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For an international audience (Clockwise from below) Tarun Tahiliani working on Team India's outfits; India's official Olympics uniform; and designer Tahiliani. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



PARIS OLYMPICS 2024 DRESSED TO REPRESENT INDIA

With National Handloom Day approaching, and in light of Team India's official Olympic outfits attracting flak, designers weigh in on the challenges of creating ceremonial uniforms

Sohini Dev

If the Olympics is one of the world's biggest sporting events, its opening ceremony is its crowning glory. On Friday, the 2024 Paris edition took things up more than a few notches. The first Games to have the curtain raiser outside a stadium, it saw almost 100 boats carrying an estimated 10,500 athletes down the Seine. The quays became spectator stands while the sun reflected off famous Parisian landmarks. And with all eyes on the global fashion capital, everyone was a fashion critic.

Dressing any national contingent for the occasion is a flex. Top designers, luxury houses and sportswear brands vie for the honour. 2024's lineup of uniform-makers included Ralph Lauren for the United States, Berluti for France, Emporio Armani for Italy, and Lululemon for Canada, among others. For the 117 athletes of Team India, it was Tarun Tahiliani, the New Delhi-based couturier, via Tasva, the premium affordable menswear label launched by him and Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail Ltd. (ABFRL).

India has not had the most shining track record when it comes to dressing up for the ceremony – the team relies on traditional dressing with little



designer flair or major crafts showcase. With Tasva taking on a sponsorship role, this edition was the first time that a designer created the ceremonial uniforms.

Part of the first generation of Indian fashion, Tahiliani has underpinned his nearly 30-year career with experiments in a distinctive India Modern aesthetic. A master of sculpting and draping, he applies Swarovski crystals and lamé on his luxurious designs with the same flair as brocades, *chikankari* and *zari* embroidery. In 2021, as part of a joint venture with ABFRL, he launched Tasva (now with nearly 75 outlets) – offering weavers the kind of supply and price points that wouldn't be possible had everything been handwoven or hand-embroidered, and giving customers the Tahiliani experience at as less as ₹1,599. It's not something many designers can boast of.

Missed opportunities

Last month, when Mansukh Mandaviya, Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, unveiled the Olympics official outfits, the designer was in attendance, along with IOA (Indian Olympic Association) president P.T. Usha, hockey players Jarmanpreet Singh and Nilakanta Sharma, and shooter Anjum Moudgil. Expectations were high, but the news did not travel much beyond



Balancing aesthetics with functionality, ensuring a proper fit for a diverse group of wearers, and maintaining high-quality standards are crucial for uniform design

RAGHAVENDRA RATHORE
The designer has created outfits for ITC Hotels, Umaid Bhawan Palace, and BSF



To make uniforms that are hardy, but also easy and comfortable, all while expressing the brand's values can be a challenging experience

DAVID ABRAHAM
One half of Abraham & Thakore, which has created uniforms for The Oberoi, Taj Group, and Vistara Airlines

the event.

Social media was mostly silent, until two weeks later when Team India's uniforms began to trend on X (formerly Twitter) after a user posted photos from the unveiling. Terms like 'tacky' and 'uninspired' were used. The images being juxtaposed with Team Mongolia's uniforms – artfully photographed and styled, as opposed to India's uniforms that were unimaginatively draped on mannequins – exacerbated the situation.

Since then, similar reactions have mushroomed across platforms. Some posted that the designs gave off an Independence Day school function vibe, while others stated that it was time "the heads realise that investing more time, money, and better resources is a necessity". Scale is a counter argument to make as to why Mongolia's uniforms were so intricately crafted. Designers Michel Choigaalaa and Amazonka Choigaalaa only

had to dress 32 athletes, and they could afford to spend hours on each uniform – with its ivory silhouettes inspired by the traditional *deel* (tunic), billowing sleeves, and embroidered vests with the sun, moon, and Gaa-Maral (mythical deer from Mongolian folklore).

In the weeks since, Tasva released new video content and images to showcase the garments, but the criticism has been hard to quell. Sports writer Sharda Ugra notes that while the "clunky presentation" did not make a good first impression for the garments, Tahiliani's uniforms will be worn IRL in a different setting. "This year's ceremony will be hosted in the daylight, as the sun doesn't set till very late in Paris in summer," she shared, a few days before the Games kicked off. "The athletes will be on boats on the Seine, and next to the flag, the uniforms may look different." The Indian contingent will wear the same uniforms to the closing and felicitation ceremonies.

Going beyond the blazer

India's uniforms for the Olympics have shown little evolution over the years. Men tend to wear blazers, *bandhgala*s or *sherwanis*, sometimes accompanied with a turban. Women wear saris, almost always with a blazer, which often does little apart from obscuring the rest of the ensemble. During the 2012 Olympics, many women athletes, including tennis player Sania Mirza, walked with their blazers folded over their arms, offering everyone a better view of their bright yellow saris. Even when the uniform for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics switched from sari to a *salwar* suit, the blazer remained.

Tasva's uniforms depart from these norms in many respects, including skipping the blazer. "When we did our research, we saw that prominent international designs were done to coordinate with the colours of their national flags," says Tahiliani, speaking of the tri-colour inspiration. "We have athletes from around the country, and ivory usually suits everybody." The *bandi* became the hero silhouette layered over a *kurta* set.

The process began in January, and Tahiliani notes there was no specific brief or guidelines from the IOA for the uniform's design. It was finalised following multiple iterations and feedback sessions; garments were crafted in stages as athletes qualified for various sports. Some qualifications continued well into June, and the Tasva team created a total of 300 uniforms for athletes and accompanying staff. "I did fittings thrice, and I was there for every meeting," says Tahiliani, responding to criticism that he did not spend enough time on the design and production.

Ugra says that many of the design elements make for a refreshing change, particularly the custom tussar gold brocade sneakers. The digitally printed tri-coloured *ikat* patterns have polarised opinion, but she observes that it can have a special appeal for its wearers. "The flag is very important to athletes, and they will feel proud to wear the tricolour on their uniforms."

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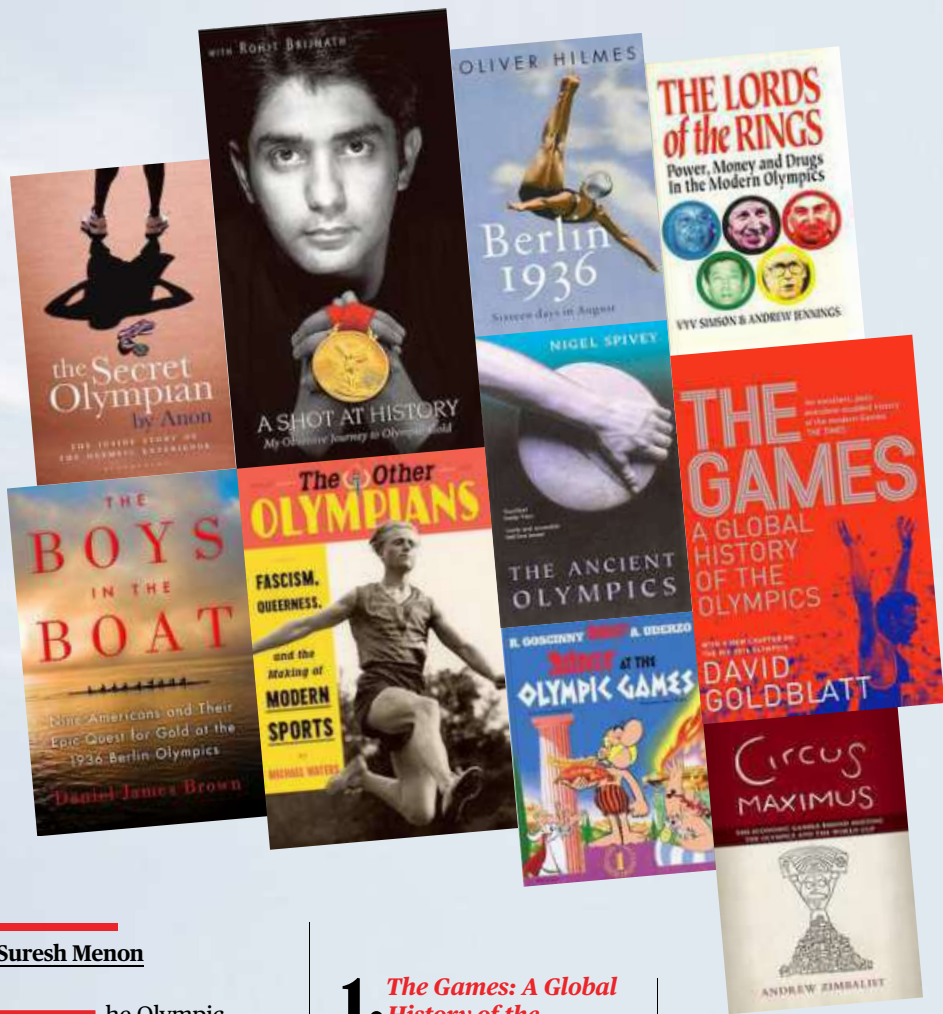
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There are fewer books on the Games than you think. Here are some keepers

