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**Abhinay Lakshman**  
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It was a jet black Jaguar one week, a Mercedes the next; sometimes, a drive within the city or a cross-country trip to Goa. Surrender Singh was 27, working for a private cab service, doing what he loved – driving. His days were spent ferrying magistrates and lawyers around the city but the nights he reserved for his friends.

“We were a large group of friends who were into bikes and cars. Some of them were dancers. And at night, I would use my friends’ bikes for stunts. They would bet on me,” he says. Born into a cross-cultural home – with a father from Delhi and mother from Tamil Nadu – Singh had just got married and had his first child. “I stopped the stunts after a few accidents. I just kept my head down and got more driving work and soon I started driving people across the country,” he continues.

“I also liked to sing, and had started scoring gigs at local pubs or neighbourhood functions. Beyond that, the memory fades a little. It was 10 years ago.”

Singh is sitting at a cafe in West Delhi, a month after being released from jail on permanent bail. He is wearing a crisp white shirt, tucked into a pair of jeans, and is sporting a black cap. He takes a deep breath, as if in preparation to talk about the worst decade of his life – the time he spent inside Tihar Jail on murder charges in a road rage case.

“The first two months, I was asked to sweep the prayer field, clean the toilets, mop the floor, and so on. It took me a while to find the rhythm of the prison,” says Singh, explaining how he worked through the various departments at Tihar Jail No.1. “It did not really seem like work until I started needing the money to

send back home.” That’s when Singh realised that as an undertrial, he had to write to the prison authorities asking to be put on the payroll. “I submitted the papers, and earned a little over ₹2,000 the first time. It took a while for the money to start coming in, however. The first few years, the wages would be staggered and we would get the accumulated amount only every other month,” he recalls, his smile fading away.

India’s roughly 1,400 prisons house 5.73 lakh inmates (as of 2022), over 75% of whom are undertrials. All of them have, at some point during their time inside, worked in one capacity or the other, irrespective of whether or not they were paid for it. This is despite the landmark Supreme Court judgment from 1998 that states no inmate can be put to work without pay. In addition, the

**Women convicts from rural areas, whom I observed in the Yerwada jail when I was there, work in the prison fields throughout the year, braving the heat and cold, and donning plastic sheets in the monsoon. The wages are not great, it was around ₹50 a day four years ago, but what mattered to them was the remission they got for this work. For each day of work, they earned a day of remission. So, it is not the judicial system, but their hard labour that helps them go home early. That’s why there is a great queue to apply for this work when the quarterly prison committee comes around to select workers**

**SUDHA BHARADWAJ**  
Activist, lawyer and author of *From Phansi Yard: My Year with the Women of Yerawada*

Model Prison Manual 2003, which is the guiding principle for prison management in India, stipulates that “the salaries given to workers should not be minimal or trifling, but rather fair and equitable. These rates, which must be paid to employees, must be standardised and frequently changed in compliance with government notices clarifying/ changing the appropriate minimum wages”. And, it is up to the individual State governments to fix minimum wages for prison inmates based on their broad classification as skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled workers.

As of 2022, in at least 14 States and Union Territories, the minimum prison wage for skilled work is set at less than ₹100 per day. Thus, a convict in Maharashtra, Goa, Haryana or Assam earns just about ₹70 (average) a day for skilled work, while his counterpart in Delhi’s Tihar Jail makes between ₹194 (unskilled) and ₹308 (skilled). For comparison, the regular minimum wages in the Capital are ₹495 and ₹600, respectively; it is ₹307 and ₹417 in Goa; and ₹292 and ₹338 in Haryana.

**Rehab and skilling**  
The idea of prison as a place for correction and improvement has its roots in the early 20th century global human rights movement, and paid work is possibly the most important part of jail reform and rehabilitation. Not only do wages accord dignity to prisoners’ labour, they also incentivise good behaviour and productivity besides fostering emotional well-being.

Prison labour also helps these institutions reduce their daily operating costs besides equipping those incarcerated with skills or training for gainful employment upon release.

**CONTINUED ON**  
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## RIGHT TO WAGES BEHIND BARS

Paid labour lies at the heart of the prison reform system but wages are far below the minimum in nearly every State. Also, with a lack of adequate training or reskilling opportunities, life after release can be a challenge for most prisoners

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# Higashino at his masterful best

The last one in the Japanese author’s Detective Kaga series is a no-frills police procedural with a veteran’s insight into the human condition



Aditya Mani Jha

Keigo Higashino is Japan’s pre-eminent writer of detective fiction, with over 60 books across 30-plus years of writing. And yet, only about a dozen of these books have been translated into English. That is why *The Final Curtain* is billed as “the final Detective Kaga book” – the original is indeed the final book in the internal chronology of the series, but there are a fair few Kaga adventures yet to be translated into English.

The book begins on an appropriately cinematic note: we see how, 10 years ago, Detective Kyoichiro Kaga collected the ashes of his deceased mother. When Kaga was just an 11-year-old, his mother Yuriko Tajima had abandoned him and his father without warning – now, the woman who kept her ashes tells Kaga that Yuriko blamed herself “for failing as a wife and a mother”.

In the present day, Detective Kaga’s cousin and colleague Shuhei Matsumiya asks for his help on a pair of murders that have a strange set of connections to Yuriko’s passing a decade ago – and her possible relationship with a shadowy stranger called Watabe. One of these curious connections is a calendar with annotations in the form of bridge-names, one bridge for each month. Another is a theatre actor and director, Hiromi Asai, and her old high school class, some of whom may have knowledge of how the past connects these disparate individuals.

**People don’t change**  
The impressive thing about *The Final Curtain* is that while the action is propulsive and the intricate plot unspools expertly, the actual ‘whodunnit’ part isn’t always the main event, especially in the second half where enterprising readers (and/ or longtime Higashino fans) may well join the dots themselves. Instead, Higashino uses his psychological acuity to delve deep into every single character’s motivation in life.

It is this brand of frothy, Freud-on-a-holiday psychological realism that’s now considered the Japanese veteran’s signature touch. Stray looks exchanged, a suspicious hand gesture, an overly familiar conversation – Higashino’s detectives are well-versed in interpreting these windows to the soul – Detective Kaga perhaps most of all.

This is the fourth book in which English-language readers are encountering Kaga, seen most recently in last year’s underwhelming *A Death in Tokyo*. Here both he and Higashino are back to top form. Which isn’t to say that Kaga has changed very much at

all. In fact, one of the points on which Higashino has been stubborn all these years is that people don’t really change. And people who are in the business of ‘solving’ other people cannot afford to change, lest they lose their edge. Sample this passage where Hiromi is meeting Kaga after several years. At their last meeting, Kaga was organising a kendo camp for some of the children Hiromi was teaching theatre to.

“He hadn’t changed at all over the intervening years: his eyes were just as keen and bright, his features were just as strong, and he still gave off that very human sense of warmth. What Hiromi had asked of him was difficult enough, but he had gone well beyond that, trying to teach the children everything they needed to know to acquire perfect sword-fighting technique. In the end, it was Hiromi who had to suggest that perhaps the children were good enough. Kaga was not just a kind man, he was also a man of his word.”

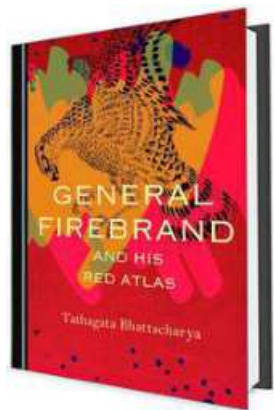
**Several story arcs**  
I was impressed, also, by the way Higashino packs in a lot of story arcs in the third act without making it impossibly dense or cluttered. Every piece of the puzzle is allotted the same degree of detail and solemnity, no theme is dangled just to check it off a list. For instance, in the past as well, Higashino has used Japan’s nuclear history as a plot point, depicting how the shadow of radiation illness still hangs upon a part of the populace. In *The Final Curtain*, too, one of the ‘people of interest’ is found to have worked at a nuclear power station – the kind of job that leaves its imprint upon the body and mind.



“Anyone who worked in radiation-controlled areas had to register. The task force had already confirmed that neither Shunichi Watabe nor Mutsuo Koshikawa were on file there. Of course, someone could still have been working under those names in nuclear power plants, just not in any radiation-controlled areas. However, an expert on nuclear power industry staffing issues they had talked to had assured them that that was highly unlikely. In the nuclear business, everyone knew that the best way to earn serious money – more money than was available anywhere else – was to expose yourself to generous amounts of radiation.”

This might be my favorite Higashino of them all, actually. As good as *The Devotion of Suspect X* and *Malice* were, this is Higashino operating with sedate mastery. No flashiness, no fuss, just good, solid police procedural writing coupled with a veteran’s insights into the human heart and mind. Highly recommended for all fans of crime fiction.

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



Saurabh Sharma

Except for a handful of rich people, the residents of Tantilash are no longer excited about the Lynch Games. Madame President Nida Dodi cracks down on farmers and dissenters alike as she feels threatened by the increasing influence of the People’s Resistance Committee under the leadership of General Firebrand, who, despite meagre resources, is fighting her totalitarian regime. A melange of such mesmerising characters, along with figures from the past, populate the world of journalist and sustainability expert Tathagata Bhattacharya’s refreshing, witty debut novel *General Firebrand and His Red Atlas*. In a Zoom interview, he talks about the novel’s world-building, our uncertain reality and the need to look into the past. Edited excerpts:

**Question:** What led to the genesis of this novel?

**Answer:** It’s difficult to answer. But let me tell you that I lost my parents and grandmother in quick succession – in three years. Call it grief or whatever, I went through a period of insecurity. I felt that everyone I knew as a part of the family was leaving me. It was at that point that I started writing this book, and finished it in less than two months like a possessed being.

Also, as writers are a product of their time, I was wondering how the country I grew up in had so radically transformed in a matter of 10 or 12 years. There are many things which, as students then, we probably couldn’t have believed would be possible today, but those have become the norm. Such things have also played a role in shaping the novel.

