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Humanoid robot Sophia with Synapse's Shoma Chaudhury and David Hanson of Hanson Robotics, which developed her; and (below) filmmaker Vikramaditya Motwane, Anurag Kashyap and others at a panel discussion at Synapse. (COURTESY SYNAPSE 2025)

Aroon Deep

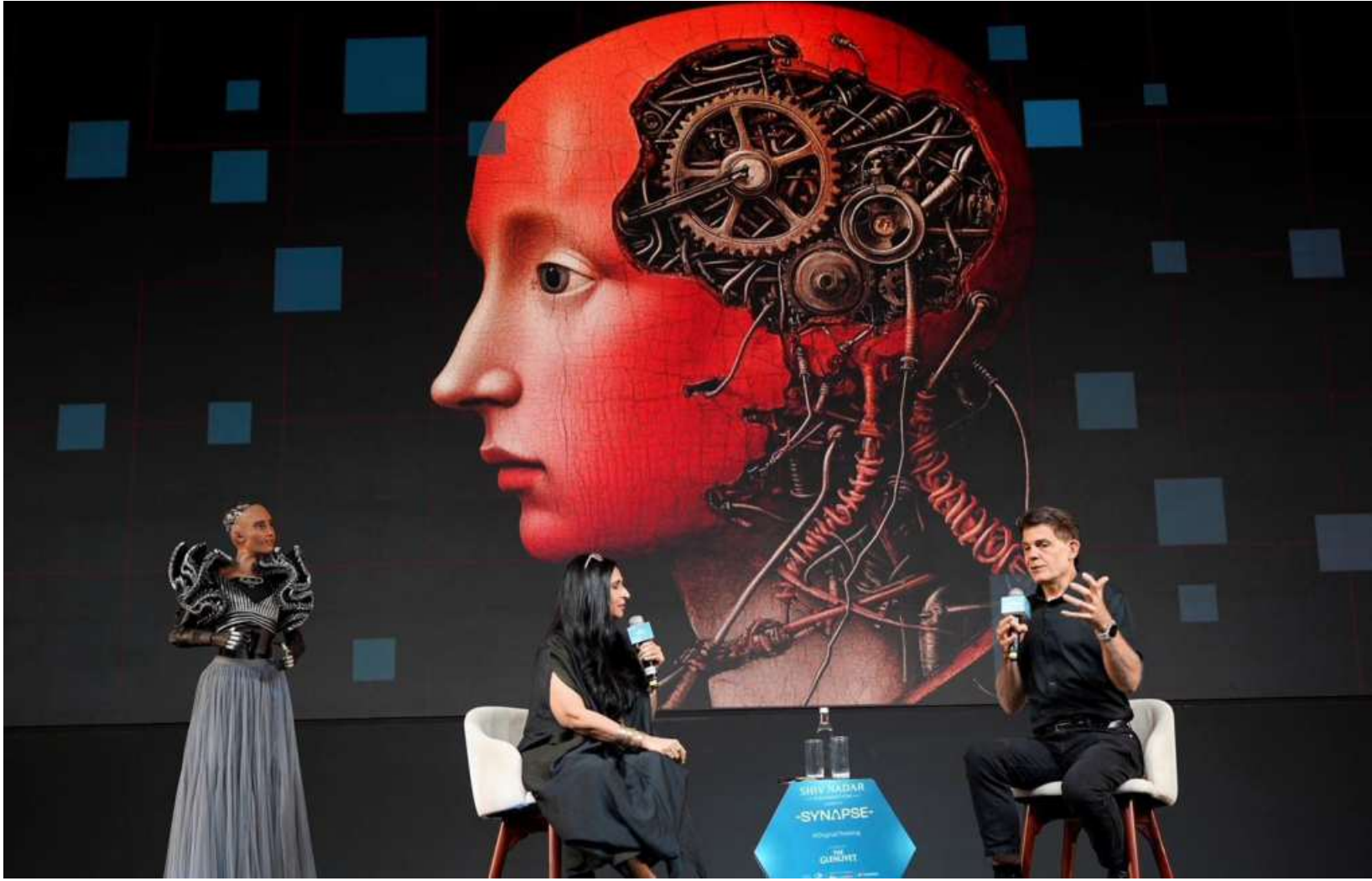
aroon.deep@thehindu.co.in

What are you going to do in an economy when there is going to be massive displacement due to AI? Can AI chatbots replace teachers? Do you have to worry about your brain being scanned for targeted ads? These were some of the questions that were addressed during the annual Synapse Conclave in the capital last month, where over 40 speakers, including Nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists, neuroscientists and philosophers, joined AI pioneers to discuss what it means to be human in an age of thinking machines.

"The core intention was the intersection between science, tech and society," says Shoma Chaudhury, journalist and founder-director of Synapse and the firm behind it, Lucid Lines Productions. While last year's edition matched AI with quantum technology and biotechnologies, this year the team focused on the brain, life sciences and bio engineering. "AI and the life sciences – material sciences, climate change – they are all converging. Typically, science and tech conferences are very B2B. For instance, you will have a crypto conference or fintech conference or an AI conference. Here, we were making visible the intersection between all these sciences, its potencies and opportunities but also its ethics and impacts on society," Chaudhury continues. For the 1,500-strong audience, which included entrepreneurs, doctors, 10 sitting high court judges, Congress chief Rahul Gandhi, people from the ministries, architects, artists, even those from Bollywood, there was a sense of learning something entirely new and its relevance to one's life.

Take, for instance, the debate around technology giving access to the inner workings of the brain and the need for laws to regulate this. Lawyer and AI ethicist Nita Farahany, a Synapse speaker also known for her TED talk on the right to mental privacy in the age of AI, has often talked about how we are quickly moving into a world where what one is thinking and feeling is just as transparent and can be just as easily decoded using AI and neurotechnology. Last year, in an interview with Manoush Zomorodi, the host of *TED Radio Hour* from NPR, she pointed out that while "consumer neurotech devices could finally enable us to treat our brain health and wellness as seriously as we treat the rest of our physical well-being and that regular use of brain sensors could even enable us to detect the earliest stages of the most aggressive forms of brain tumours... all of this will only be possible if people can confidently share their brain data without fear that it will be misused against them".

These concerns were reiterated by Carme Artigas when I spoke with her at Synapse. Artigas has served as a co-chair of the UN's AI Advisory Body from 2023 to 2024 and was also secretary of state for digitisation and AI in Spain. As an AI safety advocate, these days Artigas appears as much an inhabitant of an uncertain frontier as the scientists, considering what her domain has been up against (AI safety has gone out of style, what



BEING HUMAN IN AN AGE OF THINKING MACHINES

There is certainly more to AI than ChatGPT but as users sign up for neurotech devices and agentic AI models are we also reckoning with the risks?



with the U.S. and the U.K. refusing to sign on to a joint statement at Paris' AI Action Summit emphasising safe and responsible use of the technology).

"There's no one in the world who doesn't disagree with the need to develop AI in an ethical way," Artigas says. "But companies use this as an argument to say they don't need regulation because they already have their code of ethics. Well, ethics is subjective, and changes from country to country and from CEO to CEO." Artigas

points to an EU ban on scanning brainwaves. "Immersive technology already exists, like in hospitals. The problem is when this goes out of the hospital and it becomes a consumer good... if I buy earphones from Apple, Apple has a patent already registered where they can read your mind through your earphones. Then what is the ethical use of that? Who is preventing a commercial company from maximising their benefit by using your brainwave data and selling it to a consumer?" As things stand, outside the

The debate around mental health

Mumbai-based psychologist Shrradha Sidhwani, who counsels many young adults, says Indians are less plugged into AI for mental health right now for cultural reasons that revolve around tighter family and friend relationships. There is also an overall lack of awareness on mental health issues. For those who are plugged in, Sidhwani worries that "people are taking it at face value" as it throws up responses to mental health queries that don't take a patient's complete picture into account. About services like Character.AI, which emulate a whole person to form a parasocial relationship with, she expresses particular concern. "The whole essence of living life or therapy is not to increase the dependency, but to make a person emotionally independent and to help them cope with the struggles of life," she says, adding that learning to deal with loneliness is a life skill. But what patients can and cannot do with AI is still an open question. For instance, Sidhwani acknowledges that some patients use AI to simply learn what certain mental health problems are in the first place, and seek professional help after. She is also part of a project that is experimenting with using AI alongside real psychologists for online therapy. There are instances where AI can help counseling, she says, referring to a patient who used AI to help get out of a time management rut by asking a chatbot how other senior executives in his kind of role did so.

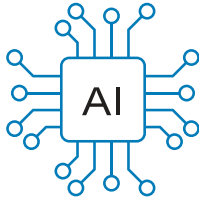
European Union, there's largely more regulation of household appliances than there is of AI.

Beyond Sophia

These were the conversations that took centrestage, as everyone from adman Prahlad Kakkar to filmmaker R. Balki from the audience lined up to have deep conversations with the speakers. While the conclave opened with robot Sophia – which rolled onto the stage, answered some light questions and had the crowd whipping out their phones –

attendees now familiar with generative AI were more curious about what happens when we take these capabilities and plug our brains into them (or plug them into our brains)? Elena Sergeeva is an advisor at the Foresight Institute, which isn't just looking at brain-computer interfaces but is offering grants to leverage such brain-computer links to compete with the super-intelligent AIs of the future. Just like some of the other speakers, Sergeeva's work also looks into using biotech to extend

FUTURE TECH



BETTER THAN ANY INTERN

AI as a personalised tutor and third parent



My use of AI in my blog Masala Lab is significantly high in its impact. I have built an AI agent that is a personalised tutor. So, every couple of hours, it pops up on my system and gives a brief course on the subjects I wish to learn. There's another AI agent that's trained on everything I've written, my notes and my book, so it's able to generate the first draft of a script for my YouTube videos. I then tinker with it and improve it. But the AI is 99% better than any intern I could have hired. I have built these tools using open-source AI chatbots from ChatGPT, Llama, Gemini, Perplexity and Claude. There's also a great AI podcast tool called NotebookLM from Google that reads out articles I missed out on the previous day. So, when I am driving, I listen to them and can even interrupt the host to ask questions of my own. I have also built a personalised tutor for my child, implementing specific guardrails around sensitive topics. The AI assistant has been optimised to use language suitable for a 12-year-old. I have finetuned it so it doesn't give out answers immediately and gives my son a moment to really think. I am also signed into my account so I can check the history and know what questions he's asked. AI can basically augment what a parent does while also keeping in mind the cultural values we have

KRISH ASHOK
Food science influencer, techie and author of *Masala Lab*

(As told to Poulomi Chatterjee)

lifespans. "People essentially want to live longer and healthier lives," she admits, and while the marriage of AI and biotech may seem new, Sergeeva points out that these are technologies that have long been intertwined. AlphaFold, first released in 2018 by Google parent Alphabet, has been used in predicting protein structures, a critical process that is of use to pharmaceutical researchers.