10 BOOKS FOR AN OLYMPICS DEEP DIVE



Suresh Menon

The Olympic Games have not attracted writers in the manner individual Olympic sports have. That's not surprising. You can be a fan of golf (John Updike) or tennis (David Foster Wallace) or wrestling (John Irving) or boxing (Joyce Carol Oates) or football (Eduardo Galeano) and write about these with passion and insight. The Olympic canvas, however, is too large and too varied for that kind of writing. There has to be a necessary pruning. Books on the Olympic Games can be divided into: history (including books on specific Games like the 1960, 1896 or 1972 editions); biographies and autobiographies; the dark side of the Games; a single event or a theme (*The Dirtiest Race in History*, about the Johnson-Lewis 100m final); stories of overcoming the odds; the political and economic impact of the Games; and finally, fiction. For long, every four years, the standard reference was David Wallechinsky's *The Complete Book of the Olympics*, but the last edition was in 2016, and it hasn't found a successor. Here are some books on the Olympics you might enjoy:

- 1. *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics* (2016) by David Goldblatt**
An enjoyable read which by extension tells the story of the 20th and 21st centuries. The Olympics may be about sport; it is equally about politics and history, and is better understood in the larger context. The Games did not become a spectacle till the 1930s. In 1932, Los Angeles introduced the three-tiered podium, and national anthems. Four years later, in Berlin, came the torch relay. As the runners approached the stadium, they became "exclusively blond-haired and blue-eyed Aryans", says the author.
- 2. *Berlin 1936: Sixteen Days in August* (2016) by Oliver Hilmes**
An intriguing romp through 'Hitler's Games' with a wide cast of characters, and written in the form of a diary with novelistic flair. The research is extensive, and we learn of such transformations as that of the writer Thomas Wolfe who began as an admirer of the German state before

- turning sceptic. A final chapter detailing what became of those in the book is fascinating.
- 3. *A Shot At History* (2011) by Abhinav Bindra, with Rohit Brijnath**
A riveting book combining the inspiring tale of India's first gold medallist with the cautionary tale of India's officialdom where apathy is a guiding light. The book is the story of two journeys – one physical, to championships and training around the world, and the other internal, through self-doubt, self-awareness, and a zen-like acceptance of things as they are.
 - 4. *The Ancient Olympics* (2004) by Nigel Spivey**
An antidote to the over-romanticising of the modern Games with its relationship to the ancient ones. The notion of participation which is placed above winning is dispelled here by the all-encompassing obsession with winning. The word 'athletics' is derived from the Greek verb 'to struggle for a prize'. There was no prize for the runner-up. The Games were, Spivey says, "a notoriously squalid experience for athletes and spectators alike". Instructive and entertaining.

- 5. *The Other Olympians* (2024) by Michael Waters**
In 1935, one of Europe's most famous women athletes declared she was now a man. This history of sex and gender in the Olympics, of crude 'sex tests' – and the continuum till the present-day unsatisfactory ones – traces the evolution of what we like to think of as a modern issue. "Today many people understand that sex and gender are two separate categories: gender is a psychological and socialised identity, while sex is assigned, often at birth, based on your physical body," says the author.
- 6. *The Lords of the Rings: Power, Money, and Drugs in the Modern Olympics* (1992) by Vyv Simson and Andrew Jennings**
The title says it all.
- 7. *The Secret Olympian* (2012) by Anon**
Probably written by a member of Britain's squad at the Athens Olympics, it answers the questions many of us ask: what does it really mean to be an Olympian? A behind-the-scenes look at the Games. The Village isn't all that great. Yes, the condom machines ran out of stuff at Sydney, but

- only because they were free and athletes hoped to sell them as souvenirs when they got back home.
- 8. *The Boys in the Boat* (2013) by Daniel James Brown**
The inspiring story of working class boys growing up in the American Depression, finding solace in rowing and making it to the Olympics. And winning gold. One reviewer called it "Chariots of Fire with oars...". The movie appeared last year.
 - 9. *Circus Maximus* (2015) by Andrew Zimbalist**
Should India get serious about the 2036 bid? This study by a sports economist shows how we need to give it a second, third and fourth thoughts. Zimbalist asks: "Why should it be necessary to spend tens of billions of dollars to host an event to get hundreds of millions of dollars of worthwhile investment?"
 - 10. *Asterix at the Olympic Games* (1972) by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo**
Fiction. The magic potion is illegal, so how does Asterix win?
The writer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?.



That's so Mumbai

In *Maya Nagari*, editor-translators Shanta Gokhale and Jerry Pinto showcase Mumbai's glitz and grime in equal measure

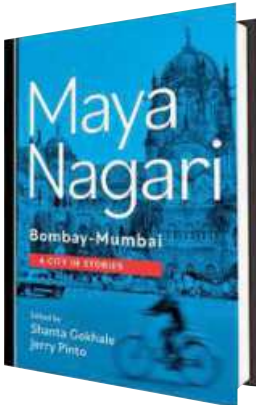
Janhavi Acharekar

How does one anthologise writings about a city that is equally seductive and repugnant? A city that has been a writer's muse from the time of its existence? In *Maya Nagari* – *Bombay-Mumbai: A City in Stories*, editors Shanta Gokhale and Jerry Pinto clarify that they didn't set out to capture the financial capital in a book; they simply compiled a list of stories they had read and loved. Writers in this fine anthology include the likes of Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Eunice de Souza, Cyrus Mistry, Bhupen Khakkar, Ambai, Urmila Pawar, Jayant Kaikini, Maharashtra's favourite humourist Pu La Deshpande, and the editors themselves, among others. In keeping with Mumbai's multilingual character, the book includes stories written in the languages of the city: English, with translations from Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Kannada, Gujarati. "To understand our own lives better, we must enter other lives, and we do that best with literature," says Gokhale in the introduction.

We see Bombay and Mumbai from the lived experience of chawl residents, street dwellers, mill workers, single women, advertising executives, furtive lovers. Aptly called 'the most expensive slum in the world', it is a city bustling with energy and coated with grime. The collection largely essays the bleak underbelly of the city, but it is not without a sliver of hope. In Deshpande's 'A Cultural Movement Is Born', we see chawl life with its intrigues and tragedies but also its comedies: "Batatyachi Chaal (*chawl*) and Bharat shared the same *raashi*. As a result, caste skirmishes, absence of unity, disease and earthquake-like tremors when matrons of a certain girth went up or down the stairs, presented everyday dangers."

Contrasting realities
Not only are the stories well-chosen, they are also beautifully translated, most of them by the editors themselves. The Ganesh

Chaturthi festival, the city's chawls and the closure of its mills are a leit motif in the book. This is where the church of St. Don Dosco becomes Don Boss and a building called 'Queen's Diamonds' overlooks a garbage heap. Here, god visits Dadar Bridge only to get caught in the grittier side of the city, and a British policeman finds respectability in India only to land himself in a metaphorical no man's land after Independence. A Ram devotee and an atheist forge an unlikely friendship, and a Ganesh idol is held hostage. A sex worker tries desperately to earn some money for a trip home to her village while a young journalist and a trade union leader become lovers. The stories draw you into their



Maya Nagari
Bombay-Mumbai: A City in Stories
Ed. Shanta Gokhale, Jerry Pinto
Speaking Tiger
₹799

grief, joys, anxieties and celebrations, delivering gut punches along the way. In Manto's 'Babu Gopi Nath', the titular character explains his love for *kothas* (brothels) and shrines: "Because both establishments are an illusion. What better refuge can there be for someone who wants to deceive himself?" Bombay/ Mumbai, too, is like that – a city of illusions and myriad contrasting realities. *Maya Nagari* represents the sea of stories that the city creates every day, to rival the vast ocean that lines its shore.

The reviewer is an author of fiction and travel, a curator and creative consultant.

BROWSER

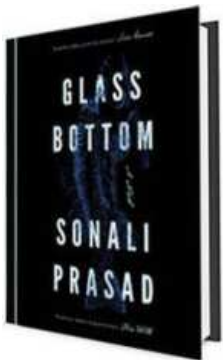
Do Not Ask the River Her Name

Sheela Tomy, trs Ministhy S. Harper Perennial
₹499
Taking readers through the highlands of Wayanad all the way to Nazareth in Israel, the story follows Ruth as she goes abroad to make a living. Weaving together a tale of love and humanity, it explores the religious and regional identities of West Asia.



