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ASSAM IN SUMMER

Once a remote and overlooked corner of India, the state is now in the global spotlight. With a tourism boom underway, it is on track to becoming the country's next big travel destination

Satarupa Paul

I grew up in Guwahati in the 1990s, a time when Assam rarely made it to national conversations, let alone global news. It was often defined by insurgency, *bandhs*, and a sense of isolation – both geographical and cultural. Yet, life carried on in its own unhurried rhythm. Rainy mornings smelled of petrichor, afternoons were reserved for siestas and freshly brewed *lal cha*, and summer evenings unfolded by the Brahmaputra's banks. Bihu and Durga Puja brought the city alive, momentarily dissolving the troubles of the time. But for those beyond its borders, the state remained a distant, unfamiliar land – reduced to tea gardens, dense forests, and one-horned rhinoceros. The idea of it as a thriving tourism hub felt improbable.

Cut to 2025, and Assam is making headlines for all the right reasons. There was the recent UNESCO addition of Charaideo Moidams – the 700-year-old mound burial system of the Ahom dynasty, often called the 'Pyramids of India' – to its World Heritage List. It has brought the medieval kingdom's legacy into the global spotlight, leading to the announcement of a new Charaideo Museum. The state, which banks heavily on its wildlife destinations to attract tourists, has also declared Sikhna Jwhwlao, a vital corridor between Manas and Raimona National Parks, as its eighth national park, further cementing its reputation as a biodiversity hotspot. The fact that Assam was ranked No. 4 on *The New York Times*' '52 Places to Go in 2025' list – for its "incomparable biodiversity", "tea estates and river islands", and its deep-rooted history and indigenous cultures – has also added to the buzz.

And the developments don't end there. Luxury tourism is on the rise with The Postcard Hotel's debut in the Durrung Tea Estate and Reliance's partnership announcement with the Oberoi Group to build a seven-star hotel. Is Assam finally on the brink of a long-awaited tourism breakthrough?

The numbers speak

Tourist arrivals in Assam have surged dramatically over the past five years, signalling a shift in the state's travel landscape. Domestic footfall, which had plummeted to just 13.5 lakh in 2020-21 due to the pandemic, rebounded sharply to 98.12 lakh in 2022-23 before settling at 70.36 lakh in 2023-24. International arrivals tell a similar story – rising from a mere 347 in 2020-21 to a high of 26,128 last year, according to Assam Tourism. Come summer, when temperatures climb to a toasty 32 degrees Celsius, the state government hopes the numbers will increase even more.

In aid of this, last month, at the Advantage Assam 2.0 Summit held in Guwahati, the state secured ₹4.91 lakh crore in investments, with 270 MoUs signed, focusing on tourism, culture, and hospitality. At a time when overtourism in popular destinations such as Goa and India's many hill stations – and its attendant troubles of environmental degradation, rising real estate costs, and overstretched infrastructure – are driving tourists to seek less congested options, Assam hopes to step up as a tranquil alternative.

> **We are aware of the** adverse impact of tourism elsewhere in the country, and beyond. While trying to increase tourism and promote new destinations [in the state], we want the activities to be sustainable
>
> **RANJEET KUMAR DASS**
> Assam's tourism minister

"Earlier, people only knew about Kaziranga [home to the endangered rhino] and, to a lesser extent, Manas. Now, with Instagram and content creators, even community festivals that were once local events are getting national attention," says Amit Kumar, executive editor of EastMojo, one of the Northeast's leading digital multimedia news platforms. He points to hidden gems such as Goalpara's Jain Caves and Kaipalanso Waterfall in Karbi Anglong, now weekend destinations thanks to social media creators seeking fresh, high-engagement content. "With insurgency at an all-time low [according to Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah this week, "violent incidents in the state decreased by 70%"], previously inaccessible regions are now welcoming more visitors," he adds.

The state is also further strengthening its appeal. There are the 'Awesome Assam' campaigns in other Indian states, proactive tourism initiatives, better road and digital connectivity, and the introduction of a tourist police force to ensure visitor safety. The Guwahati airport is undergoing a major expansion, too. Scheduled to open soon, it is increasing its runway capacity and will be able to accommodate 13.1 million passengers annually.

Rise of boutique travel

There's a shift towards experience-driven tourism as well, exemplified by hospitality brands such as The Postcard. Set within the 140-year-old Durrung Tea Estate, this boutique property marks a turning point for high-end hospitality in a region long overlooked by luxury travellers.

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(Clockwise from above) Tourists in Kaziranga; a golden langur; guests at Diphlu River Lodge; Majuli village; and a ritual during the Chomangkan festival. (RITU RAJ KONWAR, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

CHANGEMAKERS' SELECT

Rima Das picks Majuli

The state's rise as a travel destination isn't just about its landscape and heritage; it's also driven by its people. Five Assamese trailblazers, from filmmaker Rima Das to musician Papon, give their travel tips.

RIMA DAS, ***filmmaker***
"In Majuli, visit the satras, and stay in a chang-ghar"

The filmmaker behind India's official entry to the 2019 Academy Awards, continues to push the boundaries of Assamese cinema with the film's sequel. *Village Rockstars 2* received a phenomenal reception at the Berlinale last month. Known for her intimate, visually rich storytelling, Das has been instrumental in bringing Assamese cinema to the global stage. "Assam has long been known for its storytelling traditions, and now, with global recognition, there's even more curiosity about its cinema," says Das, who has collaborated on *My Melbourne*, an anthology film focused on inclusivity.

For Das, Majuli — one of the world's largest river islands — is a must-visit for its nature, culture, and spirituality. "Every time I visit Majuli, it reminds me of how deeply storytelling is woven into Assamese life. It is home to over 30 *satras* [Vaishnavite monasteries established by saint Sankardev in the 15th century]. I once met an old monk in a *satra* who recited ancient tales with such emotion that I felt transported to another time. These *satras* are not just religious spaces, but living museums of art, music and folklore." She also recommends visitors to the state try the traditional Mising *thali* featuring sweet and sour fish curry, rice steamed in banana leaves, and apong (rice beer). And for an immersive island experience in Majuli, a heritage *chang-ghar* (stilt house).

PURNIMA DEVI BARMAN, ***wildlife biologist***
"In Sikhna Jwhwlao, spot golden langurs"

Named *Time* magazine's Woman of the Year 2025, Barman's journey began in the paddy fields of Pubmajirgaon. Determined to save the greater adjutant stork (*hargila*), once seen as a bad omen, she took a grassroots approach, forming the all-women 'Hargila Army' in 2007. By blending science with tradition, she turned conservation into a cultural movement, hosting baby showers for storks and integrating them into Assamese festivals. (Read more about the conservationist on page 5.)

Barman champions Assam's lesser-known biodiversity hotspots, urging travellers to explore beyond Kaziranga. Apart from the two big ones, "Assam has six other national parks, including the newest, Sikhna Jwhwlao, each with its own beauty and biodiversity", she says. At Sikhna Jwhwlao, she asks visitors to keep their eyes peeled for the golden langur, which is "only found in this region", as well as rare butterfly species such as Moore's Cupid. "Walking through the forest feels like stepping into another world."

Lest we forget A performance commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Jeju uprising in Seoul in 2018; and (bottom) author Han Kang. (GETTY IMAGES)

HAN KANG'S IMAGERY OF PAIN

Last year's Nobel laureate looks back at the Jeju Island massacre of 1948 in *We Do Not Part*, an act of resistance against forgetting

Sudipta Datta
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In Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016), an 18-year-old who witnessed the violent put-down of a student protest, calls up the local administration's offices every day to ask why the fountain in the square is operating so soon after the uprising. Kim Eun-sook cannot fathom how life can return to normal after so many have died, with loved ones still searching for the missing.

Han based her novel on a historical event that took place in 1980, a massacre carried out by the South Korean military on protesting students and civilians in the city of Gwangju, where she was born and grew up. Kim Eun-sook's act was reflected in reality last year when the 54-year-old writer declined to celebrate her Nobel Prize for Literature amid ongoing wars in the world.

We Do Not Part, Han's latest novel to be translated into English (by e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris), looks further back at another dark chapter in South Korean history – the Jeju Island massacre of 1948 – told through the experiences of two friends and their burden of memory and grief.

Writers like Primo Levi (Auschwitz), Svetlana Alexievich (Chernobyl, World War I), Urvashi Butalia (Partition of India) and Nadine Gordimer (apartheid South Africa) have spoken truth to power by unravelling parts of history sought to be denied, downplayed or hidden. The theme of Han's witness literature is focused on human violence. But though she writes about the cruelty human beings are capable of unleashing on one another, she also shines a light on the redeeming qualities, like kindness and dignity, that make us human amid the fragility of life.

Han shot into the limelight with her 2015 novel *The Vegetarian* which won the International Booker Prize. The contemporary relevance of her works in a world wanting to erase the past cannot be underscored enough, especially in novels such as *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part*.

Violent deaths

One of the protagonists of *We Do Not Part* is Kyungha, a writer who has recurring nightmares after finishing a book on the killing fields of a place simply initialled G. Even during the writing process, she suffered physically, unable to eat or sleep properly. "I'd thought, foolishly, that once it [the book] was out, the nightmares would cease. Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively – brazenly – hoped to shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces?" she reflects. One morning during a walk in winter, she notices the maple trees ablaze and glimmering in the sunlight. But the beauty around is dead to her.

At this dysfunctional moment in her life, she receives a text message from an old friend, Inseon, whom she had met after graduation and while working at a magazine. Inseon was a photographer and they had paired up for several assignments in Seoul, till she had to leave for Jeju Island to look after her ageing mother.

Inseon, who now makes bespoke furniture, has severed her fingers in an accident and reached out to Kyungha with an assignment to urgently travel to Jeju to save her pet white badger, Ama. In severe pain, Inseon likens it to people who've suffered similar fates regardless of place. "Hit with bullets,/ hit with cudgels,/ lives severed by blades./ How agonising it must have been when it hurts this much to have the tips of one's fingers sliced off./ Everyone who's ever met such violent death/ everyone who's ever been pierced or stabbed to the point their breath itself was excised."

We Do Not Part
Han Kang, trs e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morri
Hamish Hamilton
₹999

Colour of grief

Kyungha arrives in Jeju in the midst of a severe snowstorm. Will she be able to save Ama through this act of generosity? The reader will discover much more than the answer to this question; about the art project Inseon and Kyungha were planning, that provides the title of the book, and more importantly about the brutality of the deaths of 30,000 people in 1948.

