



# magazine

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*Mahanagar* and *Aranyer Din Ratri*. This followed screenings at the top three fall season festivals in North America: Telluride, Toronto and New York. There were more awards, including from several American critics' associations. And even though India did not submit *All We Imagine as Light* for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, the buzz about it remained strong.

According to filmmaker and film preservationist Shivendra Singh Dungarpur the reason for the success of *All We Imagine as Light* is the new film language that Kapadia has developed. "She blends fiction with documentary style of filmmaking giving her narrative an almost hypnotic quality," he says. "You can't tell where the fiction begins and when it is pure documentary." Mumbai-based Kapadia worked as an assistant with Dungarpur before she joined the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). Her journey since has been one of resilience – overcoming wrong charges of rioting at FTII (where her scholarship was suspended), to persisting with her vision even when her films never found a local audience. Until now.

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## PAYAL KAPADIA'S SEAT AT THE BIG TABLE

A lack of budget certainly didn't stop the filmmaker.

Her big win at Cannes, along with rave reviews, special screenings and strong distributors with festival know-how have given her an edge

**Aseem Chhabra**

In the spring of 2022, S.S. Rajamouli's historical action drama *RRR* was a huge hit in India and in the global Indian diaspora market when two American distributors floated the idea of releasing it once again – to reach an audience not usually drawn to Indian films.

With great word of mouth and reviews, the film pulled more American audiences. It was quite unlike anything Americans had seen. *RRR* ended up winning a few critics' association awards and a Golden Globe for the song 'Nattu Nattu'. One day before the final Oscars voting began, the distributors, Variance Films and Potentate Films, organised a sold-out screening in the 1,647-seat Ace Hotel Theatre in Los Angeles. A couple of weeks later, 'Nattu Nattu' won an Oscar for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures.



**Being selected** at Cannes helped a lot. Many critics wrote positively about the film. Because of it, we met distributors from all over the world who picked up the movie

**PAYAL KAPADIA**  
Filmmaker

Indian films rarely make such an impact in the U.S. during the awards seasons. I have been observing this for over four decades, first as a journalism student, then an entertainment writer and the festival director of the oldest Indian film festival in North America. Unless it is a work of the magnitude of Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* – a British-Indian co-production that won eight Oscars in 1983, beating Steven Spielberg's most loved film *E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial*.

Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* also won eight Oscars, but unlike *Gandhi* it was a British production with no Indian producer attached to it.

**Grand Prix sets the ball rolling**  
Marketing, promotion, and celebrity endorsements are often a big part of the awards campaign. In the fall of 2001, British filmmaker Roland Joffé (*The Killing Fields*) called a few of his friends in Hollywood – all members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Joffé had seen Ashutosh Gowarikar's *Lagaan*, which was India's entry for the Best Foreign Language Film. He had liked the film – about a farmer during the British Raj who challenges its officers to a game of cricket to get tax exemption – and wanted to make sure his friends would attend the Academy's screening.

But in all these years I had not seen an Indian film reach American shores with a stamp of having won an award at a major film festival – not until May 2024, when Payal Kapadia's second feature *All We Imagine as Light* won the Grand Prix at the 77th Cannes Film Festival. It was the first Indian film in 30 years to play in the main competition section of the festival.

Suddenly, it seemed everyone was talking about *All We Imagine*

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David Walliams  
(GETTY IMAGES)

# DAVID WALLIAMS IN THE HOUSE

The bestselling children's author and comedian, in India on a six-city book tour, connects with his readers even as he tackles serious themes in his books

Rati Girish

**W**hy do you like reading David Walliams, I ask a nine-year-old friend. Without giving it too much thought, she replies, "He does everything right in his books."

This is high praise, coming from a middle-grade reader who has a thousand other distractions vying for her attention. What does "everything right" mean? Perhaps, it starts when you first lay eyes on one of his books – they have bright covers with whimsical and playful characters. Or maybe it's the interesting titles (*Gangsta Granny*, *Super Sleuth*, *Awful Auntie* – Walliams is partial to alliteration)?

And when you open one of the books, a young character will draw you into the details and bothers of their life in a way that makes you laugh and nod along. There is also a good deal of 'bogey-flicking' and 'bottom burps' to keep the young reader enthralled.

Walliams – who will be in India from January 15 on a six-city book tour, and at *The Hindu* Lit Fest in Chennai on January 18 – by his own admission is an ordinary "white, middle-aged, middle-class man" who had but one dream. All he wanted was to write a couple of books and showcase them on his mantle for his guests as a conversation starter. Little did he know that his flair for writing comedy would sell 50 million

copies of his books worldwide. Says the London-based author: "I never thought writing books for children would be a big part of my life or career. And, so what's happened is all incredibly pleasing and a surprise because I had a whole other career before I started doing this. So I feel very lucky I've had success in more than one area." Since his debut with *The Boy in the Dress* in 2008, Walliams has written over 50 books, including novels, picture books, short story collections, and non-fiction. This year, his first murder mystery, *Super Sleuth*, is set to hit shelves.

#### Boy in a dress

So how does a self-deprecating, British television actor, writer, and comedian become a bestselling children's author?

Let's say it started with an idea about what would happen if a boy wore a dress to school. Drawing from personal experiences, Walliams created 12-year-old Dennis and his little world with his father, older brother John, best friend Darvesh, friendly news agent Raj, and confidante Lisa. But he also subtly wove in that it is absolutely alright to think and feel differently from those around you. "I just kept thinking about this story, about what would happen if a boy went to school dressed as a girl. How would his friends react? How would his family react? And I thought, it's a story about a child, so maybe children would want to read it," says Walliams.

The book was a bestseller and showed Walliams that humour could be used to talk to children

about serious issues. He has since addressed poverty through *Ratburger*, homelessness through *Mr Stink*, loneliness through *Billionaire Boy*, bereavement through *Gangsta Granny*, and dementia through *Grandpa's Great Escape*.

#### Courting controversy

Over the years, creating diverse characters and plots – both for his books and TV shows such as *Little Britain* and *Come Fly With Me* – with his trademark humour has earned Walliams his fair share of negative publicity.

Critics of his books have also accused him of stereotyping minorities, and expressed dismay over his portrayal of female characters. Some stories like that of Brian Wong from his book *The World's Worst Children* have been dropped by the publisher in recent editions.

Walliams isn't very concerned, he says, adding that it is all a part of the learning process. "If I've got something wrong or somebody's not happy, I think it's my job to listen, not to get defensive, not to get angry but just to listen, because we all have different points of view. But at the same time, you should have your own sensibility about these things too."

Walliams recently announced a new show with fellow sketch comedy artist Matt Lucas, set to release this month.

#### In Roald Dahl's footsteps

Having carved a place for himself in children's literature, Walliams is often hailed as a successor to Roald Dahl for his style of blending mischief and

## What readers asked

### Strangest place you have written a book.

An Italian prison cell. I was taken by border guards because I travelled on the wrong passport to Venice. Luckily, I kept my laptop, and it was the best nine hours of writing I've ever done.

### Greatest children's book of all time.

It is probably *Alice in Wonderland* because it was the first children's book that was a work of literature.

