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COUNTDOWN TO PARIS 2024

A month before the start of the Olympics, thoughts on what this edition of the Games will bring to the table and the challenges it must tackle to present the idea of sport as a unifying force



ILLUSTRATION: SOUMYADIP SINHA

Suresh Menon

On a visit to Paris last year, I saw little enthusiasm for the Olympic Games, starting in the French capital next month. "We are not looking forward to it," said a baker, summing up the sentiment: it will be like the lockdown, we will have to work from home, going out will become difficult (16 million visitors are expected), we will be paying for the Games for years. A few, however, looked forward to renting out their apartments for a fortune during the event.

According to *The New York Times*, "The Olympic Games Committee has issued assurance that Paris will be able to house 100,000 visitors during the Games... price boosting has already begun." That is from a report ahead of the 1924 Games in Paris. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, as the French say.

The host city is seldom happy – succeeding in the bid is seen as the winner's curse – but the world looks forward to the magic. You can be cynical or optimistic about the Games depending on which end of the metaphorical telescope you view it from, but magic it is.

Even if that magic started off with a chuckle in Paris. The mascot of the Games, the Phryges, is being seen as "clitoris in trainers", the feminist's answer to the phallic symbol that is the Eiffel Tower. It is too, an inadvertent pointer to one of the issues facing the Games, and humanity in general – the matter of the gender spectrum.

In fact, many of the world's concerns – gender, environment, drugs, sexism, terrorism, cybersecurity, dislocation of communities, corruption in the establishment, financial overreach, excessive nationalism, racial inequity – can be seen in concentrated form at the Games over the years. If the Olympics are the best sport has to offer, they also display the fault lines in the real world. Sport and life are like facing mirrors, reflecting each other.

Clean and green Games?
Paris hopes the carbon footprint of the Games will be half that of London 2012 or Rio de Janeiro 2016. Construction has been minimal, with 95% of the venues being existing structures; equestrian events will be at the Château de Versailles, swimming in a cleaned-up Seine. President Emmanuel Macron – who announced that the national elections will be held in June-July, thus adding another degree of difficulty to the preparations – has pledged to swim in the river to show that it is clean.

When it is clean.
The Seine is the venue for

what promises to be a most spectacular Opening Ceremony involving boats carrying the 10,500 athletes before an audience of three lakh on its banks.

Winners will carry with them a sliver of history – the medals will have a bit of the Eiffel Tower in them, embedded from the iron that has been removed and conserved in the course of the many renovations of the 1889 structure.

Bedside tables are made from recycled shuttlecocks, dinner plates can be repurposed for they will have no logos, and the Olympic Village will have no air-conditioning. This might be the greenest Games ever.

Paris is Hemingway's "moveable feast", and so too are the Olympics. As an event, they might have lost some sheen – they are too costly (Greece went bankrupt after Athens 2004), disused stadiums abound, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is a law unto itself – but the Olympics as an idea we must cherish, believing its ideals are attainable. It is a necessary myth.

It is also an important measure of who we are and what we can do. When Usain Bolt runs the 100 metres in 9.63 seconds, we are gratified – this is what we as a species are capable of. Bolt and Simone Biles and Michael Phelps and Elaine Thompson-Herah represent us, and we are relieved we don't have to work as hard as they have. It is enough knowing their feats are possible, that our fantasies can be realised by others.

Perhaps that is the way to reconcile the contradictory nature of the quadrennial event. The attraction is not the institution, but the individual athletes, their skill, their courage.

We might like to believe that under the banner of the Olympics, our similarities will be highlighted, friendship and commonality will be the theme. Perhaps, as the author Simon Barnes put it, "The torch should be lit, and one by one the flags of the nations should be cast into it."

Prestige of hosting
We can dream, but that isn't what the sports-entertainment-marketing complex is about. NBC didn't pay \$7.65 billion (through 2032) to sink nationhood, however briefly. Triumphalism and jingoism are the keys to viewership.

We will hear in Paris speeches about how we must give peace a chance. But Russia will continue to attack Ukraine and the war in West Asia will continue despite the so-called 'Olympic truce' being in place.

The budget for Paris has already doubled – and counting – from its optimistic \$5 billion. The Tokyo Olympics were budgeted for \$7.5 billion but spent \$35 billion. This puts India's dream for 2036 in perspective. Boston withdrew from the 2024 bid, the mayor saying he "refused to mortgage away the future of the city".

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4

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**More lesbian narratives****AMBAR SAHIL CHATTERJEE**

Literary agent and writer

The focus at present seems to be on gay male narratives; there is so little on lesbian experiences, trans experiences or non-binary experiences. And imagine, if these were to be given further dimension by not restricting them to the mainstream bubble of urban experiences? What about queer narratives from smaller cities and towns, villages, from regions where there might not be an immediate vocabulary to articulate what it means to be queer? And then imagine if these experiences could be further expressed in different genres: not just in a memoir or literary fiction, but rom-coms, horror, sci-fi, fantasy, YA, children's literature. And that would only be the beginning.

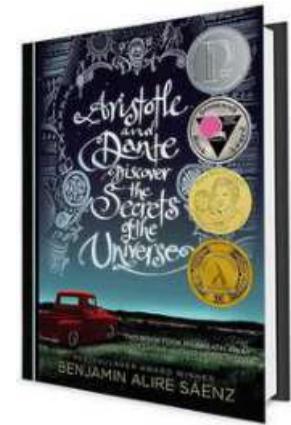


Must read
Heartstopper (Alice Oseman);
Giovanni's Room (James Baldwin);
Maurice (E.M. Forster); A Little Life (Hanya Yanagihara)

**Why are people uneasy with queer desire?****ONIR**

Filmmaker and queer rights activist

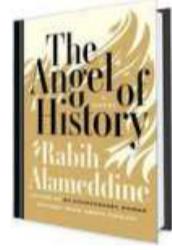
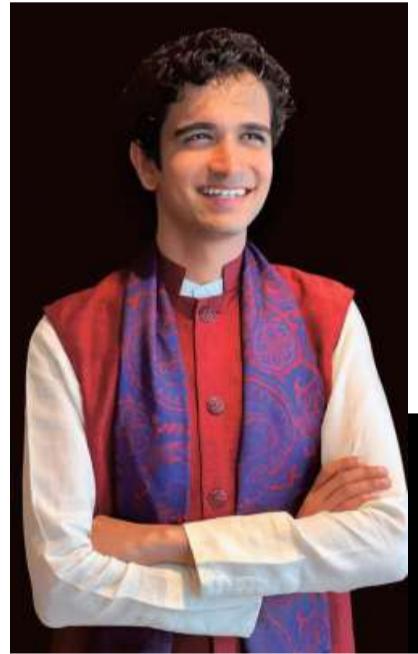
When I did my movie *Pine Cone*, I realised that none of our films represent desire and its emotional depths, and I wanted to study the emotions that a person goes through while navigating love and relationships. I found that a lot of straight or closeted people are uncomfortable with seeing queer desire on the screen. Is heterosexuality so insecure that people get anxious watching a story of queer desire? What makes it so difficult for straight people to accept these stories as just other stories about desire? The same extends to books and the stories they carry. We are not one lesbian or gay or trans story, we have so many stories to share.



