duration of the task doubled. GD, like all other children her age, was full of questions, sometimes even offering solutions, playing unexpected roles, and in the process, unearthing many surprises.

Watching cows
One morning, I took her to a cow shed nearby. While watching it being tethered, listening to the sound of milk hitting the collection vessel, she asked, like a physicist would: "Thatha, why does the sound keep changing as the container gets filled?" Later, when she noticed the cow urinating bucketloads on the ground and soiling the floor, like a marketeer looking for new applications for an existing



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

product, she suggested, "Ask that uncle to fit a diaper to the cow."

Another day, I got her a bottle of soap solution and a ring that produced bubbles. She quickly learnt how to blow them, and asked me like a scientist, "How come the colourless liquid becomes colourful bubbles?" When I answered that it was called 'Raman Effect', she exclaimed "Oh Thatha, you are awesome!"

One evening, while playing in a garden, I pointed out a centipede and observed that it had about 100 legs. She, like a

budding entomologist, demanded that I catch it and count the legs.

Her favourite pastime was singing 'happy birthday' every day to her parents and then to us. Once, during our evening stroll, a street dog, noticing her as a stranger, snarled at her. While I panicked, GD instinctively, sang 'happy birthday to you, doggy' in a soft and melodious tone. And then the unbelievable happened - the dog started to wag its tail.

During one of our walks to a public garden, I, like most Indian men, was walking ahead, while GD was holding her paatti's hand, and following me. Suddenly, she shouted, "Thatha, stop!" I halted, alarmed. She came up to me and demanded that I "hold paatti's hand and walk", as that's the etiquette. With a lot of hesitancy and embarrassment I obeyed her. GD smiled. I felt good for two reasons.

The two weeks passed in a jiffy. But my memories of GD will linger forever.

Fresh beginnings

As 2024 moves on, here's hoping everyone has a good year

Lakshmi Sundaram
drsgsundaram@yahoo.com

The Northeast monsoon beat a retreat in the month of December in Chennai, and people were finally free from the hassle of water-logging on roads that had caused vehicles and pedestrians to sink in water.

With the announcement of music

and dance festivals by various sabhas, people started preparing to get drenched again, this time in music. Ragas like Kalyani and Sankarabharanam, rendered by eminent musicians, reverberated across the city. Ragas like Thodi and Bairavi really enlivened my spirit. What an experience for me and many others to welcome the New Year in a music hall, while wishing each



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

other Happy New Year.

This was only for a small part of the

population. Many celebrated New Year's Eve at home; others did so in hotels or at parties.

2024 is also a leap year, so one more day for the year, and hopefully extra prosperity for the country. We also pray for a world full of peace, free of present tensions.

The beginning of this year also brought Pongal, the harvest festival, and we hoped for a bountiful harvest. We also worship our animals on this occasion. Rains are important too; but anything like the recent rains we had will wash away all spirit and joy. Let us hope for sunshine in everybody's life in 2024.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Sports should be the medium to foster cordial relationships between countries, and shouldn't become a blanket to cover atrocities carried out by the government. ('Saudi Arabia and the politics of sportswashing'; Feb. 4) Sportswashing can only be eradicated by sportspersons themselves, by denying the overtures of unjust governments. **Viveka Vardhan Naidu**
Bhyrupudi

original betrayers'; Feb 4). Most significantly, the author accuses Nehru of prepossessed hostility towards Muslims during the 1948 police action in Hyderabad. An infant state trying to protect nascent democracy, especially after witnessing post-Partition conflagrations, has an innate compulsion to preserve cohesion, and prevent balkanisation. The author should take factors like these into account.

T.K.C. Arunachalam

Saudi Arabia may spend billions to organise international matches. But real development hinges on the freedom and peace of its people. Saudi rulers should ponder over Confucius' words: 'What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.'

S. Ramakrishnasayee

Once money began chasing sports, earnings have become the primary motivator for sportspersons. Saudi Arabia saw an excellent opportunity to redeem itself by splurging millions of dollars. And the sportspersons, dazzled by the power of big money, are neglecting to the new finance king.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Once the new finance king started to wag its tail.

Ira Khan's wedding is a true testament to the values of contemporary relationships. As the images reveal, Amir Khan's open friendship with his ex-wives makes him a real star.

Deepak Taak

British writers of South Asian descent is a large and rich category. ('Desi girls can be messy too'; Feb. 4) The names of Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie quickly come to mind. Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi is a welcome addition to the above.