### The book you wish you had written.

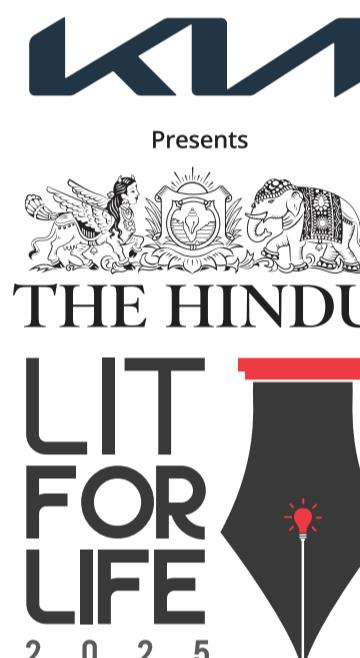
*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* because it sold a lot of copies. I wish I'd written *Twits* by Roald Dahl because I think it's the funniest children's book I've ever read.

### A piece of unforgettable feedback or review from a child.

I suppose the worst thing a child could ever say is that they found something boring.

### If you could be a character from one of your books...

I'd be Billionaire Boy because then I would have a water slide going from my bedroom into a swimming pool, which is about the most fun I can imagine.



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The writer is founder of Mother of Readers, a platform championing Indian children's literature.



David Walliams will be at *The Hindu* Lit for Life in Chennai on January 18. Scan the QR code to register.



One of the entrances at the Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur. (G. MOORTHY)

## Genre-bender

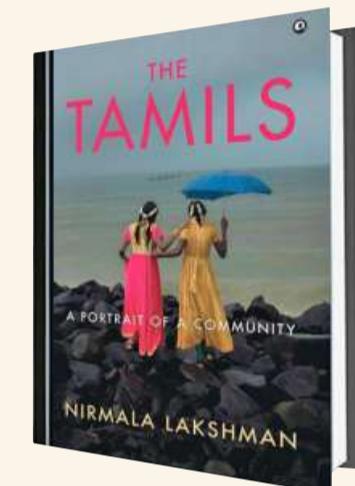
In her engaging, multi-layered new book, Nirmala Lakshman underscores the separateness and interconnection inherent in the Tamil people

Mukund Padmanabhan

For a work that is subtitled *A Portrait of a Community*, Nirmala Lakshman begins *The Tamils* on an unusual but arresting note – a pinch of prehistory. Strictly, the passages on Attrampakkam, where relatively recent digs have unearthed stone tools from a Middle Palaeolithic age possibly going back some 350,000 years ago, have little to do with the Tamil community. Lakshman, of course, is fully aware of this. One suspects her decision to start her expansive journey in her extremely engaging new book lies at least partly in her desire to ground the history and culture of a people within a 'sacred' geography. One of the finer sections of this book is devoted to exploring the concept of the *tinais*, the five distinct natural regions of ancient Tamilakam that, at once, determined idiosyncratic lifestyles and reflected diverse cultural ecosystems. One way to read *The Tamils* is to see *tinais* as a framework for both separateness and interconnection, a running theme in *The Tamils*.

### Broad brush

At one level, *The Tamils* is a broad chronological history that moves sequentially from ancient times to the present. A good part of it is devoted to the Pallavas and the Muvendar, the three powerful dynasties that ruled Tamilakam (the Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras), the somewhat accelerated remainder made up by the transitory period that led up to the coming of the European powers, the advent of Britain, the struggle and arrival of freedom, and the contemporary



**The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community**  
Nirmala Lakshman  
Aleph  
₹999

Karikala was murdered by those who wanted to avenge his killing of a Pandya king or whether the Chola dynast was done in by his ambitious cousin. Also, rival historical interpretations are appropriate to Lakshman's purpose, which one imagines is not so much to write an academic tract, but a wide-ranging and erudite account on the history and culture of the Tamils. All the same, it is possible that, here and there, some readers may wish for a more authoritative voice; for example, were the Cholas (or Malik Kafur, for that matter) especially brutal and violent, even by the standard of those ferocious times?

### A book of her own

The narrative elements that Lakshman chooses to play up and the occasional resort to first-hand accounts reveal a book that is very much her own. An example of the former is how, in 1931, a young scholar, S.K. Govindaswami, armed with a baby petromax lamp, discovered ancient frescoes in the dimly lit passages around the sanctum sanctorum in the Brihadeeswara Temple, redefining our understanding of Chola art. Related in loving detail, Govindaswami's emotions at the moment of discovery were not unlike Howard Carter's when he peered, candle in hand, through a hole into Tutankhamun's tomb. As for personal accounts, there is a particularly absorbing account of a small lesser-known Chola temple, Alanthurainathar, which Lakshman extols as a 'little gem', 'astonishing' for its 'sculptural legacy' and as an example of early Chola art – the equivalent, you might say, of Banteay Srei to Angkor Wat.

### What it is to be Tamil

The last chapter addresses the question of what it is to be Tamil, a question that evokes varied answers grounded on such things as language and culture from the people. Lakshman poses it to. Quite correctly, Lakshman recognises that this is a question that risks evoking answers that arise from a sense of Tamil exceptionalism. Like the *tinais*, it is best to note the interconnections while laying out the separateness.

*The reviewer teaches philosophy at Krea University and is the author of The Great Flap of 1942.*



**G. Sampath**  
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In *The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community*, Nirmala Lakshman presents a meticulously researched yet highly accessible account of the Tamils and their history. In a conversation, she talks about the book, its themes, and if there is something like 'the Tamil way'. Edited excerpts:

**Question:** Can you tell us how this book came about?

**Answer:** Aleph has been publishing a series of community portraits across language groups in India. I am not trained as a historian, nor am I an academic. When David Davadar [from Aleph] asked me to do one on the Tamils, I was taken aback. I thought it was above my pay grade, so to speak. But when he suggested a straightforward chronological approach, I felt more comfortable.

When it comes to Tamil history, we know all about the Cholas, Cheras, Pandya. We know about the Dravidian movement, contemporary politics, and a little bit about the ancient kings. But we don't know enough about the other things that went on in Tamilakam. I felt this

would be a learning exercise, and I was happy to take it on. But I wanted to position the project properly – this was going to be a journalist's view, and not that of, say, a Marxist historian or a R. Champakalakshmi or a Romila Thapar would approach it. Davadar agreed, and he said it should interest someone who doesn't know much about the Tamils, and be written in an easy style. I began at the beginning, and was surprised at the wealth of original as well as secondary information.

**Q:** Compressing 5,000 years of history into 400 pages must have been tough. How did you decide what to leave out?

**A:** I wanted to explore some of the historical questions that have always intrigued me. For instance, the Brahmadeya system under which Brahmins were gifted huge tracts of land, ruled administratively, and became powerful during the reigns of many of these kings. How and why did this happen? But while this sub-theme was interesting to me, it was beyond the scope of this book. I settled down to writing an account driven more by personal experience meshed with travel, and conversations with experts.

Many Tamil archaeologists and epigraphists had no visibility in the

## IN CONVERSATION

# 'I FELT LIKE A MESSENGER'

Nirmala Lakshman offers a journalist's view in her profile of Tamils and their political and cultural history



Anglo-Saxon world, and they have done amazing original work. I felt like their messenger more than anything. I also limited myself in terms of topics: political and cultural history, a little bit on art, architecture, the spirituality and religion of the times. With these broad themes in mind, I let the narrative flow.

**Q:** How old really is Tamil civilisation? Sangam poetry claims an antiquity of 5,000-10,000 years, if not more. In 2023, Bharathidasan University's department of remote sensing claimed to have found evidence in the Bay of Bengal that dated Poompuhar as 15,000 years old.

**A:** 15,000 years is absolutely not true. Even in a very generous view, it doesn't go beyond 7,000 years. There's this thing called antiquity frenzy. A lot of historians in the south and also elsewhere have it. Having said that, there is also a continuity here with the early humans. The discovery of multi-purpose hand axes in places like Attirampakkam proves that early humans walked here a million to 350,000 years ago. It is amazing that the Tamil region is one of the few places where hunter-gatherer hominids evolved into a Middle Palaeolithic culture.

