





SPOTLIGHT DELHI



A still from the Emmy Award-winning series *Delhi Crime*. (Image for representation only.)

CRIME FILES

The sense of place, integral to crime fiction, permeates Rudraneil Sengupta’s debut novel, a police procedural set in the capital

Sumana Mukherjee

Of late, publishers worldwide have been guilty of a singular crime: if there’s a body in the book, be it the victim of a gruesome murder, or a series of quiet, mysterious deaths (I’m looking at you, *Butter*), the marketing material will zoom into the detail and pitch it as a ‘crime’ novel.

It sells a few books, certainly, but more often than not, it leaves the genre aficionados wondering what just happened. There’s space, of course, for re-evaluating the category and injecting fresh ideas and perspectives but the trend has ended up shortchanging the crime-fiction fan.

Not *The Beast Within* by Rudraneil Sengupta (*disclaimer: the author is a former colleague of this reviewer*). This is the crime fiction long sought by English-reading Indians who grew up on Poirot and Superintendent Battle, moved on to Montalbano and Banks and Zen and the Dublin Murder Squad, and wondered why, for all the gory crimes that make headlines in our newspapers, there was no local equivalent of policemen driven as much by their dark past as their passion for justice.

Such good crime fiction as has emerged in the past few years has largely steered clear of officialdom (Samyukta Bhownick’s *A Fatal Distraction* comes to mind). Salil Desai’s five-book-old Inspector Saralkar series, on the other extreme, edges too close to pulp to be taken seriously as crime fiction.

One of the major reasons why the effective police procedural is a rare breed in the country’s bookscape lies in the systemic

opacity of the law and order machinery. Mostly viewed as an organ of torment, the police are also regarded as hopelessly corrupt, ill-equipped and understaffed. To then go beyond these indisputable truths and delve into the many layers that comprise policing in this country is a moment that deserves applause. Sengupta’s weary and damaged Inspector Prashant Kumar is a credible protagonist who works the many planes of NCR’s realities without either diminishing inequities or ignoring power structures.

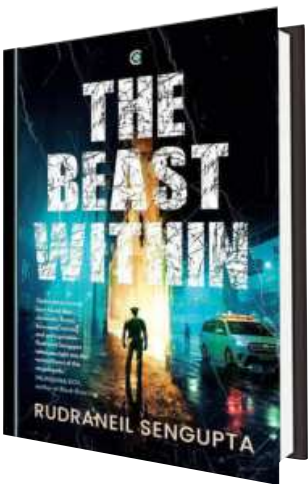
**Intriguing characters**  
Interestingly, *The Beast Within* works less as an archetypal whodunnit than as a how-the-whodidit-was-nailed. When Jyoti Dhurwa, a 15-year-old tribal house help, falls to her death in posh Panchsheel, a section of the police force is ready to close the case as an accident after quick inquiries. But Kumar, lately posted to Hauz Khas after

the successful apprehension of a cop-killer in the Bawana badlands, is having none of it. The way Sengupta captures Kumar’s delicate relational networks within the force – convincing his superiors to give him the case, building his team, earning the newbies’ trust – is worthy of savouring. It also allows Sengupta to create a host of intriguing support characters, led by the wrestler-turned-cop Meera, and chief aide Zeeshan.

As important as Sengupta’s understanding of the workings of the police system (he spent two years embedded with the Delhi police for a series of investigative reports for his newspaper) is his familiarity with the multiple terrains of the national capital region, from swish drawing rooms to wretched slums. The sense of place, so important in any crime fiction, permeates the novel like the fogs that descend on Delhi every winter: bleak, clammy, almost claustrophobic. It weighs down the investigating team in peak summer, becoming ever more dense and forbidding till Kumar – adopting unorthodox ways that would be alien to a Brunetti or a Banks, but would be entirely relatable for an Indian – fights it off to reveal a series of crimes hinged to Jyoti’s death.

Tightly plotted, with spare yet realistic portrayals of Delhi’s peoples and places, peppered with earthy humour, unforgettable characters, and a perceptible love for the city’s indomitable hustle, *The Beast Within* is the kind of novel that sets up a hit series. Maybe it’ll dissuade the marketers from using the ‘crime’ label too freely as well.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based writer and editor.



**The Beast Within**  
Rudraneil Sengupta  
Westland  
₹599

City of stories

What is it about Delhi’s contradictions that makes it unforgettable in fiction?

Radhika Oberoi

The city of Delhi evokes unease. Its skies are noxious; its politics, vile. Its breath is putrid. Uncouth people run the bureaucracy, sit behind shop counters, and drive their SUVs with mindless, brutal speed, using language that is filthy and whiskey-slurred. Everything about the city evokes a frantic need to escape it. Stereotypes proliferate, like the amaltas bursting forth in vulgar yellow in summer. But even the trees, of which there are many – neem, fig, jamun, gulmohar – are unable to redeem Delhi. It remains, in memory, in conversation, and in comparison to that city by the sea, Mumbai, unloved.

United Coffee House. It is 1974; she has only just met him at a play, *Sultan Razia*, performed for the first time at Purana Qila. A smidgen of local history seeps into my storytelling, shaping its contours, warming its blood, birthing its characters.

**Scams, slogans and sitars**

Recent novels set in Delhi portray a corrupt, polluted metropolis teeming with caricatures. I’d

**Minarets and memories**  
To me, Delhi is home. I grew up in a neighbourhood flecked with the tattered minarets of the Khilji dynasty. I was fascinated by the one closest to my house – Chor Minar, a cylindrical minaret riddled with holes that once held the decapitated heads of thieves, or of the Mongols who raided the Delhi Sultanate in the 13th century. Alauddin Khilji, ruler of the Sultanate, was an insatiable collector of heads.

As a child, I played with my friends in the circular park around the minaret, and even climbed its spiral stairway to reach its uneven roof. Years later, across continents, my wistful adult gaze caught the delightful incongruity of a Frisbee or shuttlecock severing the air around the once-terrifying minaret, reducing it to a picturesque backdrop.

In both my novels, *Stillborn Season* (2018) and *Of Mothers and Other Perishables* (2024), I depict these incongruities in a bid to capture moments of my childhood. The minarets I once knew as mute props now emerge as protagonists in the Delhi I reclaim through fiction. Other beloved landmarks – coffee shops, my convent school in Chanakyapuri, the pillared corridors of Connaught Place – materialise with imprecise details in my narratives.

In *Of Mothers and Other Perishables*, a dead mother, one of the novel’s narrators, recalls sipping Cona coffee with her future husband at

rather not name these works that attempt damning indictments, only to create cardboard fictions. For you have to know a place well enough to damn it with eloquence.

A novelist who does immediately spring to mind, though, is Arundhati Roy. To mention her in a piece about writing Delhi is inevitable, and necessary. In her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Roy throws open the Delhi of the *hijras* who live on its fringes. Shahjahanabad, or Old Delhi, appears as a cacophonous ghetto, its air rippling with prayers emanating from its

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*dargahs*, its streets crowded with vendors, cripples, and obese goats destined for slaughter on Eid. Roy’s Delhi, where the amaltas “...reached up and whispered to the hot brown sky, *Fuck You*,” is a hectic city, an ancient city, a dispossessed city, a city of slogans and sloganeers.

A recent anthology, *Basti & Durbar: Delhi-New Delhi: A City in Stories*, is a soulful exposition of the many Delhis that exist, simultaneously, or piled upon the ruins of erstwhile Delhi. In the introduction, writer and editor Rakhshanda Jalil poses a few questions: “Is the city central, or peripheral, to the writer’s concerns? Can the ‘spirit’ of Delhi, the sum total of its disparate and disarming parts, ever really be captured in words?” The 32 narratives that follow demonstrate that the elusive ‘spirit’ of Delhi can, indeed, be conveyed in words.

**From love to literature**  
The stories that, to me, truly represent Delhi are the ones that linger on

ephemeral moments of beauty or heroism or love. Preti Taneja’s novel *We That Are Young* (2017) reimagines William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* through the lives of a dynastic business family that lives and conspires in the Farm, in New Delhi. The family also runs the Company, a conglomerate of coffee shops, luxury hotels,

and *pashmina* shawl businesses. Even as the sky swoons and grand tragedies unfold, the narrative offers the unexpected tenderness of a poetry launch at a bookstore in Hauz Khas Village. It is here that Jeet, one of the novel’s characters, meets his homosexual lover Vik.

Delhi is a place of amorous encounters – romance in public parks, sex for a fee on G.B. Road. Sujit Saraf’s 2008 novel, *The Peacock Throne*, excerpted in *Basti & Durbar* as ‘An Election Meeting in Chandni Chowk’, is a subversive account of a Women’s Day function organised by the prostitutes of G.B. Road.

It is a sensual city, this Delhi; a resilient city, a city of whores, eunuchs, and coiffed rummy players at the Gymkhana Club. And because it is unloved by those who live in its neighbourhoods and study at its universities, it becomes the stuff of literature.

The writer is the author of two critically-acclaimed novels.



GETTY IMAGES

View of the underbelly

Ranbir Sidhu’s unflinching gaze exposes the invisible gears and mechanisms of the city where everybody is out to scam somebody



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

fraudulent godman. And a recently-dominant mafia group in the city pauses for breath, in anticipation of a new leader.

**‘Dirty realism’**

All of these happenings are a window into the city’s invisible gears and mechanisms, the covert economies that keep the whole thing together on a wing and a prayer. Sidhu’s gaze is unflinching, shorn of sentiment, intent on grabbing the reader by the scruff of the neck, making them look at things they would have otherwise turned their gaze away from.

In the novel’s opening line, Jaggi “unzips his fly and produces his penis” – had this been in the middle of the novel, the reader could not have been blamed for thinking that rape/abuse is in the offing. Instead, Jaggi gets up and pees on the floor, the yellow pool intended to drive away Basam, who

had been lingering with the two of them (Jaggi and the protagonist) against their wishes. It is a brilliant, dramatic moment and one which sets the novel’s noirish, ‘dirty realism’ tone.

Early on in the book, the protagonist gets involved with tele-scammers, the kind targeting American senior citizens, scaring them with stories of tax evasion and pilfering their retirement funds. In a darkly funny extended

scene, we see the protagonist giving it his best shot, trying to scam the bemused Mrs. Elaine Drummond, 73, from Idaho. “We’ve travelled a long way, Mrs. Drummond and I, through the woods in the night and now we’re close to the city in the dark, the undiscovered country, glowing distantly, as we struggle forward, and I’m ready, with luck, to show her that shining destination. As we talk, the room gradually grows quieter around me. One after another, my colleagues remove their headsets, cut short their phone calls, and rise from their chairs to gather and listen... Everyone is enraptured, and except for me, there is silence in the room.”

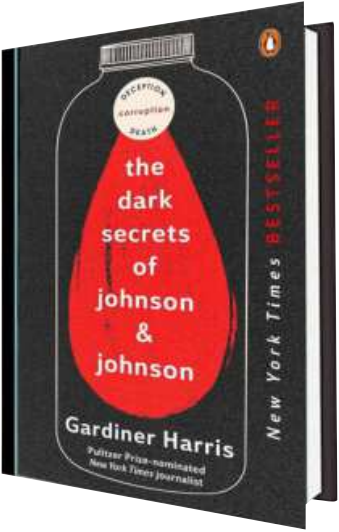
By the time the cons and deceptions are wrapped up, *Night in Delhi* proves itself to be an essential Delhi novel, and another resounding success for the author of the brilliant 2022 book *Dark Star*, a devastating meditation on misogyny, nationalism and displacement.

The reviewer is working on his first book of non-fiction.

Night in Delhi  
Ranbir Sidhu  
Context  
₹399



INTERVIEW



Ramya Kannan  
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It's difficult to read Gardiner Harris' book at a stretch, only because there are portions where you have to set it down and take a breather. The events of the book haunt you, turn you inside out and sometimes have you bristling with anger. *The Dark Secrets of Johnson & Johnson* (Ebury Press) is a hard-hitting expose on what went on at pharma major Johnson & Johnson. It uncovers the secrets across the company's repertoire of drugs and products from baby powder, Tylenol, Risperdal (antipsychotic), EPO (a cancer drug), metal-on-metal hip implants, among others, all adversely impacting the health of users. Chillingly, the company continued to market them, fully cognisant of the harmful effects. In a conversation, Harris, an investigative journalist, describes the Herculean task he took on, and what he was up against. Edited excerpts:

**Question:** Among all the violations you have chronicled, what do you think is the most egregious?

**Answer:** J&J, early on, would find out that its product was dangerous, would hide those dangers not only from the public, but from the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] and other regulatory agencies, knowing that it could result in a number of deaths. I estimate that at least 2 million Americans alone died from using J&J products. So it really is hard to rank order. But the worst of the worst, just in terms of sheer numbers,



Gardiner Harris

# THE GREAT PHARMA HUSTLE

Gardiner Harris on the dangerous practices at Johnson&Johnson which he says continued to market its products despite knowing about the harmful effects

would probably be Risperdal. Epidemiological analysis show that it is probably one of the most deadly drugs that has ever been sold in the U.S. It is sold to children, even though it causes boys to grow breasts and young girls to express milk. And again, the company hid those risks, lied about them in publications.

**Q:** You grew up in a J&J town. How did you move on from that, to launch an investigation?

**A:** I spent part of my growing up years in Princeton, New Jersey, right next to New Brunswick, where J&J is headquartered. There was a sense, growing up, that it was really a capitalistic ideal -- this was a company that both did well financially and did good in society, that it was seen as a sort of mom, apple pie and America all rolled into one. So when I first got the pharmaceutical beat at the *Wall Street Journal*, I expected to have a wonderful time covering J&J. But my interactions with them were just the opposite and it surprised me that they were the least open with reporters, the most secretive.

When the AIDS crisis in Africa hit at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the scandal around the pricing of drugs led many U.S. pharma companies to agree to allow generics companies to sell drugs in Africa. J&J was the only major manufacturer of AIDS drugs that refused to allow that. I couldn't believe it. I thought there must be some mistake, but in story after story, the image of this company ended up being entirely the opposite of what we had believed it to be.

It probably hit me hardest when my first son was born. He was born early and ended up spending days in the NICU. Soon after, I got a whole bunch of documents on J&J's heartburn drug Propulsid. Even though the company had done 20 clinical trials in children and infants, each one of which had failed to show that there was a benefit, the company nonetheless underwrote a marketing programme to sell them to infants. Not only did this drug not help these children, but it caused a QT prolongation, which is a heart arrhythmia, and for newborns, and particularly for premature babies, a heart arrhythmia can be fatal.

**Q:** Did you, at some point, feel a bit like Erin Brockovich?

**A:** I never looked that good; it's tough competing with Julia Roberts! But what was difficult about this process was just how dark and depressing it was. I spent more than five years writing this book and I go to church quite regularly. I found that I really needed that outlet throughout this process, even more than normal because I found I needed to appeal to god to help me through this, because you can lose hope.

**Q:** Do you think that the FDA, as a regulatory agency, could have done better?

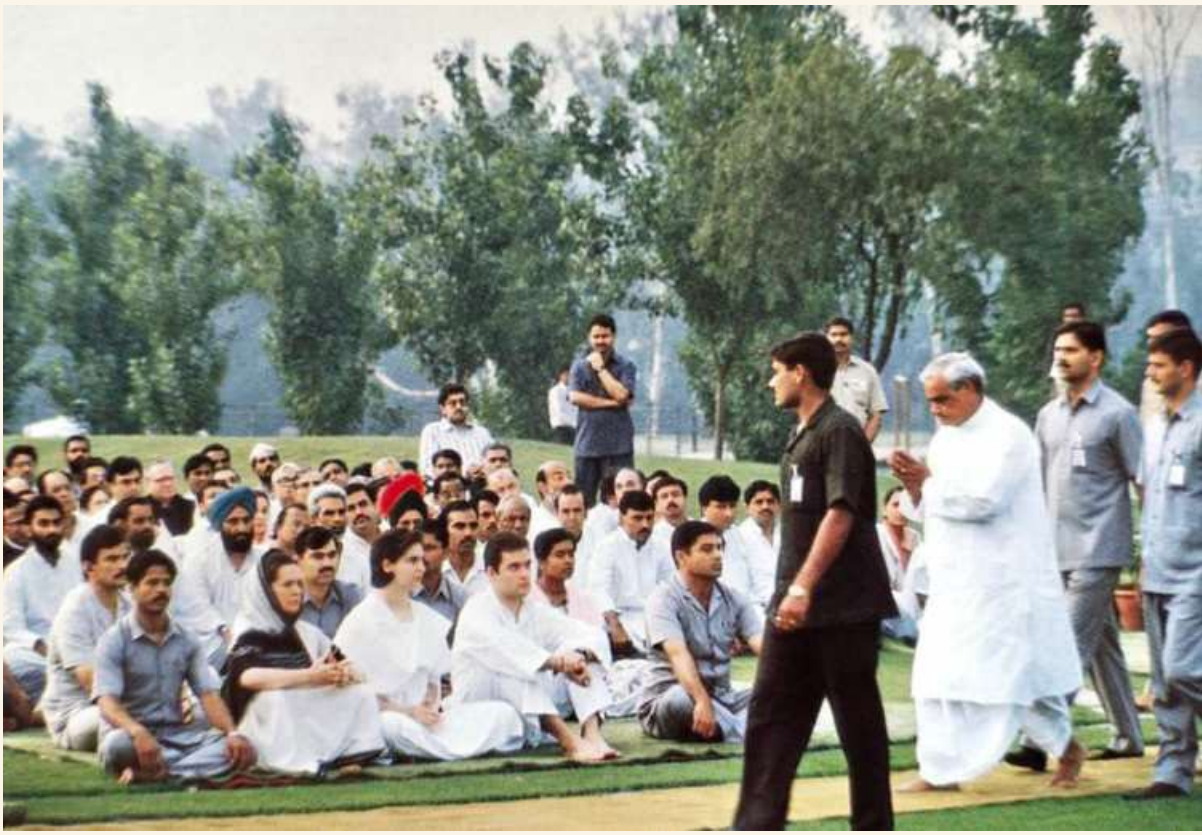
**A:** The portrait I paint of the FDA is one of real feckless disregard for protecting the public. Unfortunately, the FDA is largely funded by drug makers by what are known as user fees. The result of that is that the FDA has become captive to the very industry that it regulates. When I talk about baby powder, for instance, people had petitioned the FDA repeatedly to mandate a cancer warning on all products with talcum powder, and this would have included Johnson's baby powder. The FDA refused to answer those petitions until finally J&J lost its first baby powder case, and then suddenly, the FDA had to answer these petitions; it did so in the negative and claimed that the baby powder was fine.

**Q:** How did you decide on your chosen style for the book, an engaging, but investigative journalistic piece?

**A:** The book was nearly twice as long and I ended up hiring an editor to help me not only on the decisions about which products to include in the end, but also about the style. The original version of the book had had more personal stuff and my years as a reporter covering the company. But my editors thought the reader needed a really neutral voice in telling this story. The only way that it can work is to be told in a very low-key, neutral way.



Scan the QR code to watch Harris in conversation on magazine.thehindu.com



The second volume of a two-part biography, *Believer's Dilemma* begins with a watershed moment when India voted in its first non-Congress government at the Centre in 1977. The Sangh Parivar was in the coalition, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee got the post of External Affairs Minister. Two years later, when the coalition collapsed, Vajpayee "publicly apportioned some of the blame to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh," whose ideology he believed in. After a stint in government, "the believer now had dilemmas," and Vajpayee's relationship with the Sangh Parivar would "remain a convoluted affair till the very end." An edited excerpt:

Janata went to its funeral not only unsung but also unbathed. In mid-July 1979, the RSS's labour wing Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh instigated a strike in Delhi's water supply department, demanding a pay hike and better working conditions. It led to "choking lavatories, bursting sewers, threat of epidemics in the slums and not a drop to drink anywhere in the city". Confined to

EXCERPT

## Detached referee

As the Janata government was collapsing in 1979, Vajpayee blamed his own fraternity, says a new biography by Abhishek Choudhary

his hospital bed, Vajpayee felt exasperated with old colleagues such as Dattopant Thengadi, who was spearheading the water strike, for worsening the chaos in the capital.

Seeds of discord

Away from the mayhem, undergoing physiotherapy at his private retreat, Vajpayee introspected on the previous twenty-eight months. He used the time to churn out a longish op-ed for the *Indian Express*, where he argued that the responsibility for the collapse of the first non-Congress government lay with leaders across all factions. Partly because he was under pressure

from both sides, and divided in his loyalties, he adopted the tone of a detached referee.

The highlight of this essay was Vajpayee's takedown of his own fraternity for their failure to demonstrate that they did not seek a political role: "Patronising a press that takes sides in the sordid politics of power, involvement in youth bodies that interact with political parties, participating in trade union rivalries such as the one which recently brought enormous misery to the people of Delhi by callously cutting off the water supply - these do not help an organisation to establish its apolitical credentials. It is possible that some people genuinely feel

Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the fifth anniversary of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination; and (below) at an RSS rally in Delhi, 1997. JANANAYAK



apprehensively about the RSS. A certain onus accordingly devolved on the RSS, an onus that has not been discharged effectively by the RSS. Its repudiation of the theocratic form of the state was welcome, yet the question could legitimately be asked - why does it not open its doors to non-Hindus?"

Vajpayee's unexpected outburst had an urgent purpose: it was a careful PR exercise in showcasing the Jan Sangh's independence from

Nagpur, so Janata could lure back some of the MPs who had crossed over. In truth, he continued to be emotionally tied to and dependent on the RSS to bolster his political muscle. His mild criticism also evaded the more serious charges of the Sangh Parivar's involvement in anti-Muslim violence. Later, the enquiry commissions implicated the RSS. As in the past, the essay declared the riots to be a law-and-order failure (in Aligarh) or a response to provocation from the Muslims, such as an attack on a Ram Navami procession (in Jamshedpur).

Power games

Charan Singh had found his moment of supreme glory, but with enough hint that he could not hold on to it for long. He had agreed to withdraw Emergency cases against Indira and Sanjay Gandhi. But this demand was rebuffed by Congress-U, a breakaway faction of Mrs. Gandhi's party that formed the backbone of his ragtag coalition. It served Indira Gandhi well to pull the plug after twenty-three days of outside support.

The way was finally clear for Jagjivan Ram, who had more than 200 Janata MPs supporting him. Vajpayee's essay helped the Janata president, Chandra Shekhar, who praised 'Atal Jee on his courageous clear vision' and beseeched the

defectors to return and help usher Jagjivan Ram as the first Dalit prime minister of the republic. If the plan succeeded, it would make for a profound moment of democratic deepening.

On 22 August, Vajpayee had flown to Madras to induce M. G. Ramachandran of the AIADMK - All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam - whose flock had eighteen MPs, to support the Dalit leader. Just when MGR had nearly agreed that afternoon, the bid turned infructuous. Vajpayee received news from the capital: the president of India had, rather dubiously, dissolved the Lok Sabha.

Claims, counter claims

It was now a three-ring circus. Touring for elections, Vajpayee's twin targets were Charan Singh and Indira Gandhi. The strategy left many voters confused, unable to distinguish between Janata and Charan Singh's new party. Vajpayee tried convincing the voters that Janata had accomplished 'a lot in its short tenure'. Everywhere he flew - now in a private plane - he made hour-long speeches reminding the crowd of Janata having restored democracy, freedom of press, and judiciary. He cited improved economic indicators: falling prices, rising food stocks, doubled foreign exchange reserves. He pointed out that Janata had boosted relations with all major countries without damaging with any.

Mrs. Gandhi mocked Janata as a mishmash - a 'khichdi sarkaar' - and beseeched people to 'vote for a government that works'. The Congress-I even managed to pierce the armour of the former foreign minister: they convinced his eldest brother, Awadh Behari, who had recently retired from his government job in Bhopal, to join Mrs. Gandhi's party. Atal was obviously embarrassed, but salvaged the situation saying there was 'nothing wrong' with his elder brother joining his rivals: "It is his personal decision. I will not mind if my other brothers joined the Lok Dal or the Congress-U."

Excerpted with permission from Pan Macmillan India





**Beyond façades** (Clockwise from right) Eros Cinema in Oval Maidan; Tanya George's Dekko typeface; Yeshwant Rao Holkar; a Raw Mango sari; The Bombay Canteen's Art Deco inspired cocktail book, and a pendant designed by Hanut Singh. (ART DECO MUMBAI TRUST; TANYA GEORGE; RAW MANGO. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

‘Just a fashion statement’

“I’ve never looked at Art Deco seriously,” says New Delhi-based architect Gautam Bhatia. “I feel it is not an architectural style; it is more a decorative and ornamental one. It was a temporary, transitory phase going from the classicism of the late 19th and early 20th century into modernism. In India, what you see is a sort of exaggerated opulence in buildings — fancy lighting, stylised lettering, metallic ornamentation, all of which is two dimensional. It doesn’t have the appeal of any kind of three dimensional spatial quality. It is what people would construe as a kind of fashion statement in architecture. You didn’t need to worry too much about what is inside. In fact, in a lot of places, the spatial quality was completely neglected. Which is why Art Deco was perfect for cinemas. It drew people in from the outside into complete darkness. The only thing that is attractive about Art Deco is that it made people look at architecture. It is like a painting on a street. You can’t ignore it. It made people look up and stare — whether it was Regal Cinema or some apartment block in South Bombay.”

THE ART DECO STYLE BOOK AT 100

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

**Letterforms meet legacy**  
Art Deco has shaped not just Mumbai's shimmering skyline; its visual grammar has also permeated the city's typography. Tanya George, a Mumbai-based custom type designer, has been fascinated by its fonts. “I started noticing letterforms on buildings — printed, flex, and with adaptations of Indian scripts. Art Deco's design captured the spirit of looking forward, so even their letterforms have longevity,” she explains.



fashion, furniture, and typography at Gallery 47-A in Khotachiwadi. Juxtaposing Deco's standout features against the current city design aesthetic, he says, “Art Deco sits uncomfortably with current aesthetic choices since today's interior design style is aspirational, while (the former) was restrained and self-assured.”



Woven into borders and pallas

Elements of Art Deco are, however, finding a new expression in Indian textiles and jewellery. In its *Azalea* collection (2024-25), Jaipur Rugs has reimagined iconic motifs with a bold black-and-gold palette in hand-knotted rugs. “The bold geometry, symmetry, and glamour have a quiet dialogue with India's textile traditions,” says Ruvli Chaudhary, the brand's director. “By reimagining these motifs, we celebrate this cross-cultural legacy and present it in a contemporary manner.”

Raw Mango's Art Deco sari collection creates shapes and forms characteristic of the movement, with streamlined woven ornamentation that is geometric and stylised, translating them into silk and brocade. Think arched scalloped *pallas* with gold zari and hand-embroidered borders of



**The collective vision of Maharaja Yeshwantrao Holkar II** of Indore and architect Eckart Muthesius of Berlin. Manik Bagh began to shape the early thinking around Indian Modernism and Deco. It is good to see a new appreciation of spaces such as Manik Bagh as early expressions of distinctly Indian modernism, going beyond the overly simplified view that they were copies of what was trendy in the West

**YESHWANT RAO HOLKAR**  
Hotelier and heritage conservationist

architectural motifs. “The collection began as a questioning of possibilities,” says Sanjay Garg, founder and textile designer, adding, “The challenge of any motif incorporation is to accurately capture the essence of textiles.” The research process spanned a minimum of two years or more in terms of design and sampling at the studio, whose flagship store in Chennai, Malligai, is housed in a stunning Art Deco two-storey house built in the 1960s on Cenotaph Road.

A century ago, India embraced a modern design language, imbuing it with its own cultural tapestry, creating Indo-Deco. Today, Indian practitioners of the style remain optimistic that this timeless design syntax will endure in form and function, supported by greater awareness, informed restoration, and detailed documentation.

“In the classroom, Art Deco is still not discussed in the same breath as other architectural styles because of the vast array of architectural wealth across the country. Our effort to document, study and preserve it, is to give the movement its due recognition,” Sayal concludes.

The freelance writer is based in Chennai.

RAJASTHAN'S FORGOTTEN GEOMETRY

While there are Art Deco *havelis*, temples and water stations, the design movement gets lost among the desert state's royal architecture



**Bharat Singh**

The Art Deco movement brought with it a sense of glamour and opulence. It upheld geometric design and modern materials, and was inspired by the relics of Native American and Egyptian civilisations. It soon made its way from France to the shores of the United States. While New York went by the book, building incredible skyscrapers inspired by the original decorative phase, cities like Miami adapted the style as it saw fit, in keeping with the place.

The intercontinental appeal of the movement fascinates me. As does its evolution. For instance, major events such as the Great Depression and World War II gave rise to an offshoot called Moderne Streamline — where designs were more subtle, and inspired by nautical and aerodynamic forms. With smooth flowing lines and creative typography, it acknowledged the era's progress in technology in its design.

As it travelled to other parts of the world, Art Deco became an early symbol of ideals such as modernity and progress. India was no exception. Maharajas and merchants alike patronised the style. In fact, one of the first Art Deco buildings in the country was made in the sandy tracts of Rajasthan. So, why is its influence seldom discussed in the state? Could it be that amongst the multitude of forts and palaces, it was considered less relevant due to its relatively recent origin?



**Assorted motifs** (Clockwise from top left) A mansion in Mandawa; a *haveli* with Deco motifs in Ladnu; a house in old Jaipur with elements such as speed lines, and circle-and-lines; an example of Desert Deco — a traditional *pol* or gateway with sunburst motifs; and a Deco window grill in Ghoda Nikas Rasta in Jaipur. (BHARAT SINGH AND MINAMSHA CHAHAN)

**Birth of Desert Deco**  
Maharaja Umaid Singh was a royal patron of Art Deco. During a time of drought, the visionary ruler of Jodhpur-Marwar commissioned Chittar Mahal, a relief project to provide employment to his people. After his death, the monument was re-named Umaid Bhawan in his honour.

While the inspiration behind the palace was the glamorous European movement, it blended architectural elements and motifs of Rajasthani palaces. Thus, Desert Deco was born. Many royals followed suit, patterning their ideas after the maharaja to build new palaces or remodel existing structures with added Deco elements.

It was only after World War II and Independence that the movement spread beyond royal patronage in Rajasthan. While some people went for more affordable ways, superimposing Deco elements such as sunbursts onto existing facades, more affluent families built new structures. Merchants and businessmen, influenced by their exposure to Art Deco in the port towns and cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Surat, commissioned mansions in their hometowns. Thus, the second phase of Desert Deco was born, which merged local architectural design with Deco elements and motifs.

*Havelis* and *bhawans* — such as Jaipur's Sawai Man Singh II's Rajmahal, an Art Deco remodel of the British Residency (formerly the garden retreat, Maji Ka Bagh, built in 1729) — were adorned with chevron patterns and sunbursts, which in turn interplayed with cultural and religious themes of the region. For instance, lattice screens or *jaalis* were carved, instead of perforated, with iconic Deco elements such as the frozen fountain motif with the sacred ‘aum’ or ‘swastika’ inscribed on it.

The writer is the founder of Jaipur Houses.

**Sriram V.**

When Art Deco was introduced to the world in April 1925 at the Paris Exposition, it was in many ways a reaction to Art Nouveau, a style that was based on the premise of nature-abhorring straight lines and formal geometry. Art Deco brought geometric shapes into sharp focus once again and, interestingly, it did so with the same materials that Art Nouveau had espoused: iron, glass, concrete, and later aluminium, chromium, and mosaics.

Worldwide, the arrival of the architecture and design style coincided with many technological advances. Machinery was playing a greater role in daily life, concrete was being used increasingly for construction, large ocean liners were in vogue, and flying was just beginning to come into its own. Art Deco would make use of all these.

In America, where cinema was exploding, the new architectural form came to be closely associated with it. Studios, cinema theatres and even stars' houses came to be built in the Art Deco style. It was almost as though a new medium demanded a new architectural form. And it wasn't limited to just buildings; it extended to furniture, crockery, glassware, electric lights, even jewellery. It also influenced English typefaces.

**Banks lead the way**  
In India, Art Deco arrived in Bombay in 1932. In many ways, it reflected the aspirations of Indians. At a time when British business houses dominated the economy, a few Indians dreamt of becoming entrepreneurs. And when it came to their offices, they chose Art Deco. The first was that



A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Mumbai and Chennai have some of the best examples of Art Deco in India, and interestingly banking helped the movement spread

of Syndicate Bank in Bombay. And soon Art Deco became the idiom of Indian-run banks, insurance companies and stockbroking firms — as though they were turning their backs on the colonial styles of Indo Saracenic and Bombay Gothic.

Bombay was by then the financial capital of India. And its Art Deco icons were large edifices with extensive decorative motifs done in concrete. Even today, many of these survive in the Fort and surrounding areas, some maintained in splendid fashion. But it was undoubtedly the Marine Drive, with its curve dominated by Art Deco buildings, that gave the city its distinctive character.

Madras was just a few years behind, its Art Deco beginning not with Dare House (1938), which houses the offices of the Murugappa Group, as is often believed, but with the Oriental Insurance Building on Armenian Street in 1936.

To see the equivalent of Bombay's Marine Drive here, we need to visit NSC Bose Road. If the British business houses were just round the corner on First Line Beach, on NSC Bose Road came up Indian edifices in Art Deco: State Bank of Mysore, Bombay Mutual, and National Insurance, which together with Dare House present almost a uniform skyline. At right angles on the Esplanade are United India, Madras (now Chennai) House and the Tamil Isai

Sangam. Deeper inside are other jewels such as Andhra and Prithvi Insurance buildings. The Art Deco design did away with the portico, a standard feature of Indo Saracenic design, the buildings opened onto the street, and also introduced plenty of windows, as opposed to the verandahs of earlier design.

**Cinema, the biggest ambassador**  
But it was undoubtedly cinema that took Art Deco to the public. As Bombay and Madras were its capitals, the style came to flourish in theatres and studios as well. The first Art Deco cinema theatre in India is almost certainly Bombay's Regal, opening for business in 1933. It was designed



**Sentinels of a bygone glory** Oriental Buildings; the LIC building; and Dare House in Chennai. (MADRAS INHERITED)

Flats vs. mansions

Madras bungalows took to Art Deco but in Bombay, where space was always a constraint, it was flats that came to be in the new style. This is also why Madras lost much of its Art Deco, as pulling down a bungalow is far easier than getting tenants and owners to vacate a block of flats. Ironically, that led to Bombay preserving much of its Art Deco and making it the second largest agglomeration of that style in the world, after Miami.

Parsi dominion

Indian architects spearheaded Art Deco in Bombay and Madras. The establishment of the Indian Institute of Architects in Bombay in 1929 had much to do with the growth of this form. Almost all the proponents were Parsis — Mistry, Bhedwar, Divecha, and Dastur, to name a few — and some Maharashtrians such as Mhatre. Madras was introduced to Art Deco by a Maharashtrian, L.M. Chitale, whose legacy includes his eponymous firm, well into the third generation. The only difference: the Madras buildings were smaller and plainer. Perhaps it reflected the local psyche.

however, the style had faded by the late 1940s. World War II meant a huge disruption of shipping lines and a collapse of economy worldwide, and the Great Depression had just preceded it. When these ended, it was time for new designs reflective of socialist patterns of society.

Sadly, not much of Art Deco survives in India. While the Raj edifices were considered heritage, Art Deco was not old enough to merit protection. It is in this context that Mumbai's success in getting UNESCO recognition for its Art Deco is significant.

The writer and historian is based in Chennai.

GREEN HUMOUR

**Rohan Chakravarty**



POP-A-RAZZI

Disney is in our DNA

So what if Gurugram has floods and overflowing trash? Don't we still deserve a slice of Americana in Haryana?

some unique rides tailored to local sensitivities though the brand is unmistakably always Disney. Shanghai's version of Sleeping Beauty's castle shows Chinese influences. The Paris Disneyland avoids American flags. Maybe the Indian Disneyland can have Mickey Mouse doing yoga. But it's a great lesson in the projection of soft power, something India is deeply interested in these days. Disney can offer a masterclass on how to export the idea of Americana but make it so feel-good, it does not feel like cultural imperialism. This is Americana you are happy to take a selfie with.

Disney has not commented on whether this is really in the works and it's not clear whether this is Disneyland or just a Disney-like

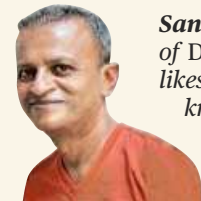
theme park. That's just a minor detail for those of us who grew up in India wearing 'Lavis' jeans because Levi's were not available. I live in Kolkata where a park has economy-version replicas of the wonders of the world from the Colosseum to Christ the Redeemer. The city is dotted with replicas of Big Ben. When the original Big Ben in London was closed for repairs, Kolkata's Little Bens tolled away merrily.

**Meanwhile in America**  
No one can deny Disneyland's timeless appeal. I thought myself too cool for it in the years I lived in California. When my parents visited from India they had two requests — McDonald's burgers (that had not arrived in India yet) and Disneyland. I succumbed and

took them to Disneyland and stopped for McDonald's on the way. They look so happy in the photographs, like children again, going on little boat rides for it's A Small World, and watching fireworks explode over the fairytale castle. Disney is in our DNA and there's no getting away from it. Its appeal spans generations. It is in many ways the American Dream super-sized, super-sweet, candy-coloured and utterly unreal. Its motto 'Happiest place on earth' is sheer PR triumph. But in these troubled times, even Disneyland in Anaheim, California, has not been spared. U.S. vice president J.D. Vance visited recently with his family. California governor Gavin Newsom wrote on X: "Hope you enjoy your family time, @JDVance. The families you're tearing apart certainly won't." Newsom was referring to aggressive immigration raids conducted by federal agents, especially in Southern California. "35% of Anaheim's residents are immigrants. Disneyland doesn't run without them," Newsom's account reminded Vance.

**Back to happy times**  
Gurugram, with its housing complexes with names like Palm Springs and Malibu Heights, was always aspiring to project Americana in Haryana. Disneyland would feel right at home in it.

It seems entirely fitting that in its Vishwaguru avatar, India too should claim Disneyland's tagline of being the happiest place on earth. America, torn apart by Donald Trump's culture wars and immigration raids, certainly doesn't feel like it anymore.



**Sandip Roy**, the author of 'Don't Let Him Know, likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.



Most texts describe Buddhism as a reaction to Vedic ritualism, but they fail to discuss how Shaivism was a response to Buddhism.

Vedic ritualism advocated material success through the grace of divine beings. Buddhism, on the other hand, taught that an obsession with material things and cravings leads to suffering. The Buddha promoted the monastic path, which became highly popular. Shaivism, however, challenges this monastic approach. The primary story of Shiva is that of an ascetic who sits atop a stone mountain but who eventually becomes a householder, with wife and children. Buddhism was the journey of householder to hermit. Shaivism was the journey of hermit to householder.

Shiva's first wife is Sati, the daughter of a Brahmin priest. His second wife is Parvati, the daughter of a king of the mountains. This story highlights the importance of marriage, women, and household life, directly challenging the Buddha's narrative of a man who abandons his kingdom, family, wife, and son in the quest for tranquillity and wisdom.

**Fighting death**  
Most people overlook this interplay of ideas countering each other over time. If Vedic ritual practices were challenged by the Buddha's inward-looking path, that path was, in turn, challenged by the more socially engaged approach of Shaivism. It is no coincidence that the silhouette of a *stupa* resembles a Shiva *linga*. However, there is one crucial difference. The Buddha was imagined as rising to higher levels, beyond the realm of the 33 Vedic



**Guiding form** An idol of Dakshinamurthy, a representation of Shiva as a teacher, at the Thirumoolanadhar temple in Perangiyur, Tamil Nadu. (R.K. LAKSHMI)

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

SHIVA THE TEACHER

How Shaivism and Buddhism challenge each other through the interplay of ideas and the role of women

gods, to a new heaven far above. The bump on his head was interpreted as a kind of spiritual fire rising upwards. In contrast, water is constantly poured over the Shiva *linga*, drawing him down to the earthly realm.

While Buddhists looked to the Buddha's realm far above or focused on inner journeys, Shaivism emphasised looking at the earth, symbolised by the river flowing down. The Buddha was initially reluctant to teach his doctrine to the world and was persuaded to do so by Indra and Brahma. Shiva, on the other hand, imparts his knowledge when questioned by Parvati.

Shiva as a teacher is visualised as

Lakulisha in North India. He sits cross-legged, much like the Buddha, but holds a staff. In South India, the highly *tantrik* (occult) image of Lakulisha is more subdued by *bhakti* (affection). He is depicted as Dakshinamurthy, the sage who sits atop a mountain under a banyan tree, facing south, teaching how to transcend death, surrounded by sages.

Death is something that bothered Buddha too. It was what made him turn away from society. But guided by Shiva, sages like Agastya travel south, the land of ancestors and Yama (symbolically). They fight death by marrying and establishing a household. Agastya marries Lopamudra. He earns a living by engaging with Devas and Asuras. He thus is taught about life.

**Of wisdom and desire**  
It is the conversation between Shiva and Shakti that contains wisdom, not just that of the Buddha alone. Ironically, it is the inclusion of

women that challenges the Buddhist path, despite one of the unique features of Buddhist monasteries being the inclusion of women as nuns, alongside many female patrons. *Theri-gatha* is the oldest collection of poems written by Buddhist nuns, who find solace outside the household, free from gendered roles. The body is thus rejected, though gender politics never left the Buddhist monastery. The leaders were always male. Same is true of Jainism, where there are more nuns than monks, but the leader is always male.

Shiva's wisdom is made relevant by the goddess. It emerges as answers to her questions. Without a student, a teacher's knowledge is useless. She feeds him, he converses with her, and when he is absent, she wields her sickle to save the gods from demons.

That being said, while Shaivism includes the goddess, it did not grant significant status to lay women, who were confined to the household. Women become holy when they renounce home and become nuns. But men are holy both as householders and hermits.

There are challenges to this model though. It manifests in the form of goddesses like Tripurasundari, shown seated on a throne held up by male gods. She carries symbols of Kama, the god of desire. Wisdom is not the end of desire. It stems from desire itself – providing pleasure to the other, rather than receiving it for the self.



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

GOREN BRIDGE

Trick two

Neither vulnerable North deals

Bob Jones

We see many deals where the key play for declarer comes at trick one. Today's deal sees the key play delayed all the way to trick two.

The auction was straightforward and simple, and West led his fourthbest club to East's ace. East returned the five of clubs, South played the jack, and West correctly ducked, playing

the four. Declare now had a difficult decision to make. The simplest play for his contract was to take the heart finesse. Should the finesse lose, however, East might be able to lead another club and West would take three more club tricks to defeat the contract. South judged the heart finesse to be too dangerous, so he cashed three high diamonds, ending in dummy, and led a spade to his jack. The 3-3 spade split with the queen onside gave South nine tricks

**NORTH**  
♠ K 9 7 6  
♥ A J 8 2  
♦ A 8 7 5  
♣ Q

**WEST**  
♠ 10 4 2  
♥ 9 5 3  
♦ J 3  
♣ K 9 7 6 4

**EAST**  
♠ Q 8 3  
♥ K 7 4  
♦ 10 9 6 2  
♣ A 5 3

**SOUTH**  
♠ A J 5  
♥ Q 10 6  
♦ K Q 4  
♣ J 10 8 2

The bidding:  
**NORTH** 1♦ **EAST** Pass **SOUTH** 3NT **WEST** All pass

Opening lead: Six of ♣

without the heart finesse. Had the spades not been so friendly, the club suit would have been protected, and South would still have had time to try the heart finesse.

At the other table in this team match, South solved the club problem at trick two by

playing his eight of clubs. West could no longer benefit by ducking, so he won with the nine and shifted to a spade. Nothing else would have been better. South could now safely try the heart finesse, hoping for overtricks, but his contract was safe.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Frequencies and wavelengths

Berty Ashley

1440 Hertz is the frequency that corresponds to the pitch of the musical note 'A' in the middle of a standard piano. In 1975, the International Organization for Standardization made it the standard worldwide. Both the U.S. time station and the BBC broadcast this 440 Hz signal every hour for what purpose?

The wavelength of 625-750 nanometres in the visible spectrum is one of the most easily recognisable colours. Being at the higher end of the spectrum, it has the highest wavelength, which means it can be seen from further away than others. What colour does this wavelength correspond to?

Language comes from the spoken word, and it evolves through the frequencies which are made by the vocal cords. A specific group of letters from the alphabets are predominantly found in the 2 kHz-4 kHz range across all languages. What are these letters which are in that frequency because the vocal tract is constricted?

This piece of audio equipment that produces low-frequencies gets its name from the noise a certain animal makes. It is in direct contrast to a 'tweeter', which produces the high frequencies, like a bird. What equipment is this?

The village of Kongthong in Meghalaya is built on very



'A Day in the Life' is a 1967 song by the Beatles. It has two significant audio bits at the end. (GETTY IMAGES)

hilly terrain. For hundreds of years, they have had a certain practice when naming a child, to ensure that they can be summoned in these areas. What high frequency practice is this?

'A Day in the Life' is a song by the Beatles released in 1967. It has two significant audio bits at the end. The first is a 40-second crescendo (which inspired the THX note). It is followed by a 15-kHz tone, which humans can't

hear. But we can purchase an instrument that can make the sound and summon a pet. What did Paul McCartney use to make this tone?

This brass instrument has two records in the orchestra. It is both the largest and lowest-pitched instrument in the brass family. What instrument is this which is used to play a 16Hz C in William Kraft's piece 'Encounters II' (a

note so low we can't hear but feel it)?

This colour is at the short end of the visible spectrum with a wavelength of 380-450 nanometres. It and its shades have been historically associated with royalty, as it was a tough dye to make. What colour is this, and what is the name given to the dangerous wavelengths just shorter than this?

This section of light has a wavelength between 780 nm and 1mm, and though we can't see it, we experience it as heat. Most remote controls use this to function. What is this radiation which gets its name because of where it is found on the spectrum?

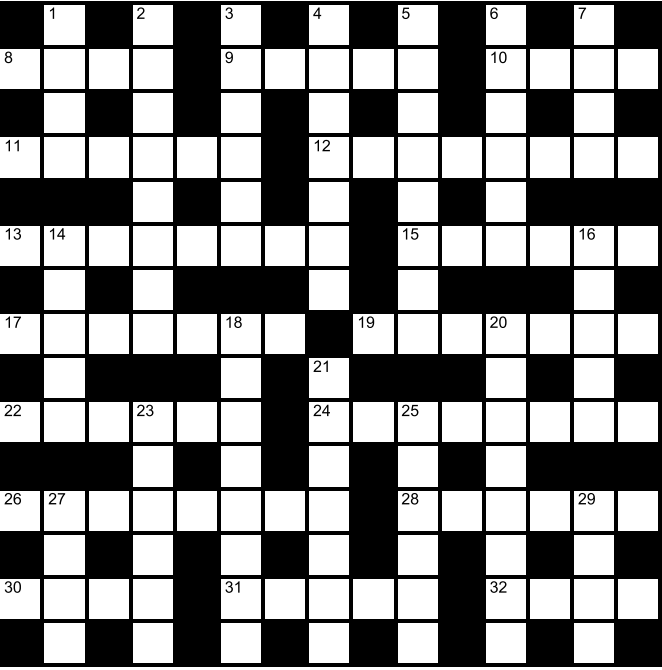
This optical phenomenon contains all the wavelengths of the visible spectrum between 380 and 700 nanometres. It is caused by light entering mist and re-emitted at different angles close to 42 degrees. What eye-catching event happens when this process takes place?

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

- 1. So that musicians can tune their instruments.
- 2. Red
- 3. Consonants
- 4. Woofers
- 5. Each child gets a signature whistle
- 6. Dog whistle, for his sheep dog
- 7. Tube
- 8. Violet, and ultra-violet
- 9. Infrared
- 10. Rainbow

Answers

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 13 (Set by Incognito)



- Across**  
8 Virginia representative's a seductress (4)  
9/11 Perhaps, registered nurse's money (5,6)  
10 City shown in diagram (4)  
11 (See 9)  
12 Dreamt I made gin cocktail (8)  
13 Makes around first of month and burns (8)  
15 Bachelor takes frozen water with protein supplement at first to build muscles (6)  
17 Old boy's remedy is esoteric (7)  
19 Vehicle storage space near English gun (7)  
22 Saw Spanish prince die badly (6)  
24 No, Canada destroyed large snake (8)  
26 Hog or ram butchered in biblical location (8)  
28 Wish to cover street for tea party location (6)  
30 More construction in Italian capital (4)  
31 Confused Saint Mark (5)  
32 European capital invested in Barbados locality (4)

- Down**  
1 Lass starting to exercise in storm (4)  
2 Pie medic distributed leads to widespread disease (8)  
3 Clear confusion before starting to taste wine (6)  
4 Anti anti-gas movement (7)  
5 Harm Alba wrongly in Spanish monument (8)  
6 Male with one account is a madman (6)  
7 Liberate without charge (4)

- 14 It's a puzzle about a vehicle (5)  
16 Carried a torch made from tree having a bit of dirt (5)  
18 Agency providing health services fudged records before commencement of scrutiny (3,5)  
20 After sound intended to scare, king hops around in establishment vending paperbacks, for example (8)  
21 Sack with husband and father in Middle Eastern capital (7)  
23 Pressed trade union to expel aunt during re- organisation (6)  
25 Baal is carried around New York state capital (6)  
27 Hobo expected, carrying instrument (4)  
29 Lubricates ring inside left side for starters (4)

SOLUTION NO. 12





# The power and puzzle of memes

Because visuals leave a stronger impression than words alone, memes are powerful communication tools

Rishi Kanna

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Though I hate to admit it, my mornings often begin with checking social media on my phone. As I scroll through the unread messages, I am flooded with photos containing motivational quotes, morning greetings, jokes, news updates, government announcements, and other information. Popularly called memes, these are snippets of information packaged and delivered in visually engaging ways. They are like mini-advertisements, artistically crafted to impress the viewers.

As I browse through these forwarded gems, I often wonder who created them in the first place. Many of them carry the creator's name watermarked in a corner. I am impressed by the ingenuity of these meme creators. A meme creator should be a multi-faceted personality with a combination of wit and intelligence. He should be topically aware and smart enough to choose an appropriate meme template that would match with the information that he intends to share. Both the information and the template should resonate with the audience. If they fail to connect, the meme simply will not be shared, as sharing is the life force of a meme.

Memes are images with a piece of text, typically comical in nature, that are spread rapidly by social media users. The viral nature of memes is behind the etymology of its name. The first usage of the term, meme, comes in the book, *The Selfish Gene*, by Richard Dawkins. He considered meme a concept similar to a gene (the idea of transmission), which passes on from one person to another. Humans love to

share information and gossip about things. They want to pass on information about someone or something when they are in a conversation. Social media and memes have tapped this basic human instinct into huge proportions. We can see people sharing and forwarding memes in troves.

**Double-edged weapons**

Because visuals leave a stronger impression than words alone, memes are powerful tools. Nevertheless, memes can be double-edged weapons. Teams winning trophies, a key message from a national leader, an announcement from a moviemaker, all reach large sections of people in a fraction of a second. On the other hand, Internet-users often forward these memes without checking the veracity of the information. Fake news about wars, death of a famous person, tragic accidents, separation of popular couples, and religious hate news are also easily spread through memes. Memes with fake information can be destructive as they are powerful weapons of bullying, media attacks, isolation, and targeting of people.

Why do people create memes? While some meme creators are paid professionals – often known as content creators – many do it for fun, driven by creativity and the joy of making others laugh. For them, meme creation is an expressive art form. There is even a friendly rivalry among creators over who can produce the most timely and relevant meme after major events.

Humour has evolved, from printed jokes and cartoons in magazines to the

fast-paced world of digital memes and video shorts. At its core, a meme has two main ingredients – a compelling piece of information and a relevant template. Choosing the appropriate meme template is the key aspect, which attracts the attention of the viewers. The templates are chosen from popular movie scenes, iconic moments from sitcoms, and funny expressions of political leaders, sportspersons, and comedy actors. There are popular meme templates available such as the unimpressed cricket fan, Drake's 'Hotline Bling', Batman slapping Robin, comedian Vadivelu, Cheems the dog and so on. Every detail matters in meme creation: the content, the choice of template, font size and placement, and even the overall dimensions of the image. A well-crafted meme is a combination of design, wit, and timing.

Memes bring people together through humour and can act as a catalyst for driving social or political conversations. However, despite the best intentions of a meme creator, not everyone gets every meme. As memes grow in popularity, they also face issues such as idea theft and copyright infringement. The future may bring legal frameworks for protecting and regulating meme creation. What is clear is that memes are no longer just jokes – they are evolving into a form of digital communication and even professional expression. In a world where advertisements cost millions, a powerful meme created at a fraction of the cost might reach more people – and leave a stronger impact.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



## FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to [mag.letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:mag.letters@thehindu.co.in)

### Cover story

Jane Austen penned novels in her inimitable, simple and mellifluous style, with deep insights into the relationships and society around her. ('250 years of Jane Austen'; July 13) Her ability to dive deep into the minds of her characters, her keen sense of subtle humour and her command over the use of irony were extraordinary.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

### Much-needed relief

The article by G. Sampath has struck a chord. ('Know your KYC'; July 13) Many of us have experienced the state of bliss after successfully updating our KYC in a bank. I know some people who have come all the way from the U.S. to update their KYC.

P. Perraju Sarma

### Global crafts

A humble housewife has been instrumental in ushering in a quiet revolution, taking the palmyra to the world and empowering local women to stand tall on the global stage. ('Visalakshi Ramaswamy and the resilient kottan'; July 13) India's cottage industry has not been doing well of late, but the quiet determination of entrepreneurs like Visalakshi will help to reverse the trend.

C.V. Aravind

### Good initiative

The exhibition at Gallery 47-A will likely inspire more artists to rethink the way they portray their culture through traditional art forms. ('Rethinking the traditional'; July 13)

Aniket Mohapatra

### Correction

In the *Magazine* article 'Of guilt and grief' (July 13, 2025), author Uttama Kirit Patel says her novel is inspired by an apology letter she once wrote, and that the book is set in Dubai, a place with limited reproductive autonomy, and not as mentioned. The error is regretted.

— Editor



## MORE ON THE WEB

[www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page](http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page)

### Mangoes hold memories

The fruit is special, and every family will have at least one unforgettable story about it

Anuradha Pati

### Murphy on a train

A fumble with a name and destination while on military duty

Hari Arayammakul

### Brand trap

There is an unspoken competition for social validation

K. Suresh Babu

### Love, power, and unspoken violence

Looking beyond acts of crime and into patterns of emotional fracture

Visakha

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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

## Sowing the seeds of success

George Netto

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Perhaps nothing is more universally and keenly sought after than success and all that it implies. It's, of course, common knowledge that success is invariably the result of untiring application and unrelenting hard work over a prolonged period of time, sometimes running into years. These are the widely tried and tested cornerstones of success. There are no short-cuts to it.

A burning and sustained desire to succeed in one's specific pursuit is, no doubt, a great motivator that ensures one does it ultimately. However, to prematurely expect to be successful in one's aspirations is unrealistic; for eventual success tastes sweetest only when tempered by initial, and sometimes repeated, failures and setbacks.

Unsurprisingly, success is known to be a harsh taskmaster, unfailingly exacting its "pound of flesh" – to use a metaphor – from all who seek it before ultimately smiling benignly on them. Sometimes, to one's acute consternation, success tends to be maddeningly elusive or slow in coming despite one's utmost and sincerest efforts to achieve it somehow. At such times, one often turns despondent and wonders whether the pursuit of success is really worthwhile. It is at such trying moments that one needs to persevere even more than ever despite all the odds heavily stacked against one. Success never comes easily. Without success – no matter how small – life would indeed be unacceptably insipid to the ambitious – and who isn't these days?

## A framework for emotionally intelligent leadership

Cultivate awareness, transformation, and mindfulness for well-being in organisations

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In today's high-octane corporate world, anxiety has become an invisible currency we trade daily – silently depleting our emotional reserves. The rise of artificial intelligence has intensified fears of redundancy, pushing some people further into isolation, with AI becoming their closest companion at work and home. The only true antidote? Cultivating a genuine, lived, and acknowledged culture of caring and sharing.

Deadlines pile up. Inboxes overflow. Expectations skyrocket as data is now available much more easily to many more. Yet leadership today isn't merely about driving results – it's about raising collective consciousness. It's about empathy, navigating hard conversations, embracing healthy conflict, and creating safe spaces for ideas that dare to challenge the status quo – even when those ideas come from the rebels in the room.

But what if accessing peace, purpose, and perspective was as easy as withdrawing cash from an ATM? ATM (awareness, transformation, and mindfulness) for humaneness is a leadership framework cultivated over years of coaching CXOs, entrepreneurs, and family business owners. This is about fundamentally recalibrating how we lead and live. What leaders reward and punish matters deeply, setting the tone for organisational culture. Being humane in adversity isn't easy, yet when approached with a "no-choice" mindset, solutions emerge naturally, emphasising objectivity and coexistence as the way forward.

A young manager, a mother, once arrived at a meeting visibly distressed. The leader



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

compassionately told her to go home and care for her sick child. No guilt, no drama – just empathy in action. Days later, she took charge of a stalled project and delivered stellar results. Why? Because she felt seen and heard, not merely supervised.

This leader established a flexible backup plan, recognising individual urgent needs. No one-size-fits-all – just empathetic awareness in action.

Once you cultivate awareness, transformation becomes the next step – not merely of systems or KPIs, but mindset shifts: reframing stress as a signal, not a weakness; choosing empathy over ego; welcoming dissent as an innovation driver; and creating safe spaces for authenticity.

Transformation often occurs in micro-moments.

A CEO I coached once told her team, "I don't have all the answers – what do you think?" Rather than surrendering authority, she invited collective intelligence. Her vision was clear: performance must walk hand-in-hand with well-being. Her mantra? "I want this – and that too." Not either-or, but both.

Mindfulness is the inner charging station. It doesn't require extensive meditation.

Sometimes, mindfulness is: 10 focused minutes before critical meetings; journaling after tough conversations; regular alignment with personal purpose and values; and rituals like gratitude circles or mindful breaks.

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Neeti Mehra

“Oon mera naam hai,  
oon oon oon; meri kahani zara sun  
sun sun.” (My name is Oon, oon oon  
oon; listen to my story.)

A tuft of raw, tangled black  
Deccani wool with tiny  
arms and a hole for a  
mouth bounces across  
the screen, narrating the story of  
neglect that *desi oon* has suffered for  
generations. The six-minute  
stop-motion animation film, *Desi  
Oon*, tells a riveting tale of how  
indigenous wool stands forgotten.  
Its compelling storytelling –  
depicting the intersection of  
ecology, dwindling traditional craft,  
and the threat industrialisation  
poses to pastoral communities –  
scooped up the Jury Award for Best  
Commissioned Film at Annecy  
2025, the world’s biggest animation  
festival, in France last month.

The film was developed over a  
year by Mumbai-based Studio  
Eeksaurus, in collaboration with the  
Centre for Pastoralism, for the  
*Living Lightly - Journeys with  
Pastoralists* exhibition in Bengaluru  
earlier this year. Filmmaker Suresh  
Eriyat, founder and creative  
director of the studio, who had  
visited a *desi oon* exhibition in 2022,  
says it all began with listening. “We  
didn’t go in with a storyboard. We  
went in with curiosity. The richness  
of what we encountered – the  
sheep, the wool, the landscape, and  
the people who live in that reality –  
left a deep impact. What excited us  
most was that this wasn’t just a  
textile story. It was a story of  
resilience, of ecosystems, of lives  
intertwined with the land.”

#### A woolly tale

Nearly 30 people worked on the  
film. Lyricist and singer Swanand  
Kirkire translated the essence and  
rhythm of the shepherds’ songs and  
folk traditions into his lyrics and raw  
singing. The catchy folk tune was  
composed by Rajat Dholakia,  
without using any electronic or  
digital sources, carefully preserving  
its organic quality. And the  
soundscape was created by  
Academy Award winner Resul  
Pookutty.

But the star of the show was the  
*desi oon*. “We wanted the wool to  
tell its own story. Wool isn’t sleek. It  
doesn’t behave. It frays, resists,  
coils. That unpredictability, usually  
considered a limitation, was  
something we leaned into,” says  
Eriyat, using real wool from Deccani  
sheep sourced in Belagavi,  
Karnataka. “We let the material  
misbehave. It gave the film a certain  
life – something beyond what we



## SURESH ERİYAT’S DIALOGUE WITH SHEPHERDS

The filmmaker’s award-winning  
stop-motion animation, *Desi  
Oon*, is sparking conversations  
across sectors, from sustainable  
fashion to tourism

were breathing into it.”

They made models and used  
specialised stop-motion techniques,  
a method which Eriyat describes as  
“slow, tactile, handcrafted. Just like  
the lives and materials we were  
depicting”. But it came with  
technical challenges, as animating  
the wool was painstaking.  
“Stop-motion gave us the language  
to do that with poetry, metaphor,  
and a warmth that invites empathy,  
not just observation,” he says.

Embracing slowness became part  
of the storytelling itself. “It echoed  
the tempo of pastoral life, the  
rhythm of herding, spinning,  
weaving, and of course their  
resilience,” he reminisces of the year  
they spent working on the film. “In

an era of fast content and CGI  
perfection, this slowness felt almost  
radical.”

#### The spirit of Balu mama

Central to the tale of Deccani wool is  
the story of Balu *mama*, a revered  
shepherd among the pastoralists of  
the region. Known for his quiet  
leadership, he dedicated his life to  
nurturing and protecting Deccani  
sheep. The Centre for Pastoralism  
and the *Living Lightly* team  
connected the studio to the  
shepherding communities, to walk  
with real pastoralists, observing their  
rhythm and routines, and to learn  
their wisdom passed on orally  
through generations.  
“Watching his followers guide



(Clockwise from top)  
Stills from *Desi Oon*;  
behind the scenes;  
and filmmaker  
Suresh Eriyat.  
(SPECIAL  
ARRANGEMENT)



Even the songs and lyrics were crafted  
with input from folk musicians who live  
this life.”

#### Storytelling with craft

The Annecy award was deeply  
validating for the studio. “Not because  
of the recognition alone, but because a  
quiet, rooted story from India  
resonated on the world stage. It showed  
us that truth travels,” says Eriyat.

Post the success of the film, can  
animation become a potent medium for  
storytelling for craft-led and even  
luxury brands? Eriyat believes it can,  
especially stop-motion, drawing in  
audiences gently, without the  
defensiveness that sometimes  
accompanies advocacy. “It makes room  
for wonder, and wonder leads to  
curiosity. That’s where change begins.  
*Desi oon* has already sparked  
conversations across sectors, from  
sustainable fashion and tourism to  
policy. There have been early inquiries  
from both luxury brands and  
government bodies wanting to  
understand how storytelling like this  
can be embedded into their  
communication,” he shares.

Eriyat believes animation can  
become a tool for cultural preservation,  
craft revival, and even rural economic  
development. “We’ve only scratched  
the surface. We hope the film becomes  
a trigger. For young people to ask where  
their clothes come from. For designers  
to rethink the supply chain. For  
policymakers to look again at  
pastoralism not as ‘backward’, but as  
ecologically vital.” The real success,  
however, will be when these  
communities get sustained attention  
and support. “When their voices are  
not just preserved, but amplified on  
their terms.”

*The writer is a sustainability consultant  
and founder of Beejliving, a lifestyle  
platform dedicated to slow living.*



## Inside the Mumbai Local

Through the *Ladies Compartment*, six Indian  
women artists challenge norms and redraw  
boundaries on the global stage

#### Aastha D.

In Mumbai’s local trains, the  
ladies’ compartment is a  
paradox. It promises safety  
through separation, comfort  
through containment. It’s where  
strangers sit shoulder to shoulder,  
share recipes before names, or  
exchange sighs instead of stories.  
These quiet solidarities are the  
premise of *Ladies Compartment*, a  
group exhibition by Method (India),

now on view at Galerie Melike Bilir  
in Hamburg, Germany.

#### Reframing the compartment

The show brings together six Indian  
women artists – Anushree  
Fadnavis, Avani Rai, Darshika  
Singh, Keerthana Kunnath, Krithika  
Sriram, and Shaheen Peer – each  
reflecting on gender, space, and  
resilience. Rooted in the hyperlocal  
image of Mumbai’s  
gender-segregated train  
compartment, the exhibition poses



larger questions of how women  
move through the world and the  
spaces – physical, emotional,  
cultural – that define those  
movements.

“Most Europeans I spoke to had  
never encountered the idea of  
gendered train coaches,” says Sahil  
Arora, curator and founder of  
Method. “But that doesn’t mean  
women in Europe are completely

(Clockwise from far left) *Gulaab*; and  
*Panna* by Avani Rai; Shaheen Peer’s *In My  
Mother’s saree*; and *Sandra* by Keerthana  
Kunnath. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



safe. The compartment becomes a  
doorway to talk about what safety  
looks like, who gets access, and at  
what cost.” The show, part of India  
Week Hamburg 2025, marks  
Method’s first exhibition in  
Germany.

#### Open to questions

While the premise of the exhibition  
draws from a recognisable Indian  
experience, its intent is not  
parochial. These are not works that  
merely illustrate a theme – they  
think through it, press against it,  
and resist neat conclusions. Each  
artist speaks in her own vocabulary  
of image, pigment, gesture, or  
breath.

Take Darshika Singh’s video  
piece, *In A Single Thought*. Built  
around rhythm and repetition, it  
quietly questions how women’s  
labour – especially physical,  
caregiving work – is rendered

invisible by its very frequency.  
“Society’s expectation of women’s  
productivity has a lot to do with  
how our gestures get naturalised,”  
says Singh. “But repetition can  
also be looked at anew. One  
way preserves order; the other  
breaks it.”

The idea that disruption doesn’t  
always need to be loud runs  
through the show. In a striking  
series of fading self-portraits,  
Krithika Sriram uses rose-petal  
pigment to create what she calls “a  
disappearing image” of the Dalit  
female body. The work deliberately  
turns away from the spectacle of  
caste violence. “This is not about  
gore,” she says. “It comes from  
someone looking at their own  
history with agency.”

Sriram’s work invites viewers to  
question how we memorialise pain  
– and whether beauty dilutes or  
dignifies it. “I don’t think beauty  
softens the critique,” she says. “If it  
exists, it reflects my perspective,  
my right to represent my own  
body.”

Photographer Shaheen Peer  
takes a similar route of quiet  
defiance. Her faceless self-portraits,  
draped in fabric, speak through  
form, not identity. “We’re often  
more concerned with who is in the  
image than what the image is  
about,” she says. By omitting the  
face, she shifts the gaze – toward  
memory, material, posture,  
presence.

#### Shaped by artists

These subtle but deliberate gestures  
accumulate across the exhibition.  
Fadnavis’s decade-long photo  
archive of everyday life inside  
Mumbai’s trains builds an  
ethnography of kinship and  
solitude. Rai’s portraits of Punjabi  
women document the weight of  
land, grief, and belonging. They

have a blurry quality to them,  
making the subject – a young girl of  
about 10 – a figure of aspiration as  
she writes, stands, and looks at you  
sideways while laying on a bed of  
flowers. Kunnath’s photographs of  
Indian female bodybuilders  
destabilise the idea of strength as  
masculine, and femininity as small.  
For Arora, the curatorial process  
was artist-first. “This wasn’t about  
illustrating a curatorial statement,”  
he says. “The artists shaped the  
show.” He acknowledges the  
persistent gender imbalance in the  
art world – why “women-only”  
shows still exist. “If representation  
was truly balanced, these  
categories wouldn’t be necessary,”  
he says.

#### No grand claims

The show doesn’t offer any easy  
takeaways. There are no  
declarations of revolution, no grand  
claims of feminist triumph. Instead,  
*Ladies Compartment* focuses on  
what is often overlooked – gesture,  
routine, and the quiet strength of  
repetition. It asks: when does a  
boundary protect, and when does it  
confine?

In Mumbai, women in the ladies’  
compartment know each other by  
their train stops, silences, and the  
weight they carry – long before  
they know names or professions.  
Perhaps that’s the real offering  
here: a glimpse into how women  
learn to share space – unequally,  
gently, strategically – and the kinds  
of care, strength, and camaraderie  
built along the way.

*The exhibition is on view till  
today at Galerie Melike Bilir in  
Hamburg, Germany.*

*The essayist and educator writes  
on design and culture.*