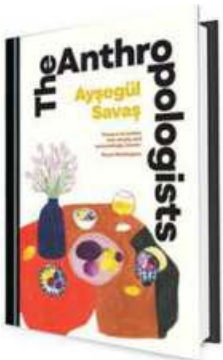
Glass Bottom

Sonali Prasad
Pan Macmillan
₹669
Following the lives of two mother-daughter pairs, the book journeys through confrontations, hope and fear as Gul, Arth, Luni and Himmo, who live by the sea, try to find an anchor amidst the tempest that sweeps through their homes and hearts.



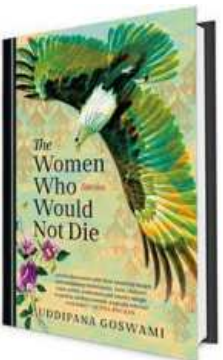
The Anthropologists

Aysegül Savas
Scribner U.K.
₹669 (ebook)
A soulful examination of modern love as young couple Asya and Manu contemplate putting down roots in a foreign city. As they open up the horizons of their lives and establish new traditions, they must decide what to hold on to, and when it's time to let go.



The Women Who Would Not Die

Uddipana Goswami
Speaking Tiger
₹499
A collection of stories about the deeply fragmented society of Assam where people find ways to love, cope and heal in the wake of war and violence. Through folk narratives and more, the book reveals the everyday resilience of humankind.





We are designed to forget

A neuroscientist examines how the remembrance of things past shapes our present and future

Sanjay Sipahimalani

For Marcel Proust, it was the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea that triggered vivid childhood recollections. For Charan Ranganath, it is the aroma of jackfruit that reminds him of walks on the beach with his grandfather in Chennai. Memories are contingent, and in his book *Why We Remember*, the California-based neuroscientist examines how the remembrance of things past shapes our present and future.

For most of us, forgetting a recent acquaintance's name while recalling a long-ago lyric are signs of memory's imperfections. However, Ranganath argues that such processes enable humans to thrive. "The problem isn't your memory," he asserts, "it's that we have the wrong expectations for what memory is for in the first place". The pertinent question, then, is not "why do we forget?" but "why do we remember?"

Malleable memories

Memory, as he illustrates, transcends a mere recollection of the past; it is a lens through which we perceive ourselves and the world, guiding what we say, think and do.

According to Ranganath, we are designed to forget because we need to prioritise information and efficiently use it when necessary. Our memories can be malleable and sometimes inaccurate because our brains evolved to navigate a changing world, and neurons constantly create and recreate connections to improve perception, movement and thinking. To explore the ramifications, *Why We Remember* takes us on a whistle-stop and sometimes breezy tour of current findings in neuroscience, simplifying concepts without dumbing them down.

In essence, the brain's prefrontal cortex and hippocampus play a critical, collaborative role in the formation, consolidation, and retrieval of memories. The former absorbs and processes information while the latter organises and retrieves it. Additionally, the amygdala creates emotional connections that influence the strength of memories. Our context and feelings, then, play a large part in how, why, and what we recall.

Semantic, episodic

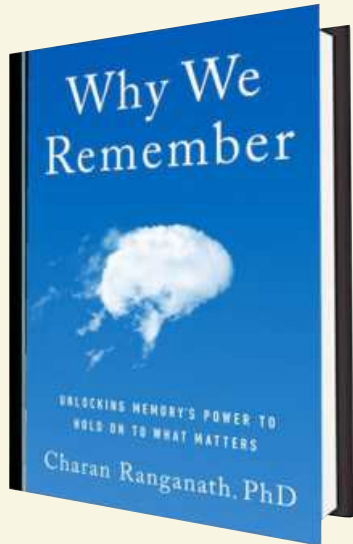
Broadly speaking, memories can be classified into two types: semantic, which deals with general information, and episodic, which relates to specific events. In Ranganath's example, you're using semantic memory when you recall facts about Paris, such as famous landmarks. When you re-experience a trip to the French capital, including sights, sounds, tastes, and emotions, you're using episodic memory. Both work together, enabling us to pick up information we can rely upon. An everyday example would be taking the optimal route to work while being flexible enough to adapt to circumstances such as using an alternative road when the usual one is closed.

How do mortals accomplish breath-taking feats of memorisation,

be it reciting pi to thousands of digits, narrating epics, or keeping a multitude of chess moves in mind? Ranganath discusses some tactics that make this possible. Among them are chunking, which involves grouping large pieces of information into small, manageable units; and using schemas like the memory palace technique that links information with a familiar environment or narrative.

One of the most interesting chapters deals with the way memory is connected to imagination. "We do not simply replay a past event," he writes, "but use a small amount of context and retrieved information as a starting point to imagine how the past could have been." This is akin to the way artists work – as Austin Kleon puts it, they create a collage of influences and memories filtered through imagination.

This malleability can lead to false memories, either through strong emotions or the planting of misinformation. As Proust writes in *Swann's Way*: "Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were."



Why We Remember
Charan Ranganath
Penguin Random House
₹699

Vivid textures

Ranganath offers strategies for reality monitoring, suggesting that imagined events tend to be more focused on internal thoughts and feelings and lack the vivid texture of actual memories. The more sensory details you can recall, the more likely it is that the event truly happened.

Throughout *Why We Remember*, he foregrounds the contributions of others in the field and those with whom he has collaborated. The book includes pacy accounts of tests and fMRI findings and is peppered with anecdotes, including his stint in a neuroscientists' rock band called (groan) Pavlov's Dogz.

"We look at the world once, in childhood," wrote Louise Glück. "The rest is memory." Ranganath's book lifts the curtains on this remembering self to give us a window into the pervasive role that memory plays in every aspect of the human experience.

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based writer.



AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

Aruna Roy looks back at her years of social activism after she resigned from the IAS in 1975 to work for the rural poor

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

Aristotle famously said the purpose of knowledge is action, not knowledge. And in the words of Perumal Murugan, "There are many who speak, but very few who act." Aruna Roy has spent her entire lifetime engaged in constructive action.

Joining the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1968, she soon realised that the civil service, which still retained colonial vestiges, was not the place for her: "The possibility of change was continually shrinking. The primary function was to maintain the status quo." She resigned in 1975 and joined her husband Bunker Roy at the Barefoot College Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) in Tilonia, Rajasthan.

The birth of RTI

Motivated by interactions with the rural poor, Roy and likeminded activists Shankar Singh and Nikhil Dey founded the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). From the mud hut in the Rajasthani village of Devdungri where it was founded with a view to strengthen participatory democratic processes, this non-partisan people's organisation has been at the forefront of transformative national campaigns for transparency, accountability, and an employment guarantee for the poor. It is in significant measure due to Roy, the MKSS, and likeminded activists that India now has a Right to Information (RTI) Act and a Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

During their training period at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy in Mussoorie, young IAS trainees are invariably told about Gandhi's talisman: when in doubt over a difficult decision, to think of the face of the poorest person one has encountered, and ask whether this decision will restore them to a control over their own life and destiny.

However, as the years pass, Gandhi's words sometimes slip away. In the quest for efficiency, equity can get left by the wayside. Which is why the poor are sometimes invisible to policy. Such as Mangi, the migrant Dalit worker who lost six children because of lack of access to medical care.

Call for empathy

In this deeply thoughtful and clear-sighted memoir, *The Personal is Political*, Roy reminds us that the poor are all around us: "The poor work. They build



Evolved to serve (Top to bottom) Aruna Roy during the early days of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, in Devdungri, Rajasthan; Roy in the field; and students at Women Barefoot Solar Engineers Training Centre, Barefoot College, Tilonia, Rajasthan. (THE HINDU ARCHIVES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND SANDEEP SAXENA)

our homes but live under the flyovers, in railway stations, under plastic sheets, in cement pipes; they clean our toilets but have none they can use. They clean our mess, wasteful plastic and rubbish we strew, and we call them 'rag pickers'. They grow our food, they craft to make our homes look chic, but we grumble at their subsidies and are angry when they die by suicide.... The complete illogic of the popular discourse which labels them a 'burden' remains unchallenged."