**Q:** You say in the book that untouchability embedded itself in Tamilakam during the reign of the

**Historic trail** (Clockwise from left) Author Nirmala Lakshman; sculptures of deities at a temple near Tirunelveli; a Chola mural at the Thanjavur Brihadeeswara Temple; sculptures of the Nayaka rulers at Pudhu Mandapam in Meenakshi Temple, Madurai; sculptures of Tirumalai Nayak and his wives at the Pudhu Mandapam; a dyeing vat at Keezhadi excavation site near Madurai.  
(THAMODHARAN B. AND G. MOORTHY)

Pallavas. How did the caste system entrench itself in Tamil culture?

**A:** Some of it happened organically but more than anything it was firmly established by the rulers. The monarchs probably found it convenient to have this group of people known as 'Brahmins' who helped them in their administration. The hierarchy set in at once. The cultivators of land were the Vellalas, and there was a tussle over land ownership between the Vellalas and Brahmins. There is evidence that in non-Brahmin villages, Vellalas were made to forfeit their land to Brahmins. With this rivalry, and royal patronage, the caste system solidified. Also, in the early stages, caste was a matter of professions you practised. No one frowned on inter-caste marriage. The aspect of superiority and inferiority came in later. By the time Jainism arrived, the caste system was fairly solid, which is why a great many people broke away and became Jains or Buddhists.

**Q:** Is there a set of core attributes that might be said to constitute a 'Tamil consciousness' or 'the Tamil way'?

**A:** Academics are typically wary of naming anything as a quintessential Tamil 'gunam'. But yes, Tamil oratory is certainly a key aspect. Arjun Appadurai talks of how the poetry of the Sangam era finds an echo in contemporary Tamil usage. Arjun likens this persistence of Tamil literary culture to using Hellenic Greek in modern-day Greece, and this is certainly unique. But he cautions against essentialising Tamil identity. I also don't think there is something exceptionally Tamil. Tamil identity is just as human as any other community.

Nirmala Lakshman's session, 'This Jasmine Country', is on January 18 at The Hindu Lit for Life in Chennai.

## INTERVIEW

# Indians and their love for English

**Shashi Tharoor on why his command over the language attracts memes and admiration**

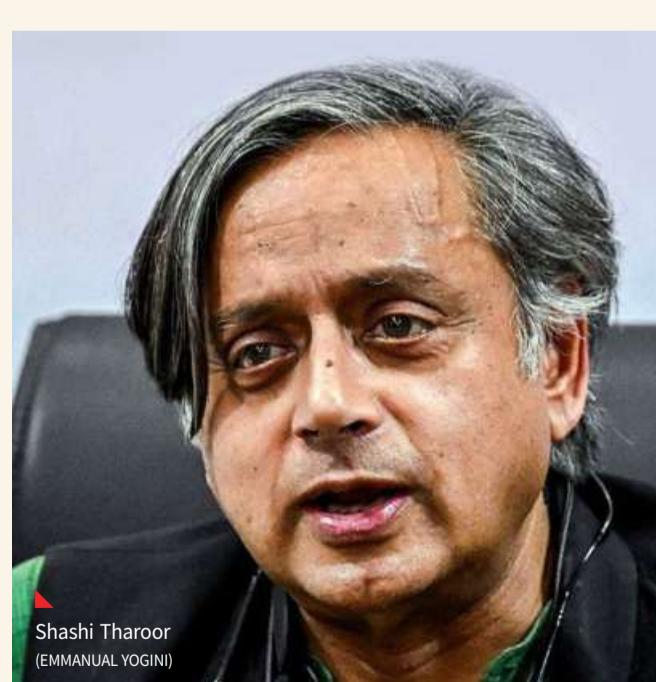
because you have to work in multiple languages; or rather, things you say in one language can be translated, distorted and made stories of in other languages. As a result, I learned to be rather conscious of my public English.

What's interesting is that while I have indeed been converted into a meme and an object of joking, the truth is there are also a lot of people who come up to me, asking for selfies and expressing admiration for my English. They often do so in rather modest and accented English, which means that for aspirational Indians, command

of English is what they look up to as an admirable trait. If I can be a useful model for people to emulate, why not?

**Q:** Could you talk about the kind of research that went into the book?

**A:** I began this as a series of columns. Then I started merging columns, expanding some for the book. Secondly, some of the pieces are clearly off the top of my head, but some required more research, and I did have help, which I've acknowledged in the book. Professor Sheeba Thattil did the research for me. She had access to lots of philological

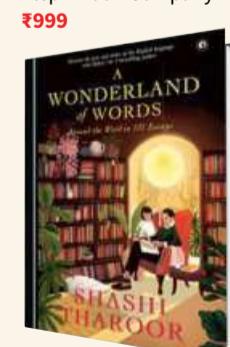


Shashi Tharoor  
(EMMANUEL YOGINI)

and etymological texts that I don't routinely come across or know where to look for. I was emphatic that I was not writing this for other professors of English. I was writing for general readers like myself, or people less involved in language than me. There

were also some things I just stumbled across on the Internet. For example, in the Introduction, I include that wonderful letter by Robert Pirosh, who got a Hollywood screenwriter's job on the strength of it. I came across that entirely by fluke.

**A Wonderland of Words**  
Shashi Tharoor  
Aleph Book Company  
₹999



**Q:** It's been a long time since you wrote fiction. Has returning to words in this sort of playful, interesting way given you room between much more intensive research and work on your non-fiction writing?

**A:** Partly true, but there is a more serious challenge, which is that fiction requires not only time, which is scarce enough for me, but it requires a space inside your head to create an alternative moral universe, to populate it with characters, incidents, episodes, conversations that are as real

to you as those you encounter in your daily life. You construct this kind of glass palace of illusion, and you enter into it, ideally, every day while you're writing a novel. The problem with my life, both in my other stages of my UN career and in my entire political life, is that I am constantly interrupted. The great merit of non-fiction is it's interruptible. Even if you suddenly have to go off on some work, on your return you can reread what you are writing, and your own line of thought and argument will recur to you and you will continue the work. That's why I found, as a practical proposition, that writing non-fiction was manageable. I have not abandoned fiction. If God grants me enough years, I certainly intend to return to it.

Shashi Tharoor will discuss his book at The Hindu Lit for Life, on January 18.

The writer is an independent journalist.

**Well deserved** Kani Kusruti, Chhaya Kadam, Payal Kapadia and Divya Prabha pose with the Grand Prix Award in Cannes; and (right) Kapadia with Mira Nair at the post-screening Q&A. (AFP AND IAN SCHULTZ)



CONTINUED FROM  
» PAGE 1

**Under a Golden spotlight**  
One of the advantages *All We Imagine as Light* could have had is its European producers. "I don't know [if there's a specific] benefit in having a producer from a different part of the world... but if you are keen to premiere at a film festival in Europe, then European producers know the process," says Kapadia. "Now, many Indian producers are learning about it, along with the American festival system."

Late last year, several critics and major publications – from *The New York Times* to *Sight and Sound* magazine ranked *All We Imagine as Light* as the number one film of the year. In its recent Instagram post, *Sight and Sound* described the film as "a delicate, dreamlike tale of loneliness and fellowship" and added that the film recalled works of Ray and Wong Kar-wai. One day after Christmas, *Variety* named Kapadia as one of the international breakouts of the year.