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Missing divine madness

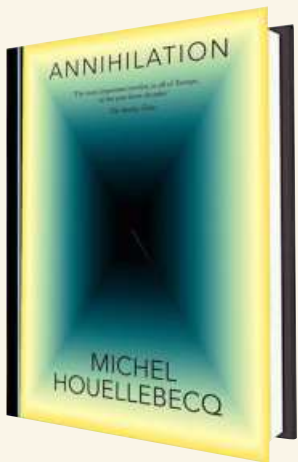
Controversial French writer Michel Houellebecq strikes again, but the parallel storylines don't do justice to the novel's cause

Anil Menon

Michel Houellebecq, considered as a career, is a curious case. He's not an arthouse orchid, living solely off a meagre but steady diet of literary awards. In fact, the awards are relatively few and he actually makes money from his novels. On the other hand, Houellebecq isn't merely one of those commercial successes, well-known enough to be sold on the streets of postcolonial nations. He is despised among the righteous – at least outside of France – for his alleged racism, misogyny, and Islamophobia. Yet, Houellebecq got his *Paris Review* interview, the industry's equivalent of the star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

All this is perhaps irrelevant for considering his latest work, *Annihilation*, translated from the French original *Anéantir* (2022) by Shaun Whiteside. The 500-page novel has two storylines. In one, a technically-savvy group of mysterious terrorists stages perfect attacks, some symbolic, on the instruments of global capitalism. This plot could be removed entirely.

The other storyline has to do with Paul Raison, a high-level apparatchik in the French Ministry of Finance. His father, Édouard, once a respected spy, is now retired and living a contented life with his partner Madeleine. Paul has a younger sister, the deeply religious Cécile, and a much younger brother Aurélien. The siblings aren't estranged and share a love for their father, but they are not close. Of the three siblings, only Cécile is happily married; Paul's marriage is a hibernating tardigrade, an organism of routines and rigid house-sharing rules. His wife Prudence is also a government functionary, and since this is a Houellebecqian novel, a



Annihilation
Michel Houellebecq, trs
Shaun Whiteside
Picador
₹1,000

Wiccan convert. Aurélien's wife seems to be a composite of all the female literary critics and journalists who have ever annoyed Houellebecq.

Where is the plot?

Édouard suffers a debilitating stroke, and Madeline, his children and their partners have to deal with the fallout. As with Braess' traffic paradox, in which the removal of a road can sometimes improve traffic conditions, so it is with the removal of a strong parent from the children's lives. The affective logjams between the siblings start to clear. Paul is launched on a trajectory towards rediscovering life's real meaning; namely, cuddling at night with someone you love.

There isn't much of a plot. This author has always been better at narrative perversions such as irrelevant quips, rants, and info-dumps, than at making conflicts, cliffhangers and other embarrassing inducements for the more dimwitted reader. So we learn, for example, that a good smoke is the only thing that can match the gravity of a hospital situation; and that job-centre advisors must have taken clowning workshops because "the psychological treatment of the unemployed had got much better over the last few years"; and so on.

Houellebecq's style has similarities with those of Poe, Marguerite Duras, Fleur Jaeggy, Robertson Davies and other novelists of the Balzacian persuasion. But unlike them, he is flippant and self-indulgent, and his novels, including *Annihilation*, suffer on that account. He has a sense of chaos and evil that contemporary literature badly needs, but his sentimentality prevents him from achieving the tragic grandeur signature to such efforts. A certain divine madness is missing. I didn't regret reading this novel one bit. However, I have no desire to read it again.

The reviewer is an author, most recently of *The Coincidence Plot*.



IN CONVERSATION

THE ASTONISHING BANU MUSHTAQ

Who is the Kannada writer, activist and advocate whose short story collection has been longlisted for this year's International Booker Prize?

Sathish G.T.

sathish.gt@thehindu.co.in

An eight-year-old Muslim girl is brought to a school run by Christian missionaries in Karnataka's Shivamogga in the 1950s. The management is reluctant to admit her in the Kannada medium as they are worried she will not pick up the language and might be better off in an Urdu school. After much persuasion by her father, the girl is granted admission on the condition that she learn to read and write Kannada in six months or else leave the school. To her teachers' surprise, not only does little Banu manage the feat, she does it in just a few days of joining school.

On February 25, 2025, Banu Mushtaq, 76, scripted history by becoming the first Kannada writer to be nominated for the International Booker Prize for her short story collection *Heart Lamp*, translated into English by Deepa Bhasthi. The book has 12 stories published originally between 1990 and 2023.

Mushtaq, who is also an advocate, politician and activist, has had a six-decade-long writing career. Her first story appeared in a periodical called *Prajamatha* in 1974, a year after she married Mohiyuddin Mushtaq, a businessman from Hassan near Mysuru. "Those

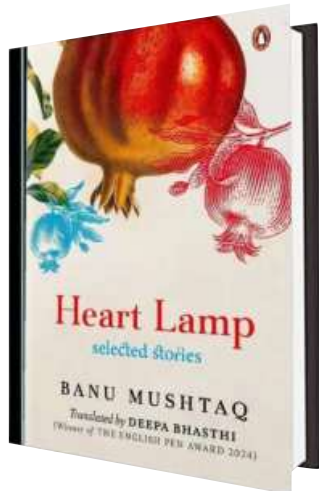
were tough days. I had just given birth to our first daughter. My husband would bring books and magazines to keep my mind engaged," says Mushtaq. Soon, she was introduced to *Lankesh Patrike*, a tabloid edited by poet and writer P. Lankesh (father of slain activist and journalist Gauri Lankesh), and began working there as a reporter.

For over a decade, she filed news reports, mainly investigative stories. During this time, she also brought out short story collections in Kannada. Mushtaq was associated with Kannada literature's Bandaya movement for social and economic justice, and in 1983, she was elected to Hassan City Municipal Council as a member.

In 1990, when Mushtaq left journalism following differences with Lankesh, she began practising as an advocate to support her family. "For the next 15 years, I focused only on my profession. Occasionally, I would find time to write stories and poems. But much of my time was devoted to my work," she says.

'Observer of human nature'

In 2000, when her anthology *Benki Male* was published, Mushtaq faced criticism from community elders for stating in an interview that women too had the right to offer prayer in mosques. There was severe backlash, including an attempt



on her life by a knife-wielding attacker. It took her years to overcome the trauma, she says.

But the firebrand writer continued to enrich the Kannada literary arena with her stories about Muslim families with women characters who fight for their rights and assert themselves. Over the decades, she has published several books, including *Hejje Moodida Haadi* (1990), *Benki Male* (1999), *Edeya Hanate* (2004), *Safeera* (2006), *Haseena Mattu Itara Kathegalu* (2015) and *Hennu Haddina Swayamvara* (2022). Her stories have been translated into Malayalam, Tamil, Punjabi and Urdu besides English. She won the Karnataka State Sahitya Academy award in 1999.

In its observation about her work, the International Booker Prize panel noted that "it's in her



Author Banu Mushtaq
(PRAKASH HASSAN)

characters – the sparky children, the audacious grandmothers, the buffoonish *maulvis* and thug brothers, the oft-hapless husbands, and the mothers above all, surviving their feelings at great cost – that Mushtaq emerges as an astonishing writer and observer of human nature, building disconcerting emotional heights out of a rich spoken style".

Edited excerpts from an interview with the author:

Question: What inspires you to write?

Answer: For me, writing is as easy as breathing. Whatever I think of and observe around me can be easily converted into a story, once I start to write it. Writing is also an expression of my feelings. I cannot sit quietly if I witness something that I don't agree with. I don't keep my emotions to myself. I react through my writing.

Q: Your writing and opinions have attracted the ire of many people. How do you overcome that?

A: I had to go through a tough time in the year 2000 after I expressed my opinion supporting women's right to offer prayer in mosques. I received threatening phone calls. For months, I could not leave my house. I was very worried about my family, particularly my children. But my mother and husband stood by me.

My mother, who hardly studied up to middle school, did not know what was happening but she knew that I was disturbed. When I explained the matter to her in detail, she supported my views. She also promised to look after my children if something happened to me. Those were terrible days. I could not write anything for two years.

Q: How do you feel about the International Booker Prize nomination?

A: It all started with the translation of my stories into English by Deepa Bhasthi a few years ago. The first collection, titled *Haseena and Other Stories*, won the English PEN translation award last year. Deepa then translated 11 other stories and the book, *Heart Lamp*, has been now nominated for the International Booker. I am happy to be among the 13 longlisted authors. Kannada language is being represented and I am happy for the recognition it is receiving.

Q: Tell us about your writing process?

A: As a practising advocate, it is difficult to find the time to write. Earlier, I had a helper to take dictation. But, in recent years, I have been using a mobile app. I use it for my court drafts as well. It understands my pronunciation and I can finalise the copy with minimal correction.

Q: What are you writing now?

A: I am writing short stories set in the present. It will be my seventh collection. Over the years, the distance between people has been growing. Some people whom I have known for decades hardly talk to me in person, but they are curious to know my political views on social media platforms.

Besides the anthology, there is also my autobiography, which is half-done. I need to collect some more material, and I am hopeful of completing it soon.

BROWSER

Dream Count

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Fourth Estate
₹599

On the longlist for this year's Women's Prize for Fiction, this novel is her attempt to "write a wrong", says the Nigerian author, who bases one of the four main characters on the New York hotel employee who accused then IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn of sexual assault in 2011.