Narendra Dani

Elite politics At the outset, I am shocked at the bias in this account of history. ('The

While zooming to the top, Leena Nair broke several glass ceilings with flourish, and, despite the pitfalls that came her way, she has reached an enviable position in a highly competitive industry. ('So talented, should have been a boy'; Feb. 4) She is an inspiration to women across the world.

C.V. Aravind

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The clever crow

The bird would limp up and down until I threw something on the porch.

Buddhadev Nandi

Studying under kerosene lamps

Nostalgia about a fact of life in the past decades

Kalvakuntla Sreelatha

The City of Joy

Missing Kolkata and its unique vibes

Koti Rajasekhar M

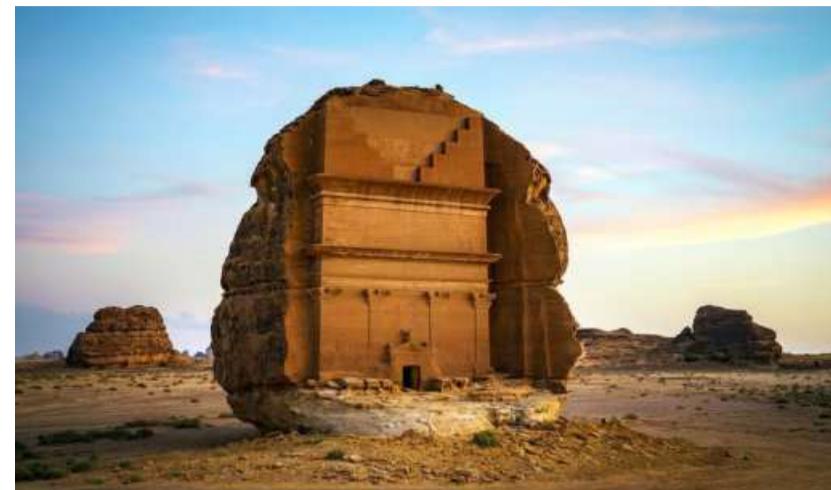
The Japanese way

How a collision and fire on a plane was contained without loss of lives

Kannan Balasubramaniam

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Immersive museums, historic digs and a heterogeneous workforce are helping pave the way as Saudi Arabia pivots from a carbon-based economy to a culture-focused one



REOPENING THE INCENSE ROAD

Prasad Ramamurthy

They had called it a 'vast open-air library' before we got there. But that hadn't quite prepared me for the sight of thousands of inscriptions carved into the sandstone surfaces of mountainsides in Jabal Ikmah, in Saudi Arabia's AlUla region. Names of kings and traders, their official proclamations and records of transactions, notes on rituals performed and messages from those who had travelled through. A bibliothèque of a bygone age, written in at least 10 distinct languages, including Nabataean, Arabic's precursor.

I had joined an international group of journalists and academics to see first-hand the archaeological sites that are being thrown open to tourists. Ruins of ancient settlements such as Dadan, Tayma and the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hegra. While it was interesting to hear about the millions being spent to build immersive on-site museums, it was far more fascinating to learn of the historic discoveries being made. For instance, as far back as the early first millennium BCE, these sites were linked by verdant oases giving



From the sands (Clockwise from above) Statues found in AlUla that bear similarity to Egyptian statues; a funerary monument in Hegra; a dig site in Dadan; monuments in Hegra; Wedad Al Yaseen; and a guide walking visitors through the restored Old Town of AlUla. (PRASAD RAMAMURTHY AND THE ROYAL COMMISSION FOR ALULA)



rise to influential agrarian kingdoms. And that these kingdoms controlled the trade along the Incense Road – the collective name given to a web of trade routes leading from southern Arabia, where frankincense was harvested, to the markets of Egypt, Rome and Mesopotamia.