Must read
Queeristan (Parmesh Shahani); Aristote and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe (Benjamin Alire Sáenz)

PRIDE MONTH 2024

Fair and inclusive representation in Indian literature continues to be a distant dream, say artists and activists as they articulate what they would like to read

RESISTING STEREOTYPES OF QUEERNESS

Must read
The Angel of History (Rabih Alameddine); Payakhali Hirval (Ramchandra Siras) Alire Sáenz

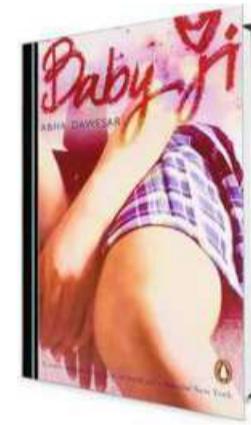
Kartik Chauhan

The arrival of Pride Month sends a rainbow-coloured shockwave through corporations and cultures globally, as brands change their logos and devise woke marketing campaigns. Over the last few years, a lot has been written about this sudden and temporary awakening. But despite our frequent and critical engagement with ideas of representation and diversity, we are far from their balanced applications. In most representations of queer identity, a sameness pervades.

In the introduction to their ground-breaking anthology of queer

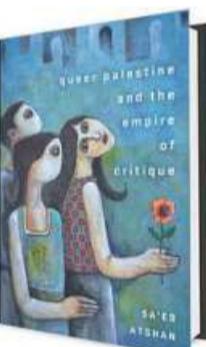
poetry from South Asia, *The World That Belongs To Us*, authors Akhil Katyal and Aditi Angiras write about the need to "disperse" and "splinter" the word "queer". "People live their lives through a maddeningly complex slew of names, identities and gestures. 'Queer' only pretends to signpost them all, but it is precisely that, a convenient pretence, meant for book covers, not for all its contents."

The challenge of representation, it seems, is its inability to incorporate a spectrum. We ask queer activists, voices and personalities about their vision for the way forward, and the queer stories, narratives and representation they'd like to see more of in literature. Edited excerpts:

**Go beyond the funny or traumatised sidekick****NEHA BHAT**

Sex and trauma therapist

In my book, *Unashamed*, I write about the concept of 'neuroqueerness' which is the idea that one's queerness isn't limited to and defined by sex and sexuality only, but rather, can focus on a more expansive view of living a life outside norms. I find this definition more inclusive of Indians who do not want to be seen as either the main character's funny or traumatised sidekick, but as a healthy individual with their own life journey. Our narratives must focus on family challenges in embracing queerness, showcase successful familial stories where elders have silently accepted and in their own way made space for their family member's queerness, alternative family structures such as women heading the family, single people bringing up children with less stigma, and so on.

**No marketing budget for queer authors?****CHINTAN GIRISH MODI**

Journalist and educator

Queer publishing seems to be growing well in India, especially after the Supreme Court read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. What's missing is a big marketing budget to make these books visible not only to readers but also to award juries and literature festivals. Queer narratives need to be marketed sensitively and intelligently, and publishers should make an effort to support queer authors who are not celebrities.

**Queer and trans subjects not just for entertainment****SANTA KHURI**

Gender-rights activist, writer and artist

In India and the rest of the world, media platforms mostly use queer and trans subjects either for entertainment or commercial reasons. Any narratives that come from unconventional gender paradigms are made to feel alienated and disgusting. I wish more queer and trans scholars would support grassroots writers. Also, our community needs to exchange experiences and improve our writing skills. We can also write about cis gender stories to help shift people's prejudices into progressive forces. This may help increase the demand for our writings both in the publishing industry and elsewhere.

Give us queer stories all-year round**PRAMADA MENON**

Queer feminist activist

Queer narratives have to be more expansive and inclusive and not just about queer identity. They should include gender and sexual orientation and cut across class, caste, religion, ethnicity, disability. It's rare to find queer stories except during pride month or when crimes against gay people happen. What about the rest of the year? There's silence. Most importantly, what do you mean by queer representation? Is there heterosexual representation or Dalit representation? Publishing has to tell stories because they exist. And people look for some validation that they exist. So if stories are told, then people will just take it in their stride instead of only seeing pride photographs.

Needed: translations of queer fiction, poetry and non-fiction**ANISH GAWANDE**

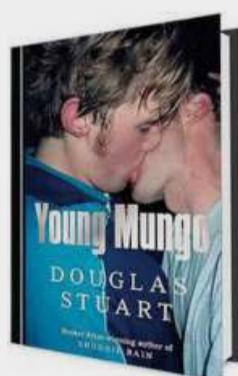
Founder, Pink List India

Translations of queer literature are sorely needed today. There are, of course, notable exceptions. *Entering the Maze: Queer Fiction of Krishnagopal Mallick*, translated by Niladri R. Chatterjee and published by Niyogi Books last year, is a spectacular example. I do wish more publishers would commission translations of queer fiction, queer poetry, even queer non-fiction.

**We still can't put two men kissing on the cover****MANISH GAEKWAD**

Author and screenwriter

Representation is double-edged. It's blunt on one side, as in there is no clear narrative, we haven't even captured the imagination of the YA genre like in the west, where representation is strong and inclusive. On the other hand, representation gets sharp in interpretation around here. It's how we read text. Most queer writers do not like being labelled and yet the stories they tell carry a queer subtext, or a sub-plot. We still can't put two men kissing on the cover, as in the case of *Young Mungo*, or tweak the nursery rhyme to 'Jill And Jane Went Up The Hill' because our educational institutions don't teach inclusivity, our society does not normalise it and our culture does not support it in cinema, music, theatre, art, because it is viewed as commercially non-lucrative.



Must read
Douglas Stuart's Shuggie Bain and Young Mungo

The writer is a Delhi-based literary reviewer. On X @karteak.

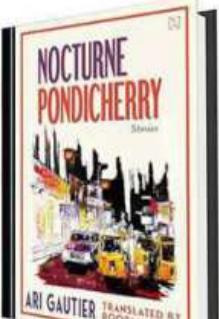
BROWSER**Nocturne Pondicherry**

Ari Gautier, trs Roopam Singh

Hachette

₹399

A collection of seven stories with layers that are slowly unmasked, offering readers a glimpse into the greed, anger and lust that fill the common man. Translated from the French, this makes for a riveting portrait of Puducherry.

**Talashnama: The Quest**

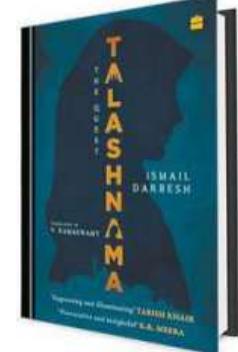
Ismail Darbesh,

trs V. Ramaswamy

HarperCollins

₹699

The Bengali bestseller about the colliding worlds of love, religion and politics, told through the story of a headstrong Muslim woman with a troubled past, is rendered just as powerful in this expert translation.

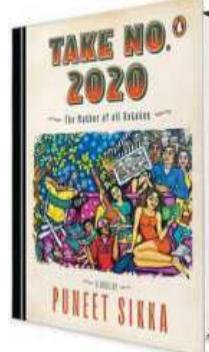
**Take No. 2020**

Puneet Sikka

Penguin

₹350

This novel is a witty take on the dreams and aspirations behind the silver screens of Mumbai, where reality is nothing except what you believe in. In the climax of their lives, the characters are forced to choose to be either a villain or a hero in their own stories.