The Comeback

Annie Zaidi
Aleph
₹599

Her new book was born out of her love of theatre, says the author, journalist and playwright, who pens a story of friendship and betrayal, forgiveness and second chances, set amid a grassroots small-town theatre. "You cannot do theatre without solidarity," says Zaidi.



Women's Prize for Fiction longlist

In its 30th year, the Women's Prize for Fiction longlist "shows the echoes of world events on everyday lives as well as the power and brilliance of women writing today", said jury chair and author Kit de Waal, announcing this year's 16 nominated books. New releases *Dream Count* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *The Dream Hotel* by Moroccan-American novelist Laila Lalami vie for the £30,000 prize alongside last year's well-received titles such as *All Fours* by Miranda July, *Crooked Seeds* by Karen Jennings, *Tell Me Everything* by Elizabeth Strout and Booker Prize-shortlisted *The Safekeep* by Yael van der Wouden, among others. The shortlist of six books will be announced on April 2, and the final winners of the fiction and nonfiction prizes will be declared on June 12.

Sanjay Sipahimalani

How do you do it? That must be one of the questions writers are most often asked. By what alchemy do ideas and experiences translate into words on the page? Most books that profess to answer deal with craft through a decidedly western lens. The work of writers from elsewhere is unfairly judged through standards of authenticity and representation. As Filipino-American writer Elaine Castillo puts it, one result is that readers “end up going to writers of colour to learn the specific – and go to white writers to feel the universal.”

An exception is *Letters to a Writer of Colour*, an edifying essay collection edited by authors Deepa Anappara and Taymour Soomro, in which writers reflect on hard-won lessons from personal experience. And now, there is *How I Write*, edited by writer Sonia Faleiro. The book grew out of the South Asia Speaks Masterclass series, conceived as a space for writers of South Asian origin to speak about their craft. The larger aim of the organisation is to help South Asian writers grow through mentorship, thus breaking down publishing barriers and amplifying unheard voices.

Candid compendium

How I Write is a candid compendium of perspectives by 18 noted practitioners of fiction and non-fiction on “what it means to be a creative person navigating and responding to a tumultuous world”. They speak about, among other things, writing habits, influences, and, perhaps most importantly, how their circumstances have shaped their work.

With the practice of journalism, Pankaj Mishra says in his conversation with Faleiro, “You have to be very clear about who you’re standing in solidarity with.” This leads to other questions: “Who are you really responsible for? What is your analytical

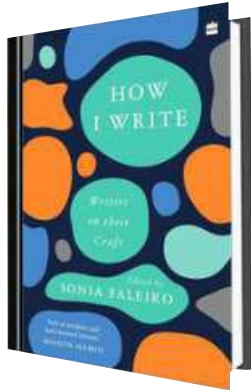


With one voice 1. Sanam Maher; 2. Manjushree Thapa; 3. Deepa Anappara; 4. Sonia Faleiro; 5. Meena Kandasamy; 6. Mayukh Sen; 7. Alice Albinia; 8. Pankaj Mishra; 9. Parul Sehgal; 10. Kamila Shamsie; 11. V.V. Ganeshananthan. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Karan Mahajan that fiction gives him “the space to explore the contradictions occurring throughout my life and the way they impacted how I saw myself, how I saw history”. His reflections on personal and historical complexity are underscored by critic Parul Sehgal who, speaking with Isaac Chotiner, deplores the pressure on South Asian writers to make their work “legible”. She cautions against the urge to “simplify, flatten, and overexplain” because much is lost when writers reduce their characters and stories to meet predetermined standards.

Canadian writer Sheila Heti recently wrote that what perplexes her about those who prescribe rigid rules for writing is that “they assume all humans experience the world the same way”. *How I Write* interrogates this assumption by presenting a range of personal experiences and perspectives, showcasing how each writer’s background shapes their approach to the craft.

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based critic.



How I Write: Writers on their Craft Edited by Sonia Faleiro Harper Collins India ₹699

‘DON’T SIMPLIFY’

Writers on what it means to be a creative person in tumultuous times

framework? What should shape your narrative, if not sympathy with the underdog?”

The importance of reading

A common theme is the importance of reading. Mayukh Sen, for example, tells Sanam Maher that he tries to follow the adage of ‘read more than you write’. On similar lines, Manjushree Thapa tells Roman Gautam that before you’re a writer, you’re a reader; V.V. Ganeshananthan tells Faleiro that

she chose to become a writer because she loved reading; and Taymour Soomro reveals to Deepa Anappara that from a young age, he would read absolutely anything at all.

Several writers emphasise the importance of finishing a first draft without judgment. As Kamila Shamsie tells Maher, “If anyone ever asks me for one piece of advice, it’s always, ‘Get to the end of your first draft.’ Don’t worry about making it good.” Future drafts are for figuring

out what the book is really about and making it as polished as possible. A book is like a river, Alice Albinia tells Taran Khan: “There may be lots of sources and tributaries but there is one river, and you have to find your way through it, narratively.”

Aside from habits of writing and reading, the interviewees discuss their initial impulses to write and how their work interacts with the larger world. For Nilanjana Roy, the challenge was overcoming “the fear

of being seen” as a writer rather than a journalist or reader. As she tells Mariam Tareen, it was a struggle to “stop people-pleasing” and write in her own voice. Meena Kandasamy, speaking with Fatima Bhutto, points to another personal dimension: “You don’t write out of rage; you write what you see, to make sense of a story.”

Pressure to be legible

In one of the more powerful conversations, Jamil Jan Kochai tells

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THE CHATGPT OF SHOPPING

Having raised \$50 million in seed funding, Daydream AI is now aiming to become 'a personal stylist for everyone'

Gavatri Rangachari Shah

I know how time consuming and exhausting it can be to scroll through endless windows searching for the right outfit at the right price. All those tabs open on the laptop – whether I am on Instagram, Amazon, Net-a-Porter or Ensemble's website. This is compounded by the fact that what I click on fuels algorithms, which throw up suggestions that I may not want. And I say this as someone who enjoys online shopping!

Now, imagine the ability to have a fashion advisor at your fingertips whenever you need outfit ideas. With advancements in AI, that looks set to happen. "Daydream, in essence, is ChatGPT for shopping," says Julie Bornstein, one of the co-founders of a new e-commerce search engine that uses technology to connect shoppers to the products they want. "Our goal is to build a personal stylist for everyone." Bornstein, who debuted a beta version of the platform at the BoF VOICES conference in Oxfordshire last November, hopes to launch this spring in the U.S., and roll out to the rest of the world later.

Simplifying shopping

"The problem today is information overload, and in shopping, the way that really translates is that there are too many web pages, too many products," she explains. The company has raised \$50 million in seed funding from major venture firms, and it has already signed on luxury brands from Gucci to Jimmy Choo, to retailers such



What's your order? Daydream has natural language search capabilities and a large catalogue. (top) Julie Bornstein at VOICES. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

as H&M to Net a Porter, to cult athleisure labels, including Alo Yoga. "We are partnered with fashion brands and multi-brand retailers," she says. "In beta today, the site has over a million items and over 5,000 brands, and as we sign on additional brands we will ultimately have the largest branded fashion catalogue online."

The idea, of course, is not unique. Amazon, Google, Meta and TikTok are using AI-enabled technology for shopping search and discovery. And according to an article in *TechCrunch*, multiple startups are attempting similar approaches, from True Fit, which tries to find the right size for consumers, to e-commerce sites such as Deft and Cherry that use text and pictures to find shoppable goods.

Daydream plans to differentiate itself by being extremely personalised, using photos and text to create a superior customer experience. It is building a generative AI agent with natural language search capabilities to help customers discover pieces. So, a user can go to the site, type in what they are looking for – a burgundy dress with an asymmetrical silhouette suitable for an

evening event – and the search engine will generate branded options.

Largest database

Bornstein is no stranger to AI-powered retail. The entrepreneur, who started her e-commerce journey at U.S. retailer Nordstrom, co-founded The Yes, an AI-powered shopping platform, in 2019. After Pinterest acquired it in 2022, she continued as its Chief Shopping Officer. She also has a strong record of using e-commerce to grow billion dollar businesses, as she did with Stitch Fix, an online personal styling service – where she learned how algorithms could give real-time product recommendations.

Daydream hopes to leverage its first mover advantage. They are using OpenAI and working with a set of stylists who are helping to train and work with current trends. "There are no direct competitors doing exactly what Daydream does, leveraging AI with deep domain level fashion knowledge models," Bornstein concludes.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.



CONTINUED FROM
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"AI has already been helpful in drug discovery," Sergeeva says. "In a few years, it will not be possible to do biotech without any AI support."

So what if these advances – like arresting ageing – burden the world with overpopulation, or what if they remain available only to the rich? "Humans are transhumanistic all the time," Sergeeva responds. "In the past, nobody could imagine that if you have bad vision, you can just use glasses... Technologists will develop in synchrony. When technologies appear, they are kind of a luxury, but over time, they become available to everyone. Businesses compete to make it cheaper and better."

Synapse founder Chaudhury says these conversations have opened her mind to how young tech entrepreneurs are thinking in the country. Awaiz Ahmed, founder and CEO of Bengaluru-based space-tech start-up Pixel, is a prime example. "Extremely tech-savvy and optimistic, they believe in techno-solutionism. It has opened my mind, even when I debate or question some of their enterprises. They don't think death, age, or the nature of human intelligence is inevitable. They believe that intelligence itself can evolve into something else. It is disturbing at some levels and eye-opening at another," she says.

OF AI friends and assistants
Earlier that day, when I opened Instagram, the platform had an ad featuring someone selling shared genAI subscriptions on the cheap. The last time I saw such illegal ads was for

shared Netflix subscriptions. More than 65% of Indians polled by Microsoft said they used AI, over double the global average of 31%. And Indians are using AI more and more for a host of things: it's not just about automating homework to writing polite emails with formal English. An increasing number of young Indians are using services like Character.AI to substitute real world friendships, or even emulate a relationship. This is particularly interesting for the consequences it can wreak on young people resorting to AI for guidance at sensitive times in their lives (see box on page 1).