Those who are truly great know that personal ambition comes in the way of good work. Referring to Gandhi's categories of public action as *seva* (service), *nirman* (create), and *sangharsh* (struggle), Roy acknowledges the

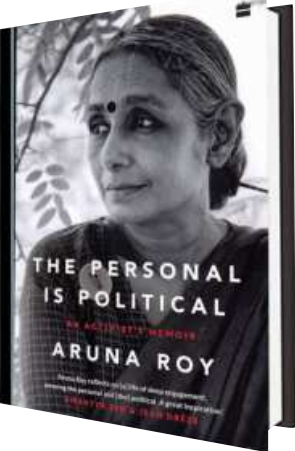
contributions of others: such as Naurti's struggle for minimum wages; Bhanwari Devi's fight against rape; Dr. Anandalakshmy's work on "Thinking with the heart"; and Lal Singh, who sacrificed his job as a constable by joining a protest against the oppression of the lower constabulary.

Most of all, Roy acknowledges the voices of ordinary people without which there can be no sustainable change. Without participation and deliberation, policy can be disconnected and even meaningless. "Participatory policymaking in a democracy is a sound principle, value, and process. To place people in the centre of the discussion and to consult them as equals is the way to real development. Those

preoccupied with efficiency and implementation should understand that planning done without reference to the conditions of people begins with a false premise."

Standing up for women

The title of Roy's memoir comes from the 1960s feminist slogan: the personal is political. As a privileged Indian woman, she left the centres of power to participate, on the ground, in the Indian women's movement. Reflecting on women's struggles, Roy recalls the words of Maya Angelou: "Each time a woman



The Personal is Political: An Activist's Memoir
Aruna Roy
HarperCollins
₹599

stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women."

For me, the most powerful section of the memoir is about the great Mahila Mela that brought together a thousand women at Barefoot College, Tilonia in 1985: "*Mele mein kain hoosi? Hivdari bataan.*" ("What will happen at the mela? We will discuss matters of the heart.") The women held '*prabhat pheris* (a morning walk, singing songs)' to celebrate women's solidarity; they also had serious conversations which recognised the deep post-traumatic stress associated with the aftermath of rape. A man from Ajmer had brought his 11-year-old daughter, a survivor of rape, to the Mahila Mela for justice. Discussion on the subject ended with a silent public rally in which local Rajasthani women also participated. They covered their faces, but carried placards. The women tied their black armbands on a thorny babul tree outside the court. A powerful message.

The writer is in the IAS.

PARIS OLYMPICS 2024
DRESSED TO REPRESENT INDIA

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Originally, both men and women athletes were meant to wear the same uniform. The sari – a leitmotif in Indian ceremonial uniforms and regarded as a cultural marker – was introduced later, Tahiliani tells me, following a revised mandate from IOA. But as Ugra rightly points out, many athletes don't know how to drape the sari and first-time wearers may find it daunting on a global stage. "India has so many options for women to wear, be it the *mekhla-chador* or a *sabwar* suit," she says. "The aim should be to have well-fitted and comfortable garments." Tasnuq offered a solution for any draping issues with pre-pleated saris, a signature design element from Tahiliani's repertoire.

Not standing on ceremony
Collaborations with designers are not limited to ceremonial uses, but extend to uniforms of all kinds. Hospitality and aviation sectors – where the staff is expected to look sophisticated – often engage designers. In 2020, Rajesh Pratap Singh, known for his clean, contemporary silhouettes, and make-up artist Ambika Pillai, partnered to create a new look for the cabin crew of Indigo. More recently, Singh designed uniforms for the Akasa Air crew in 2022. Air

India's rebranding last year also reflected in new garments, created by Manish Malhotra.

Irrespective of the designer, uniforms are a brand entity. "It is important to begin with understanding the client's vision and the social landscape they interact with," says designer Raghavendra Rathore, who put the Jodhpuri *bandhgala* on the fashion map. "Balancing aesthetics with functionality, ensuring a proper fit for a diverse group of wearers, and maintaining high-quality standards are crucial for uniform design." His eponymous label has created garments for ITC Hotels, Imperial Hotel (Delhi), The Claridges, Umaid Bhawan Palace, and Jio World Convention Centre, as well as a ceremonial uniform for BSF (Border Security Force).

The Abraham & Thakore label is known for their engagements with *ikat* and hand block printing. They have also experimented with handloom uniforms in the past. David Abraham notes, however, that it can be a "completely impractical" choice. "The garments go through rigorous use. How can we expect flight attendants who may wake up at 3 a.m., wash and wear their garments regularly, and use it for at least for 6-12 months, to maintain the garments?" he asks. "Handlooms have beauty and value, but it is ill-advised to use in a space for



performance-textiles." What many don't realise is that while a designer tag is attached to such collaborations, what you see is not what you get. Industry insiders who have worked on corporate uniforms agree that though designers are posed as the face and minds behind it, a lot goes on behind the scenes. "There are far more people involved in the design and selection, especially in big, public sector enterprises," says designer Nimish Shah, whose label Shift created the crew uniforms for Spice Jet in 2017. "It is just not about a designer's acumen."

Why are handlooms missing?
In a country known for its weaving and handloom culture that go back centuries – producing handwoven silks and cottons, from Banarasi to Madras checks that have found global renown – the use of digitally printed *ikat* in this year's Olympics uniforms seems unimaginative. The buzz around National Handloom Day (August 7) is also giving momentum to people's criticism of the use of viscose textiles. However, Shah's statement holds true here too. Budgets don't always support the engagement of handloom clusters, and crafts interventions require time and collaborations with craftspeople for distinctive designs. "It's not a

vendor type system where an order is placed and there is an assembly organised production line," says crafts practitioner and author Meera Goradia. Quick turnarounds – such as, when the IOA decided to ditch the *kurtas* and go with the drape for women athletes – are impossible. While working with "easily available colours, designs that can be produced at scale, or building on fabrics in stock" such as Kutch *kala* cotton weaves and Banarasi jacquards can facilitate faster production, Goradia adds that planning is paramount. Tahiliani says, in the case of the Indian Olympics uniforms, he chose

ikat as emblematic of a weaving tradition practised around the country, but opted for digital prints to meet timelines. The choice of viscose was also deliberate. "Cotton would have crushed badly. We used viscose because it is a wood pulp fibre and lets you breathe. It is cooler than silk," he says. "We had to consider breathability because the athletes would be on a barge, in the heat, for up to five hours." Similar criticism has been levelled at airline uniforms in the past. Goradia sees value in using traditional skills, but with logistical consideration. "Using cultural techniques and vocabularies in everyday spaces would not only generate employment, but give

Global check (Clockwise from far left) Official uniforms of Mongolia; France; Thailand; and Haiti.

visibility and pride to both the maker and the user," she says. "R&D needs to be done before this can be applied at scale – the quality of the fabrics for durability, dyes, and prints that would be hardy enough to take multiple washes, stains, etc."

Uniforms: always a point of debate
In the age of social media, presentation becomes paramount for uniforms as much as any fashion collection. It is not surprising that national committees and brands have invested heavily in visual imagery to showcase their ceremonial uniforms. The Team India incident has certainly emphasised the need for sport committees to pay greater attention to how designs are presented. But India is not the only team facing criticism for its uniforms. Fans have criticised USA's opening ceremony blazers – tweeting that they are past their heyday – while Thailand's outfits were panned for being outdated, to the extent that the country's prime minister issued a statement defending the uniform. They have since switched to an eye-catching dark blue design with motifs inspired by Ban Chiang pottery. Tahiliani admits that the presentation, particularly the mannequin drapes, have been weak links but is confident that the uniform will deliver. "We stand by our designs," he insisted, when we spoke earlier this week. "The team will look great when they take their place in the ceremony, and I will be cheering them on."

The writer and editor is based in Delhi.

Swapna Majumdar
At 11 a.m., the sun is beating down in the densely populated urban slum tenements of Mumbai in Thane, Maharashtra. But Amrien Khan is unfazed by the heat. She walks purposefully down the narrow alleys, nodding her head as she is greeted by her neighbours. She rechecks the name displayed on the tablet in her hand and turns towards a partially constructed building. After walking up two floors, she stops in front of a room and calls out: "Salam Alaikum! The last time I came, it was to bless your newborn. I sang and performed for donations from you. Now, I have come to remind you that your baby is due for her next dose of immunisation." Immediately, the door opens and Khan is welcomed inside.

It is not just this door that the 30-year-old has helped to open. In a unique initiative, the transgender community has been engaged to improve immunisation among the children of Mumbai-Kausa. With a population of 3.68 lakh, the neighbourhood of Mumbai-Kausa, comprising predominantly migrant minority communities, is the biggest contributor to zero-dose (children who have not received a first dose of diphtheria-tetanus pertussis, or DPT1, vaccine) and under-immunised children under the purview of the Thane Municipal Corporation (TMC). Now this is changing, thanks to Sakhee, the two-year pilot project designed and implemented by ZMQ



MEET THE FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD VAX ADVOCATES

How an initiative involving transgender persons has helped improve children's immunisation in a Navi Mumbai slum while also empowering the community

Development, a not-for-profit, with support from GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance. Transgender persons employed and trained by ZMQ have facilitated the immunisation of 733 children identified as zero-dose or missed dose since the project began in April 2023.