AlUla's place in history

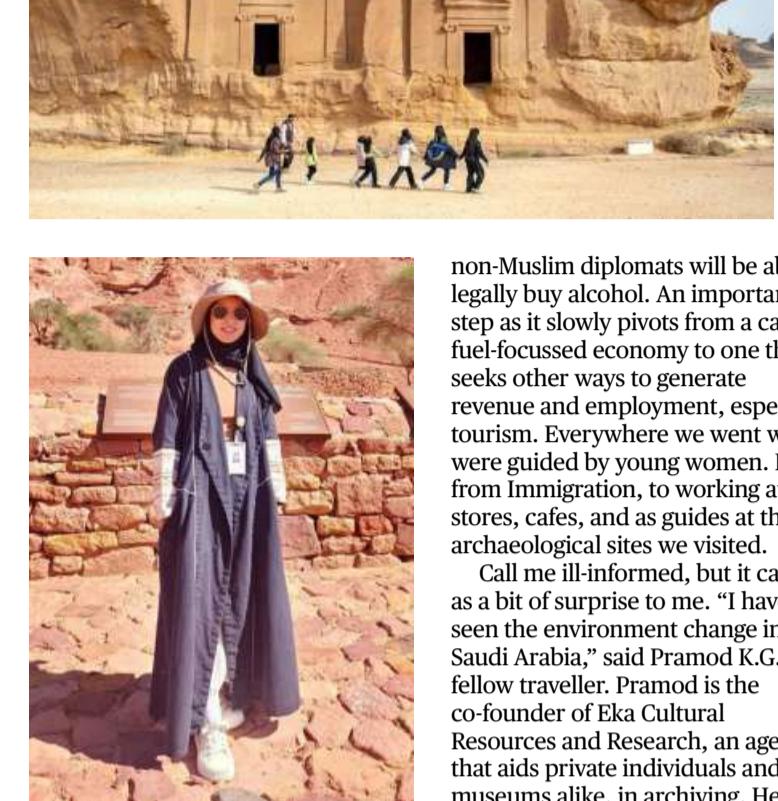
"Incense can be compared to oil in modern times. And so, the Incense Road was a major evolution in terms of trade and economy," said archaeologist Jérôme Rohmer, of the French National Center for Scientific Research as he walked us through an active dig site in Dadan that dates back to the 3rd millennium BCE. While in today's globalised economy incense might seem commonplace, back then, "thousands of temples burnt incense daily throughout the ancient world, from Italy to Egypt and Mesopotamia. So, the demand was huge but supply very limited". Which meant that those who controlled the trade – i.e. the Dadanites, and the Lihyanites and Nabataeans who followed them – became rich and powerful.

What's already been revealed through surveys and excavations is that this region of Arabia has been continuously inhabited since as far back as the Palaeolithic age, 200,000 BCE. But the most interesting bit is how, just like today,



in ancient times global trade had resulted in migration and the growth of heterogeneous societies. "We've discovered inscriptions in Minaean, a language spoken in ancient Yemen, 1,800 km south of here," said Rohmer. The inscriptions speak of a very large autonomous colony of south Arabian traders who lived in Dadan to manage the incense caravans. "We know these two populations practised the cults of each other, intermarried... The culture of Dadan was cosmopolitan."

One evening as the setting sun lit Hegra's monolithic Nabataean tombs in golden light, I asked Janina Ramirez what she made of everything we'd seen. Ramirez, a co-traveller, teaches history at Oxford and her documentaries stream on the BBC. "I cannot



3 things to know

AlUla is a north-western region of Saudi Arabia

Main sites: Dadan, Jabal Ikmah, Wadi AlNaam, Hegra

Key sights:

- Inscriptions in Jabal Ikmah
- Petroglyphs from 5,000 BCE showing ostriches in Wadi AlNaam
- Excavation of an old temple and the Lion Tomb in Dadan
- The Nabataean funerary monuments of Hegra

overemphasise how important the finds in AlUla are in terms of global history," she stated, emphatically. In her opinion, the discoveries push back the chronology of civilisation and relocate it outside of the established centres of Ancient Egypt, Greece and Persia. "Hegra, where niches were left open for visitors to honour their own deities, is a powerful reminder that cooperation between people of different cultures and beliefs have long been sought by the powerful and civilised."

More power to the women

All this, some would argue, was forgotten with the advent of Islam and the impact of colonialism. Change, though, is afoot in Saudi Arabia, which recently announced a relaxation in its alcohol sale policy –

non-Muslim diplomats will be able to legally buy alcohol. An important step as it slowly pivots from a carbon fuel-focussed economy to one that seeks other ways to generate revenue and employment, especially tourism. Everywhere we went we were guided by young women. Right from Immigration, to working at stores, cafes, and as guides at the archaeological sites we visited.