**Q:** What books, music or other resources did you rely on to create the intricate world of the novel?  
**A:** Ever since a teenager, I’ve



IN CONVERSATION

## GHOST OF MISTAKES PAST

With his witty debut novel that mirrors the times, Tathagata Bhattacharya wants readers to learn from history and not repeat it

been interested in the history of wars. In my Calcutta house, there are entire almirahs dedicated to warfare history, starting from 500 BCE to the modern era. Peaceniks and liberals don’t realise that today’s world is largely shaped by wars. The World Wide Web (WWW) is a product of military research. Penicillin, too.

The World War II generals



**Peaceniks and liberals** don’t realise that today’s world is largely shaped by wars. The World Wide Web (WWW) is a product of military research. Penicillin, too

mentioned in the book, I’ve read their memoirs – all of them. So, books helped, but I wasn’t listening to any music as I wasn’t in that frame of mind. In fact, the novel itself became a kind of redemption song. And as I felt everything was coming down crashing on me, it became a kind of an umbrella, a shelter.

**Q:** Your principal characters Nida Dodi and General Firebrand are quite eccentric. Also, in my view, there’s a homoerotic tension between El Comandante (aka Kapo) and Firebrand. Your thoughts?

**A:** I deliberately chose the character of Madame President to break away from stereotypes because whenever you think of an autocratic figure, you think of a man. But then, there’s this strange platonic affair she has

Author Tathagata Bhattacharya is a journalist and sustainability expert. (SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP)

with a man, whom everyone would call a loser. She looks forward to their meeting – she dresses up and cooks – every 90 days. This wasn’t done to “humanise” her but to add a layer of complexity to her character. The same is the case with Firebrand. Though a very competent military commander, he’s a flawed person. Can’t keep his family in order; unsocial, especially with women; not good at listening; has temper issues; drinks too much. He knows he’s flawed, but he’s very comical, too. With Kapo and Firebrand, I didn’t want to convey any homoeroticism but friendship and camaraderie.

**Q:** Why invoke figures from the past?

**A:** You study history to not repeat the mistakes you made in the past. Unfortunately, such mistakes are being made. When the Roman Empire was disintegrating, it was trying to grasp it all; it was trying to project its strength at its zenith because it knew it was falling. That’s what’s happening today. A few people are convinced about the supremacy of their ethnic, racial, or religious identity. The irony is that no one is seeing that this is exactly what happened in the past. Which is why WW II was a watershed moment in history unlike WW I because it showed what the world hadn’t seen earlier – targeted ethnic cleansing.

I’ve visited concentration camps and war museums. There, I’ve seen what human beings are capable of. And remember, they were no barbarians. They were very sophisticated people, who read [Otto von] Bismarck’s works; listened to [George Frideric] Handel and [Franz] Schubert. And after doing that, they turned the gas valve in the concentration camp and killed children. They did it because they believed in what they were doing. A kind of rerun of the same is happening today. In our country, too, there’s a conscious attempt to brand a few people as second-class citizens. So, I thought a reminder of things was very essential, especially in the times we live in.

The interviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and freelance journalist.

## Like a delicious curry

The tactile nature of Bulbul Sharma’s words in this collection of tales builds an appetite for more

R. Krithika

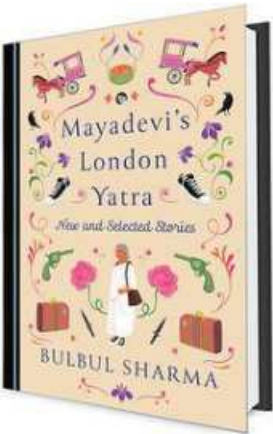
krithika.r@thehindu.co.in

Do I start with the stories I have read before or dive into the new ones? This was my dilemma when faced with Bulbul Sharma’s *Mayadevi’s London Yatra: New and Selected Stories*.

Since the first – ‘Fish Curry Memories’ – was new, I dove right in. Paraphrased, the story is rather bald: an elderly woman tricked into housekeeping for her nephew in a foreign land and her longing for home. But Sharma throws in various ingredients – broken

relationships, food, resilience, courage, fear – to serve up a tale as delicious as the curry Leela dishes out before finally making her escape. To savour Sharma’s writing, read the passage in ‘Food to Die For’, on how the narrator’s grandmother and her sidekick begin cooking for a religious ceremony. There is an almost tactile nature to her words, as if you can reach out and touch the various items being prepared.

**Powerful voices**  
Completely different is ‘The Child Thief’. A young girl, trained from babyhood to help her father steal, begins to work



**Mayadevi’s London Yatra**  
Bulbul Sharma  
Speaking Tiger  
₹399

in her brother’s gang. But made uncomfortable by his boss, she devises a novel way to get rid of the man. In total contrast is ‘Roses for my Love’. On his 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Mr. Sen recalls how he got married and drifted apart from his wife. But,

even as he realises that there is love in the relationship, he gets some bad news.

Sharma’s writing is simple but powerful and poignant. “Like two boxing champions, trapped in a ring...,” she writes of a conservative mother-in-law and her foreign daughter-in-law sizing each other up. Immediately, you get the picture of wary advances and tactical retreats before punches are thrown. Another striking sentence comes from ‘In Possession’, a story of a young man building a relationship with the family he serves: “He looked after them as possessively as a she-wolf with cubs...” The only discordant note was the repetition of 10 pages in the middle of one story breaking the flow.

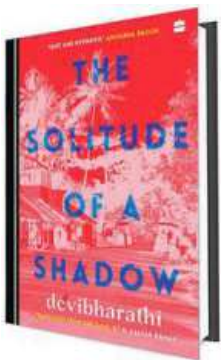
A great introduction to Sharma’s work, the book also offers a tantalising glimpse into a forthcoming novel. Here’s looking forward to more from a master storyteller.

## BROWSER

### The Solitude of a Shadow

Devibharathi,  
trs N. Kalyan Raman  
Harper Perennial  
₹399

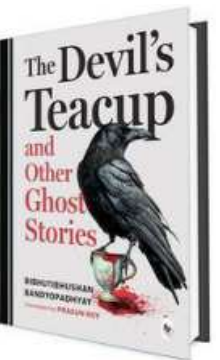
Translated from Tamil, the narrative follows a nameless protagonist and his burning desire for revenge. The object of his wrath is Karunakaran, who had molested his sister and abused him. .



### The Devil’s Teacup and other Ghost Stories

Bibhutibhushan  
Bandyopadhyay,  
trs Prasun Roy  
Fingerprint!  
₹199

An anthology translated from Bengali, this collection comprises stories of malevolent ghosts lurking in the shadows and paranormal activity.



### The Murder After the Night Before

Katy Brent  
HQ Digital  
₹499

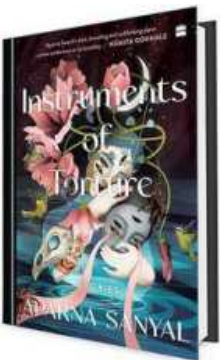
The protagonist wakes up to horrible news: her best friend Posey is dead and the police think it’s a tragic accident. She is sure her friend was murdered, but there’s a small problem: she can’t remember anything from the night before.



### Instruments of Torture

Aparna Sanyal  
HarperCollins  
₹399

Each story in this collection is named after a medieval torture device: ‘The Rack’ is about a child drugged with hormones to cure his dwarfism; ‘The Judas Cradle’ about a forbidden love affair; and ‘The Pillory’ about a man reunited with his first love.





INTERVIEW

Pursuit of unity

Sudipto Das on the relevance of scientist and polymath Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose in the contemporary world

Ashutosh Kumar Thakur

Jagadish Chandra Bose was a polymath, a pioneer in wireless communication and plant electrophysiology. In 1917, he set up the Bose Institute in Calcutta dedicated to scientific research, but as a scientist he was misunderstood, as is clear from this letter to Patrick Geddes, written in 1917: “I do not belong to any special fold – the physicists think that I have given up physics and gone over to the botanists; the vegetists think that I am the physiologist and so on...” In his new book, *Jagadish Chandra Bose: The Reluctant Physicist*, Sudipto Das profiles Bose and his contribution to science. Edited excerpts from an interview:



**Question:** Your book is divided into four parts exploring the theme of unity. Can you elaborate on the significance of this theme in the context of Jagadish Chandra Bose's life and contributions?  
**Answer:** Bose belonged to the Unitarian Brahmo fraternity, like Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rammohan Roy and other eminent Bengalis. Brahmoism was founded on the principles of Advaita Vedanta, the genesis of which can be captured in these words from a verse from the *Rig Veda*: “Ekam sat, vipra vahudha vadanti” or there exists only “One, the wise call It variously.” At its core is the universal concept of unity in everything. Bose's pursuit of unity leads him to find a commonality in life in a plant and human. He prophesied that plants, too, like humans and animals, can feel pain, thus creating the foundation of new disciplines like plant-neurobiology and plant cognition.

**Scientific temperament**  
'Jagadish Chandra Bose's biggest patrons were from the West,' says Sudipto Das. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

A: Vivekananda and Tagore were both global citizens, as was Bose, whose life and work had a universal appeal, thus making his associations with westerners natural and spontaneous. Though a staunch nationalist, thriving on the idea of achieving India's self-reliance through science and technology, he always believed that India and the West should go hand in hand in all their endeavours. That was a deviation from the anti-British sentiment that was brewing in India at that time. No wonder, some of Bose's biggest patrons were from the West. These relationships tell of his belief that knowledge and human progress are a collective affair, not fragmented, or divided between borders.

**Q:** How did you uncover Bose's overlooked role as a radio inventor in the late 1990s, and what methods did you employ to navigate historical records for this significant revelation?

A: The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers brought out a series of publications in the 1990s unearthing the truth that eluded us for many decades. It was settled that Bose had set up one of the world's first functioning wireless systems before Marconi, and that Marconi later used Bose's radio receiver to receive the first trans-Atlantic wireless transmission in 1901, without giving any credit to Bose.

**Q:** How did you portray him as a multifaceted personality?

A: From the beginning, my aim was to get under the skin of the person and explore the man he was, with his share of virtues and vices, rather than present him only as a scientist. That naturally brought out his multiple facades, from a hunter chasing tigers in the Terai jungles to sculling in the freezing waters of the Cam River in Cambridge, writing the first Himalayan travelogue in any language, influencing Tagore to write poems inspired by stories of love and sacrifice from Indian history and mythologies, or even surreptitiously keeping quiet when, he perhaps knew, lab aides planted by Sister Nivedita in Presidency College were regularly taking out explosive materials from the laboratory to make bombs.

The interviewer is a Bengaluru-based management professional, literary critic, and curator. He can be reached at ashutoshbthakur@gmail.com

Nandini Bhatia

The shadows of the past follow us all our lives. Our history becomes our inheritance; its events, our legacy. Indira Varma, seven years old in the autumn of 1947, inherited the loss – of her childhood, her home, family, and their life in Peshawar – amidst the new found, bitter-sweet “independence”. Overnight, her home is in “another country”, no longer theirs. She carries the weight of this legacy all her life. In all new beginnings, she reminisces the loss of what is left behind – the gardens, fields and farms, a house with hundred rooms, rich fruit and richer meat, horses, sports, pigeons, and guns that her grandfather polished with great pride. *Lest We Forget* follows the transition and reinvention of their lives. At the announcement of partition, Indira Varma, her two sisters, a mother and grandparents, leave their life of abundance behind and enter a

life of decades of uncertainty, hardship and deprivation. The three sisters, of which Indira is the middle-child, grow up before their time. The ex-aristocratic Singh family lives between Kanpur, Aligarh, Dehradun and Delhi, doing odd jobs like pasting stickers on bottles and making candles. For the elders, “the loss of home was the loss of identity, the loss of roots, a way of living... it was the loss of self.”

**Kindness amid adversity**  
However, in the face of every adversity – displacement, hunger, poverty, unemployment – kindness is found in strangers. Slowly, with resilience, the three sisters start building a life for themselves. The eldest, Uma, who had started earning at 13, later finds a stable job at Delhi's Cottage Industries Emporium. The youngest, Roopy, becomes a stewardess and later settles in London. Indira, who once wanted to be a doctor, marries into a stable, large family, to a husband with cultural tastes like hers. After



Lost and found

How three sisters reinvented their lives after Partition

the birth of her three children, she begins a career-driven life, from working at Citibank, to travelling for Thomas Cook, to being the Honorary Director of Travel for Festival of India, to being an entrepreneur, starting the first ever visa service

provider company in India, 'International Visa Service', and finally a writer. The sisters hold one another through other losses of life, death of parents, grandparents and spouses. They travel the world and when life allows,

they visit the place of their lost childhood in Pakistan, to find that only the clocktower built by their great-grandfather stands as a remnant. In her 83 years, Indira Varma learns that, “life can only be understood

On the move (clockwise from right) Mughal women display their archery skills by shooting arrows from their palace; portrait of a woman in a Chaghtai hat, 18th century Mughal era; and Akbar's tomb in Agra. (GETTY IMAGES AND ISTOCK)



At 63, Gulbadan Banu Begum, the only woman historian of the Mughals, was prompted by her nephew Emperor Akbar to write about his dynasty

THE MUGHALS' MEMORY KEEPER

Sushila Ravindranath

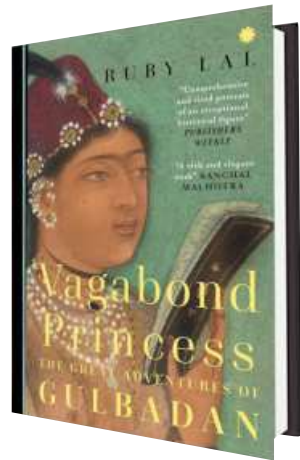
Most people tend to have cliched ideas about the role of women in the Mughal empire. The royal women were not cloistered away in zenanas. They lived separately, but were much respected; they were educated and had a voice of their own. The emperors often turned to them for guidance and advice.

Historian Ruby Lal's book, *Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan*, is an account of Gulbadan Banu Begum, literally 'Rosebody', Babur's daughter and an exceptional but under-appreciated figure. Gulbadan wrote a historical memoir of the Mughals when she was in her sixties, 'Ahval-i Humayun Badshah' or the 'Humayun Nama', providing an insight on life under her father Babur, brother Humayun and nephew Akbar. Gulbadan is the first and only woman historian of the Mughal era.

**Linking three emperors**  
Akbar asked his aunt to write the book as she had known and interacted with three Mughal emperors. Her book is not political unlike the other accounts of the time. It provides details of everyday life in the royal palace and is also an account of the empire as it was taking shape. The

princess travelled, crossed the seas, was showered with gold and diamonds, and led an adventurous life.

Gulbadan's peripatetic life started early. Humayun consulted the women in the palace on how to deal with his rebellious son Hindal who had fled to Agra from Alwar. When he decided to forgive him, he asked Gulbadan, who had just got married, to go and fetch him. Her mother Dildar did not allow her to do so as she was too young. Gulbadan, however, took many trips between Kabul, Agra and other places with her family as and when politics and war demanded.



**Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan**  
Ruby Lal  
Juggernaut  
₹699



these journeys were considered too risky for the kings. Gulbadan sought Akbar's permission to visit Mecca and Medina. Her entire life had been spent in moving from one place to another till Akbar settled the women in harems. Akbar consented to her request and Gulbadan set forth with a group of 15 women to western Arabia. This was a great adventure.

Lal brings alive Mecca as Gulbadan saw it: “Mud-built lattice-windowed houses with balconies jutting out over streets, bazaar lanes jingling with goods, the scent of fragrant olives, dates, sweetmeats, sherbets and pilafs, and throngs of rich and poor travellers, pilgrims and merchants from around the world, characterised the monumental gateways of the Great Mosque of Mecca.”

Mecca was a crowded city for everyone, rich and poor. The generosity of the Mughal royals towards the poor in the holy city knew no bounds. Gulbadan and her companions stayed on in Arabia for four years before they were literally asked to leave.

A few years after her return, Akbar decided to “compile a monumental history of his empire so that posterity would never forget his grandeur or his dynasty.” Among others, the emperor also approached his accomplished aunt Gulbadan, then 63 years old, and an astute witness of the events of the Mughal dynasty. He saw her as a dynamic memory keeper.

In Gulbadan's biography, details of the four-year pilgrimage to Mecca and some other parts are missing. Lal surmises that it might have been removed by male authorities. She has painstakingly researched and tried to fill in the gaps. What we get is a fascinating account of an exciting woman from an interesting period of Mughal history.

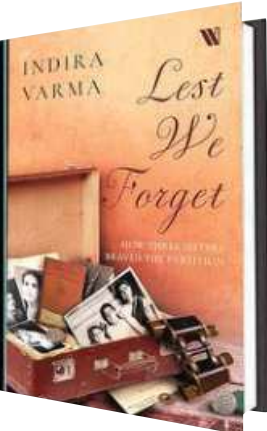
A pilgrimage to Mecca

The women of royal families went on holy pilgrimages as

The reviewer is a journalist and writer.

**Power women** Uma, Roopy Mathur and Indira Varma. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

backwards, but it must be lived forward.” With her love of music, ghazals, poetry and language, she builds a life with “music-minded” people. Her ‘glass half-full’ philosophy and keenness to learn, empowers



**Lest We Forget: How Three Sisters Braved the Partition**  
Indira Varma  
Westland Publications  
₹599

her to rebuild her life. Written between quotes from literature and history, *nazms*, odes, correspondence and testimonials, *Lest We Forget* makes for a complete memoir of a life lived fully.

Although the life trajectory of Indira Varma and her family is not typical of most Partition refugees, she lives through the haunting grief of *batwara* (partition) in her own way. It may be easy to assume her comfort and luxury to be eternal and infinite – as is generally easy to dismiss others' share of collective history, especially when it comes at a personal cost – but her memoir is fair and honest. It preserves the culture of oral history, at a time when the last generation of Partition survivors is disappearing. Most importantly, it restores the hope of success in life, despite grim circumstances.

The reviewer is a freelance feature writer. She reviews books on Instagram @read.dream.repeat.



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Retired IPS officer Kiran Bedi, who won the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1994 for her reform measures at Tihar jail, says that prisoners with professional skills, whether undertrials or convicted, must be identified to train others. “We can build on time in hand with prisoners, and create an ecosystem wherein prisons can become rehab and skilling centres. When a prisoner enters the system, a work profile with details of his education and employment must be created and shared across jails. His skills must be marketed so work orders can be accepted from anywhere,” she says, adding that such systems may already exist in some jails in the country.

Most prisons have manufacturing units for daily grocery items such as oils and spices, workshops for woodwork, metalwork, candle-making units, garment factories, and so on. Some like the Meerut District Jail have a unit that produces cricket kits, while prisons in Maharashtra have inmates operating bakeries. In Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, inmates run petrol pumps. In 2022, prisons all over India sold products worth ₹267.03 crore.

However, it is in the physical day-to-day running of the prisons themselves that most inmates are engaged in – from cooking and cleaning to managing wage rosters, phone booths, volunteering for legal aid, and running libraries.

Lawyer and activist Sudha Bharadwaj, who spent three years behind bars in Pune’s Yerwada Jail and Mumbai’s Byculla Jail after her arrest in the Bhitna-Koregaon case, speaks highly of the women convicts at Yerwada whose daily toil keeps the jail machinery running. “These women grow the rice, green leafy vegetables, onions and radishes that are a wholesome part of our diet in jail. There is also factory work,



## RIGHT TO WAGES BEHIND BARS

sewing, weaving and some auto spare parts jobs. The most unskilled is the rolling of *agarbattis*, again earning paltry wages. What the women earn allows them to buy some items such as soaps, shampoo, nappies for their babies, notebooks, etc.,” she says, adding, “But work is also important to fill up time, to maintain sanity, to feel worthwhile and useful.”

### Choice to work

Most prisons across the country largely put only convicts to work compulsorily – about 25% of the prison population – as part of their sentence. The undertrials are given the option to either work (without pay) or go for vocational training. For instance, in Bihar, only the convicts are entitled to wages in exchange for the work they do. Undertrials may choose to work but this will only be counted towards ‘good behaviour’ and will not get them any wages. But, in Uttar Pradesh, both convicts and undertrials are paid for their work. In

Telangana too, both are entitled to equal wages but undertrials have a choice of whether they want to work or not, just like in Delhi’s Tihar.

According to G. Thangavelu, a former life convict recently released from the Central Jail in Salem, Tamil Nadu, “Prisoners get work at the whims and fancies of jail officials. Also, we are paid poorly and not as per the Minimum Wages Act. In 1990, after conviction, I was assigned to work at a boot workshop in Vellore Central Prison though I was not skilled at the job. I got 50 paise as wages per day. In 1992, the government hiked it to ₹2 but there was a delay in payment. We went on a strike demanding our wages and all of those who agitated were shifted to different prisons in the State,” says the 67-year-old.

Currently, convicts engaged in prison industries in Tamil Nadu are paid between ₹160 and ₹200 per day. The wages are modified by a Wage Fixation Committee every five years.



**Odd jobs** (Clockwise from above) Prisoners operating a fuel bunk in Andhra Pradesh; a stitching unit inside Tihar Jail; and farming in Coimbatore Central Prison. (K. MURALI KUMAR, SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Sanjay Banivall says there have been rapid improvements in the Capital’s prisons as well. He says that the 16 jails of Tihar now have 34 working units that train and employ inmates. “We’re reinventing ourselves to suit the modern market. The inmates are efficient in creating good quality products for both commercial and personal use. The task right now is to approach retailers and online markets to scale up our business,” he says, adding that most orders they get are from the Supreme Court and the Delhi High Court for stationery items.

Yet, according to data, in Delhi where undertrials outnumber convicts 10:1 in a prison population of over 19,000 inmates, only 3,174 undertook vocational training in 2022. Senior prison administrators in Bihar, Telangana, Delhi and Tamil Nadu who spoke to *The Hindu* insist that they maintain the highest possible standards of working conditions within the prisons in an effort to turn punitive labour into rehabilitative labour. But

“I had to struggle a lot to mark myself as a skilled labourer. I worked at a clothes store for the last six years before joining the laundry service, which was newly introduced,” says Thangavelu. “Earlier, 70% of my salary was deducted towards different heads. Towards the end, only 20% was deducted. We would carry ₹4,000 or ₹5,000 when we went home on parole. Despite the meagre sum, it was a solace for our family members.”

A senior officer of the Prison and Correctional Services in Tamil Nadu says the percentage of deduction from convicts’ wages is very low now when compared to previous years. “The wages are increased by the State government from time to time. The prisoner can choose to pocket his earnings or have it sent home. They are also permitted to use the money for purchase of articles of personal use from the prison canteen,” he says.

In Delhi, Tihar’s Director-General

“So much of the work that the inmates do is under some form of duress. When we first walk in, the cleaning work begins, and after that, almost everything that you are assigned is dependent on how the people in power perceive you,” says Natasha Narwal, a student activist who was jailed for 13 months in Tihar under UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967), in a case related to the anti-CAA protests in New Delhi.

“Most days, we would work for six to seven hours but only four hours would be clocked. The jail officials would decide that a particular task takes x number of hours and the inmate will get paid only for those hours, regardless of how much time the task actually takes. And they would assign cleaning duty on Sundays, so they could say it is a holiday and not have it count towards paid hours.”

According to Thiyaagu, a former life-convict-turned-writer and social activist, and coordinator of the Joint Action Committee Against Custodial Torture, “The labour assigned to a prisoner is not useful for him after his release. The government should have a plan for rehabilitation and employment of released prisoners. In the absence of such a plan, will any private entity give him a job? The government should set an example by giving employment to such persons.”

Second innings Santosh Rao is not a very large man. Dressed in blue jeans and a black jacket, he might be just another face in the crowd at West Delhi’s Pacific Mall but a few kilometres away, inside the jails of Tihar, his voice is legendary and unmistakable.

“I came to know about Rao after I first heard his voice on the PA system inside my jail,” says Singh. “This man had started a radio station inside the jail and was running music classes, accepting inmates into his cohort. I remember thinking to myself that I

could not have asked for a better opportunity.”

Rao, a freelance recording artist, who has worked with Akashwani Bhawan, FM stations and recorded music, had the idea of working with prison inmates of Delhi and set up the Lakshay Foundation in 2011. “We started the first radio station in jail that year itself,” Rao says, adding the response was not what he expected at all. “You see, in prison, there is not much entertainment. The few inmates who had the chance to provide it were treated like gods. They were in charge of playing music through the PA system, taking requests, and performing on special occasions, so there was a lot of interest in the programme,” he says, adding that he admitted only talented inmates.

“Not everyone inside the jail will be able to pick up things like music – careers where a criminal past might not necessarily be a deterrent. And even in my class, it is not possible that all inmates will be able to learn and use their talents outside,” says Rao, adding that he continues to help his students once they are released.

“The moment I was accepted to Rao’s class, I knew this was my place,” Singh says, beaming. “I used to just sing before but I learned to play the guitar and the keyboard at these classes.”

Singh is now looking to rebuild his life – this time with a career in music, “mostly for my family, my wife and daughter, and my mother”. As part of Rao’s group, he was among the first batch of prison inmates to score a show at the India Habitat Centre two years ago. “All I can say is that I got lucky finding the people I did when I did. I can only hope others on the inside have the same luck.”

*With inputs from Mayank Kumar (U.P.), Amarnath Tewary (Bihar), Purnima Sah (Mumbai), R. Sivaraman (Tamil Nadu), Naveen Kumar (Telangana) and Samridhi Tewari (New Delhi).*



## ROOM FOR CREATIVITY

Art and craft initiatives such as carpet weaving and *kalamkari* give prisoners a break from routines and encourage new skills

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At Bikaner Central Jail, inmate Amar has formed a strong bond with three others. “We are sailing the same boat, and the journey becomes easier when you have friends. We drink tea together and exchange our thoughts during tea time,” he says. So, when he joined Jaipur Rugs’ Freedom Manchaha project to learn how to weave and hand-knot carpets, he created a piece with stripes to depict the ups and downs of his life, and four tea cups, to symbolise his friendship. “Hum Chaar”, his wool and silk rug, is

available on the luxury carpet brand’s website for ₹1,32,300.

Since the project launched in 2018 – across prisons in Alwar, Jaipur, Bikaner, Dausa, Amer and Bharatpur – Jaipur Rugs’ director Yogesh Chaudhary says he’s seen a growing interest. “Many prisoners say it has brought them peace; that weaving is like meditation. It has also helped them regain some of the hope that they had lost.” Each rug takes between one and three months, and 75% of the sales goes to the prisoners’ families. “Reintegration into society is tough; some commit suicide once they leave jail,” Chaudhary says. “But this profession requires one to stay at home and work, thus

making reintegration easier.”

### Rajasthan leading the way?

Jaipur Rugs is not the only ones in the State helping motivate prisoners. Over the years, artists, fashion designers, master craftspeople, and even professors from the National Institute of Design have stepped up. This, along with initiatives such as open prisons (Rajasthan has the highest number, at 40), could be one of the reasons why former chief minister Ashok Gehlot stated back in 2021 that the State’s jail system is better than others in India.

“All nine central jails in the State have factories, where training and employment are being given to approximately



**Freeing hope** Prisoners with a carpet they made; the mural at Thiruvananthapuram’s Central Prison; and an inmate weaving. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

and Commercial Arts vocational training course three years ago, in association with the State Resource Centre. “We extend training to 20 persons in a batch at a time,” says D. Sathyaraj, superintendent of the prison. “Rather than run the course over a few months, it is more intense and wraps up in 10 hours – keeping in mind the floating nature of the prison population.”

The focus is on mural and canvas paintings, *netipattam* (carpans on elephants), and wooden decorative items. While Sathyaraj feels that the production is yet to hit mass commercial volumes, the response has been good for the products sold through Free Fashionista, their on-site store. “A share of the sales is set aside for the prisoners,” he says. “Inmates who are interested can sign up. We also identify those that have the talent.”

### Talent hunt

While not all states provide creative work outlets for its prisoners, the few that do try to ensure broad-based training. In Kerala, at the Central Prison and Correctional Home in Thiruvananthapuram, a large 200-metre mural on the perimeter wall is a testament to the skills of its inmates. The prison launched their Classical

*kalamkari* to its women inmates. “We launched the programme last month, after noticing the demand for the textile,” says superintendent Shiva Kumar. Carpentry is also taught at Chanchalguda and Cherpally. “The products, including *dhurries*, woollen garments and yoga mats, are also sold at the 38 prison-run petrol stations across the State and through our ‘My Nation’ stalls at fairs.”

### Reformation models

Creativity in prisons isn’t always channelled into workshops, though. At Tihar Jail, after organising art and craft classes, Project Second Chance is now concentrating on creating reformation and rehabilitation models to help prisoners. “There aren’t enough innovative models in India. And who better to create them than the ones who have lived through these problems,” says Mohit Raj, the founder of the initiative. These include Better-Life Prison School; Kunji, a helpline for ex-inmates; and using games like Jenga and Ludo to help think legacies and conflict resolution in mental health.

But that’s not to say the creative initiatives are in the past. “Soon, in Jail No. 6, we will be starting pottery classes,” he says. Raj recalls one of their bigger creative projects, a painting workshop led by artist Veer Munshi in 2017. Prisoners made 300 paintings, with which they organised an exhibition-and-sale at Lalit Kala Akademi. Perhaps pottery will be their next outing at the Akademi.

*– With inputs from Mohammed Iqbal, Praveen M.P. and Naveen Kumar*

## GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Maheshwar’s Sacred River Festival prides itself as an investigation of harmony, which honours both classical and folk arts

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Look, she’s coming up,” someone said, and just like that, a group of us turned around to see a glorious full moon rise from the ramparts of Ahilya Fort.

We were seated on the fan-shaped ghats leading from the fort down to the river Narmada. For the last half hour, the young *santoor* exponent Satyendra Singh Solanki had been playing ‘Raag Bhoop’ on the stage erected against the backdrop of the river. The Sacred River Festival in Maheshwar, near Indore in Madhya Pradesh, was a collection of such moments rather than one grand spectacle – from the providence of a boat moving slowly behind the stage just as Satyendra’s brother Ramendra’s *tabla* accompaniment picked up to the explosion of flavours in the saffron *kheer* served as part of the dinner *thada* to guests staying at Ahilya Fort.

Now in its 21st year, the festival celebrates the twin deities who define Maheshwar: the Narmada and Ahilyabai Holkar, the visionary

18th-century ruler who established Maheshwar as her capital. This year explored the theme of ‘Utpatti’, the Sanskrit word for genesis. Fittingly, all the six performances over the three-day festival were by musicians and dancers hailing from the state. Conceived and hosted by the present-day custodian of the Holkar royal family, Richard Holkar, the festival is not a moveable feast. The river, the ghats, the battlements of the fort, the temples, and perhaps most of all the ancient elegance of the location, make for a unique historic and spiritual setting that is irreplaceable. Ahilyabai championed women’s empowerment, conservation and inclusivity – a focus on women’s education, the construction of dams, temples open to all castes – and this appears to inform the soul of the festival. As Richard explains, the objective has always been to give both artists and audiences an intimate and immersive setting distinct from the auditorium format.

Though it might baffle geographers, according to local legend, a line from the North Star to the Earth’s centre passes through Maheshwar, making it the ‘centre of the universe’. The Baneshwar temple, perched on a small island visible from the site of the performances, marks this spot. One has to believe Richard’s son Yeshwant Rao Holkar, managing partner at Ahilya Experiences, when he says there is an almost spiritual connection between the artist and the audience at this place.

### The river flows both ways

The next morning, in a more intimate setting in the family’s personal courtyard within the fort, vocalist Dhani Gundecha spoke to audiences about her renowned family’s Dhrupad tradition. The oldest form of Indian classical music, used for chants in the Samaveda, it is considered inaccessible and rigid by many.

As someone who has recently returned to weekly Hindustani vocal lessons, I found it particularly illuminating to hear Gundecha speak about Dhrupad’s slow and deliberate expansion into a *raag*; and the challenges she faces as one of the few female exponents. Her accompanying musician, the *pakhavaj* exponent Dnyaneshwar Deshmukh, shared



**By the Narmada** (Clockwise from above) Satyendra and Ramendra Singh Solanki on the *santoor* and *tabla* respectively; *kathi* dancers in their vibrant regalia; festival guests at Ahilya Fort; homemade food ready to be served; and *sarod* player Amir Khan during the morning lecture demonstration. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

the legend of the instrument’s genesis: the sage Panini was drawn to the sound of rain falling on a lotus leaf and asked Vishwakarma, the divine architect, to recreate it.

The morning lecture demonstrations are another avenue for the emerging artists to invite audiences into their practice. Anjana Rajan, the festival’s curator believes that it allows the musicians to delve into the finer nuances of their art. To see and hear the artists up close in the morning without electronic

amplification, and to then see them perform under the open sky in the evening, is a singular experience.

### Historical notes

In classical geography, the Narmada is the dividing line between north and south India. But the Holkars and Rajan are both clear that this is not a festival of Hindustani music or Carnatic music but a festival of arts, covering both classical and folk, and an investigation of harmony. Maheshwar’s history goes back to the protohistoric period (2,000 BC). The historical city came under Mughal rule in 1601, when Akbar built the riverside fort as an important military base. Later, under Maratha rule, the Peshwa gave Maheshwar to his trusted general Malhar Rao Holkar. It is his daughter-in-law Ahilyabai who is remembered today, among other



things, for reviving the dormant handloom industry in the late 18th century.

I spent my last morning speaking to Amir Khan, the young *sarod* player from a long lineage of sarangi maestros. In his lecture demonstration, he spoke about the difference in the quality of sound based on where the drum of the instrument is placed on the player’s knee. For these young musicians from Madhya Pradesh, performing at a venue that holds such significance for the people of the state is a privilege. “The energy is unparalleled... the river is so beautiful and broad at this point,” says Gundecha, adding, “As a singer, you are aware of certain spaces that provoke you to sing. Maheshwar is one of those places.”

### Marmalade and boat rides

Yeshwant shares that his philosophy of guiding this annual “heart-driven” production is something he’s imbibed from his father. “This is really a platform to achieve a particular vision and impact within a place that we love and we have 300 years of connection to,” he says.

Many of the festival guests are regulars who stay in the heritage rooms at Ahilya Fort, but it is free and open to the local public. Attending the festival as a guest is like being invited to the private world of the Holkars. You cannot order meals off a menu, for instance. Everybody dines together, on organic produce mostly grown on site, and the fruit preserves and marmalades at breakfast are “handmade by Prince Richard Holkar”.

The festival mornings allow ample time to visit Ahilyabai’s private temple, take a heritage walk of the fort complex, or visit REHWA society to see the women weavers at work. At the not-for-profit foundation, I held a “fresh off the loom” sari that was resting on a table for a quality check before it went out to the store. It was still warm, like freshly baked roti. For me, the music at the festival carries that same temperature.

*The Sacred River Festival was held from February 22-25 in Maheshwar.*

*The writer is a Mumbai-based arts journalist and editor. Her debut novel 'The Illuminated' was published in 2021.*



## POP-A-RAZZI

## The Indian super family

It doesn’t matter if brothers feud over business empires as long as the family sings and *dandiyas* together

In the United States it’s hard to run for high political office without a photogenic family in tow. The only unmarried American president ever was James Buchanan (1857-1861).

In India it’s never really been an issue. Congress party president Rahul Gandhi is unmarried. Former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was a bachelor with an unusual living arrangement involving a longtime partner and her family. It didn’t faze the electorate. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power touting his lack of immediate family as an electoral asset. It was a guarantee, he said, that he would never go down the dynastic route and favour his children.

Now that political rival Lalu Prasad Yadav has made a jibe about Modi’s lack of family, the Prime Minister has cleverly turned it on its head just as he had once done with the “*chaiwala*” sneer. His supporters are rallying around him putting up signs calling themselves “Modi ka parivar”. “140 crore people in the country

are my family,” said the Prime Minister.

At one time, I thought that Americans were obsessed about their presidential families because their own families were falling apart around them. Fewer people were getting married, divorce rates were climbing, and conservatives were complaining that the only people who seemed to really want to get married were same-sex couples. Saving the family had become a political preoccupation.

America might have a first family but India firmly believes in family first.

### Simply rich values

The great Ambani pre-wedding bash was as much about glitzy excess as it was about projecting a wholesome Indian family for the world at large. It doesn’t matter if brothers feud over business empires as long as the family sings and *dandiyas* together while celebrity stars play second fiddle. They were the extras in this grand family affair. And family values look better when wrapped in Tarun Tahiliani.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, we have a very different super wealthy family. Narayana Murthy and Sudha Murthy have much to be proud of, including her recent nomination to the Rajya Sabha, but lately people seem to worship them as the living *muris* of the simple family. Every other day, I get a gushing WhatsApp forward showing the Murthys doing simple *aam aadmi* family things together. People rhapsodise about them going to the market or getting an ice cream as if they are witnessing minor miracles. Simply rich is one thing, but so rich and yet so simple is quite another.

As onlookers with our noses pressed to the glass, we are really drawing the same lesson from both these spectacles. We are reassured that the great Indian family is alive and well even though we know, in the real world, husbands are beating wives, sons are throwing fathers out of their homes, and siblings are at daggers drawn. But on Instagram Reels, their pre-wedding dance steps are

coordinated. They work 70 hours a week and recount charming ‘*jab we met*’ stories. They are always perfectly turned out unlike my family in its nightgowns and sweatpants. If the big fat Indian wedding wasn’t a headache enough, now we have the ‘Indian super family’ as our aspirational nightmare.

### Eye on the polls

To be honest, I like reading about families like the ones in Gerald Durrell’s *My Family and Other Animals* – dysfunctional, squabbling but still loving. Later, I discovered even Durrell took great literary licence but it still felt real as opposed to the Reels out of Jamnagar. It’s not about the Murthys or the Ambanis or any other family. It’s just that family values seem to have become more about the market value of a family.

Now that value can be measured in terms of electoral gold.

After Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991, Congress coined the electoral slogan ‘*Ma bete ka balidaan, yaad karega Hindustan* (India will always remember the sacrifices of mother and son)’. But that was also reminding the electorate that this was a very special family, one that ordinary Indians were allowed to revere but never hope to match up to. Instead, they could show their respect, one vote at a time.

That exclusivity yielded rich dividends for the Congress for years. Now Modi has cleverly invited every Indian to become part of his friends and family programme and feel like they belong to something special. The best thing about this plan is that it’s electorally a win-win proposition. *Hum do, humare do* vote basically.

Now that takes family planning to a whole new level.

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





Harappan seals depict many monsters: unicorns, sphinx, and horned tigers, and these may have been inspired by their trading relations with West Asia. But unlike the green sphinx that has a lion’s body, the Harappan sphinx is a woman with a tiger’s body. The tiger body indicates the indigenous origin of the Harappan motif.

Nearly 1,500 years after the fall of Harappan cities, these mythical creatures reappear in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, along trade routes connecting the Gangetic plains to the western coast and to northwestern lands such as Gandhara. At sites such as Sanchi and Mathura, one finds Buddhist and Jain artworks, where sphinx-like creatures reappear alongside birds with human heads. They are shown as celestial beings arriving to pay homage to the monks and teachers, and do not seem to be of Indian origin.

Lions with wings and bird-like heads, known as griffin, are still popular in young adult fantasy novels, and are creatures from Persian mythology. Men with horse bodies, known as centaurs, are from Greek mythology. Such images are also found in the Bhaja Caves of Maharashtra’s Western Ghats, and are dated from 200 BCE to 300 CE. This was the time trade between India and West Asia was at an all-time high. Indo-Greeks (also called Yavana) had established cities in the Gandhara region. Their culture mingled with Persian culture, which in turn was influenced by Mesopotamian culture, and shaped much of Scythian and Parthian art. Temples of this region are full of fantastic beasts.



FROM CULT TO CULTURE

# Purusha-mrigha and other fantastic beasts

### Why images of a man with tiger’s feet can be found on temples, gates and lamps across South India

#### Migration to India

The Vedic corpus, composed between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE in the Indus and Ganga river basins, alludes to mythical creatures such as the three-headed serpent but lacks such fantastic imagery. There is no

such creature in early Sangam poetry either. It is only in later Puranic literature that we encounter fabulous beings who are part-human and part-animal. Could this be the influence of Greek and Persian artists employed by Mauryan and

#### Satavahana kings in their courts?

Around 300 CE, when the Roman Empire became Christian, artists who carved pagan gods were persecuted and many migrated east, finding patronage in Indo-Greek kingdoms, perhaps even in the

Mythical forms A purusha-mrigha stone carving at Narthamalai, Tamil Nadu. (G. MOORTHY)

western ports of India. Did they inspire the image of Narasimha, the lion-headed avatar of Vishnu, emerging from a pillar, perhaps a Persian pillar, to rescue a devotee? The Vedic antecedent of Narasimha’s story involves the *asura* Namuchi, who can only be killed by a weapon that is neither water nor air, prompting Indra to use foam. The story has no reference to a creature that is neither man nor animal.

Shiva’s bull Nandi is sometimes depicted as a bull-headed man, just like Durga’s enemy, the buffalo Mahishasura, is sometimes shown as a buffalo-headed man. But these cannot be classified as half-animal creatures. The most popular mythical creature in India is no doubt the multi-headed serpent or *Naga*, which is very indigenous. It is linked to fertility and wisdom, and found in the earliest Buddhist, Jain and Hindu art, protecting Buddha, Parsvanath and Vishnu. Another creature is the half human-half bird who sings, known as *kinnara*, though this image is more popular in Southeast Asia. While Greek myths show monsters as symbols of chaos, in Persian myths they seem to be guardians, and in India, they appear as symbols of grace and benevolence.

#### The Southern sphinx

In South India, we find images of the *purusha-mrigha*, a man with the feet of a tiger, though sometimes he is shown with a lion’s mane. Interestingly, no such images exist in North India. In Tamil mythology, he

is identified as Vyaghrapada, or the one with tiger feet, who collected forest flowers for Shiva. When offered a boon, he asked for protection for his feet from the thorns and sharp rocks on the forest floor. So he was given tiger feet.

*Purusha-mrigha* is linked to Vishnu through a version of the *Mahabharata* found in a Tamil temple. The Pandavas were conducting a *yagna* and for it to succeed, they needed the presence of a *purusha-mrigha*. When invited by Bhima, the forest creature presented a condition. ‘If I outrun you, I will eat you,’ said the beast. ‘But if you outrun me, then I will come for the ceremony.’ So the two raced towards Indraprastha. To help Bhima, Krishna gave him shiva-lingas to drop on the forest floor, which forced the *purusha-mrigha* to stop and offer them forest flowers. The resulting delay would have been just enough to help Bhima win the race. But by Shiva’s grace, the *purusha-mrigha* managed to catch Bhima just as he put one foot in Indraprastha.

Yudhishtira was called to judge the contest, and he declared that the *purusha-mrigha* could eat that half of Bhima which was still in the forest. Yudhishtira’s fairness so impressed the beast that he decided to spare Bhima and attend the *yagna*. His presence brought fortune to the Pandavas, and since then, his image is often found on temple walls, gates, processional images and even in lamps of South Indian temples.

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

#### GOREN BRIDGE

Bob Jones

## Brilliancy in the gloaming

Neither vulnerable, North deals

Our thanks for today’s deal goes to Chris Dixon, from London. The deal is from a late-night rubber bridge game in London. East had enjoyed a few too many adult beverages and he was annoying the other players. Most evenings, they would not allow East to play in his current condition, but there was no other fourth available at

this hour and they would rather play with him than go home.

North-South were playing the weak no trump, very popular in England, so North’s raise to two no trump showed 15-17 points. Through his self-induced haze, East saw his partner’s seven of hearts lead. Declarer played low from dummy and East cleverly applied the “Rule of Eleven”. He knew that he could win the trick by playing his jack of

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

#### The bidding:

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

#### Opening lead: ?

hearts, but what then? Partner could not have much more than the king of hearts and it seemed that defeating this contract was a hopeless task.

East came up with a brilliant plan. In one

smooth move, he played his ace of hearts and returned the jack. He expected his partner to win the king and clear the suit with a third round of hearts, on which East would discard the king of

diamonds! South would have no route to nine tricks without allowing West on lead with the jack of diamonds and the defense would prevail. “This is great”, thought East, “They will be talking about me for weeks here at the club.”

As East’s jack of hearts hit the table, the other players pointed out that the opening lead was not the seven of hearts, but the seven of spades. East was, in fact, the talk of the club for several weeks.

#### QUIZ

## Easy like Sunday morning

What has March 17 ever given us?

#### Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1580, Prince William the Silent, was welcomed in Amsterdam as the leader of the Dutch revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs. His ancestral home was the city of Aurenja in France, but the name changed over time. He eventually founded the monarchy in the Netherlands and his family name (and the colour associated with it) became a symbol of the country. How better do we know Aurenja?

2 Born this day in 1777, Patrick Brunty was a clergyman in England who had three daughters: Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and a son, Branwell. The siblings were very imaginative and spent a lot of time telling stories to each other. They built intricate fictional worlds and later even published them under pseudonyms. What did Patrick change his name ‘Brunty’ to as an adult?

3 On this day in 1845, London-based Stephen Perry obtained a patent for a product that held sheets of paper together. It was made by the simple act of slicing a hollow tube made from latex and sulphur. What did that lead to, which all of us have lying around the house?

4 On this day in 1898, Irish engineer John Philip Holland successfully carried out a test run for his invention. Named ‘Holland VI’, it was the first modern version of a vehicle that could stay submerged for more than an hour as it had electric and petrol



Young love George Harrison and Patti Boyd in Epsom, England. (GETTY IMAGES)

engines. The earliest version was designed in 1775 and called the ‘Turtle’. What type of vehicle is this?

5 On this day in 1901, at a show in Paris, 71 paintings of an artist were put on exhibition 11 years after his death. The bold brushstrokes and expressive colours caused a sensation across the art world. In 2022, his painting ‘Orchard with Cypresses’ sold for \$117 million, even though in his lifetime, he only sold one painting for \$2,000 (current rate). Who was this misunderstood artist?

6 On this day in 1905, this physicist finished his scientific paper detailing his

‘Quantum Theory of Light’. The idea that light travels in bundles of energy called ‘photons’ led to one of the foundations of modern physics. Who was this scientist?

7 On this day in 1930, construction began on the world’s first skyscraper with more than a hundred storeys. Built on 5th Avenue in New York City, it gets its name from the nickname of the State. Built by 3,400 men in 410 days, it was the tallest building in the world till the World Trade Center came up. Which iconic building is this?

8 Born this day in 1944, Pattie Boyd is an English model who was married to George Harrison and inspired the Beatles song

‘Something’. After their divorce, she married Eric Clapton, and he wrote the song ‘Wonderful Tonight’ for her. He also wrote the most famous song about her, which is named after a 7th century Persian love story by Nizami Ganjavi. What is the name of the song and the story?

9 Born this day in 1976, Stephen Gately was the co-lead singer along with Ronan Keating of the most successful boyband to come out of Ireland. Formed after auditioning more than 300 singers, the band eventually had five members and went on to release seven studio albums. Which band was this, whose first U.K. chart topper was a cover of the Bee Gees song ‘Words’?

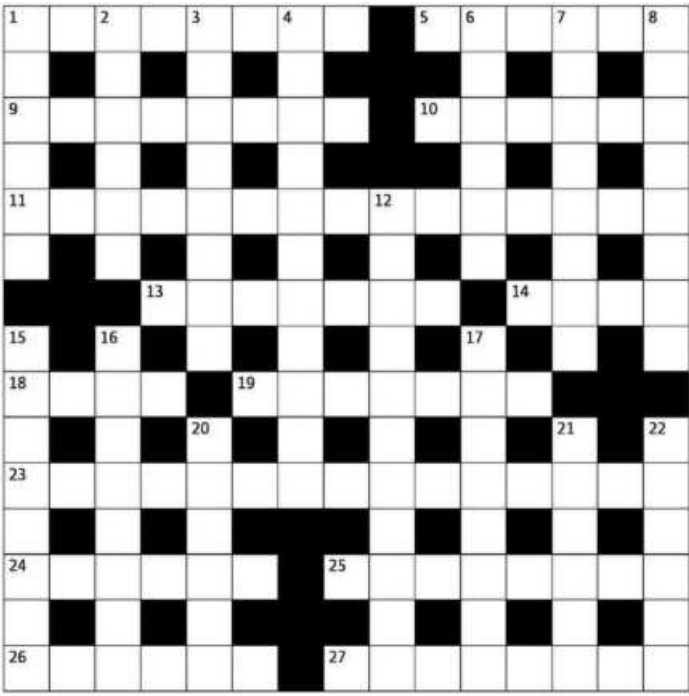
10 Born this day in 1990, this woman is the first Indian athlete to win two Singles gold medals at the Commonwealth Games. She was the first badminton player to win an Olympic medal and a Super Series title. Who is this athlete, whose autobiography is titled *Playing to Win: My Life On and Off Court*?

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. Brenne
- 2. Bronte
- 3. Rubber band
- 4. Submarine
- 5. Vincent van Gogh
- 6. Albert Einstein
- 7. Empire State Building
- 8. ‘Layla’; The Story of Layla and Majnun
- 9. Bogyone
- 10. Salma Nehwal

#### Answers

#### THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3298



#### Across

- 1 Shows articles needing revision (8)
- 5 Bows found in war chest (6)
- 9 Guiding bovine in German (8)
- 10 T-bone? Quite the opposite; it’s a rice dish (6)
- 11 Then I get how playing vuvuzela perhaps is epic (4,4,3,4)
- 13 Diana Ross’s colleague is kind of chicken (7)
- 14 Hide from ultimately hideous family (4)
- 18 This kind of jazz makes you leap back (4)
- 19 Great syrups for VIPs (7)
- 23 Bizarrely, some cheer tabloid (a number) (4,5,3,3)
- 24 Taking heads – extremely impatiently – ghastly husband, this Henry? (6)
- 25 Remove somewhat obese para, temporarily (8)
- 26 Drank heavily, like an ornamental fish? (6)
- 27 Easiest trips taking in Italy, in my view (2,1,3,2)

#### Down

- 1 Quit – and enlist once again? (6)
- 2 Charlie rests, then does housework (6)
- 3 Deliberately lose boxing match – no longer bold – waste (5,3)
- 4 Thinking ahead, men trim logs ornately (4-7)
- 6 Red Queen’s absorbing a bookworm? (6)

- 7 European capital’s underworld’s dark, they say (8)
- 8 Deputies’ reputations not good (5-3)
- 12 Samples including Everyman’s – I’m disgusted – pointless diversions (4-7)
- 15 Ethicist squirming, most uncomfortable (8)
- 16 Model and monarch in Iberian kingdom: bit of a dish? (8)
- 17 The quickest learners hurl foodstuffs at senior teachers (8)
- 20 Finally finishes plastic surgery with the sharpened tool (6)
- 21 Who speaks for author who’s pegged it in largish car (6)
- 22 Consume food – not seriously, you say? (6)

#### SOLUTION NO. 3297







# Limits of simplification

The fundamental question is whether the complexity of laws can be addressed by solely prioritising the language and style of drafting

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The language of law is self-contained and distinct from plain English. It has certain defining peculiarities such as domain-specific vocabulary, lengthy sentences, repetition of words within the same sentence, inclusion of foreign expressions, use of obsolete words, and so on. As a result of these distinctive characteristics, it is often referred to as legalese and is criticised for being incomprehensible to the layman.

The Union government, to make the statutory texts clear and comprehensible to common people, has initiated a mission to simplify the legal language in India by aligning it with the vision of the access to justice scheme titled DISHA.

Simplification of text of the statutes and plain language reforms are imperative for not only making the laws intelligible to all citizens but also to instil public confidence in the legal system of the country. However, the fundamental question that arises is whether the complexity of statutes and incomprehensibility can be addressed by solely prioritising language and style of drafting.

The plea for laws in plain English is a centuries-old matter across the globe. This concern led to a campaign in the West in the 1960s known as

the Plain English Movement, which launched initiatives to draft various documents accessed by the public at large in the most lucid and understandable language possible.

A consumer movement was set in motion in 1975 when the Citibank of New York introduced a plain English consumer-friendly promissory note that attracted global attention. It was a step taken towards empowering common people, abolishing excessive bureaucracy and officialese, and making important consumer-related documents easy to understand. This gradually entered the legal realm with the introduction of plain English legislation in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

Though this movement did not strongly impact the language of the statutes in the U.K. and the U.S. at that time, it did so systematically.

The general consensus in relation to legal language simplification reforms include suggestions such as replacing obsolete words and foreign expressions and reducing the length of sentences.

## Decades of use

The language used in the statutes and courts in India are to some extent the result of the influence of the British colonial period. Expressions such as *mens rea*, writ, *ex parte*, in camera, *sub judice*, and deem were added to the Indian legal system from the Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and French languages during British rule. After decades of use, these

expressions have become conventional in the legal profession and therefore any change would only lead to confusion.

To elucidate, though the entire text of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 uses the term “child in conflict with law” to minimise stigma surrounding the word juvenile, the Women and Child Development Ministry stated that the change in the title of the Act would create confusion as the term “juvenile justice” is well-understood by most of the stakeholders as well as the civil society.

In addition, simplifying the statutory text may, in certain cases, unsettle the legal clarity already provided by the judicial precedents relating to legal terminologies used in a statute.

It is not disputed that brevity is the soul of good legislation, but short sentences are not always the answer to incomprehensibility as many a time drafters are required to write complicated legal provisions comprehensively and with utmost clarity so that there is no room for ambiguity.

Though simplification of legal language is a progressive step taken by the Indian government, it is pertinent to note that plain English language is only a minuscule part of the simplification process.

Understanding statutory enactments and judicial language by a layman requires the knowledge of judicial decisions, facilitation of understanding by simplifying court forms, practices and procedures, and so on.

It is also significant to note that the position of the government is unclear regarding whether all the existing legislation would be rewritten and re-enacted in the plain English language or a legal reference handbook would be made available for the common citizens. The former may pave the way for more litigation by unsettling the settled law if the simplified law does not accurately reflect the intent of the original law.

## Clean-up exercise

Plogging is a unique, eco-friendly way of working out

Prarthana Sen  
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Next time you go for your morning cardio – a walk, jog, run, or even cycling – consider combining it with some litter-picking. In 2016, the Swedes were the first to embrace this unique, eco-friendly way of working out. It is called plogging.

Plogging is a fun way to tweak your fitness drill. It moves your muscles in ways they are not used to. It challenges you by adding a range of movements – stretching, squatting, and pulling – to your workout routine. Apart from the fact that you are constantly on the move, you are also putting your flexibility to test while picking up litter. If you want a more intense session, you can spice it up with a few walking lunges, butt kicks, and high knees. The point is there are no hard-and-fast rules. The idea is to just keep picking up litter while you are on the move. Even if you are forest-bathing, hiking, beachcombing, rowing, or birdwatching, you can still plog.

According to figures from National CleanUp Day, an initiative by a non-profit called Clean Trails, two million people plogged every day in 2019.

Being an aerobic exercise, plogging releases “happy hormones” or endorphins. So, plog to de-stress, especially, if you have eco-anxiety. It will leave you calm, content, and happy. I say this because completing a workout session gives you a sense of accomplishment. Cleaning your surroundings also feels rewarding. With plogging, you get to do both.

## Overcoming gender bias

Mere rules and regulations are not enough to empower women, it is the mindset that has to change

Jayanthi Rangarajan  
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India, the world’s largest democracy, created history by passing the women’s reservation Bill in Parliament some months ago. Though it took almost 30 years to achieve this, the law is something for all women in this country to rejoice about. We will be happier if the law is enforced in letter and spirit.

Tracing the history of women in leadership and administration, some socioanthropologists are of the view that earlier societies were matriarchal or gynocentric, where women were active in public work, and there was equitable distribution of resources and work.

However, over time, society took on a patriarchal, male-dominated character. Neglect and discrimination against women crept in.

Even though women have played a vital role in creating and perpetuating civilisation, they have been marginalised in the story of mankind. “History” itself is a biased

term and may well be referred to as “Her story” from a feminist viewpoint.

We have to admit that mere rules and regulations are not enough to empower women. It is the mindset that is important for any real change to occur. The world has to realise and understand that gender equality is not just a fashionable term which has to be conceded grudgingly!

## No to patriarchy

The respect for women and their status in society should be natural. Unfortunately, gender bias has become so deep-rooted in the human psyche that it might take ages for the patriarchal attitude towards women to change.

I take pride in the millions of ordinary, faceless Indian women with no big family names or backing who have empowered themselves. My heart warms as I watch our domestic help whizz by on her two-wheeler to her next destination. She works tirelessly from morning to night, sporting a smile. She almost single-handedly supports her family. I am in awe of the fisherwoman who



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCKPHOTO

comes to our neighbourhood, the flower vendor down the street, and the conservancy worker doing her work cheerfully every morning. These are all sights to behold however mundane they may seem.

Then there are woman police officers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists, and many other professionals.

These women dared to get out of the confines of the stereotypical roles that were expected of them. The IT boom has seen the rise of women as programmers, team leaders, and CEOs of established companies and start-ups.

The new world order is shining. We have more women in unconventional jobs who have taken untrodden paths. There

are woman truck, bus, and auto drivers in the country and fighter pilots too! We also witnessed an all-woman contingent of Army officers marching on Kartavya Path on Republic Day.

I have always been awed by the visionary poet Subramania Bharati’s superlative verses about women: *Nimirantha nannadaiyum/ Nér konda paarvaiyum/ Nilathil yaarkum anjaatha nerigalum/ Thimirantha gnana serukkum ...*

The words can be translated thus: *O behold the woman who walks with her head held high/ eyes looking straight ahead/ her unshakable conviction that makes her fear none on this land/ her pride and wisdom ...*

We salute you our “Sheroes”!



## FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to [mag.letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:mag.letters@thehindu.co.in) by Tuesday 3 p.m.

### Cover story

Recently, we have witnessed the emergence of non-fiction films as a genre of storytelling. (‘India’s documentary wave’; Mar. 10) Documentaries like *Children of the Pyre* directed by Rajesh S. Jala, *Born into Brothels* by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, and *Gulabi Gang* by Nishtha Jain are paragons of the genre. More films should address 21st century challenges like environmental pollution, deforestation, etc.

T.N. Venugopalan

Amidst the din of commercialisation, the Indian documentary scene has successfully made a mark for itself. It is quite heartening to see our documentaries bagging prestigious global awards at Cannes and Sundance festivals. Choosing the documentary genre makes the story emotionally organic. With the emergence of the cost-effective medium of OTT platforms, their reach is significantly enhanced.

G. Ramasubramanyam

### Disrupted idyll

The reviewer mentions that the book reminded her of Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things*. (‘Murder on WhatsApp’; Mar. 10) In fact, I was reminded of *Chemmeen*, the Malayalam novel by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. Regardless, the writer is well within his right to weave an entirely different story with similar characterisation.

Rajesh Sankaranarayanan

### Earning credits

‘Save a cheetah and earn more green credits and be a saviour of the environment. Who cares for grass and a tiny bird?’ (‘Green Humour’; Mar. 10) Rohan Chakravarty is right, we make a mockery of environment protection,

only to pay a heavy price tomorrow.

Prajeet Dev Boinapally

### True crime

There is unnecessary hype being created around the murder case involving the high-profile Indrani Mukherjee, who had allegedly planned to murder her own daughter Sheena Bora. (‘Chasing the Indrani Mukerjea story’; Mar. 10) The case is sub-judice but it’s now on the OTT radar.

K. Nehru Patnaik

### Fly high

G. Sampath in his inimitable style took a swipe at the country’s richest businessman. (‘Flexi-airports a la Jamnagar’; Mar. 10) The conversation between Sampath’s fictional characters, Dhandapani and Bhai, make one smile. Sampath is the new age Art Buchwald. His sarcasm is gentle yet intriguing.

K. Pradeep

### Feminist doctor

In this age of commercialisation of healthcare, it is inspiring to see doctors like Nikhil Datar, who are championing the rights of women. (‘Nikhil Datar: pro (a woman’s) life’; Mar. 10) Adjectives fail to describe his empathetic nature. Kudos to the doctor.

M.B. Zahir Abbas

### Correction

In the *Magazine* edition dated March 10, 2024, the summary for the book, *Mithun Number Two and Other Mumbai Stories* by Jayant Kaikini, should have stated the title is translated from Kannada, and not Konkani as mentioned. The error is regretted.

– Editor



## MORE ON THE WEB

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

### Off the grid

The Internet no longer packs that dopamine hit of yore

Najila T. Yahu

### Of books and bookstores

The printed word can bring both pleasure and solace

K.V. Anusree

### A tradition of pakoras

The inter-generational excitement about a crispy snack

Viney Kirpal

### Leadership with a kind heart

Motivating a team and recognising its worth is the key

R.D. Singh

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# ‘Indian design is having a contemporary renaissance’

David Alhadeff on why modern design “can have as much soul as antiques”, and how he’s planning to team up with the country’s makers

Gavatri Rangachari Shah

David Alhadeff is a celebrated figure in the world of design. The Seattle born native, who now lives in Los Angeles, championed the work of contemporary American design at a time when that nation was fascinated by mid-century masters and all things Europe. Almost a decade ago, *The New York Times* wrote: “The self-described outsider was soon the fulcrum of a witty, rustic brand of industrial-tinged modernism now known worldwide simply as ‘Brooklyn’.”

The Future Perfect, the design gallery he founded about 20 years ago, represents work from all over the world. “The brand started with a strong leaning towards American design, but over the years, we’ve expanded our purview to encompass international design,” says Alhadeff. “Our upcoming events include the first solo show by Adam D. Miller of highly graphic and colourful clay pots, furniture and sculptural objects by Netherlands-based studio artist Floris Wubben, and a group exhibition curated by Gallery

Director Laura Young, which explores the reality of being a plus sized person in the design world, where furniture is not made for larger bodies.” During a brief stop-over in New Delhi last month, while en route to attend Qatar’s design biennale, Design Doha, where he was a judge, Alhadeff spoke to the *Magazine* about the significance of contemporary design and why it ought to be taken as seriously as the visual arts.

**Question:** What attracted you to the world of design?  
**Answer:** I had always loved interior design, industrial design, and I founded Future Perfect as a way for me to take that personal interest and make a business out of it. Twenty years ago, the design scene in New York was dominated by the big brand Italian players like B&B Italia and Boltani. When I started, I saw this amazing community in New York that was producing beautiful furniture and no one was representing this work. So, we opened by representing that American design talent. At the time, I didn’t realise what a brash move that was. Today there is a developed design gallery movement in cities like New York,

Los Angeles, Paris, London.

**Q:** What do you think has shifted in terms of consumers taking design more seriously?  
**A:** It’s multi-pronged, in a very democratic way. It starts by large brands investing in design and showing people that there’s a difference in something that is well-designed as compared to something that has not really been considered in that way. But I think for our company and for the niche that we work in, the biggest move that happened is that [unlike] 20 years ago, when in the specialised high-end world, people were more interested in historical design, now there’s much more appreciation for contemporary design and talent. A recent column in the *Financial Times* said contemporary design can have as much soul as antiques. I love that idea. It wasn’t like that when I started. People would say to me, ‘Oh my God, I never buy contemporary design, I can’t believe I’m buying this.’ I didn’t know how odd it was at the time that we had opened up a contemporary design gallery. What I’ve noticed is that there’s been an ongoing appreciation and we no longer have to defend our



position as a contemporary design gallery. It also seems now that a lot of the historical galleries that used to represent more of that vintage work, have developed programmes of contemporary design.

**Q:** Some books you’d recommend for people to learn more about design?  
**A:** As you go down the rabbit hole, there are so many beautiful and unique boutique publications. There’s a new interiors magazine called *Ton. Arc Journal* is beautiful. I recently got this beautiful book of the photographer Horst [P. Horst], of his interiors photos, and it was very inspiring. I also have a lot of



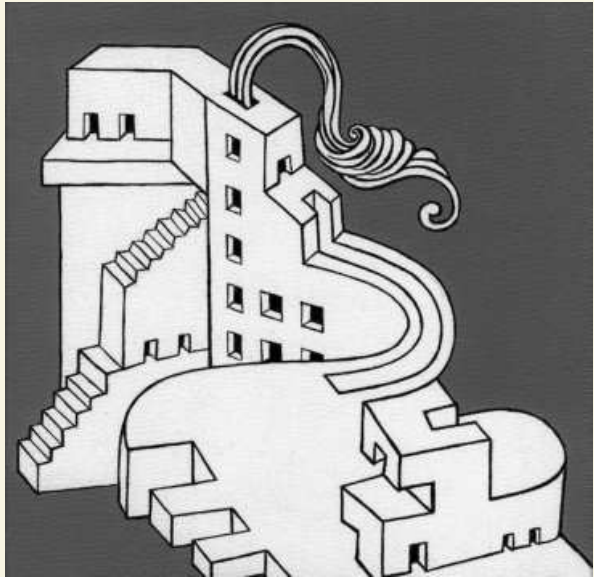
**American modern** (Clockwise from top left) David Alhadeff; and contemporary designs backed by The Future Perfect. (SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA, SAM FROST, RICH STAPLETON, JOE KRAMM, AND ELIZABETH CARABABAS)

great vintage design books, like *Styles of Living*, all the Memphis Group’s catalogues and [Italian architect] Gaetano Pesce books. *Learning from Las Vegas* and Rem Koolhaas’ *Delicious New York* are inspiring. The Internet is an incredible resource, too. Instagram handles I love are @sightunseen\_ and @amyastley, who is editor in chief of *Architectural Digest USA*.

**Q:** Your thoughts on India’s design scene?  
**A:** Indian design is having a bit of a contemporary renaissance. I am a big fan of Indian culture and design, so I wanted to enrich myself with it as much as possible, from the manufacturing to the designers who work here. There has been cross cultural collaboration between India and the world, [mostly] in the area of textile fabrication. But the

contemporary design scene is something I’m not as familiar with. So, just visiting is an incredible education. For example, I got connected to Vikram Goyal in Delhi. He is exactly the kind of artist that we look to represent. I am also doing factory tours to learn about fabrication in India and working with the makers’ community. They are an amazing resource to be able to collaborate with. The casting works in bronze, brass, aluminium, for instance. What is made for the domestic market may not work in the U.S., but the people and their capabilities are international. So, if paired with the right design talent, any skilled fabricators and crafts people could produce work well suited to the markets that I work in.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.



Ritika Kochhar

Colours can make a lasting impression, as can the lack of it. As a newborn, Rudritara Shroff was gifted a copy of *Art for Baby* by Candida Gertler. The 2009 book, co-curated by the British-German art collector and philanthropist, contained high contrast black-and-white images created by some of the world’s leading modern artists, such as Damien Hirst, Gary Hume and Bridget Riley. Growing up in a family of art connoisseurs as she did – her mother Poonam Bhagat Shroff is an art patron and her grandmother Rajani Bhagat is a collector of

## Baby book at Christie’s

15 renowned Indian artists, backed by a 16-year-old curator, have created high-contrast artwork for infants that is now being auctioned

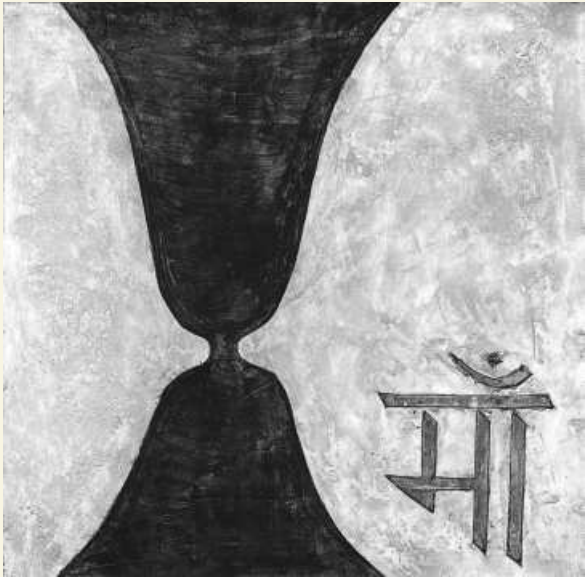
black-and-white sketches – the now 16-year-old says her parents knew that showing high-contrast pictures could be stimulating for newborns. “It helps develop picture recognition and fosters a connection with the surrounding world,” says the teen, who often browsed her grandmother’s monochrome collection.

These formative experiences inspired her to produce another edition of *Art for Baby*, this time with 15 artists from India, including Dhruvi Acharya, Atul Dodiya, Jyoti Bhatt, Reena Kallat, Jogen Chowdhury, Bijoy Jain, Shakuntala Kulkarni and Gigi Scaria, among others. The project brings together

several loves of Rudritara’s: her exposure to the arts, her interest in psychology, which she plans to pursue at university, and charity. As a child, she was fascinated by the cyan blue of



the UNICEF logo – she recalls collecting loose change from her parents before a flight so she could donate it. It’s no surprise then that the proceeds from *Art for Baby* will go towards the humanitarian agency and the arts charity Outset. The contemporary artworks are currently on display at Christie’s, as part of their South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art online auction in New York. **Monochrome impact** The artists, all of whom agreed to do



**Providing contrast** (L-R) Artworks by Gigi Scaria; Anju Dodiya; and Atul Dodiya; (below) Rudritara Shroff. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

the project for free, have produced works that stay true to their styles. Many also conducted research before getting started. Rudritara shared in an earlier interview that artist Shilpa Gupta showed different kinds of artworks to babies three months and below and discovered that they were most attracted to the picture of a tongue. So, that’s what she illustrated in her artwork. Gigi Scaria, who explores urban topographies, alienation and displacement through his work, thought he should create something simple that would “still contain the nature of my work style – with an element of architecture and motifs from nature”. His artwork, titled *Flow*, has the image of a multi-storied house with smoke coming out of it. “Children would identify with forms in their early childhood, and flat colour application would enhance the importance of the forms in the painting,” he says. Atul Dodiya, renowned for his allegorical paintings, says he was intrigued by the fact that babies initially see things in black and white. “It is hard to imagine a baby’s perception, but difficult perception is the area that artists get engaged with,” he says. “I found it [this project] challenging. The first thing that came to mind was a mother’s touch. Keeping the idea in mind, I created an image with text written in Devnagari that says ‘Ma’, and a mirror image of a mother’s breast that created an image of a cup or vase in its negative space.” The artworks are on auction on christies.com till March 27.

The writer is an expert on South Asian art and culture.