Win-win for all
Just as this achievement has been life-saving for children, it has also been transformative

for the transgender community. Being a part of Sakhee has boosted their confidence and provided them with a livelihood of dignity. Learning to use a mobile-based application to map and track children who have fallen off the immunisation radar has given them a new purpose in life.

For Simran, it is a chance to begin anew. Losing a leg in an accident had led to depression,

an uncertain future, and financial anxiety. Although she managed to source a prosthetic limb, it was Sakhee that helped her regain confidence in her abilities. "I never got this kind of platform before to do something for the community. I'm saving lives by raising awareness through behaviour change stories on the app on each of the nine vaccines critical for children. The badge I wear around my neck has



given me a new identity and respect," she says. For decades, the transgender community has been an integral part of the lives of the families living in Mumbai-Kausa, celebrating births, marriages and other milestones with them. ZMQ saw them as natural allies in their initiative to save lives and channelised the strength of their informant network. "As they already have access to these families, we knew they could be the bridge between them and the government health system. Since ZMQ uses technology and storytelling to share information and address hesitancy and myths about

Drumming up support
In the Azad Nagar locality of Kausa, a large crowd gathers on hearing the drums typically played by transgender persons. While some men, women and children are standing on their rooftops to get a better view, others are sitting on the staircases in front of their small two-floor tenement. With a colourful

vaccines, transgender persons, with their talents in communication and performing arts, were the perfect choice for the intervention," says Hilmi Quraishi, co-founder and chief mentor, ZMQ.

Independent journalist writes on development and gender.

tent displaying banners on immunisation and a TV monitor showing audiovisual digital stories as the backdrop, Khan leads the dancing and singing, with Tulsī, Megha, Nazo and Simran joining the performance. All five transgender persons are part of the ZMQ field team, and come together on occasions to drum up support for the cause. Having been trained on awareness messages, they script their own stories around vaccination and sing about its benefits. Rafiya, 26, is among the crowd, transfixed by the twirling performers. Hers was one of the many cases handed over to ZMQ by the TMC after frontline health workers failed to convince the families to get their children immunised. Concerted follow-ups by the ZMQ team helped to turn around Rafiya's case and 115 messages, they script their own stories around vaccination and sing about its benefits. Rafiya, 26, is among the crowd, transfixed by the twirling performers. 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Rafiya, 26, is among the crowd, transfixed by the twirling performers. Hers was one of the many

At 23, after multiple rejections, Alina Alam found herself in the northeastern Karnataka town of Hubballi, with zero capital, an offer of a rat-infested tin shed and lots of community goodwill to execute her longstanding dream of a café that would employ people with physical, intellectual, and psychiatric disabilities. One panel of experts had rated her idea poorly on a variety of parameters, but what annoyed her was that they had also rated her 1/5 on a quality she had in abundance: passion. You just have to listen to her talk to know instantly that Alam has enough passion to power a hundred ventures.

Now 31, Alam travels to her 46 cafés spread across India in institutions such as airports, large companies, banks, her one-year-old son Orhan in tow. He’s already logged around 150 flights. In the past year, she has opened her Mitti Café at the Supreme Court, Rashtrapati Bhavan and IIM-Bangalore. In the coming months, you’ll see the café at many more airports, metro and railway stations. Alam uses and swears by words such as magic, courage and compassion. She believes that everybody can fight injustice and discrimination. “My confidence comes from faith,” she says. Faith that if you do your best, things are likely to work out.

She prefers to use the phrase ‘social duty’ over social work, and describes it as the debt we must pay for the privileges we enjoy. “My belief in the innate kindness of the community has been proved time and again,” she says. In a cynical world, Alam is a blinding ray of hope. Her favourite quote – also her sister Ayesha’s favourite – is from *Cinderella*: “Where there is kindness,

PERSON OF INTEREST

ALINA ALAM: POWER OF MAGICAL THINKING

The founder of Mitti Café quotes *Cinderella* and believes you can fight injustice



there is goodness. And where there is goodness, there is magic.”

Mitti Café has 500 employees and has trained nearly 10 times that number, placing them with various companies. “We encourage the larger ecosystem to hire from us,” says Alam. Some, like Saviha, who has multiple sclerosis, have become entrepreneurs. “We discovered she has the gift of the gab,” says Alam. “If you come in to buy a ₹10 *chai*, she will convince you to buy a ₹50 meal.” Saviha now runs her own grocery store in Hubballi and is one of Mitti Café’s vendors.

Inclusivity through service
Alam’s inclusivity-through-service model is an opportunity to alter perceptions about differently-abled people – even the way they see themselves. Since the pandemic,

Mitti Café has distributed six million meals to economically vulnerable communities. In a country that offers few opportunities to the differently-abled, Alam’s team not only looks out for themselves but contributes to the larger good. “It’s changed the whole paradigm,” she says, adding that the team knows the café is an opportunity to change society and the way society thinks about them.

One time in Bengaluru, an angry customer stomped up to her in a café, complaining about the abrasive way the server had been communicating with him. “I told him his name is Bharat, he’s on the autism spectrum, his expressions may not do justice to his role but he takes back money every month, and this is possible because of customers like him and the



Led by passion
Alina Alam (above); and with President Droupadi Murmu at the opening of Mitti Café in Rashtrapati Bhavan this June. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

community.” On her next visit to the café, she spotted the same customer and he had brought along a friend. “He was giving a high five to Bharat and introducing him to his friend,” says Alam. “You can’t take for granted that people know.”

Seeing beyond grades
Growing up, nobody looked at Alam as someone who would be a success story. “Everybody gave up on me,” she says. “I don’t think I was the most disciplined student, my grades were never that great.” After her

Class X exams, her school told her mother they were worried about her future and suggested that she enrol her daughter elsewhere. Alam’s success is a reality check for educational institutions and parents who can’t see beyond marks.

Alam isn’t the first entrepreneur among her siblings. To support the family, her elder sister Ayesha started exporting ethnic wear to Bangladesh when Alam was still in school. Another early influence was her grandmother, with whom she stayed for many years. The older woman needed support to walk but was never defined by what she could and couldn’t do. “When I went into the world, it was confusing to see how a person’s disability could define everything from their friends’ circle to their opportunities,” says Alam.

At that first café in Hubballi, a local printer helped her translate an ad for jobs. It said that Alam was looking for people with disabilities. The only requirements for the job were a minimum age of 18 years and the intent to work. “For two days, nobody called,” she says, recalling how she grappled with self-doubt. “Then Sandhya aunty called, very hesitantly, about her daughter Keerthi who has a very severe disability. She came to the café crawling,” Alam says. “Today, she is quite an inspiration. She manages a team of 10-15 as a manager.”



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

GOREN BRIDGE

Nice choice

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

North-South in today’s deal were experts Michael and Debbie Rosenberg. They lived in New York for many years and moved to California some years ago. East’s aggressive five-heart bid, at unfavorable vulnerability, created a lot of pressure. Debbie, South, passed it around to Michael, North,

hoping he would know what to do. Michael chose to force to slam and made a good choice when he bid five no trump. This asked Debbie to pick the best slam. On her way to six spades, Debbie showed her four-card side suit and Michael let it play right there. This was a great choice, as an opening heart lead against six spades, forcing dummy to ruff, would have created a trump trick for East. The

THE BIDDING:

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

Opening lead: Ace of ♥

best slam had been reached, but it still had to be made. Debbie ruffed the opening heart lead in

dummy and cashed the ace and king of clubs. She left the last trump outstanding and led a diamond to her ace and then another

diamond. That did the trick as West had no winning option. Should West play low and let East ruff, East would be endplayed and forced to lead a spade or yield a ruff-sluff. West chose to rise with his king, but he was also endplayed. West led a heart, but Debbie ruffed in dummy and then ruffed a diamond in hand. She drew the last trump, shedding a spade from dummy, and claimed the balance. Dummy was high! Well done!

Easy like Sunday morning

The sea is an underwater museum still awaiting its visitors: Phillip Diole

Berty Ashley

Born on July 28, 1922, Jacques Piccard was a Swiss oceanographer, who developed submarines for studying ocean currents. His father, August Piccard, was a balloonist, who was the first human to reach the stratosphere. On January 23, 1960, Piccard and Lieutenant Don Walsh in his submarine – the Trieste – achieved a remarkable feat in the Pacific Ocean. What did he reach, which completes his family legacy?