So, no one seemed surprised

when *All We Imagine as Light* received two Golden Globes nominations, including one in the Best Director category. *Variety* wrote this reflected "Kapadia's growing influence in world cinema". This was the first such nomination for an Indian filmmaker for a film made in India. In 1999, Shekhar Kapur received a Best Director nomination for *Elizabeth*, but that was a British production.

*All We Imagine as Light* also received a Golden Globes nomination for Best Motion Picture - Non-English Language.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences only accepts one international film submitted by each individual country, but the Hollywood Foreign Press Association – the body that awards the Golden Globes – accepts submissions by producers of foreign language films. And so the film could compete.

For a while now, commentators have said that the Golden Globes have lost their significance. But one cannot deny that Academy members and studios seriously follow the Globes – the

## PAYAL KAPADIA'S SEAT AT THE BIG TABLE

nominations and the awards. (And since any film that runs for a week in any of the U.S.'s six metropolitan areas is eligible to be nominated for the Oscars, *All We Imagine as Light* is a contender.)

Kapadia attended the Globes dressed in a black silk outfit designed by Payal Khandwala and she wore earrings gifted to her by her mother, the painter Nalini Malani. She was accompanied by both seen our movie, and they liked it!"

Kapadia's chance of winning a Globe was never definite, given the competitive field she was in, but her name has already registered in the minds of many Academy members. Meanwhile,

last week, the film was longlisted in three categories for the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA), including best director.

ceremony. "The nominations really put our film back in people's attention. And of course, talking to stars you have admired is always a thrill. I met Jodie Foster as well as director Walter Salles who had both seen our movie, and they liked it!"

Kapadia's chance of winning a Globe was never definite, given the competitive field she was in, but her name has already registered in the minds of many Academy members. Meanwhile,

last week, the film was longlisted in three categories for the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA), including best director.

### Celebrity support

The torch of *All We Imagine as Light* has been kept burning by the film's two distributors, Janus Films and Sideshow. The former had two other foreign language films nominated for the Golden Globes: *Verniglio* (Italy), a drama set during World War II, and *Flow* (Lithuania), a fantasy adventure about a solitary cat's survival.

*Flow* won the Globe for the Best Motion Picture, Animated.

"We are lucky to work with Janus and Sideshow who really take care of the films they distribute," Kapadia says. "They understand this system well and

make sure that the campaign effort is streamlined and specific. We don't have a major studio funding backing this effort so it's sheer hard work from everyone involved." A stark contrast to money-backed films such as *RRR* or even a *Gandhi*, which had the support of a big studio for its Oscar campaign.

But in a crowded field with Hollywood and foreign language films competing for the short attention span of Academy members, celebrity support for films can be really helpful. Late last year before the Oscar shortlisters were announced, Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón hosted a screening of Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* in London. British film director of Indian origin Gurinder Chadha, who is a member of the Academy along with Cuaron, also attended the screening.

In mid-November, Indian-American filmmaker Mira Nair moderated a post-screening Q&A with Kapadia at NeueHouse, a small theatre in Manhattan with just 86 seats. The screening was

organised by Janus Films and Sideshow to generate interest before the limited release of the film on November 15 in New York City. But it was also intended to start the buzz among Academy members based in the city. The NeueHouse screening was attended by a few Indian-American Academy members, including publicist Gitesh Pandya and producer Shrihari Sathe. Nair is also an influential member of the Academy.

The same evening, Netflix hosted a screening of *Laapataa Ladies* in New York City. At the time, the film was in consideration for the Best International Feature Film award. Kiran Rao and Aamir Khan were present as Nair, who did a Q&A with the director and producer. Nair then rushed to moderate the NeueHouse Q&A of *All We Imagine as Light*. She had seen Kapadia's film earlier.

**Is another nomination likely?**  
These special screenings by well-known filmmakers are held throughout the awards seasons. In December, Kapadia was interviewed by director Shuchi Talati (*Girls Will Be Girls*) after the film's screening at Film Forum, a prime art-house theatre in New York City. Again, the Q&A was meant to create a buzz about *All We Imagine as Light* as the Academy members were getting set to watch the film in consideration. The film is now in its eighth week of theatrical run at Film Forum.

And earlier at the end of October, Kapadia was in Japan for the Tokyo International Film Festival when she had an in-depth conversation with the Japanese master Hirokazu Kore-eda.

(Kore-eda received a Palm D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018) Voting for the Academy Awards ends today, and the nominations will be announced on January 17. While no one can predict whether *All We Imagine as Light* will receive any nominations, this much is clear: Kapadia and her film already have a seat at the main dinner table. She will be there even after the award season has ended.

**The writer is a film festival programmer and author.**



## 'AWAL HAS A CHANCE AS BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY'

The filmmaker, whose Gujarati film *Chhelo Show* was India's entry for the Oscars in 2023, breaks down the Academy Awards campaign

Pan Nalin

**E**verything starts with a good movie. If your movie is good and original, it can travel. But that is just not enough. When *Last Film Show* (the coming-of-age drama also known as *Chhelo Show*) became India's official entry to the 2023 Oscars, I realised that being on the other side was a completely new experience.

The Academy Awards are voted on by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which is a group of industry professionals and I am a member. But there is a very organised ecosystem when it comes to Oscar campaigns, and your film has to be supported by three key elements according to me. The first is the studio that is going to distribute your film, which could be an OTT platform like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney, etc. Those studios get the second most important element right, the publicist.

Oscar campaign publicists have become extremely powerful in the last five years, as they design a whole strategy according to your movie, and that will cost you a bomb. So, money is the third element. My analysis is that, at a minimum, to run a good Oscar campaign, you need \$1.7 million. You have to factor press screenings for Academy members, conferences, minimum advertisements in publications such as *LA Times*, *Variety* and others. So, while you may have a good movie, what is important is how many Academy members have watched it. And that is the biggest battle. During the Oscar season, they have 300-400 movies to watch, and the industry (which constitutes the voters) is extremely busy working. So if they watch the movie and it is good, it will stay with them.

### Betting on Kapadia

So, how do films stand out in the final round? If it is author driven and if there is out of the box thinking, or if you have gone against the mainstream you are noticed. That is likely to happen again this year, with movies like *The Brutalist*. And what are the chances for Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, as it already comes with the Cannes tag? I feel they have a chance with Best Original Screenplay and the Best Picture categories, especially if the Academy decides to have more nominations in this category this time. And perhaps Best Director.

**In December 2022, documentary and feature filmmaker Pan Nalin's *Last Film Show* became the fourth film in Indian cinema history to be shortlisted for the Academy Awards**

— As told to Rosella Stephen



**In the race**  
(Clockwise from far left) Stills from *Putu, Kangava, Girls Will Be Girls, Swatantara Veer Savarkar* and *Aaduveethitham*.

## BEHIND OSCAR'S BEST PICTURE

With the Academy's list of 207 eligible contenders out, here's a look at what it takes to make the cut

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury  
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**S**ix Indian films are eligible for the 2025 Oscars' Best Picture race, including *Kangava*, the Tamil epic fantasy; *Shanti Talati*'s coming-of-age drama *Girls Will Be Girls*; the UK's official submission *Santosh*; *Swatantara Veer Savarkar*, the polarising historical biopic; *Putu*, the experimental Bengali film; National Award-winning *Blessy's Aaduveethitham: The Goat Life*, and Payal Kapadia's Cannes-lauded *All We Imagine as Light*.

Conspicuous by its absence (yet again) is Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* – India's official Oscar submission this year that only recently missed out on being a contender for Best International Feature.

According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' evolving rulebook, for a feature film to be considered for the general entry categories at the Oscars, it must meet a basic aesthetic criterion. This includes a minimum seven-day

commercial run in at least one of the six major U.S. metropolitan areas – Los Angeles, New York, the Bay Area, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, or Atlanta – within the calendar year.

