



magazine

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Meet fashion's radical star: Iris van Herpen

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Simrit Malhi

In my farm in Kodaikanal, insects were 'signalers': fireflies in August meant it was going to be a good monsoon, aphids meant my neighbours had been spraying pesticides, and the literal thousands of winged termites that would hover under every lightbulb in my house, just for a few days every year, meant the monsoon was starting.

I should have understood, when every creature from ants to my cats and dogs ate the termites that had fallen to the ground, their wings singed by the bulbs, that there was more to them than met the eye. But it was much later that I found out that 'eesal' (Tamil for winged termites) was a traditional delicacy, owing to the few days a year they were available.

I am thinking of the 'eesal', curry leaf, mustard and red chilly 'poriyal' (a sautéed dish) that my neighbour had taught me to make, when Tansha Vohra offers me a chutney at her session at the Old GMC Complex in Goa. "Coriander, salt, onion, chilly... and red weaver ants," she says, adding with a smile, "No lime," just as I pucker my lips at the tangy sourness of the ants' formic acid. It is delicious.

Vohra, a London-based food anthropologist and writer – an speaker at the recent 'Imaginir Insects - Rethink Taste, Disgust and Delight' talk at Serendipity Arts Festival – stumbled upon weaver ants in 2018. She disturbed a nest in a cacao tree while trying to harvest cocoa beans, a month into her internship at Rosie and Peter Fernandes'

edible forest garden in Goa. There was no way she could reach the fruit without destroying the nest, and when Fernandes shared they were edible, she took matters into her own hands and harvested her first 'crop'. The rest is history.

She now regularly harvests ants. "I have found them all around the country. They nest in almost any tree," she says, as the young man across from me takes a tentative spoonful of the chutney. "I have even found them on passion fruit vines." It takes two people at least to harvest, she adds; you need someone to catch the rain of ants once you break the nest off the branch they attach themselves to. "But that just means you end up introducing someone else to the joys of eating weaver ants."

Today, Vohra keeps a bag of ants in her freezer at all times (freezing them is the best way to preserve their formic acid), which may sound strange for someone who grew up in Bengaluru, and loves going to bookstores and parks, but she is genuinely excited about the potential entomophagy, or the practice of eating insects, offers for the future of humanity. As a fellow permaculturist, she tells me how it is a perfect example of the "problem becoming the solution". (Permaculture is a system of designing ecosystems that mimic nature, and aims to reduce waste, improve biodiversity, and protect wildlife.)

Fernandes, her permaculture mentor, agrees. "Climate change is a reality now, and the crops

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Satire | Are people in love the biggest security threat?

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LITERARY REVIEW

Unpacking the life of LTTE chief Prabhakaran

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A SELECTION OF INSECTS EATEN ACROSS INDIA

1. Jharkhand

Weaver ants



2. Tamil Nadu

Asiatic honey bees



3. Odisha

Date palm weevils



4. Manipur

Water beetles



5. Arunachal Pradesh

Silkworm larvae



6. Nagaland

Goat moths



7. Mizoram

Stink bugs



8. Assam

Giant wood spiders



9. Maharashtra

Honey bee larvae



10. Kerala

Winged termites



11. Telangana

Locusts

12. Madhya Pradesh

Swallowtail butterflies

ILLUSTRATIONS: SAAI

Global interest

Insects such as weaver ants and winged termites, which are traditional delicacies around the world, from Brazil to Thailand, are part of a growing global trend in sustainable eating. In Denmark, René Redzepi – co-owner and head chef of Noma, long considered the best restaurant in the world – could be the reason why insects are now available in supermarkets across Europe.

His project, 'Future Staples of Food', includes insects such as wasps, all kinds of ants and crickets among many others. Noma's gastronomic experiments have included bee mayonnaise, grasshopper garum, salted larvae, fermented cricket paste and crème fraîche with live ants. Today, cricket flour is selling off the shelves in the U.K. and insect burgers can be bought from supermarkets in the Netherlands. In Thailand, insects are so popular that they have to import them although there are 20,000 cricket farms producing 7,500 tonnes each year. In the U.S., you can have insects (mostly crickets) in chips, cookies, and protein bars. They are also ground and processed into burgers, schnitzels and nuggets.

ILLUSTRATION: SOUMYADIP SINHA

BUG APPÉTIT

Demand for sustainable insect protein is expected to explode by the end of the decade. With its traditional culinary heritage and edible insect advocates, is India ready to capitalise on this?

used to feed livestock are being affected by it. The amount of water, space and resources needed for a similar amount of protein is drastically reduced when farming insects," he says. "Moreover, the changes in temperature cause trauma to livestock, which insects can easily be insulated from."

Environmental impact
Fernandes is a convert, too. He started harvesting black soldier fly larvae and weaver ants during the early days of lockdown and, with some online help, now develops his own recipes. Vohra shares a favourite: "We found the fly larvae breeding in a compost heap that was too wet. We fried them with garlic in their own fat, and served them butterflied like a prawn, which is what they tasted like!"

When I bring up the gross/gourmet dichotomy that edible insects find themselves in, she brings up sushi. "People said the same things about sushi in the beginning, and now it's a global phenomenon. I believe insects have that potential. It's a multi-million dollar industry; it's good for the environment; it's good for our health; and they

taste great." The statistics prove her right: the global edible insects market size was valued at \$1.35 billion in 2024 and is expected to grow at a CAGR of 25.1% from 2025 to 2030, according to American consulting firm Grand View Research.

She insists, however, that she is in it wholly for the taste. I believe her. "You won't guess it," she exclaims mid-interview, "but rhino beetle larvae taste exactly like bacon."

Vohra now runs a programme with Serendipity Arts Foundations called The Boochi Project. Kicked off in 2021, it is dedicated to researching entomophagy in India. She collects recipes from around the country that use edible insects, as well as researches and develops recipes of her own – from fermenting weaver ants and making a grasshopper miso, to discovering new edible species, such as the savoury rhino beetles.

Insect protein market
More than 2,300 insect species globally are considered edible; they are both aquatic and terrestrial. While most are

foraged, some are now farmed on a large scale in countries such as the U.S., France, Thailand, Denmark, China, South Africa, and Canada. In 2023, Singapore-based multi-million dollar company Entobel inaugurated its largest insect protein production facility in Vietnam for black soldier fly larvae to "produce functional insect-based ingredients for animal feed and health". In India, Insectifii in Bengaluru, also farms insects for animal feed.

Vohra believes the time is right to market insects for humans, with rampant gym culture, menopausal women understanding their body's need for protein and, of course, the phenomenal rise of Ozempic – which requires people to increase protein in their diet. Everyone wants to incorporate 30g of protein per meal, and insects are extraordinarily high in it. The Indian weaver ant, for example, is reported to be 55.27% protein; compare that with 26% in beef, 27% in chicken or 33% in rabbit.

Lobeno Mozhui, a zoologist from Nagaland University with a Ph.D. in the nutritional value and medicinal uses of edible insects, says, "In traditional Naga societies, insects are alternative protein and energy sources. They are considered more valuable in terms of nutrient content than any other conventional meat source. For instance, after heavy manual labour, the tribal people consume cooked dragon nymphs and water larvae to rejuvenate themselves."

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In India, the concept of edible insects is still emerging. Cultural preferences and dietary habits play significant roles in this hesitation. The development of insect-based foods [such as snacks and protein bars] faces challenges, including regulatory hurdles. However, as global interest in sustainable protein sources grows, it's possible that Indian entrepreneurs and companies may explore this sector in the future

VICKY RATNANI
Chef



IN CONVERSATION

'MY WOMEN ARE NOT PLEASING'

Booker-nominated author Charlotte Wood on penning characters that are multi-dimensional and true to her feminist ideals

Amarjot Kaur
amarjot.kaur@thehindu.co.in

Award-winning Australian author Charlotte Wood speaks almost meditatively about the fundamental structure of narratives that dictate the plot of her novel *Stone Yard Devotional*, shortlisted for last year's Booker Prize.

It traces the journey of a woman (an unnamed narrator) who escapes to a monastery of Catholic nuns in the face of personal adversities. "The book has been written in tiny little fragments or some longer ones, in different rhythms. I wanted something a bit more jagged because my book is about stillness and silence; I needed movement on the page. Otherwise, it's too boring," she says, in a conversation on the sidelines of the just-concluded Jaipur Literature Festival.

Set in the sparse Monaro plains of southern New South Wales, *Stone Yard Devotional* is Wood's seventh novel. Much like her 2015 book, *The Natural Way of Things*, which won the Stella Prize in 2016, the location sets the tone for the storyline in *Stone Yard*, too. "That's helpful because people [characters]

have to respond to the place. It is what filmmakers sometimes call a single arena. So, by starting with a place – like a convent where all my characters choose a life, but don't necessarily get along with each other – I create a contained environment, which is very useful for creating friction."

Wood expands on this idea of friction in context to another character – Helen Parry, a radical environmentalist nun – in *Stone Yard Devotional*. "The narrator, with other women in the convent, is living a very rhythmic, ordered, quiet life, but when Helen comes into this place, there's a culture clash. They don't want her there. She doesn't want to be there too, but she kind of gets stuck there," says Wood.

Inspired by rogue nuns
Interestingly, there are several instances of nuns who have tread the path of activism, like Australian Catholic nun Brigid Arthur who, along with eight teenagers, took Australia's environment minister Sussan Ley to court and won; and American nun and rainforest activist Dorothy Stang, who campaigned for 30 years to save the Amazon from the interests of wealthy landlords

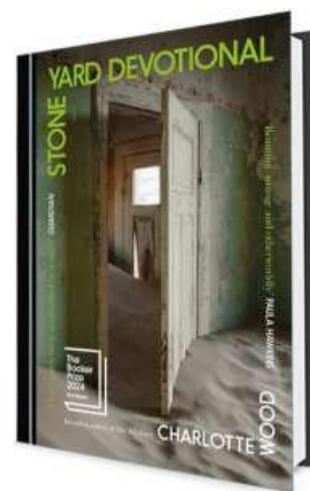
and was shot dead in 2005. "I call them the rogue nuns. You know, they're almost acting alone, but doing very serious work with the poorest of the poor, and speaking truth to power by going to court. So, I find that very inspiring and to have someone like that as a character in the book is helpful narrative-wise, to cause this friction and clash," she says.

That said, Wood explores powerful feminine identities in her stories. She acknowledges Helen Parry as a very difficult person. She's blunt, demanding and critical, she says. "I think it's part of my feminism – to show women as complicated, flawed, powerful, cowardly, annoying, loving, all the range



After my mother's demise, I realised that writing is very important to me. It was a place where I could take all my confused emotions and turn them into a book. And I don't mean that writing is therapy because it's art, but that doesn't mean that it also doesn't have therapeutic effects

Author Charlotte Wood
(GETTY IMAGES)



of personalities and emotions that we have always allowed men to have. But women in my culture, and probably, in your culture, have been taught that they can only be a certain number of things – you have to be nice, obedient, pretty, pleasing. And I'm not interested in women being pleasing. My characters are not pleasing," she adds.

Wood, 60, took to writing at the age of 29 when her mother passed away, but she does not necessarily view writing as a cathartic escape. She chooses to call it art, instead. "As a child, I was an obsessive reader. I did some writing classes at university, too. My father died when I was younger, but after my mother's demise, I suddenly realised that writing is very important to me. It was a place where I could take all my confused emotions and turn them into a book. And I don't mean that writing is therapy because it's art, but that doesn't mean that it also doesn't have therapeutic effects," she says.

Good editors and freedom
Though *Stone Yard Devotional* marks a defining moment in Wood's writing career, catapulting her to esteemed global stages in the literary arena, she is particular about mounting her book on a trusted publishing house. "I like having a conventional publisher because I like the editing, publishing and marketing support, all of which I would hate to do if I were self-publishing. I've been very lucky that I don't have any strictures or expectations placed upon me about what to write, how to write. I value having good editors. I now have trusted relationships with editors who will save me if I go off balance or something's not working, but they also allow me this freedom to try," she says.

Wood now finds herself in the embryonic stage of penning her new book. Though she hasn't started writing it yet, she has certainly finalised the place where it will be set in. "It's going to be based in a retail workplace," she shares. Dashing off to her session at the festival, she leaves us with the titles of books she's currently reading. "Right now, it's David Nichols' *You Are Here*. And I also keep revisiting *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner."

The writer was on invitation from the Jaipur Literature Festival.



Deviants
Santanu Bhattacharya
Tranquebar
₹799

After his debut novel on growing up in a politically charged contemporary India, author Bhattacharya returns with the story of three generations of gay men. It's important to put yourself out there, he says, talking about the need to increase visibility of the queer community in India.

Notes from the Jaipur Literature Festival

Where major themes ranged from AI in publishing to the Israel-Palestine conflict, and stardom arrived with the Murthy-Sunak quartet



Former U.K. prime minister Rishi Sunak (centre); and author Stephen Greenblatt (bottom) at the Jaipur Literature Festival. (PTI, JLF)

Suhasini Haidar
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Every literature festival in India has its own flavour, culture and identity, but few rival the sheer size of the Jaipur Literature Festival or JLF, first held in 2006, and in that sense, the OG.

The Hindu's Lit for Life in Chennai is awe-inspiring for how well-read and intellectual its audience is, and I am always intimidated to moderate a session with an author, knowing that most people in the audience have read the book we will discuss. The Bangalore Literature Festival is quintessential Bengaluru – civil citizenry at the fore, conversations that are chilled but candid all the same. The Khushwant Singh Literature Festival in Kasauli feels like a warm drawing room with a fire roaring nearby, where the audience knows one another, where the debate can get raucous but always ends on friendly terms.

But JLF is JLF – built on a massive scale with crowds so large that it is referred to as the "Mahakumbh of literature", multiple stages and parties across the city, and celebrities so internationally renowned that it is both exhilarating and exhausting to navigate. According to JLF organisers, led by authors William Dalrymple and Namita Gokhale, as well as Sanjoy Roy, who runs one of India's biggest production and event management companies, more than five million people and about 8,000 speakers have attended the festival in nearly 20 years.

One of the major themes this year is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in publishing. While AI can replace some of the functions of writers and editors, it can't replicate the sheer energy and chemistry of this sort of literary gathering, where authors and readers meet face-to-face. Controversy is a constant theme at the festival, although it is clear the organisers have considerably reduced the presence of politicians and ideologues at the event, given past experiences.

Palestine's corner

For a foreign policy buff, JLF always has a special corner of programming that brings together a range of diplomats based in India, former Indian diplomats as well as international journalists. This year, the

overarching issue is Palestine and the Israel-Gaza conflict, with more than a dozen different panels discussing the issue directly or in the context of geopolitical turmoil or international rule of law, including writers such as Pankaj Mishra, Avi Shlaim, Selma Dabbagh, Philippe Sands, as well as foreign correspondents like Lindsey Hilsum, Gaith Abdel Ahmed, Yaroslav Trofimov and Edward Wong who have covered the conflict, and diplomats Kishore Mahubhani, Navtej Sarna, Vikas Swarup and Navdeep Suri

who worked on policy around it. Even serving diplomats like the U.K. High Commissioner Lindy Cameron and Irish Ambassador Kevin Kelly speak about the issue, defending their government's contrasting positions.

At the start of the festival, the organisers shut down an interview given by the Palestinian Charge d'affaires Abed El Razeg Abu Jazer at the JLF media centre, saying he is not an invited speaker, but a guest at the festival. Right-wingers rage on social media about the platforming of "woke" sentiments, but the crowds at the event seem clearly sympathetic of the Palestinian cause.

The showstopper is Gideon Levy, Haaretz columnist who doesn't mince his words about Israel's actions, the illegal occupation by settlers and bombardment of Gaza. If the future is not a two-State solution for Israel and Palestine, then there are only two options, he says: for Israel to be an 'apartheid' Zionist or discriminatory single state, with one population oppressing the other, or for it to be a single democratic state, which would bring its own strife. While we rightly celebrate journalists who put on their bulletproof vests to go cover conflicts around the world, there's a special kind of courage that Israeli journalists like Levy demonstrate, by staying in their country and not censoring criticism of their government's actions despite pressures and threats.

A different kind of stardom hangs around another gutsy journalist – Tina Brown, former editor of *Tatler*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and now *The Daily Beast*. She shocks the audience by questioning the U.K.'s King Charles' longevity.

Lunch with the Murthys

But the big buzz at JLF is around the Murthy-Sunak quartet, including the former prime minister of the U.K., Rishi Sunak, his wife, investor and educationist Akshata Murty, and her parents – Infosys chief Narayana Murthy and author and Member of Parliament Sudha Murty, each an international celebrity in their own right. Murthy and Sunak say they are there only in "supportive" roles for Sudha and Akshata, who speak at a packed morning session about their relationship. Walking into the author's lounge, they carry their own bags, eat at the lunch buffet with the other speakers, and chat with those who come up to them, cheerfully agreeing to selfies.

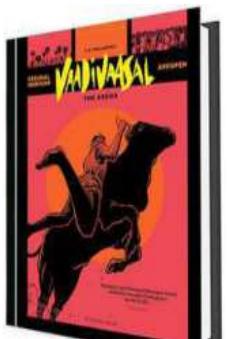
There is, however, no escaping the debate around Murthy's contentious remark on the need to "work 70-hour weeks", and so I begin my panel discussion with former Tata Group directors R. Gopalakrishnan and Harish Bhat with the question, "How many hours did you work?", to many laughs from the audience. Both directors are clear that the Tata Group, already more than 150 years old, will defeat the "shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations" jinx, and emphasise that the secret to the Tatas' longevity is the familial work culture, with focus on public service and philanthropy rather than a more "Western" corporate work ethos.

BROWSER

Vaadivaasal: The Arena
C.S. Chellappa, Perumal Murugan and Appu

Simon & Schuster
₹699

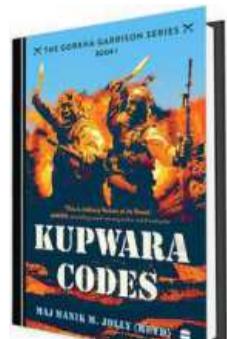
This Independence-era novella about *jallikattu* (bull taming), set to be made into a film with Tamil star Suriya, gets a fresh literary lease of life with International Booker-nominated Perumal Murugan's script and illustrator Appu's sketches.



Kupwara Codes

Maj. Manik M. Jolly (retd.)
Harper
₹299

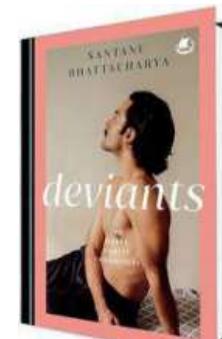
Stories inspired by the Indian Army continue to feed the imagination of writers and fascinate readers alike. This thriller penned by a retired Army Major draws on real stories from the battlefield and is set in Kashmir.



Deviants

Santanu Bhattacharya
Tranquebar
₹799

After his debut novel on growing up in a politically charged contemporary India, author Bhattacharya returns with the story of three generations of gay men. It's important to put yourself out there, he says, talking about the need to increase visibility of the queer community in India.



We Do Not Part

Han Kang, trs e. yaewon and Paige Aniah Morris
Hamish Hamilton
₹999

Her works are often called "extreme" and "bizarre" but the South Korean Nobel laureate says her books based on Korea's history and society are an attempt to bridge the gap between human savagery and dignity.



Erik Solheim

What turns a young man, who leaves home to fight legitimate grievances in his community and nurtures big dreams on behalf of his people, into a dedicated killer who sees violence as the answer to every problem?

The Indian journalist, M.R. Narayan Swamy, who has followed the story of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), sets out to answer this question in his timely and well-researched book *The Rout of Prabhakaran*.

As the chief negotiator in the Sri Lankan peace process, I asked myself the same question numerous times: How, as Swamy puts it, did "guns become the answer to overcome each and every obstacle in the chessboard of Tamil Eelam" in Velupillai Prabhakaran's mind?

Prabhakaran was the main strength, as well as the principal weakness, of the LTTE. He created one of the most effective guerrilla forces in the world and turned the somewhat sleepy and unsexy Tamil struggle into one of the epic wars at the turn of the 20th century. No movement in human history has mobilised the suicide weapon in such a deadly fashion – killing a former prime minister of India, and numerous Sri Lankan leaders.

It all ended in an orgy of violence orchestrated by the Sri Lankan army in May 2009, with the death of every LTTE leader who had not defected to the army years earlier. Prabhakaran and his entire family was killed. His 12-year-old son Balachandran was murdered in a blatant war crime even after being taken into custody by the army.

A paradox

Though he was fighting for Tamils, paradoxically, Prabhakaran also became the big killer of Tamils. He annihilated all competing Tamil militant groups. He hunted down Sri Sabaratnam of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation in Jaffna. His comrade-in-arms Mahattaya was shot as an Indian spy in the Vanni. The historic Tamil leader Amirthalingam was murdered in

SUICIDE MISSION

A new book deftly sums up the life and legacy of LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran



Colombo. My friend Neelan Thiruchelvam was blown up by a suicide cadre in Colombo, even as he was headed for Harvard. The LTTE later told me it was because he had refused to abandon the process of proposed changes to the constitution. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was shot in 2005 in what today can best be seen as the beginning of the end for Prabhakaran.

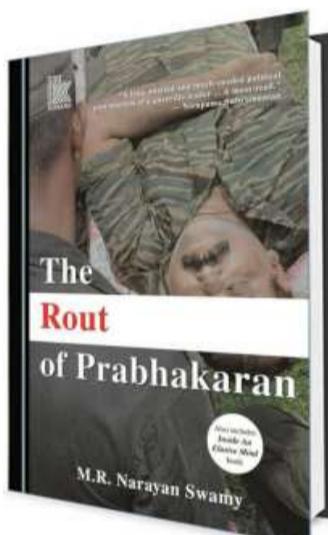
How does one explain this turn in Prabhakaran? Two explanations stand out in Swamy's telling. Prabhakaran had a very narrow horizon; he did not understand

geopolitics or the workings of the big neighbour, India. He hardly ventured to the south of Sri Lanka and had interacted very little with Sinhalese or Muslims. His perspective was that of the village. How else can you explain the stupidity of killing Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, who was India's prime minister from 1984 to 1989, at a time when India was the main source of support for his struggle? Would a successful rebel movement in Mexico attempt to murder President Trump?

The LTTE was also primarily a military movement. It did not mainly involve itself in mass work, political



Myriad faces
(Clockwise from left)
Prabhakaran with close friend Anton Balasingham; an undated picture of him with wife Mathivathani, son Balachandran and daughter Duwaraka; and briefing his team prior to the attack on Elephant Pass in Sri Lanka. (REUTERS AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES)



The Rout of Prabhakaran
M.R. Narayan Swamy
Konark Publishers
₹895

mobilisation or humanitarian efforts. Did the early spectacular military success against the Indian army, later over-running the Elephant Pass, nearly wiping off the Palaly air base and attacking Colombo airport in an extraordinary raid with devastating effects on the Sri Lankan economy create a certain arrogance?

There is a history of guerrilla fighters turning themselves into successful political leaders, particularly when they understood the need for a broad front, and, even more importantly, that the gun was only a supplementary vehicle to the political struggle. Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists won military triumphs against all odds, but at the end their victories were political. Michael Collins, the founding father of Ireland, was an

extraordinary assassin of the British, but he knew that the British empire could not be brought down with guns alone.

An end foretold
Was the end preordained then for Prabhakaran? Swamy thinks so. But he doesn't try to explain why the LTTE entered into the peace process, not out of weakness, but at the peak of its power in 2002. Why negotiate when you are strong?

I met Prabhakaran many times and saw softer aspects to the man. He was a film enthusiast and a dedicated cook. He adored his children and sent me to Ireland to secure a place at Dublin University for his beloved daughter Duwaraka. She was accepted, only to be caught up in her father's renewed war and perish with her family in 2009.

Prabhakaran's friend and partner Anton Balasingham was the good influence on him, always offering sound and critical advice. It was after Bala died in 2006, that Thambi or younger brother as Bala called him, started making many mistakes.

He strongly advised against the Tamil boycott of the 2005 election which brought Mahinda Rajapaksa to power. The Sri Lankan government also made a mistake by restricting access of foreigners to Prabhakaran. International diplomats like me had tried to guide him towards peace.

At the end, it all led to his last apocalyptic decision to fight to the last day – and the last Tamil. Through Kumaran Pathmanathan, KP, the LTTE 'foreign minister', we offered to bring out all the combatants and civilians from the war zone. When KP went to finalise the deal, Prabhakaran refused. The rest is history.

Swamy does not explain all aspects of the Sri Lankan crisis. The Sinhala war crimes are not centrestage; nor the catastrophic decisions of so many Colombo leaders who created a divided rather than united land. But Swamy sums up the extraordinary life and legacy of Prabhakaran in masterly fashion.

The reviewer was chief peace negotiator between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government.



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Pest to plate (Clockwise from below) Cooking with carpenter worms; Papa's Bugs Bunny; weaver ant chutney; and chocolate-dipped black soldier fly larvae. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



CONTINUED FROM
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She points to how SDG 2 (Sustainable Development Goal 2), a branch of the United Nations that focuses on eradicating global hunger, is today seriously looking into edible insects as an answer to rising malnutrition, and its Food and Agriculture Organization has already started advocating edible insects for food security.

The focus is not only on insects, but the entire traditional food system – to achieve food security, improved nutrition, and sustainability. "So, we all need to come out of the disgust factor and focus on what is healthy," says Mozhui.

The politics of food
Unfortunately, the reality is that food in India is heavily entwined with a person's socio-economic and political standing, and selling insects as a form of protein in a country where being vegetarian is equated with purity seems difficult. Mumbai-based Gitika

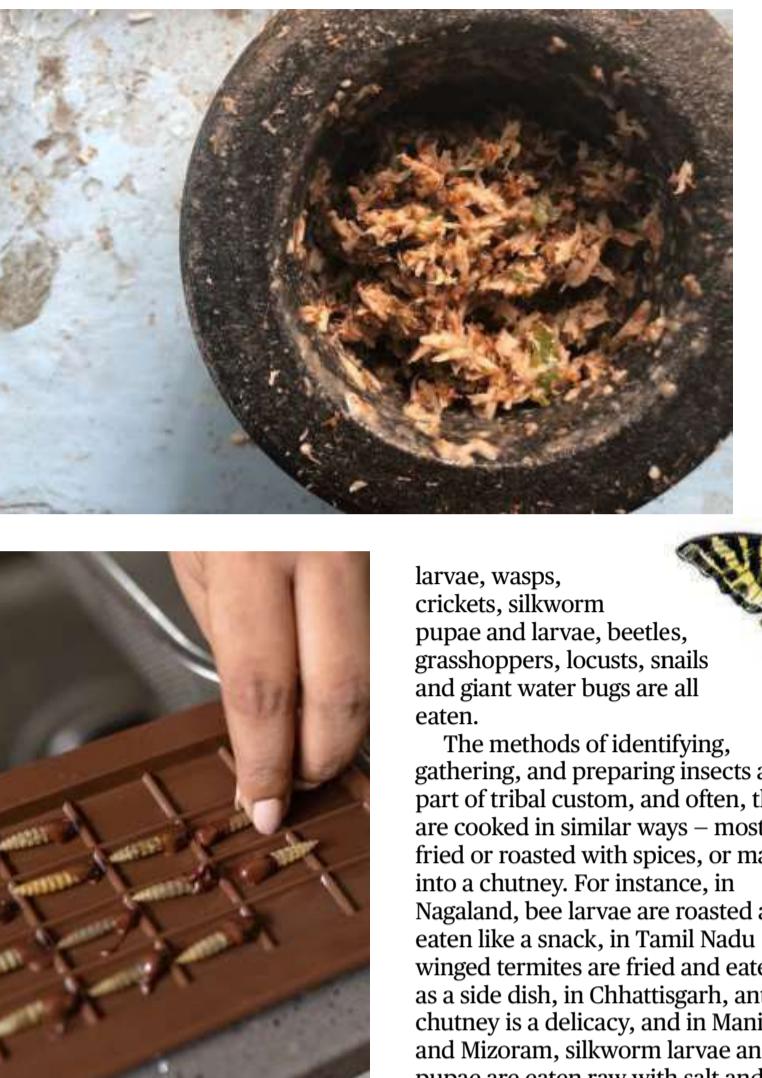
Saikia, an Assamese home cook, has been a long-time advocate of edible insects. Belonging to the Kachari community, she has fond memories as a child of collecting water beetles from nearby ponds and silkworm pupae from mulberry trees to take home.

"During Bihu, we have a food ritual to prepare a dish with 101 green vegetables. But it's often impossible to collect so many different varieties. So, we eat weaver ants, with the belief that it has ingested all these vegetables," she shares.

Saikia has worked with chefs such as Manu Chandra and Prateek Sadhu and restaurants like The Bombay Canteen, collaborating for Assamese food pop-ups and sharing her knowledge of insects.

She's even appeared on the Netflix show *Menu Please* in 2020. Unfortunately, she faced backlash after the show was streamed, with trolls asking her to remove videos of edible silkworm pupae from her Facebook page and telling her "to go back to China to eat these insects."

BUG APPÉTIT



On the menu

● **Jharkhand:** Weaver ants are a delicacy in the Panch Pargana area, while the villagers of Pithra in Simdega district eat the ants' eggs.

● **Tamil Nadu:** The six inhabitant tribes of the Nilgiris – Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulars, Paniyans and Kattunayakans – eat around eight species of insects, including Asiatic honey bees, vulture bees, weaver ants, lesser banded hornets, and termites. Winged termites are also eaten by many ethnic groups in the state.

● **Odisha:** Tribes of the Kandhamal, Koraput, Sundergarh, Kejoihar and Mayurbhanj districts eat roasted insects such as date palm weevils as snacks and the famous weaver ant chutney with rice.

● **Maharashtra:** Honey bee larvae are eaten among the Dalti community.

● **Kerala and Telangana:** Winged termites are a pre-monsoon delicacy. Indian honey bees, rock bees, dwarf honey bees, weaver ants, and locusts are also eaten.

● **Madhya Pradesh:** 10 insect species have been recorded among the tribal people of Satpura Plateau, including weaver ants, red paper wasps, rock bees, Indian honey bees, black mud-dauber wasps, silk moths, blister beetles, wheat termites, grasshoppers, and swallowtail butterflies. Additionally, since 1946, the state's Silk Federation has been producing canned silkworm pupae, encouraging people to use them in pickles and as a topping for pizza.

NORTHEAST

● **Manipur:** Over 41 species of insects are consumed, with aquatic insects – such as giant water bugs, water scorpions, water beetles, diving beetles, and scarlet skimmers – being a favoured group.

● **Arunachal Pradesh:** Members of the Nyishi and Galo tribes eat over 81 species of insects. Think bamboo caterpillars, silkworm larvae, honey bee brood, wasp broods, dragonflies and larvae, aquatic beetles and bugs, stink bugs, sand crickets, and brown Anomala spiders.

● **Nagaland:** The indigenous people widely consume carpenter worms and goat moths, whose larval stages are cooked during their festivals. The ethnic people of Phek, Dimapur and Kohima eat grasshoppers, crickets, red ants and larvae of mulberry silkworms.

● **Mizoram:** An edible stink bug is a delicacy for inhabitants of the Mizo Hills.

● **Assam:** The Bodos eat over 23 species, including paper wasps, weaver ants, water bugs, crickets, grasshoppers, praying mantis, termites and giant wood spiders. The ethnic tribes of Dimoria Development Block use 18 species for food, while those in Baksa district eat 30 species. The eggs and larvae of fire ants and water beetles are consumed by members of the Karbi community.

Ati Atir from Kohima started Oyas Umani, a catering company in Goa in 2019, where she serves up a modern take on her native Naga cuisine. She grew up with her grandparents who were farmers from Mopungchuket village. "Every time we went out to the fields, we would catch insects to bring back to eat. We ate big bellied spiders and cicadas during the onset of summer. I loved collecting water beetles that swim in the ponds for dinner," she says, adding how they often grew what the larvae like to eat – like mulberry for silkworm larvae.

Images from *Go Wild: Stories, Essays and Comics that Celebrate the Earth*; and (bottom) Bijal Vachharajani. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

There is little to be ashamed of, especially when eating insects has long been an integral part of culinary tradition among many communities across India. From Nagaland, to Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, to Tamil Nadu and the Andaman Islands, over 500 varieties are eaten, according to Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). While winged termites and weaver ants are the most common, adult bees and bee larvae, wasps, crickets, silkworm pupae and larvae, beetles, grasshoppers, locusts, and giant water bugs are all eaten.

The methods of identifying, gathering, and preparing insects are part of tribal custom, and often, they are cooked in similar ways – mostly fried or roasted with spices, or made into a chutney. For instance, in Nagaland, bee larvae are roasted and eaten like a snack, in Tamil Nadu winged termites are fried and eaten as a side dish, in Chhattisgarh, ant chutney is a delicacy, and in Manipur and Mizoram, silkworm larvae and pupae are eaten raw with salt and chutney.

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Ati remembers catching weaver ants from mango trees, shaking their nests with a pole and collecting them when they fell. The best part is that insects are still a big part of their diet. "In the markets, we have grasshoppers, locusts, wood worms, rhino beetles, winged termites, and hornets. Silkworm larvae are served in restaurants. The youth still eat them," she says. And with tourists interested in trying them, she hopes the interest will spread.

While there are currently no nutritionists in India seriously recommending insects as a form of protein, plenty of studies prove their nutritional supremacy. Especially following a 2013 paper published by the U.S. Food and Agriculture Organization titled "Edible Insects: Future Prospects for Food and Nutritional Security", which suggested that insects have the potential to become one of the staple foods of the future.

A study by life science consulting firm Halloran and others stated that "edible insects not only fulfil daily energy and nutrient requirements, but also contain essential amino acids, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, zinc, iron, and fibre. In addition, [they] also contain functional components like chitin, phenols, antioxidants, and antimicrobial peptides, which have potential benefits for immune support and disease prevention in humans".

Ants on the dinner plate
Mumbai's latest 'it' restaurant, Papa's from Hunger Inc. Hospitality – a 12-seater led by chef Hussain Shahzad, where your fellow guest could be Dua Lipa (the British-Albanian singer dined there before her concert last November) – has red ants on their menu. 'Bugs Bunny' is a grilled rabbit marinated in sundried weaver ants from



A punchy bite

Protein bars, fortified with insect protein, offer a sustainable and nutrient-dense alternative. The rising awareness of the environmental benefits of edible insects, such as lower resource requirements and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, further fuels this trend. "Unlike whey protein and other plant-based protein powders, the processing time is much less," says Vohra, adding that the flavour profile is so much better.

"Insects have long been a part of fine dining menus at some of the world's top restaurants. Alex Atala, Brazil's most famous chef, has been a vocal advocate of entomophagy. When I dined at his two-Michelin-starred DOM in São Paulo, he served me a large Amazonian leaf-cutter ant placed on a slice of pineapple as a starter," he says. "But insects haven't achieved mainstream acceptance in India yet. Chefs and restaurants will need to do more to shift perceptions for it to become the next big food trend."

Combating diner aversion
ATREE has made it a priority to research edible insects for food



Hungry for insects Tansha Vohra, and (left) Ants on a Shrimp' at Noma's Kyoto pop-up. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

security. They have documented the many species across the Northeast to preserve the traditional knowledge of their consumption, and are developing different ways, such as drying and grinding them into powder, to garner interest. Priyadarshan Dharma Rajan, a researcher and senior fellow who, along with three others, discovered three species of edible stink beetles last year, says, "Not only in Northeast India, but many indigenous and some mainstream communities in the rest of India eat insects. We have documented more than 500 species being consumed by people, almost all sourced from the wild. But a surge in demand from the outside market could lead to overharvesting from the wild, and could pose a threat to insect populations. For now though, he says, "They bring taste, texture, and a sense of adventure to our tasting menu at Papa's."

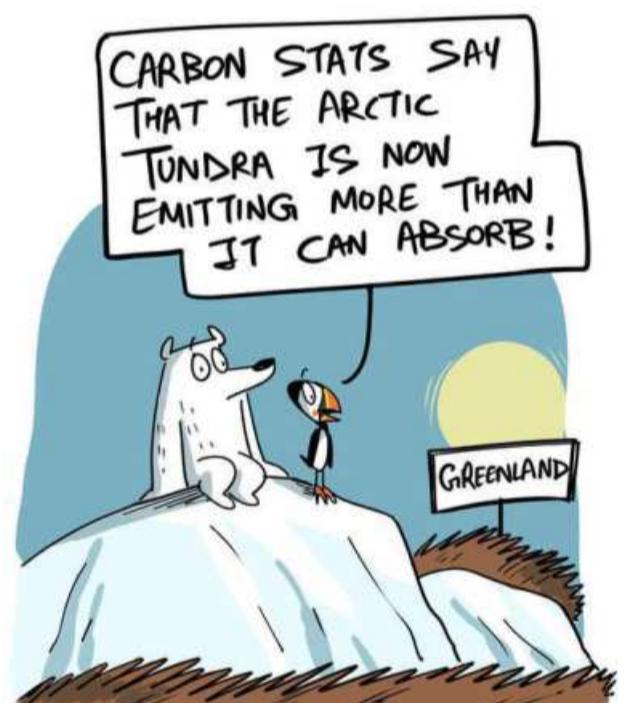
Raj Sanghi, CEO of Culinary Culture, a platform for restaurant ratings, chef awards, and culinary content production, added "Bugs Bunny" to his Best Plates of 2024. "Insects have long been a part of fine dining menus at some of the world's top restaurants. Alex Atala, Brazil's most famous chef, has been a vocal advocate of entomophagy. When I dined at his two-Michelin-starred DOM in São Paulo, he served me a large Amazonian leaf-cutter ant placed on a slice of pineapple as a starter," he says. "But insects haven't achieved mainstream acceptance in India yet. Chefs and restaurants will need to do more to shift perceptions for it to become the next big food trend."

Most recently, red weaver ant chutney or 'kai' chutney from Odisha's Mayurbhanj district was awarded a geographical indication (GI) tag. It feels like it is time to put squeamishness aside and dig in.

The writer is a permaculture farmer who believes eating right can save the planet.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



IN CONVERSATION

Writer and editor Bijal Vachharajani lightens up the serious subject of climate change for children in her new anthology



REWILDLING IMAGINATION

Chintan Girish Modi

Bijal Vachharajani is on a mission to make children fall in love with "the planet we call home" because she believes that "to love it is to protect it". The former journalist, who is based out of Bengaluru, is a wildly (pun intended) prolific author of fiction and non-fiction. A voracious reader herself, Vachharajani thinks of books as "a wonderful way to be introduced to the wonders of the natural world, and lure you into the outdoors, be it a tree in your school ground or a plant that's home to a mantis in your vicinity". Her latest offering, called *Go Wild! Stories, Essays and Comics that Celebrate the Earth*, is an anthology that she has edited for Puffin, the children's imprint of Penguin. It is illustrated by Prabha Mallya. The impressive list of contributors includes Bittu

Sahgal, Harini Nagendra, Zai Whitaker, Ranjit Lal and Yuvan Aves, among others.

"I wanted to bring together authors who, in their practice, centre nature in some way or the other, and strongly believe in rewilding imaginations," says Vachharajani, who has assembled an intergenerational cohort exploring nature writing in a variety of forms.

For instance, Biju's story, 'The Banyan Tree of B.D. Kelkar Road', revolves around a group of children who hatch a plan to save their beloved banyan tree from being cut down to construct a fancy new residential tower. Kisan's story 'Wise Old Fool on the Hill' takes us into the inner world of a owl called Budhiram Ulju ji who is a seer and chronicler watching the world go by from his high perch.

'A Vulture's Story', written by Roy, is about the unusual friendship between Saro – a woman who lives in the hills – and a vulture she calls Her Excellency Perveen Pestonji Peekervala. She feeds the bird, and also speaks in vulture language. "Similar to Aramaic, but with more 'sh's and 'hs'. I do wish it was taught in schools, but what can you expect these days?" she says.

With a dash of humour
Vachharajani's curation reflects her sparkling sense of humour, which lightens up the serious subject of climate change for children, and also the expertise and networks built in the process of getting a Masters in Environment Security and Peace from the University for Peace established by the United Nations in Costa Rica, and her professional stints with organisations such as Sanctuary Asia and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

"I will be writing my nonfiction book on personal and planetary losses and grief. This is a set of long form essays that I have been working on for the last few years," she says. Clearly, Vachharajani is not likely to run out of ideas to power her mission anytime soon.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and educator.



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As part of its unwavering commitment to regulating personal choices, trampling on liberty and invading privacy, the Department of Moral Surveillance, Kingdom of Uttarakhand, is inviting applications from eligible candidates for the post of Registrar (Live-In Relationships). This role will bring cohabiting couples into full compliance with the newly introduced Uniform Civil Code (UCC).

Job responsibilities
In keeping with the guiding principle of "minimum governance, maximum harassment", the registrar will be tasked with ensuring that all forms of romantic love and companionship are thoroughly vetted, closely monitored, and meticulously documented. Additionally, the registrar will serve as the nodal point for couples seeking to commence, worsen, and terminate a live-in relationship before acceding to marriage. Responsibilities include:

Registration of live-in relationships

Saurabh Bothra, 32, is everyone's favourite 'son'. Maybe that's because he has mastered the ability to get even the most inactive women to exercise and feel better about themselves. He lives by the 'yoga everyday' motto printed on his white tee, showing up for them every single day since he launched his self-funded online yoga startup Habuild, days before the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. "If you are expecting someone else to be consistent, you have to be the epitome of that," he says.

His marketing team isn't targeting that coveted 18-45 age group. Unlike most, he doesn't invisibilise the women who quietly manage households across the country, prioritising their family's needs over their health.

Instead, Bothra has figured out how to make them attend his online yoga classes regularly. For every *asana*, he offers an easy alternative for those suffering from the two common older women ailments of knee pain and back ache.

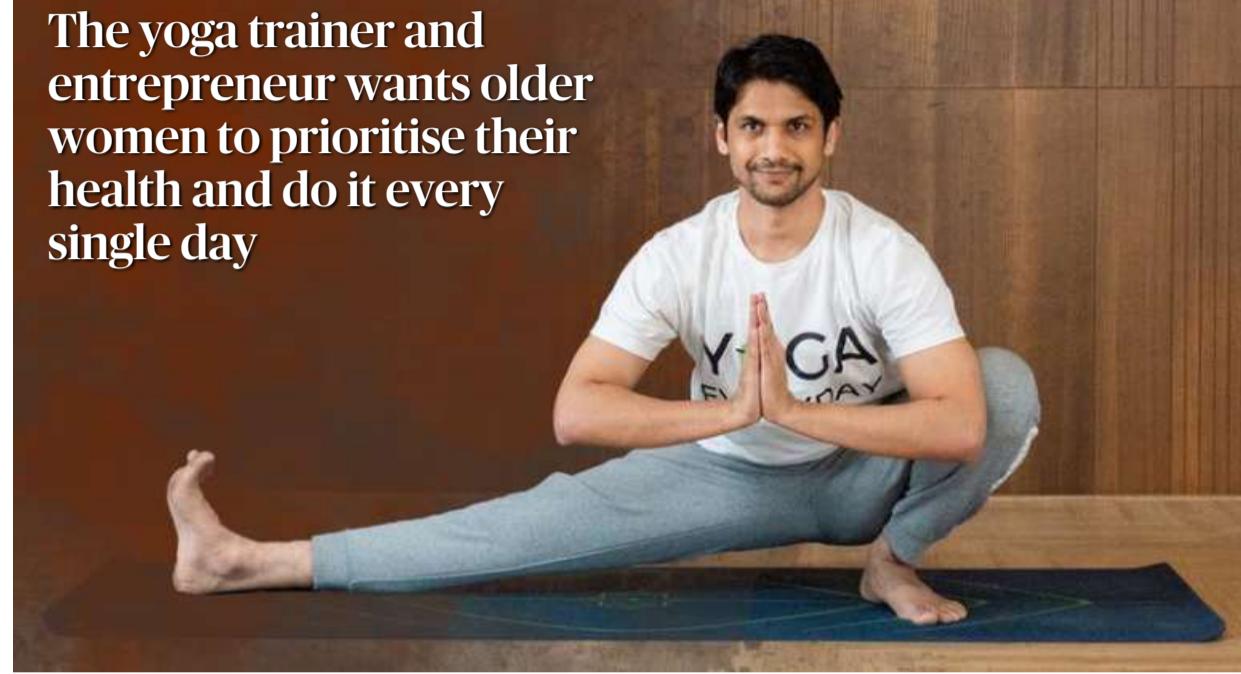
One participant described the classes as "me time". Some testimonials of those who attend his classes sound as chuffed as the successful followers of a 12-step programme – "360 days so far". Their gratitude and cheers fuel Bothra's journey.

With a 14-day free challenge for newcomers every Monday, a twice yearly 21-day free challenge and the regular online classes that cost a modest annual ₹3,999, Habuild has trained 80 lakh people, making it the world's largest online yoga community. It holds three Guinness World Records; some 4 lakh people log on every day, 70% of them women.

PERSON OF INTEREST

SAURABH BOTHRA: MUM'S THE WORD

The yoga trainer and entrepreneur wants older women to prioritise their health and do it every single day



Building a community

It began when Bothra, a mechanical engineer who has been teaching people yoga since his IIT-BHU days in Varanasi, realised that though most people were aware of yoga, they just didn't practise it regularly. Habit-building (hence Habuild) became the focus of his classes. Logging on every day is the one thing he wants from all who attend.

It wasn't easy. People didn't take free classes seriously. So he asked them to pay a monthly charge of ₹500, and returned it if they attended every day. You can imagine the accounting chaos. Next, he began deducting money from those who didn't attend and soon realised another basic truth: "Nobody likes to be punished."

That's when he hit upon his hit formula: empathy and leading by

example. "There's no point scolding someone who already understands that exercise is important for them," he says. His own mother, a chartered accountant, was inspired to sign up and gave him valuable feedback. "If you understand one mother, you understand every mother's problem," he says.

He's likely improving the Internet knowledge of a generation.

Asanas for all Saurabh Bothra says habit-building is the focus of his yoga classes.

His team is gentle with tech-illiterate participants who may get upset when they are unable to log on to the class, not understanding that it might be their Internet at fault. "If we cater to mothers, we should be prepared to be shouted at like we are their children," Bothra says.

That's probably why his first lesson of entrepreneurship is that he doesn't call Habuild a startup. "It's a community," he says, adding that his work philosophy is a mix of lessons he learnt from his businessman father and socialist grandfather, a rural doctor and *sarpanch* in the 1950s.

While Bothra is not a believer of the 70-hour week for his team, he has dedicated the last five years to this work, even skipping bi-annual team retreats. He doesn't take time out, and is always smiling and gently encouraging in his classes.

his participants daily – and he wants others to do the same.

When he was living in the IIT coaching hub of Kota in Rajasthan, he realised that the education system and families didn't equip young people to handle failure and negotiate emotions such as jealousy and anger. "The manual passed on has been wrong," he says.

"Communication is through hitting." So Bothra encourages guests such as Sudarshan, whose Tiny Mic stories help parents and children better converse with each other, to interact with his community. If you sign up, you're also likely to encounter experts who talk about alternative therapies such as *marma* (pressure) points and *mhuras* (hand gestures).

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His co-founders are his younger sister Trishala, whom he describes as "an upgraded version of myself" (she quit a consultancy job in London to join Bothra), and his IIT batchmate Anshul Agrawal, who has been a believer since the first time he attended an early online class.

Bothra is skipping the upcoming trip to Manali too and his team has labelled the clean-shaven yoga teacher as "boring".

In mom-speak, that's reliable and the mark of a good son.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Careful timing

North-South vulnerable,
North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a tournament in India a few years ago. South was Anil Upadhyay, from Delhi. South might have tried to penalise the opponents' two-spade contract, but he chose to pursue a vulnerable game instead. South played low from dummy on the opening heart lead and captured East's jack with his ace. He knew that he could

force a spade trick for himself, so he went after that right away by leading a spade to dummy's king. East won with his ace and shifted to the four of diamonds.

South won with his ace and led a low club toward the dummy. West had to duck, or dummy would have two club tricks, and dummy's king won the trick. South now had seven tricks – four hearts, two diamonds, and a club. He cashed all his heart tricks before leading dummy's

NORTH

♠ K 2

♥ K Q 10 8

♦ 9 7 5

♣ K Q 6 4

EAST

♠ A Q 10 8 7 5

♥ J 5

♦ 4 3

♣ 10 8 3

WEST

♠ Void

♥ 9 4 3 2

♦ Q 10 8 6

♣ A J 9 7 2

SOUTH

♠ J 9 6 4 3

♥ A 7 6

♦ A K J 2

♣ 5

The bidding:

NORTH 1♣ 3♦ **EAST** 2♠ Dbl* **SOUTH** Pass **WEST** All pass

*Negative

Opening lead: Two of ♠

remaining spade toward his hand to build a trick in that suit and bring his total to eight.

East rose with his queen and led another diamond. This time, South played low from his hand and

allowed West's 10 to win the trick. West was none too happy about it, as he now had to give South his ninth trick with either the queen of clubs or the jack of diamonds. Very nicely played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about net and ball games!



A game of 'foot volleyball' in progress at a tournament in Vijayawada.
(G.N. RAO)

Berty Ashley

1 On February 7, 1895, William Morgan, a YMCA physical education director created a game called Mintonette. His sport was meant for middle-aged businessmen, who found basketball too demanding. Originally, one could pass a ball around any number of times before hitting across the net. By what name do we know this sport now?

2 On February 7, 1900, this competition was established, in which 155 countries take part, making it the world's largest annual team sporting competition. The first different countries to

win this 'World Cup' were the United States, Great Britain, France and Australia. Hence they are given special 'Open' status. What event is this?

3 This is a racket sport that originated in Mexico. It pretty much resembles tennis but the main difference is that the court has walls. Players can bounce the ball off them like squash but across a net. What is the name of the game, a reference to the solid stringless bat used?

4 This sport is supposed to have originated from Germany. The activity became popular onboard cruise ships as the thing the players

throw around was not in danger of rolling off deck. What sport is this, which was originally known as 'Ring Tennis'?

5 This sport originated in Victorian England as an after-dinner parlour game. Players used to stack a row of books in the middle after clearing the plates, use two more books as rackets and hit a golf ball across. It was called by another name because of the sound the actions made. What sport is this?

6 This sport was invented in the United States in 1965 and uses a hard plastic ball that has less bounce than tennis balls. It's a very dynamic

game and is now becoming very popular. It gets its name because it was created from leftover equipment from other games. What sport is this which has nothing to do with relishes?

7 This sport is technically 'Foot Volleyball', as it's a combination of both those sports. It is played with a ball made of rattan. Originating in Southeast Asia, it has become very popular in Manipur and even won bronze at the 2018 Asian Games. What sport is this whose name means 'kick ball'?

8 Teqball is a sport that combines table tennis with the sport from the

previous question. It is played with a football which is hit with any part of the body except arms and hands. The playing surface is unique as the 'table' is designed to keep rallies going at a fast pace. What is special about the table?

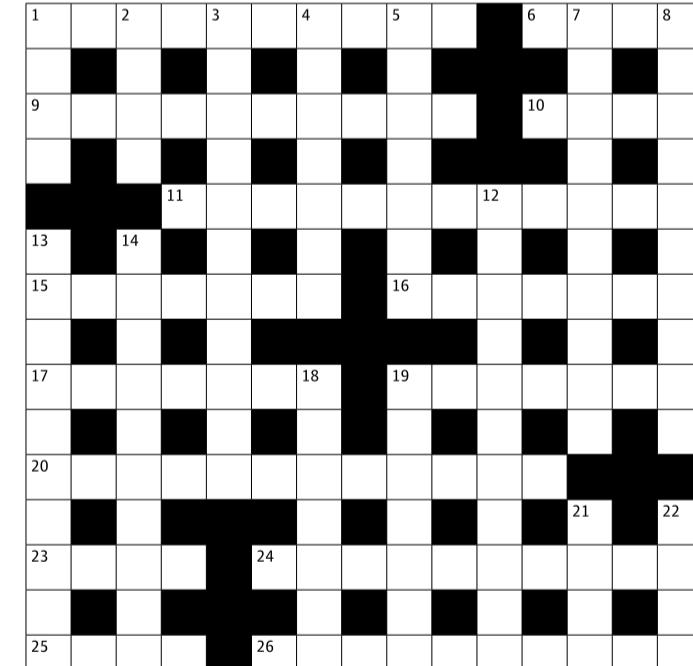
9 Headis is a sport that was invented in 2006. It came about because a football pitch in Germany was being used to store the playing surface for another sport. The name comes from the fact that the player 'heads' the ball. Which sports surface is used?

10 This sport is played with seven players per side and was first played in India as a women's sport in Chennai in the 1940s. Developed by the YMCA the name of the sport comes from the fact that the player doesn't use any racket and does not hit the ball. What sport 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

1. Volleyball
2. Davis Cup in tennis
3. Padel
4. Tennis
5. Ping-Pong
6. Pickleball
7. Tennis
8. Table tennis
9. Snooker
10. Throwball

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3344



Across

1 Morph: OK, OK Mr Hart, here we have an artist (4,6)

6 An idiot yesterday, in a manner of speaking (1,1,1,1)

9 Those choosing prison for Spooner: might they be hampered? (10)

10 Storage unit for socks, nipp of putrid atmosphere (4)

11 Used woolly thinking when lacking illumination? (7,5)

15 Walk out on salsa band onstage for using a sample (7)

16 Evidently clumsy type — and a loafer (7)

17 Swallowing duck, one checks for poison; I say 'Cheers!' (7)

18 Residents x workers? (7)

20 Sinful American peels back — and out (6,6)

23 I appreciate that German is curt, having unpleasant air (4)

24 Can Guarani get translated for C. American? (10)

25 It goes well with curry, whichever way you look at it (4)

26 'Hot location acceptable' — tiny oriental feline (5,5)

Down

1 Everyman, having taken on work, to look miserable (4)

2 Dicky and Fatty (4)

3 Calling for the French? (6,1'4)

4 Admitted what the sights may be (5,2)

5 Cores — or, reportedly, senior members of what sounds the same? (7)

7 Southern facility by river restrained aquatic menace (3,7)

8 Present alternative rendering, albeit parallel — here represents a suitable example, primarily! (10)

12 Snack recipe concocted in experimental facilities (7,4)

13 Dinn' on chocolate eggs, you say, in Steinbeck novel (4,2,4)

14 Film in Almodóvar's language for the White House (10)

18 Appreciate fizzy ale, Sire? (7)

19 Newspaper exposé showing Archer and friend scratching bottom (4-3)

21 Relative somewhat daunted (4)

22 Jealousy picked up from leading characters in *Nouvelle Vague*? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3344



When the locomotive of a special train failed

Railways had a contingency plan by deploying a spare engine to escort the ashes of Rajiv Gandhi

Shubhranshu

shubhranshu@msn.com

For decades, this was perhaps one of the best kept secrets of Indian Railways. When the locomotive of a special train carrying the ashes of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi failed, the Railways had a contingency plan that worked flawlessly to keep the wheels rolling. No one knew of the failure and immediate success in operating one of the most important trains in history.

On the night of May 21, 1991, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a suicide bomber of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during an election campaign at Sripurumbudur, near Chennai. The mortal remains were flown to Delhi for cremation. The ashes were immersed in the Sangam at Allahabad (now Prayagraj).

The train was to traverse about 675 km with multiple stops where thousands of mourners were waiting to pay homage to the departed leader. We were told that Rajiv's wife, Sonia Gandhi, would be on board along with their children, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi. With reports of a large number of emotionally charged people gathering along the route to have a glimpse of the urn carrying the ashes, the Railways had to ensure a smooth travel. The whole country was in shock over the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

I was asked to provide a diesel locomotive for the special train. I was a young, rather inexperienced Divisional Mechanical Engineer in charge of the Mughalsarai Diesel Shed of Northern Railway. The



After the assassination Rahul Gandhi placing an urn containing the ashes of Rajiv Gandhi on a special train at the New Delhi railway station in 1991; and (left) Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi immersing the ashes of their father in the Sangam in Allahabad. (THE HINDU ARCHIVES)



shed had nearly 60 WDM4 locomotives that had become rather old. The Railways had imported 72 of these locomotives built by the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors, U.S. They were ageing and were not very reliable by the time I was put in charge of them. When called upon to provide a WDM4 for the special train, I was worried that the locomotive might fail *en route* and cause massive embarrassment to the Railways. Any failure could delay the train by several hours until a relieving loco was found. What would happen if the train got stranded in the middle of nowhere with Rajiv Gandhi's family and top Congress leaders on board? That would have been the biggest embarrassment for the Railways. The milling crowds at the stations *en route* could have created mayhem.

After many deliberations, I decided to deploy a spare locomotive to escort the special train. The idea was that it could be quickly brought in to continue the journey in case the first locomotive failed. My operating colleague told me that he was not responsible for any failure and that I would be

answerable for it. I told him that it was not a matter of who was accountable but to ensure that the train journeyed through the land unimpeded.

And our worst fears came true. The locomotive failed halfway on its route. Though Murphy's Law prevailed, our Plan B worked flawlessly. Without anybody even noticing that the engine had developed a snag, the spare engine came to the rescue of the stranded special train and the wheels kept rolling. The journey continued as though nothing had happened. There was nothing to be embarrassed about and nothing to celebrate either. This story was never told.

Later, the Railways built thousands of more advanced versions of the same EMD locomotive in the Diesel Locomotive Works, Varanasi that transformed the rail traction of Indian Railways. We are no longer dependent on imports.

More recently, we built the much-celebrated Vande Bharat Express in the Integral Coach Factory, Chennai, which has the propulsion distributed along the train and failure of a unit is not a major challenge.

Going the retro way to listen to music

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Recently, the Official Charts of the U.K. published on its website the best sold audio cassettes of 2024. It reveals that the highest selling album of the previous year was Sabrina Carpenter's *Short n' Sweet* followed by Dua Lipa's *Radical Optimism* and Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department*.

For a majority of the Gen Z and Gen Alpha youngsters in India who have not seen an audio cassette, this analogue format was the dominant music-playing medium throughout the 1980s. People used to record voice and listen to music through the tapes. Currently, this format has seen a resurgence in the western countries and its sales have been increasing year by year since 2012.

In India, new cassettes are not produced and hence, only old stock is available to buy. The cassettes, which cost between ₹40 and ₹60 in the 2000s, are now priced in the range of ₹150-₹500 in physical music stores and ₹500-₹2,000 online.

Most Indians may have witnessed a comeback of vinyl records, which were the largest used music format in the 1950s and 1960s. New records are being produced by various companies in Hindi. They include re-issue of old film songs in vinyl record which was originally released in cassettes and CDs in the past. The examples include songs of films such as *Dilwale*, *Pukar*, *Saajan*, *Kasam*, *Paida Karne Wale Ki*, *Tum Se Achha Kaun Hai* and *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya*. Nowadays, it is easier to get a sealed LP (long play) record than any other analog format. The price ranges from ₹1,999 to ₹3,499. These are sold at record stores and shopping apps.

The question is why are these vintage music formats becoming popular again. The cassettes come with decorative inlay cards and vinyl records come with great artwork. Similarly, both retro technologies foster a sense of ownership for the users. If there is poor network connectivity or shortage of data, the vinyl and cassettes become helpful for uninterrupted listening. The advertisements on cassettes are always about music or upcoming albums in contrast to online streaming which can give irrelevant advertisements on stock market or education unrelated to music.

Unforgettable guides

Striking a rapport with the go-to people in tourist destinations

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The travel bug bit us late in life. We were not tech savvy backpackers ready to do walking tours or bike tours and discover new places on our own. Guides played a major role in our travel. They became as unforgettable as the places we visited.

The most unforgettable was our driver-guide in Portugal. Our original dream destination that year, Austria, was still freezing at the end of February. But very soon, unlike Vasco da Gama, we had confirmed air tickets, accommodation and googled information. Outside the airport, we found a nine-seater minivan which could take

our eight-member group to the hotel. Greeting us with a smile, the driver quickly hoisted our luggage onto the van's boot. During the 15-minute ride, he offered to take us sightseeing in Lisbon. He spoke English and we began with the sights of Lisbon that evening, stopping at a 150-year-old coffee shop for custard tarts and amazing coffee.

It was cold and windy. His warmth and geniality were endearing. We asked him about travel to Porto where we had booked a service apartment for two days. "Well, you have the train, the bus and then you also have me," he grinned. His reasonable charges would be split among the eight of us.

Sometimes he drove with a furrowed forehead, deep in thought. He said,

Anna, our guide at Corfu, explained local



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legends and family traditions including dowry. Spiro, our driver, negotiated sharp turns on narrow streets over steep cliffs. She said 65% of Corfu men were named Spiro after St. Spiridion, their patron saint.

During the Holy Land tour, we were told that every bus had a Jew and a Palestinian, one as the guide and the other as the driver. The 10-day tour included overnight stays in Amman, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Cairo. At Mount Sinai, the guide moved us to tears speaking about St. Catherine. He was puffing a hookah a little later. Some wanted to get baptised in the Jordan river but there were no priests. Our guide said he was licensed to conduct Christian baptism. Later, we learnt that he was a Jew and had fibbed to save time.

These tourist guides were engaging and enthusiastic and left us with lasting impressions and great memories.

Caught in gloom

One of the fastest growing economies, India is also one of the unhappiest



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than 40% of the country's wealth, whereas millions live below the poverty line.

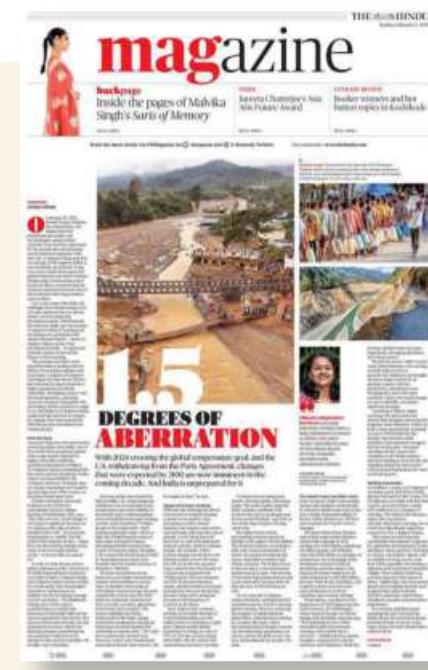
The immense disparity stems from a sense of discontent, with a large segment of population finding it difficult to make ends meet every day, struggling for basic

necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare and educational facilities.

While India has achieved several significant milestones in technological and economic advancements, its low ranking has perhaps highlighted some grassroots-level structural issues which do not allow its citizens to live their lives to the fullest. The country has often struggled to provide an environment for its citizens where they can flourish in a complete social, mental and emotional manner. This raises multiple questions on the nation's priorities and ability to foster holistic well-being for its citizens.

One of the major components of happiness lies in social support, but even today despite various support groups and initiatives, India is still struggling in this arena. Mental health crisis is an alarming concern.

The suicide rate among youth due to unemployment and societal challenges is alarming, showing deep despair in society. COVID-19 has exacerbated the crisis, leaving people emotionally devastated after the loss of their loved ones and lack of social support. Stigma often compounds the crisis and discourages people from seeking professional help and support services. Despite various community welfare programmes and initiatives, systemic inefficiencies have caused hurdles in the path of people, therefore leaving them in a perpetual state of melancholy.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

That a cross-section of climate scientists has laid stress on the urgent need to use the latest science to inform policy deserves the immediate attention of the government. ('1.5 degrees of aberration'; Feb. 2) It is only by coordination and cooperation between the scientific and political communities that there can be improvement in policy for mitigating climate change and ensuring the welfare of the present and future generations.

Painful picture

Cartoonist Rohan Chakravarty accurately describes the current state of olive ridley turtles in Chennai. ('Green Humour'; Feb. 2) The government must act in haste to save the species.

N. Rama Rao

The U.S. exit from the Paris Agreement is a major blow to all the hard work on climate action thus far. If developing countries are refused financial and technological aid for mitigation and adaptation measures, all hope will be lost.

Kamal Laddha

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Prayer for the world

Liberal democracies all over the world have been turning authoritarian one after the other and the senseless killing of people in wars has been going on without any qualms. ('That whisper in the ear'; Feb. 2) Fiction writers like Paul Lynch have been trying to awaken the world with their powerful stories. One hopes these stories will stir the conscience of leaders and common sense will prevail in the world.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Football inside a bubble — that's what struck me when I read Suresh Menon's review. ('Game over'; Feb. 2) I'm sure the

Anusha Pillay

Sari love

Malvika Singh's novel initiatives blend poetry and pragmatism to create a compelling account of the sari as a living legacy of Indian heritage. ('My saris and I have conversations'; Feb. 2) Her concern and empathy for weavers shine through in her efforts to empower, and not patronise, them.

Jayanta Bhattacharya

Climate and sport

Overcoming stage fright is tough but is in the realm of possibility.

Kannan Balasubramanian

A happy coincidence

Similar looks, similar names, a wonderful encounter

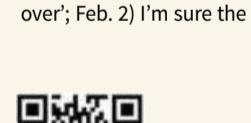
C.V. Sukumaran

Sacred bonds, silent scars

In the middle of marital struggles, it's the children who face the worst

Jesilita Mary J.

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The power of the unfinished

An imperfect work is full of potential; anything can happen

Krishna Khandelwal

When words fail

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Luxurious and futuristic (Clockwise from below) The making process at Iris van Herpen's atelier; creations from *Carte Blanche*; a design being put together; the Water Dress; van Herpen's team's attention to detail; the designer; and an outfit from the Meta Morphism collection. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



IRIS VAN HERPEN: INSIDE A HYBRID MIND

Meet the Dutch fashion designer who uses materials in ways never seen before, pushing boundaries with everything from art and technology to mycelium networks and kinetic energy

Akanksha Kamath

Nestled near the riverside in Amsterdam, Iris van Herpen's atelier is a reflection of her work in blending fashion with art, science, technology, and the natural world. We speak over a Zoom call in September, a few weeks after she wrapped up her couture show in Paris. The visionary Dutch couturier's eyes settle on the serene water body in front of her; it is those effervescent and transformative qualities of water that form her approach to design. Sometimes quite literally – as the 'Water Dress', created in collaboration with artist Daphne Guinness and photographer Nick Knight and currently held in The Museum at FIT, and at other times, as the backdrop for her fluid clothes, as seen in the *Sensory Seas* collection video that was shot underwater with French dancer and freediver Julie Gautier.

"When you look at everything that exists, it is all just energy," says van Herpen, 40, her voice an assuring monotone. Perhaps this is why her clothes are rarely just garments; they are rather, dynamic sculptures that appear almost alive. Case in point: the dresses in the 'Root of Rebirth' collection inspired by mycelium networks, the underground fungal systems that connect forests. It features intricate, root-like structures that seem to be alive, embodying her vision of nature's hidden connectivity. Or the 'Magnetic Dress' in collaboration with a Dutch artist, which uses resin mixed with iron filings manipulated by magnets to create organic, almost alien-like textures that grow from the fabric, resembling living organisms.

Visceral expression of motion

To really understand the essence of van Herpen's 16-year-long career, I reach out to veteran fashion critic and an ardent fan of the designer, Suzy Menkes. In her email, she succinctly captures what sets the designer apart in fashion today: "Iris invents everything, particularly the fabric, if that's what it could be called," she writes. "She uses materials – or did right at the beginning of her career – that had never been seen or used before. Her designer skill has been to take the extraordinary and make it wearable and usable."

Using technology, art and

philosophy to transform material into a visceral expression of motion and life is omnipresent in the work she creates today. As is her relationship with classical dance – being a ballet dancer, van Herpen has a deep connection to the physicality of the body. In 2023-2024, she celebrated 15 years of her brand with an exhibition at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The exhibition titled *Carte Blanche* featured over 100 pieces from her oeuvre, organised into nine themed rooms. Among them, the 'Water Dress', which simulates splashing water by employing moulded sheets of acrylic,



a technique pioneered by van Herpen to evoke the illusion of motion in a still form, stands alongside collaborations with artists and scientists, reflecting her fascination with nature and transformation. The retrospective took five years to curate, and for van Herpen, it was also a way to track her own change and growth over the years. "It was like looking at my own diary, of who I was at each moment," she explains. "So, choosing pieces wasn't about logic – it was pure intuition."

As one meandered through the exhibition, another element of van Herpen's work became apparent – that her use of materials is "primal". From the tensile strength of plant stems, the delicate intricacy of spiderwebs, and the incredible world of mushrooms, her artistic expression spans the gamut of



I want futuristic design to mean natural, with an organic presence

IRIS VAN HERPEN

nature. Fashion, in many ways, is her way of visualising the interconnectedness of the natural world and human life. To that end, she has created couture with recycled plastic, digitally printed clothing, and harnessed kinetic energy in calf-length dresses.

Futuristic and cutting-edge, but natural

Sustainability, too, takes the steering wheel in the design process. According to van Herpen, the future of sustainable couture lies in balancing innovation with natural materials and developing biodegradable alternatives that retain a luxurious, futuristic feel. "Even 10 years ago, my work felt futuristic, but

Earth on your sleeve

The examples of van Herpen's wildly wearable creations are several: be it the avant-garde gown from the Spring/Summer 2021 collection that Sonam Kapoor Ahuja wore for a *Vogue India* feature, featuring a 3D-printed bodice and ethereal, floating layers; or the outfits from the 'Earthrise' collection. The pieces – inspired by the iconic photo of Earth taken from space during the Apollo 8 mission – were crafted from layers of fine silk and metallic threads, and evoked the colours and curvature of the planet as seen from 570 km away.



it relied on synthetic materials," she explains. Her first-ever outing as a designer was a dress made out of 150 hangers. The 'Hanger Dress', as it came to be known, demonstrated her meticulous approach to transforming everyday objects into high-fashion. "Now, I want futuristic design to mean natural, with an organic presence."

To make her vision come true, she is collaborating with universities and research institutions, in addition to the already existing laboratories she works with. "They're often cutting-edge, sometimes even two steps ahead of companies," she says, citing 4D printing as her next big step. The technology will take the

4D printing is van Herpen's next big step. The technology will take the dynamism of 3D printing further, where designs will be able to change shape over time, responding to the environment or wearer's movements. "The pieces will perform a kind of micro-dance around the body," she says. Imagine a dress that could change with your body, and accommodate all of life's changing cycles, from giving birth to growing old.



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"What sets Iris apart is her creative process and the way she thinks about fashion and its place in our contemporary world," says Melissa Marra Alvarez, curator of education and research at The Museum at FIT, also home to the 'Water Dress'. "Beyond creating unique or beautiful dresses, she understands the interdisciplinary nature of fashion." And to reflect the high level of expert choreography required to create collections using techniques such as laser-cutting and custom 3D-printed fabrics, a synchronised dance of specialists, including scientists and architects, come together at the atelier.

Presentations of the collections, too, experiment and innovate. From museums to galleries, and runway shows, no space is out of context for van Herpen's couture creations. For her Paris Haute Couture Week show, she eschewed the runway entirely – choosing instead to show in an art gallery. Models came attached to canvases, balancing on a platform, their hair set into the canvas like an impasto portrait. For about an hour and a half, audiences walked around and took in the beauty of the moment and her collections up close. It was a rare occurrence where people were invited to step into her world. Future installations will likely follow this format, she says. "I want to open people's eyes and create a profound experience."

The next leg of Carte Blanche will open at Kunsthall Rotterdam in September.

The writer is an independent journalist based in London, writing on fashion, luxury and lifestyle.