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magazine

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The right mix
(Clockwise from above) Art Alive's booth at the India Art Fair; a visitor signing KNMA's interactive maze; a snapshot from Tarun Tahiliani's parade; Karan Johar at Art Mumbai; and Tahiliani's models dressed in frames.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

As India Art Fair and Art Mumbai get ready to compete next year in Maximum City, organisers, gallerists, and collectors weigh in on whether two art fairs on the same date is a recipe for disaster or a masterstroke

MUMBAI'S 2025 ART FACE-OFF

A fair is a commercial place, it's not a biennale. I think what IAF and Art Mumbai have done very well is get younger people engaged with art. Of those 5,000 people that come in, if even 20 end up becoming collectors — that's good. Our immediate challenge is to be able to create that appreciation for visual arts in cities like Chennai, which have a great culture of dance, music, theatre and film, but are trying to plug the gap between access and interest in visual arts

JAIVEER JOHAL
Art collector

In London, Frieze and the London Design Festival happen at the same time. So there is space for more, because there's so much talent in India and it's such a huge market. Having two fairs at the same time can also be helpful to us visitors to a city

SHALINI PASSI
Art collector and Internet personality

We are all very surprised by this decision that IAF has taken. They could've come to Mumbai five years back, but they didn't. I'm sure they have a plan, but on the first instance of hearing this, the entire industry has had the same reaction — why the same dates?

SUNAINA ANAND
Founder, Art Alive

Nidhi Gupta

No riding boots were to be found at Mumbai's Mahalaxmi Race Course in the middle of November. On a Saturday afternoon, braving traffic, an unseasonal temperature spike and the risk of whiplash, well-heeled visitors to Art Mumbai walked into a veritable garden of curiosities at the race track. The question was, which to stop at first: the frazzled man perched on a stool directing them to the red velvet curtains studded with giant eyeballs (Tejal Patni's immersive installation *Vichitra: Spot The Difference*), admire the pink botanical pillar (Alex Davis' *An April Stack*) or the giant fibreglass woman's head (Ravinder Reddy's *Devi*), the white maze with walls covered in signatures (KNMA's interactive installation), or the cocktail bar serving iced and curry-leaf spiked potions?

Many may have missed the jaw-dropping invite-only celebrity-studded parade thrown by fashion designer Tarun Tahiliani on the opening night. Inspired by his book, *Tarun Tahiliani: The Journey to India Modern*, released earlier this year to mark 25 years in business, it was a whimsical procession of fashion and art, complete with folk musicians, giant chariots and models in frames named after artists such as Ram Kumar and Ravinder Dutt. But at sundown on day three, most visitors watched filmmaker and Art Mumbai cultural ambassador Karan Johar on stage, quizzing the entire cast of *Fabulous Lives vs Bollywood Wives*, which included internet personality Shalini Passi, on art, personal politics and who really was passé in current pop culture.

Inside three tented spaces, visitors clutched coffee cups and wine glasses as they viewed art mounted on walls and pedestals, suspended from the ceiling and splayed on the floor by 71 galleries from around the world, across all eras, mediums and genres – not to mention the odd celebrity, such as Gauri Khan or Madhuri Dixit, trying their hardest (and failing) to not steal the spotlight from art.

Success brings rivalry

"The phrase 'bigger and better' has been floating around," laughs co-founder Minal Vazirani over a phone call a few days after the second edition of Mumbai's first real art fair came to a rapturous close. Indeed, aside from the remarkable carnivalesque atmosphere, the numbers speak loud: a 40% increase in the number of galleries participating, a 60% increase in sales of tickets, new world records for artworks by Ganesh Pyne, J. Sultan Ali (₹8 crore), Shanti Dave (₹4 crore), and Rajendra Dhawan (₹1.5 crore), and some galleries reporting sales for 80% of all art on display. Vazirani is thrilled as much by an inbox stuffed with encouraging feedback, as with the fact that several gallerists have already signed up for the 2025 edition. "Our main aim was to try and create accessibility through art. It was a slice of history combined with a dose of the contemporary. It made for a fantastic mix of art, culture and experience."

There is a note of satisfied exhaustion in Vazirani's voice as she relays these data points that demonstrate the astonishing speed with which Art Mumbai has been able to entrench itself in the city's increasingly vibrant art scene. Two months earlier, though, she and her partner Dinesh Vazirani, co-founder and CEO of auction house Saffronart, could not help but express their frustration when it was announced that Delhi-based India Art Fair, the OG of the Indian art market that has been around since 2008, will launch a new fair in Mumbai. Called IAF Contemporary and focusing on "contemporary art and collectible design", it will be hosted at the Jio Convention Centre from November 13-15, 2025.

The Vaziranis did "not understand the logic", reported the American publication *The Art News*, and "doubted the business sense of the decision", given the two fairs would be located five miles from each other and overlap in dates. Now, though, Vazirani is more circumspect. "IAF has done a great job over the last 15 years in Delhi," she notes. "We're not really aware of any in-depth plans of theirs, except that it is to be a design and contemporary art fair. The one thing that this does attest to is that Art Mumbai has become such a significant anchor for art in Mumbai and in South Asia that it has become the most important calendar point. I assume that's why there is an interest in adding to what we're doing, because we do attract a significant client base."

Yays, nays and maybes

News of a new fair, while exciting, has raised questions, mainly: is it fair to have two art fairs at the same time? "We are all very surprised by this decision that IAF has taken," says Sunaina Anand, founder of Art Alive, a Delhi-based contemporary art gallery that has participated in both IAF Delhi and Art Mumbai since their inception. "They could've come to Mumbai five years back, but they didn't. I'm sure they have a plan, but on the first instance of hearing this, the entire industry has had the same reaction – why the same dates?"

Ashish Anand, director-founder of the modern art-dedicated DAG, is of the opinion that IAF Contemporary will add another interesting dimension to Mumbai's vibrant art landscape. "I believe that together the two events will account for additional eyeballs and footfalls since it expands the choices available for the whole gamut of the art world. But it would have been a win-win if held at different times."

The clash in dates feels like IAF is acting out of impulse, observes Anant Ahuja, co-founder of Irregulars Alliance, a forum dedicated to young and emerging artists who had, in 2019, put together a small but notorious 'anti-fair' at the same time as IAF 2019, but were unable to continue due to logistical and support issues. "Art Mumbai was a big challenge to the status quo, a big blow to the India Art Fair. When they announced earlier this year, galleries were torn – where does the patronage lie? That's a big question."

Others are more optimistic. "Fairs all over the world have multiple satellite fairs and events at the same time – it is not uncommon," says Roshini Vadehra, founder of Delhi-based Vadehra Art Gallery. "In fact, it adds to the energy and buzz in the city. I think the Indian art community has also built a good enough appetite to take this through." Avid art collector Passi agrees: "In London, Frieze and the London Design Festival happen at the same time. So there is space for more, because there's so much talent in India and it's such a huge market. Having two fairs at the same time can also be helpful to us visitors to a city."

Tahiliani, who met Jaya Asokan, the IAF fair director, at dinner some days ago, shares how she stated they will be doing something very different and keep it design focused. "When there's a fashion week, there are hundreds of shows happening simultaneously, it's not one at the cost of another," he says. "I don't understand the dynamics of art, but I think in a way, if multiple things happen, if multiple venues are created, there can be more levels of art. That's how all great cities work."

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GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

IN CONVERSATION

'NOT AN ALLEGORY OF A FUTURE INDIA'

Sci-fi is never based on one society, explains lawyer and author Gautam Bhatia, as his new novel explores the connection between power and the urban landscape

Jaideep Unudurti

No, no, no," says Gautam Bhatia. "That would be a disaster." I've just asked him whether the futuristic city of Peruma in his new novel *The Sentence* (Westland) is a riff on Gurugram. "It's not a future India. It's a secondary world," he says.

Lawyer and author Bhatia's latest science-fiction novel features a city divided by a river. One half is High Town, filled with shiny towers and boulevards. The other is Low Town, or the Commune, a kind of mega-*basti* organised on anarchist principles.

"Please," he says earnestly, "science-fiction is not allegory. So, I'm not superimposing a Delhi map on a science fiction novel, that just defeats the whole point of the genre."

An imprisoned man days away from execution. A young lawyer hunting for clues to save him, while imperilled by shadowy forces determined to conceal a secret that could blow up their entire way of life. These could be the standard ingredients of a Grishamesque legal thriller. Except, the imprisoned man is cryo-frozen, the economy is based on "mandalium" mining, and courts are called chapterhouses here. Says Bhatia, "It's a future society, obviously. But no, it's not a future India. Science fiction is never based on one society or one future. Of course, there are influences of my upbringing and where I am, but it's not an allegory of a future India."

Meticulous worldbuilding

The Sentence transports us to the city-state of Peruma; when industrial unrest leads to a standoff, the leader of the ruling council goes to talk to the miners. His assassination by a young man leads to a conflagration that is resolved by partitioning the city; the low town, where the miners live, becomes the Commune, a grouping of "free revolutionary workers". A peace charter is signed that is valid for a hundred years, and to manage disputes, a body called the Guardians is formed, drawn from the population of both sides but who are sworn to strict neutrality. These are the lawyers of this world.

The city lives in a stalemate, "an old world with its death aborted, and a new one that has been prevented from being born". Now, the hundred years are up, and the charter is about to lapse. Bhatia introduces another ticking clock – the assassin who is in suspended animation must be either thawed out to live, or left to die. Young lawyer Nila has to manage these converging cases and prove that the assassin is actually innocent, setting up a century-old whodunnit. Says Bhatia, "The novel deals with the idea of how important origin myths are to societies, and how, when the origin myths break down, you have a social breakdown."

Science-fiction is the literature of worldbuilding, and not everybody is a fan. Writer M. John Harrison once said that, "Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of writing over worldbuilding." Setting up a future world also means a mass of exposition that must be delivered to the readers. Bhatia agrees. "Science fiction novels, especially novels of ideas, have this huge problem of trying to contain the exposition in a way that doesn't bog down the reader with so much detail, but also gives them enough so that they can build a map of the world in their own heads."

He sweetens the pill by delivering the context through podcasts, newspaper headlines, and even hand-written letters, all weaved into the narrative.

Divided cities

In the novel, the peace charter results in a permanently divided city. This is the continuation of a theme where urban spaces are ordered, as Bhatia's first novel featured a circular city divided into zones. He points to critic Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, who has "this famous line, that SF is basically the genre of the city". Indeed, the French geographer Élisée Reclus argued that the full flowering of human potential was possible only in cities.