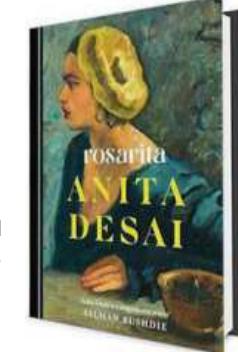
**Rosarita**

Anita Desai

Picador India

₹499

A novel from the Booker Prize-shortlisted author about an Indian student, Bonita, learning Spanish in Mexico and stumbling upon an unexpected past. A story of grief, memories and determination, *Rosarita* is a tribute to the past, present and future.



Crackdown on dissent

Alpa Shah's meticulous biography on the Bhima Koregaon accused is also an exposé of the misuse of state power

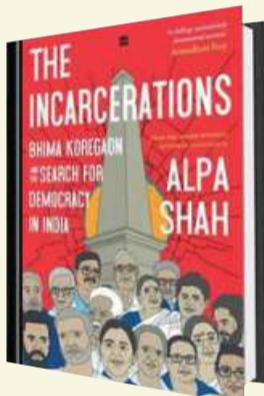


Voicing out
At a rally in Kolkata.
(GETTY IMAGES)

Ziya Us Salam
ziya.salam@thehindu.co.in

How does one summarise a richly detailed and painstakingly researched 560-odd page book, *The Incarcerations: Bhima Koregaon and the Search for Democracy in India*, by Alpa Shah? While it narrates the story of each of the 16 accused in the case with beguiling simplicity and without any embellishments, it is not your everyday leisurely read. Its best words, the most simple yet powerful ones, come not just with the stories of each of the accused but a little before the end.

Shah opens the chapter, 'Clipping the wings of the last bastions of democracy', with these words: "In the 'mother of



The Incarcerations
Alpa Shah
HarperCollins
₹699

democracy', 16 largely unconnected people from different parts of India – from Delhi in the north to Hyderabad in the south – found themselves thrown into jail between 2018-2020, accused of being Maoist terrorists, 'Urban Naxals'... they were all 'custodians of democracy'.... They had fought for the social justice of India's most vulnerable sections of society."

Sinister fabrication

Calling the Bhima Koregaon case, "a targeted state-driven attempt to silence the BK-16", she reveals that the so-called evidence used to rally the public against the accused was fabricated, and not entirely without the blessings of those at the very top of the hierarchy. She writes, "Such is the extent of evidence tampering, that the BK case has become a landmark for research into cyber espionage." If this is shocking, what comes later is startling. Shah reveals that the U.S.-based experts who took an interest in the cyber-data related to the BK case showed there was "a link between the police who made the arrests and those who hacked the computers". The evidence was planted remotely through a hacker-on-hire mercenary gang infrastructure. Due to such wilful lies and sinister fabrication, the likes of Stan Swamy, Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao, Shoma Sen, Gautam Navlakha, Vernon

Gonsalves, Arun Ferreira, Anand Teltumbde, Hany Babu and others found themselves behind bars for years. Swamy died in judicial custody in 2021.

Of course, part of the reason for their prolonged incarceration was the communal politics of the day. Attention was drawn to the so-called 'Urban Naxals' to protect instigators of a communal riot at Bhima Koregaon on January 1, 2018. In the riot, Hindutva leaders Milind Ekbote and Sambhaji Bhide stood accused of mobilising Marathas against local Dalits with the former being imprisoned for a month. Around this time, a new narrative was spun and raids were conducted on the premises of BK-16 activists alleging that they had incited the violence. Despite their protests and claims of innocence, this led to the arrest of the BK-16 activists. "The BK case provides a window into how many state institutions, including the judiciary, have come to be dominated.... The police force appears to be ready to stand back and grant a long leash to offenders, even protect them, for instance, by overlooking the alleged crimes of Milind Ekbote and Sambhaji Bhide, while at the same time, incarcerating those it wants to silence, like the BK-16."

Sending a signal

The Hindutva activists' angle was soon forgotten, with the help of the mainstream media. The focus shifted to 'Urban Naxals', and even an alleged death threat to the Prime Minister. Shah writes that the mainstream media was propagating the government's version of events. "This was clear in the media trials that dramatically flashed the fabricated Modi assassination plot letter across the country, and declared the BK activists to be guilty before the matter even reached the courts. Those media outlets which challenged the regime's version of events were targeted in order to be silenced."

The BK-16 case was much more than a targeted attack on supposed Maoists. It was meant to send a strong signal to anyone daring to speak up. "Comply with the regime, hide inside your shell, or else you too may find yourself in jail," is Shah's brief analysis of the events.

One may never know why these activists who did not know each other until after their arrests were linked together by the state apparatus. But there were common threads of speaking for justice, for Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims. This emerging alliance of the weak, vulnerable and the marginalised had to be nipped in the bud.

Shah's book raises pertinent questions. At one level, it is an unsettling human story of the activists. At another, it is an exposé of a system which uses different organs of the state to shape a politically convenient narrative. It's a must-read book for the times.



INTERVIEW

RIGHTS, INTERRUPTED

Brinda Karat on the rise of Hindu majoritarianism, its link with Manuvadi, and the impact of this combined force on society

Sunalini Mathew
sunalini.mathew@thehindu.co.in

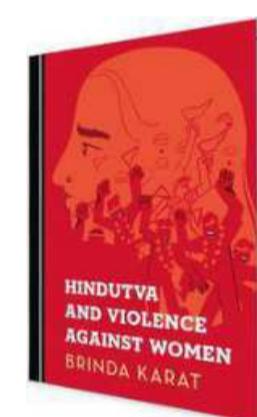
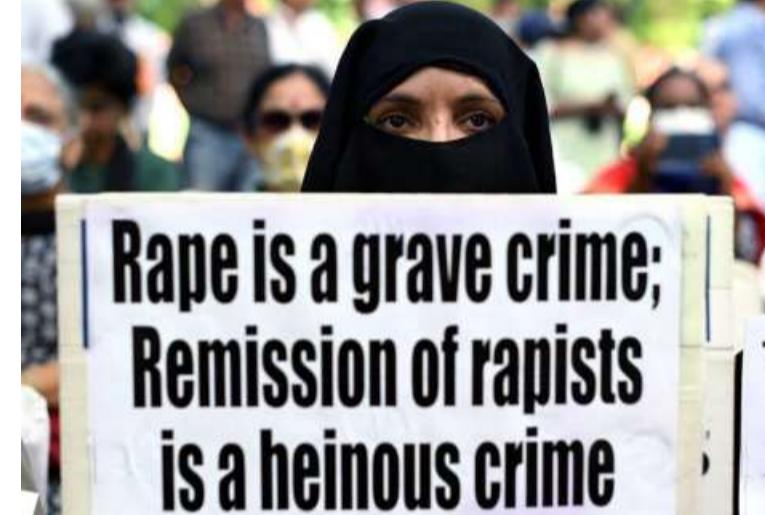
Brinda Karat's *Hindutva and Violence Against Women* came out during peak Lok Sabha election time, when every day brought with it an unsettling feeling that members of the ruling party would say something so nasty that we wouldn't be able to heal from the wounds. The "mangalsutra bhi bachne nahin denge" ('they will not let even your mangalsutra go') comment by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was blame twisted so out of shape, it pegged imagined future crimes on a Muslim minority whose women had in fact suffered at the hands of Hindutva, as the book proves. In fact, a part of Karat's 90-page monograph talks about "the demonisation of Muslim men" being an "important aspect of the Hindutva project", as she explains in this interview. Edited excerpts:

Question: The title is about women, but you talk about different groups of marginalised people: Dalits and Muslims, for example. Why?