**Steep climb for contenders**  
For Best Picture, however, the requirements don't stop there. The Academy's Representation and Inclusion Standards (RAISE), implemented last year, mandates that films must meet at least two of four diversity benchmarks. These include on-screen representation, where the subject matter or cast reflects underrepresented groups; diversity in key creative leadership roles or crew positions; industry access opportunities, such as internships or apprenticeships for marginalised groups; and inclusive marketing or publicity strategies.

Best Picture hopefuls must also complete an expanded theatrical run in at least 10 of the top 50 U.S. markets within 45 days of their initial release.

Now in their second year, the RAISE standards have unsurprisingly spurred significant debate. Some view them as overdue; others, as performative

hoops that do little to reward artistry. Critics warn that they risk sidelining smaller, independent films from less resourced regions – films that might lack the means to meet the expanded theatrical and inclusion requirements, even if they excel artistically. Many international films, documentaries, and animated features often don't bother vying for Best Picture, deterred



by the dual burden of theatrical expansion and RAISE compliance.

**FFI's fumble**  
The glaring absence of Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* from the shortlist for Best International Feature, let alone for Best Picture, continues the Film Federation of India's (FFI) frustrating tradition of fumbling the ball. The omission had earlier reignited perennial debates over the FFI's selection process, which has long faced criticism for its opaque decision-making.

Meanwhile, the six Indian films that have moved one step closer for Best Picture consideration offer a fairly diverse slate. Of the lot, *All We Imagine as Light*'s inclusion is a no-brainer. In contrast, *Kangava*'s eligibility feels emblematic of the Academy's occasional infatuation with the over-the-top spectacle, à la *RRR*. Now, as the countdown to the nominations begins, the question is: will any manage to secure the coveted Best Picture nod?

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Whether the shredding was an artistic act done to add theatrical value to the painting, it is hard to say, but in all likelihood it was part of Banksy's plan to ensure that art is appreciated in quick succession on London walls. A gorilla at the entrance to the local zoo, two elephants stretching trunks out of building windows, pigeons on an imaginary wire – the graphic simplicity of much of the work is often undercut by scathing satire. Two surveillance cameras strut about like pigeons on the sidewalk; on a wall in Ukraine, a young boy wrestles a bully to the

### GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Gautam Bhatia

**S**ome years ago, in the U.S., I remember attending a charity auction organised by the Philadelphia Arts League. Local artists were invited to display and sell their works by placing them on a conveyor belt that moved slowly towards a shredder. If a piece was picked by a buyer, the proceeds went to the children's hospital; if not, it was shredded into the garbage bin. The artist merely watched helplessly.

London-based street artist Banksy similarly sold a painting at a Sotheby's auction for £1 million. As soon as the bid was accepted and the hammer came down, the artwork slipped out of its frame and shredded onto the floor. The self-destruction ironically increased the artistic value of the painting which was renamed *Love is in the Bin*.

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appreciated in quick succession on London walls. A gorilla at the entrance to the local zoo, two elephants stretching trunks out of building windows, pigeons on an imaginary wire – the graphic simplicity of much of the work is often undercut by scathing satire. Two surveillance cameras strut about like pigeons on the sidewalk; on a wall in Ukraine, a young boy wrestles a bully to the

ground; another is seen painting a sign 'Graffiti is a Crime'. It is hard to qualify Banksy's work – site-specific and done at night – as art or vandalism; but as a critic noted, it is the most essential form of public vandalism.

Sadly, such vandalism is entirely

out of the framework of art in India. How well would Banksy do in a country where the primary showcase for public art is a triptych of the *Mahabharata* in a metro station, or a bronze statue of Shivaji at a roundabout? Would he be allowed to run his painterly fingers on the walls surrounding Churchgate Station in Mumbai, or to deface Delhi's India Gate? Could he in fact write a cryptic message about Indian democracy on the dome of Rashtrapati Bhavan, or

wrap the new Parliament building in plastic. Unlikely.

**Evocative messaging**  
For the past decade, despite increasing popularity or cultural artefact; surveillance cameras posing as street pigeons – public protest or political comment? The calculated absurdity of the artist's position is baffling, clever, disturbing, always surprising, but rarely self-conscious. When will it appear, next, where, and in what medium...?

As the Indian art season reopens, our own ill-tempered cities – desolate, bereft of landscape, and falling apart – cry out for such expression. Religion, separation, censorship, communal rage, growing illiteracy, bureaucratic apathy, political arrogance, business bluster, media manipulation, the list of Indian issues in need of public scrutiny grows day by day. But an Indian Banksy refuses to step out of the shadows.

**The writer is an architect.**

## IS IT TIME FOR AN INDIAN BANKSY?

The list of issues in need of public scrutiny is growing by the day but Indian street art continues to play it safe



ground; another is seen painting a sign 'Graffiti is a Crime'. It is hard to qualify Banksy's work – site-specific and done at night – as art or vandalism; but as a critic noted, it is the most essential form of public vandalism.

Sadly, such vandalism is entirely out of the framework of art in India. How well would Banksy do in a country where the primary showcase for public art is a triptych of the *Mahabharata* in a metro station, or a bronze statue of Shivaji at a roundabout? Would he be allowed to run his painterly fingers on the walls surrounding Churchgate Station in Mumbai, or to deface Delhi's India Gate? Could he in fact write a cryptic message about Indian democracy on the dome of Rashtrapati Bhavan, or

will cost you. Or do you want to be on a roundtable of directors – and who wouldn't want to sit next to director Alejandro G. Iñárritu? But then we were presented a bill of \$32,000 and I had to walk out. There were only eight directors on that roundtable finally, as seven of us didn't have the budget. You need to be present everywhere and everything costs money.

Also, in my opinion, India should decide on their official entry by July end or early August. Then films like Reema Das' *Village Rockstar* (India's official entry to Oscars 2019), which did not have the money, can at least make use of the time to build storytelling. Also, many countries such as Italy, Ireland, South Korea, France, Germany and Denmark sanction huge amounts of money for Oscar campaigns. For them it's like sending their athlete to the Olympics!

**The writer is an architect.**

THE HINDU  
magazine  
Sunday, January 12, 2025



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

**D**ear reader, first of all let me take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy new year. If 2024 was a good year for you then I hope 2025 is even better. And if perchance 2024 was a regrettable experience, then I hope 2025 will more than compensate for that shortfall. Onwards and upwards et cetera.

Reader, if there is one thing we know about the great country that is India, it is this: religion is a Sachin, and god is cricket. Wait. Sorry. Sachin is a cricket and god is a religion. No wait. Sacket is a... okay look, you know what I mean. Do I have to explain everything? What is this? IAS exam?

Back in the good old days, cricket was a simple religion. In fact, let me tell you a true story. Sometime in the late 1960s, this writer's father went on a college tour from St. Thomas College, Thrissur, to some prestigious college in Thiruvananthapuram.

There at this prestigious college, he saw a sight he had never seen before: some dozens of young men wearing white clothing, wearing hats, and just standing around a football

## TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 5

# ABSOLUTE CRICKET SHENANIGANS

Some people hijack every conversation with inane gossip... about Kohli's wife, Ashwin's Instagram, Chahal's sunglasses

field doing absolutely nothing.

"What are these fellows doing?" my father asked his friend.

"I don't know. Maybe some type of agriculture?" his friend replied after some reflection.

So my father went and asked the nearest man in white. Who explained that he was, in fact, indulging in Test cricket.