2 Creatures that are found at the bottom of the ocean usually live near hydrothermal vents. Unlike any other form of life present on the Earth, they don’t rely on the sun for their energy. They use the chemicals that are pumped up from the Earth’s crust. By what name is this process known, an alternate to the term we are familiar with that plants use?

3 Scientists believed that no life could survive below 8,200 metres due to the extreme pressure at those depths. Only in 2022 was a species of snailfish discovered at the bottom of the Izu-Ogasawara Trench, near the main islands of Japan. By what name which refers to the incredulous nature of its existence is this fish known by scientists?

4 In the deep ocean, there is a continuous shower of organic debris that falls from the upper layers of water. Made up mostly of dead phytoplankton, fecal matter



Mariana Trench in the Western Pacific Ocean is the deepest part of the earth. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

and parts of dead fish, it is the main source of energy for many life forms at the bottom. It is known by a term that refers to the fact that it looks like a slow white drizzle underwater. By what name is this vital component known?

5 *Grimpoteuthis* are a type of octopuses known for their cute and cartoonish appearance. Their standout feature are two prominent fins that extend like ears from above each eye that they flap to fly around in the depths of the ocean. Due to this resemblance, they are nicknamed in reference to a 1941 Disney film about another cute animal that could fly using its ears. What is the common name of this octopus?

6 The scaly-foot gastropod is a species of deep-sea snail,

which is the only animal that has been able to armour itself with a heavy metal. It sources this metal from deep sea vents and forms a hard outer layer. What metal does this animal use for its armour that should remind you of a superhero?

7 *Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni* is the largest known invertebrate animal on the planet. Very rarely seen as they live in the abyssal depths of the ocean, they are known to weigh upto 700 kg and measure 46 ft. in length. Known variously as Humboldt, Giant and Colossal, what animal is this?

8 Mauna Kea is an inactive volcano that is technically the tallest mountain in the world. Although 13,804 ft. above sea

level, it measures a staggering 19,700 ft. below sea level. When measured from base to top, it is almost 1.4 km taller than Mount Everest. To climb this mountain, which tropical destination island would one have to visit?

9 Researchers found the oldest living animals on the planet off the coast of Hawaii in 2009. At the depth of 3,000 metres, the species *Leiopathes* were gathered and radiocarbon dated and one specimen was discovered to be 4,265 years old. What brightly coloured animals are these, which one would see in a fish tank?

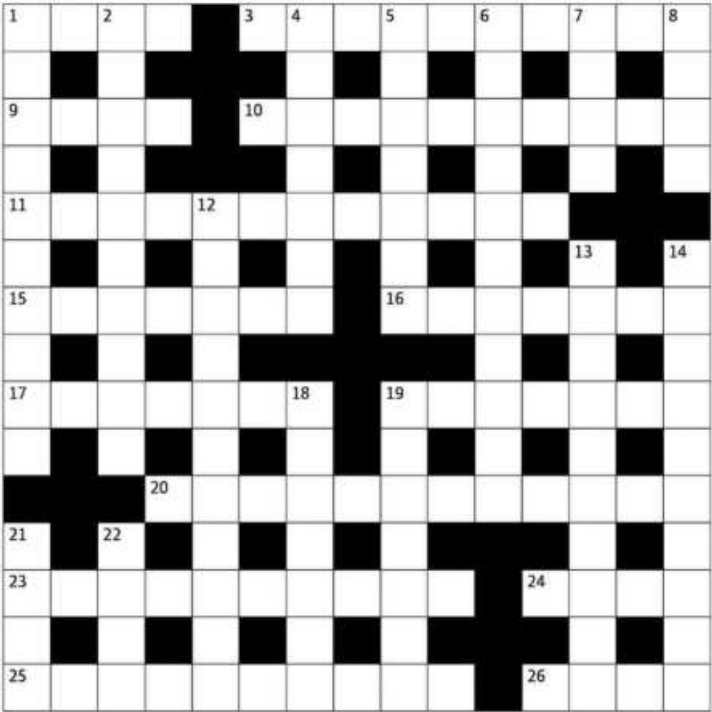
10 In 2012, this person became the first human to reach the bottom of Challenger Deep solo, which is the deepest part of the Mariana Trench. He collected scientific data, specimens and pictures. He is better known for introducing us to fantastical fictional worlds such as Pandora, or the lives of Rose and Jack. Who is this explorer/ moviemaker?

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

1. Trench (deepest point on Earth)
2. Chemosynthesists
3. The impossible fish
4. Marine snow
5. Dumbo octopus
6. Iron (from snailfishes)
7. Squids
8. Hawaii
9. Deep-sea coral
10. James Cameron

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3317



- Across**
- 1 Bit of beer and a nut (4)
 - 3 They mean the same thing (5,5)
 - 9 In the lecture hall, study example of pond flora (4)
 - 10 Cambodia’s king overtly to embrace act of invitation (6,4)
 - 11 Old pile in a state: bingo! (7,5)
 - 15 Excerpt of text remembered in the end (7)
 - 16 Basis of a speech? (7)
 - 17 Briefly make the case for mullet? That’s mean (7)
 - 19 Heath promises to be monotonous (7)
 - 20 Mother’s involved with suave bewhiskered type (7,5)
 - 23 Two airlines with grand facility for customers (7,3)
 - 24 Everyman, I appreciate that, is given to self-reflection (4)
 - 25 Being sociable with group of journalists where music is made (6,4)
 - 26 Primarily, hoopla yielding phoney enthusiasm? (4)

- Down**
- 1 Bad luck that’s likely to grate? (4,6)
 - 2 Commercial to liken Luxembourg to last thing in luxury – well enough! (10)
 - 4 Splashy, tinselly, less large: so trendy (2,5)
 - 5 Adapts Swift etc for the audience (7)

- 6 The writer, funny character, to cover dirty old men in intros: great note! (11)
- 7 Positive review of DJ’s gig (4)
- 8 Lover-boy rises, inflamed? (4)
- 12 Partitioned carelessly, leading to apprehension (11)
- 13 Yes, you: all bets are off (10)
- 14 Old flame, slippery sort, heading off to scold and enrage (10)
- 18 Performed a chore, removing duck that’s lingered awkwardly (7)
- 19 In France, you run over small Italians (7)
- 21 Flipping computers making a racket (4)
- 22 Wine before kiss, that’s the heart of it (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3316





Gully rap finds its rhythm

Online rap battles became a breeding ground for talent, and the DIY spirit permeated the scene

Ancilin Biju

ancilinbijup@gmail.com

For the longest time, India’s music scene had been dominated by the glitz and glamour of Bollywood. But recently, a new wave of rappers have emerged, spitting rhymes that paint a starkly different picture. Now these are not rhymes about high-life fantasies or polished lifestyles, but about dodging potholes and chasing dreams in a system stacked against you. It is the raw, unfiltered truth of a generation finding its voice in the gullies they call home.

Gully rap is a genre born in the narrow streets of Mumbai and its impact on Indian music and society

is undeniable. The term gully rap itself speaks of its origin story. It has acted as a forum for young people from India’s underbelly to express their struggles and aspirations through an art form. As Naezy, one of the genre’s pioneers, puts it: “Gully rap peels back the curtain of corruption and poverty and crime.”

A far cry from the bling-fuelled narratives of mainstream rap, it resonated deeply with a generation craving for authenticity.

Gully rap’s roots can be traced back to the early 2000s when hip-hop culture began to take hold in Mumbai. Drawing inspiration from American rappers such as Tupac and Nas, young artists started expressing themselves through local rap battles and breakdancing events, and gully rap took off with the implementation of the rap style with different cultural contexts. The Bollywood connection also boosted its growth after the growing usage of gully raps in films. Songs such as *Apna Time Aayega* from *Gully Boy* became a massive hit and exposed the audience to the idea of gully rap.

The drastic turning point came with the rise of social media platforms and with it, online rap battles became a breeding ground for talent, and the DIY spirit permeated the scene. Rappers such as Divine, another leading figure who began his career as an underground rapper after discovering hip-hop on his friend’s T-shirt, honed their craft independently, recording tracks on shoestring budgets and promoting them through word-of-mouth.

The release of Divine and Naezy’s collaborative track *Mere Gully Mein* in 2015 was a watershed moment. The song, with its infectious beats and lyrics that spoke about the harsh realities of Mumbai’s slums, captured the imagination of a nation. It lighted up social media, igniting the gully rap revolution. This focus on self-reliance, a

reflection of the *Jugaad* mentality rather common in India, became a hallmark of gully rap. Divine himself emphasised this stating, “We didn’t have the infrastructure or the industry support. We had to create our lane.”