Answer: The central point of this essay is not just the increase in cases of brutal violence against women over the last 10 years. We have seen horrific cases earlier too. To me, what is striking is that the government in power and dominant forces look at violence against women dictated by a changing framework which has two interlinked aspects – communal and Manuvadi majoritarianism – where the processes of justice get subverted. The approach is determined not by the need for justice for the victim, but it depends on the religious or caste identity of the victim and the perpetrator. This is my basic premise, and I link this with Hindutva's approach to women. If the perpetrator happens to be Muslim, the entire Hindutva ecosystem is driven to select those cases of rape and sexual violence to talk about. If both the perpetrator and the victim belong to the majority community, it is the woman who is blamed, particularly if she belongs to an oppressed caste.

Q: What aspects of violence against women should we be particularly cognizant of?

A: Change is so under the surface that we don't really see it and identify it until it hits us in our



Hindutva and Violence Against Women
Brinda Karat
Speaking Tiger Books
₹450

will only be read by those interested in feminism?

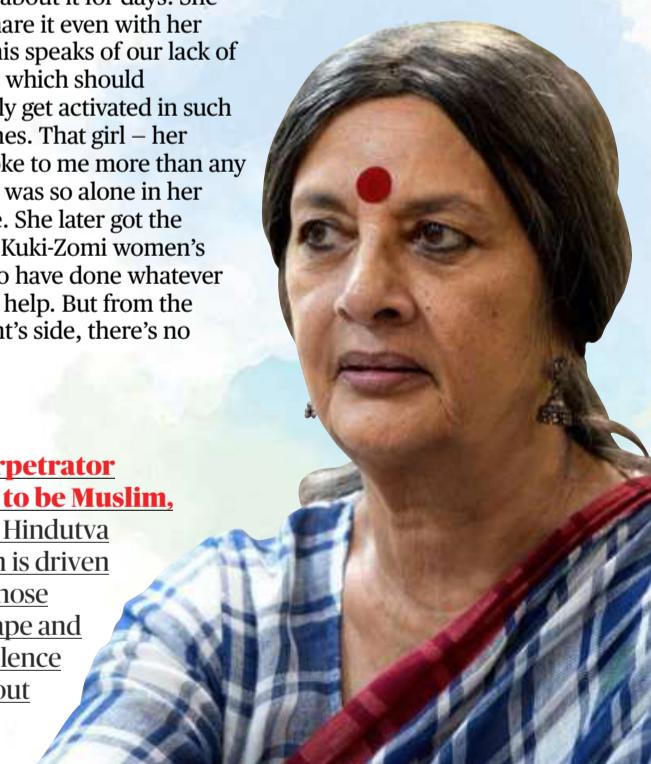
A: I do hope it will reach a larger audience. I would think there is an interest among young women who are grappling with some of the difficult situations [in the book] and this discussion may help.

Q: While all the incidents in the book are both heinous and heart-wrenching, which impacted you the most?

A: I cannot pick one; they all had a huge impact, but I do remember the 19-year-old tribal Christian girl in Manipur who saw her father and son killed in front of her eyes and was then stripped and gang raped. Later, that video was seen across the world. I cannot forget her courage and dignity. After that horrendous sexual violence, she kept silent about it for days. She couldn't share it even with her mother. This speaks of our lack of structures, which should immediately get activated in such terrible times. That girl – her silence spoke to me more than any words; she was so alone in her experience. She later got the support of Kuki-Zomi women's groups who have done whatever possible to help. But from the government's side, there's no



If the perpetrator happens to be Muslim,
the entire Hindutva ecosystem is driven to select those cases of rape and sexual violence to talk about



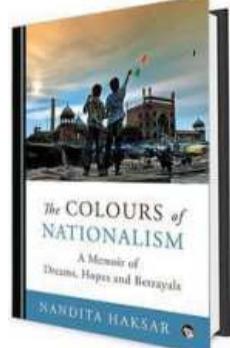
The Colours of Nationalism

Nandita Haksar

Speaking Tiger Books

₹599

A human rights lawyer writes a first-person account of the workings of the legal system, the challenges faced by marginalised communities including Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims, the reality of army rule in the Northeast, and the erosion of workers' rights.



CYK

Intimacy in Alienation

Ashis Roy

Yoda Press

₹599

Exploring Hindu-Muslim relationships, Roy talks to couples, all from the urban middle class, about their experiences. The two communities have a history of coexistence and conflict. He finds out about the challenges they face in holding on to diverse faiths and cultures.



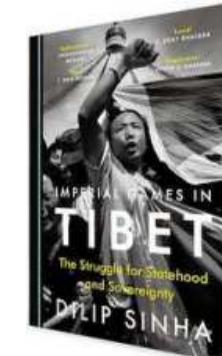
Imperial Games in Tibet

Dilip Sinha

Pan Macmillan

₹599

A former ambassador guides readers through Tibet's complex geopolitics, tracing its history from the rise of Tibetan Buddhism, through the Great Game, to its invasion and annexation by China in 1950. He explores the Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959.



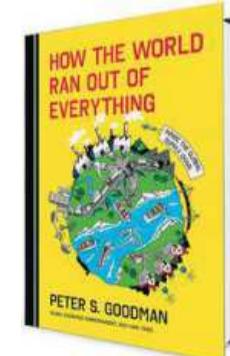
How the World Ran out of Everything

Peter S. Goodman

HarperCollins

₹599

In the backdrop of a pandemic and two wars, a journalist unravels the complexities and vulnerabilities of the global supply chain. Pushing for a resilient and equitable system, he looks into the chaos behind product shortages and shipping delays.



Game time French President Emmanuel Macron talks to young swimmers during the inauguration of the Olympic Aquatics Centre in Paris; and (below) French athletes pose with the Olympic Phryges mascot. (GETTY IMAGES)

CONTINUED FROM
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It will be interesting to see what Ahmedabad 2036 does if it wins the bid.

In 2012, a study in Oxford found that there had been a 25% cost overrun since 1976, the year Montreal was host. It took Montreal three decades to pay off its debts. Beijing's Olympic stadium, the Bird's Nest, cost \$460 million to build, needs \$11 million annually to maintain, and is now just a museum piece.

There is a good argument for hosting the Olympics either in one city – Athens, where it began in 776 BCE suggests itself – or for using the same venues in different continents in turn.

Financially and environmentally, that makes the most sense, but the IOC is only too conscious of the prestige attached to hosting the Games, by authoritarian regimes seeking the world's approval.

It is naive to believe that the Olympics are about sports alone. But, as



COUNTDOWN TO PARIS 2024



the gold-winning hurdler Edwin Moses said, "Most people only care about watching the Olympics every four years and couldn't care less about how they operate."