But then in the 80s, the average Indian person's knowledge of cricket changed radically after India won

the World Cup in England. Suddenly we knew the name of most of the players in the Indian team: Kapil Dev, Sunil Gavaskar, Roger Bannister, Feroz Shah Kotla et cetera.

This information was already too much.

Then in the 90s, things started spiralling out of control. By this point, the average Indian schoolchild not only knew the name of every Indian cricketer, she also knew the name of every player in every other

team in the world. (Notwithstanding the fact that there were four Wauchs, two Crowes, six Flowers and 17 Khans.)

Things should have paused there. But, much like a season of the Royal Challengers Bangalore, things kept on getting worse and worse.

By the early 2000s, you could not attend college, work in an office, or go to a family function without somebody accosting you and demanding to discuss cricket in

## GOREN BRIDGE

# The illusion

East-West vulnerable,  
South deals

### Bob Jones

**S**outh's five-club bid is perfectly reasonable. He did not know whether or not four spades was making – it wasn't – but five clubs might also make and it could not be a very expensive sacrifice. In the right hands, it turned out to be quite a good contract.

West found the most effective lead of a trump, preventing any real chance of ruffing two hearts in dummy. South's first thought was

that he would need a successful diamond finesse to make his contract. After a bit more thought, he realised that the diamond queen was just an illusion. A low diamond would have done as well. He won the opening trump lead in hand with the ace, cashed the ace of diamonds, and led the queen of diamonds. West won with the king and led another club, won in dummy with the queen.

South now ruffed a diamond, crossed back to dummy with the ace of hearts, and ruffed another

**NORTH**  
♠ K 10 3  
♡ A 8  
♦ 10 8 7 5 2  
♣ Q 6 3

**WEST**  
♠ A J 8 7 6  
♡ K 10 7 5  
♦ K 3  
♣ 10 9

**EAST**  
♠ Q 9 5 4 2  
♡ Q 4 3  
♦ J 9 6 4  
♣ J

**SOUTH**  
♠ Void  
♡ J 9 6 2  
♦ A Q  
♣ A K 8 7 5 4 2

**The bidding:**  
**SOUTH** 1♣  
**WEST** 1♠  
**NORTH** 1NT  
**EAST** 4♣  
All pass

**Opening lead:** 10 of ♣

diamond. This felled the jack and established dummy's 10 as a winner. He conceded a heart to the defence, ruffed the spade shift in hand, and ruffed a heart in dummy. He discarded his remaining heart on dummy's 10 of diamonds and claimed his contract. Nicely played!

## QUIZ

# Easy like Sunday morning

### Practical inventions

#### Berty Ashley

**1** Born on January 12, 1879, Ray Harroun was an American race car driver who at the inaugural Indianapolis 500 in 1911 controversially declined to take along a mechanic as other drivers did. Ray replaced one of the jobs the mechanic did with a small device he mounted on the top of his windshield. What had he invented which helped him win the race, and is now found on all automobiles?

**2** René Laennec was a French doctor, who was also a flautist. In 1816, he had difficulty diagnosing a young woman, who had a heart problem due to her obesity. Using his knowledge of flute making, what did he invent to help that is now a staple of the profession?

**3** Johann Döbereiner was a German chemist, who invented the Döbereiner's lamp. It was a portable device inside which zinc reacts with diluted sulphuric acid to produce hydrogen. On opening a valve, the gas reaches a platinum sponge that on reaction with oxygen ignites the hydrogen. This was one of the earliest examples of what device?

**4** Charles Goodyear was an American chemist, who is credited with inventing the chemical process that made rubber pliable and waterproof. He discovered by accident that adding sulphur under heat gave rubber all the required



**Pioneering research** The locality of Lawes in Queensland, Australia, is named after English agriculturist Sir John Bennet Lawes. (GETTY IMAGES)

characteristics. He named the process after the Roman god of fire. What is the process known as?

**5** Sir John Herschel invented the cyanotype process, which is a slow-reacting photographic printing formulation that is sensitive to light near the ultraviolet spectrum. The resultant prints had a characteristic colour. By what name were they known, which is still in use today?

**6** Sir John Bennet Lawes was an English entrepreneur, who founded an experimental farm. In 1842, he obtained a patent for a

process to treat phosphates with sulphuric acid, which resulted in 'superphosphates'. This was the beginning of which industry that revolutionised agriculture?

**7** Walter Hunt was an American mechanical engineer, who invented the modern version of an item that had been used by the ancient Greeks. They used a 'fibula' to help secure their tunics. Hunt included a clasp that covered the point, and a circular twist to act as a spring. What did he invent in 1849, which now makes millions?

**8** John J. Loud obtained his patent in 1888 for something

he invented so that he could write on leather and wood products. The fountain pen that people normally used was useless in both cases. But it could not be used for letter-writing and the patent eventually lapsed. What had he invented which we now know in another format?

**9** Robert Gair was a Scottish paper bag maker. One day, by accident, the metal ruler he used to crease the bags cut it. He realised that by cutting and creasing thick paper boards he could make a prefabricated item, which was easy to store. What did he invent, which revolutionised the packaging industry?

**10** William Halsted was an American surgeon, who came to know of a scrub nurse in his surgery called Caroline Hampton. She complained of being painfully allergic to the antiseptic used on patients. Halsted reached out to Goodyear Rubber company to make something for her. What did he introduce to the field that drastically improved overall sterility of the industry?

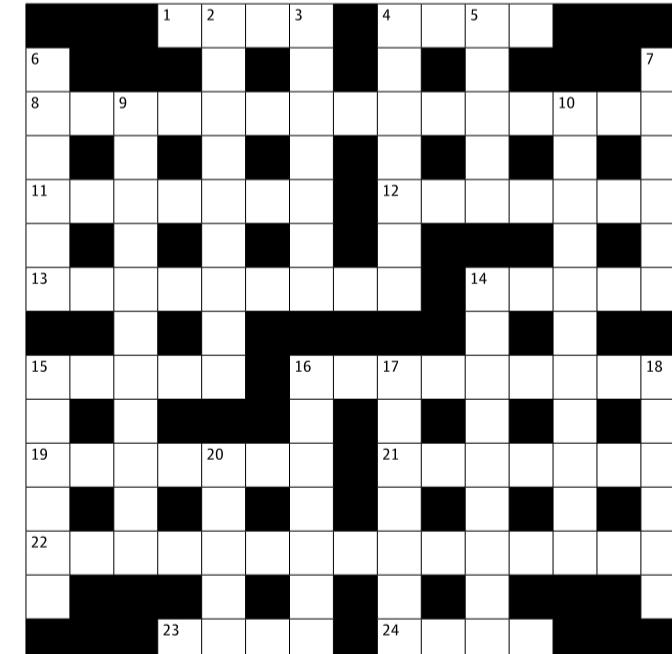
**A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'.**

@bertyashley

10. Surgical gloves  
9. Foldable cardboard cartons  
8. Ballpoint pen  
7. Safety pin  
6. Feeler  
5. Ulcerant  
4. Tightener  
3. Telescop  
2. Reviewer mirror