The imagery Han uses – falling snow, and the world covered in white – is reminiscent of *The White Book*, her sublime book on grief in which she takes white things like salt, snow, ice, white bird to write about a baby sister who died at birth. "The process of writing it would be transformative, would itself transform, into something like white ointment applied to a swelling, like gauze laid over a wound," says the narrator.

In *We Do Not Part*, gentle white things like snowflakes cover what lies buried underneath, like mass graves of slaughtered civilians. "There was an accompanying clarity to snow, especially slow, drifting snow. What was and wasn't important were made distinct. Certain facts became chillingly apparent. Pain, for one," feels Kyungha. For survivors, it's like a fight with the hell that has been survived, a fight with the fact of one's own humanity. Han's profound novel is an act of resistance against forgetting.

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

A DARING GAMBIT

In this sequel to his debut novel, Amitabha Bagchi dissects every character and their motives through carefully crafted memory-excursions

Aditya Mani Jha

Not every sequel needs to validate the emotional universe of the original. *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), for example, critiqued not just its predecessors but also the very concept of a movie franchise and what it does to viewer expectations in the post-Twitter (now X) era.

Amitabha Bagchi's new novel *Unknown City*, a 'jump sequel' to his breakout debut *Above Average* (2007), doesn't exactly repudiate the learnings of the original. But it does, through a series of carefully crafted memory-excursions, lay bare the emotional and behavioral missteps of its returning protagonist Arindam, now an almost-50 novelist and professor.

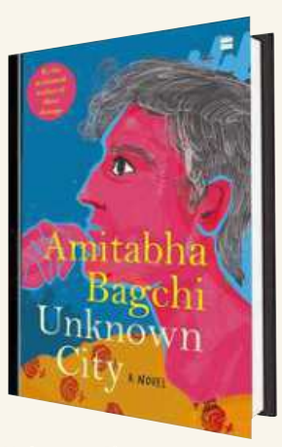
Arindam has been married for a while. Through his recollections of past relationships (and friendships) with women, he realises how his masculinity stood in the way of truly connecting with any of them. And extrapolating this realisation to the writing process, he re-assesses his own work through a gendered lens. It's a daring gambit that works on both levels, largely due to Bagchi's masterful grip on his protagonist's still-evolving interiority.

Puddles and potholes

In fact, this is one of the novel's recurring concerns – the idea that we do not 'come of age' in perfectly-photographed, cinematic moments of epiphany. Even for the self-aware, growth is a continual, almost imperceptible process. As philosopher Kierkegaard said, life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

Watching Arindam revisit incidents and meetings from the past is like watching someone demonstrate the Rashomon effect with their own lives. Every character's motivation, every seemingly off-the-cuff remark is dissected with gusto. When Arindam thinks about his time at Johns Hopkins University, where he took a film writing class, he realises that he had underestimated his female classmates' capabilities – while also exaggerating the intellects of his male classmates (even though he was personally irritated by them).

"David, with his numerous published short stories, was harder to dismiss, and despite his overly earnest manner and his seemingly put-on ruggedness, I found myself respecting his abilities as a writer. It is only now that I realise how an underlying tendency to downplay the intellectual capabilities of women so naturally fit the particular shape of the situation I found myself in – like water forming a puddle in the exact shape of a pothole that was already present in the road."



Unknown City
Amitabha Bagchi
HarperCollins India
₹599

Achingly human

Arindam's 18-month relationship with Supriya, a history grad from JNU, is reassessed along similar lines. He realises that as an IIT boy studying computer science, he was drawn to her in part because the liberal arts represented something 'exotic' for him. Supriya was the platonic ideal of an intellectual companion for him – only better, since with her Arindam could and did go beyond the platonic. He never really gave a second thought to Supriya's own inner life because he only ever saw her in terms of what he wanted from her.

In the hands of a less accomplished writer, this broad outline – sensitive IIT nerd reads Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous and confronts his past masculine arrogance – could have come across as somewhat dry, an academic exercise undertaken by a career academic. Instead, *Unknown City* ends up on the other end of the novelistic spectrum, an achingly human story about a man seeking to gain a fuller understanding of his own humanity.

The reviewer is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

Defining a woman's worth

75 poems of pre-eminent Urdu poet Zehra Nigah remind us that the fight for women's independence is as urgent today as ever

Abdullah Khan

From the ancient verses of the *Therigatha*, composed by Buddhist nuns over 2,600 years ago, to present-day feminist poetry, the struggles of women resonate across time. *The Story of Eve*, an anthology of 75 poems by Zehra Nigah, translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, reflects on this timeless theme – women's survival and dignity in a society that frequently tries to suppress their voices.

For those familiar with Urdu poetry, Nigah is a towering figure in contemporary literature, a poet who has spent over six decades writing verses that are both political and deeply personal. As one of the first women to gain acclaim in the largely male-dominated field of Urdu poetry, she is now celebrated as one of its living greats. Nigah writes with a keen awareness of socio-cultural undercurrents, addressing not only individual experiences but the collective journey of women.

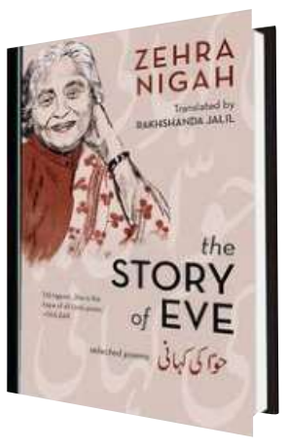
The titular poem 'Havva Ki Kahani' ('The Story of Eve') offers a fresh interpretation of the age-old tale of Adam and Eve, questioning the traditional blame laid upon Eve. Nigah's Eve is not portrayed as a seductress or sinner but as a figure of loyalty, tasting the forbidden fruit out of love for Adam, not out of seduction or defiance. Nigah captures this perspective with these simple lines:

I did not compel you to eat the apple.
Nor was that grain of wheat grown on my palm,
And the serpent – he was no friend of mine.
If I had a friend, it was you.
If I loved someone, it was you.

A moral urgency

Another powerful piece, 'Mai Bach Gayii Ma' ('I Was Saved, Mother'), demonstrates Nigah's sensitivity as a social critic. Responding to the grim reality of female foeticide, the poem addresses violence against women with piercing simplicity. Here, Nigah does not merely comment; she condemns. Her words uncover the deeply ingrained biases that define a woman's worth, challenging a society that professes to honour her yet repeatedly subjects her to harsh scrutiny. The poem transcends individual experience to portray the struggles of countless women, infusing Nigah's voice with a moral urgency that resonates throughout the volume.

In her voice Poet Zehra Nigah in New Delhi, 2012. (SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)



The Story of Eve: Selected Poems
Zehra Nigah, trs Rakshanda Jalil
Speaking Tiger
₹499

Many more gems lie within its pages. Each poem reflects on the cost of being a woman in a patriarchal system, touching on themes of poverty, helplessness, and resilience.

Jalil's translation, preceded by the original Urdu verse, beautifully captures the essence of Nigah's expression, bringing her poetry to an English-speaking audience while retaining the subtlety and strength of the original. This careful rendering allows Nigah's words to speak directly to readers, preserving the richness of her perspective.

In these poems, the age-old journey of Eve – for self-respect and autonomy – finds a modern voice. Through Zehra Nigah's words, this journey remains alive, reminding us that the fight for women's independence is as urgent today as ever.

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based novelist, screenwriter, and banker.

Pictures of Jews sent to Nazi camps, at the Memorial de la Shoah Holocaust Museum in Paris; (below) people at a protest in solidarity with Palestians, in Shannon, Ireland; and a view of war-torn northern Gaza Strip. (AFP, REUTERS AND AP)

THE COST OF WAR

Three writers reflect on the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israel's weapons of destruction, and the road ahead

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Killing or injuring Palestinians should be as easy as ordering pizza, writes Antony Loewenstein in his book, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World*. He was referring to an app designed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in 2020. The app allows a commander in the field to send details about a target on an electronic device to troops. "The strike would be like ordering a book on Amazon or a pizza in a pizzeria using your smartphone," says Oren Matzliach, the IDF colonel working on the project. "This kind of dehumanisation," writes Loewenstein, "is the inevitable result of endless occupation."

The app is only the tip of the iceberg. Israel has built a sprawling defence and surveillance industry, including advanced weapons, drones and spyware, which it uses against the Palestinians and has exported across the world in return for money and influence. Israel's clients include both democracies and repressive regimes – from apartheid South Africa to the U.S., Myanmar's junta to India, and from dictatorships in South America to the European Union. For Loewenstein, the occupation of Palestinian territories and Israel's security complex co-exist – one complements the other – while the world looks away. *The Palestine Laboratory* is a brave attempt to tell the story of how Israel has built a network of high profile defence clients by exporting the tools of occupation across the world.

The Palestine Laboratory
Antony Loewenstein
Pan Macmillan India
₹699

Monetising an occupation

Loewenstein writes that historically, Israel has had little moral qualms when it comes to exporting its weapons to other countries. From the very beginning of its existence, Israel began developing a vibrant defence sector, mainly with help from France, the U.K. and then the U.S., to "sell them to anybody who wants them." Israel was a strong supporter of apartheid South Africa. It had close ties with Iran's brutal monarchy, which was brought down by a popular revolution in 1979. Israel's clients included Ceausescu's Romania, the Duvaliers, Papa and Baby Doc's Haiti and A. Somoza Debayle's Nicaragua. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., when the world's focus shifted to the new 'war on terror', Israel became a lot more appealing for other countries. "The ability to monetise the occupation was turbocharged after the September 11 attacks," writes Loewenstein.

Several private enterprises, with support from Israel's defence and intelligence establishment, sprung up during this time. They were specialised in crowd management techniques, urban security, drone warfare and mass surveillance – Loewenstein calls it "the privatisation of occupation". AnyVision, for example, is an Israeli startup that secretly monitors Palestinians across the West Bank with a range of cameras. "Artificial Intelligence merges with biometrics and facial recognition at dozens of Israeli checkpoints throughout the West Bank," he writes. AnyVision is a global company that operates in over 40 countries. NSO, makers of the Pegasus spyware, is another example. NSO is registered as a private company but Pegasus has emerged as Israel's most powerful cyber weapon in recent years. The company has sold the weapon, which is used to hack into smartphones, to dozens of countries – both democracies and dictatorships – which used the product to illegally spy on political opponents, activists, journalists and others. Today, Israeli drones are used for surveillance in many parts of the world, including the U.S., the European Union and India.

Role of the U.S.

Loewenstein, a Jewish intellectual and journalist, argues that this is not a sustainable model, but agrees that Israel, a friend of the West, "can kill and maim with impunity". Raja Shehadeh, the Palestinian human rights lawyer and activist, would agree with him. "It should be noted that Israel's ability to continue waging wars is highly contingent on the support of the U.S.," Shehadeh writes in his latest book, *What Does Israel Fear from Palestine?*. If *The Palestine Laboratory*, written before Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack in Israel, was all about how Israel was exporting the tech of occupation, *What Does Israel Fear from Palestine?*, a short book of 113 pages, is a no-nonsense take on how Israel (and Palestine) reached where it stands today.

Today, Israeli drones are used for surveillance in many parts of the world, including the U.S., the European Union and India

"Israelis should have known that violence would erupt when people are bereft of hope... I had anticipated that the rising tensions would eventually lead to a major conflict. However, I hadn't expected it to be much different from previous wars. How wrong I was," writes Shehadeh, referring to the October 7 attack, in which 1,200 people were killed by Hamas, and the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza, when about 47,000 people were killed by the Israeli military in 15 months. Why is Israel doing this? "The very high human and material cost of the war in Gaza proves that what Israel fears from Palestine is Palestine's very existence," writes Shehadeh.

Will the ceasefire hold?

There has been a ceasefire in Gaza since January 19. In its first phase, the truce saw Hamas releasing hostages and Israel freeing Palestine security prisoners. But the ceasefire has run into trouble after the first phase as Israel refused to pull back troops from Gaza. The focus of Israel, and the U.S., do not seem to be on bringing the war to an end, but rather forcibly expelling the 2.3 million Palestinians from Gaza. U.S. President Donald Trump has unveiled a proposal "to transfer Palestinians" out of Gaza and then redevelop the enclave as the 'Riviera of the Middle East'. For Israel, Trump's proposal is music to its ears.

Loewenstein foresaw this scenario. "The worst case scenario, long feared but never realised, is ethnic cleansing against occupied Palestinians or population transfer, forcible expulsion under the guise of national security. A catastrophic war... could trigger an overwhelming argument within Israel that Palestinians... are undermining the state's integrity," he wrote in the book. With Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government announcing the setting up of a government agency to carry out the Trump plan of displacing Palestinians from Gaza, Loewenstein's words are turning out to be prophetic.

What Does Israel Fear from Palestine?
Raja Shehadeh
Hachette India
₹299

Moral breakdown

Pankaj Mishra questions why the West continues to back Israel irrespective of its actions

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," Milan Kundera wrote in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. "But when does organised remembrance become a handmaiden to brute power, and legitimiser of violence and injustice?" asks Pankaj Mishra in his latest book *The World After Gaza*. The collective memory of the Shoah (Holocaust) was "belatedly constructed, often very deliberately, and with specific political ends," Mishra writes. Rather than being a struggle against power, this politicisation of memory allows the state of Israel, "a cruel settler-colonialist, and Jewish supremacist regime", to do what it does against the Palestinians with impunity. And the West, which upholds the memory of the Shoah across societies and political groups, continues to back Israel irrespective of its actions.

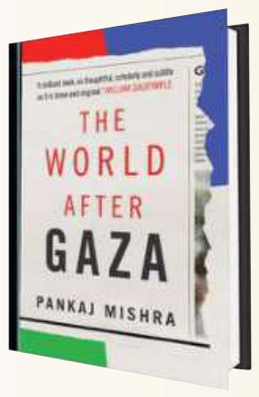
'Victim and victimiser'

How did Israel, founded by a people who were victimised by Nazism, become an "inhuman victimiser?" How can the liberal "gentile" West not be bothered by the mass violence Israel is committing against the Palestinians? In *The World After Gaza*, Mishra seeks to understand the shrinking grey zone between the victim and the victimiser.

Mishra, who grew up in India in a Brahmin Hindu nationalist family, had admired the state of Israel as a young boy. Mishra's ideas about Israel would change later as he began writing about the world's conflicts and suffering. Yet, nothing prepared him for "the brutality and squalor of Israel's occupation" that he witnessed during a visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in 2008. He noticed tools of the occupation and segregation – "The snaking wall and numerous roadblocks meant to torment Palestinians in their own land...; and the racially exclusive network of shiny asphalt roads, electricity grids and water systems linking the illegal Jewish settlements to Israel." After Israel's latest war against Palestinians began, triggered by Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack in Israel killing 1,200 people, Mishra says he "felt almost compelled to write this book to alleviate my demoralising perplexity before an extensive moral breakdown."

Extension of colonialism

Israel's violent policies and the support Israel gets from the liberal freedom-loving West might appear to be contradictory. But for Mishra, Israel's policies are a continuation of the policies of erstwhile colonial regimes. "For two centuries, western countries subjugated peoples across Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, fuelled by the Social Darwinist belief now sacralised by Israel that a race, people or nation that did not dominate would instead be dominated," he adds.



The World After Gaza
Pankaj Mishra
Juggernaut
₹799

The West sees Israel as an extension of its own past. Israel, Mishra writes quoting Yuri Slezkine, produced a warrior culture of remarkable power and intensity – the "only place where European civilisation seemed to possess a moral certainty, the only place where violence was truly virtuous." The Jew, James Baldwin once wrote, "is a white man."

So Mishra doesn't see any contradiction in Europe's and America's most authoritarian, and often anti-Semitic, politicians, movements and personalities being some of the most fervent upholders of the memory of the Shoah, and defenders of Israel. "Hitler and Mussolini had presented themselves as guardians of a superior Western civilisation," he writes. "Many white nationalists today aim for the same moral advantage by offloading the scourge of antiSemitism on Muslims, and by claiming to stand in solidarity with Israel."

But what has Israel become? It continues to occupy Palestinian and Syrian territories in violation of international law and UN Security Council resolutions. Israel is today ruled by a far-right coalition, which has the backing of "the far-right maniacs" in the West. "A radical Zionist vanguard, fired with millenarian zeal, eliminationist Arab racism and Jewish supremacism became one of Israeli society's animating forces," Mishra writes. But none of these bothers the conscience of the world.

"The profound rupture we feel today is a final rupture in the moral history of the world since the ground zero of 1945 – the history in which the Shoah was the universal reference for a calamitous breakdown of human morality," writes Mishra.

A quibble

Both the book's strength and weakness are its style of writing. *The World After Gaza* is not a book that is structured around an argument and written with historical facts and analytical insights. Instead, it takes the reader through waves of history, from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 to the October 7, 2023 attacks and from the racist crimes of the West to the apartheid regime of Israel, with abundant quotes from Holocaust survivors, philosophers, critics, historians and politicians. It's like a stream of consciousness novel in non-fiction. But sometimes, in the plethora of references and quotations, the main argument seems to get lost. Mishra, known for his well-structured, argumentative essays including his ripostes to Niall Ferguson or Jordan Peterson, lacks his usual moral punch in the book. Also, *The World After Gaza* has very little to offer about the world after Gaza – it's almost entirely about the world before Gaza. Yet, it is a compelling read on the moral faultlines of a violent past and present.

The reviewer is International Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

ASSAM IN SUMMER

Community fishing in Panbari village. (RITU RAJ KONWAR)

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"From the very inception of The Postcard, we recognised the immense potential of India's Northeast. Durrung stood out for its accessibility, deep-rooted tea legacy, and seamless connection to Assam's culture and wildlife," says founder and CEO Kapil Chopra. In 2022, the Assam government allowed tea estates to use 5% of their land for eco-friendly tourism.

"We chose Assam as our first destination in the Northeast for a very strategic reason: India's tea trails begin here. Durrung is also surrounded by five national parks and offers excellent accessibility – just three hours from Guwahati, two from Itanagar, and 15 minutes from Tezpur airport, which is being upgraded," states Chopra, adding that instead of a large-scale development that disrupts the place's natural beauty, "we've taken a more thoughtful approach, with just 12 rooms spread across 1,400 acres of pristine tea estate".

At The Postcard Durrung, life moves at the unhurried pace of the tea pluckers.

Rural tourism is coming up, with homestays in Majuli, Goalpara and Nagaon offering immersive experiences. "I work with women to help them set up homestays — not just as a business but as a way to introduce authentic Assamese culture to travellers," says Arijit Purkayastha of Koyeli Tours and Travels. Tea tourism, once confined to specific seasons, is also expanding, reinforcing Assam's position as a year-round destination.

From December to March, a new three-month Brahmaputra Carnival in Guwahati is offering river cruises, water sports, and glamping in luxury tent on islands. It is being projected as the biggest festival of the Northeast.

Mornings begin with a tea appreciation masterclass led by an estate sommelier, where guests learn to distinguish the finest Assam brews. Meals are a deep dive into the region's flavours, from tangy *tenga* curries to smoked meats prepared with age-old tribal techniques. Days unfold with immersive excursions – a visit to Sengeli Mari Gaon, where 500 women weave *eri* and *muga* silk, or a hike through Nameri National Park, a paradise for birdwatchers. "What's really special about Assam is how beautifully untouched and deeply engaging the state is. Every experience here offers a deep connection to history and tradition." Assam, Chopra believes, has all the makings of a premier luxury travel destination – it just hasn't been positioned that way until now.

Navigating the road ahead

Addressing key infrastructural gaps is a priority add travel experts. "For boutique hotels to flourish and promote Assam's unique culture and flavour, I can only hope the government puts some policies in place," says Shoba Rudra, founder partner of Rare India, one of India's leading aggregators of boutique properties. Though the state has come far since a 2020 study published in the *International Journal of Management, Technology, and Social Sciences* noted that Assam suffers from "lack of infrastructure and communication bottlenecks, apart from general geographical isolation", making travel cumbersome for visitors, there is still a way to go. While cities such as Guwahati have seen rapid development, many promising destinations – especially in Upper Assam and the hill districts – remain difficult to access. Initiatives such as the Assam Tourism (Development and Registration) Bill, 2024, and the tea tourism scheme, which aims to develop 50 estates as tourism hubs, signal progress.

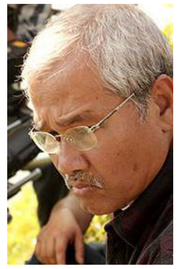
"Kaziranga is adequately promoted, but Majuli is yet to hit critical mass. The cultural context of these places holds a lot of interest, as do Assam's textiles and crafts, which have immense potential yet to be explored," Rudra concludes.

With inputs from ***Rahul Karmakar***

The writer is an independent journalist and photographer who covers travel, food, culture and sustainability.

LOVLINA BORGOHAIN, *boxer*
"In Karbi Anglong, try the local greens and smoked meats"

Last month, this boxing sensation made history once again by clinching gold at the 2025 National Games. The Olympic bronze medallist, who rose to global fame at Tokyo 2020, has become a driving force for Indian boxing, especially for women in the sport.
"There are so many talented young girls in Assam who can excel in boxing if given the right opportunities. We need more infrastructure and coaching at the grassroots level," says Borgohain. Determined to inspire the next generation, she actively works to encourage young girls to take up the sport. Tourists can check out local tournaments, such as the Assam Inter-District Junior Boxing Championship (usually held mid year), and help spread the word. "If you want to truly experience Assam's beauty, you must visit lesser-known places like Manja in Karbi Anglong. It's a place of incredible natural beauty. The traditional Karbi cuisine is a must-try — especially the aromatic Joha rice, wild greens, dried fish, smoked meats and fermented bamboo shoot dishes. The local weaves [like *pini*, a type of skirt, and *choy-an*, a jacket for men] and handicrafts also make for beautiful souvenirs." Borgohain is hopeful that the global spotlight on Assam will extend to sports development as well, giving young athletes the support they need to shine.



JAHNU BARUA, *filmmaker*
"Tezpur has stories of ancient kingdoms and legendary battles"

The 12-time National Award-winning director has shaped Indian cinema with his deeply humanistic storytelling. Barua's films, including *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987) and *Bonani* (1989), have brought Assamese cinema global recognition. This year, he also found unexpected fame as an actor, with his role as Uncle Ken in *Paatal Lok 2*. "This was the first time I saw a genuine approach to portraying the Northeast, so I accepted the role," he says with a laugh. Barua laments the general lack of national awareness about Assam. "Elsewhere in India, they have this notion that Assam is almost primitive. But we have a rich history, where men and women are equal, and dowry is unheard of." He believes that the best way to understand Assam's history and culture is to engage with its living traditions and historic centres. One such place is Tezpur, a city steeped in mythology and history. "It is not just about scenic beauty or tea gardens — it holds stories of ancient kingdoms, legendary battles, and even connections to the *Mahabharata*. It's where history and folklore blend seamlessly." Barua also highlights Hajo, a town that reflects Assam's inclusive spiritual fabric. "It's one of the few places where Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism coexist harmoniously. That itself tells you what Assam is about."

PAPON, *musician*
"Try a river cruise where every bend brings a shift in rhythm, flavour, and identity"

Angaraag Mahanta, popularly known as Papon, has delivered unforgettable hits such as 'Moh Moh Ke Dhaage', 'Jiyein Kyun' and 'Kaun Mera'. Beyond Hindi movies, his independent work carries the soul of his home state, shaped by its rich folk traditions and unique cultural crossroads.
Papon describes Assam as the bridge between India and the Far East. "I was lucky to be born in a place where I could grasp both worlds — western and eastern music, and of course, Indian music." He is also passionate about showcasing Assam's cultural depth. His latest project, a film-in-progress, traces the Brahmaputra's journey from Assam to Bangladesh, and is intended to explore the river's role as a lifeline of traditions, music and cuisine. He sees a river cruise as an immersive way to discover Assam's hidden gems, from remote tribal villages to centuries-old spiritual sites. "I've taken a short trip before, but this time, I want to travel its entire length in Assam," Papon says. "Every bend in the river brings a shift in rhythm, flavour, and identity. Through this film, I hope to showcase 10 to 11 distinct forms of music, ways of living, food traditions, and cultural expressions that thrive along the Brahmaputra." Companies such as Antara Cruises and Assam Bengal Navigation help plan cruises.

United in action (Clockwise from left) The 'Hargila Army' celebrates the nesting season of the greater adjutant stork in Hajo, near Guwahati; Purnima Devi Barman; and the endangered birds near the Deepor Beel wildlife sanctuary. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & RITU RAJ KONWAR)

THE STORK SISTER AND HER 'HARGILA ARMY'

Purnima Devi Barman, the only Indian in *TIME*'s Women of the Year 2025, has mobilised 20,000 women in Assam in her efforts to conserve the endangered greater adjutant stork

Prabalika M. Borah
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Purnima Devi Barman, a wildlife biologist from Assam, is the unexpected commander of a large, and powerful army. Globally, she is now known as the Stork Sister.

The only Indian woman featured in *TIME*'s Women of the Year 2025 list for her contributions to conservation, Barman is renowned for her pioneering efforts to save the endangered greater adjutant stork, locally known as *hargila* (meaning 'bone swallower' in Assamese).

In her mission to protect the bird and its habitat, Barman has mobilised a powerful community of over 20,000 women, forming the Hargila Army, an all-women conservation group. The birds – there are around 1,800 in Assam – are mostly found in the three districts of Guwahati, Morigaon, and Nagaon.

A testament to their success is the steady rise in the stork numbers and the Hargila baby showers, now on as it is nesting season – this community event welcomes new hatchlings. "From being seen as a bad omen to being celebrated with baby showers, we've come a long way," says Barman.

Growing up with trees and birds

Recalling her first time in the field in 2007, urging villagers in Dardara (near Hajo) not to cut trees where the greater adjutant storks nested, she says, "I wasn't sure what I was doing or how I was going to fight for the birds. I was in Dardara that day because I heard trees with nesting birds were being felled. By the time I arrived, to my horror, the *kodom gos* [*Neolamarckia cadamba*, also known as burflower-tree, laran, or Leichhardt pine] had already been cut down, destroying many nests with chicks. As I pleaded and argued for the trees and the birds, the villagers thought I had lost my mind. To them, the bird was a harbinger of bad luck."

At the time, Barman was a new mother to twins. As she pleaded with the villagers to save the birds and their nests, she instinctively picked up the fallen chicks and rushed to Guwahati in an autorickshaw. "To me, they were no different from my babies. I was helpless, scared, but also determined to save them."

Looking back, Barman recalls what drew her to these birds. She grew up in Palashbari, about 30 kilometres from Guwahati, with her grandmother, who would weave magical stories about nature. In these tales, trees were kingdoms, while birds and insects were their loyal residents and warriors. "*Aita* [grandmother] always made up these stories featuring adjutant storks, egrets, vultures, and Asian openbills, among others. But, unknowingly, she was teaching me about nature. I could identify birds from a young age and soon learnt their nesting seasons and preferred trees," she says.

Her grandmother's love for nature shaped Barman's path in life and led her to pursue a Master's degree in zoology, specialising in ecology and wildlife biology at Gauhati University. "My professors inspired me immensely. They sent us on various bird-watching camps, and during discussions on endangered species, the topic of *hargila* and *bortukula* [lesser adjutant stork] came up. It was an instant connection to my childhood, and I decided to do my Ph.D on the greater adjutant stork," she says.

From research to conservation

Barman's work has earned her global recognition. She is the recipient of honours such as the Champions of the Earth Award, in 2022 – the UN's highest environmental honour – and the Whitley Gold Award, which she received in 2024, often called the Green Oscar, for her work in biodiversity conservation.

Now a member of the IUCN Stork, Ibis, and Spoonbill Specialist Group, Barman recalls how the 2007 incident shifted her perspective. She realised she was busy gathering material for her Ph.D on a bird that was at risk of disappearing. "What good is a thesis if the bird itself cannot be saved?" she thought. That moment changed everything – her focus shifted from research to direct conservation.

Determined to make a difference, she returned to the village, this time as an advocate for the birds. "The villagers complained that the birds made the area dirty and smelly. So, I offered to clean the foot of the nesting trees myself," says Barman. These birds who mostly fed in marshy areas and shallow pits are now scavengers because of the loss of habitat and urbanisation.

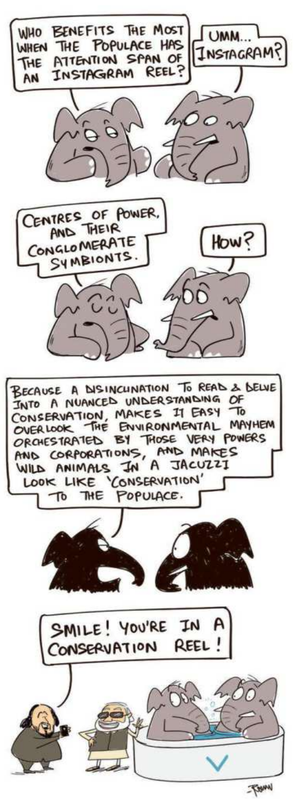
At first, her efforts were met with ridicule, says Barman. "People laughed, mocked me with songs, and called me crazy. But I was persistent. I showed up every day until they finally decided to listen." That was her first small step, but she knew it was not enough. She began rallying like-minded people, including families on whose properties the birds nested. "We organised *pitha* competitions [local food contests], *naam* competitions [*bhajan* singing gatherings], cleaning drives – with the *hargila* at the centre of it all," she shares. These gatherings always concluded with awareness talks about the birds and the importance of preserving trees for biodiversity.

Recognising the power of collective action, she has focused on including women in her efforts. "Women can drive real change. That's why we call ourselves the Hargila Army, and we say it with pride," she says. Thanks to their work, the once-neglected bird is now protected, celebrated, and even growing in numbers locally.

The movement has since expanded to include environmental education. Barman and her team have established the Hargila Learning Centre, where they introduce children to conservation and instil a love for nature from an early age.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



A MORBID IMAGINATION IS A LOVELY THING

Says a writer about the journalistic practice of commissioning obituaries, in advance, of public figures

Saikat Majumdar

A leading Indian newspaper recently asked me to write an obituary for a well-known writer. The request unsettled me. The writer was alive. True, they were of advanced years. In the words of the commissioning editor, it was all "very morbid".

A morbid imagination is a lovely thing for a writer. I wrote the essay, but not as an obituary – my imagination couldn't be *that* morbid. I visited their books, what they meant to me and to people who meant something to me. It could just as well be published as a celebration of the writer's life. But if there's something that I want to stay asleep forever in the drawer's darkness, it is this one.

A genre of its own

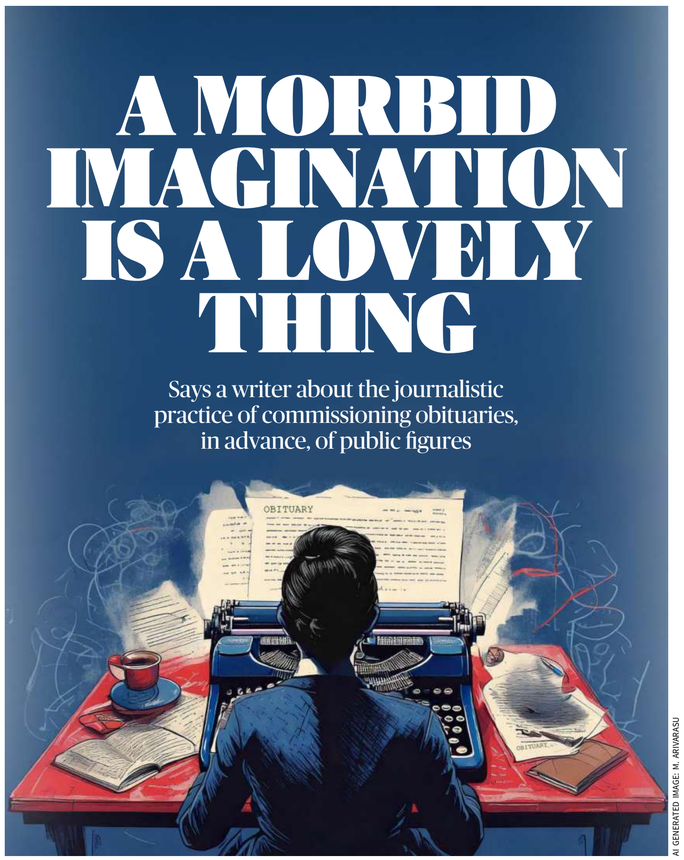
Incidentally, newspapers don't find this practice shocking at all. In a spoof-shot at writing her own memorial, *The New York Times* obituary writer Margalit Fox describes this practice as "the Sisyphean task of obit editors to stockpile 'advances' for as many of the newsworthy undead as possible", to which she herself contributed "dozens".

Sometimes, the subjects would remain undead for years, such as that of the very first advance she wrote in 1995, of a major American scholar still going strong in his nineties. "He remains, blast him," she wrote in 2018, "almost obscenely productive, forcing me to update his obituary several times a year."

The unique signature behind a heartfelt obituary is a momentous subjective utterance – a soul looking back to the life of another, and its mark on the world. When in the future, obituaries are generated by Artificial Intelligence, they will make well-informed death notices, but in the absence of a unique voice, I worry they will not give readers a sense of why that life was special.

Listen to this voice in this obituary of the poet Lord Byron, who threw himself headlong in the Greek war of independence: "It is fortunate for the great when they can escape from themselves into some pursuit, which, by firing their ambition, gives a stimulus to their active powers. We rejoiced to see Lord Byron engaged in a cause which afforded such motives for exertions, and we anticipated from him many days of glory. But it has been otherwise decreed."

These are lives snuffed out too early. Byron died at 36. Even Charles Dickens died at an age that would be too young today – 58. You can hear the sound of lamentation in these lines from his obituary, sliding to a whisper of a literary allusion: "There is not a home in the United Kingdom in which the sad news of today will not be received with the deepest and most heartfelt regret. Mr Charles Dickens is dead." Will AI either craft or catch the submerged allusion to the famous lines from *The Old Curiosity Shop* describing the death of Little Nell? "She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon."



AI GENERATED IMAGE: M. ARIVAZHAGU

Remembering the bygone

The end of a public life, especially if lived to the fullest, often feels like the end of an era. Such was how three deaths at the end of 2024 came to me – those of Bapsi Sidhwa, Shyam Benegal, and Manmohan Singh. Sidhwa's 1988 novel *The Ice-Candy Man* evoked the traumatic childhood of a nation in the act of being ripped; Benegal's films brought up the decades of the nation's bohemian, socialist youth; and Singh remains best-remembered for the country's market liberalisation in 1991, an economic adulthood that defines India to its uncertain present.

I wrote about this end-of-epoch, as I did about what felt like the end of another age in another country that claims my citizenship – English literature at the university, in the death of David Lodge, the great campus novelist of the 20th century. Uncannily, it felt like the end of the university as we know it, and of the place of literature and the humanities in it.

The end of a public life, especially if lived to the fullest, often feels like the end of an era. Such was how three deaths at the end of 2024 came to me — those of writer Bapsi Sidhwa, filmmaker Shyam Benegal, and former prime minister Manmohan Singh

This sense of an ending, I feel, is the dark gift of the COVID-19 pandemic to human consciousness.

The pre-pandemic and the post-pandemic worlds are divided by loss of lives on a scale not seen before in our living memory, including strangely disembodied deaths where bodies lay beyond reach in the same city. As we enter the world after Gaza, with nearly 50,000 dead in less than a year, including 18,000 children, we cannot help but wonder if this is the death of the world as we know it. Are we special in feeling this, or does every age meet an epiphany like this one?

Will this world require all of us to imagine our own obituaries? If it does, we must take up the challenge with a smile. They cast light, not darkness – the memorial, the obituary, the epitaph. Life knows no greater celebration of itself than the solemn remembrance of its bygone contours.

The writer's most recent books include a novel, The Remains of the Body, *and a book of criticism,* The Amateur.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

ALLEGEDLY

Why not a 14-language formula?

The poorer a country and its government schools, the greater should be the number of languages forced upon its children

I am an eminent North Indian intellectual and a permanently aspiring politician. I have an opinion on everything, especially issues on which I am not qualified to speak. I like to give lectures, especially to people who have no interest in my opinions. I can afford to do so because I have connections, I have influence, and I know how to use ChatGPT. I am also very humble. For all these reasons, I want Tamil Nadu politicians to follow my advice on how many languages they should teach in their government schools.

I speak two languages (both of them softly). They are Hindi and English. It is true I don't know Tamil. But I love Tamil. Tamil culture is amazing, just like Hindi culture. Brilliant guy, your Thiruvalluvar. So here is my humble submission: junk your 2-language formula. Be more ambitious. Think bigger.

As I have explained in many wonderful videos on my social media channel (do subscribe, if you haven't already), children have an unlimited capacity to learn several different languages simultaneously. Therefore, restricting them to two languages is a terrible idea. True, a 3-language formula is not much of an improvement over a 2-language formula. According to a new paper published in the *Harvard-Cambridge Journal of Advanced Mathematics*, it turns out that 'three', numerically speaking, is only one more than two.

A new language every year

In other words, a 3-language formula would force children to learn only one language more than a 2-language formula would. This is a travesty in a country renowned for its linguistic diversity and lack of public investment in education. Ideally, the poorer a country, and the worse the condition of its government schools, the greater should be the number of languages forced down the throats of school children. And given the recent changes in our economy, Tamil Nadu's language policy needs to be upgraded – from a 2-language to a 14-language formula.

Why 14? I say 14 because that's the number of years of mandated schooling (if you include LKG and UKG). An average adult can easily learn a brand new language in six months. Since we're dealing with children, let's go easy, and double the time required to 12 months. So, a child can start by learning one language in LKG, a second language in UKG, a third language in Class I, and so on until she would have learned 14 languages by the time she clears Class XII.

Now the big question: what should these 14 languages be? I suggest we adopt a system of 'core' and 'elective' languages. Three languages – Sanskrit (best language ever), Hindi (every thinking Indian must know the sections of the BNS under which he can go to jail for thinking), and Gujarati (the language of our masters) – would be 'core' or mandatory. For the remaining 11 (elective), the student can pick from a menu of 72 languages. As a strong advocate of co-operative federalism, I believe state governments should have exclusive say in picking the 72 languages.

Learn Valyrian, Klingon and more

How to organise 72 language teachers in every school? That's easy: AI. Millions of grown-ups all over the world are turning heptalingual overnight using AI-driven language teaching apps such as Dua Lipa. For children, given their superior language learning aptitude, picking up 14 languages in 14 years would be child's play.

If I was a three-year-old joining in LKG tomorrow in a school in Tamil Nadu, apart from the mandatory Sanskrit, Hindi and Gujarati, my choice of 11 electives under the 14-language formula would be:

1. Tamil: Yes! I told you, I love Tamil. So I am walking the talk as you can see.
2. High Valyrian: The only language dragons understand, so it's a no-brainer.
3. COBOL: One of the oldest living machine languages, a classic.
4. Dothraki: Love the way it sounds, and Daenerys learnt it in a matter of days.
5. Teleprompterese: It's the language of power, after all.
6. Malapaambu (also known as Python): As we transition to a world dominated by AI, it's essential to know at least one AI language.
7. Low Valyrian: So I can watch *Game of Thrones* in the original, without the English dubbing.
8. Java (not the bike): Doesn't hurt to learn an extra AI language, in case you run into a bot that doesn't speak Malapaambu.
9. Klingon: You never know who among the people you meet every day are actually aliens.
10. C++: The most important language an Indian will ever learn.
11. English: Well, you can't write TOEFL, SAT or GRE in Hindi.

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

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

FIRE, FIDELITY AND AN INHUMAN HERITAGE

Once reserved for the warrior caste, the 'prestige' associated with the act of Sati led to its proliferation. Until the British arrived

In Europe, Christian clergy burnt alive women suspected of being Satan-worshipping witches. In Arabia, the 'People of the Ditch' were martyrs who chose death by fire rather than giving up Islam.

The theatre of death in matters of faith is very much part of human culture. The practice of Sati – burning of Hindu widows – needs to be seen in this context.

In 1829, the East India Company passed a law banning Sati. Christian missionaries had long highlighted this practice in European circles to argue that, despite its lofty philosophy, India was a barbaric land in need of civilisational rescue. Defying this ban, a decade later, the Sikh-controlled lands saw the burning of four Rajput queens and seven slave girls on the funeral pyre of Raja Ranjit Singh. A Kangra miniature painting was commissioned to commemorate this event.

In 1861, Michael Madhusudan Dutta wrote his famous ballad *Meghnad-Badh* that valorised the

Sati-hood of Prameela, widow of Indrajit, daughter-in-law of Ravana, a story with roots in the 700-year-old Telugu *Ranganatha Ramayana*. Even Hindu social reformers, known for supporting the ban against Sati, praised this Bengali ballad as a literary masterpiece.

Chastity at what cost?

No one knows when the pan-Indian practice of warrior widows burning themselves with (*sahagamana*) or without (*anugamana*) the corpse of their husband came to be known as 'sati' – a word that means the chaste wife. The inhuman practice was strongly linked to the belief in fidelity-magic; that a woman who thinks of no one but her husband had supernatural powers. She could collect water in unbaked pots, as in the story of Sati Renuka; she could stop the sun from rising, as in the story of Sati Shilavati; she could turn the Hindu Trinity into her babies, as in the story of Anasuya. Sati Savitri even saved her husband from the jaws of death. So, it was assumed that a chaste wife would protect her warrior husband from death.

Vedic literature does not speak of this practice. In the *Rig Veda*, a widow is made to lie next to her husband's corpse and then told to

(Clockwise from left) A sati-stone at Veerabhadra temple in Andhra Pradesh; another in Coimbatore; and at Korlai Fort in Maharashtra. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, WIKI COMMONS)

grasp the hand of another man and return to the land of the living. This may have inspired the practice of *chadar-chadhana* or 'drape-offering' by which widows in pastoral communities of North India were remarried to relatives of the husband. Similar practices are found in the Jewish *Bible* where Tamar is forced to marry her husband's young brother. Feminists saw this kind of remarriage as patriarchy, as the widow had no agency here.

Brahmins and Rajputs frowned on remarriage as a 'low' caste custom seen among monkeys and demons of the *Ramayana*. A 'high' caste widow, who refused to burn herself on her husband's pyre, was respected only if she shaved her head, stripped her body of ornamentation, ate food without salt or spices, and lived like a nun, abandoned in temples of Mathura and Vrindavan.

Mira, a Rajput princess of the 16th century, embarrassed her household, when she refused to become Sati and instead devoted herself to singing praises of Krishna in public. Hounded by relatives, she disappeared mysteriously in Dwarka.

The prestige of death

The earliest archaeological and epigraphic evidence of widow immolation comes from around 1,600 years ago, from Nepal and central India and western India – roughly from the period when Satavahana kings controlled the Godavari river basin. In a Tamil *Sangam* poem from this period, a widow says: 'That funeral pyre of black twigs that frightens you is not fearful to me, who has her broad-shouldered husband. A lotus pond and an altar of flames are both the same to me' (*Purananuru*, 246). In the Prakrit literature work, *Gaha Sattasai* (poem 407), also from this period, we are told how the flames were doused by the sweat of the widow, who lovingly clung to her husband's corpse.

Around 1,300 years ago, we find the earliest Brahminical texts, the *Parasara* and *Vishnu Dharma-shastra*, endorsing this practice as a way of preserving chastity and making a path to paradise. But it was reserved for the warrior community. The prestige it granted made it popular, as indicated by the widespread proliferation of sati-stones from Rajasthan through central India and Deccan to Odisha. The first king to oppose it officially was Muhammad Tughlaq in the 14th century. But monuments were being erected to mark the spot of the sati sacrifice by Rajput and Maratha nobility even in the 17th and 18th centuries.

About 300 years ago, this practice was widely adopted by Kulin Brahmins of Bengal. What made it alarming, however, was that along with polygamy, it was being rationalised by the elite priest community for childless child widows – in service of caste purity. This is what the British clergymen reported in Europe to defame India and bring about the ban.

Devdutt Pattanaik *is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Brilliancy?

Neither vulnerable, East deals

Bob Jones

Sherlock Holmes would often dazzle his sidekick, Dr. Watson, with his deductions and observations about the people around them. Watson would express his admiration and wonder before Holmes patiently explained the reasoning that led him to those conclusions. It would all seem so simple to Watson, after the explanation, that Watson wondered why he hadn't reached those same conclusions himself. A bridge expert is a mini-version of Sherlock Holmes. You may think that he has done something quite brilliant, but the expert doesn't consider it to be brilliant at all. His play is simply the result of logical thought.

NORTH
♠ Q 9 4
♡ K J 4
◇ K J 6 5 3
♣ K 5

WEST
♠ K 8 6 3
♡ 10 8
◇ 7 2
♣ J 10 9 3 2

EAST
♠ A 10 7 5 2
♡ 2
◇ 9 8 4
♣ A Q 7 6

SOUTH
♠ J
♡ A Q 9 7 6 5 3
◇ A Q 10
♣ 8 4

The bidding:

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
1♠	2♡	3♠*	4♡
4♠	5♡	All pass	

*Pre-emptive, at least 4 spades

Today's deal sees North-South being pushed to the five level to buy the contract. Good decision by South, as four spades by East was unbeatable with best play by declarer. What would you lead from the West hand? Most would lead a low spade, partner's suit. You would no longer be able to defeat the contract. A club lead would be the winner, but why should you find that lead? An expert West would lead the king of spades! He could then retain the lead and judge what to do next. Finding the club shift would be trivial and five hearts would be defeated. Was that a brilliant lead? Not really. There was no suit West wanted led by partner after winning a spade lead. Leading the king of spades could not hurt and might help.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Names that are brands!

'31 flavours' Liverpool mascot Mighty Red scoops ice cream at a store in San Jose, California. What is the shop famous for? (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On March 16, 1867, Joseph ____ published his article in *The Lancet* outlining the discovery of antiseptic surgery. He was a revolutionary surgeon who introduced phenol as a steriliser making surgery safer for patients. One of the most popular antiseptic mouthwashes is named after him. Which brand and what was his name?

2 William __ started his own company in 1900 running small theatres. He eventually went on to run a chain of movie theatres. By 1914, he started a studio that made movies. In 1935, it merged with another studio called 'Twentieth Century Pictures'. How do we now know this very successful company?

3 Adolf Dassler was a German cobbler who made sports shoes. He was adept at mechanising the process even without electricity. His company, a reference to a shortening of his name, was one of the first to obtain endorsements from athletes. Which shoe company was this?

4 John ____ was a Quaker businessman who opened a shop in 1824 to sell cocoa. He eventually started a company with his brother to sell drinking chocolate as an alternative to alcohol. What company is this, which is one of the largest confectionary manufacturers in the world?

5 Bertie Charles ____ was a Scottish American journalist who founded a business magazine in 1917. Although it features multiple articles on finance and the industry, it is best known for its ranking and lists, such as 'Richest people', 'Most powerful women leaders' etc. Which magazine is this?

6 Facundo _____ was a Spanish businessman who started a general store in Cuba. Following an earthquake, business slumped and he started looking for another opportunity. He figured out through experimentation, a process to make a refined type of rum, which till then had been a crude beverage. It eventually became the best-selling rum of all time. Which company is this that is represented by an upside-down bat?

7 King Camp _____ was an American businessman who innovated an inexpensive disposable blade made of stainless steel. This cheap version made it very popular and he started a company in his name to market it. What company was this, which has the tagline 'The best a man can get'?

8 Burt ___ & Irv ____ were brothers-in-law who both ran ice cream parlours in California. They merged both in 1948 and offered 31 flavours of ice creams. What are the blanked out names?

9 Larry Hillblom was a law student who took up a job at an insurance company, moving packages between Oakland and Los Angeles airports. He then partnered with Adrian Dalsey and Robert Lynn, bought a Plymouth car and rushed documents between airports. What company did they start, which has their initials?

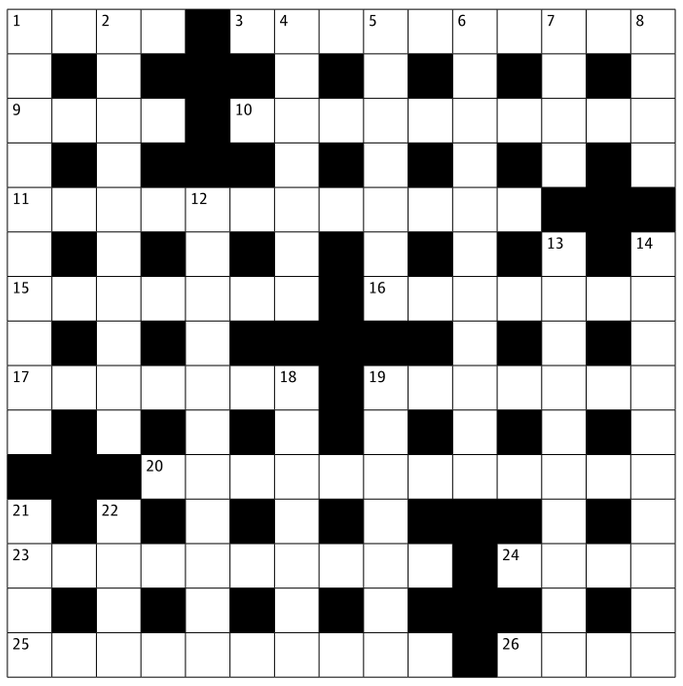
10 August Horch was a German engineer who initially worked for Karl Benz. In 1899, he formed A.Horch & Co. to make automobiles under his name. After an internal dispute, he had to change the name; hence he chose the Latin translation of his name. If 'Horch' means 'listen', what company is this?

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

Answers

1. Listerine, Lister
2. 20th Century Fox
3. Adidas
4. Cadbury
5. Forbes
6. Bacardi
7. Gillette
8. Baskin Robbins
9. DHL
10. Audi

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3349



Across

1 Tree resins in health facilities sent back (4)
3 Common insects: audience hurries away (10)
9 What's in jug? Lichee fruit (4)
10 Messed around with ease, I might be on a roll (6,4)
11 Bureaucrat to avoid waterfowl (8,4)
15 Pine marten perhaps leading in distance raced (7)
16 Ignoring some affront, he got busy (2-3-2)
17 Everyman initially nags deputies: they fill the cells (7)
19 Corroborate order for Paddington to go? (4,3)
20 Writhing, hurt, rocks or reels at first, filled with dread (6-6)
23 According to Spooner, not one youngster or the other is to wed (3,3,4)
24 In den, with stomach churning, peddler of falsehoods (4)
25 Records rugby highlights in woven illustrations (10)
26 Empire invaded by Spanish finding home by Central America (4)

Down

1 Miss embraced by oiled nudist hunk (4,6)
2 Race car, for example — or kayak! (10)
4 Job available in Gap (7)
5 Creep showing how to describe what's average in two words? (2-3-2)
6 Egg on this: santé! (6,5)
7 Notion, *almost* perfect(4)
8 Scandalous author — disturbing eroticist, principally? (4)
12 Characters seen in *Britain's Got Talent* and *The Winter's Tale*? (11)
13 Rising gyration (10)
14 Alternative adopted by disruptive shakeout somewhere on the Yellow Sea (5,5)
18 Attacking footballer, one with brilliant match? (7)
19 Read aloud *Howl*, poem: will it scan? (7)
21 Piece of info, ASAP! (4)
22 Look furtively — in both directions? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3348

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The unending **cycle of deprivation**

It is indeed a pity that Congo with its flora and fauna, rich tribal culture, and incredible resources has always been seen as a 'trophy' to be milked and exploited

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Living in fear A Congolese woman prepares a meal near a temporary shelter at Rugombo Stadium, after fleeing from renewed clashes between M23 rebels and the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (REUTERS)

Lubunga hesitated. He was clearly nervous and unsure. This was his first visit after appointment to the Ambassador's residence. In a Francophone country, he spoke remarkably good English. He was the office assistant and was tasked with supervising some work in India House, the residence of the Ambassador.

My wife and I tried to put him at ease and had him come inside and seated in the waiting hall. My wife asked our domestic help to give him a glass of juice and some biscuits. "Are you sure ma'am that this will be correct as it is not mentioned in my contract," he asked surprise writ large on his face. I assured him that it's all right. Only after this did he start sipping the juice.

Such is the simplicity of the local Congolese that they can stump one with innocence and straightforwardness. The ravages of war, disease colonisation, and exploitation have wrought havoc in this hugely resource-rich country. I am saddened to note that the country is once again in the grip of war with nearly 3,000 deaths reported in less than two months. This was a country where six million people had died or been displaced or struck by diseases during the period from 1997 to 2003. Pogroms carried out by one ethnic group against another led to mass migration. Poverty worsened. Not much had changed during my nearly three-year tenure in the Congo. People were mired in abysmal poverty. There was no organised industry. Jobs were hardly there, and youngsters simply lazed around, sniffing anything from glue to drugs.

Flora and fauna

I remembered the Tarzan comics which had the jungles of Congo as a backdrop. I vividly recall the adventures of Tintin and V.S. Naipaul's *A bend in the river* set in Congo. While in that country, I visited the dense jungles near the Virunga National Park, which was home to the extremely intelligent silver mane gorillas. In Kinshasa, I got to see cute and adorable bonobos which would clap their hands in delight at getting to munch some plantains. It is said that both the gorillas and bonobos have a remarkably similar genetic make-up (around 98%) to that of humans.

It is indeed a terrible pity that this country with its flora and fauna, its rich tribal culture, and its incredible resources ranging from copper and gold to tungsten, tantalum and tin (also often referred to as "conflict minerals") has always been seen as a "trophy" to be milked and exploited. Corruption is rampant and anyone with the scope of making some money does so with impunity.

I was once amazed and saddened to know that one of my domestic helps had lost his son to malaria (rampant throughout the country) and yet he showed no visible signs of despair or sadness. After completing the last rites of his son, when he got back to the residence, I asked him why he did not show any sadness at his loss. His response, by and large, captured the sentiments and mindset of most Congolese. "Patron, that is all right. I have eight children and even the loss of one or two does not matter as there are fewer mouths to feed," he said.

The Congolese are remarkably skilful in their athleticism. Their sense of music is incredible. My domestic help picked up the tune of the Gayatri Mantra in a matter of a few days by just listening to the chant of my wife. Once he had picked the tune up, he was forever humming this hymn. One sincerely hopes for the sake of this country and its beleaguered citizens that things stabilise quickly and the local people find some food on their plates.

The author is a former Ambassador to the DRC.

When siblings are polar opposites

Sudhir Vombatkere
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I had a sweet, gentle old aunt named Sushila. She always spoke softly and endearingly, never speaking ill of anyone, leave alone uttering a strong word. Her sister Uma, who lived a couple of streets away, was also sweet, but frank and forceful in manner and expression.

On one occasion, Aunt Sushila had been annoyed by her neighbour, who had carelessly cut the flowering creeper on their common wall without even speaking about it with her. Uncharacteristically venting her feelings with her family, she was searching for a suitable word to describe the neighbour. She finally blurted out, "That, that ... (still searching for a strong word) ... that naughty man!", greatly stressing "naughty". Aunt Uma burst out laughing, as did others in the family, at Aunt Sushila's gentle expression of annoyance.

Some days later, when Aunt Uma visited, she spoke of her intention of getting her expiring passport renewed. She had contacted the nearby travel agency, to which everyone in the family went for their travel needs.

On paying a hefty additional sum, the travel agent had assured Aunt Uma that he would get her passport renewed well before the date of her travel.

As the deadline approached, as most elders do, Aunt Uma was getting jittery, and telephoning (no mobiles in those days) the travel agent frequently, but he was not receiving her calls. And Aunt Uma's anger was mounting, with very few days left for her departure.

Aunt Sushila asked her sister whether she had received her renewed passport. And, in her gentle manner, she asked, "What is that nice man's name?", meaning the agent's.

This infuriated Aunt Uma, and she said, "When I meet that [expletive], I will give him a piece of my mind!"

There was a shocked silence. But after a while, helped by another round of tea, desultory conversation resumed. Eventually Aunt Uma left for home.

After she left, Aunt Sushila smiling gently, said, "I have never seen Uma so angry. By the way, what is the name of that nice travel agent? I couldn't catch it when Uma mentioned it."

The sweetest sound to hear

Hearing one's name activates different parts of brain as no other words do

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The usual question I face whenever I meet somebody for the first time is what my title, name, and surname stand for. It reinforces my belief that a name is not just a word but a unique identifier that differentiates a person from most others. On your birth, you are assigned the label and it is what people call you all your life.

"A person's name," says Dale Carnegie, "is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language." It's so powerful that if someone calls your name even in a crowded place, you would instinctively turn your attention towards the person and respond.

In India, parents choose the most suitable name for their child, often based on astrological beliefs. In cultures with strong religious traditions, children are given divine names, invoking the blessings of the deities. However, modern trend in naming babies is to straightaway select an attractive or fanciful name from a book of baby names. Those not pleased with their given names can change them legally at any time.

(ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES)

Part of identity

All said and done, a name is a name whether ascribed or acquired. It has to be treated with respect like any other part of an individual's identity.

In using names, certain etiquette is followed in almost all cultures. Making a joke or trying to shorten, mispronounce or misspell a name could have disastrous effects. It is customary not to call elderly people such as father or grandfather by their first names. Of late, addressing senior colleagues as sir, sahib or boss at the workplace is discouraged as being a colonial vestige. The usage of first names is preferred in the interest of better collaboration and communication. While most senior officers are comfortable with being addressed by their names, there are exceptions like a colleague of mine who would not only be unresponsive but would also lose his cool if a callow probationer does so.

As we are heading towards a casteless society, surname is now rarely used as a source of information about the social group one belongs to. In India, sections of women change their surname from that of their fathers to that of their husbands despite a furore over this switchover.

Brain research has demonstrated that hearing one's name activates different parts of brain as no other words do. The other day, I was standing in a long queue waiting to enter an art museum. The security guard was frisking every one, checking handbags and stamping each entrance ticket to confirm completion of checking. He was discharging his duty mechanically with a doleful look on his face. When my turn came, I greeted him with the words "Good morning Mr. David", picking his name from his badge. His face immediately lit up with a broad smile as he responded to my greetings. It is obvious that hearing his name had triggered in him a sense of recognition and validation.

A threat to all sexes

Male, female, and non-binary rape victims need societal support

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A reel that I saw triggered many questions within me. It portrays a woman who wants a girl child and is sad when she gives birth to a boy. However, after seeing news about girl children and women being raped, she feels relieved to have given birth to a boy.

This reel disturbed me as it raises numerous questions. Why does society reach the conclusion that a rape victim is always a woman? Why are rapists predominantly perceived as men? The truth is that rape victims include men. Studies show a good percentage of men above and below the age of 18 have been victims of sexual assault. Yet, most individuals are unaware that men can also be victims of rape.

(ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES)

The societal image of men is that they should be "alpha males". Many stereotypes persist – "Boys don't cry", "Men are the ultimate protectors", and so on.

When male rape victims come forward, they are often ignored or mocked as weak, and this societal behaviour hurts them even more. Whether the victim is male or female, society labels them as weak while the perpetrators go scot free.

Many victims choose not to speak up because of the stigma and mistreatment they face. Parents, too, often prioritise the perceived dignity of their children, regardless of gender, over seeking justice. As a result, many rapists remain free.

We need to stand by the victims and support them in seeking justice to put the perpetrators behind bars.

The stereotype that only men are rapists needs to be challenged, as the harsh truth is that male victims are those raped by men and women. There are helplines and communities dedicated to supporting those who have been sexually assaulted. While it is true that women experience a higher rate of sexual violence, we must not turn a blind eye to the suffering of male victims. Gender-based stereotypes must be broken. The issues faced by both men and women should be acknowledged transparently. A victim is a victim, let it be male, female, or non-binary.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Human history is not just a tale of biological evolution but also one of relentless technological transformation. ('Being human in an age of thinking machines'; Mar. 9) The real challenge lies not in resisting new technology but in managing it with a humane touch. Striking this balance is the only viable path forward.
Haneefa Puthuparamb

AI is not a substitute for the human brain. It cannot bring peace, real pleasure and joy of life. It is an easy coin to counterfeit like digital frauds. So more caution should be exercised while using AI.
Sravana Ramachandran

AI-powered tools and robots can play a catalytic role in nearly every field. Shamefully, we have also seen how vulnerabilities have crept into the use of AI with deepfakes and the like. As such, it calls for a robust regulatory policy framework and deployment of necessary firewalls to address such threats. There is an imperative need to foster an intelligent human skilling ecosystem to reap the best from emerging AI technologies.
G. Ramasubramanyam

Language matters

Author Banu Mushtaq and translator Deepa Bhasthi deserve our congratulations. ('The astonishing Banu Mushtaq'; Mar. 9) And journalist G.T. Satish has done an excellent job of introducing the 76-year-old storyteller from Hassan to readers from everywhere. We eagerly await the release of Mushtaq's autobiography.
Prajeet Dev B.

At a time when states resist the three-language formula in schools, a Muslim girl's rise to glory through a local language that is not her mother tongue is inspiring. Banu Mushtaq's proficiency in Kannada is an indicator that learning multiple languages not only emboldens the child but will add value to the language itself in the long run.
S. Raghavan

AI as personal assistant

The idea on which Daydream is conceptualised is genius. ('The ChatGPT of shopping'; Mar. 9) Offering users an AI-driven personal stylist will totally change the digital shopping experience. The scope is endless.
Kirti Wadhawan

Use tech wisely

The advice of Spanish filmmaker Paco Torres for the ethical and judicious use of AI needs serious consideration. ('Treat AI as an ally, not a threat'; Mar. 9) Use of technological advancement without proper scrutiny and guidance is a sure recipe for disaster.
Satvik V.M.

Giving back to society

The myriad areas, whether it is fashion, music, food or business, that the Parsis women are involved in is laudable. ('Parsi ladies and a Bombay club story'; Mar. 9) Above all, their philanthropic contribution to society is phenomenal.
Ratna Naidu

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The dangers of precocious stardom
A healthy dose of appreciation is essential, but what social media brings is appreciation that is excessive
G.L. Krishna

Social media and young minds
Children, influenced by carefully curated images, are increasingly striving to meet unattainable ideals
Sucheta Das

Writing for self-clarification
Keep writing and keep exploring its multiple dimensions which emerge in due course
S.A.Thameemul Ansari

Various shades of lies
Not all lies are perceived equally; the severity correlates with the harm inflicted
P.S. Parameswaran

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(Clockwise from left) A few dishes from The Sarvato; the rooftop restaurant; and Padmanabh Singh (seated) with Abhishek Honawar. (BHARAT AGGARWAL, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

DINNER AT PACHO'S PALACE

At The Sarvato, the new seasonal restaurant in Jaipur's City Palace, recipes dip into the royal kitchens, and menu experiments begin in the desert when it's off-season

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I enter Jaipur's City Palace to the sound of drums, weaving past a bejewelled foot-stamping, ear-flapping elephant. There is a wedding in progress outside and the streets are festive with light.

Earlier that morning, I had bought a ticket and jostled through gawking crowds to admire the stately buildings, crafted in pink sandstone and marble. By evening, I am back inside, seated in the serene heart of the complex, sipping a crisp Maharaja martini and scooping up creamy *bajra malai koftas*, inspired by the palace kitchens, with freshly made ghee-smeared *phulkas*.

Built by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II in the early 18th century, the palace was expanded by his successors till the 20th century. It is still home to the Jaipur royals. An intricately detailed square pavilion, popularly known as the Sarvatobhadra, stands at the centre of the expansive compound. This was historically used as the *diwan-i-khas*, where the maharaja once held private audiences. Today, a maître-de is stationed outside, leading guests up a narrow passage lined with historical photographs of the family taken at state banquets and polo fields, to the rooftop where The Sarvato now stands.

The seasonal rooftop restaurant is an intriguing new venture by Sawai Padmanabh Singh (Pacho to his friends), the 26-year-old titular maharaja of Jaipur, and Abhishek Honawar, who runs the city's popular hotels, The Johri and 28 Kothi.

Hyperlocal six-course dining

"The whole reason the city of Jaipur was built was to deliver perfection," says Singh, adding, "The maharaja who built the city had that vision for the city and its people. Over the past couple of years, we have been trying on all fronts to deliver that vision [first through the Jaipur Centre for Art, a contemporary art institution launched last November, and now The Sarvato]."

The open-air restaurant, which will close by the end of March as it gets warmer, and then reopen in September, offers a six-course experiential tasting menu inspired by the food of Rajasthan. "It's 100% local ingredients – the freshwater fish, the *bajra*, the indigenous grains... we are doing a lot of sourcing and talking to the community," explains Honawar. "There is no point in serving something that is generically available. If you see an avocado on our menu, it's an insult to the menu. That's where we are coming from. It's hyperlocal, but that doesn't mean you can't apply technique to it, process to it, energy to it."

My meal begins with a miniature brass container, shaped like a traditional tiffin carrier, filled with a deeply savoury consommé with *papad dhokli*. The bartender suggests I team it with a refreshing Chukker, tangy with locally sourced *ber* fruit and tequila. Sipping on my drink, under a star-strung inky night sky, I admire Chandra Mahal, where the royal family lives, shimmering under blue and white lights. On the other side, the stately clock tower looms. It's like sitting in a jewel-studded tiara.

Inspired by royalty and the community

Chef Sonukumar Singh, who says they spent eight months working on the menu, shares that some dishes come from the villages and some from the palace. The herbed *bejad* bread, for instance, is served with a generous bowl of airy white butter spiked with jaggery, sesame and salt from Rajasthan's Sambhar salt lake.

Without giving away too many details (since tasting menus pivot on surprise), the meal is thoughtfully curated, showcasing some of the State's most delicious and underrated ingredients. There are firm *lachi* fish from Udaipur's lakes, served with *kumbi* Bikaneri mushrooms. A melt-in-the-mouth *junglee maas* [a rustic dish traditionally made with game meat, but now uses mutton] heady with the ruby red Mathania chillies, garlic and ghee. And olives. "They're grown in Alwar, Jaisalmer and other parts of Rajasthan," explains the chef, adding with a smile, "So they're now a local ingredient."

The meal also includes a rich, white *bajra malai* meat *kofta*, which is a speciality. "When it's full moon, people [in Rajasthan] would eat white food," states chef Sonu. "The maharaja shared how his grandmother used to cook this, and we followed that recipe". Honawar adds: "People want to eat *bati*, *laal maas* and *junglee maas*. There may be cliches, but with this menu we want to pay homage to classic dishes." So they apply technique to heighten traditional, familiar flavours, like creating confit *laal maas*, in a rich slow-cooked gravy.

"It's a grade A heritage structure – so you cannot touch it. You have to work around the functionality," the restaurateur says, explaining how nothing is nailed to the walls (to prevent added weight on the stone slabs), and the entire structural intervention can be easily dismantled. "We want to make sure we celebrate the space by preserving it and keeping the integrity of the structure intact." It took time and effort, but as he says it's well worth it "because when you are on top, it's magical".

Honawar is already excited about the next version of the menu. "We want to go to the toughest regions in Rajasthan, like Barmar, Bikaner and Jaisalmer during May and June, in peak summer," he says, adding that the trips will also involve documentation. "It will be challenging [the regions are predominantly desert with extreme climatic conditions] but we want to celebrate these communities by bringing their ideas and techniques to the forefront. We want to see what they are cooking, what they are eating. There will be processes like fermentation, which we can learn along the way," he shares. "Off-season is going to be incredible."

A meal for one at The Sarvato is ₹8,000 plus taxes.

Local ticket to Manipur

Much like Kolkata's Chinatown and Dharamshala's Little Tibet, Guwahati's Manipuri Basti is a microcosm of the people and their culture. And nowhere is it more pronounced than in its rice hotels

Simanta Barman

It is a busy weekday afternoon at Meitei Chakluk Manipuri Rice Hotel. Bidya Devi is preparing *thalis*. Bowls of *ooti* (mashed pea curry), *eromba* (a fermented fish-based dish), *kangshoi* (vegetable stew), *atoiba* (fish stew), *singju* (a perilla seed-based mix salad), and *hawai* (Manipuri *dal*), among other dishes, make up the plate.

Fish is a staple in most Manipuri meals, but for her *thali*, Bidya ensures there are "less fishy" options to suit all palates. For instance, her *singju* – a Manipuri favourite made with dry *ngari* (pool barb) – is vegetarian. "The heart of a vegetarian *singju* is *thoiding* [a type of perilla seed], which you grind for the aroma and nutty flavour," she says. For her own *thali*, however, her favourite is *atoiba*. "If the fish is *borali* [Mully catfish], the taste just multiplies," she laughs, even as she makes a fresh batch of *singju* in a large steel bowl.

There are over 20 rice hotels in Guwahati today, with around 10 in Manipuri Basti – a centrally-located neighbourhood, and a cultural hub of the Manipuri people who settled in the state. Bidya and her husband, both in their 50s, have been running their hotel in the *basti* for close to 35 years. The hotel (*chakluk* translates to a *thali* or a full meal in Manipuri) has just been renovated to a larger, well-tiled space. "We used to have buses halting in front, as early as 4 a.m.," she reminisces, adding that being close to the Guwahati Railway Station, a major transportation hub of the region, and the Assam State Transport Corporation office meant many commuters as well as travellers from Manipur and other Northeastern states. "We would have just opened and as we prepared the dishes, they'd wait."

(Clockwise from left) Bidya Devi; a typical rice *thali*; Manipuri ingredients; and Amit Kumar Haobijam's hotel. (SIMANTA BARMAN)

However, COVID-19 and the ongoing unrest in Manipur have hampered some of that flow, especially from their home state. "Now, we rely mostly on locals. On some days, we also get foreign tourists stopping by. They are quite curious and enquire about everything, from the sticky rice and *singju* to the preparation methods," she says.

Creating a legacy

Manipuri Rice Hotels, a moniker that became popular for the uniqueness of Manipur's rice varieties – from *chakhao amubi*, a fragrant, sticky black rice, to the red *khongan* – started to spring up in the early 80s. Bimola Devi, another hotel owner, claims hers to be among the oldest operating in the area. Her husband's family, who are from Manipur (Bimola, who belongs to the Meitei community, was born and brought up in Assam), had a hotel in 1984. "Back then, a Manipuri *thali* consisted of a few dishes, with fishes like *rohu*, *borali* [catfish], and *ilish* as crowd favourites. With a consistent increase in demand, more hotels have mushroomed and now serve elaborate preparations," she says, as she sifts through dried peels of *heiribob*, a citrus fruit used to flavour *dals* and curries.

Most rice hotels are run by members of the Meitei ethnic group who have generationally inhabited the area. For decades, these institutions have been bastions for food lovers, curious about the community's eating traditions – much like a Chinatown in different parts of the country and the world, it is a historic hotspot. "People come to have an authentic experience, and I try to deliver," says Bimola. For instance, in her kitchen you'll find *korfu*, a traditional vessel used to steam Manipuri rice to retain its texture and taste.

Being Manipuri in Assam

Assamese historian Kumudeswar Hazarika notes that it was the Burmese invasion that prompted the influx of Manipuris to this 14-*bigha* plot. Since then, the community has made its mark on Assam's socio-cultural landscape.

Establishing an identity for themselves away from their homeland was a challenge. And while many have gone on to hold government positions, and some have represented the state in sports, it is entrepreneurs such as Bidya and Bimola who have contributed to creating a legacy – despite hurdles such as delayed land *pattas* and competition from big chains and commercial establishments. "Buying this plot was a cherished dream. Now, this space feels like home," says Bidya. The close-knit community thrives on resilience against the odds.

Community congregation spots

Most rice hotel owners, though born and brought up in Assam, still have kin in Manipur. The persistent unrest in their home state has not only impacted business, but also made them wary of what the future holds.

In the meantime, the hotels have become congregation spots for the community. Young and old alike meet up for a meal and to check in with each other. "We are a close-knit community. Over food, people talk and check up on each other with the hope that things will get better soon," says Amit Kumar Haobijam, who co-owns Ema Phouoibi Chakhum rice hotel with his wife. He is also among the younger generation of restaurateurs now upping their social media game to bring their food to a new audience.

As Bidya, Bimola and the others continue to serve their *thalis*, they stand as testaments to stories of resilience, community and the love of food. And if you drop by, definitely try the *atoiba* and *singju*.

The Guwahati-based journalist writes on food, travel, culture, and everything in between.