The IOC has shown in recent years that it is suspended between morality and human rights on one side.

commerce and dictator-pleasing (the Games in China, Russia) on the other. Pure coincidence, of course, but Albert Speer Jr., son of Hitler's chief architect, was the lead designer for the Beijing Games 2008, and created the central axis.

Still, the Olympics, despite everything, continue to have meaning and relevance. They are a reminder of possibilities, a tribute to the human spirit. "Faster, higher, stronger – together", the new motto contemporises the old one, bringing it in line with the concept of inclusivity. After all, to paraphrase poet Robert Browning, our reach should exceed our grasp.

The Olympics are magical. Or why would we stay awake till the early hours watching sports we have no idea about, cheering the winners, and just as importantly, those who tried and failed?

The writer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?



Games of power and change

Y.B. Sarangi
sarangi.y@thehindu.co.in

Paris 2024 will be the third edition of the Olympic Games to be held in the French capital after the first one in 1900 and the second, exactly 100 years ago, in 1924. Dubbed as Games Wide Open, the International Olympic Committee has taken some initiatives to set new benchmarks and emerge as a sensitive and responsible Games towards future generations. Fielding a Refugee Olympic Team for the third time in a row, comprising athletes from various conflict zones, underlines the need for a humanitarian approach in a world full of crisis.

Highlights from the upcoming Games and a reminder of some of the all-time greats from previous years:



Eyes on the prize (Clockwise from above) Indian athletes Mirabai Chanu and Neeraj Chopra; the Indian hockey team that won bronze at Tokyo 2020; and American swimming great Michael Phelps. (SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP, K.R. DEEPAK & GETTY IMAGES)

● For the first time, the opening ceremony will be held outside a stadium – on the Seine river.

● Break dance will make its debut at the Olympics this year.

● The mascots, called the Phryges, are based on the traditional Phrygian hats that have been a symbol of freedom since the French revolution.

● A single emblem will be used for both the Olympics and Paralympic Games, signifying inclusivity.



● This will be the first Olympics where an equal number of male and female athletes, 10,500 in all, will take part.

● More than 100 Indian athletes are expected to participate in this edition.

● Javelin champion Neeraj Chopra, boxer Lovlina Borgohain, shuttler PV Sindhu, weightlifter Mirabai Chanu and the men's hockey team will be seen in action in Paris.

● India hopes to reach double digits in their medal tally this year. They won seven at Tokyo 2020.

● American swimmer Michael Phelps, with 28 medals, including 23 gold, is the most decorated Olympian in the world. He was the first athlete to secure eight gold medals in a single edition. Former Soviet gymnast Larisa Latynina, with 18 medals (nine gold), is the most successful female Olympian. Among countries, the U.S. leads, with a total 2,638 Olympic medals (1,065 gold) over the years.

Sunil Rajagopal

I live near a siris (*Albizia lebbeck*). It stands shoulder-to-shoulder with a copper pod, flanked by two smooth-skinned *gummoths*. The *siris*, however, is not gregarious even with its own kind. It bends away from them, draping its rounded, umbrella-shaped shade gently over our yard. Trees do not like their canopies to touch.

Every year, I know summer is coming from the sudden abundance of tiny, wandering red ants and colourful picturewings framed against the sky. They arrive in time for the *siris* blooming in a burst of fluffy white pom-poms, which slowly turn a pale yellow, emanating a mellow fragrance that lingers on at night. Ants, flies and stingless bees swarm; butterflies like the restless green-tailed Jay and the slower, iridescent great egg fly pause to settle on the flowers.

The picturewings hover over the trees in small groups on stained glass wings, filtering black and yellow light from the sky. They look aimless and slow but are actively hunting the flower feeders. In turn, the picturewings and bees are picked off mid-air by blue-tailed bee-eaters.

Other birds also join the melee on the *siris* – flamebacks, white-throated kingfishers, drongos and tailorbirds all making use of this feast.

Who remembers the *vaagai*?

The *siris* is an Indian native and was once fairly widespread. Kalidasa personified Parvati with its delicate flowers in his *Kumarasambhava*. In Tamil, it is the *vaagai*, legendary in Sangam literature for its connotation to victory. Legends speak of Durga gathering her strength under a *vaagai*, before proceeding on her war with Mahisha. For this reason, garlands of its flowers were apparently worn by warriors.

Almost every part of the tree is considered useful as per Ayurvedic texts. Later, many trees with mimosa-like leaves came to be called *vagai* or variations of it. In Kerala, the Madagascar-born *gummotha* is often referred to as a *vaaka*.

How many of us can recognise or name a *vaagai* now? How many from Kerala would know the picturewings by their Malayali name, *Onathumbi* – literally the dragonfly of Onam. They would typically emerge during the harvest season, during August–September, to feast on the burgeoning insect population. Built-over wetlands and paddies have made them uncommon in

cities, so much so that most of us have forgotten their names. The *siris*, too, is not as conspicuous now, ignored in places as an avenue tree due to its deciduous and reclusive nature.

Tapping into collective memory

Naming something has an unseen power. Especially in nature, which many of us deem indistinguishably homogenous. Names, especially those in the local tongue, lead to stories, and stories tap into our collective memories. Learning the name of a tree or a bird or an insect often means learning something about it: its uses, its ties with local culture and geography, or its connections to other forms of life. Naming a living being is also an awareness of its position in a seasonal cycle or its place in time.

Above all, we understand something best when it can be quantified, especially in terms of its usefulness. Picturewings, for example, serve as biological pest control. As creatures of all three realms – earth, water and sky – dragonflies are excellent indicators of wetland health. Terrestrial insects are declining globally at 9% per decade. This is a critical number when you consider insects pollinate 75% of global crops and 80% of wild

plants. As the base of most food chains, fewer insects mean less food going around and yields dropping everywhere. An ecosystem's service that a value in billions of dollars would not do justice to.

Saviour of urban heat islands

Trees like the *siris* also combat heat island effects (which occur when natural land cover is replaced with pavements, buildings, and other surfaces that absorb and retain heat and lower temperatures locally by several degrees). Not just by its shade but by allowing cities to perspire



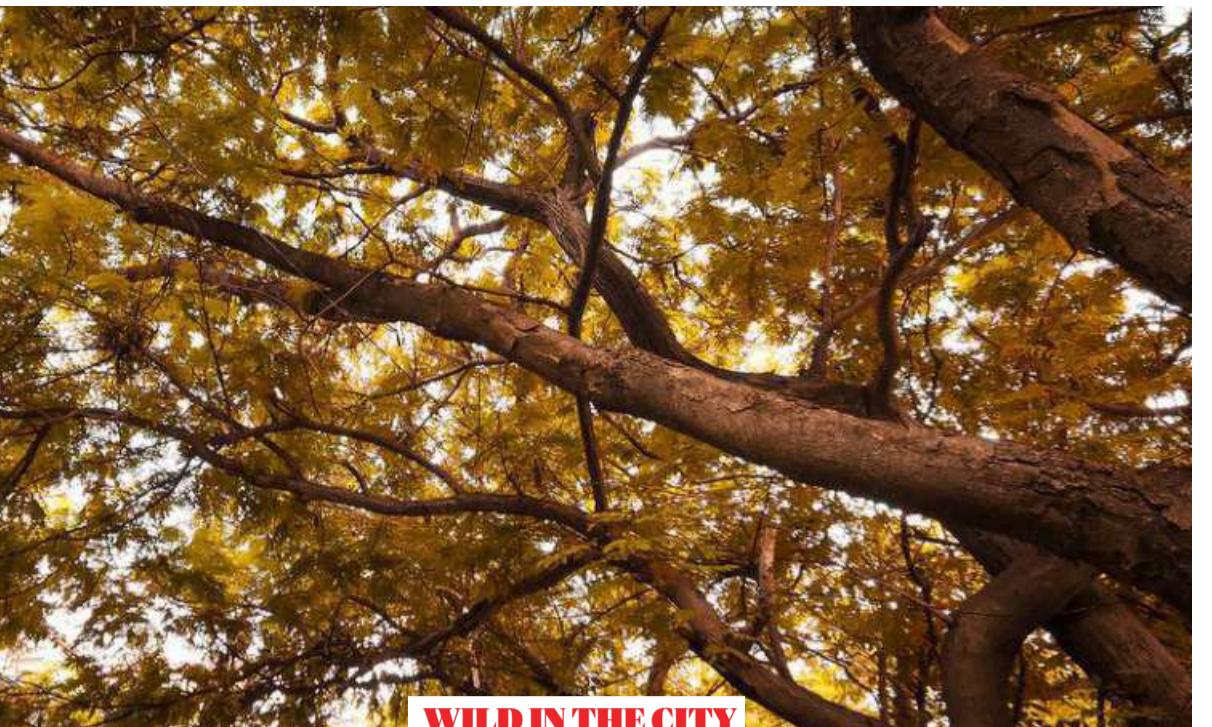
Leafy guardians (Clockwise from far left) A *siris* captured in the late evening light; common picturewings; and a man walking under the *vagai*. (SUNIL RAJAGOPAL)

through leaf transpiration. They decelerate raindrops, and their roots control runoff to allow better percolation. Dense foliage lowers particulate and noise pollution. All this while boosting insect and bird diversity. The extent of these effects varies with species, their structural features and geographic suitability.

It may be interesting to study the impact of Cyclone Michaung on Chennai last December, juxtaposed with the presence of tree cover. At a glance, it would appear that localities with more tree cover and consequently some amount of exposed soil for drainage fared better with flooding. They are also more likely to be the places with usable ground water availability. Unfortunately, public parks and privately owned gardens take up a lion's share of our urban green spaces. Making trees an indicator also of discrepancies in socio-economic well-being, sustainability and liveability of a city.

The author is a birder and writer based in Chennai.

The third article in a series that looks at urban spaces as havens for biodiversity and often overlooked species.



WILD IN THE CITY

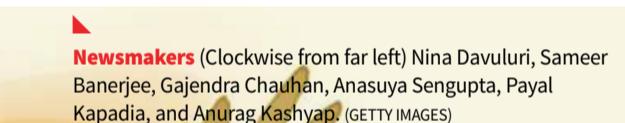
THE GREAT SIRIS OF INDIA'S CITIES

These majestic trees burst into bloom in summer, support hundreds of birds and insects, and inspire a myriad stories



plants. As the base of most food chains, fewer insects mean less food going around and yields dropping everywhere. An ecosystem's service that a value in billions of dollars would not do justice to.

POP-A-RAZZI



Newsmakers (Clockwise from far left) Nina Davuluri, Sameer Banerjee, Gajendra Chauhan, Anasuya Sengupta, Payal Kapadia, and Anurag Kashyap. (GETTY IMAGES)

himself was actually American, the son of Indian immigrants, was an inconvenient fact that was brushed aside in the euphoria.

When Nina Davuluri faced some slurs after she won the Miss America title in 2014, a newspaper in India said, "Racist remarks sour Indian girl's Miss America moment." Davuluri had already categorically said she viewed herself as "first and foremost American" from Syracuse, New York and Oklahoma. No matter, Indians were ready to claim her success as their own achievement.

WE DID NOT ROOT FOR THEM

But those were just strands of DNA pride and mostly limited to the media asking all-important questions like: "Do you like Indian food?", "Do you watch Bollywood films?", "Who is your favourite film star?". It was a way to claim our little corner in their global success story.

The Cannes jubilation is more misplaced. As Kashyap and others have pointed out, these achievements belong to those indie filmmakers and actors alone. They struggled against all odds to make the films. They didn't have the support of all those falling over themselves now to congratulate them. None of these people were rooting for them.

Will their success make it easier for the next Payal Kapadia to make an oscar-bait film? Will another Anasuya Sengupta attract the attention of filmmakers despite not having the traditional film hero look? Indie films will always be niche but will that niche get "an certain regard" in India without the *chappa* of a foreign award for Indians to take notice?

And when that film releases (and gets some godfathers mid-afternoon or late-night slot), will we go to the multiplex to see it? That's if it gets a slot at all. The Oscar-nominated documentary *All That Breathes*, which won an award at Cannes in 2022, never even got a theatrical release.

Perhaps, the Cannes moment is not just an occasion for celebration. But also a moment for introspection.

Misplaced pride

Why India's most recent Cannes glory is not just an occasion for celebration, but for introspection too

Yes, we Cannes. That seemed to be the prevailing sentiment after India's historic showing at the Cannes Film Festival this year.

Every year, India's Cannes coverage typically follows a certain formula. First there's a slew of photographs of Indian celebrities and quasi-celebs posing on the red carpet and a gush of reports about their outfits.

Then there's a series of finger-wagging articles bemoaning the fact that none of the red-carpetbaggers was there to promote actual films, that the film industry had again produced nothing that could be deemed Cannes-worthy.

Finally, someone shares an old photograph of Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil and Shyam Benegal at Cannes when Benegal's *Nishant* (1975) was nominated for the Palme d'Or award and everyone wistfully sighs about the long-lost good old art-film days.

This year, India broke the jinx. The *nishant* happened when Payal Kapadia took home the Grand Prix for her film *All We Imagine As Light*,

and Anasuya Sengupta won the Un Certain Regard Best Actress prize for *The Shameless*. It led to widespread jubilation and social media celebration from Prime Minister Modi to Bollywood stars to former FTII chair Gajendra Chauhan.

But as many pointed out, it was a little ironic for Chauhan to "feel proud" that he was "chairman at the time when (Kapadia) was doing the course there" given that Kapadia is still fighting legal cases stemming from his involvement in months of protest against his appointment.

Artists have their wishlist, too. Doha-raised Indian singer-songwriter Govind Thampi aka Thumpli, for instance, wants "more reliable ways of sending your music to playback editors and other promotion partners". Considering the rising number of bedroom artists today, they will soon be dictating more terms to distributors.

A taste of success

Chauhan, however, was an easy target for hypocrisy, a way to deflect attention from the rest of us. As filmmaker Anurag Kashyap said in an interview, India did not support these films. These "Indian" films were really French productions or self-funded or financed by the U.K. Film Lottery Fund. Even the Indo-French production is yet to receive its promised government rebate. Kashyap said Konstantin Bojanov, director of *The Shameless*, spent 10 years struggling with the

film and chose Sengupta, an art director, as lead after getting no interest from better-known actors.

And the truth is, most Indians didn't even know these films existed before they won their awards. We were too busy Googling influencer Nancy Tiya and her red-carpet outfit.

But while failure is an orphan, success has many mothers. Many Indians, especially movers and shakers, are patting themselves on the back about the Cannes success. It is proof positive of India's rising global star. But Cannes is just the latest example of an old phenomenon. Indians will routinely puff up with pride about *desi* entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, ignoring the hard truth that many of those super-achievers went to America because they felt stymied and snubbed in India.

When 17-year-old Samir Banerjee won the Wimbledon Boys' championship in 2021, a television channel in Assam called it a "proud moment for the Northeast" because his grandfather had been a general manager with an oil company in Assam in the 80s. That Samir

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

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Anurag Tagat

Anoushka Maskey's 2020 song "September Embers" has all the makings of an international hit. The folk pop tones have global appeal, and at over 12,800 streams on Spotify, it's fair to say it has its own audience. Her song was not made in some state-of-the-art studio, but with producer Pranay Bakshi aka Cosmic Grooves at his home studio. The Sikkim-origin, Mumbai-based singer-songwriter, who started out by recording guitars and ukuleles through a USB microphone on her Macbook, has since steadily upgraded to a "humble set-up" consisting of monitor speakers, electric guitar, MIDI keyboard, and a condenser microphone. "For me, there is no longing for a time in the future when I'll have more equipment or resources. All the resources are already there," says Maskey.

Down South, Kerala indie artist Haniya Nafisa has over 18,600 monthly listeners on Spotify, attracting a chunk of her over 2 lakh Instagram followers with homemade covers of popular songs. With a few film songs in her catalogue, she can evoke the intimacy of a lo-fi electronic pop sound on songs like "U good". "The quality of music or an artist is not dependent on the

resources," says Nafisa, who recorded "U good" in her bedroom – a collaboration with Gujarat-origin artist Kramer and Kerale producer 6091. A genre-wise look at bedroom studio artists reveal pop, lo-fi, indie-folk and even hip-hop. These styles are popular perhaps because the songs don't call for live recorded drums (like in rock or metal) or string sections (for

more ambitious pop). Here, everything can be added through beat pads, sound libraries, plug-ins and digital audio workstations.

DIY your next album

Bedroom-produced music has been around for a while – from the Beach Boys in the 1960s who recorded what are now considered the first two 'lo-fi' music-making "the" series, which launched this January, was

singer-songwriter Billie Eilish – whose Grammy winning album, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*, was recorded in her brother's bedroom – and British singer Kenya Grace. The electronic-pop artist's song 'Strangers', from her 2023 album *The After Taste*, was recorded entirely in her Hampshire bedroom, and it not only went viral but also topped the Billboard Dance/Electronic Songs chart last October.

When Harish Iyer showed up on his first day at work wearing a blazer, albeit pale pink, the head of human resources had to remind him to be himself. Iyer had warned those interviewing him that he had failed his MBA and knew nothing about being in a corporate job. The equal rights activist had worked largely in the social sector and advertising, but Axis Bank went ahead and hired him as head of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in 2021. That first day, Iyer said, he had been trying to be himself within the confines of male dressing. Now, he dresses feminine in *salwar kameez*. "It's not a struggle to fit in as much as it is an everyday effort to stand out," Iyer, 45, said.

Axis is among a handful of companies that lead the way when it comes to implementing equal opportunity in the workplace, from the #ComeAsYouAre policy to the self-reflective Pause for Bias sessions. The bank's Women In Motion programme helps women bridge the gap from classrooms to workplaces. It was among the first to offer joint bank accounts for LGBTQIA+ couples and encouraged the community to list their partners as nominees.

Iyer was one of the petitioners in the marriage equality case. He's attended more queer *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* style weddings than straight weddings since the Supreme Court struck down section 377 in 2018. "Nothing stops people from getting married," he said. "It's legal recognition of their marriage that they want."

He describes himself as an everyday crusader, one who can never be a bystander in the face of



PERSON OF INTEREST HARISH IYER: NEVER LOOKS AWAY

In a country that knows to avert its eyes, this equal rights activist is not a bystander

violence, like a man hitting his wife on the train. For as long as he can remember, he has been a regular at the police cyber cell, armed with evidence of child sexual abuse on social networking sites. He's protective of animals, describes his dietary preferences as "cheating vegan", cares deeply about

environmental issues and counsels rape survivors. He was a witness in the Tehelka rape case and a friend of Kolkata gang rape survivor Suzette Jordan. "I connected with them through the same thread of abuse that all of us go through," he said. "Pain is a great binder, it imparts a sense of relatability."

Pride, pain and passion
Some may remember the 2018 episode of Aamir Khan's *Satyamev Jayate*, where Iyer shared the story of his decade-long sexual abuse that started when he was seven years old, but it was not the first time he had spoken about this issue on television. In a country where most

Pushing binaries Activist Harish Iyer.
(EMMANUEL YOGINI)

people prefer to secretly nurse their trauma, Iyer openly shares details of his horrific story.

As an abused child, he found parallels in nature. "I knew it's exactly how animals feel when they know their end is near," he said. "They struggle, then give up."

"I used to hear the sounds of wind whistling, animals howling, birds flying out of trees leaving behind their nests. These were the images and sounds in my head and in them was a feeling of absolute escape from the space I was in, they helped numb myself," he adds. "It explains why people and children who experience abuse are vivid in their imagination."

Nearly a decade after a casteist "Iyer preferred" matrimonial ad that his mother and grandmother helped him write, and his subsequent justification of it in the face of an angry backlash, he is deeply regretful. "I should have said it's wrong, I could have done better."

In the corporate world, caste and religion are invisible on most diversity and inclusion charters. Companies don't speak about these two big issues at all, even though some of them may have an internal reprimand mechanism in place to

deal with casteism and Islamophobia. Many companies fear an upper caste backlash if they put their policies in writing. Even those firms that proudly have LGBTQIA+ employees likely treat gender as a binary in their annual reports. Real equity continues to be elusive in our workplaces.

'Merit is not a leveller'

Iyer emphasises the importance of "intentionality" in corporate inclusivity practices. "When you are hiring people, say specifically that you are looking for LGBT employees or women or PWD [persons with disabilities]," he said. "Don't say equal. We need more representation so that we become equal." He cites Tata Steel's effort to hire transgender employees as an example.

Iyer is constantly debunking the idea of 'merit'. "Merit is not a leveller," he tells people. "We don't begin from the same place. Our opportunities and histories of oppression are not equal." He is a big believer in merging the personal and the professional, and in the "audacity" of organisations that value personal experience and hire people such as himself who don't have fancy degrees. "You draw so much from your personal lives and however much you try to divorce the personal and professional, you get valued only if you bring the personal to your professional space, whether it's your strength or your weakness," he said. "You can't get rid of bias, make it an asset."

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



GOREN BRIDGE

Two chances

North-South vulnerable,
South deals

Bob Jones

South in today's deal was young Australian star Michael Whibley. One no trump showed 14-16 points and the three-heart bid was a re-transfer, showing at least invitational values. Whibley's three spades was a rejection. Four diamonds promised a singleton diamond - a psyche trying to inhibit a diamond lead. Whew!