Gully rap is not just a catchy tune. It is a cultural earthquake that shook things up in more ways than one. It provided a platform for marginalised voices to be heard, giving the everyday struggles of many the attention it deserved. One of gully rap’s strengths has been its defiance of the status quo.

Unlike the polished pop of Bollywood, it thrives on the DIY spirit and stories of struggle, reflecting the realities of the marginalised communities. This authenticity is what propelled artists such as Divine and Naezy to stardom, becoming heroes for a generation yearning to be heard. However, mainstream success can be a double-edged sword. Popular record labels offer resources and increased audience, but can also water down the raw energy that defines this genre. The pressure to conform to the commercial expectations might lead to sanitised lyrics and beats, erasing the very element that made gully rap so powerful.

The future of gully rap hinges on finding the correct balance. As the genre navigates mainstream recognition and evolving trends, staying true to its core message of struggle and authenticity will be a necessity. Independent platforms such as Spotify and YouTube offer the solution, allowing artists to retain creative control. However, gully rap’s true potential lies in its ability to become a voice for offering a critical commentary on the Indian socio-economic landscape.

One thing is certain: gully rap has left an indelible mark on the Indian music landscape. It serves as an example of how powerful music can emerge from the most unexpected places, giving voice to a generation and inspiring countless others to chase their dreams.

The flight of the eagles

Pulluru Jagadishwar Rao

pjdrao123@gmail.com

In my childhood, the bird that caught my imagination the most was the eagle as it soars high and makes circles in the sky without flapping its wings.

My curiosity was enhanced when a pair of them made a massive tree its home, right across my street in the village. The pair would perch on top of a branch scanning the entire surroundings for its potential prey. I grew up watching every moment of the eagles from cleaning feathers and taking off and landing to building a nest with twigs and leaves. I became a fan of them, known for keen eyesight, sharp claws, strong beak and amazing hunting skills.

However, one incident made me turn into a foe of eagles forever. In those days, it was very common to raise poultry birds in every household. We too had some birds. Every season except summer, my mother would keep a dozen eggs or so with a brooding hen to hatch. One of the hens hatched all the eggs and the chicks began to grow, accompanying the mother all the time.

One day, the mother hen leading the brood went outside the house in search of feed. Coming from nowhere, the eagle swooped down like a dart and snatched a young chick clutching tightly with its claws and flew away. It happened in front of my own eyes and it was over in a flash, leaving me helpless to rescue the chick.

My mother said, “All hatchlings do not survive. The eagle is a bird of prey and is at the top of food chain because of the large size and ability to fly.” My anger subsided to some extent after listening to my mother. After 30 years, no hate for eagles is left in me. But my childhood avian friend is missing in action.

The eagles left my village long ago as their habitat was snatched for “development”. Left with no alternative, they migrated to urban centres, disappearing from the rural landscape.

Thus my village has become poorer in biodiversity.

Routine is not boring

It helps to order and prioritise our lives and inculcate discipline

Ashok Warrior

ashokwarrior27@gmail.com

The other day, I heard a sportsman say, “I have my routine and I try to adhere to it.” In our daily lives too, most of us, I would like to believe, have our routines. Because of factors beyond our control, if ever the routines in our lives get disturbed or disrupted, we often encounter guilt or frustration or both or an added determination at times to correct the glitch.

What is the purpose of a routine? Or does it have a purpose at all? There is a clock and a calendar but as to whether we have to follow them is left to us, right? In my opinion,

routines help us to order and prioritise our lives. One would actually get an idea of the value of routine, if and when we do not have a routine or decide to give it a pass.

Routine inculcates a sense of discipline and adherence in our lives. A life without a routine can become meaningless. It can lead to confusion and a cluttered mind. Disruption in routines because of travel, health issues and the like makes one want to get back to routine as quickly as possible. I suspect that the saying that “one’s home is the best” also stems in a large measure from the fervent desire to get back to one’s routine.

This also brings up the



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

seminal question: is routine applicable to, or practised by, only humans or does it apply also to other animals? I remember watching, a few years ago, in the jungles of Congo, an alpha-male gorilla leading his troops to a clearing in the forest where they all lay down and indulged in some serious grooming. Once this activity got over, they trudged off to the large bamboo trees for their regular feed. Was this a part of their daily life routine?

As man evolved and

moved from the jungles and caves to the kind of lives that we lead now, so did the emphasis on timings and routine. Increase in activities, which I guess would have happened over time, demand a greater adherence to timings and routines. Timings are an integral part of routines.

Routines have different dimensions. While there are some routines such as brushing our teeth which we have been conditioned over several years and right from our childhood, there are some others which we are required to follow because of our training and functions in life. A footballer or badminton player invariably does some warm up before a match. This is also a routine.

Routines are without a doubt important and can have a huge bearing on our lives. It is important, therefore, to choose them carefully and wisely.

Snakes and ladders

Fear of reptiles turns into anger against benign trees in a neighbourhood

Sujith Sandur

sk.sandur@gmail.com

Having technical know-how about soils, I had no difficulty gauging that the residential plot I owned was suited to raise a home garden. We planted saplings much before the construction of the house began. Over a short time, 12 trees helped transform the concrete structure into a lush green abode. A few flowering plants and wall creepers completed the picture.

The trees attracted birds. In the beginning,



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flocks of house and yellow-throated sparrows frequented. As the days passed, red-whiskered bulbuls, babblers, and others dotted the foliage. Enthused by the opportunity to indulge in

bird watching from our comfort zone, we began feeding them grains and water and eventually succeeded in making them colonise the garden. The sparrows were the first to build nests. It was a visual treat to observe how the mother sparrows diligently wove intricate nests. Some built them in an ivy in the portico, while a few preferred to have them in the trees.

We thanked God for providing us with the luxury of seeing the birds freely fly around the garden and preen at water pits. We got so used to the chirps and tweets of young birds demanding their mother’s attention that quite often we became engrossed in guarding the chicks and the eggs in the nests while she was away.

Needless to say, we took

pride in our garden. But it did not take long for us to realise that it came at a cost. We had to be vigilant against stray dogs, cats, and snakes that preyed on birds, especially sparrows. The people in the neighbourhood who used to admire the greenery started to make their apprehensions loud and clear about the snakes. They held the trees responsible for the problem. Their grouse was that snakes could enter their compounds too.

To address the issue, I may be asked to either fell the trees or chop off their branches to drive away the birds. I fear I might be compelled to yield to this pressure. If I do, it will sadden me deeply. It seems that trees in a home garden no longer fit into the scheme of things in an urban ecosystem.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Stereotypes and lack of awareness have for long restricted the participation of Indian women in the sports domain. (‘Road to skateboarding glory’; July 21) Although there is improvement, overall, India lacks representation in 16 out of the 32 sport events in the 2024 Olympics. Effective fund devolution, infrastructural support, and parental behavioural change are the need of the hour to conquer rather than merely compete on the Olympic stage.

Bhyripudi Viveka
Vardhan Naidu

Skateboarding is definitely not everyone’s cup of tea as it involves the risk of injury. There is a need to construct more skateparks across the country to encourage skateboarding.

N.S. Reddy

Despite its rising popularity amid its inclusion as a competitive sport at the Olympics, most skateboarding enthusiasts face logistical problems due to the scarcity and accessibility of skating parks. Other hurdles that cannot be overlooked include the high cost of quality skating equipment and coaching, as well as worries about children’s safety at badly maintained skating rinks.

Kamal Laddha

Skateboarding might be the first cousin of roller-skating but both have yet to get wider acceptance in India. As an agent of social change and being gender inclusive, skateboarding deserves government

support as well as corporate patronage.
A. Raveendranath

Interpreting cultures

The *Ramayana* has been embraced in several Muslim, Buddhist and Christian majority nations and there are over 300 versions of the epic across cultures in Southeast Asia. (‘The other Ayodhya’; July 21) In Thailand, Buddhism is followed by 95% of the population but the *Ramayana* is integral to their culture. In one version of the *Ramayana*, Sita is Ravana’s daughter. Epics contain many stories and can be interpreted in different ways to suit a variety of purposes.

H.N. Ramakrishna

Changing patterns

Gala Dali, Yoko Ono and Naomi Campbell are bold artists who displayed innovation and excellence far ahead of their times, but were victims of misogyny, unfair criticism and name-calling. (‘Gala Dali: in the company of ‘difficult’ women’; July 21) It is a surprisingly delightful coincidence that various exhibitions are resurrecting the works of these strong and talented women in 2024. It will serve as an inspiration to the current generation of women and teach them to be bold and assertive in the male dominated (art) world.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Correction

In the article titled ‘Road to skateboarding glory’ in the July 21 issue of the *Magazine*, the lead image should have been credited to Ankit Kotian. The omission is regretted.
— Editor



MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

A case for menstrual leave

It aids those disrupted by menstruation, providing a platform to recover and prioritise mental health.