Gautam Bhatia
(SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP)

Bhatia says, "I was very interested in how power is channelled through the urban landscape, the way that it creates hierarchies using just the architecture of urban space."

The novel also draws on cutting-edge constitutional debates, anarchist architecture, the experiences of Latin American countries post-revolution, and even landmark Supreme Court cases, such as Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala. It plays a part, Bhatia says, "in the sense that Kesavananda Bharati is one of the cases that deals with this idea: can you alter the entire legal architecture of a society through legal means, or do you need a revolution to do that?"

When the sleeper awakens

The legal worldbuilding strain of sci-fi has few precedents, so instead of staples such as rampaging robots or spaceships chasing each other, here the action is made up of filing applications, downloading depositions and unearthing testimonies. Instead of ray gun firefights, there are sharp dialogues and rapid-fire cross-questioning. At the heart of it all is the foundational myth of the society, as one character says: "There may be a time, Guardian, when it doesn't matter whether our peace is founded on the truth or a lie. All that matters is that there be peace."

Similarly, the trope of the frozen sleeper awakening into a new world is an industry standard, from Rahul Sankrityayan's *Baisvin Sadi* to Hollywood's *Demolition Man*, where the awakened one offers a new disorienting vantage to look at truths regarded as self-evident.

As a part of his deft reworking of genre staples, Bhatia inverts this trope by making it about the society that the sleeper wakes into.

The writer is a freelance journalist and graphic novelist.

Melancholy mountains

Author Olga Tokarczuk
(GETTY IMAGES)

In her retelling of Thomas Mann's classic which turns 100 this year, Olga Tokarczuk delivers an equally affecting if not more horrifying account of pre-World War Europe

Nandini Bhatia

Piercing through the alpine mist, an "unhealthy" face emerges and enters the world's first sanatorium in Görbersdorf (present-day Sokołowsko in Poland), where "[e]very breath is curative" because doctors are convinced that open mountain air is all one needs to be cured of tuberculosis.

In "these melancholy mountains, from the world beyond", a to-be engineer finds temporary solace before the unnerving horrors of the village come alive to keep him nauseous throughout the three weeks that he will spend there. Olga Tokarczuk, in her latest novel *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story*, translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, revisits the pre-World War I European landscape of Thomas Mann's magnum opus, *The Magic Mountain*, as it turns 100 this year.

The 'Guesthouse for Gentlemen' hosts patients awaiting formal admission to the sanatorium. Tokarczuk's Mieczyslaw Wojnicz, much like Mann's Hans Castorp, is exposed to debates on the workings of the world as he meets both humanists and radicals. Underneath those debates simmer misogyny and prejudice, either towards women or "inferior" races. "[E]very discussion, whether about democracy, the fifth dimension, the role of religion, socialism, Europe, or modern art, eventually led to women."

Divided in their socio-political viewpoints, the men at the guesthouse are united in their disregard for the second sex. Considering that Germany is the origin of Freud's psychoanalysis and Wertheimer's gestalt psychology, the views expressed on women and on modern art aptly reflect the trends of the time.

Missing women

One's stomach might churn at the explicit display of sexism and bigotry throughout the novel, only to be appalled further by the author's note at the end of the book. Tokarczuk says that these views are borrowed and paraphrased from texts by a long line of writers, artists and philosophers, ranging from Jean-Paul Sartre to Charles Darwin – men who have shaped modern thought.

For a novel that comments on the limits of womanhood at length, women are conspicuously absent from the story. Tokarczuk chooses to keep the subject lurking because "the most interesting things are always in the shadows, in the invisible". Women exist here as symbols of "the violence of male desire, its impatience and overpowering force", most prominently in the mention of Tuntschi dolls made of moss, created for the sexual gratification of the local chimney burners; and in Greek tales of witch hunts of women who ran to the forests, never to return. It is this runaway group that readers may suspect to be the ominous "we" who partly narrate the story and haunt the village.

Visible and the invisible

Görbersdorf is a strange village where the water, wind, as well as human mind come to a standstill, as Mieczyslaw soon discovers. Its people, their food, folklore, and the local liqueur, Schwärmerei, which tastes of ants, are stranger still. The Fernando Pessoa quote from *The Book of Disquiet* (1982) then is the choicest opening to set the tone of the novel right: "Every day things happen in the world that can't be explained by any law of things we know. Every day they're mentioned and forgotten, and the same mystery that brought them takes them away, transforming their secret into oblivion. Such is the law by which things that can't be explained must be forgotten. The visible world goes on as usual in the broad daylight. Otherness watches us from the shadows."

The Empusium
Olga Tokarczuk, trs Antonia Lloyd-Jones
Riverhead Books
₹489 (ebook)

Through *The Magic Mountain*, Hans learns that "one must go through the deep experience of sickness and death to arrive at a higher sanity and health... in just the same way that one must have a knowledge of sin in order to find redemption", notes Mann in an article in *The Atlantic* in 1953. Mieczyslaw experiences something similar in *The Empusium*, as he starts to suspect the hallucinogenic liqueur and believes in conspiracy theories of his fellow comrades. However, as is characteristic of Tokarczuk's works, this transition, too, occurs subtly. Mieczyslaw's character development is subtle also because, for most of the story, he operates as a passive observer and not as an active participant.

This artful subtlety is not limited to the portrait of Mieczyslaw but is also visible in the way Tokarczuk addresses the degree of prejudice that the 'gentlemen' at the guesthouse hold as well as in the gothic impressions of the novel which claims to be a horror story. In the author's hands, the horror too is implied at best.

The Empusium has all the signature moves of the Polish writer: fiction that compliments non-fiction as historical events (even if occurring in the background) are seen in new light; classic literature that inspires modern literature; a landscape that has a life of its own; and most importantly, a systematic metamorphosis of her characters. Olga Tokarczuk, after all, is a Nobel laureate not for no reason.

The reviewer is a books and culture writer.
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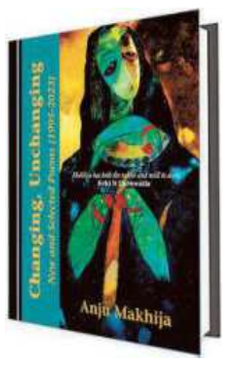
BROWSER

Aunties of Vasant Kunj

Anuradha Marwah
Rupa
₹395
A divorcee, a single mother and a housewife are the unlikely protagonists of this cheekily-titled book by the noted playwright and academic. With slices of her own life woven in, the novel is an attempt at reclaiming the "aunty" label, says the author.

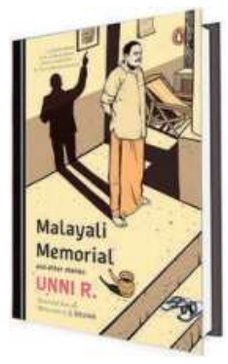
Changing, Unchanging

Anju Makhija
Red River
₹399
This collection of poems by the Sahitya Akademi award-winning poet and playwright covers themes like Sufism, technology, and even life after death. With shots of humour and fantasy, the verses push readers to think beyond man-made societal barriers.



Malayali Memorial and Other Stories

Unni R., trs J. Devika
Penguin
₹599
From the award-winning writer of *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* and *Vaanku* comes this collection of stories featuring a motley crew of characters in Kerala's Kottayam, the hometown of the author. Many of the writer's works have been adapted for the big screen.



The Hidden Girl

Lucinda Riley
Macmillan
₹750
Originally published in 1993 as *Hidden Beauty*, this novel, described as a 'lost treasure', has now been reworked and released under a new name by the author's son, Harry Whittaker, who also completed the last novel of his mother's 'Seven Sisters' series after she passed away in 2021.

THE JOY, AND PAIN, OF BEING SMALL

With limited resources, high costs, and other challenges, why do authors and editors still turn to independent publishers?

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Printers of dreams (Clockwise from left) The Yoda team at work; Indu Chandrasekhar; and Gita Ramaswamy. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Ten years ago, when I spoke to Arpita Das on Yoda Press's 10th anniversary, the founder and her team were celebrating amid a period of "immense overhaul". This included difficult decisions, like closing Yodakin, their bookstore, and later, some positive ones too, such as the joint academic imprint with Sage. "That allowed us to curate brilliant academic books, and perhaps, for the first time, we had liquidity."

Das remembers the time as the beginning of "a sort of shift", and now a decade after that conversation, and recent and successful publications like *Homeless* by K. Vaishali, which won the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar 2024, I speak with her once again on the occasion of not just their 20th anniversary, but the time of another shift – this time a more welcome one. Last month, Das announced that she was bringing on Ishita Gupta, who had interned with them, to join her as publishing director. Das isn't the only founder of an independent publishing house planning for the very real and hypothetical challenges ahead.

The challenges

"Independent presses like ours can't survive commercially without the kind of investment publishing needs," says Urvashi Butalia, founder of Zubaan Books. "We have never had an investor and never really looked for one. But even if we might have thought about it, there hasn't been a lot of positive empathy or sympathy. So, going forward, how *do* we survive?" It's this question, prompted by other changes, more specifically to their publishing list, that has Butalia thinking about the future. "Increasingly, our publishing is becoming more political, more focused on marginalised voices, and we are comfortable with that. But we know we can't succeed commercially in the marketplace. None of these books are going to break the bank."

Widespread challenges, including GST and increased production costs, were worsened by the pandemic. "The cost of everything has gone up," says Ananda Lal, of Kolkata's Writers Workshop. "Writers Workshop has never been profit-oriented. We look only to cover costs, and to do that, the only thing we can do is raise the prices of our books," he says. Bigger publishers can absorb such costs, Butalia notes, but "for the others, the economics of publishing can be really scary." All publishers admit they have been badly hit by GST. "Every product we buy has 18% GST, but books don't have GST. So our margins are reduced," Butalia adds.

Another obstacle is distribution. "Unless you go with a big distributor, which is costly, you cannot put your books out," says Butalia. She explains that distributors sometimes return unsold books, forcing publishers to bear heavy losses. They end up selling copies at a fraction of the price to recoup even partial costs.

Other challenges arise from issues like author retention. "Debut authors who start with indies then go on to large publishing houses," says Indu Chandrasekhar, Publisher and Managing Editor of Tulika Books. Butalia has experienced this at Zubaan, which first published critically acclaimed authors like Geetanjali Shree, Manjula Padmanabhan and Samhita Arni. "Many first books came to us, and after that, they move on." Some of these decisions by authors are also driven by the market. "In publishing today, you need to work in multimedia formats. You really need to have ebooks and audiobooks. And while ebooks are possible because they're economical, we just don't have money to produce audiobooks," says Butalia.

Outside the practical challenges, Gita Ramaswamy, co-founder of the Hyderabad Book Trust, which has launched its English imprint, SouthSide Books, points out that the existence of the new imprint is rooted in a challenge itself, that publishing still largely remains concentrated in the north. "Delhi remains the imperial capital. The idea was to tap into South India's talent, and literature, which is often ignored by the people sitting in Delhi."

For Ramaswamy, common issues like rising costs are simply part of the work. "We remain an activist publishing house. Much of the work is voluntary, functioning on low budgets and single teams."

Most independent publishing houses have a vision; sometimes, a challenge can arise from the refusal to compromise on that vision. For example, Lal says on the subject of e-books that it's something he's decided against having. "Writers Workshop has always prided itself in the hand-crafted book that we create," he says, and hence he decided against ebooks. It's a tough call, especially because "the family of craftsmen who work on the books have only two people left who know the craft, the art. It is most unlikely that the next generation would like to carry on," he adds.

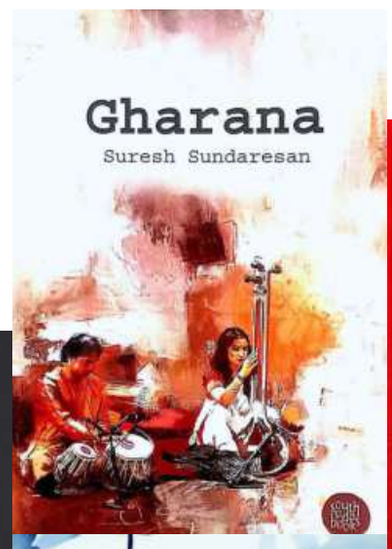
Why publish with Indies?

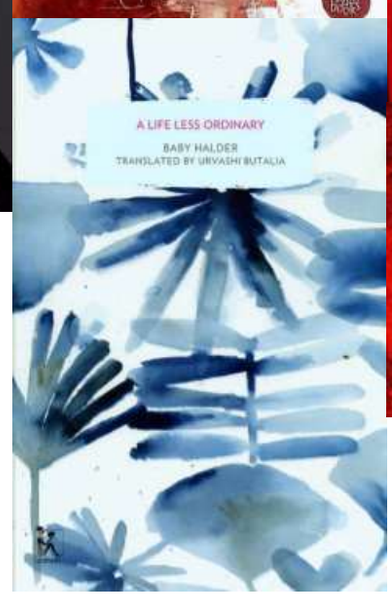
With limited resources, high costs, and other challenges, why do authors and editors still turn to independent publishers? Chandrasekhar brings up what might be the biggest reason: "Editorial and pre-press production processes are much more robust within small and independent publishing houses than among corporate publishing houses. Larger publishing houses these days tend to rely on outsourcing to a pool of freelance copy-editors and therefore the editorial process is much more dispersed. Also, the focus is on building infrastructure devoted to marketing and sales rather than editorial departments."

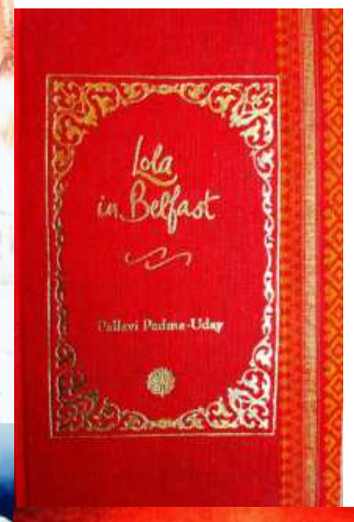
In fact, Chandrasekhar attributes their survival to these processes and their "smallness". Unlike big publishers, indies also take more risks. "We will risk an author or a book that a big publisher will not publish. We will also risk book formats and sizes that big publishers will not. And it helps being small, and therefore somewhat below the radar while taking these risks," she says. Writers Workshop, for example, specialises in poetry. "Poetry doesn't sell," Lal admits, but adds that their commitment to it remains.

Given the number of challenges, it seems like running an independent publishing house is a lot about "keeping your head above water", but to thrive, they have to find lasting solutions. For every publisher, these solutions can look very different. At Yoda, Das has found a long-term partner in Gupta. Zubaan, meanwhile, is considering a return to a not-for-profit model. Ramaswamy takes a grassroots approach, building relationships with bookstores. Chandrasekhar attributes the survival of the independent publishing houses to "collaboration and collective work".

While the possibility of an end is real, publishers like Butalia and Das aren't afraid. The most hopeful note comes from Ramaswamy, who says that the end of one such initiative does not really mean it's all over. "Someone else is going to stand on our shoulders. I'm confident that, even if we don't succeed, somebody else will."







INTERVIEW

'Navayana is a necessary mistake'

A publishing house celebrates 20 years of books on caste injustice

Annihilating discrimination An artist paints a portrait of Ambedkar, near Vijayawada; and (below) Anand. (G.N. RAO AND SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP)

Harsh Mander

The independent publishing house Navayana was born out of a desire to address a silence. Hardly anyone was touching the subject of caste in English language publishing. In an interview, founder Anand explains why he linked Ambedkar's call to educate to the idea of publishing, and what has changed in the two decades of Navayana. There's much to celebrate as the independent publishing house has won the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Prize, 2024, for a biography of B.R. Ambedkar, *A Part Apart*, by Ashok Gopal. Edited excerpts.

Question: *It's been a pretty singular journey of Navayana over 20 years. The obvious question first: why publish this genre of literature?*
Answer: A range of historical forces and contemporary pulls and pushes caused me and Ravikumar [then a bank clerk and now a politician and two-time Member of Parliament] to found Navayana. To claim individual agency here is utterly fallacious. By the 2000s, we saw a range of independent presses emerge in English. Each was focused on communalism, feminism, the environment, the Left, on translations, and so on. Hardly anyone touched on caste in English language publishing. Navayana was born out of the desire to break this silence.

Q: *What does Navayana mean?*
A: It literally means a new vehicle, a new path. It was only much later that I learnt it was a term Ambedkar used but once in 1956, ahead of the massive religious conversion ceremony in Nagpur. He said that the new practice will return to the essence of the Buddha's teaching and not be aligned to Vajrayana and Mahayana and credos that emerged later. In that sense, he said you could call it 'Navayan'. Ambedkar reconstituted the Buddha's message – it was both a turn and a return. Navayana as a publishing venture is only a spoke in this wheel. It is a mistake which is slowly correcting itself.

Q: *Do you mean the mistake of silencing the voice of the Bahujan?*
A: Not just that. It's about how caste impinges on everybody. As a child, I saw my mother ostracised for four days every month for having menstrual periods. That's untouchability too – like Ambedkar says in his 1916 paper 'Castes in India', control over women's sexuality and agency is at the root of the caste system. Which is why child marriage flourished in this land. Ambedkar never treated the problems of caste as a Dalit issue. He wrote scores of works to enlighten all Hindus. Ambedkar's call is to educate, agitate, organise. For me, this call to educate is directly linked to the idea of publishing.

Q: *Why publishing?*
A: Because a book lasts or appears to last. You see, Ambedkar is forced to self-publish *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936. And 70% of his writings were not published till he died. Whom did he write for? Who were willing to publish or read Ambedkar? Very few. That's because people don't even acknowledge caste to be an issue even if it surrounds us.

Q: *It's also like fish swimming in water and asking "where is the water?"*
A: Exactly! But why is this? What Ambedkar says may hurt Hindus but he captures it so well in *Annihilation of Caste*: 'There can be a better or a worse Hindu. But a good Hindu there cannot be.' If you're a Hindu, you have caste. That's why he says let's put a dynamite to the Vedas and Shastras. He wants all of us out of caste.

Q: *What have you been able to accomplish through Navayana that gives you the greatest pride and joy?*
A: To me each book gives joy. So when we had to choose 10 books for our 20th anniversary set called Everblue, it featured great books that had lost their way. When I published Bhagwan Das's memoir *In Pursuit of Ambedkar* in 2010, it took 10 years to sell. We have now revived it.

Q: *What other titles strike out?*
A: Of course *Bhimayana*, our biggest success, with art by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. In 2011, few gave it a chance. Savarna reviewers harped on the madness of putting Adivasi art and Ambedkar together – I was shattered. I thought of it as another flop until it picked up slowly and turned into a bestseller.

Q: *When you put Ambedkar with the Adivasi there's a problem; likewise controversy erupted when you worked with Arundhati Roy for a fine annotated 'Annihilation of Caste'...*
A: That's why I said Navayana is a historical mistake because the question remains: why is a Savarna doing all this? Of course the social capital I have helps. I can keep quiet, wallow in my identity and die. But I'm an Ambedkarite. Ambedkar says in 1935, "I had the misfortune of being born with the 'Untouchable Hindu' stain; that was not in my hands... [but] I will not die as a person who calls himself a Hindu!" To echo him: I had the misfortune of being born a Brahmin, and I will not die as one.

Q: *I think that's profoundly important because if you're saying the accident of your birth determines your consciousness, then you're...*
A: You're going back to the caste system. You're affirming caste. I totally understand when a Dalit person says I get all these chances. That's why I treat Navayana as a necessary mistake. When it becomes unnecessary, we would have liberated ourselves from caste.

Q: *Last question. What next?*
A: These days I only think of how to pass the baton. Navayana needs to thrive so others can take it over. I'm keen to start an anti-caste children's list helmed by Dalits.

The interviewer is a human rights worker, writer and teacher.

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

MUMBAI'S 2025 ART FACE-OFF

In focus (Clockwise from left) The cast of *Fabulous Lives vs Bollywood Wives* at Art Mumbai; a display at India Art Fair; Minal Vazirani; and Jaya Asokan of IAF. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Even though Hena Kapadia, founder of Mumbai-based contemporary art gallery TARQ, is yet to decide whether she'll put up booths at both events when the time comes, she believes the more the merrier. "We participated in two different shows in Hong Kong earlier this year – TARQ had a presence at Art Basel, as well as at the Supper Club at the Fringe Club... I think where there's a will there's a way."

It's always tough to have fairs opening on the same dates, adds Vazirani, "which does make it difficult to attend or participate in both". IAF director Asokan, who has previously said it will be a collaborative process, was unavailable for comment. While time will tell on how that plays out – a clash of titans or an alliance among giants – everyone the *Magazine* spoke with agrees that this moment in India's art history attests to a massive spike in appetite for art among collectors of all sorts.

For collectors, more the merrier

The Hurun India Art List 2024, at the top of which presides British-Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor, indicates that sales by the top 50 artists reached a record-breaking ₹301 crore, a 19% increase from 2023. 92% of the featured artists – also including Gulam Mohammad Sheikh, Arpita Singh and Thota Vaikuntham in the top 10 – saw a rise in sales value, which meant the threshold for an artist to enter the Top 25 in the list increased from ₹35 lakh in 2021 to ₹1.9 crore in 2024, a rise of 443%.

While modern art, masters and otherwise, continue to grab headlines for the nine figure sums they fetch, insiders feel that India is bullish on contemporary art as well. "Who are the consumers of gallery based art?" muses Chennai-based collector Jaiveer Johal. "They are institutions, collectors and people who are building their homes. The moderns have gone up because of a lot of institutional interest from India and abroad, from KNMA to LA County, and international museums who have stopped collecting classical art for various reasons of provenance."

"For the kinds of houses that India is building right now, it's impossible to fill it up with modern art. The only way to do it is with contemporary art," he adds. "Then there are the collectors – most senior collectors are now focused on filling the gaps in their collections, which is why you see great quality selling at great rates, okay art is selling at okay prices. Look at the Pundole's recent auction. A miniature sold for ₹18 crore, but other artworks sold for ₹75,000 also. Collectors know quality."

According to Anand of DAG, the moderns continue to reign as favourites. He adds that, aside from seasoned collectors, the real spenders are the first-generation wealthy industrialists, business owners and professionals whose wealth has grown with an upswing in the economy – age, location and pedigree no bar. "While they are open to ideas and suggestions, they already have their opinions and strong likes with a wish list, at least to begin with, which is why prices for the moderns have been rising over the years."

Passi, who has famously filled her Delhi home with contemporary art and collectible design, and hosts soirees for both IAF and Art Mumbai, believes the younger generation wants to experience and collect art they can relate to – a more desirable approach than the collector-investor who, she says, are hoarding art like gold. She exemplifies this philosophy herself. "I've been collecting Tanya Goel's works; and in general have been making a conscious effort to collect women artists. Male artists talk about things like urbanisation, which I'm bored of at the moment. There's also a lot of interest in minimalist art, which I really think looks like wallpaper. A few lines on the canvas in the 1970s by [Indian American artist and printmaker] Zarina Hashmi obviously had a different meaning and impact but now someone doing it is just boring and repetitive."

If we look at the auction market for total global South Asian modern and contemporary art (the only publicly available numbers), "auction sales values were over $150 million in 2022 and nearly $190 million in 2023. The market was exceptionally strong in 2022, surpassing its previous peak from 2006-2008," notes Vazirani, adding that greater wealth levels, along with an abundance of knowledge at your fingertips, and a connection with a broader cultural identity as a new India manifesting itself very much with the arts are key factors.

A 'contemporary' destination

To Vazirani, it is natural (not ironic) that Mumbai – home of the Progressive Artists' Group since 1947, the J.J. School of Art since 1857, and the country's most prominent contemporary artists in the 21st century – seems to be coming into its own as an art market destination. "When we started Saffronart [in 2001]," she estimates, "about 65%-70% of the transactions were from Mumbai." That's not unusual for a city that's the financial capital of India.

"Mumbai has always shown contemporary in a better fashion," suggests Ahuja, as to why all eyes seem to be on the city right now. "Younger galleries, more art nights, gallery weekends, walkthroughs: you can experience the gallery culture in a more democratic manner than you can in Delhi." Add to that events such as Galerie Isa's soiree at Altimus (an Art Mumbai collateral event) and parties such as Chennai gallery Ashvita's cocktail do at Worli's Slink and Bardot– it's art pouring out of the white cube.

Anand of Art Alive, though, feels that the need of the hour is to "create more centres". "Hyderabad is a rapidly emerging market, Bengaluru is another great place. Chennai now has its own Madras Art Week, while Goa has the Serendipity Arts Festival right after. We're going to both. That's how we'll have more engagement. If you expand the ecosystem, involve more people – more cross movement will bring more focus on India as an art destination."

The Indian art landscape is an exciting one to train one's eye on at the moment. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is back next year with artist Nikhil Chopra as chief curator; the Bengal Biennale, supported by JSW Foundation, takes off in Santiniketan this weekend. Institutions such as the Museum of Art and Photography in Bengaluru, the upcoming massive KNMA project, and Serendipity founder-patron Sunil Munjal's yet-to-be-unveiled The Brij, an arts and culture establishment in Delhi, are creating even more space. "It feels like a lot, but for a country that has one of the oldest aesthetic traditions in the world, we have a lot of art to put out there," says Vazirani. "I'm so proud that we are finally, as a country and an art community, stepping up and becoming the arbiters of our own quality. And saying to the rest of the world, that instead of being on the margins, we're here to take centrestage."

The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, writing on culture, lifestyle and technology.

Hard to ignore war

On November 12, at a glittering evening organised at the Museum of the Future, Fatima Shbair walked up to thunderous applause to receive the first prize in storytelling at HIPA. The extra-strong applause was because a few minutes ago, HIPA had showcased the shocking visuals of destruction in the Gaza Strip that she had taken during the 200 days she spent there during the war. Shbair was born in the Gaza Strip and learnt photography from her grandmother who had old cameras. For the first 200 days of the Israeli attack in Gaza, the 27-year-old shot moving photographs for the *Associated Press*. But then the war reached home when her family could not find the medicines that her ailing father had been taking for nearly 15 years. He passed away in the same hospital where she was taking photographs of bombing victims, she said, recounting how her photographs also reflected her own story.

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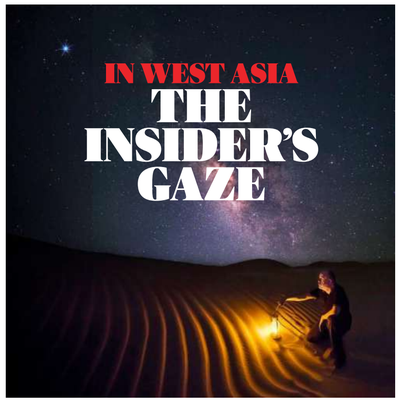
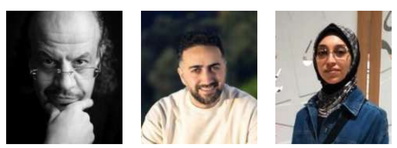


Going beyond war's horrors, these photographers train their lenses on the stone mustatils of Saudi Arabia and the olive groves of Lebanon



The year has been difficult for Lebanon with war and destruction engulfing the Mediterranean country. Known for its capital Beirut and its beautiful mountains and Roman ruins, the country suddenly has found itself embroiled in the Israel-Palestine crisis. First came the pager blasts of September 17, followed by images of exploding buildings and of the dead and the injured. However, in the world of photographer Ihab Fayad, the Israeli bombing raids are nowhere to be seen. His work gives a hint of the violence unfolding all around but the war and its difficulties are nowhere to be seen.

Fayad focuses on the 150,000 hectares of land on Mount Lebanon that hosts some of the most ancient olive groves in the world. They produce exquisite olive oil that is a symbol of national identity and pride. However, this year, the region has suffered as around 40,000 olive trees were destroyed in the Israeli attacks. In his photographs, Fayad shows how olive grove owners harvest the fruits carefully covering them in white cotton fabric and choosing the most succulent olives to be driven in battered 1980s taxis to the olive mills.

His photographs show a tradition that has been a part of the region for nearly 5,000 years. War and violence may come and go but the glorious Lebanese tradition of making olive oil has continued uninterrupted. Fayad, who received an honourable mention in the recent Hamdan bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum International Photography Award (HIPA) in Dubai, is part of an emerging tradition of photography in the Arab world – reinterpreting itself by often looking away from the war and violence that has been the defining feature of imagery from the region.

Desert canvas

Starting with the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and the Gulf war of 1990-91, the primary images from the West Asian region have been associated with violence, terror attack and human tragedy, but this year at HIPA, a large number of entries and award winners provided a different way to look at the region, stretching from Palestine and Lebanon to Saudi Arabia and Oman. This alternative view of the geopolitical fulcrum of West Asia was also seen in the work of Duhain Abdulhaim. His canvas is the Saudi Arabian desert and Saudi history and identity. The kingdom is the home of Islam and it is also a hydrocarbon powerhouse driving the world economy – these two have therefore been the primary lenses used to view Saudi Arabia. But Abdulhaim takes his lens to the vast desert and the ancient, mysterious stone mustatils that have added a supernatural air to the arid landscape.

A similar attempt was made by Samy Al Olabi, winner of the HIPA Photographer of the Year Award. A Syrian by birth, Al Olabi was educated in Cairo and came to work in the United Arab Emirates. It was while dealing with the stress of his profession that he took to photography – in fact, astrophotography – which captures the stunning night sky over the Arabian peninsula.

Light and glory (Clockwise from left) Photos by Ihab Fayad; Salma Ali Alsuwaidi; photographers Fatima Shbair; Fayad; and Samy Al Olabi; winning shot by Rahul Sachdev; and Al Olabi's stunning desert night sky. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

In the wild

From the sky to the mountains, Al Olabi has been prolific in covering the natural beauty of the Arab world that is often overtaken by the mainstream media's focus on military campaigns and conflicts. In his camera, the grey, barren mountains turn green after being sprinkled by rain and he shows that the stereotypes of mass media are not necessarily the reality of the Arab world.

This year, HIPA also witnessed notable participation from Indian photographers, often self-taught, across the world. Rahul Sachdev of Pune, who takes high-end tourists on international holidays, won the first prize in colour photography for capturing a southern white rhino in Kenya in the morning light, turning it into a mythical beast.

But the high point of HIPA this year was the work by West Asian photographers steeped in the traditions and ethos of the region. The photography content creator award winner Salma Ali Alsuwaidi stood out with her captivating shots. A Bedouin, Alsuwaidi maintains strict *purdah*, but her expressive eyes reflected her emotions as she spoke about her struggles overcoming both social restrictions and a physical handicap to become a nature photographer.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

'NOBODY CAN OCCUPY THE DREAMS OF A PEOPLE'

Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, whose new production *From Ground Zero* was cancelled at film festivals, speaks out against the silence of the world

Saibal Chatterjee

The situation in Gaza, where 62-year-old Rashid Masharawi was born and raised in the Shati refugee camp, has spurred the filmmaker to produce *From Ground Zero*, an anthology of 22 short films that capture the plight of Palestinians under siege for over a year now.

From Ground Zero was screened this month at the 12th Ajyal Film Festival in Doha and at the Cairo International Film Festival, where Masharawi's latest directorial, *Passing Dreams*, was the opening night title. The film is covering a lot of ground the world over. However, last month's Dharamshala International Film Festival, dedicated to independent cinema, was denied "official permission" to screen the anthology. Earlier this year, the 77th Cannes Film Festival shunned the film because the organisers wanted to keep politics out of the official selection. In protest, Masharawi held a screening outside the festival venue and attended the event sporting a necktie made of the Palestinian *keffiyeh*.

Speaking on the sidelines of Ajyal, where *From Ground Zero* was part of a special exhibit, Masharawi asks: "Why was it cancelled [at Dharamshala]? Did they watch it or only saw its title before deciding that the film wasn't fit for screening?" He quips: "Gandhiism is over but we still have it, not in India but elsewhere in the world (referring to the resistance and resilience of Palestinians fighting never-ending occupation)."

Immediately after a wave of Israeli attacks on Gaza began in October last year, Masharawi, who lives between Ramallah and Paris, set up a fund to help filmmakers from the region tell their stories. "It was easy for me to convince the young filmmakers to show the world what they are going through. For them, however, it wasn't easy to follow my ideas," he says, adding, "People want to save their lives. They want food and electricity as they move from one place to another as refugees inside Gaza." Making cinema, Masharawi admits, wasn't top priority for these young Gazans. But stories, he asserts, cannot wait. They have to be told.

Voices amid the rubble

From Ground Zero records the personal experiences of the filmmakers. It embraces various forms – fiction, documentary, cinematic experiments, animation, video art and even a story told with marionettes. "Every idea was welcome," says Masharawi. "Our resources were seriously limited. We had to make do with what we had and innovate."

The subjects that the anthology film deals with reflect the diversity of the directors. Among them are painters, theatre professionals, writers and filmmakers.

"The selection was focused more on the stories than on the personnel," Masharawi continues. "I insisted that we should tell untold stories in an artistic way."

Nothing represents the spirit of Palestine more than *Awakening*, a film that artist Mahdi Karirah contributed to. It emerged from rubble, literally. Karirah's home was bombed. All his marionettes, tools and colours were destroyed. He picked up things from the garbage, created marionettes and made the film. "This is resistance," says Masharawi. "Nobody can occupy these people. They are fighting for their lives. They have a life. They are life."

Making cinema, Masharawi admits, wasn't top priority for young Gazans. But stories, he asserts, cannot wait. They have to be told

Not everybody who wanted to be a part of the project made the cut. "Many aspirants were not selected. Some who were could not complete their film," Masharawi recalls. "People sometimes want to complain and spark angry political debates. For sure, all this is in *From Ground Zero* but we are not saying anything directly. When you see the film, you will say that it is about genocide. I do not have to say it. I do not want to use the methods of television news. I would rather employ purely cinematic means to make my point."

Documenting life (Clockwise from left) Stills from *From Ground Zero*, *Passing Dreams*; and the filmmaker. (GETTY IMAGES)

Cinema as a tool

That is precisely what the seasoned director has done in his latest, *Passing Dreams*, a simple, gentle and non-confrontational 'Palestinian road movie' about a 12-year-old boy in the Qalandia refugee camp in East Jerusalem who sets out to search for his missing pigeon.

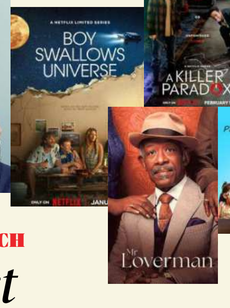
"The boy goes to Bethlehem and Jerusalem before he ends up in Haifa [where the original owner of the pigeon lives]," says Masharawi. "The film is not about the pigeon. It is about the region. It is about the beauty of Palestine's landscape, about its problems, about its history and about the primacy of hope."

Passing Dreams, Masharawi reveals, was filmed on real locations before October 7 last year – in a refugee camp, in Bethlehem, in the old city of Jerusalem near the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The film was in post production even as Gaza was battered and the producer-director soon got busy with *From Ground Zero*.

Masharawi, who has been making films for 40 years and is a role model to an entire generation of Palestinian directors, swears by cinema as a tool of record and resistance. "Cinema is essential when you want to talk about history and memory," he says. "The stories we tell enable us to assert our identity and defend our culture. Nobody can occupy the dreams and imagination of a people."

His career is a testament to freedom, defiance and assertion. "I never take permission to film," he says. "Seeking permission would be tantamount to legitimising the occupation. It is my country. I shoot when and where I want. I know that the authorities can create problems, but this, no matter what, is my land."

The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.



Top picks (From far left) A still from *Raat Jawaan Hai*; posters of *Shrinking*; *Boy Swallows Universe*; *Mr Loverman*; *A Killer Paradox*; and *Raat Jawaan Hai*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

BINGE WATCH

5 most underrated

Some of 2024's must-watch streaming shows you have (probably) never heard of

Today, with over a dozen major streaming platforms and their weekly releases, if a professional critic is telling you that they watch a third of all the new releases, they're flat-out lying. This is not humanly possible. Mindful of this new reality, my "must-watch" shows of the year shall not include, say, *Shogun* – it's a great show, but chances are you have heard this already from 20 different sources.

This column, therefore, is about "must-watch" shows that did not receive the kind of critical attention and social media traction that a *Shogun* or a *House of the Dragon* did.

***A Killer Paradox* (Netflix)**

A fiendishly clever South Korean series starring Choi Woo-shik (*Parasite*, *Train to Busan*) as Lee Tang, a youngster who has just been discharged from the army and is working at a convenience store. After he accidentally kills a serial killer, Lee realises he has a gift for sensing evil inside of people – and making these evildoers pay. However, Jang Nan-gam (Son Suk-ku), a detective with an unusually keen sense of intuition himself, realises that Lee has become a vigilante of sorts and races against time to stop his kill-spree. The narrative invites the viewer to ask moral questions of both its leads. Like the best Korean shows and films, this is actually a story about deep-seated social alienation and intense loneliness – only it's wrapped up in genre conventions.

***Mr Loverman* (SonyLiv)**

Arguably the most impressive British TV show of 2024, *Mr Loverman* is based on the novel of the same name by the Booker-winning writer Bernardine Evaristo. Both book and TV show follow Antiguan-born Londoner Barrington "Barry" Walker (Lennie James), a dandyish 75-year-old man whose marriage collapses after his decades-long affair with his male best friend Morris (Ariyon Bakare) is revealed. Obviously, this is a sensitive subject and the show consistently makes smart storytelling choices to bring out the nuances here. James turns in the performance of a lifetime as a lifelong "family man", doting father and grandfather, who is suddenly forced to justify his life choices in front of people who he thought loved him unconditionally. Barry also has to confront the undeniable pain this revelation has inflicted upon his wife Carmel (Sharon D Clarke, magnificent).

***Boy Swallows Universe* (Netflix)**

Boy Swallows Universe is based on the eponymous 2018 debut novel by Trent Dalton, one of the bestselling works of literary fiction in Australia these last few years. Eli Bell (Zac Burgess) is a troubled teenager in Brisbane with an absentee father, a mute brother – and an imprisoned mother he is trying desperately to free. In order to do so, Eli reluctantly enters the city's underworld, becoming a heroin dealer for his shady stepfather Lyle (Travis Fimmel). *Boy Swallows Universe* is a heartbreaking watch on occasion, but well worth your time because of its evergreen themes of family and betrayal. Add to that the power-packed lead performances by Burgess and Fimmel in particular. Emmy and Golden Globe-winning actor Anthony LaPaglia, one of Australia's Hollywood veterans, also has a delightful extended cameo.

***Raat Jawaan Hai* (SonyLiv)**

No Indian show in 2024 gave me the kind of wholesome pleasure offered by the 'buddy dramedy' *Raat Jawaan Hai*, directed by Sumeet Vyas and written by Khyati Anand Puthran. This is a story about the trajectory of friendship, especially in terms of how friendships change when you become parents. Avinash (Barun Sobti), Radhika (Anjali Anand) and Suman (Priya Bapat) have been friends since childhood. But when the trio become parents for the first time (at around the same time) they must confront the prospect of "becoming boring" and sacrificing their buddy time in favour of *Cocomelon*, story time and soiled nappies. Director Vyas cut his teeth on a number of shows produced by TVF (The Viral Fever), but *Raat Jawaan Hai* comfortably outstrips anything Vyas acted in. You'll leave this show with a smile and a tear wiped away hastily.

***Shrinking* (Apple TV)**

With its second season (which premiered in October), *Shrinking* confirms its place as "the best Hollywood show you've never heard of". Now, one might argue that a TV show starring Jason Segel (Marshall from *How I Met Your Mother*) and Harrison Ford isn't exactly 'flying under the radar' but that's exactly what has happened to *Shrinking*. Part of it is the fact that Apple seldom goes for a publicity blitz for its TV shows or original movies. But this shouldn't dissuade you from *Shrinking*, a distinctive, 'funnysad' story about a grieving therapist called Jimmy Laird (Segel) who, following his wife's death, decides to become drastically more involved in his patients' lives. Harrison Ford plays Dr. Paul Rhoades, a colleague of Jimmy's who has Parkinson's Disease and is hiding this fact from his daughter.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

GETTY IMAGES

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 3

MIND THINE OWN BUSINESS

Why have mega wealthy industrialist fellows hopped aboard the Vande Bharat Youth Blame Express?

Readers, do you ever wonder what you would do if you were to find yourself in the position of one Mr. Moses of *Old Testament* fame? Not in terms of maritime bifurcation, but in terms of codifying rules that all of humanity must follow?

Do you? If not, you should. It's very therapeutic.

At least once a week, I find myself coming up with the latest updated versions of my very own Ten Commandments by Sidin Vadukut.

For example: thou shall not wait till thou reaches the front of the queue at the coffee shop before thinking about what coffee thou wishes to consume.

Another example: thou shall not stand outside the cafe and then suddenly ask me for the time because I will check my watch and thereby pour the entire coffee down the front of my long pants. And now I can never go back to the cafe again because they are going to say something like, "Hello Mr. Sidin, another Decaf Pantsaccino for you?"

But one commandment has been on my list since at least 1998: thou shall mind thine own business.

Readers, nowadays you simply cannot open a newspaper, switch on the TV, or surf the Internet without some retired fellow trying to intensely mind your business. And usually these guys have the same script: they harangue youths such as you and I for not working enough, or having work-life balance, or working from home, or eating lunch more than twice a week, or some such nonsense.

At some level, this is not news at all. Inter-generational acrimony has been a part of human existence for millennia. Way back in 700 BCE, back when they had only just started constructing the bullet train from Ahmedabad to Bombay, the ancient Greek poet Hesiod was exasperated by youth. The youths of his day, Hesiod complained, were not as they were in the past. They did not respect elders, and they did not work hard.

Then, just 1,200 years later, one Scottish writer was very, very upset about young people because... they didn't walk enough and took too many buses. Really. "Many young people were so pampered nowadays that they had forgotten that there was such a thing as walking, and they made automatically for the buses... unless they did something, the future for walking was very poor indeed."

All this is just shenanigans.

But more recently, there is a new phenomenon that is absolute shenanigans: mega wealthy industrialist fellows have hopped aboard the Vande Bharat Youth Blame Express.

First of all, there is the billionaire who spends at least 35 hours every week reminding young people to work at least 80 hours per week. Okay uncle, then you come to my house and do the laundry, water the plants, and prepare my children for English spelling test on Monday, maths homework on Tuesday, and then you spend the weekend making a plaster-of-Paris model of Van Gogh's missing ear for Art Appreciation Week.

Then there is LinkedIn, the global headquarters of absolute shenanigans. Once a week or so, I make it a point to check my LinkedIn profile. Just in case somebody is hiring a new CEO with a very particular set of skill requirements: metallurgical engineering, MBA, freelance writing, moderate hygiene, handsome with rugged features. Unfortunately, I spend all my time reading posts by business magnates complaining about – writer takes a deep breath – youths taking leave, youths asking for salary increments, youths asking for flexible timings, youths rejecting dress code, youths ordering food online, youths writing short emails, youths listening to music in the office, youths getting tired of meetings... In fact, the very existence of youths seems to be driving these fellows to shed tears of disappointment into their caviar smoothies.

They will finally say something like, "Over the last 20 years, I have been lucky to have been on this long and fulfilling journey of discovery and growth, but the state of young people today truly worries me."

Machaan, please calm down. You worked at Tata Motors for 15 years. As if you are some Marco Polo who went from Venice to Shanghai. Long and fulfilling journey, it seems.

And yet the English language does not have a word to describe these millionaire types who will not shut up about telling other people how to work. Which is why I have the great pleasure to introduce the following word into the lexicon with immediate effect: workaholigarch.

Example sentence: "Doctor, my workaholigarch CEO is joining this Google Meet call, so can you please try and transplant my kidney quietly?"

But what is the point of all this? Have you seen children today? Nobody reads a word.

Workaholigarch
/ˌwɜːrkəˈhɑːlɪˌgɑːrk/
noun
Plural: workaholigarchs
Definition: A person, often in a position of power or influence, who fervently, and often hypocritically, promotes an extreme work ethic, often leading to the glorification of burnout and the systematic dismantling of joy.
Related forms
Workaholigarchy (noun): The oppressive regime under which workaholigarchs govern, characterised by endless meetings, unrealistic deadlines, and relentless youth-blaming.

***Sidin Vadukut** is head of talent at Clarisights. He lives in London and is currently working on a new novel.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Sure thing

North-South vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

East took advantage of the vulnerability and made a very aggressive jump overcall. South, however, had an easy bid, and the normal contract was reached.

West led the queen of hearts, ducked in dummy, and continued with the jack of hearts. South played dummy's king, winning the trick, and he was sure that West held the 10 of hearts along with the ace. West would not have risked setting up dummy's nine of hearts, which he might have done had he not been looking at the 10. Assuming East held the king of spades, there were only eight tricks. South judged that the diamond king was not likely to be onside after the pre-empt, but there were other chances.

South led dummy's jack of spades, covered with the king, and won with his ace. South cashed the queen of spades to confirm that spades were 7-1. He then cashed four club tricks, ending in dummy. South had a good count on the hand and was sure of the opponents' distribution. He exited dummy with the nine of hearts to West's ace. West was able to cash two more heart tricks, but then had to lead a diamond from his king, and declarer had nine tricks. Note that this line of play would have worked even if East held the king of diamonds. Very nicely played!

NORTH
♠ J 2
♡ K 9 7 4
◇ Q 6 5
♣ A K J 7

WEST
♠ 7
♡ A Q J 10 5
◇ K 10 8 3
♣ 10 8 6

EAST
♠ K 10 9 8 6 5 3
♡ 8 2
◇ 9
♣ 9 4 2

SOUTH
♠ A Q 4
♡ 6 3
◇ A J 7 4 2
♣ Q 5 3

The bidding:

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

Opening lead: Queen of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

The winner ain't the one with the fastest car; it's the one who refuses to lose: Dale Earnhardt

Berty Ashley

1 On December 1, 1955, this lady, after a long working day, got on to bus no. 2857 in Montgomery, Alabama. She paid her fare and sat at the back in a separate section. After a few stops, the driver noticed a few people standing, so he moved the section and asked her to vacate her seat. She didn't comply and was arrested. Who was this lady whose action would inspire a nation-wide movement?

2 This car was designed to be the 'people's car' by Volkswagen, and it is officially known as 'Type 1'. With a distinctive, cute shape and rear-located engine, it was hugely popular and went on to sell more than 21 million units, the most of any car manufactured on a single platform. By what name would the car become famous?

3 The Morris Oxford III was a saloon car made in 1956 that had an iconic design of a fluted bonnet and rear fins. In 1957, Hindustan Motors produced it in India under a different name. It soon earned the title of 'King of Indian roads' for its rugged and stoic capability to handle any roads. By what name would Indians know this car?

4 The 'Pope-Waverly Edison Wagon', made in 1904, could seat two passengers. It was marketed as woman-friendly with an enclosed coach body to protect long skirts from dirt and debris. It was one of the earliest versions of a type of car that is now common on our roads. What ran the car?

Old Liz A painting depicting the Model T automobile 'Tin Lizzie'. (GETTY IMAGES)

5 This person visited a Chicago meatpacking plant and saw the efficiency with which a conveyor belt helped meat cutters. He introduced the same system in his factory on December 1, 1913, and made the 'Tin Lizzie'. A standard in all automotive factories, what system was this?

6 The fastest-selling car in history was a stylish sporty coupe made by Ford, which became an icon of American racing. It went on to win the Indianapolis 500 and the Tour de France rally. Named after a breed of horses that roam freely in the Western United States, what model of car is this?

7 Willys-Overland was an American automobile company that made the model MB. These were built for 'General Purpose', and soldiers started calling them by a nickname. It became popular after the name started appearing in the Popeye comic strip. How better do we know this vehicle?

8 The 'Defender' is a series of off-road four-wheel-drive cars that gained a global reputation for ruggedness and versatility. Now under the Tata Jaguar name, they were originally made by a British company whose name refers to the fact these cars could go anywhere. What is the name of the company?

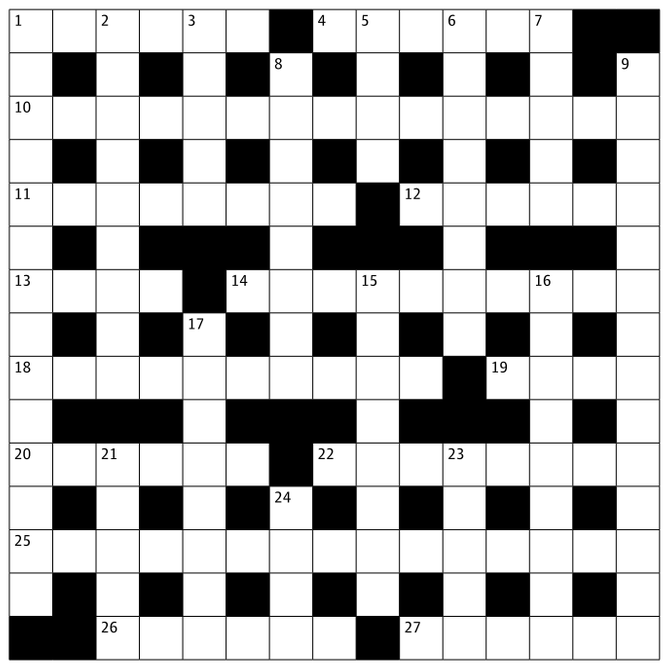
9 A pickup truck is a light-duty truck that has an enclosed cabin and a flat cargo bed with no roof. These trucks make up 16% of all automobiles made in the U.S., and one of the most popular ones is the F-150. Now in its 14th generation and seen in a lot of Hollywood movies, which company makes this vehicle?

10 This car is the longest-standing sports car in automotive history. A two-door high-performance car has been in production since 1964 and has been one of the most successful competition cars of all time. Originally called the '901', they had to change the name after Peugeot laid claim to that series. Which model is this that is still heard before being seen on roads?

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

Answers
1. Rosa Parks
2. The Beetle
3. Ambassador
4. Batteries (it was an electric car)
5. The assembly line
6. The Mustang
7. Jeep
8. Land Rover
9. Ford
10. Porsche 911

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3334



Across
1 Snakes which may repel the rain, Hans tells us (6)
4 Eldest archdeacon concealing primness (6)
10 Old fellow amid leonine noise and activity showing boisterous amusement (5,2,8)
11 Not good, working – ingenious! – assert rights collectively (8)
12 Announced 007's means for seeing tiny oriental craft (6)
13 They're doubly of interest to the sawmill's bookkeeper (4)
14 Italian food:Victor, tell Inigo to take a portion (10)
18 Safari's speed? (10)
19 Counterpart of doe or hen (4)
20 Like water on lake? £1 (6)
22 Duck, ablaze: this bird's brightly coloured (8)
25 In which squiffy or tight men fear retribution, finally? (3,7,5)
26 Runs over, sits back for Alpine dish (6)
27 Less important songs lacking energy as well (1-5)

Down
1 Preposterously arty, evil ritual in which other worlds are 'seen' (7,7)
2 Misbehaving act in animated film trousering £1,000 (7,2)
3 Sap about to stray (5)
5 Snare's component set up (4)
6 In fancy car, duke carries silver playthings (3,5)
7 Primarily: hideously detailed, titanic, verisimilous screens? (5)
8 With components reversed, run away to find branch (8)
9 Leaving chief execs exhausted where knives are out? (8,6)
15 Meandering topless, provoking reactions (8)
16 National Trust supported by Everyman: donated, tipped, droned on (9)
17 Mentors giving Bill protection from sun (8)
21 Unusual powerful chesspiece, itself taking its own knight (5)
23 Nasty and small, the wherewithal (5)
24 Against – alternately, 'gainst – independence (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3333

W	I	D	O	W	S	P	E	A	K		A	B	E	L
E		O		A		R		L			E		A	
L	E	D	E	R	H	O	S	E	N		G	A	R	B
L		O		A		P		R			R		Y	
			O	N	E	H	I	T	W	O	N	D	E	R
I		I		D		E		E		V		E		I
S	A	N	D	P	I	T		D	R	E	S	D	E	N
T		F		E					R		T		T	
H	O	L	L	A	N	D		O	S	T	R	I	C	H
I		E		C		E		W	H		T		S	
S	I	X	F	E	E	T	U	N	D	E	R			
L		I				R		G		H		P		I
O	R	B	S		M	A	J	O	R	I	T	I	E	S
V		L				C		A		L		A		I
E	V	E	N		S	T	I	L	L	L	I	F	E	S

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

A chain fence

How women traverse a minefield during their daily commute, and in life

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A few months ago, while chatting with my household help, I stumbled upon a truth that left me deeply shaken. She casually mentioned that she is a single mother. I could not help but feel confused. Every day, I see her wearing a *mangala sutra* around her neck, with a bright red *bindi* on her forehead – symbols that, in my understanding, signified marriage.