**Answers**

## THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3340



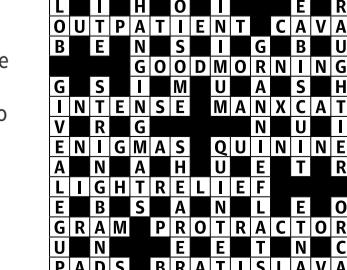
### Across

- 1 Old Testament prophet seen in tamo'-shanter (4)
- 4 Intensity regularly dropped in avian protection (4)
- 8 'How eerie!' 'Why, sure!' Uneasy sentiment when abroad (4,3,4,4)
- 11 Chose, after imbibing drop of Laphroaig, to become drunk (7)
- 12 Moves heavily wanting sleep after cycling (7)
- 13 With buff back muscles, doing a flip, they're resolute (9)
- 14 Tax channel (5)
- 15 Wristwatch, say: not so exciting but a becoming one (5)
- 16 Like a competition involving multiple setters? (3-3-3)
- 19 Ghastly duck penetrating — we need camouflage! (7)
- 21 Erstwhile capital offence: agent provocateur finally taken, 7 beheaded (7)
- 22 Liberally salt the roast, say? Who does that any more? (5,2,4,4)
- 23 Everyman gripped by American science fiction? Hardly (2,2)
- 24 What pothead may get from — or do to — his habit (4)

### Down

- 2 Historic ship showing might on river (9)
- 3 Quiet location for milk... shake (7)
- 4 Annoys the French (a primary requirement)? (7)
- 5 Energy shown by Second XI? (5)
- 6 Pinches small tissues (6)
- 7 Shaking tail end, watch a lad fall in Vermont, for example? (6)
- 9 TikTok etc, therefore claim idea is deranged (6,5)
- 10 On the phone, Ms Raducanu will call Ireland (7,4)
- 14 Using reason, conciliated freely? That's not on! (9)
- 15 Turncoats abandoning HMS inhabited this island, primarily? (6)
- 16 Scribble, leave hurriedly (4,3)
- 17 Understand second Beatles hit (3,4)
- 18 They're beyond help? King George succeeded in the protection of one (6)
- 20 Where to get dates and a drink for '90s rockers (5)

### SOLUTION NO. 3339



Friends, the new Indian cricket-obsessive is deeply concerned not with cricket, but with Virat Kohli's wife, Rohit Sharma's girlfriend, Ravichandran Ashwin's Instagram, Yuzvendra Chahal's sunglasses, and so on and so forth.

If you try and discuss some cricket match, these rascallions will immediately hijack the conversation with inane gossip nonsense.

"Machaan, what a cracking session after tea, no?"

"Nobody cares. Did you see what Harbhajan tweeted about Dhruv Jurel when Washington Sundar got run out across the Delaware? Dude it was fire!!!"

Dude, please. Just die. The shame cherry on this sadness cake is that this cancer has metastasised into the sports media as well.

And the garbage glitter on the above mentioned shame cherry on the sadness cake is that it is January 2025, and the English language still does not have a word to describe ruffians like this.

That travesty ends today. Henceforth, these fellows will be known as inningsigators.

**Example sentence:** "I tried discussing Bumrah's brilliant spell with Nitin Sundar, but the inningsigator immediately launched into a 20-minute analysis of why the third slip wasn't invited to the fourth ship's daughter's wedding."

Are there any readers with political connections? Can we please pass some law in the Lok Sabha to ban inningsigation?



**Sidin Vadukut** is head of talent at Clarisights. He lives in London and is currently working on a new novel.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Naveen Khajanchi  
leadersnkh@gmail.com

**Y**ou have reached many of your goals, yet the desire for more lingers. But for whom? For what? Perhaps, there is a belief that happiness lies just beyond your next achievement or acquisition. This relentless chase can become an obsession with "I" and "me". In reality, you may be missing out on genuine fulfilment that comes from restful sleep, meaningful relationships, and true contentment.

Take a moment to reflect. Those who genuinely smile, forgive, forget, and love – both themselves and others – often experience the deepest happiness. You may recall a time when you prioritised quality time over material gain, but somewhere along the way, the balance tipped, and the rat race took over. Initially money is a critical need, but once a reasonable sum is there, the returns start diminishing from a happiness perspective unless we have the wisdom to use it for the wellbeing of society.

**My way or highway**

It's time to step back from the relentless pursuit of more. Slow down and let go – whether it's unnecessary lifestyle gadgets, constant mobile connectivity, or daily indulgences such as alcohol and smoking. The ego tied to success can push a "my way or the highway" approach, damaging relationships despite your best intentions. When was the last time you spent an evening with your spouse with no expensive gifts needed. Recognise that you have the means to break free from this cycle – before it's too late.

The happiest people are often those who give and



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

**Compassion and understanding**

Priyanka P. Venugopal

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**C**omfort zones are often misunderstood. While some people may view it as laziness, it's not always the case. For those who have been through traumatic experiences, physically, mentally, or emotionally, their comfort zone may be a necessary refuge. At the beginning of their healing journey, they may feel a sense of calm and stillness, like the calm after a storm. They may not be ready to face the world again, and that's not due to laziness, but rather exhaustion.

These individuals have often lost faith in the possibility of a better future and may procrastinate, feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the world. As a result, they may fall behind and begin to accept themselves as failures. However, it's essential to recognise that they are not failures, but rather, they are healing.

I want to assure them that it's okay to not be okay, and it's okay to take time to heal. They don't need advice or criticism; they need someone to believe in them. It may take time for them to trust, but with compassion and understanding, they can begin to heal.

I sympathise with those who advise others to simply "forget and move on". If it were that easy, they would have done so already. Instead, this advice can strengthen their belief in being a failure and prevent them from acknowledging their pain.

Acknowledging their pain, even if it's frightening, is crucial to their healing. It gives them the power to accept their mistakes and build self-acceptance. Only through acceptance can they face their wounds again and begin to heal.

Your belief in them can become their strength to believe in hope again. We need to remember that the world is not a race, and all we need is compassion. Let's live and let live.

CM YK



**Recontextualise her work** (Clockwise from right) *Photo Lies*; Dayanita Singh standing in front of *Time Measures* at the Jaipur Centre for Art; and her architectural montages.

## DAYANITA SINGH: ALWAYS DISMANTLING AND DISSEMINATING

Six exhibitions in five cities – the photo-artist shares the story behind her travelling museums and how she began creating her ‘placeless places’

### Georgina Maddox

I reach Dayanita Singh's home and studio on a chilly December evening, and I am immediately greeted by hugs, coffee, and captivating prints of the veteran photographer's works. Scattered around are miniature versions of the structures for her mobile museums.

Singh is in the midst of creating one of her biggest travelling exhibitions – six showcases in five cities – but she is calm and focused as we sip coffee. She talks about how, over the years, she has taken on the role of curator, archivist, and more recently, a photo architect, who is “collapsing time and geography” through her analogue montages mounted on compact, portable wooden installations.

These have freed her of walls, and allows her to change the order of the display, defining how the works are laid out and observed.

“I am engaged with what it means to disseminate an exhibition. Especially one that is as large as *Dancing with my Camera* [curated by Stephanie Rosenthal, it started its journey in 2022 in Gropius Bau,

Berlin, and ended in May 2024 at the Museum Serralves in Porto, Portugal],” she says. The touring retrospective “was displayed in 11 galleries, which is why it made sense to have a series of exhibitions back home, spread across India”.

Singh is so engaged that she draws a diagram to show her complex plan: *Museums of Tanpura* at the just concluded Bengal Biennale; *Museums on Tour* at Kolkata's Indian Museum, till March 31; *Photo Lies* at Mumbai's Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, till February 23; *Time Measures* at the Jaipur Centre for Art, till March 16; *Photo Architecture* at Ahmedabad's Kanoria Centre for Arts, from March 1 to April 27; and *Mona and Myself* at Vadodara's Gallery White, from March 6 to April 30.

The vast dissemination seems overwhelming, but Singh isn't fazed. “This is what I do. My work must be taken beyond galleries where some people come just to take selfies and not really look at the work,” she says.

### Pushing the ‘photeness of photography’

Singh has never been one to settle for a single style, be it in her

photography or the way she displays her work. From building sculptural installations to using her images to make books, she is constantly innovating. The thread that unites her multi-venue project now is her idea of photo architecture.

Mining her large repository that dates back to the 1980s, she is showing different configurations of an exhibition in different cities, and adding something new and specific with each iteration. “My ‘museums’ are able to change, both in their form as well as the images they hold,” she says, pointing to a model of the teak frame in her drawing room. She switches the order and images as we speak, thus changing the viewing experience instantly.

This fluidity is also evident in her architectural montages, the highlight of her exhibition *Photo Lies*. She picks out a display on her wall, and as I look closely I realise the beautiful black-and-white image of a well-lit interior space is actually three different locations montaged together, each angle meeting in such a manner that it creates a new location. “The first image was shot in Japan, the other in India, and the third in Sri Lanka,” she says, adding how they are a way for her to go



beyond the “photeness of photography”. They are not digitally manufactured, she emphasises. “I brought all three photos together, physically cutting and pasting them myself, to create something more than what I started with.”

In an interview with *Architectural Digest*, she threw light on the “early epiphany” that set her on this path. While staying at the Heritance Kandalama hotel, designed by architect Geoffrey Bawa, she says she started “feeling a sense of déjà vu, though I had not been to Sri Lanka before”. She later discovered that Bawa had been inspired by the Padmanabhapuram Palace in Tamil Nadu, a place she had photographed for one of her books. This put her on the path to creating these “placeless places”.

### Forever chasing new forms

In the coming months, Singh's exhibitions will morph even more. *Museums of Tanpura*, which disseminates her work documenting classical musicians – including Kishori tai (vocalist Kishori Amonkar) and Singh's accordion-fold book of the icon, and the Zakir Hussain Maquette, a facsimile of the book she made as a student – will get bigger as Singh adds more works (*Pillar of Pandals*, *Sari Museum* and *Indian Museum Pillar*) and moves the show into the Indian Museum's corridors.

*Photo Lies*, meanwhile, will split into two. One half will head to Ahmedabad, and the other to Vadodara. And on its journey there, it will transform from an ode to architecture into an ode to friendship – the celebration of Mona Ahmed (confined to montages and an installation of her desk in Mumbai) will expand into *Mona and Myself*, chronicling Singh's decades-long relationship with her friend.

Even as the project and the processes impress, there is criticism too. Some say Singh has not created any new work, and is merely disseminating existing work. “It does not matter when I shot something. When I make a work and display it, I recontextualise it,” Singh responds, expressing disappointment that the critics have not understood her process. “Whether it is architectural montages, constructed contacts, and painted photos [painted over with enamel paint so they become ghost images of themselves], these are all new work. It is not just new images, but new forms that have not existed before.” Indeed. Excavating, constructing, de-constructing and re-constructing have always been at the heart of Singh's work.

The writer is a critic-curator by day, and a visual artist by night.

### Shweta Shiware

The lines between craft, art, and design are blurring now more than ever before. Artisanal techniques, once seen as the antithesis of “cool”, are gaining ground in art and design circles.

Last year saw several narratives around textile, helping transform them into powerful tools of inquiry into cultural identity and sustainability. Exhibitions such as *When Indian Flowers Bloomed in Distant Lands* (on view in Ahmedabad until March) highlighted the political and economic importance of textiles in India's global trade, while *From Folk to Fibre* – featured at the ‘Journeying Across the Himalayas’ festival in December under the Royal Enfield Social Mission – celebrated the myths, stories, and social bonds woven into textiles from nine Himalayan regions.

Reimagined by a new wave of artisans, designers, and craftspeople, these showcases challenged traditional biases in textile storytelling, offering unique perspectives on social, environmental and cultural concerns.

### Themes of community and empathy

*Sense and Sensibility*, a showcase by Bengaluru-based research and study centre The Registry of Sarees (TRS) at last month's Raw Collaborative exhibition in Gandhinagar, invited viewers to see textiles not just as objects, but as extensions of identity. Ahalya Mathan, founder of TRS, describes it as “an exploration of human interactions”. She adds, “There is a divisiveness [between art and craft], though it isn't always acknowledged. Exhibitions like this place the onus



## Breaking silos

In a year that saw several narratives around textiles, *Sense and Sensibility* attempted to blur the lines between artists, craftspeople, and designers

on us to tell the story inclusively, highlighting not just craft, art, and design, but the people behind them – their processes, materiality, and skill.”

Curated by textile designers and researchers Aayushi Jain, Vishwesh Surve, and Radha Parulekar, the exhibition breaks from academic rigour to explore themes of community, empathy, and collective identity. Textile history is often shaped by academicians and experts, while the vernacular voices, particularly those of contemporary stakeholders such as weavers and designers, remain largely sidelined.

Nearly 100 works from 36 designers, artists, darners, collectors and community-led initiatives participated, the works on display tracing a continuum of influences: from industrialisation and Art Deco to Bauhaus, minimalism, sustainability, and technology. Be it monochrome *ikat*, brocade and *jamdani* artworks by designer duo David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore, Kutchi *torans* from collector Salim Wazir's private collection, heirloom Banarsi brocades showcased at the Festival of India exhibitions in the 1980s and 90s, or Toda embroidery from the pastoral people of Nilgiris.

### Textiles in focus

(Clockwise from left) Wall hangings and lamps from furniture brand This and That; Toda embroidery; and *Naye Mein Purana*.



### Set to travel the country

*Sense and Sensibility* is part of an extensive study on the ‘History of Design in India through Textiles’, tracing its evolution from the 19th century to the present. The research, which delves into the materials, skills, and processes of diverse textile stakeholders, will continue at The Registry of Sarees until 2026, with a publication to follow. As the exhibition travels across India and internationally, it will evolve, incorporating fresh voices and perspectives, ensuring the project remains a living testament to India's ever-changing textile design history.

tradition in Kutch”, says Dinesh, one of the four sons of the National Award-winning craftsman, and who dedicated 25 days to weaving the piece. On the adjacent wall, Farooqui combined art and architecture through indigo, sheer *jamdani* panels, and a contemporary take on the *mehrab* motif, traditionally found on the walls of mosques.

The two installations – one by a

craftsperson, the other by a designer – represented distinct social and creative experiences. And the proximity of the works, particularly given that Farooqui has collaborated with the Valji family to develop textiles for her brand, broke down the conventional divisions between designer and craftsperson. “Design and craft must merge – we can't do without each other,” Farooqui says.

### A cultural exchange

Rather than framing India's crafts as relics of colonial plunder, the narrative is evolving into a dynamic, ongoing cultural exchange between rural and urban practitioners, craft and commerce, and the past and the present.

“I question how much we should revere craft or freeze it in time,” states Mala Pradeep Sinha of Vadodara-based Bodhi design studio. “For craftspeople, it's about responding to the market. If change is needed, so be it. So why are we, the so-called experts, trying to impose a narrative that suits us?” This thinking translated into Sinha's QR Code Quilt, a striking black-and-white wall hanging made from upcycled block-printed scraps.

Textiles and fibre-based art are more complex than people often think. As Aratrik Dev Varman, the founder-designer of Ahmedabad-based Tilla studio, puts it, they are about “intent and exploring personal expression”, and not just creating for the market. “Exhibitions like *Sense and Sensibility* are crucial for mapping India's evolving textiles and crafts before they're lost,” he concludes, stressing the designer's role in influencing and recording change.

The writer is a columnist and critic, with a keen focus on fashion, textiles, and culture.