Beyond making digital friends and romantic partners, though, there's 'vibe coding,' a term invented by the computer scientist Andrej Karpathy. Give



Hemu Ramaiah of Assign (left) and actor Pooja Bedi interact with robot Sophia; and (top) neuroscientist Elena Sergeeva at Synapse. (COURTESY SYNAPSE 2025)



a chatbot information on what you want a piece of code to do, and it handholds a user on how to deploy it. I have no coding background, and while writing this paragraph, I was able to write a piece of code on my phone that will now alert me whenever the Union government's gazette website puts out a notification for the ministries I cover. This may well take off massively among young IT graduates, with many tinkering with unfamiliar coding environments, and perhaps successfully fooling prospective firms about their actual capabilities. Or they could just make really cool code that works just for themselves.

Then there are agentic models, which can take over an entire device and automate tasks end-to-end, as though a human was going through the steps. At the very least, we can expect something like "Send good morning messages to each family member on WhatsApp". At the limit, imagine autonomous embodied AI bots that, unlike Sophia, can actually take chores off your hands. On the industrial side, Automation Anywhere, a San Jose-based firm that develops AI code for robotic automations, said 40% of its deployments globally were in India.

So, should one worry about AI taking over a big chunk of our lives as we know it? "The thing is AI creeps up on you bit by bit," says another Synapse speaker, director Vikramaditya Motwane (of *Udaan* and *CTRL* fame). AI tools are already being used in music and visual effects, he adds, and there may soon be specialised software to automate writing processes. "As long as this technology is as expensive as making a film in real time, people won't bother. The moment the technology catches up, AI is going to be at half price versus us at full price. Then what's the industry going to do?"



Flying high Fanni Pajer is also an active blogger and shares her adventures on Instagram.

to Casablanca in November 2020. With COVID-19 restrictions, she couldn't fly on a linear path from Austria into the African continent and instead flew along the western coast to enter Morocco, resulting in a longer than usual journey on this route.

Unlike commercial aircraft used to ferry passengers, the smaller planes that Pajer flies are often assigned landing permissions at the airport buildings meant for chartered planes or helicopters. More often than not, she also finds herself at airstrips where there aren't any passenger facilities but only maintenance hangars. Such facilities typically have toilets only for airport staff who are mostly men.

Designed for men

Pajer had other observations to share. About the plastic bags used by male pilots inside cockpits that are designed for the male anatomy, making them unusable for women. Similarly, there are "survival suits" used by pilots on trans-Atlantic flights that haven't yet been adapted for use by women aviators.

"These uniforms are designed for stick figures, and not for a person with breasts and hips. You can't breathe in them," says the mother of two. The suits are a specialised garment designed to keep the wearer afloat and maintain body temperature in cold water in case of an emergency.

With her 20 years of experience, Pajer had more than enough personal anecdotes to regale the audience. And not all of them had to do with relieving herself mid-flight. She hoped that these conversations as well as her active blogging, Instagram page and speaking assignments would help show what is possible for women in a male-dominated field as well as to bring about more empathy at the workplace.

INSIDE THE COCKPIT

Why kitchen jars are basic work accessories for this woman pilot from Austria

Jagriti Chandra

jagriti.chandra@thehindu.co.in

Glass jars wrapped inside jute bags and portable urination devices are a must-have in a cockpit for 48-year-old Fanni Pajer. As a ferry pilot, she flies small planes for an Austrian aircraft manufacturer, delivering them to customers around the world.

Transporting the DA-40 single-engine, light aircraft of aerospace company Diamond Aircraft – used often for pilot training, surveillance, and private flying – from its manufacturing site in Austria to customers in destinations as far as Australia could involve as many as 15 halts every four to five hours during a flight. An assignment that could

pose unique challenges for a woman pilot.

Doing your business in a cockpit on a plane without loos can involve "bending this way and that way" using either portable urination devices or kitchen jars, while ensuring that the control column or the joystick used for manoeuvring the plane is not disturbed. "Let's just say that doing yoga helps," Pajer told a gathering in New Delhi with a laugh.

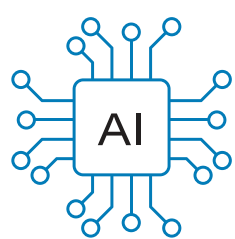
It was a get-together by The Ninety Nines Inc., an organisation of women pilots founded in New York in 1929 by the celebrated aviator Amelia Earhart. They extend mentorship and scholarships, and aim to create a sisterhood of pilots. Over 100 such pilots along with their partners were in India for 10 days last December, as a part of this mission.



Tricky terrains

At the event, Pajer went on to explain that often one lands at an airport either in Europe or Asia, where hangars do not even have toilets for women staff. Or there is a "VIP toilet" that is no more than a sandpit as she found out on a flight

FUTURE TECH



At work, I use ChatGPT, DeepSeek and Grok primarily for research when I am looking into new markets, competition, or companies. I also use them to rewrite drafts for social media posts, emails and investment memos. Of these, DeepSeek is the best for any reasoning problems and research. ChatGPT and Claude are good for storytelling, and Midjourney or Grok are great at generating images. Among the new, cool AI tools, Apple's AI generated transcript for podcasts and readalong is amazing and very accurate: the new note-taking capability from Gemini on Google Meet is phenomenally helpful during meetings, and if you're a developer or want to get started, Bolt.new is excellent for building and deploying simple apps quickly

GOWRI SHANKAR NAGARAJAN
Associate Partner, Antler India

(As told to Poulomi Chatterjee)

Saibal Chatterjee

Spanish filmmaker Paco Torres, preparing for his second narrative feature, began his career in the pre-digital era a quarter century ago. "I have seen it all – film, Betacam, analogue, digital and after," he says on the sidelines of the recently-concluded 23rd Pune International Film Festival (PIFF).

He is now in the thick of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) action and making the most of the freedom and flexibility that generative tools offer. "In the fluid moment that the world is in, AI gives us the power to work very fast. We can make much more in much less time," says the Seville-based director. Ahead of his session on 'Using AI in Cinema' at PIFF, Torres made a 90-second film in just four hours, working alone in his hotel room with a slew of AI generative tools.

In his talk, he presented a demonstration of how he made the film happen, starting with a prompt to ChatGPT and then employing Midjourney to improve the image, Kling to convert image to video, Krea to enhance the visuals and Eleven Labs for lip sync. He used the short film – titled *Chai & Secrets*, about two grandmothers sitting on a bench in Pune and revealing long-suppressed secrets to each other – to spell out the strengths, limitations and dynamics of AI. Although the background was less than perfect, given that the film was pulled out of a hat in next to no time, it was nothing short of a mini marvel. "The dialogue could have been in the local language if I had a few more hours at my disposal," says Torres. He adds: "There is no way that AI can be wished away. Things are moving faster than ever before. Don't be afraid. Surf the wave. We need to be in the driver's seat instead of letting AI completely take over content generation."

AI vs. human brain

Torres' body of work includes 300-plus commercials made worldwide, one fiction feature (*The Magic of Hope*, 2011) and several short films, including the award-winning *The Rattle of Benghazi* (2012), about a boy and a girl who play with a rattle to drown out the noise of bombing.

While Torres has used AI extensively in his filmmaking in the

'TREAT AI AS AN ALLY, NOT A THREAT'

Says Spanish director Paco Torres who made a short film using AI tools in just four hours, to demonstrate the speed and potential of the emerging technology



(Clockwise from left) Filmmaker Paco Torres; a still from his AI film *Chai & Secrets*; and a shot from Torres' award-winning short *The Rattle of Benghazi*.

last three years or so, he strikes an inevitable note of caution. "Ensure that AI is only the co-pilot. Our active participation is crucial because no AI can yet compare to the human brain," he points out.

It is important, he asserts, that "you have the services of a team for the ability to work better and faster". He adds, specifically referring to India's innate potential in animation and visual effects, that with the judicious and ethical use of AI, "you could produce three films or TV shows, instead of just one, in a year-and-a-half".

At the end of Torres' two-hour talk, Serbian cinematographer Djordje Stojiljkovic, who shot last year's Telugu blockbuster *Kalki 2898 AD* and served on PIFF's Mumbai Film Competition jury, wondered if AI could deliver an over-the-shoulder shot of the face of one of the old women in the film Torres rustled up in his hotel room. That might not be possible right now, Torres admitted. But he was quick to add that AI might soon be able to fully replicate camera placements and movements.

His remark reflected the misgivings and doubts that technicians are currently

grappling with across the world. Another PIFF jury member, Indian filmmaker Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, whose directorial credits include *Pink* (2016) and *Lost* (2022), asserts that AI can at best be a butler, an assistant. "It can never replace the human brain," he says.

Torres does not disagree. "AI is an ally and not a threat if you know how to use it creatively and imaginatively." He, however, understands why people in the industry are worried. Misgivings are inevitable when any new technology disrupts the routine, he says. But we must recognise that by innovating and experimenting sustainably, we only extend the possibilities of the medium.

Notwithstanding the inevitable doubts being expressed by film professionals and festivals, the role of AI as a support tool for filmmaking is increasingly being acknowledged, if only grudgingly at this point of its evolution. "I expect festivals to programme films made with AI sooner than later," says Torres.

Building a 100-year-old port
How much AI will Torres be using in his upcoming film, *Veleta*, which brings to screen the story of Spain's first woman footballer, Anita Carmona, who played in the 1920s disguised as a man? Not much, he says. He might, however, need AI in a scene to create a boat at the port from a hundred years ago. It would cost a bomb to make a boat from the period. "I will use AI for the purpose and then let the VFX company take it from there. That will be much, much cheaper," says Torres, who will be in Jordan next to film a commercial.

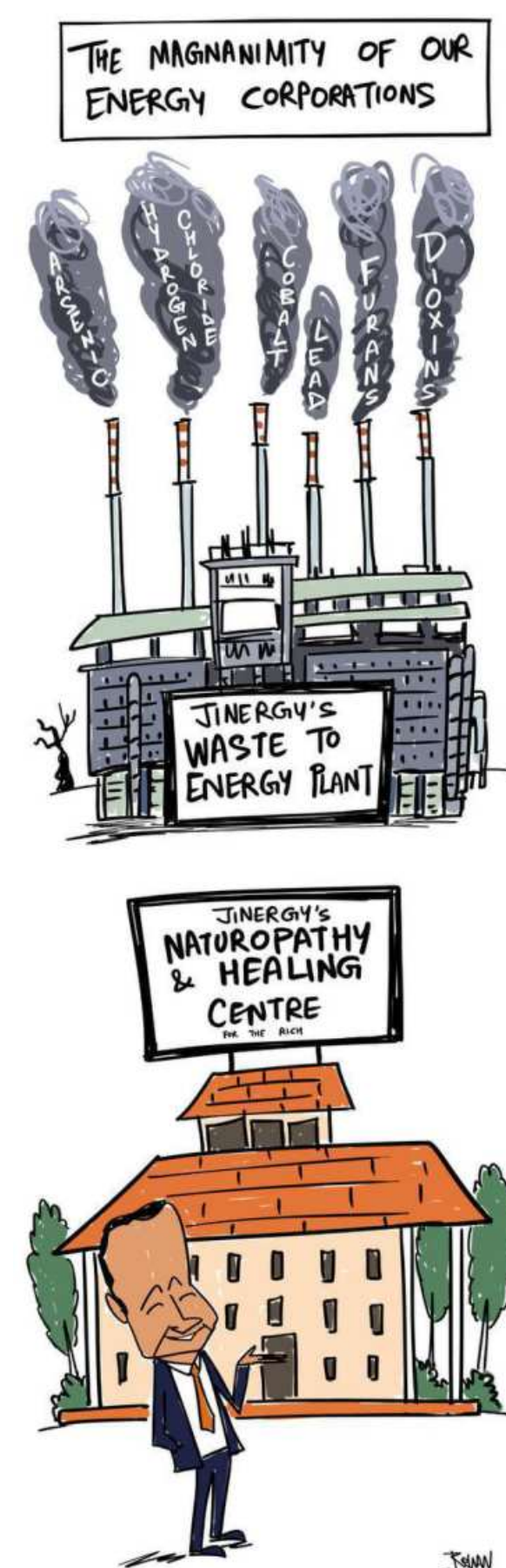
Veleta has entities such as La Liga Studios, Banijay Iberia and M Content on board as producers along with Amaya Muruzabal, showrunner of the successful Spanish series *Reina Roja* (Red Queen).

"This year," says Torres, "we are going to see a bunch of movies made entirely with AI. These are in the works even as we speak. We must embrace AI and mould it to our needs. Banish the idea that AI will replace you. It will only be an extension of your work."

The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



During the first episode of 7 Days Live, JioHotstar's new reality show hosted by Anubhav Singh Bassi, the comedian read out the 'house rules' for participants. The show places four digital creators inside a *Big Brother*-like enclosed space for seven days straight, challenging them to entertain viewers live, 24 hours a day, via skits, gags and so on. The four influencers in question are Lavkesh Kataria, Anjali Arora, M-Zee Bella and Dolly Javed, each with millions of followers on Instagram. Audience votes decide who wins. While laying down the rules, Bassi had a moment of (surprising) self-awareness: "The rules say that participants cannot write anything while inside the house," he says. "Why do we need this rule? If we were so interested in *padhai-likhai* [studying], we wouldn't be influencers, no?"

7 Days Live is one among a slew of new, unscripted shows released by JioHotstar via its all-new 'Sparks' vertical, which focuses on popular Indian influencers, comedians, and Internet celebrities, in general. Actor and influencer Uorfi Javed hosts *Engaged: Roka Ya Dhoka*, a *Temptation Island*-style reality show that tests the compatibility of couples. Comedian Rahul Dua is the face of *Victim Yaa Victor*, a game show where fans complete tasks and challenges to free their favourite influencers from behind cages. Stand-up artist Munawar Faruqui hosts *Hafta Vasooli*, a news comedy/satire filled with ironic 'panel discussions' and improvised skits, while Zakir Khan, one of the most popular Indian comedians, helms a talk show called *Love, Life, Laide*.

Bollywood on the wane

What has prompted the newly-merged entity JioHotstar to invest so heavily in the Hindi-speaking Internet ecosystem? There are a number of solid reasons that immediately suggest themselves. One is the slow but inevitable decline of the Bollywood box office. On that level, JioHotstar Sparks is an exercise in "following the money", although it is a tad bit early to discuss revenue models. Another reason: youngsters too



BINGE WATCH

Digital creators in the mainstream

In a sort of 'YouTubification' of traditional daytime television, OTT platform JioHotstar's new vertical focuses on popular content creators

young Bollywood icon they can get behind financially, in good faith. Cinema halls, too, are going all out to re-release old Shah Rukh Khan or Aamir Khan hits instead of putting their trust in New Bollywood. On that level, JioHotstar Sparks is an exercise in "following the money", although it is a tad bit early to discuss revenue models. Another reason: youngsters too

busy on their phones to notice what's happening on the large screen. Well, just give them more of what they're already consuming. What we're witnessing is the 'YouTubification' of traditional daytime television templates – everything is shorter, more compressed, illuminated with



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

Russian literary and cultural icon Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy’s great-grandson talks about war and peace, and how non-violence is a forever theme

Kallol Bhattacharjee kallol.b@thehindu.co.in

It’s not every day that you bump into a Tolstoy in India. At this year’s Jaipur Literature Festival, as I wait to check into the hotel, a stranger greets me with a warm smile. “Hi, I am Daniil Tolstoy,” he says. He had flown in from Sweden, where he lives. As we catch up at the five-day programme, I learn that Daniil is the great-grandson of Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, the Russian literary and cultural icon (referred to in English as Leo Tolstoy), who is celebrated in India for his literature and his ties with Mahatma Gandhi. Being a part of Czarist Russia, the Tolstoy family left the country in 1917, following the Bolshevik revolution, when Czar Nicholas II was eliminated along with his family. While Lev himself had died in 1910, Daniil’s grandfather and his family, including Daniil’s father Nikita Tolstoy, left for Sweden. “My mother’s family is Swedish. They



MEETING A TOLSTOY IN JAIPUR

originally came from Germany with the industrialisation of Sweden in the early 1800s and started forestry operations,” he shares. The Tolstoys quickly assimilated into Sweden, but they kept up their Russian family ties. Daniil regularly visited Russia, until the Russia-Ukraine war erupted in February 2022. “Travel to Russia was complicated by the war,” says

Daniil, who like his great-grandfather, believes in non-violence. “He believed in living a simple life, supported by one’s labour. Slightly inspired by that, I decided to start an organic farm near the old family estate in Yasnaya Polyana [about 160 km south of Moscow], and I did that until the war started when it became too complicated to run it,” says Daniil.

Gandhi, Lev and a Buddhist monk India’s link with the Tolstoy family can be traced to at least 1909 when Mahatma Gandhi, then fighting a battle for ending racial discrimination against the Africans and Indians in South Africa, exchanged a number of letters with Lev. The letters came during the last year of Lev’s life, and Gandhi described himself as a follower of his commitment to non-violence. Daniil says that long before his letters to Gandhi, Lev was influenced by an Indian Buddhist monk whom he had encountered in Kazan, in western Russia. “He was perhaps 17 when he met this monk.” He recounts that the monk was looted of his belongings by bandits, but he had refused to meet violence with violence. “This left an impression on young Lev.”

A family point of view Gopalkrishna Gandhi and Daniil Tolstoy (far left) at the Jaipur Literature Festival. (PTI)

Enduring popularity

“Russian classic literature continues to have a strong presence in India, being a throwback market, particularly in cities where there is a deep appreciation for classical works and translations,” says Aakash Gupta, managing director of Crossword Bookstores. Leo Tolstoy and other renowned authors such as Anton Chekhov and Alexander Pushkin have maintained their stature as monumental figures in world literature. “Another significant factor contributing to the ongoing popularity of Russian classics is the rising trend of book collecting. Beautifully bound editions, often crafted in hardcover or leather, have become highly sought after by collectors,” says Gupta, adding that in terms of sales, they sell “multiple hundreds of Tolstoy’s popular books like *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* and his short stories”. At New Delhi’s The Bookstore too, Tolstoy sells all the time. “While *Anna Karenina* is the most popular, *War and Peace* and his short stories sell as well. I can’t speak for earlier, but since the pandemic, we sell one copy of *Anna Karenina* a month, at least,” says a spokesperson.

have been provoked into a war. Moscow should have found a solution through diplomatic means.” The Buddhist link that inspired Lev early in his life is maintained by Daniil’s mother, who practices it. “She became interested in Buddhist ideas when she was young, and was quite active in spreading them in Sweden and across Europe. In fact, the Dalai Lama visited our country house in the 70s and asked my mother to help in establishing Buddhist centres in Sweden.” In keeping with his India focus, he feels India needs to do more to live up to its reputation as the home to Gandhi and Buddha. “India is already of great importance, but its role on the international stage can help to guide the world in the right direction.”

GOREN BRIDGE Winning at rubber Bridge Both vulnerable. South deals

Bob Jones Playing in a duplicate pairs competition, the declarer would have to assume that every single pair in his direction would reach this slam. There are 33 combined high-card points including all four aces and kings. A 3-2 diamond split with the queen onside would

yield an easy 13 tricks and no declarer could afford to give that chance up in a pairs game. He would cash the ace of diamonds and lead another diamond, disappointed to see West show out. There would still be a slim chance to make the contract – we’ll let interested readers figure that out – but it would fail on this lie of the cards. The best declarer could do would

NORTH
♠ K 9 2
♥ 5
♦ K J 7 4 2
♣ A Q 6 3

EAST
♠ 6 5 3
♥ J 9
♦ Q 10 6 5
♣ 10 7 4 2

SOUTH
♠ A 8 4
♥ A K Q 8 2
♦ A 8 3
♣ K 5

The bidding:
SOUTH 2NT Pass 3NT
WEST Pass Pass
NORTH 3♠* 6NT
EAST Pass All pass
*Minor-Suit Stayman

Opening lead: Queen of ♠

be down one. At rubber bridge, however, declarer would realise that he only needed four diamond tricks to make his contract. An overtrick

would be irrelevant. A thoughtful declarer would start diamonds by leading a low diamond to dummy’s king, noting the nine from West. He would lead a low

diamond from dummy and insert his eight when East played low. Should this lose to the 10 in the West hand, diamonds were splitting 3-2 all along and he could claim the rest. Had West followed to the first diamond with a low card, and not the nine, 10, or queen, South would have played his ace on the second round and relied on a 3-2 split. Easy game!

QUIZ Easy like Sunday morning Places named after people



Where is this colourful island, which was named after a saint? (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

Berty Ashley

1 Born this day in 1451, this Italian cartographer explored the world on behalf of Spain and Portugal. During his voyages, he came across a new land, which he noted down in his maps as ‘New World’. His name then became latinised and put on maps that followed after. This led to the naming of which continents, the only ones to be named after a person?

2 This country has been home to indigenous people for more than

14,000 years and is known for its high biodiversity. Only in 1819 did it take on its new name, a reference to an Italian explorer who accidentally landed on its shores. Which country is this?

3 This country in South America was one of the epicentres of the Mesoamerican nations, where the Mayans were prevalent. Although many countries are named after saints, this is the only one directly named after Jesus Christ. Which country is this whose name literally means ‘The Saviour’ in Spanish?

4 This country in the Pacific Ocean has evidence of early ancestors of humans living in caves more than 67,000 years ago. Due to its geographic location, it eventually had a mix of people from China, Polynesia and Japan. The Spanish landed in 1542, and they called it after the Prince of Asturias, who later became King Philip II of Spain. Which country is this?

5 Lech, Czech and Rus are three brothers, who were supposed to be the founders of three Slavic peoples, the Poles, the Czechs and the

Ruthenians, in an ancient European legend. Each were settlers in a certain region of Europe, and the Ruthenians eventually became three countries. If one of them is Ukraine, what are the other two?

6 Tariq ibn Ziyad was an Umayyad commander, who led an army across the narrow strait that connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. There is a city located at the tip of the strait, which has been historically important for trade and military. The city is dominated by a huge rock that is named ‘Mount of Tariq’, in his honour. What is the English translation of this name?

7 The full name of this South American country refers to two entities. When Amerigo Vespucci first saw the houses on stilts here, he was reminded of Venice, so he called it ‘Little Venice’. Its full name also refers to a military officer who led the country, and five others (including one named after him) to independence from the Spanish. Which country is this?

8 This country in Eastern Europe was inhabited by settlers for thousands of years. It has been controlled by multiple empires – Mongol, Ottoman, Persian and Russian. Earlier known as Colchians or Iberians they became followers of Christianity in 4AD and were named after their favourite saint, who was supposed to

have slain a dragon. Which country?

9 Özbek Khan was the longest-reigning ruler of the Golden Horde, a nomadic empire that started off under the Mongols. Oghuz Khagan was an ancestor of the Oghuz Turk tribe. Which doubly land-locked country is thought to be named after either one of these rulers?

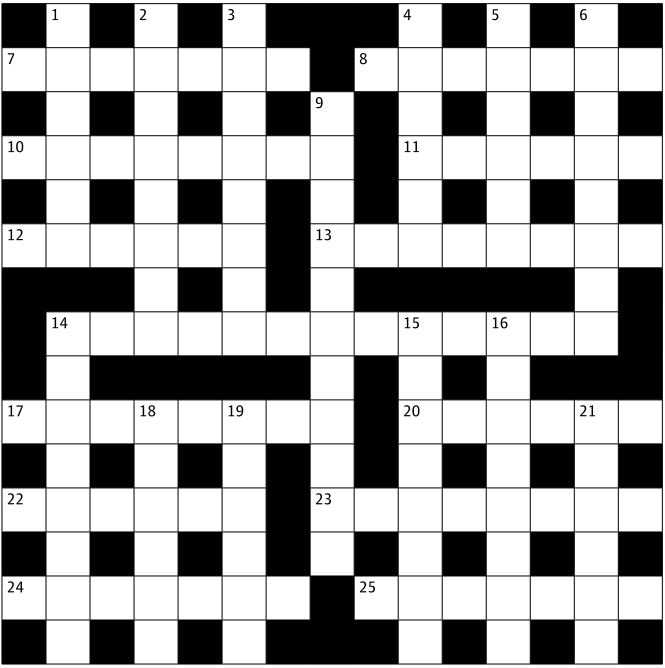
10 Saint Lucia is an island country in the West Indies, which having been inhabited for thousands of years, was fought for control between the English and the French for two centuries. It was named after Saint Lucy of Syracuse as sailors landed on the feast day of St. Lucy. What makes this country the only one in the world etymologically?

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. North and South America (Amerigo Vespucci)
2. Colombia
3. El Salvador
4. Philippines
5. Russia and Belarus
6. Gibraltar
7. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
8. Georgia
9. Uzbekistan
10. The only country named after a woman.

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3348

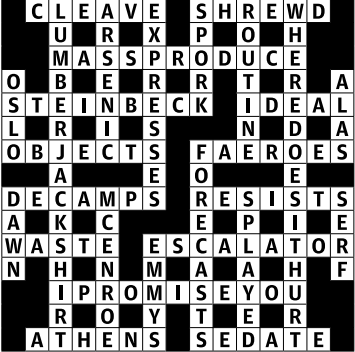


- Across**
- 7** Wild misery drinking drop of Drambuie: it’s only partly sweet (4-3)
8 Appetizing cabbage stuffed with quark on a regular basis (7)
10 Cultivated pasture but no time for *mangetout* (5,3)
11 Urge nephew to get round, grand festive booze (6)
12 In speech, would you let Everyman drink? (3,3)
13 Adieu! Eve’s off: this calls for strong drink! (3,2,3)
14 Behind boozer, fatso that’s often steaming (6,7)
17 Greens, then fruitcake and fried *pâtisserie* item (8)
20 Somewhat sombre, a stockbroker’s bust (6)
22 One particular ticket-seller vocally eschewed home cooking (3,3)
23 One opening function, first I reveal curry (8)
24 Pupils nervously bottling beer (7)
25 Judge with mounds of fat, heading off for desserts (7)

- Down**
- 1** Creepy-crawly, one in which you find the Spanish caviar (6)
2 Coriander? Instead, linguistically American name that’s rife online, primarily! (8)
3 It’s useful for Yorkshire puddings left out in

- the rain, perhaps (8)
4 Golden Gate — first, some cake! (6)
5 Meaty sandwich ingredient that might be Old Norse (6)
6 Evidently hungry, doctor taking first slice of cake, fresh out of the oven (8)
9 Too bad! Kept a vulgar jacketed item (5,6)
14 Flings cut short, stopped by questionable charmer (8)
15 An *apéritif* or 10? No, mate, on reflection (8)
16 Reserve cash for summer treat (3,5)
18 German to wake up and complain (6)
19 Woody spice — prized item — cash sent up (6)
21 Prepare round ball that’ll cleanse your palate (6)

SOLUTION NO.3347



Y. Mercy Famila
mercyfamila@gmail.com

Indian cinema has long shaped cultural norms, inspiring dreams but also reinforcing harmful stereotypes. One of the most damaging narratives is the portrayal of women as possessions to be “won” in the name of love. This toxic storytelling has real-world consequences, normalising harassment, stalking, and entitlement.

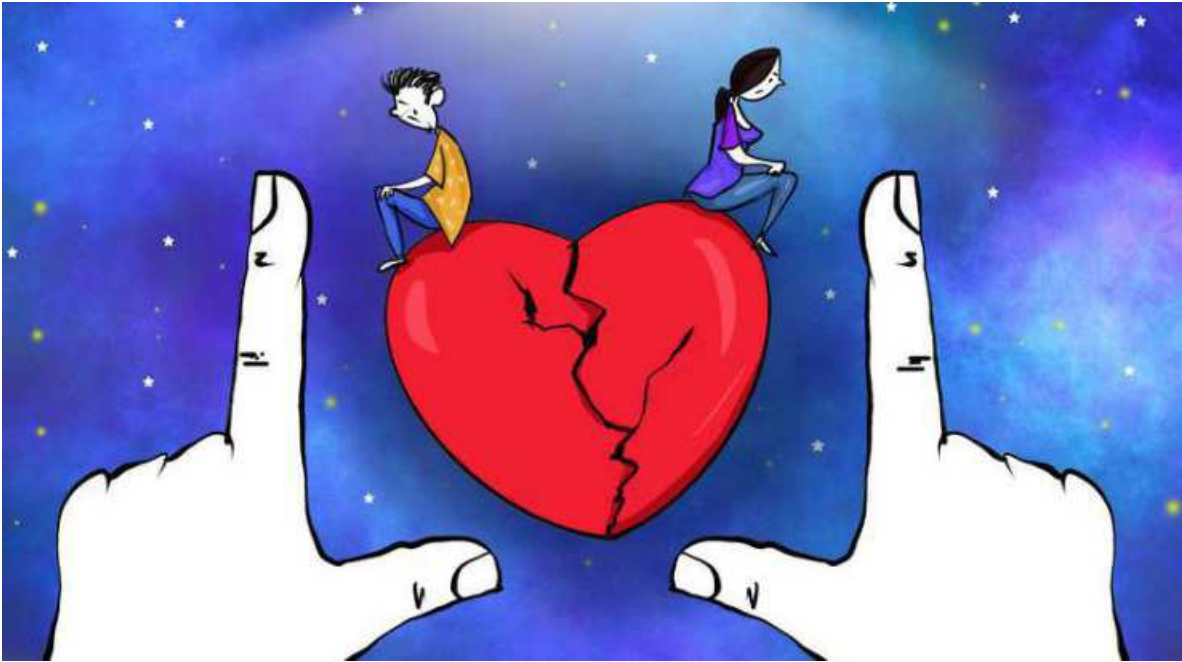
A recurring theme in Indian films is the relentless pursuit of a woman by the hero, often against her wishes. This pursuit, sometimes involving manipulation, stalking, or even violence, is framed as romantic. The woman’s rejection is depicted as a temporary obstacle rather than a decision, sending the message that persistence is love. When rejection is not respected in films, it fosters a culture in which women’s autonomy is disregarded, sometimes leading to violence. It is time filmmakers took responsibility and reshaped these narratives.