My mind swirled with questions. Was this a cultural practice I did not know about? Out of curiosity, I asked her why she wore those symbols despite being single. Her answer pierced through me like a cold blade.

She told me that during her daily commute, she had to take a bus to get from her home to mine. If the men around her knew she was single, she feared they might see her as vulnerable prey. To protect herself from unwanted advances and leering eyes, she adorns the symbols of marriage– a *mangala sutra* and a *bindi* – as a kind of armour, a fragile illusion of security in a world that can be so predatory. When she returns home, she takes them off, shedding the facade along with the exhaustion of the day. The idea that a woman must cloak herself in the guise of marriage, not for love or tradition but for survival, was heart-wrenching.

As I reflected on that conversation, a deep sense of discomfort settled over me. It nudged me to look inward, to unravel the defence mechanisms I have woven into my life. Whenever I speak with a man – whether at work or elsewhere – I instinctively mention being "in a relationship". It's not always true, but it feels safer that way.

It's strange how easily this lie slips into place, not to comfort myself, but to ensure my warmth is not mistaken for invitation. Interactions have become like walking a tightrope. Childhood friendships with boys were simple, and easy. Now, every glance and word demands scrutiny, as if guarding a fragile boundary between professionalism and something darker. This invisible armour, though heavy, feels necessary for survival.

It's maddening how my mind has been rewired to see suspicion where there should be none. I have trained myself to be cautious, to withhold trust, to assume the worst. Because time and again, the men who commit crimes against women are not strangers – they are someone's father, brother, husband, or partner. And that terrifying reality always leaves me asking the same haunting question: "What if he's the same?"

This is just one example, only a glimpse into the daily struggles women face and the masks we wear to protect ourselves. It's a mask born out of necessity, a shield we are forced to carry, but it's far from the only one. For every story like mine, there are so many more untold. As I write this, I can't help but wonder – will the men who read these words pause, reflect, and understand the weight of our experiences?

I write this with a spark of hope in my heart. Hope that these words will resonate, that they will open eyes and stir something deeper within men – a desire to be part of the solution. To not only read and empathise but to act, to change their behaviours, their environments, their interactions, so that women can walk this world without the constant fear of being misunderstood or preyed upon.

Writing this piece is both cathartic and painful. It's a reminder of the burdens women carry but is also a call for change. And I hold onto the belief that maybe, just maybe, these words will reach someone who's ready to listen and make a difference.

Dogs as walking buddies

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Archaeological evidence shows that the relationship between dogs and humans is one that transcends centuries, cultures, and civilisations. For instance, an investigation carried out by prehistorian Michel-Alain Garcia on the paw prints of a large canid revealed that they were from a domesticated dog accompanying a child into the Chauvet cave, a famous Palaeolithic structure in southern France. This landmark find offers proof that dogs travelled alongside our ancestors during their nomadic days.

Cut to the present day, and we see that nothing much has changed with regard to the human-canine bond. But due to the pressures and demands of modern-day work schedules, many are not only compelled to embrace a sedentary lifestyle, resulting in issues related to limited mobility but also face severe time constraints that hinder them from fulfilling their personal interests. Inevitably, this challenging situation also affects those with dogs at home. Many people, as a result, find it difficult to take their dogs out for regular walks, and may prefer walking them occasionally. As dog parents, however, we must prioritise walking them regularly.

Staying indoors all day paves the way for obesity and boredom among canines. Dogs are quite active by nature, especially in their puppy years. However, factors such as inactivity and a steady decline in their metabolism rate as they age makes them prone to obesity. Also, when other factors such as overfeeding are at play, obesity can appear earlier, even at a young age. Fortunately, however, regular walk sessions can help prevent obesity among dogs, and at the same time, alleviate boredom among them by fostering their natural curiosity and enhancing their social confidence.

Furthermore, it is no secret that dog walks not only benefit our pets, they benefit us too. From giving us the opportunity to spend quality time with our canine buddies to exploring the outside greenery, dog walks prove their worth as an important physical activity for humans. Being a fabulous low-intensity exercise, dog walking also reduces the chances of cardiovascular diseases, constipation, and weight gain. Additionally, it gives us the chance to meet and interact with others in the locality, which, in turn, has a profound positive social and psychological impact.

Women's safety is a national concern

High-profile incidents of violence spark public anger but fade too quickly from the memory

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Millions of women live in India's congested streets, busy marketplaces, and even peaceful homes with a silent anxiety of being in danger in places where they ought to feel safe. There is always a risk of violence or harassment even at home, not to mention when taking a stroll or using public transport. Safety is a daily struggle for many women, fought in whispers and caution, and it frequently goes undetected by others around them.

Even with India's advancements in a number of areas, the protection of women is still a major national concern. High-profile incidents of violence against women often spark public anger, but fade too quickly from public memory. Women who experience pain after harassment, abuse, or violence but choose to keep quiet out of fear of social stigma, humiliation, or lack of support are innumerable and unheard.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Laws alone are insufficient to address women's safety. There is the utmost requirement of a change in society – a mentality that all women are equal to men and should be respected from an early age.

There is a need of creating an atmosphere allowing women to feel free to walk alone and raise their voice and share their concerns without worrying about repercussions. As a society, we have to choose between allowing fear to continue to control the lives of our mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends, or establishing a country in which women are free to live, work, and dream. If we bring in change within our society, the day is not far when women can walk freely and fearlessly with every voice raised, hand offered in support, and action taken to ensure their safety.

Women's security is not just a women's issue but it is a human concern. It is an utmost necessity to replace the silent cries of women by their loud courage reverberating throughout a country that unites for their safety and security.

Reading by other means

A new generation of readers does not bank on books alone but taps a variety of digital sources

Aakash Bajpai
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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Once in an interview, a woman remarked, "You must be an avid reader." I replied in the affirmative. Then she asked me about my favourite book. I told her that I do not read books as such. She was perplexed and held that today's generation has lost a taste for reading. I explained to her that digital sources have made the job of finding suitable content simpler. So, I was a reader but not a book-reader, in the traditional sense. Her surprise reminded me of the prudes obsessed with the printed book.

Some people have abhorred the idea of e-books and blogs replacing the good old books. They have argued that new media lacks the potential to help learning in the way books have done so far. Apart from ridiculing today's generation for losing interest in reading and wasting their time on screens, some have mocked their intelligence quotient. But, this obsession with books does not make sense to me. Ultimately, books are a medium of exchange of ideas. We must give primacy to the ideas and not the medium.

Media have kept pace with the change in technology. In ancient times, people used to transmit knowledge through verbal medium, apart from inscribing on the materials available then. Then, the paper was invented and documentation became easier. The invention of the printing press brought about another revolution and then came the computers. This change not only reflects the technological progress but also the democratisation of information that followed it.

But the transformation is seldom smooth due to the cultural lag. People have always resisted the changes that compel them out of their comfort zones. Think about the opposition to the printing press during medieval times. The opposition to digital content could be viewed with a similar lens. Traditional book lovers need to realise that printed books were a revolution of their time and the digital media of today is its successor.

Digital media has made a plethora of content accessible to the masses in the remotest areas. Now, information is no longer a monopoly of the few on the privileged premises. Not only content consumption but also its creation is getting decentralised. This has also led to a rise in questions about quality and credibility. So, when a journalist told me that research has become easier, I disagreed with him. I said it had become even more difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. Technology has made things accessible, not easier; it has made things faster, not accurate. But still, technology has its merits anyway.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Students from rural India face innumerable challenges in finding a job for lack of spoken English skills. (The Indian school of personal improvement'; Nov. 24) We need more entrepreneurs to help in building such institutions while also making them accessible to all.
M.N. Saraswathi Devi

Our universities with obsolete syllabi hardly provide the requisite skills and knowledge to students. Thanks to the initiative of creative entrepreneurs, there are now many institutions that give finishing touches to raw talent from colleges. This value addition is immense and can make our youth suitable for numerous lucrative jobs in international markets.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

In a dog-eat-dog world, a make-believe transmogrification of personality has reached the level of inevitability, and therefore Personal Improvement Schools have space to flourish. From success in the marriage market to political one-upmanship, a spruced-up personality can do wonders. After all, there is no second chance to make a good first impression.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

The truth about Kashmir

To characterise the entire Kashmiri population as 'oppressed' at the hands of the Indian soldier is shameful stereotyping. ('Love in the time of espionage'; Nov. 24) At the same time, this betrays abysmal ignorance of the ground realities in Kashmir. Having spent close to two decades in Kashmir (not in a combat role), I can vouch that the majority of the Kashmir population wants peace and is grateful to the Indian army for maintaining it.
Ram Paniker

Women in cinema

One of the main aspects of moviemaking is box office success rate. ('Notes on feminism from the hills'; Nov. 24) Considering that men are the major consumers, women characters are made just to look pretty. A change in society where there's greater gender equality and autonomy of women will reflect in such character appearing in films as well, while ensuring ticket sales.
Rohith Varon S.S.

Satirical warfare

Let's take a moment to appreciate G. Sampath, whose satires have always been on point. ('Mind the g-word'; Nov. 24) He has the wit to takes digs at the current happenings around the world, ensuring that the gravity of the situation is not compromised. His articles remind me of the famous saying, 'Life is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think'.
Rohit Kaushik

Celebrating art

It is imperative that corporations come forward to support this great celebration of art. ('Bengal Biennale and the tale of the wolves'; Nov. 24) The West Bengal government should provide the necessary infrastructure in Santiniketan, where thousands of art admirers are expected to gather for the Biennale.
N. Rama Rao

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Are we too quick to judge?
Rather than rushing to condemn, what if we took a moment to consider the circumstances?
Asma Afreen

The lost magic of cinema halls
Standing in long queues, eagerly waiting for the bell to ring, navigating narrow, pan-stained corridors
J. Clement Selvaraj

Outwitting the onion
The duel with the staple in the kitchen
Nirmala Varma

The importance of exercising
It does help to counteract the ill-effects of prolonged sedentary lifestyles
George Netto

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Art in a tourist hub (Clockwise from left) Jessica Segall's *(un)common intimacy*; Ravinder Reddy's *Parvati*; George K.'s *Aravani*; Anish Kapoor's *S-Curve*; and Priyageetha Dia's *Spectre System*. (PREECHA PATTARAUMPORNCHAI, SENI CHUNHACHA, AND CHRIS VAN KLINKEN)

Spread across 11 venues that include busy shopping centres and temples, the fourth edition of Bangkok Art Biennale is getting a lot of things right this year

ANISH KAPOOR AT THE MALL

Bharat Epur

A large coral-coloured resin horn, *Good Like Gaia* by Italian artist Lello Esposito, curves to the sky in the gardens at the Wat Prayoon temple complex. Eyeballs pop up at the most unexpected places across Bangkok: British artist Bruce Asbestos's wobbly, green *Eye of Newt* at Museum Siam, inspired by frogspawn and the idea of change, and the late French-American artist Louise Bourgeois' carved granite *Eyes*, signifying introspection, at Wat Pho. And 10 minutes away, at Siwamokkhaphiman Hall, part of the Grand Palace complex, a 19th-century clock – a gift to the monks from Thai king Rama V – takes on significance juxtaposed with a video installation about the king's Europe tour in 1897. The four-minute piece by Thai artists Nakrob Moonmanas and Chitti Kasemkitvatana delves into concepts of time, and how it changed from the Buddhist non-linear format to the more western one defined by productivity.

These seemingly distinct installations cohesively come together when viewed through the lens of Bangkok Art Biennale's 2024 theme, 'Nurture Gaia' – embracing themes of hybridity, contemplative ecology, femininity, disappearing knowledge, and the supernatural.

Curated by Apinan Poshyananda, artistic director of the biennale since its inception in 2018, and a team of curators, the fourth edition features 76 artists from 39 countries, and exhibits across 11 venues in the city. "The theme reflects an urgent call to address the Anthropocene impact while also offering hope. Through art, we explore the duality of crisis and care, showcasing works that advocate for environmental awareness, activism, and healing," says Poshyananda. Among the big names from India are Anish Kapoor, with his iconic *S-Curve*, Ravinder Reddy, George K., and Chitra Ganesh.

One for families and tourists

In contrast to the Venice Biennale, with its formal pavilions and art cognoscenti flying down to visit, biennales hosted in the heart of a city, especially a tourist hub, are quite different. At the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India, you spot families and tourists wandering the bylanes of Fort Kochi, slipping into old warehouses and walking up wooden staircases in historic cafes to interact with the art. There is a similar, familiar air in Bangkok, where parents with children in tow, tourists, and art lovers dog each other's footsteps as they follow the river and city routes. Spread across temples, museums, galleries and convention centres, the art merges seamlessly with daily life.

Reddy's *Parvati* draws large crowds at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, as does Anish Kapoor's gleaming *S-Curve* displayed at the new lifestyle hub, One Bangkok. At the National Gallery, I meet George K., a retired banker and self-taught artist whose *Aravani* series of sculptures and paintings of transgender women from Tamil Nadu explores inclusivity and gender fluidity. The life-sized hyperrealist fibreglass sculptures are eye-catching with their bright costumes, and inscribed words in English, Tamil and Hindi. "Thai and Indian aesthetics overlap in many ways, so I can see how people relate to my work," says George. "The concept is also timely because Thailand will legalise same-sex marriage in January 2025. I am in the right place at the right time."

Elsewhere at the gallery, Ganesh, a visual artist from New York, uses images from billboards, product labels, advertisements and comics in *The Thick of Time* to 'speak to contemporary realities of conflict, power, and desire'.

Among the more unique exhibits is Jessica Segall's *(un)common intimacy*, a two-channel video installation in a temple hall at Wat Prayoon, where the artist is shown interacting with tigers and alligators in swimming pools – addressing the loss of wild commons and offering a contrast to the ideas of control and entertainment that these creatures usually face. Lao artist Bounpaul Phothyzan's sculptures, carved out of bomb casings, are evocative of entire generations destroyed. And let's not forget Amanda Coogan's performance of *Ode to Joy* from Beethoven's 'Ninth Symphony' with Thai adults and youths who have hearing disabilities. The silent choir, which bypasses language and racial barriers, is a powerful collaboration.

Lessons to learn

As more visitors arrive, one has to ask what Bangkok is getting right. "The Bangkok Art Biennale has a wide cross-section of artists on display, often two-three from a country. But what I find most interesting is that they had a pavilion at the Venice Biennale earlier this year. They showcased their work and built up momentum," says George. "You attract a much wider audience in this way. I still don't understand why we are not doing this in India."

Back home, budget has always been a sore point. The Kochi Biennale recently cited 'organisational challenges' when they announced postponing the event by a year, to December 2025. Bangkok doesn't seem to have the same challenges. "From what I could see, the government funds it, as do several business houses," the artist adds.

The Bangkok Art Biennale is on till February 25, 2025.

The writer is a Chennai-based art aficionado.

Deepali Dhingra

The gallery that Husain named

As Gallery Espace celebrates 35 years, founder Renu Modi looks back at a brand built on intuition and friendship

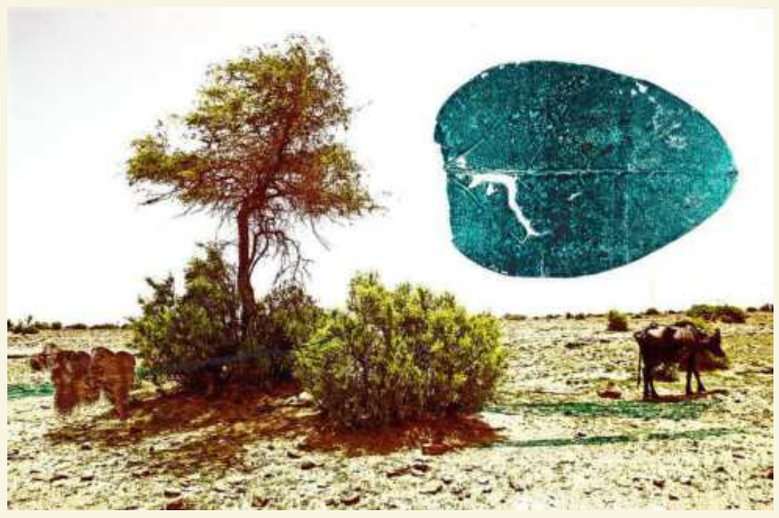
Renu Modi learnt all about scale, light, shadows and angles from M.F. Husain. In fact, it was the legendary artist who encouraged her to open her own art gallery in Delhi 35 years ago. Husain named it Gallery Espace, designed its logo with his distinctive horse, and ensured the first exhibition in 1989 was of his autobiographical watercolours.

Not surprisingly, he also designed her house back then. The day before the exhibition opened, Husain invited his friends to Modi's house for an unofficial preview. "People would tell me that you have powerful friends," she recalls with a laugh, adding that to her he was just a loyal friend.

Painting walls and having fun

As a self-taught gallerist with no formal education in art, Modi, 67, has always relied on her intuition – and the relationships she nurtured with artists such as Husain, which helped shape her perspective. On the 35th anniversary of Gallery Espace, she looks back at a large roster of shows of note, art *addas* (informal discussions at the fringes of exhibitions), and new talents. Prominent names such as Manjunath Kamath and Subodh Gupta started their artistic careers at her gallery. "Pakistani artist Talha Rathore showcased for the first time in India at our gallery, as did Ali Kazim," she says, recalling his layered, textured watercolours.

One of their biggest shows, *The Self and The World* (1997) curated by art critic Gayatri Sinha, brought together 16 Indian women artists, from Amrita Sher-Gil to Anjolie Ela Menon. Modi shares how it was the result of several discussions with artists such as Manjit Bawa and Husain about the need to showcase more women.



But she's had the most fun with shows that have been more instinctual. In 2010, when Kamath asked her if he could paint on the gallery's walls and turn it into a mini studio, she agreed. "That was the kind of understanding we had," she says. Artists such as Chitra Ganesh and Ishita Chakraborty have also used these walls to create art.

A new ecosystem

Over the years, Modi has been a witness and active participant in the evolution of the Indian art ecosystem – from when "art was not really seen as an investment; it did not exist as a market", to the present when collectors are well-informed, thanks to exposure through increased travel, spending power, and the "amount of information available online".

The presence of younger gallerists, artists, and trained curators, she says, is also contributing to the change. Their ongoing exhibition, *Ancestral Futures*, a part of their anniversary celebrations, is a good example. Swiss curator Damien Christinger offers not only a retrospective of the gallery's journey, but also looks to the future through contemporary art practices. There's commentary on the present – "Sonia Mehra Chawla showcases the post-colonisation tea and jute industry of Bengal; Ravi Agarwal looks at our changing environment" – and shared storytelling that loops back to the past.

For instance, Christinger invited artists to reimagine the 1989 poster of Husain's show. A wall is dedicated to its various interpretations: from Delhi-based photography studio Maze Collective Studio's deconstruction, where founder-artist Ashish Sahoo collages it with superimposed images of a woman dressed as Gaja Gamini (the protagonist of Husain's eponymous film starring Madhuri Dixit), to visual artist Uzma Mohsin, who cut up the poster and spliced it with other images, including Husain's face.

How to spot an artist

Modi says she still relies on intuition. However, she adds that intuition also comes from years of honing her eye. "The market is not my focal point for selecting an artist. I look at what they have done and are doing. I look at their drawing practice and their thought process, and I ask, 'Why are they doing what they are doing?'"

In this digital age, when avenues are plenty, she believes galleries are still the most important link – as they represent artists and take them forward. "Once Husain and I were in Dubai, and he told me, 'I don't need any of you [galleries], but what all of you have done for me when I was growing, is something I could not have done myself." The same holds true now.

The Delhi-based writer covers art, culture, theatre, food and travel.

35 and counting (Clockwise from left) M.F. Husain's 1989 poster, reimagined; Renu Modi with Husain; an installation by Sonia Mehra Chawla; and Ravi Agarwal's artwork. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)