Call me ill-informed, but it came as a bit of surprise to me. "I have seen the environment change in Saudi Arabia," said Pramod K.G., a fellow traveller. Pramod is the co-founder of Elka Cultural Resources and Research, an agency that aids private individuals and museums alike, in archiving. He has been visiting Saudi Arabia over the past decade to work on a private collection. Indicating to one of our guides who'd driven off in her Honda sedan, he said: "The mobility of being able to drive has allowed an entire generation of women to go out and do their own thing. The other thing that I've noticed is the withdrawal of the compulsory hijab rule, which has meant that locals and visitors are perfectly free to wear what they want to wear."

On a sunny morning, our 28-year-old guide, Wedad Al Yaseen, pointed out the Lihyanite funerary chambers in Dadan, speaking eloquently about their history. The linguistics graduate was dressed in an embroidered coat thrown over an athleisure outfit. "We always knew these were ancient sites," she said. "But till recently we did not know how important they were. To me this site is not about our history, it's about human legacy."

What about modern Saudi Arabia's legacy, I posed, as we got ready to leave. Does she have an elevator pitch to those outside the kingdom? "We all have stereotypes about each other," she said, matter-of-factly. "I have thought of some places as being unsafe and have discovered I was wrong. So, I would say don't judge till you've seen for yourself." Fair enough.

The writer is based in Mumbai and reports on travel and culture

Proof of concept

Can art do more than build awareness around climate change?
This Delhi exhibition would like to find out



Thought-provoking
(Clockwise from right)
There Is No Such Thing Called Waste;
Living With The Land; and
Thukral & Tagra.

Nidhi Gupta

British Columbia in Canada is home to temperate coastal rainforests, some of the oldest growths of their kind on the planet. When Manjot Kaur, a contemporary artist who spends her time between Chandigarh and Vancouver, began to make excursions there some years ago, she was struck anew by the greenery. "I was born in Ludhiana, a very industrial, urban town in Punjab,"

says Kaur, one of three selected fellows at Sustaina India, a unique new art exhibition with a focus on raising climate awareness, at Bikaner House in New Delhi. "I lived in Vancouver for two years, and as soon as I started to venture into the forest, I realised that it was not just trees. We are in symbiosis with them, there is reciprocity."

Kaur's observations have manifested in *The Parliament of Forests*, a video installation that seeks to highlight the idea of nature having rights of its own. "The goal of

this project is to think about personhood for forests," says the artist.

Sustaina India's first art exhibition is the result of 18 months of conversations between the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), a New Delhi-based think tank, and the multi-disciplinary artists Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra. Born from the alarming research-based observation that eight out of 10 Indians now reside in districts vulnerable to extreme climate events, CEEW sought to fill



people and communities, without any tech involved".

The inter-connectedness of everything

In another room of Bikaner House, stands a part-mud, part-cement wall – artist Debasmita Ghosh's *Living With The Land*, an art installation that tracks the after-effects of switching from mud to industrial material for building houses in the Kondh community of Orissa.

Ghosh, who first ventured into this tribe's hamlet in 2018, knew there was not going to be any solutions or answers to the questions she was asking the community. "What we wanted to show was the process and the journey that the women of the community are taking: the impact, the transitions, their feelings about it – how this impacted different aspects of their lives."

Elsewhere, Mumbai-origin environmentalist and artist Rachna Toshniwal has draped a patchy fishing net over a table of what look like colourful tchotchkes, but are in fact an assortment of sculptural

objects fashioned from the waste she (and the women of Naari Shakti SHG) has collected on the beaches of Alibaug. Titled *There Is No Such Thing Called Waste*, the installation is about "transformation". "There is no waste in nature – everything gets recycled," says Toshniwal. The essence of the work is to remind ourselves of that interconnectedness; but also to "restore dignity to that material that we discard, that the ocean gives back".

Heed the message
Thukral & Tagra have been preoccupied with climate change for a good eight years now, and continue to feel compelled to "create a system or open-source programs to help people understand that there can be a shift and more sensitivity to this", as Tagra puts it. In the long run, they hope to see more mainstream conversation around climate change by pushing it in major fora, such as the India Art Fair, and in galleries and museums, both in terms of conception as well as the final message.

But can artistic practice do more than build awareness around the urgency of climate change? "As painters, we understand that poetic expression can be one aspect of this, the other aspect is problem-solving and exercise." But their experience as artists and curators at platforms such as Sustaina India leaves them hopeful. "I think we in the art world can offer proof of concept," concludes Tagra.

Sustaina India is on till February 15.

The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai.