



magazine

backpage
Pandal-hopping with
Sharan Apparao

GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
Behind Hindi film *Santosh*,
UK's official Oscar entry

GO TO » PAGE 5

LITERARY REVIEW
Beauty and complexity: six
stories from Kashmir

GO TO » PAGE 3

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Sunalini Mathew
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First, there was a quad-building uphill climb to reach the accommodation every evening. Then, a weak-knee-straining descent on three consecutive mornings, albeit through wet-forest smells, and past the stone and wood of buildings that blended into the greens and browns of nature. In between, as the mist wafted in and out of Doon Valley in Mussoorie, the hours were filled with camaraderie, bridge-building, and chatter around how an adult community of educators and counsellors could support a generation of students to reach their peak potential.

At what was heralded as India's first conference of mental health for schools – organised by Woodstock School in Uttarakhand towards the end of September – there were over 200 attendees from 77 schools. David Bott, who runs The Wellbeing Distillery in Melbourne, Australia, that consults with schools and educators, was the lead speaker, talking about choosing connection over correction, using the vocabulary of emotions, and the psychological sigh (a breathing exercise that helps reduce stress).

It was only towards the end of the Pathways to Flourish 2024 conference that Binu Thomas, who heads personal counselling at the school, spoke about its Wellness Ambassador programme that brought children into a circle of trust. Through the programme, 15 student volunteers (for 480 schoolchildren) are trained to be peer supporters. They are put through training that uses role play, communication games, and scenario building among other tools, for 18-20 hours over a few weeks.

The aim is to channel their strengths to be active listeners to fellow students, while also being taught about confidentiality, conflict management, and more. This spreads a culture of support through the student, staff, and parent community. "I was convinced that counselling had to go beyond an in-the-room service," says Thomas, of the programme that has been running for three years now.

Students as peer influencers
Globally, such programmes are gaining more ground in the face of twin challenges: the rising number of adolescents struggling with mental health issues and a dearth of

resources to help them. In 2021, UNICEF brought out The State of the World's Children report, *On My Mind: Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children's Mental Health*, initiated to examine the mental health of children, adolescents, and caregivers. It found that while 83% of 15- to 23-year-olds in 21 countries believed that a good way to heal was to seek support, in India, only 41% believed this. And in a country where up to 14% of children report "often feeling depressed", the report also stated that "a cross-sectional study of 566 secondary school teachers in South India found that nearly 70% believed that depression was weakness, not sickness..." It is in this context that schools are now thinking harder about a peer support system for children.

At Woodstock, through the programme, a group of students, mostly 15- to 17-year-olds, help with various aspects of boarding school life. They are able to identify homesickness in students who have just joined, alert the counsellor if someone shows worrying signs of isolation or anxiety, and hold space

for those who find it easier speaking to someone their age or a few years older. The team also helps host events around anti-bullying, cyber detox, sleep awareness, among others.

Thomas says there is a strict filtering process for enrolment, involving a 400-word essay on why a student wants to be a Wellness Ambassador, references from a 'dormitory parent' and teachers, and a final interview. Peer supporters work with the counsellor closely. "We choose those who are all-rounders so they can also mentor students who may be struggling with time management or study resources," she says. Part of the process is to make sure the ambassadors are visible so children can approach them, but also for them to seek out children who may feel lonely, for instance. "So an ambassador may go and just have lunch with that child for a few days or meet them on the games field."

On the last day of the conference, the Wellness Ambassadors gather for a chat, instinctively suggesting everyone sit in a circle, the way they do at weekly team meetings. Sahiba

Sindhu, 17, remembers her time as a new student in class 9, and how an ambassador helped her feel less homesick. Twisa Kanwar, 15, talks about how they trained in listening not just to the words, but also to look out for body language. Snigdha Matanhelia, 16, notes the change in her own interactions with people: "I realised I was giving solutions. Now, I just listen and mostly people come up with their own solutions."

Aadi Mehta, from Ahmedabad, who graduated from the school last year, used this idea of all-round campus wellness as his main poll plank when he stood for elections at the George Washington University, in Washington D.C., this year. As a Wellness Ambassador, he remembers the non-judgmental attitude that students needed to develop, to talk to peers. "It helped me form genuine connections in school," he says. He is now one of the senators at university, and hopes to make the



The school has zero periods, where students take up topics such as bullying, social media, or time management. The teachers are not in the classroom then, so students can open up about what they feel

AAHANA JAIN, 14
Tagore International School



college's functioning mental health support more visible to people so they reach out for help.

Children respond to care
About 45 kilometres away from Mussoorie is the Navadha School in Dehradun, run by the Building Dreams foundation. Set up just 300 metres from Sisambara *basti*, a colony of rag pickers and daily wagers, Ranjit Bar, 28, runs the school, where the children also have a peer support group. "We need it even more because so many of the children come from challenged backgrounds. A number of them are surrounded by substance abuse and financial abuse," he says. They grow up viewing pornography, drugs, and alcohol as normal, and many have single parents.

Bar says the peer-to-peer programme began with children who had a better grasp of academic concepts teaching younger children and slower-learning peers basic maths or language skills. "These are all first-generation learners, and the main aim is to keep them in school. When we meet a child, we start the actual school curriculum only after six months," he says. Children from three to 16 are integrated into school through games and the food provided. The peer supporters step in at this point and stay with them if they need further help.

"The world creates for people who have," says Bar, directing all his attention to those who have little. Seventeen peer educators for 117 children help children learn about hygiene, health, and nutrition as well. Since the children come from the same area, they chat with each other easily, but they have also learnt when to escalate to the special educator the school employs.

'They must be taught boundaries'
Aneesh Kumar, the associate professor of psychology at Christ University, Bengaluru, agrees that peer listeners can catch vulnerabilities early, so adults in the team – whether a teacher or counsellor – can take pre-emptive or preventative measures. "Students can be given age- and developmentally-appropriate tools to talk about mental health. For instance, if sex is being spoken about in a group, a peer educator can lead the others, with support of training from professionals and evidence-based information," he says.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4



Storyteller Omani writer Jokha al-Harhi, author of *Celestial Bodies*, in Jaipur. (GETTY IMAGES)

IN CONVERSATION

THE MILK-SISTERS OF OMAN

International Man Booker-winning author Jokha Alharthi says her novel about female friendships is a reflection of her country’s paradoxical yet multifaceted social tapestry

Sudipta Datta
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Omani writer Jokha Alharthi’s new novel, *Silken Gazelles* (Simon & Schuster), translated from the Arabic by Marilyn Booth, begins dramatically. A woman is suddenly told of her father’s death; and as she gives a loud wail, her baby girl, Layla, who she had been clutching, falls out of her hands, and lands into the arms of one of the mourners. The mourner, Saada, has a 10-month-old child of her own – Asiya, and as she offers her breast to the child she plucks from the air, she names her Ghazaala or gazelle. Alharthi, who won the 2019 Man Booker International Prize, along with translator Marilyn Booth, for her novel *Celestial Bodies*, deftly tells the story of the milk-sisters in her new book, and of their journey from village to city, the changes they encounter, and the grief they carry. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: How were the characters Ghazaala and Asiya born?
Answer: I first thought about Ghazaala. I was thinking of her for months without writing a word. Then I wrote a few scenes that I did not like and deleted them. At that point, Asiya came along and I started again, writing about them both. You might say that the characters were born – and reborn – in the writing and rewriting of the novel.

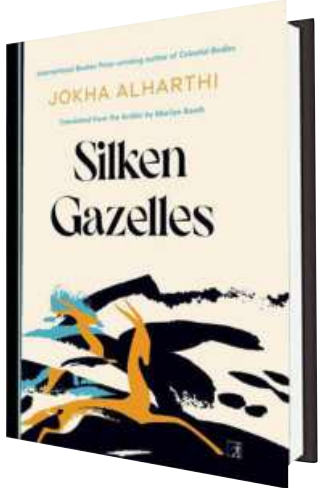
Q: Like in your earlier books, one of the strands in *Silken Gazelles*

is the acute grief carried by different generations. Do you think women carry grief differently through the ages?
A: Or perhaps they have been expected to carry it? We are, differently, experiencing the strengths of women, through and beyond grief, in all of the novels. Perhaps one important point is that it does not get easier – there is a perception that it is easier for the younger generation. But sometimes the illusion of modern freedom does not translate into an ease of agency or actual freedom. I think a lot about Maliha in *Silken Gazelles* – she’s only a few years older than Ghazaala but seems to have less freedom of movement, or self-expression.

Q: Themes of patriarchy, love, loss, class relations, sisterhood dominate *Silken Gazelles* too. Are these the dominant concerns in Omani society?
A: I do not see myself, nor any writer, as a definitive spokesperson for Omani society. Our society, like any other, is a tapestry woven with intricate threads of diversity, layered with complexities that resist singular interpretations. Omani society is as multifaceted and paradoxical as any other, filled with competing narratives and lived realities. What interests me as a writer are the subtle nuances and tensions that define human relationships – the intricate dance between love and power, the evolving dynamics of friendship, and the silent yet potent currents of social class and gender. It is in the interstices of relationships, in the unspoken words and fleeting moments,

that I find the richest material. My work reflects the diversity and contradictions inherent in our society, not as a means of explanation, but as a way to engage with the ever-shifting landscape of human existence.

Q: Arabic literature is old, and the English speaking world is just discovering it. How important is the art and craft of translation?
A: We are lucky to have literature in translation. It allows us to transcend the boundaries of language, culture, and geography. Through translation, we gain access to the vast and varied landscapes of human experience. It is offering us insights into lives, emotions, and histories that would otherwise remain foreign and inaccessible. Imagine the loss if we were confined to stories only within our own language – how narrow our understanding of the world would be, how limited our empathy. In India this must be particularly true – to think of India and see India must be quite different in Kerala and in Assam, or in



Tamil or in Gujarati. Through translation, however, we are able to encounter the wisdom of Confucius, the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez, the timelessness of Tagore and the intensity of Dostoevsky – all without leaving the comfort of our own language.

There are many Arabic authors that I like. In this particular moment in time, in history, I would recommend writers from Palestine. Reading Adania Shibli’s *Minor Detail* may change the viewpoint of many readers with regard to what happened in Palestine in 1948. The novelist Ghassan Kanafani and the poet Mahmoud Darwish are a must. From Oman, I would suggest Zahran Alqasmy.

Q: When the world is in turmoil, how important is it to hear voices of women, who usually face the brunt in a conflict situation?
A: I think it is always important. Perhaps because fiction helps us to concentrate on the individual fate of characters? Or at least to a certain extent. Whereas global turmoil is quite hard to think about because we are removed from the lives of individual women in Gaza or Ukraine or Sudan or Yemen.

The novel can also do something valuable in taking us away from the generalised narrative of current affairs and allowing the imagination to run free. This is why, in a novel, it is nice to leave a little room for the reader to fill in the details of the scenes, to feel that they are in close proximity with the characters and their stories.

2024 BOOKER PRIZE-SHORTLISTED

Spy versus rebel

Rachel Kushner’s departure from the espionage novel format is refreshing in this narrative based on eco-terrorism, anarchism, and the murky world of surveillance

Pranavi Sharma

For those familiar with Rachel Kushner’s previous work, her latest novel, *Creation Lake*, is an extension of her signature style. She has always been adept at blending political history with personal narrative and exploring topics such as the prison-industrial complex and revolutionary movements. It’s precisely this engagement with urgent themes that perhaps earns her a spot on this year’s Booker Prize shortlist.

Creation Lake isn’t your typical spy thriller like the blurbs promise, and that’s largely because Kushner is always pushing the boundaries of form. She takes us into a world of eco-terrorism, anarchist communes, and the murky ethical boundaries of surveillance.

The narrator is Sadie Smith – a disillusioned former agent who, after a botched federal case, is hired to infiltrate an eco-terrorist commune. Her target? A collective led by a mysterious anthropologist, Bruno Lacombe, who dwells in caves and has retreated from the world to explore a consciousness beyond our temporal reality.

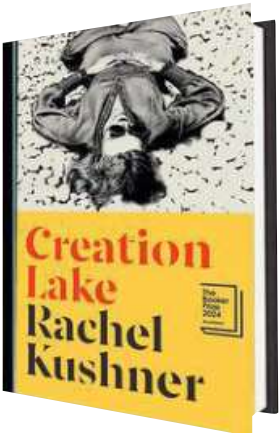
Undercurrents of the past
The novel doesn’t just follow Sadie’s journey but also invites readers to question the nature of surveillance, the limits of resistance, and the line between fanaticism and principled rebellion. The story doesn’t remain comfortably in the realm of spy-versus-rebels but instead winds through themes of isolation, lost ideals, and the collapsing distinction between the natural and the industrialised world.

Kushner’s departure from the spy convention is refreshing. Yes, there’s action, but it’s sparse, with much of the novel centered around Sadie’s slow, almost reluctant, infiltration of the group. Her approach is roundabout – she doesn’t dive headfirst into the commune but instead begins a relationship with someone loosely connected to it. She’s strategic, methodical, and detached, using every resource at her disposal, including her body, to get closer to the group. And yet, despite her best efforts to remain emotionally uninvolved, there’s an unsettling undercurrent suggesting her past might be creeping up on her.

Redefining the character
The author’s wariness about character is palpable in *Creation Lake*. She revealed in an interview her suspicion of characters having a fixed, “20th century subjectivity” – the idea that a character is a fully formed person with a clear psychological profile. In *Creation Lake*, we never get a complete sense of who Sadie



(Above) Image for representation purpose only; (below) Rachel Kushner. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK AND GETTY IMAGES)



Creation Lake
Rachel Kushner
Jonathan Cape
₹799

really is. We see glimpses of her past, but much of it is obscured, leaving the reader to question whether this is simply the nature of being a spy: slipping in and out of identities, leaving no trace. Sadie’s voice on the page is more thought than speech, reflecting the author’s desire to strip away the confessional tone that often defines first-person narratives.

The character of Bruno is a fascinating one. As a former radical-turned-recluse, his



philosophy is discomforting and prompts the readers to wrestle with questions about what it means to abandon the world, or to engage with it through extreme, sometimes violent, measures. His communiques from his cave, intercepted by Sadie, act as a kind of underground manifesto, a dialogue between past and present radicalism.

Behind a utopian society
Kushner’s exploration of radical movements – whether through the rural commune that clashed with the French state, or Notre-Dame-des-Landes (a real-life site of environmental resistance) – grounds the novel in a fierce sense of place. However, what stands out is not just her portrayal of history’s victories and failures, but the human impulses that drive these insurrections. Through Bruno, the anarchists’ leader who romanticises the Neanderthals and their supposed “purity”, Kushner teases out philosophical questions about the nature of resistance, sacrifice, and the pursuit of a utopian society. Bruno’s long monologues – often delusional but always fascinating – feel both absurd and profound.

Sadie is no idealised heroine; she is morally complex, occasionally cynical, and her loyalties are unclear even to herself. And Bruno’s commune, with its utopian aspirations, is far from idyllic. The author admits in an interview that the book was shaped by her time spent with friends serving life sentences, individuals who had committed acts of such finality that understanding or excusing them was beside the point.

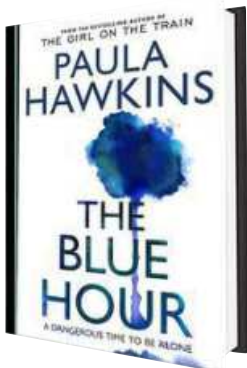
If there’s a takeaway from *Creation Lake*, it’s that revolution – whether political or personal – rarely comes without contradiction. The novel leaves the reader contemplating the intersections of history, ideology, and the messy reality of trying to change the world, or oneself.

The reviewer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.

BROWSER

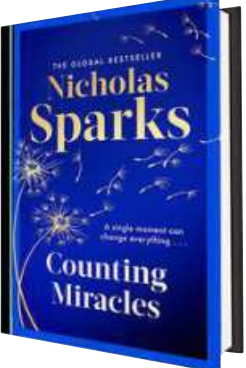
The Blue Hour
Paula Hawkins
Penguin
₹899

From the author of *The Girl on the Train* comes a new thriller set on a faraway Scottish island called Eris, home to its lone inhabitant Grace. When an unexpected visitor arrives, Grace is forced to forego her isolated life and contend with the secrets of her hometown.



Counting Miracles
Nicholas Sparks
Hachette India
₹499

This latest romance from the bestselling author follows army ranger Tanner Hughes, single mom and doctor Kaitlyn Cooper, and 83-year-old Jasper, who lives in a cabin near a forest. Each of them is looking for a missing puzzle in their lives. Will fate bring them together?



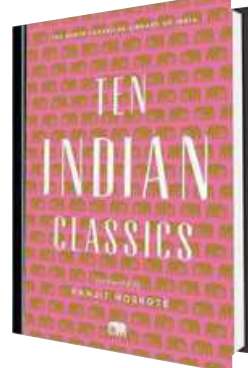
Francis Itty Cora
T.D. Ramakrishnan,
trs Priya K. Nair
HarperCollins
₹399

Originally published in Malayalam in 2009, this multi-layered novel takes the reader through the scandalous life of a 15th century pepper merchant, Francis Itty Cora, and his present-day descendant, ex-U.S. Marine Xavier Itty Cora.



Ten Indian Classics
The Murty Classical
Library of India
Harvard University Press
₹599

With translations from Hindi, Kannada, Pali, Telugu, Persian and other Indian languages, this volume contains poems by Surdas and Bullhe Shah, sacred Sikh verses, Emperor Akbar’s chronicles and some of the oldest women’s writings in the world.



KASHMIR SELECT



Love in the time of conflict

Kashmiri writers lift the veil, bearing witness to the changes in their region through stories

Kartik Chauhan

Srinagar cannot be read as a normal city; it has been a city of turmoil.” In Sadaf Wani’s fascinating new book, *City as Memory*, she keeps her eyes open to “witness the changes to the geography, demography and the idea of Kashmir.” The main characters are Srinagar’s everyman and woman, and its extraordinary city spaces. Wani tells me, “The onslaught of Kashmir’s violent reality has been so continuous that there has been no temporal pause that has allowed Kashmiris as a community to look back and make sense of what has happened. There has been no space to document what went on, mourn what was lost, or memorialise the efforts that were made to shape a distinct Kashmiri identity based on shared values. In the absence of all these, there is a sense of unresolvedness that we all carry in our heads.”

Lamenting the gaps in the current canon of books on Kashmir, she says: “Much of the literature on Kashmir, especially by non-natives, exhibits an impatient tendency to oversimplify the region’s complexities, offering sensational and reductive solutions.” *City as Memory* is cautious against rehashing these stereotypes. Written in crisp prose, it is profound in its intimate investigations of identity. Wani says that recent art and literature from Kashmir have provided a “shared understanding of the context” of how its people have processed “macro-historical events”. In effect, they have performed the incredible task of “making Kashmiris visible to each other, of understanding the state of each other,” in all the inherent socio-politico-cultural complexities of the region.

‘Illness’ in the Valley

Over the past few months, a number of books on Kashmir have been published, including memoirs by M.K. Raina and Siddhartha Gigoo. If we were to look for a common thread, it would be that the stories from Kashmir, founded on interrogations about identity and belonging, are primarily about loss and accumulated grief. Raina, the eminent thespian and social activist, feels the psychological effects of the insurgency and continuous violence have not been addressed. “There is an illness in the valley,” he says.



In his memoir *Before I Forget*, Raina narrates heartbreaking stories about his work with the children of the Valley in the early 2000s. Raina’s team visited these children to organise creative workshops, but on the first day, the “children would not even know how to look you in the eye, they would keep their heads bowed.” Asked to colour a lush garden, the children could not even use different colours; all turned in similar-looking monochromatic green sheets to mark the trees. Raina says that in the history of literature on Kashmir, “most ordinary stories have not been told.”