Sejalsri Mukkavilli

A perfect storm

The double whammy of pandemic and recession has left students in a state of limbo

Shivani Sharma

Figuring out life

For an adult, the doors seem to throw themselves open

Hari Shankar

Music weaves in the fabric of life

A song can touch off a flood of memories good and bad

Swathy Rao

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Large, bold, public (Clockwise from below) Bharti Kher's *Alchemies* installation at Yorkshire Sculpture Park; the artist; Suhasini Kejriwal's *Garden of Un-Earthly Delights*; and Kher's *The Intermediary Family*. (COURTESY YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK)



URBAN GODDESS MEETS GOLU DOLL

Women sculptors have been traditionally overlooked, especially in outdoor works. All the more reason to visit Bharti Kher and Suhasini Kejriwal's new show in England

Ela Das

Bharti Kher has always felt different. Born in London in 1969, she grew up as a person of Indian origin in an English suburb, which instilled in her a sense of otherness – an experience that shapes her diverse practice today as a contemporary artist. “Which Bharti would I have been in America?” she ponders. Her desire to know how it feels to be “something, someone or somewhere else” is endless. Central to her work is the idea of having multiple versions of oneself, and that of a universal consciousness.

This is reflected in her survey show – part retrospective, part new commission – at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP). Titled *Alchemies*, the exhibition of sculpture and 2D work (created between 2000 and 2024) features themes of diversity, mythology, identity and gender. Like *Ancestor*, the 18-foot-tall painted bronze

mother figure, with 23 heads emerging from her body. Commissioned for the southeast entrance of New York's Central Park, the 2022 creation, “a mythical female force that pays homage to the generations before and after me”, has crossed the ocean to take pride of place at the West Yorkshire art gallery.

In a light-filled space is a powerful group of hybrid figures – part women, part animals, part goddesses. Many are cast from real bodies of women known to Kher. “Each being is a mythical urban goddess, who is part truth and part fiction, part me and part you,” she says. Elsewhere, there's also *Virus*, the monochromatic spiral of large *bindis* that Kher has been making, one a year, since 2010. Set to complete in 2039, the version she has made for YSP is bright yellow.

Statements in bronze

The show, in collaboration with Bengaluru-based NGO RMZ Foundation, also features

Kolkata-based artist Suhasini Kejriwal. According to Anu Menda, managing trustee of RMZ, the exhibition aims to bridge cultural divides and promote female artists. “In a rapidly evolving world, international collaborations are more vital than ever. By sharing unique artistic practices and viewpoints, stereotypes are challenged, commonalities are discovered, and new perspectives gained,” she says.

While Kejriwal's pieces seem more delicate in comparison to Kher's, they too challenge the viewer. *Garden of Un-Earthly Delights* explores the divide between humans and nature. “It is a physical embodiment of an imaginary landscape – my experience in my garden surrounded by plants and birdsong,” she says, of the works that underline the evolution of her practice with totemic sculpture. “It is playful and surreal, and references the work of Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch.” For instance, an anthropomorphised plant-human



hybrid with eye pods, brightly coloured body parts and foliage, depicts an unfamiliar combination of familiar things. It is part of a collection of bronze sculptures that reflect upon “the gap between the real and the imaginary, the everyday and the fantastic, and the familiar and the unfamiliar that is constantly being negotiated in our own perception”.

In the gardens also stand four giant bronze works from Kher's *Intermediaries* series. What began as small *golu* dolls grew in size over the years, and explored different materials. “These figurines, traditionally displayed in homes during Navratri, pay homage to generational family connections, encompassing everyday people, animals, food and deities,” says the artist who lives between Delhi and London. She amassed the figurines over several years before shipping them to her Delhi studio in 2016, where many arrived broken. Through meticulous repair and reassembly, Kher created unexpected, hybrid combinations, stripping the objects of their original associations and purposes – liberating them to embody new

possibilities and meanings. “These fluid beings embody an intermediate state, capturing the potential for people, animals or objects to transcend the constraints of reality and become something entirely new.”

Amplifying diversity

In sculpture, women have been traditionally overlooked, especially in outdoor, public works. Menda believes the works of Kher and Kejriwal are a good vehicle to amplify exceptional talent and more diverse representation.

“The growth of Indian art is creating an impact on the global art industry. By actively supporting artists, the foundation aims to bridge global contemporary art with India's cultural context, promoting artistic diversity and gender equality,” she says. “By celebrating artists like Bharti and Suhasini, the foundation hopes to inspire younger, emerging women artists, who can see a more inclusive and equitable space for themselves.”

The writer and creative consultant is based in Mumbai.

One day, a dispute of an odd nature reached Phuphee. She was in the kitchen standing over a bubbling pot of *buntchoont ti maaz* (quince apples and meat). It was a balmy August afternoon and she had come in from the orchards with a basket full of golden quinces. They had been washed, cored and sliced into wedges, before she had fried them and set them aside. When the meat was halfway done, she had added the *buntchoont* and let the flavours mingle.

The steam from the pot had clouded her glasses, but even without looking out of the window, she instructed one of the helpers to make some *kahwa* in preparation for guests. I looked out of the window trying to figure out who the three people walking towards the house were, when she nudged me with her *chonche* (a chunky wooden spoon) and said, “The important thing to remember about *buntchoont ti maaz* is that you must wait till the meat is halfway done before adding the fried fruit. If you add it any sooner, it will be a lumpy mess.”

She instructed one of the other helpers to take the dish off the *daan* in 20 minutes, and to serve it to the guests for lunch.

“How do you know they will stay for lunch?” I asked.

“Arguing with your children is hard work,” she replied with a wink. I had no idea what she was going on about.

“Come and sit with me and

learn.” She held my hand and led the way.

The family of three – father, mother and their daughter – were waiting in Phuphee's room and drinking hot cups of *kahwa*.

After greeting them and asking

after their health, Phuphee asked what she could do to help?

The gentleman teared up and narrated his tale of woe. They were from a higher caste family and had planned to send their daughter to university to study science, and

become a teacher or a professor. But she had refused and instead asked if she could go to the fashion college in Srinagar. His voice had become exponentially loud at this point.

“Tell me sister, have you heard of

anything more ludicrous? A girl from our family going to some college to study to be a tailor?” he roared. “Someone has cast an evil spell on her and I have come here so you can help us remove this evil from her brain.”

Phuphee nodded sympathetically. Up until this point, the girl's mother had not uttered a peep. Phuphee turned to her and asked what she thought about her daughter's request. The gentleman interrupted, “She thinks the same...,” but Phuphee raised her hand to signal that he had had his time.

“Dapp sa [tell me],” she told the woman. “We have another child, an older boy. His father wanted him to become a doctor, but he wanted to be a lawyer. His choice was respected. He studies abroad because that is what he wishes. When he told us of his decision, no one thought he was possessed or under a spell. I know what my daughter is proposing is a little unusual, but it is neither beneath nor above anything. I have seen her designs and I believe she has talent. I know she will work hard. The only reason people think it is acceptable to throttle her aspirations is because she is a girl,” the woman said, a little out of breath.

Everyone, including the daughter, was left stunned. The room was silent.

“I think it is time for lunch,” Phuphee said, splintering the quiet.

The food was brought in and eaten in silence. Only Phuphee spoke towards the end of the meal. “Knowing that *buntchoont ti maaz* go together is knowledge, but adding the *buntchoont* at the right time during the cooking process is wisdom.”

Once done, she invited the gentleman to have a smoke with her. They went out to the verandah where they smoked and spoke in hushed voices. When they came back, Phuphee wished them all well and told the young girl she wished her good luck at fashion college.

Later in the evening, I asked Phuphee what spell she had cast on the gentleman to make him agree to his daughter studying fashion.

“I reminded him of the time he had come to see Aapa [Phuphee's grandmother] when his father had opposed his wish to marry the woman who is now his wife because she was from a different caste. And how he had been prepared to run away and leave his family for the sake of the one he loved. I asked him to remember how that felt. That was it,” she replied.

I was stunned. What, no magic? No spells? She had changed his mind simply by speaking to him?

“Yes,” she said. “Sometimes people become buried under the weight of the world telling them what life ought to be like. You just have to dig deep enough to find the beating heart under all that rubble. That's all.”

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