The term “love failure”, popularised by cinema, reinforces the idea that love is a conquest and rejection is a loss. This framing fosters entitlement, where men see rejection as an affront to their worth. Instead of encouraging acceptance, this mindset fuels anger and sometimes leads to revenge. Language shapes perception, and removing this term from cinematic dialogues can promote a healthier understanding of relationships. Rejection should be portrayed as a natural part of life, an opportunity for growth, rather than as a failure. So, filmmakers should consciously avoid using the term “love failure” in their movies, as it carries a deeply negative connotation.

Instant attraction

Indian films often depict love at first sight, reducing women to mere objects of attraction. This superficial portrayal distorts relationships, prioritising looks over emotional depth and mutual understanding. Even children casually use this phrase, reflecting how ingrained this idea has become. True love is built on respect and shared values, not instant attraction.

India’s high rate of acid attacks is a grim reflection of how cinematic narratives influence behaviour. Many attacks stem from rejected romantic advances, fuelled by the entitlement cinema often glorifies. When movies depict rejection as an insult to male pride, they contribute



Filmmakers, rewrite narratives

As they wield immense power in shaping societal attitudes, they should choose to tell stories that celebrate mutual respect, consent, and equality of the sexes

to a culture in which women fear the consequences of saying ‘no’. Films must shift from portraying women as prizes to be won and instead show them as autonomous individuals with the right to choose.

A common cinematic trope is the hero drowning his sorrows in alcohol after rejection. This dramatisation presents rejection as a life-altering tragedy. Why should a boy’s life stop because of rejection? Why can’t he focus on personal growth or career aspirations? Instead of glorifying despair, films should portray characters who move on with dignity, promoting resilience and self-respect.

Filmmakers wield immense power in shaping societal attitudes. They can tell stories that celebrate mutual respect, consent, and equality. Imagine films where love is a partnership, rejection is accepted gracefully, and relationships are built on trust. By moving away from toxic persistence and superficial romance, Indian cinema can foster a culture of respect. Hollywood and other industries often depict relationships based on consent and equality. Indian filmmakers can adapt these narratives while maintaining cultural relevance. Stories should inspire positive change, reflecting relationships built on understanding rather than conquest.

By 2043, when the Beta generation comes of age, we have the chance to build a society free from regressive cinematic influences. Filmmakers must lead this transformation by avoiding harmful tropes and promoting empowering narratives. This is a plea to Indian filmmakers: “Stop reinforcing toxic narratives.”

Making a decision and standing by it

Sujith Sandur
sk.sandur@gmail.com

Since our school days, we have been encouraged to be bold and to ask questions. In essence, asking questions is about seeking understanding. However, some seize every opportunity to ask questions, often without considering the discomfort their enquiries may cause. This trait, though more pronounced in the elderly, is not exclusive to them. What makes it worse is the insistence on receiving a response, as though it is their inherent right. Imagine a conversation in which one person is hesitant to open up but worries that ignoring the question might offend the other. Such situations can be challenging.

I recall one of my friends, a highly educated, graceful woman with a mature outlook on life, who decided during her undergraduate years to remain unmarried. Over time, her parents accepted and respected her decision. Yet, what hurt the family most was the relentless questioning from friends and relatives about her choice. Initially, they tried to avoid answering, but eventually, their responses became curt, and they found solace in that approach.

One afternoon, she visited me and shared her excitement about going abroad for higher studies. She was thrilled at the prospect of living in a culture where probing into personal matters was considered taboo. While I shared her joy, I asked her – perhaps for the first time – why she had chosen to remain single.

She told me about a practice she had adopted during her decision-making process. Whenever she thought of reasons to marry, she wrote them down. Similarly, when considering reasons not to marry, she recorded those too. Over time, she separated the “to marry” notes from the “not to marry” ones. When doubts arose, she revisited her notes to reaffirm her decision. Confidently she concluded, “If you make a decision with your eyes wide open, you won’t regret it because fulfilment is deeply personal and individual.”

Most of us fail to recognise that every individual has unique perceptions of life, their own aspirations, and their chosen paths to fulfilment. For some, wealth holds little significance; for others, travel is everything. Some find joy in spiritual pursuits, while others prioritise different values. It is crucial for us to appreciate and respect the diverse ways people seek and find fulfilment.

Home rules for health

For children, emotional and mental health are as vital as physical health

Mamata Singh
drmamta@sriramachandra.edu.in

Children today are under enormous academic, social, and digital pressure that affects their quality of life. They need holistic health with physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being for their balanced development. Physical health is very important for a growing child. A well-balanced diet provides proteins, vitamins, and minerals to boost immunity and overall health.

While reducing the consumption of processed and convenience foods, the Indian dietary rules place a strong emphasis on the value of eating home-cooked, freshly prepared meals. To support general health, these recommendations recommend a balanced diet of whole grains, legumes, fruits,



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vegetables, dairy products, and healthy fats.

Maintaining an active lifestyle requires promoting physical activities focused on the family. Playing traditional Indian games such as kabaddi and kho-kho or badminton or taking a post-dinner stroll or doing yoga together are simple ways to keep children active and strengthen family ties. Regular physical activity in the family may help lower the risk of lifestyle disorders such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, according to research. The Behavioural Model of

Sleep (Mindell et al., 2009) is arguably the best theory to enhance the sleep of children. It prioritises a routine bedtime consisting of behaviour such as bath time, brushing teeth, and reading to foster good sleep associations. By establishing self-soothing abilities and encouraging healthy sleep hygiene, the child learns to fall asleep and awakens less frequently during the night. Parental participation, such as reading a story before bedtime, relaxes the child. This structured method has been scientifically shown to improve the quality of sleep and overall health in children.

Emotional stability

Emotional and mental health are equally as vital as physical health. Emotional stability is fostered in a home where children feel free to express their feelings. For instance, parents should not brush off their child’s exam anxiety when they get home from school; rather, they should support candid discussions to assist the youngsters work through their emotions. Children can benefit from being

taught mindfulness practices such as deep breathing or silent thought for a short while. Our emotional and mental wellness is just as vital as our bodily health. An emotionally stable atmosphere is produced in a home where children are free to express their feelings. If your children tell you they are nervous about an exam when they get home from school, parents should encourage them to talk about their feelings to help them process.

Children can process and deal with stressors more effectively if they are taught mindfulness practices such as deep breathing or simply spending a few minutes in silence. A child’s personality and emotional intelligence are greatly influenced by social well-being. Sports, cultural events, and volunteer work are examples of team-building activities that promote empathy and collaboration. You teach children to be socially conscious and helpful in small-scale community service projects such as volunteering at a charity or aiding neighbours.

What is in a name?

Much, if there are many namesakes to contend with in the cyberworld



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responses from a matrimony portal intended for a namesake. Earlier this year, someone registered on a job site using my email ID. As I did in the matrimony case, I reset the password, logged

in, obtained the guy’s phone number, and called him. The jobseeker apologised, as did the matrimony guy, who asked me if I could edit the email field for him. However, not everyone is so understanding.

A guy from a north Kerala town refused to believe that the email ID he used for taking a motorbike insurance policy belonged to me.

The funniest incident was receiving a cruise ticket intended for a honeymooning couple. I quickly emailed my namesake in Australia, whom I knew from earlier such mishaps. He

contacted a third namesake to see if the tickets were his, and fortunately, they were.

I am certain this problem is not a stray one; any of those who have managed to create a “firstnamelastname” email ID would have faced this problem at least once. Receiving wrong-number phone calls was fun back in the 1980s and 1990s, but these emails are a mix of annoyance and amusement.

Wrong footprint

There is the problem of an erroneous digital footprint that gets created. In some database, you are so many people you are not, be it the young gentleman in the matrimony case or the motorbike owner. Or it’s probably a way for the universe to tell us that our names are not as unique as we think they are.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

To see unexpected styles of presentation conceived by people endowed with unique skills is an emerging trend. (‘World building is their forte’; Mar. 2) Such endeavours must be encouraged.

M.V. Nagavender Rao

Missing humour

The columnist is indulging in Modi bashing. (‘One unicorn whisperer coming up’; Mar. 2) I am not a *bhakt* and have no interest in politics. But I find no humour in G. Sampath’s columns any longer.

Murli Nair

Support women’s dreams

A mother pursuing her dreams would set an excellent example for her child by teaching values of commitment, hard work and passion. (‘Gulkand ice cream and ambition’; Mar. 2) Families and society must respect, and not judge, women’s choices, and support them in their endeavours.

Anusha Pillay

Phuphee’s lessons come as a solace to a troubled mind, and when we think of it coming from a Kashmiri landscape, there’s a sense of stillness and peace that’s indescribable. I learn a lot from her.

Rohith Varon S.S.

Sunday learning

Last week’s quiz about the various online scams now prevalent in India was an informative compilation. This will help people be on guard. Thank you, Berty Ashley.

H.N.S Mani



MORE ON THE WEB
www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Of ‘evolution’ in India

How the country opts for a patchwork quilt stitched together with hope, desperation, and duct tape

K.M. Vishnu Namboodiri

Plunge into reading

Good literature provides a plethora of perspectives to see the self and the world in a different light

Aakash Bajpai

Life of a bookworm

Behind the dusty bookshelves lies a series of pressures and misconceptions

Chanchala Borah

An era of darkness

Months of COVID-induced behaviour deprived the mind of its past, pleasant memories

Meena Sodhi

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Barry Rodgers

barry.nathaniel@thehindu.co.in

In 1980, when writer Murzban F. Shroff was 15, he found himself in a dilemma. British rock band The Police were playing a one-off gig at Rang Bhavan, their only concert in India. Unable to afford a ticket, he scaled the venue's wall – only to be caught.

“Just when things looked bleak, a westerner stepped in, persuading the police to let me go,” says Murzban. In an unexpected act of kindness, the stranger handed him a ticket and walked away. “I was stunned by his generosity. The atmosphere was electric; it was Bombay's first major rock concert. At the time, I had no idea that the event was organised by the ladies of the Time & Talents Club.” Interestingly, in an interview with *Rolling Stone* India last year, Sting recalled the performance, describing it as a defining moment in his love for India.

Last month, the Time and Talents Club marked its 90th anniversary, and did what it does best – held a fundraiser with some help from Delhi-based designer Ashdeen Lilaowala. As the lights dimmed, singer Delraaz Bunshah took the stage in a hand-embroidered black Ashdeen bustier gown, followed by several members of the Parsi community, including digital content creator Scherezade Shroff Talwar and celebrity stylist Anaita Shroff Adajania, walking the ramp. “I curated 30 archival pieces, tweaking them for the occasion,” says Lilaowala, whose label reimagine the Parsi *gara*. He donated a *gara* sari for auction, with proceeds going towards women's empowerment projects.

The designer speaks fondly about planning the fashion show, and how whenever they met, the ladies would bring along chicken sandwiches and an icebox full of drinks. “They believed in keeping me well-fed,” he laughs, “but it also created a lovely sense of community.” Their discussions were lively, and while they admitted that technology wasn't their best friend, they were



willing to embrace it. In fact, they agreed to list tickets for the celebration dinner on BookMyShow – something they had never done before.

Building the city's cultural landscape

The Time & Talents Club has around 175 members today, the majority of whom are over 60 years of age. But that hasn't put a damper on their philanthropy. The funds from their latest initiative, for instance, “will go towards [a variety of initiatives] – whether it's training, shelter, or healthcare”, says Bhaktawar Shroff, the current acting president.

The club began in 1934 when three sisters – Gool, Hilla, and Sooni of the Mulla family – met Roshan Sethna. They invited her to share her jewellery-making skills with them over coffee, and as more friends joined, Sethna became part of a weekly gathering at their mother Lady Jerbai Mulla's residence.

What began with sewing, knitting, and cooking later expanded into broader philanthropic initiatives – like setting up the Victoria Stall in Apollo Bunder to make meals for the Indian Armed Forces during the 1966 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars. The club's golden jubilee in 1984 saw Zubin Mehta perform; a fitting tribute since his father, Mehli Mehta, had been the first featured artist in their concert series.

“The ladies were resourceful in securing top musicians,” says Bhaktawar. She recalls how in 1957, they staged two landmark events: a San Francisco ballet performance at Rang Bhavan, and a concert by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Antal Doráti at Eros



PARSI LADIES AND A BOMBAY CLUB STORY

From flying down The Police to cooking for Indian soldiers, the women of the Time & Talents Club have always celebrated art, culture and the spirit of giving back

Theatre. “They reached out to managers and convinced artists touring Japan and Southeast Asia to make a stop in Bombay. And the club handled everything – from flights to accommodation, often hosting them in their own homes.”

Over the years, there were several bloopers, too. A member remembers when the club brought Chinese pianist Fut Song for a concert recital. At the dinner that followed, a guest tried to show off his musical knowledge and told Fut that though he had played well, he had left out a whole section. The pianist was offended and a huge argument broke out, and the host had to intervene.

Cookbooks to high fashion

Fashion was another of the club's cultural touchpoints. In 1962, member Dina Bilimoria, who was living in Paris then, contacted fashion designer Marc Bohan of Dior, leading to a Bombay showcase of the French luxury brand's latest collection, with mannequins flown in from France. The event was held at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, thanks to physicist Homi Bhabha. Similar shows followed with Pierre Cardin in 1967 and Jacques Esterel in 1969.

“The club has also left its mark on Bombay's culinary history. In 1935, it published *The Time & Talents Club*

A legacy of care

Victory Stall was a defining project for the club. Established in 1963 during the Chinese aggression, it was set up to support widows and orphans of soldiers. Pipsy Wadia, a club member, persuaded Homi Bhabha to allocate space at the Atomic Energy Commission for the initiative. Initially a small operation serving homemade Parsi dishes, it evolved into a full-fledged restaurant at NCPA. It became a Bombay institution, drawing intellectuals, families, and office workers for its affordable meals.

During the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1966 and 1971, the club sent care packages to soldiers. One of its creative fundraisers showcased handcrafted floral arrangements, dolls, and artefacts from South India. This led to The House of Bamboo, a souvenir shop that later became a Fair Price Shop, selling household goods at some of the lowest rates in the city. The initiative even inspired the Maharashtra government to launch Sahakari Bhandar cooperative stores.



(Clockwise from above) The Police; Scherezade Shroff and Anaita Shroff Adajania at the event; Ashdeen Lilaowala with Bhaktawar Shroff; an archival photo of a few committee members; and conductor Zubin Mehta hugging Gool Shavaksha. (TIMES & TALENTS CLUB AND ASHDEEN)

Recipe Book, which went on to become a staple in Parsi households,” says Kamal Mulla, who served as director of projects for over three decades. “What started as a modest collection of 100 recipes grew into a compendium of over 2,000 dishes, spanning Parsi, Indian, and international cuisines.” It included recipes from well-known Parsi figures. One standout is Curry à la Zubin Mehta, a dish shared by the famous conductor that he probably whipped up on his tours, with canned shrimp and coconut milk.

Giving and receiving love

“We take friendships seriously. There's personal philanthropy – the way we show up for one another – and a universal compassion, which I believe stems from our history,” says Bhaktawar. “We were given shelter in India, and many of us haven't forgotten that. It's reciprocal – we give, but we also receive love and respect.”

A small difference now: while the newer generation is willing to contribute financially, few are stepping up to join committees or take on organisational roles.

Today, the club's philanthropic focus spans rural welfare, healthcare, and rehabilitation. “Our focus is curative cancer treatment for children of labourers, rickshaw drivers, and shopkeepers who require chemotherapy and radiation,” she says.

The club also supports a safe shelter for women in Gadchiroli, provides menstrual health education in Dhanora village, and works with survivors of human trafficking, offering vocational training.



Sriram V.

To the East India Company and the British Raj that followed it, mapping was an obsession. The empires that came before them, such as the Mughals and the Marathas, did not engage in cartography in quite the same way.

The British needed to study the topography of what was to them very foreign territory in order to assess revenues from rent-farming in the subcontinent. The result was survey maps, which were among the earliest efforts to document the country as a whole. Through these maps, for the first time, India emerges as we recognise it today. These give us an idea of how splintered we once were and how we have moved ahead, shaped by many forces, to become a unified whole.

South's inflection point

A study of some of the historic maps in the Sarmaya collection reveals how, once, even a cohesive Deccan and the Coromandel seems to have been a distant possibility. A map from 1758 by Jacques-Nicholas Bellin reveals the inflection point in the history of South India.

The map has just about every empire represented: the Carnatic, with its Nawab, is a huge presence, and huddled against the coast are the colonial powers stretching from the present Andhra border all the way to Kanniyakumari. What is today just one state, namely Tamil Nadu, has the Dutch (Pulicat, Sadras, Nagapattinam), the British (Madras, Fort St David at Cuddalore), the remnants of the



Defeat of Tippoo Saib before Seringapatnam by the Marquis Cornwallis, 1795; and (below) East view of Seringapatnam, 1793. (SARMAYA ARTS FOUNDATION)



LIVING ARCHIVE

Tracing empires on paper

Before the era of photography, the theatre of war played out on maps and paintings. A heritage activist reports from the southern frontlines, over two centuries later

Portuguese (San Thome is listed separately), and the Danes (Tharangambadi). At this stage, though the game was still wide open, the British had begun to emerge as the strongest contenders to the seat of power in South India.

Obsession with Tipu Sultan

Soon, however, British ascendancy was challenged by Hyder Ali, the de facto ruler of Mysore. By the 1760s,

all attention was centred on how to tackle him. What followed was a series of four wars, spanning three decades. The first Anglo-Mysore War was decisively won by Hyder Ali but his death in 1782 meant the second one was inconclusive.

He was succeeded to the throne by his son Tipu Sultan, who commanded even greater fear among the British. In Madras, English traders rarely ventured out

of Fort St. George, such being the terror that Tipu struck. In 1782, he had come up to the Fort and threatened the Governor's bungalow on Mount Road.

Several maps show the British obsession with Tipu Sultan. In 1792, in the third Anglo-Mysore war, the Governor-General of India Charles Cornwallis defeated him and imposed war damages. Tipu's sons were taken hostage, brought to

Madras and kept there till the money was paid. Given their respect for Tipu as an adversary, this victory was very important for the British to commemorate. In paintings and sculpture, artists of the time recreated the moment. The scene when Lord Cornwallis took the two sons from Tipu Sultan is carved into the frieze under the statue of Cornwallis at the Fort Museum in Chennai.

In time, Tipu repaid damages and took back his sons. But he and the kingdom of Mysore were now much weakened and in no position to take on the British. Then the battle came to his doorstep.

Art of battle

The last stand of Tipu Sultan, the storming of Seringapatam and the discovery of his body are all

gripping action paintings, recreated by artists from eyewitness accounts. The most decorated among these was Colonel Arthur Wellesley, who was sent in 1798 by his brother, Governor-General Richard Wellesley, to stir up war with Mysore.

It was claimed that Tipu had sought help from Napoleon, who had by then reached Egypt, and urged the French to attack the British in Madras. To prevent this, the British, the Marathas and the Nizam of Hyderabad formed an alliance. The fourth and final Anglo-Mysore war ended with the siege of Seringapatam, which lasted through April and May in 1799. Tipu may not have wanted to fight but he emerged, and perished.

The fall of Tipu marked the rise of Arthur Wellesley, who went on to greater glories in his career. He distinguished himself at the Battle of Assaye against the Marathas, defeated Napoleon at Waterloo and became the Prime Minister of England twice. He was made Duke of Wellington, and Wellington cantonment in the Nilgiris is named for him. One last map makes for poignant viewing. It shows us how the Nizam, the Marathas and the East India Company carved up Tipu's territory. An era had ended, and the British were all set for a lasting tenure as overlords.

The columnist is a writer and historian.

The last in the series of columns by sarmaya.in, a digital archive of India's diverse histories and artistic traditions.