Siddhartha Gigoo’s *A Long Season of Ashes* is similar to Raina’s memoir. He was 16 when his family was forced out of their home at Saffa Kadal in Srinagar in March 1990. It took Gigoo 34 years to return to his memories, but the act of writing was necessary for several reasons.

“It is my duty to tell the world what we were made to go through. I wanted to document how we struggled to survive in the camps, and also our resilience. A few years from now, Kashmiri Pandits will only have an inherited memory of our way of life in the Valley.”

Identity crisis

Karan Mujoo, whose debut novel, *This Our Paradise*, traces a Kashmiri Pandit family’s exodus, echoes Gigoo’s thoughts: “We are in the middle of an identity erosion. Slowly but surely, Kashmiri Pandit culture will cease to exist. The Pandit community has no geographical centre.” In alternating chapters, Mujoo’s novel also tells the story of a Kashmiri Muslim family’s decline as their son joins a militant group – revealing a fundamental truth about how wars make corpses of all.

On choosing this double perspective narrative style, he says, “Kashmir contains multitudes: of people, of stories, of events. Often in conflict with each other and often conflicting in their narratives. I wanted to explore what happened in Kashmir during the 1980s-90s. That needed multiple perspectives and creative liberties only fiction can provide.”

A forthcoming book by Mehak Jamal, *Lōal Kashmir: Love and Longing in a Torn Land*, “traverses decades from the 1990s to the 2020s in Kashmir, and does so through stories of love affected by the conflict.”

All the stories have been collected from real people, and they illustrate how living through an unrest has affected them for better or worse, she says. By talking about love during conflict, are the people of Kashmir taking their power back? Jamal thinks so, and her words are similar to Raina’s who feels art and literature are the highest tools of soft power people have to preserve their culture, heritage and stories.

The writer is a Delhi-based literary reviewer. He can be found on X @kartekkk and on Instagram @karkritiques.

ABOUT MY PEOPLE

Priyanka Mattoo on her journey across countries, and why she sees herself as the ‘megaphone’ for a culture

Veena Venugopal

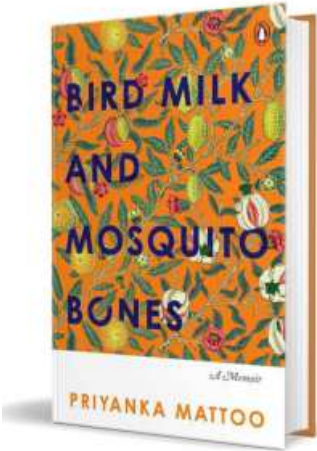
It’s safe to say that Priyanka Mattoo’s life and career have often taken the scenic route. Born in Kashmir, she grew up in England, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. She has worked as a talent agent in Hollywood, produced podcasts, is a partner at the comedian Jack Black’s production company making TV shows and films, and her writing has appeared in various international publications. Her memoir, *Bird Milk and Mosquito Bones*, traces this journey through countries and cultures, while remaining, at heart, a story about being Kashmiri and all the loss and longing that comes with it. Edited excerpts from an interview.

Question: Books about Kashmir usually tend to be about the violence the place has witnessed. Yours is largely about your family. What prompted you to make that choice?

Answer: I’m by no means a political correspondent, I am simply a person who was born in Kashmir and has grown up with this specific history. And I traffic in personal essay. That said, my personal history happens to be one that people love to shout about online, for political points or clicks, and I wasn’t at all interested in adding to the noise. It’s all just blended into a roar for me, after a lifetime of hearing it. I wanted to celebrate all the things I love about my people – our strength, our sense of humour, our shared stories – outside of what has happened to us.

Q: Food is an important construct for your connect with your roots. You write about wrangling your mother’s rogan josh recipe out of her. Tell us why food is an important aspect of family and identity.

A: This is a question a lot of non-diaspora desis are interested in because I think you see it as a trope – and maybe it is! But in the shifting abroad, I think we feel some level of comfort in knowing that no matter what lies just outside, we can always count on home cooking to remain the same. We moved an incomprehensible number of times, but the one constant was my family, and my mother’s cooking –which I had to learn, and connected me to her once I also left. Trope or not, that’s my truth. There’s also something very specific to



Bird Milk and Mosquito Bones
Priyanka Mattoo
India Viking
₹699

Kashmiri cooking in that it’s near-impossible to get in the U.S. if you’re not at a Kashmiri’s home. I can’t just order it. Not that I’d want to.

Q: It’s always a little difficult writing a memoir about a wholesome, loving family. It is only when you move to the U.S. as a teenager that you record some dissonance with your parents. How did you bridge the gap between what you wanted to do and what your parents allowed you to do?

A: My parents didn’t allow me to do much, to be honest – it was quite an extreme, old-fashioned clampdown once we moved to America, borne of fear that I might run wild. It was interesting to witness my cousins back home able to socialise and travel much more freely than I was in the U.S. It felt deeply unfair. I was certainly a misfit in some ways, but I was used to being a misfit, and my friends understood that I was dealing with something unusual. Here’s where I suppose we address another trope, that of eldest immigrant daughter.

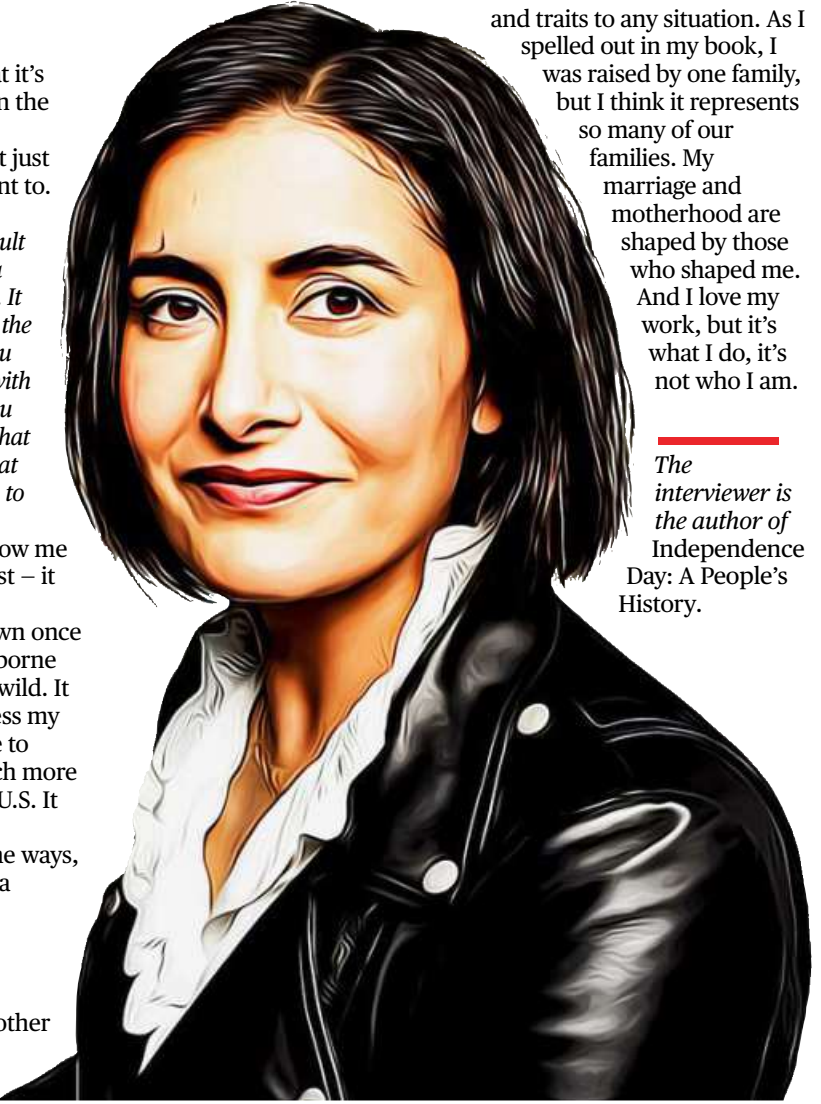
Essence of life (From above) Boat rides at sunset on Dal Lake, Srinagar; the aromatic Kashmiri rogan josh; and Priyanka Mattoo. (IMRAN NISSAR, MOHAMMED YOUSUF, AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

negative experiences came in the form of comments and not much else. Unfortunately in the early aughts, when I started working in entertainment, the general understanding was that these things happened, and my job was to deflect them. In the last 20 years, especially post #MeToo, I’ve seen a lot of unacceptable behaviour labelled as unacceptable, whereas before it was not. I don’t think any of my experiences would be shrugged off today; they’d at least feel like they had to be dealt with. Hollywood work environments are not yet great, but they seem to be moving in the right direction.

Q: At this point in your life, where you have seen professional and personal success, how do you assess your Kashmiri-ness?

A: I will always define myself first as Kashmiri, not just because it’s so crucial to me to be a megaphone for the culture, but I bring foundational Kashmiri values and traits to any situation. As I spelled out in my book, I was raised by one family, but I think it represents so many of our families. My marriage and motherhood are shaped by those who shaped me. And I love my work, but it’s what I do, it’s not who I am.

The interviewer is the author of Independence Day: A People’s History.



HOW PEER LISTENING CAN FLIP THE SCRIPT

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

He adds, however, that the students must be hand-held at every stage and work closely with the counsellor, so they don't feel the mental load and are well-equipped with information and skills. "There are a few downsides, like they may take on more than they can handle. To limit this burden, they must be taught boundaries," he says. Another downside is that if the emphasis on confidentiality is not strong enough, it may turn into snitching, gossiping, and spying.

Peer education is part of a larger, positive youth development framework that institutions adopt. Its central idea is the harnessing of students' strengths through an enabling environment. In layperson's language, it's about drawing a person's attention to what they're good at, so they lean in to those traits and skills. Dr. Kumar says the overall framework percolates down to every area of school life, and has proven to be successful around the world, in terms of how teachers record the changes in "classroom climate".

This is why schools are increasingly looking at it. Anju Soni, principal of Shiv Nadar School in Noida, says while three wellbeing prefects have been a part of the student council for three years, they are in the process of having 14

buddies who will chat with students about issues that concern them.

After COVID-19, many schools felt the need for a more robust system that would build resilience, collaboration, and empathy. Peer support is a part of the social-emotional learning (SEL) 'syllabus' that many boards began to develop in the aftermath of the pandemic. While the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) rolled out the Adolescent Peer Educators Leadership Programme in 2021, the Council for Indian School Certificate Exams (CISCE) is in the process of formulating a plan that will fan out over its 3,000-odd schools countrywide, in the next academic year. Joseph Immanuel, chief executive and secretary of the CISCE board, says, "The idea is for every teacher to be a counsellor." Then, through teacher and student training, the peer-to-peer support will be introduced.

Most schools do not keep parents specially informed about peer counselling programmes. They treat it like another school activity, involving the children's freedom of choice. For now, it's mainly schools that have enough teacher and counsellor support that are implementing it. But once a peer-to-peer programme becomes mass, parents may need to be inducted into it, so day scholars can be supported at home too.



First-time mentors

Delhi's MCD primary school in Amar colony has students from a few neighbouring areas, where many of the parents work in the homes around, or as daily wage labourers, or auto drivers. The school has a buddy system where each child is paired with another. "It began as support for new children, but has now extended across classes 3 to 5," says Urmila Chowdhury, co-founder and director of the non-profit Peepul that has worked in collaboration with the school since 2017. The idea is to build a community where people help each other.

Children are paired depending on their learning and skills, so someone good with numbers may be buddied up with someone who draws well. Every lesson follows the structure 'I do' (where the teacher explains), 'We do' (children collaborate), 'You do' (children work independently). Within the we-do time, buddies tackle exercises together. The think-pair-share method, while old, works, says Chowdhury, who spent many years as a teacher in Shri Ram School, Delhi. When asked about the buddy system, a group of class 3 students use the words 'ek saath [together]' several times over.

Not far from the MCD school is Tagore International School. Here, Aahana Jain, 14, in class 10, is part of the Peer Mentoring club with other



Delhi steps up

Apurva Sapra, who heads the Delhi government's School Mental Health Initiative, says their programme has two arms: one for teachers to understand the impact that mental health issues has on students, and the other that loops students in — through circle time and life skills education. Circle time is student driven, and if it throws up issues, school psychologists get involved. They also have mobile mental health units run by the Institute of Human Behaviour & Allied Sciences that visit government-run schools. The programme currently runs in 35 government schools, and an evaluation is expected next year before it is rolled out to the 1,000+ other schools.



students from classes 10 to 12. Every week, the school has three zero periods, where students take up topics such as bullying, social media, or time management. "The teachers are not in the classroom, so students can open up about what they feel," she says. Her mother, Aanchal Jain, a dentist, remembers her own time in a girls' school when "so many topics were taboo we could not even talk about them to our peers for fear of being judged". Priyanka Randhawa who is the project director says they take small triggers and use them as big lessons. "A child from the Northeast told us how targeted she felt in Delhi's public spaces, how people would call her 'momo' and 'chinky'. So we took up the idea of diversity and bullying," she says. She adds that the avenues of bullying have increased: it's no longer just on the playground or in the classroom, but also online.

"Someone can just expel you from a WhatsApp group, and a child could feel terrible about that." Younger children, she feels, tend to listen more to older children than their parents, and that's where the peer mentors come in.

Meanwhile, in Kodaikanal International School, Shiv Gandhi, 15, has signed up to be a Peer Mentor. He talks of the "adolescence to adulthood" GenDerations programme that the school has signed up for. "We learnt that the person [who the peer is listening to] does 80% of the talking and we do just 20%, and we give them some [non-verbal] indication through the conversation so they know we are listening," he says. He liked the trust-building exercises within the group: "It allowed me to share about myself, even though it was with someone whom I had never spoken to."

It is this understanding of vulnerability that the peer supporters take into the school, to form deeper bonds. As Gilda, a counsellor at KIS says, "They have experienced how uncomfortable it is to be honest about their own feelings and emotions, that they become open and understanding to those who reach out to them."

(Clockwise from above) Wellness Ambassador of Woodstock; Shiv Gandhi, a Peer Mentor at KIS; and students at Navadha School in Dehradun. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



WHAT'S INDIAN ABOUT SANTOSH?

Everything, barring the money and the principal crew. UK's official Oscar entry also reflects the nature of global arthouse cinema today

Saibal Chatterjee

Never before has the United Kingdom picked a Hindi-language film as its official entry for the Best International Feature Oscar. British-Indian documentary filmmaker Sandhya Suri's narrative feature debut *Santosh* is not, however, the first subcontinental film to earn the distinction.

Sarmad Masud's Urdu film *My Pure Land*, "a modern-day feminist Western set in Pakistan", was the UK's 2017 Oscar entry. But that obviously does not diminish the distance the Uttar Pradesh-set police thriller *Santosh* has travelled.

"I was really hoping we would be the U.K. entry, but as a filmmaker I

prefer not to second-guess outcomes we have no control over," Suri says. "But did I do a huge fist pump and yelp with excitement?"

Shahana Goswami, the film's lead, learnt only the day before the announcement that the U.K. would be betting on *Santosh*. It is a British production but India has the right to be proud of the film, she feels.

"*Santosh* is an Indian co-production made with an Indian cast and a partly Indian crew by an Indian-origin filmmaker telling an Indian story," she notes, but is quick to add, "Appropriation is a tricky thing. I am not saying we can claim that *Santosh* is our film, but we can celebrate that a story set in India and involving talent in this country has travelled this far."

For Goswami

personally, *Santosh* is special. "The film," she says, "is hugely shouldered by my character. I've always wanted to do more of this... [Rubaiyat Hossain's Bangladeshi film] *Under Construction* was the last film that had me in every frame. It's been 10 years since then."

Head start at Cannes

Santosh has had a successful theatrical run in France after its Cannes premiere. As an Oscar entry, it can now hope for distribution in other markets, too. "We are lucky," says Suri, "to have had a phenomenal run in France, nearing 150,000 entries and maintaining a solid position over two months at the box office."



Not an average police drama

"We knew all along that *Santosh* would not be an average police drama," Rajwar continues. Suri, she reveals, auditioned Goswami and her twice, "once individually and then together to ascertain our chemistry".

"We spent 10-12 days with Sandhya to grasp the requirements of the characters. All three of us were together. It helped us understand each other. Sandhya was very clear about what she wanted," adds Rajwar.

Suri, who is a regular visitor to India — "the visits are a little less frequent since I have a daughter now," she says — was acutely aware of the need "to depict violence against women in a meaningful way".

Her work process involves asking many questions. "Since I live outside, I am conscious of how I'm going to portray things. I ask myself questions, too many questions, which is why my films take as long as they do."

Erasing boundaries

Santosh exemplifies the nature of global arthouse cinema today. In recent decades, these films have erased national boundaries. *Santosh* is a BBC Film

production with Petit Chaos and Haut et Court of France, ZDF Arte and Razor Film Produktion of Germany, and India's Suitable Pictures as partners.

As a multi-national production, it will be competing with several other films of its ilk for an Oscar nomination. Poland's entry *Under the Volcano*, about a holidaying Ukrainian family stranded in Tenerife due to the Russian invasion of their country, has, besides Ukrainian, Spanish, English, Russian, German and Wolof on the soundtrack.

Matthew Rankin's *Universal Language*, Canada's entry, is a predominantly Persian film, France's *Emilio Perez*, the Cannes Jury Prize winner directed by Jacques Audiard, is a Spanish-language film set in Mexico, Germany's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* is a Persian film directed by Iran's Mohammad Rasoulof, and Switzerland's *Reinas* was filmed in Peru in Spanish.

The contender from Iceland, action director Baltasar Kormákur's *Touch*, is in Icelandic, English and Japanese. Senegal has chosen *Dahomey*, Mati Diop's Golden Bear-winning documentary. It is a Senegal-France-Benin co-production.

It is, therefore, no big deal that *Santosh*, lensed by Dutch cinematographer Lennert Hillege and edited by Paris-based Maxime Pozzi-Garcia, is going to the Oscars as U.K.'s entry.

What perhaps is, is that the U.K.'s 2023 submission, Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*, a German-Polish-Yiddish film loosely based on a Martin Amis novel, went all the way and won the Best International Feature Oscar, the first for a non-English British film.

That would be the act to follow, though a hard one indeed!

The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

MEDIA-PROPAGATED WOLF MYTHS VERSUS FACTS

MYTH: LURKING AT EVERY CORNER TO AMBUSH YOU

FACT: DECLINING POPULATION, RAPIDLY SHRINKING HABITATS, NO GOVERNMENT EFFORT FOR CONSERVATION DESPITE SCHEDULE-1 LISTING.

MYTH: LOVE HUMAN BABIES FOR DINNER

FACT: FORCED TO PREY ON LIVESTOCK AFTER HAVING NATURAL PREY WIPED OUT OF HOME RANGE. RARE ATTACKS ON HUMAN INFANTS ARE A RESULT OF HIGH POPULATION DENSITY, POVERTY, POOR HOUSING AND SANITATION.

MYTH: WILY, VICIOUS & DESPICABLE MAN-EATERS

FACT: FIND ME A MORE VICIOUS MAN-EATER THAN FAKE NEWS, AND I'LL BE YOUR PET DOG.



Vinay Aravind

There were two Vijay hits in the Tamil film industry this year. In one (*GOAT*), he's 50 years old. In the other, he's 30. If you're wondering if this is some cutting-edge AI de-ageing, let me stop you. The latter was the re-release of *Chilli*, the 2004 superhit that cemented his position at the top of the Kollywood pecking order. If media reports are anything to go by, the re-released version grossed in the excess of ₹50 crore at the box office, matching the then-record collections from its original release.

Chilli is not an isolated incident. If you paid any attention to the schedule in your neighbourhood theatres, you would have noticed a trend of old films being re-released. From decades-old classics to more recent cult films, there is a wide range of titles finding their way back to the theatres.

It all began with the Amitabh Bachchan retrospective in October 2022. Or did it begin with the re-release of Mahesh Babu's 2006 hit *Pokiri* in August 2022? It's actually a bit tricky to pinpoint the precise origin of this phenomenon, but there are a few things we can say with some certainty.

For one, it happened post-lockdown. While there have been re-releases in the past, these were sporadic one-offs. It was when a few re-releases happened in 2022, in different markets, that the trend grew legs. People started to realise there was a viable business model here.

Pulling in the crowds 2024 is the year that the re-release business achieved critical mass. "If we have to say when the momentum picked up, it was with

FOR A FULL HOUSE, REWIND

Why movie theatres are seeing the most number of re-releases this year, from *Vinnaithaandi Varuvayaa* to *Wake Up Sid* and *Veer-Zaara*



the films that released this year, starting with *Rockstar* and *Laila Majnu*," says Niharika Bijli, lead strategist of multiplex chain PVR INOX. "It opened our eyes to the fact that even a film that is available on OTT is able to pull in extraordinary numbers to the theatre."

Before we examine their motivations, it's worth understanding that broadly there are two kinds of re-releases. On the one hand, there are more recent

original camera negative. "If a film is maintained well, then the moment you scan it, you're ready to remaster it," says Abhishek Prasad, chief technology officer of Prasad Corporation in Chennai, the pre-eminent facility for film restoration in India. "Some of the films that are badly maintained become extremely brittle, or are stuck layer to layer, or have the chemical bleeding out."

The challenge of Manichitrathazhu While attempting to restore the Mohanlal-Shobana blockbuster, Unaise Advadu, operations head at Matinee Now, the company that oversaw the remaster and re-release of *Manichitrathazhu*, and his team could not even locate a usable camera negative, and had to fall back on restoring from a positive print. This is an inferior starting point. Even in its original form, a positive print is a somewhat degraded version of the original camera negative.

Once you have the film, the first task is to clean it, using a combination of manual and mechanised processes. It is then scanned at a very high resolution of up to 14K to get an enormous file measuring several terabytes, which is then digitally worked on to further repair defects, including the effects of mould, fungus, perforation tears and so like. Finally, the film is colour graded to replicate the original look to the extent possible, and it's ready for release.

Manichitrathazhu also had another challenge — its soundtrack was recorded in mono, a single channel of sound, while current theatrical releases are distributed with multi-channel Dolby Atmos soundtracks. So the folks at Matinee Now took the dialogues and songs from the original mono, but



(Clockwise from left) A still from *Manichitrathazhu*; posters of recent re-releases; Aditya Shrikrishna; Abhishek Prasad; Unaise Advadu; Tanul Thakur; and Niharika Bijli. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

re-recorded much of the score and sound effects to arrive at a multi-channel mix. Restoration like this can therefore be an expensive proposition. "We've done titles for ₹4-₹5 lakh, and others for up to ₹1 crore," says Prasad. "It just depends on the time and effort that has to go into the restoration."

Manichitrathazhu's re-release went on to be a great success. And this has been the case for most of the full-ticket re-releases in the recent past. As producers, distributors and exhibitors realise that there is a relatively lower-cost asset that is available for them to deploy in theatres, everyone wants

The momentum picked up with the films that released this year, starting with *Rockstar*. It opened our eyes to the fact that even a film that is available on OTT is able to pull in extraordinary numbers to the theatre

in on the action. "Timing is crucial. Re-releases often perform best during leaner periods when there are fewer new releases. We work with distributors to ensure that re-releases don't overlap with major blockbusters" says PVR INOX's Bijli.

'A guaranteed good time' But what is pushing the crowds back into the theatres to see these

films? The oft-cited answer is nostalgia, but is there really, for instance, ₹50 crore worth of nostalgia in Tamil Nadu? There are almost definitely other factors at play. "Back in the 1990s or 2000s, you would go to a theatre not knowing how a film was going to be," says film critic Tanul Thakur. "It was two hours of pristine immersion. Nowadays, with the OTT culture, people want to control the experience, as opposed to allowing the experience to control us. We are wary of disappointment."

This is definitely one of the great pluses of watching a re-release: a guaranteed good time. "You are not discovering. You are reassuring yourself," he says. There is also the fact that with many of these classic movies, the younger audience has never had the communal experience of watching them in the hall.

"Many generations have not seen Dilip Kumar or Dev Anand films in the theatre," says Shivendra Durgapur, founder-director of the Film Heritage Foundation, which is responsible for restoring and re-releasing several classic films from across the country. "I screened *Mahal* (1949) in July and 1,500 people turned up on a rainy day. Why? They wanted to see Ashok Kumar, they wanted that theatrical experience."

Perhaps another consideration is that re-releases are stepping in where new releases are falling short. At least for Bollywood and the Tamil industry, the last year was brutal, with few hits to speak of. "If *Manjummel Boys*, a Malayalam film, is one of the biggest hits in Tamil Nadu this year, then they are really on shaky ground," says Aditya Shrikrishna, a Chennai-based film critic. "There is a complete homogeneity of films that are being made, and this has pushed a particular kind of audience away from the theatre. Because we don't see as many rom-coms, or as many softer [lighter] films."

There is also the simple physical immersion of watching a film in glorious 4K resolution on a giant screen. This holds appeal even if the title is available for free on YouTube. At the end of the day, the re-release phenomenon is a classic example of a situation where everyone comes out a winner.

The writer and photographer is based in Chennai.

One nation, one pollution

Unite and campaign to evenly redistribute northern India's polluted air to the rest of the country

India is a world champion in air pollution. Every year, in the Winter Olympics, Indian cities, led by our national capital, win gold medals in multiple pollutant categories. Last year, India swept the medals table, winning the gold, silver, bronze and arsenic medals in both categories of Particulate Matter (PM2.5 and PM10). While Delhi also won the gold for ozone and benzene, Noida and Greater Noida won the gold for highest concentrations of carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides, while Ghaziabad grabbed the gold for peak levels of methane and sulphur oxides.

Unfortunately, despite laurels at the global level, India lacks a Uniform Pollution Code (UPC) that's enforceable across the length and breadth of the country. As a result, millions continue to be deprived of the basic pleasures that anyone living in Delhi takes for granted. Pollution inequality in India is the highest in the world. The distribution of polluted air across the country is so uneven it surpasses even our world famous economic and social inequalities.

Expectedly, the pattern of deprivation follows a rural-urban divide, with the metros hogging much of the pollution, leaving very little for the folk in the hinterlands. The most famous examples are of Punjab and Haryana, which burn thousands of tonnes of stubble every year. But much of the pollution they produce is sucked up by the National Capital Region (NCR), making a mockery of the federal principles enshrined in the Constitution.

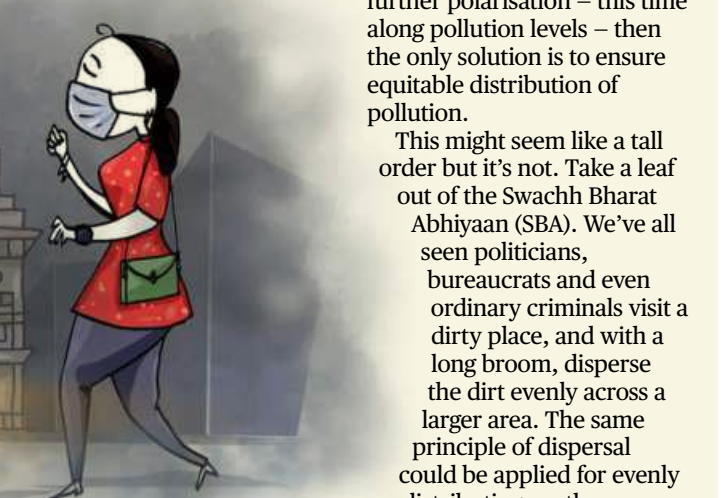
No appreciation of humidifiers Today we have a situation where, on a given winter day when Delhi might have an AQI of 899, a state capital like Imphal or the boondocks like Madikeri would show an AQI in the double digits, like 12 or 17, which is outrageous. But let's forget the Northeast and small town India, which shouldn't be difficult given the amount of practice we've put in. Even a metro like Chennai

He was like, "Winter-a?" "Yes-da," I said. "It is the name of a season." "Season-a?" "Yes. Winter is the opposite of summer." "I thought the opposite of summer is summer only? Like how the plural of sheep is sheep?" "No-da," I said. "That's true in Chennai. In Delhi, we have a separate season called winter. It's that time of the year when the air turns into smog—" Nation, One Pollution. Why should the air pollution in Meerut be vastly superior to that in Mandaveli? And why no PILs in the Supreme Court seeking a UPC?

How to save a polarised nation Also, a new study by the Mottahal Institute of Global Eminence (a Dreamed University) found that India's different communities are not contributing equally to pollution. If we want to save an already polarised nation from further polarisation — this time along pollution levels — then the only solution is to ensure equitable distribution of pollution. This might seem like a tall order but it's not. Take a leaf out of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan (SBA). We've all seen politicians, bureaucrats and even ordinary criminals visit a dirty place, and with a long broom, disperse the dirt evenly across a larger area. The same principle of dispersal could be applied for evenly redistributing northern India's polluted air to the rest of the country. It is no longer tenable, nor just, that India's most precious minority — the luxury SUV driving, fossil-fuel guzzling, frequently flying, elite company-owning, income tax-evading, poor working classes — continue to bear the burden of growing India's pollution levels. Let us unite and campaign for a UPC and ensure all of India's air has the same quality as Delhi's air in peak winter. Jai AQI.

And all flights to Delhi get cancelled?" "Correct." "So why can't you talk if winter is coming? You have an appointment with winter right now?" "I have an urgent errand," I said. "I'm stepping out to service my HEPA filter." "Hippo-what?" I hung up at this point. You see how clueless the rest of India is? That's why it's disgraceful that in a nation moving rapidly towards One Nation-One Election, One Nation-One Language, and One Nation-One Businessman, no one is talking about One

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R KUMAR



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

MODERN TIMES

A triptych to illustrate that while we are seemingly grappling with the same questions decade after decade, the wheels are slowly turning

THE ZEITGEIST OF MODERN TIMES



On a cold, rainy morning last week in London, I walked past a trio of older teenagers. The guy in the middle had said something and the Asian kid leaned over to ask, “What is consent?” It felt like the kind of scene, if tweeted by someone like me, would fetch many replies suggesting that I had made it up. “Oh, consent,” the guy said, “it’s like when you like somebody, you know, you should take their permission before proceeding.”

“Ah, of course, consent!” the Asian kid remarked. “So how do you communicate consent here? Do you ask in a direct sentence?” I walked away to the sound of the other two establishing a scenario with an example. It was fresher’s week in college campuses across the city, and everywhere you turned you encountered young people, shivering in anticipation at the beginning of the big story of their lives. No better time to think about consent, to check with your new

friends, to verify that your understanding of the culture is correct.

Often, in writing this column, I have wondered about what really the zeitgeist of Modern Times is? Often it feels like nothing has changed, that we are grappling with the same questions decade after decade – of wars and brutality, of women’s safety, the perils of a planet that is rapidly depleting of flora and fauna. But sometimes it feels like even if the wheels are slow, they are turning. That if a white, a brown and an Asian student, all of whom likely met earlier that week, were discussing consent, it has to be a sign of progress, that at least in some pockets, kids are being raised unafraid to ask what they are not certain about.

Modern Times.

wearing an ivory and black dress that she had accessorised to such perfection that it jumped out even to my fashion agnostic eye. “I love how well you’ve put this together,” I told her. She was startled at first to hear a stranger speak, and then her face dissolved into a smile. “Thank you,” she said and walked on, and at the end of the corridor when we had to go our separate ways, she turned to me and said, “I have an important presentation today and your compliment is the confidence boost I needed.”

The one thing I don’t hold back anymore is in complimenting strange women. Partly, it is because I am now old enough to not care about coming across as a “cool” person, but mostly it is because the solidarity of the sisterhood is the best thing in our lives now. Never before have I encountered so many women actively engaged in the enterprise of lifting each other up.

Don’t believe me? Check out the Instagram accounts of young women, and you won’t miss the trail of comments from her friends, and some strangers, calling her a queen.

For days, I thought about the way the woman’s face changed in the time her brain heard and interpreted my words. How little it took to make someone feel supported. Earlier this week, I was in the elevator of the same building. There were about six or seven people – men and women – and a young girl stepped up to me and said, “May I?” Before I knew it, she reached out to tuck the tag of my shirt into the collar.

Modern Times

victim to a scam in which he was placed under “digital arrest” (no such thing) and made to transfer ₹7 crore into various accounts. In the course of this arrest, he was even shown a courtroom in which the chief justice of India, D.Y. Chandrachud (fake), heard his case and passed an order. The rest of the cast was mostly officers from the Enforcement Directorate, dressed in civilian clothes, with ID cards dangling from their necks.

I must say I read this story with a bit of envy and regret. I had never engaged in these scam calls; as soon as the recorded message starts about my Fedex consignment or my account in a bank I don’t have one in, I immediately disconnect and block the number. I know several people who have fallen victim to these scams, intelligent and discerning people, who emerge from the fugue of their encounter in shame. In the retelling of events,

Sign of progress ‘Never before have I encountered so many women actively engaged in the enterprise of lifting each other up.’ (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

they know how ridiculous it sounds, but the sophistication of these scams is such that people don’t realise the complex psy-ops they are part of until it is too late. So, I have been wary of engaging with these callers, even when I am certain it is a scam. But the idea that there was so much theatre playing out in these calls is too tempting. I’d love to see the fake CJI banging his fake gavel in his fake court.

So the next time my phone rang and it asked me press 9 to prevent the immediate cancellation of my phone number by TRAI, I took a deep breath and did as I was told. But, alas, the extension rang and rang and nobody answered. A recorded voice came back and apologised for the delay, assured me my call was important and asked me to hold on. I did. But after six rounds of this, and a 10-minute wait, I knew there was no fake courtroom destined for me that day. It’s a tough life when even the scamsters put you on hold because they have far more wealthy people to deal with first.

Modern Times

Veena Venugopal is the author of Independence Day: A People’s History.



NORTH												
♠ 7												
♥ K Q 9 7												
♦ J 10 8 6 5 2												
♣ K Q												
WEST												
♠ K 10 6 5 2												
♥ A 8 6												
♦ Q 7 4												
♣ A 6												
SOUTH												
♠ A Q J												
♥ 4 3 2												
♦ A K 9												
♣ J 10 7 2												

Good bidding

Both vulnerable.
South deals

Bob Jones

North-South had an intelligent auction to their best spot. South, who had already denied holding four spades after his Stayman response, bid three spades to show his concentration in that suit. Should North hold four spades and one heart, for example, they could have played in five diamonds instead of three no trump. South won the opening spade

The bidding:

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

Opening lead: Five of ♠

lead with his queen and cashed the ace and king of diamonds, hoping to see the queen fall. No luck there, but he needed more tricks from the diamond suit so he led another diamond to

West’s queen. West led the six of hearts and South played the king from dummy, winning the trick. South still did not have enough tricks because he had no entry to his ace of spades. He cashed

three diamond winners in dummy and led the king of clubs. West won with the ace and led another club, locking South on the table and forcing South to lead a heart from dummy. The defense was now assured of two heart tricks, but the contract was in no danger. There was no lie of the cards that would allow the defense to take three heart tricks and the defense would have to give dummy the queen of hearts or put declarer in his hand in a black suit.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

There is geometry in the humming of the strings. There is music in the spacing of the spheres: Pythagoras

Berty Ashley

Born on October 13, 1948, this gentleman was known for his iconic powerful voice and the ability to enthrall an audience for hours on end. He went on to popularise his artform worldwide and be nominated for two grammy awards. Who was this legendary singer, known as the ‘Shahenshah-e-Qawwali’ (the King of kings of Qawwali)?

This New Jersey-born singer is affectionately nicknamed ‘The Boss’ and, for over six decades has been taking his brand of ‘heartland rock’ around the world. His anthemic songs about the working class make them popular everywhere, from TV shows to presidential elections. Who is this singer talking about the problems of being born in the USA?

Sripathi Panditaradhyula is widely regarded as one of the greatest singers in the Indian film industry. Having sung more than 40,000 songs in 16 languages and having won multiple awards, there are few who can match his prodigious output. Who was this singer with an iconic voice who recorded 21 Kannada songs in one day (on February 8, 1981)?

Since releasing his debut album at the age of 31 in 1946, this singing icon known for his smooth and silky voice went on to become one of the world’s



Image for representation purpose only. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

best-selling artists, winning 11 Grammy awards. A successful actor, he also won an Oscar award in 1953. Who was this singer known for doing things his way?

This nationally acclaimed singer is known as the ‘Modern Rafi’, a tribute to the late singer Mohammed Rafi. His skills at mimicking the great Indian singers showcased his versatility, eventually giving him the opportunity to sing in 54 voices for the track ‘Tees Maar Khan’. Who is this singer, who has collaborated with Britney Spears, DJ Avicii, and Jermaine Jackson?

There is a popular but wrong myth that this popular singer was born in India. He was actually born in what is modern-day Tanzania, but spent his childhood near Bombay, where he learnt to play the piano and formed a band.

It was then he decided to change his name. By what name do we know this rocker whose voice echoed across stadiums worldwide?

Akhtari Bai Faizabadi was an Indian singer whose prowess in Hindustani classical music earned her multiple awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan from the Government of India. Known as the ‘Mallika-e-Ghazal’ (Queen of Ghazals), by what name do we better know this legendary singer?

This Canadian lady was born into a large musical family where she enjoyed entertaining everyone at events. In 1988, at age 20, she won Eurovision representing Switzerland and soon had a string of pop songs topping the charts around the

world. Her 4-octave voice range is known for both softness and power, including the F5 she hits in the song ‘All by Myself’. Who is this iconic singer whose most famous song was recorded in a single take?

This singer, who is an officer of the British Empire, was born in Lucknow, but his family moved to England post-independence. He is often credited with singing the British rock and roll song with his hit ‘Move It’. Going on to give long-lasting hits like ‘The Young Ones’ and ‘Bachelor Boy,’ he and his band – The Shadows – became global stars. Who is this singer whose song ‘Congratulations’ is sung even today at weddings?

This singer, with more than 75 million albums sold, is the highest-certified female artist in the US. Her control of her extreme vocal range is only overshadowed by her ability to sing in the whistle register (the highest a human voice can achieve). Who is this singer who, according to a popular internet trope, is activated yearly for Christmas?

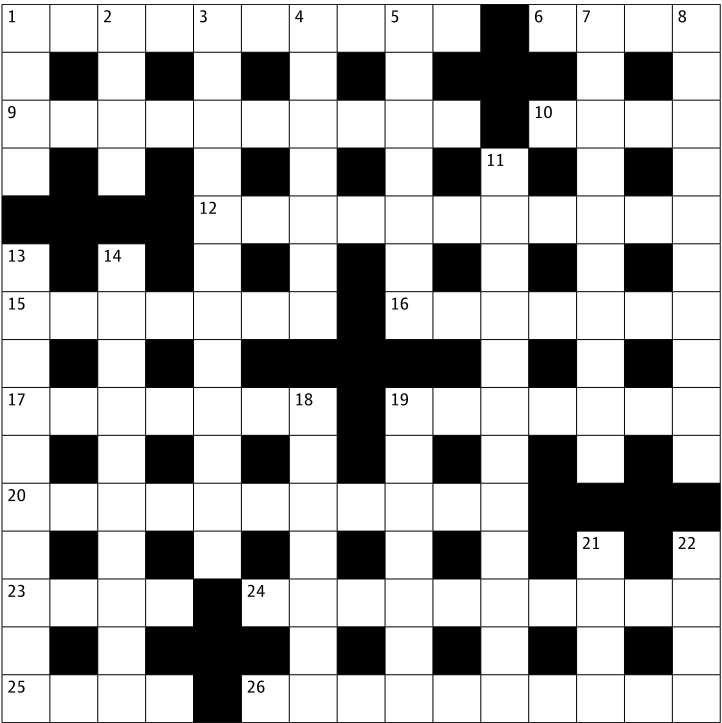
A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music and is working on a rock ballad called ‘Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion’.

@bertyashley

- 1. Musrat Batsh Ali Khan
- 2. Bruce Springsteen
- 3. (S.) Balaasubrahmanyam
- 4. Frank Sinatra
- 5. Sonu Nigam
- 6. Freddy Mercury
- 7. Begum Akhtar
- 8. Celine Dion
- 9. Cliff Richard
- 10. Mariah Carey

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3327



Across

- 1 Son, clumsy, far from alert (10)
- 6 Posseseth headgear, ‘tis put on horse (4)
- 9 Pulling wrestling move that binds (7,3)
- 10 First man to block America First (4)
- 12 Angry Charlotte and King Edward’s unwanted issues (3,8)
- 15 A long, powerful harmonic object rendered naturally, principally? (7)
- 16 Tedious far side of Stromboli, disruptive smoker (7)
- 17 They describe pupils’ behaviour: explosions, gunshot, etc (7)
- 19 Ripped off like a dart (7)
- 20 Euros for brioche? (6,5)
- 23 As delivered, proper ceremony (4)
- 24 Hoarding William’s canned food (10)
- 25 Nauseous, oily, not a little lugubrious (4)
- 26 ‘Cyber’-? ‘E’-? Call out what some junk may be! (10)

Down

- 1 Git given a fizzy drink (4)
- 2 Regularly unteach Mormons found in this state (4)
- 3 Sweet book with Sussex setting... (8,4)
- 4 ... agreed, that’s an extract from it (5,2)
- 5 Safari centre sees Everyman fatigue abrupt Scotsman after capsizing (7)
- 7 Accepting only some commands of orthodontists, etc (3,2,5)

- 8 Fake some deaths where people might be living (10)
- 11 Shrinking baked good: it’ll keep you in shape (8,4)
- 13 Director, light-hearted fellow, equips places with milkmaids (5,5)
- 14 Inflamed, each lech’s mostly shown involuntary movement (10)
- 18 Magnificent muesli in mix bachelor’s ingested (7)
- 19 Poet, husky in voice? (7)
- 21 Miserable poet on the up (4)
- 22 Tennis legend showing evidence of fire and energy (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3326





ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

A women-only conversation, but for all

Why do we descend to the misogynistic use of ‘girlish’ and ‘womanly’ as labels to demean some of the complex disciplines?

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As yet another discussion on the androcentric nature of cognitive experiments swept our ever-enthusiastic psychology class, I found myself quietened by a sudden dawning. I scoured the room with keen eyes, scanning the faces of each participant and feeling increasingly ashamed of my evident ignorance. I realised with a jolting taste of reality that our classroom featured no male students. Our discussion on the overrepresented male perspective was destined to be intrinsically

unrepresentative. The attempt to unpack the contentious case of lopsided gender representation in an exclusively female classroom would be ironically pointless. This unexpected awakening then impelled me to further investigate my surroundings. I found that biology and English classes too were entirely female. Why did this realisation consume me? Well, if this strange phenomenon was just an interesting coincidence, it was hampering classroom experience – for how could one possibly acutely discuss feminist literary theory devoid of the male voice?

Probes around women in STEM have permeated significant conversations on the influence of gender on career pathways, and we have made some progress (not nearly enough). Then why do we not talk about the stigma against men in the arts and social sciences? Why do we descend to the misogynistic use of “girlish” and “womanly” as labels to demean complex disciplines, and make them uninviting to interested individuals?

Disparities in gender are perhaps more threatening today than they were earlier, for they appear less conspicuous, despite their immutable reality. Gender roles and expectations seem to be less rigidly upheld by the more aware and educated members of society; yet the very essence of these social structures are innately, and perhaps unconsciously, accepted by them. Only recently, I overheard two high school boys discussing the indubitable importance of pursuing a career in the sciences, emphasising to each other the fatal future they would be awaiting if they failed to do so. “Otherwise you won’t get a job anywhere,” I heard one say. Is the pressure to be the stereotypical male breadwinner still the propeller for the customary

choice of career? In a society we name progressive and perpetually developing, it seems concerning that the entrenched dichotomy of gender expectations should still plague us. As “Look how far we’ve come!” and “Your generation has it so much better” continue to be yielded only too frequently, I have begun to wonder whether these proclamations aim to console the self more than offer authentic reflections on society.

I recall my grandmother explaining the insufferable lack of opportunity she was presented with at school. “Biology was mostly for girls – physics and chemistry were for the boys,” she said. “But you have so many choices now.” We do. But we still abide by the same rules. Crenshaw’s intersectionality would probably put it this way: we are not merely men or women, or Indians or 21st century citizens of the world – in isolation. Our individual characteristics are not disparate from one another, rather, they naturally interlink, interconnect and intersect. The same woman who enters a classroom that preaches equality is one who has likely experienced blatant inequality outside it. The same man who is taught, at home, that men can find success by pursuing their passions, may be discouraged by the students he meets at school. So we have come far, but not far enough. Our generation is an improvement, but not on all grounds. For change to be distinguishable, it must reflect in each layer of our identity, in each environment we are a part of – it must be congruous and consistent.

As I left my psychology class that morning, I saw an eclipsed penumbra of light arch across a whiteboard that had been covered in notes. A flicker of hope, if incomplete.

A lie and its deleterious effects

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Lying can profoundly affect one’s happiness, mental well-being, relationships, and peace of mind. No other vice threatens happiness as much as lying does, be it in one’s professional or personal sphere. Just as a nation may suffer from its leaders’ lying, a family can also suffer from the lying of its members. Often, we overlook the fact that lies, intended to enhance our happiness, can ultimately destroy it. While lying may provide temporary benefits, entertainment, and pleasure, upon contemplation, one may recognise that lying, as their greatest enemy, has snuffed out the very happiness it aimed to cultivate. This is how lying destroys our happiness:

Lying often results in guilt, anxiety, or the fear of being caught. The mental effort required to sustain a lie can be overwhelming. Lying typically causes cognitive dissonance – the unease felt when your actions don’t align with your beliefs or self-perception, which can wear away at your inner tranquillity.

True happiness usually stems from living with authenticity, making meaningful contributions, and staying true to oneself. Deception erodes these principles.

Building strong mental reserves

Add to happiness like an ‘account’ with regular deposits of nurturing habits, thoughts, and positive actions

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In today’s fast-paced world, the concept of mental health has gained increased importance, especially in light of growing stress and societal pressures. As individuals, we often find ourselves juggling multiple responsibilities, affecting emotional and psychological well-being.

To counteract this, I have found an interesting and practical approach for maintaining mental health – a concept I call the ATM for happiness. This metaphor encourages us to treat our mental health like an “account” from which we can withdraw positivity and happiness, provided we make regular deposits of nurturing habits, thoughts, and

actions. It’s a personal model that can guide us in managing our mental well-being, much like we manage our finances. Just as we need to deposit money in a bank account before making withdrawals, our emotional and mental health needs consistent positive inputs to keep functioning healthily.

To maintain good mental health, we need to make regular deposits into our emotional bank. These deposits come in the form of positive actions, relationships, habits, and mindset shifts that strengthen our mental resilience. Mindfulness is a powerful tool that allows us to remain in the present moment, reducing anxiety and stress about future uncertainties. Incorporating daily



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mindfulness practices, such as meditation or deep-breathing exercises, can boost our mental well-being.

A simple habit of noting down things we are grateful for shifts our focus from what’s lacking to what’s abundant in our lives. Acknowledging small wins and practising optimism helps to build emotional wealth over time. Strong, supportive relationships play a crucial role in maintaining mental health. Whether family or friends, having a circle of people with whom we can share our joys and challenges ensures that our emotional balance remains positive.

Just as we draw from a financial account when needed, life’s challenges

often force us to withdraw from our mental health reserves. However, when our emotional balance is low due to insufficient deposits, it leads to burnout, stress, and poor mental health.

Constant pressure from work and personal responsibilities can deplete our mental energy if not balanced by sufficient relaxation and self-care. Toxic environments and strained relationships are significant withdrawals that affect our mental balance. It’s important to assess these and either heal or limit our exposure to them. Many of us are conditioned to fear failure or strive for perfection in every aspect of our lives. These high expectations reduce our emotional wealth, leading to anxiety and dissatisfaction.

In today’s social media-driven culture, it’s easy to compare yourself to others, which can drain your emotional reserves. The constant focus on how others are doing can lead to feelings of inadequacy and poor self-esteem. It’s better to see yourself as a person who is doing well for yourself.

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Retired from police service six months ago, after serving for nearly 38 years. With the happy realisation of having become my own master after half a lifetime, I decided to get into farming in Kodagu. Right now, I am planting coffee, pepper, areca nut, banana, avocado, forest trees and so on with an almost maniacal frenzy. I am even in the process of acquiring rhododendron saplings from the Himalayas to be planted around an irrigation pond. My main worry are

In the abode of lush greenery

There is a gentle breeze that blows ever so often from the Kunda Betta and the old trees sway gently, as if in sheer delight

two herds of crop-raiding elephants. Their depredations are regular and they destroy more than what they eat. I am perhaps the most persistent caller for the services of the local Elephant Task Force. There is a certain edge to the voice of the ETF commander when I call him nowadays, but

he sends his team nevertheless, and its staff gallantly chase away the herds. But the elephants promptly return in a couple of days.

Marauding elephants have become a serious threat to life and property in my part of the world. There seems to be no durable



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solutions in sight. So, I asked the young man in charge of the ETF, “Why don’t you tranquillise the matriarch and a few herd members and tie big brass bells on their necks with steel chains? That way, people will be forewarned of their presence and can take precautionary

measures.” To my surprise, he did not dismiss my idea as too outlandish, and said he would take up the matter with the government.

I keep a keen eye on the happenings in the village. It is a lovely place in the heart of Western Ghats, the northern boundary marked by a hillock, Kunda Betta, and the southern by a perennial river, Kuthnad Pole. The latter is taken to mood swings and right now, she is foaming and frothing. As I wake up every morning, I am greeted by birdsong. Then there is a gentle breeze that blows ever so often from the Kunda Betta and the old trees

sway gently, as if in delight. Sometimes, the breeze carries the scent of wild flowers and the heartstrings ache, bemoaning the loss of youth.

My frequent dream is about all my saplings flouting the laws of nature by growing overnight and giving bountiful yields. I also dream often about the elephants; they now enter the property gently, raise their trunks as if in salute when they see me and quietly melt away when I say ‘dismissed’! We have entered into a secret “no destruction” pact!

The writer is a former NSG Director-General



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Unclehood is a status quo human frailty, and it has its negative impact on society. (‘Indian Uncles Inc.’; Oct. 6) The situations highlighted are true, with a pinch of sarcasm added for hilarious effect. The dichotomy in preaching and practice is the crux of the problem in unclehood/auntiehood and it is beyond generational and gender divides.

A. Raveendranath

co-exist on this planet. M.V Nagavender Rao

Perspectives of art

Saryu V. Doshi has made a wise, relevant, and valid observation. (‘Wrong approach to art scholarship’; Oct. 6) Our art scholars should make an in-depth analysis rather than mere documentation. Analytical attitude and approach pay rich dividends to our society. Prajeet Dev Boinapally

Societal changes

Our society is stuck in a digital world with no interest in listening to dissent. (‘V. Ravichandar: Bengaluru’s public eye’; Oct. 6) Literature, music, dance, comedy and drama have the power to transform and unite us. Efforts by V. Ravichandar to revive public spaces though art and culture is a much needed and commendable one. Rohith Varon SS

Passage of time

Trams once running in major cities were removed from the roads, labelling them as snail movers. (‘End of the line for Kolkata’s trams’; Oct. 6) I made use of the tram for three years in Calcutta in the early 90’s. By buying a ticket in first class, we could have the luxury of two large winged fans in addition to the breeze. R V Baskaran

Secular idols

Justice A. M. Ahmadi has really proved his character and fearlessness by outright rejecting the proposal to transfer his Sikh secretary while he was dealing with a sensitive appeal case of assassins. (‘Unmoved by whippers’; Oct. 6) We have to nurture this special character of his to set an example for other nations to peacefully



MORE ON THE WEB
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Tackling sexual assault

Change should start from home, from education system Shalini Bhardwaj

See more, seek more

Tourism catalyses job opportunities and infrastructure development, and provides a fillip to local communities Urmi Chakravorty

United by food and festival

A Bengali raised in Jharkhand with a yen for celebrating Nam Bishakha Bhattacharyya

The placid lake

Have of peace, life-giver to many birds, fish, and other organisms Adithya Madupu

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Unparalleled 1. Bhabatosh Sutar brings the focus on the Constitution of India; 2. Susanta Shibani Paul's *Resonance*; 3. Aditi Chakravarty's *jamdani pandal*; 4. itinerant puppeteers; 5. Pradeep Das' multi-armed Durga; 6. Das' *Aranyak*. (PALASH DAS, GETTY IMAGES & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Sharan Apparao

Every year, during Durga Puja, nearly three crore people visit Kolkata's *pandals* – up for just five days. But now, the evolving nature of public art during this season is catching the attention of the art cognoscenti, rivalling any of the big art shows around the world.

Over the last decade, more and more contemporary artists have been involved in conceptualising, designing, and orchestrating massive installations that have gone far beyond conventional *pujo pandals*. An explosion of creativity post-COVID has only boosted this vernacular vocabulary.

As a novice *pandal*-hopper, I was recently part of a small preview group, which included art aficionados Lekha Poddar (of Devi Art Foundation), Saloni Doshi (founder, Space 118), artists Sakshi Gupta and Suhasini Kejriwal, and a few diplomats – invited by my artist friend Sayntan Maitra. Over three evenings, we visited intricately-crafted pavilions, met the artists, artisans and technicians behind the installations, and even caught a show by itinerant puppeteers in the intimacy of a private courtyard.

A 300-year-old tradition, *pandals* were originally smaller community-driven initiatives, funded by *chanda* or donations from residents of a locality to welcome goddess Durga during Navaratri. But with the festivities being both a religious and a cultural event, they became platforms for artists to experiment – from subversive themes to ideas of activism, history and craft. Today, with AI and new media technology, these statements have gotten that much bigger.

Kolkata alone has 4,000 *pandals*, and some of these surpass what I've seen in the global meccas of art such as the Venice Biennale. Poddar echoed the sentiment: "It is better than Documenta [in Germany] or

WHEN KOLKATA RIVALS THE VENICE BIENNALE

Pujo pandals go beyond rituals and religion to outshine global art events such as Documenta with their scale, creativity and labour

the biennales. It is the epitome of creativity." The artists use sound, light, art and performance to guide the public around the installations. Picking themes that are current and topical also give people fresh ideas to ponder. Here are a few that caught our eye:

Razor blades and the Constitution

While *pandals* invoke religious fervour, their art is secular and unique. One of the most powerful ones of 2024 was by artist Bhabatosh Sutar on the threat to the Constitution of India. Spread over 15,000 sq. ft. on two sides of the street, black-and-white portraits with

razor blades in their mouths – set against slogans about the rights of the people – led visitors to a 30-foot sculpture of an open book of the Constitution. Cut-outs in the wood and papier-mâché structure made room for people to stand and recite poems of anguish and introspection in the presence of a multi-armed Durga.

Indigo tales

Artist Pradeep Das designed two remarkably effective pavilions. The first, titled *Sada aur Neel*, tackled the subject of muslin and indigo, and their role in Indian history and colonisation. Walking through a tunnel lined with artwork – that



introduced the materials and historical events (for instance, how farmers were subjected to much cruelty under the British) – we entered a large arena full of platforms and a marble statue of Queen Victoria. Along the edge were sculptural references of British army costumes, a guillotine-like structure, and a wall created with wooden shuttles. A lone weaver sat weaving against a backdrop of embroideries depicting ships sailing the seas.

The second, spread over 1,850 sq.ft., was a mosaic of the people of the Sundarbans. Titled *Aranyak - The Unfolding Narrative*, it had plenty of drama: with large mangrove roots, ceramic plates depicting abstract

ideas of the delta; and a large map placed on a platform with drawers filled with sketches of the flora and fauna of the region. Both were charged with emotional ethos and provocative suggestions.

Fractured beauty

Maths, drama, sound and light came together in Susanta Shibani Paul's large-scale contemporary pavilions. In *Void* (35,000 sq.ft.), the sculptor and costume designer used soulful Gregorian chants in Bengali in a Gothic-style metal interior. A candle flame flickered in multiple projections devised to multiply it four fold. The empty space echoing with the chant, I felt, reflected the

void of sensitivity (as a nation) of our time. The second installation, *Resonance* (9,800 sq.ft.), was much like a sculpture – of an energy field that led visitors to the main deity. It too shared the idea of carefully calculated surfaces broken with panels of wire and string to reflect light, giving an illusion of mystery. He worked with 350 artists for over two months to put it together.

With jamdani at its heart

As I walked from *pandal* to *pandal*, I came across themes of climate change, the city's environment, nature, women's issues, and more. A distinctive pavilion was *Uddan*, which showcased *jamdani*. By Aditi Chakravarty, it addressed the textile craft that is shared between Bangladesh and India. During Partition, Bangladesh was in turmoil and many weavers crossed the border and created clusters in West Bengal. The pavilion was poetic; its design and execution took over nine months.

The writer is the founder of Apparao Galleries. She was invited to a curated preview by massArt, in collaboration with UNESCO.



Portals to India's monuments

DAG's seminal show, *Histories in the Making*, foregrounds photography's role in shaping our understanding of the subcontinent's past



photographs taken by British officers and military men, and this met some of the administrative demands of the Raj for a photographic record. However, the Indian photographers emulated and built upon the aesthetics of the European photographers, and therefore it is not possible to distinguish between the foreign and native gaze."

Postcards and bamboo parasols

A parade of photographers such as Edmund Lyon who photographed the pillars of the famed temple at Rameswaram (1867-68); Eugene Impey who



Sepia and silver (Clockwise from above) A postcard depicting the exterior of the Zenana, Agra, 1905; Ice cave, source of the Buspa river, 1860-70; Sanchi Stupa, 1880; Hooseinabad Gateway, 1905; and Pillar of Kootub, 1858. (RAPHAEL TUCK & SONS, SAMUEL BOURNE, LALA DEEN DAYAL, FELICE BEATO)

clicked the Kootub complex rising from the surrounding shrubbery with its stunning calligraphy visible even from a distance in 1858; Babu Jageshwar Prasad's Munikarnika Ghat shot in the 1880s, filled with corniches and bamboo parasols, the dead and the dying; and Beato who documented the Mutiny when it was almost over in Delhi, Agra, Lucknow and Kanpur with a "clear focus on British travails and victories" rack up story after story on the Raj in India.

The photographs, where monuments take centre stage, present India's past in elegant picturesque prose, its epic cycles of affluence and ruin captured in sepia. Another collectible during that period was postcards of the monuments. Omar Khan, collector and writer on early postcards in South Asia, says eloquently in the catalogue, "For the British, the dispatch of an archaeology postcard of India was the pluck of an imperial string. No firm better illustrated India's past than Raphael Tuck & Sons. They sold oilettes, made to resemble oil paintings and successfully marketed them by hosting annual collector competitions in which the winners... were awarded grand prizes."

Most were British women who had never left the shores of ol' Blighty but wished to vicariously participate in the sights and sounds of the Empire.

The exhibition is on till October 19 at DAG, New Delhi.