Whibley rose with dummy's ace on the opening spade lead, felling the jack from East. There were 11 tricks, and either the clubs or the hearts might provide another. Should Whibley knock out the king of trumps right away, however, East might win and shift to a heart, forcing Whibley to decide immediately which suit to go after for the extra trick. Whibley wanted to combine his chances, so he

immediately cashed dummy's ace and king of clubs. That dropped the queen from West, so Whibley could lead a trump and he had no further problems.

Had the queen of clubs not fallen, Whibley would have cashed the ace and king of hearts, shedding a low club from dummy. A club ruff with the eight of spades would establish the suit and he could then safely lead another spade. A well-thought-out line of play.

NORTH
♠ A Q 10 9 8 4 2
♥ 8
♦ 4 2
♣ A K 6

WEST
♠ 7 3
♥ Q 10 9 7 6 3
♦ Q 9 8
♣ Q 3

EAST
♠ K J
♥ 5 4 2
♦ K 7 6 5 3
♣ 10 5 2

SOUTH
♠ 6 5
♥ A K J
♦ A J 10
♣ J 9 8 7 4

The bidding:
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
1NT Pass 2NT* Pass
2A Pass 3A Pass
3A Pass 4A Pass
4A Pass 6A All pass

*Transfer to spades
Opening lead: Three of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

A lifetime of training for just 10 seconds: Jesse Owens, four-time Olympic gold medallist

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1894, the International Olympic Committee was founded in Paris. An initiative of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who believed that organised sport can create moral and social strength, the first modern Olympic Games was held in Athens in 1896. At the 1912 games in Sweden, Coubertin himself won a gold medal for his effort 'Ode to Sport'. In what now-defunct category did he win the medal?

2 Born this day in 1877, Norman Pritchard was a hurdler who won two silver medals at the 1900 Summer Olympics in Paris. Earlier, while studying at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, he scored the very first football hat-trick on record. When Neeraj Chopra struck gold in javelin at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, he overtook Pritchard's record in athletics. What was his record?

3 Born this day in 1912, this English computer scientist loved running. He once said, "I have such a stressful job that the only way I can get it out of my mind is by running hard; it's the only way I can get some release." He almost qualified for the 1948 Olympics but had a leg injury. Who was



Speed skater-cum-track cyclist Christa Luding of Germany at the Olympic Games in Albertville, France, in 1992. (GETTY IMAGES)

this runner, whose work with the Enigma machine played a huge role in ending World War II?

4 Born this day in 1972, Zinedine Zidane is a French footballer who is one of the most successful coaches as well. He led the French team to the trophy at the 1998 FIFA World Cup. Although he has never played at the Olympics, he made a cameo appearance as 'Numérodis' in the 2008

take up cycling and progressed so well that she represented East Germany in cycling at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, where she went on to win silver. What unique record does Christa have, which can never happen again?

6 At the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, the men's pole vault event ended in a three-way tie for second place. After American Bill Sefton was eliminated in a jump-off, the two remaining athletes, both Japanese, refused to compete further. Officials chose one of them as silver medallist and the other for bronze. What did these two friends do with the medals after the games (in true friendship fashion)?

7 One of the places during the Olympic flame journey to the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics required a special flare carrier, which had a mix of oxygen-generating chemicals as well as magnesium in a finely powdered form. This allowed the flame to burn at 2,000 degrees Celsius creating enough pressure to keep even surrounding water from entering the tube. This was done so that the flame could be carried through what iconic place?

8 As part of the Olympic flame's journey for the 1992 Albertville Olympics, it had to travel from Athens to Paris. During this trip, for the first time, it travelled faster than the speed of sound. What was its mode of transport?

9 This sport was contested as a team

event in the Summer Olympics from 1900 to 1920. The teams consisted of six members each, and Great Britain has won five medals in it. It is the only land-sport in which you have to go backwards to win. What sport is this, which nowadays you mostly see only in fun picnics and at company outings?

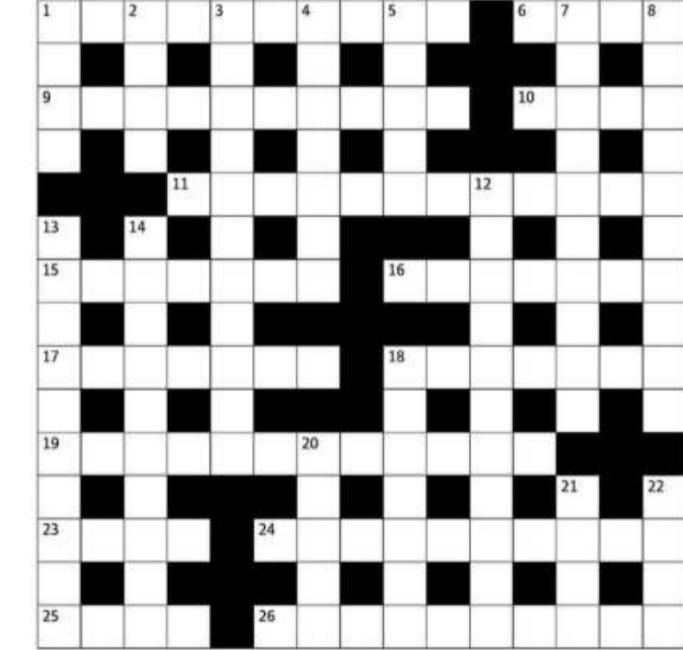
10 The original Olympic motto Citius, Altius, Fortius (Faster, Higher, Stronger in Latin) was proposed by Pierre de Coubertin at the creation of the International Olympic Committee in 1894. Since then, this year will be the first time the updated motto will be used. Now, "Citius, Altius, Fortius – Communiter", what does it stand for?

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

—Together,
1. Faster, Higher, Stronger
2. Tag of war
3. The Curmudgeon (unemployed)
4. Asterix Barfarrer Reef
5. Won medals in both Winter and Summer Olympics, in
the same year
6. Cut both in half, combined
7. The Great Barrier Reef
8. Silver-tail bonze medals
9. Only Indian to win a medal
10. Artisan
11. Games
12. Olympic
13. Athletes at the Summer
14. Home match
15. Nobleman seen in rear light
16. Brook's features
17. Informed of second loo, did you say?
18. Wildly eviscerate group holding
gunpowder? (3,7)
19. I Have a Clue
20. Brainteasers
21. Andy Warhol
22. Andy Warhol
23. Oboe
24. Charles
25. Andy Warhol

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3312



Across

5 Initially didactic young lyricist (aged, now) (5)

7 Those two torture devices – for Spoooner – they belong to bygone times (10)

8 Soldiers run away: traitors! (6,4)

12 20 isn't one – but here it is! (5,6)

13 After period of maturity, fruit and cheese finally rot (10)

14 Everyman's jokes? Of no significance (10)

18 Second aggressive fellow's punky hairdos (7)

20 Ether, quaint number (5)

21 Globalism overwhelming island (4)

22 Island where you once sat next to small king (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3311

RELIEF MAPS POMP	A E A I R N R
DEADRINGER HAKE	A D I E M L S
ARTIAN DROPOUT	A C A A E S F N
HACKLES INJURER	M A R T I A N D R O P O U T
BRAINTEASERS	P A R E N N U E
JEPOE E A	H A C K L E S I N J U R E R
OBOE CHARLESTON	I K I T M A S S
UK ERINCA	B R A I N T E A S E R S
STEM ANDYWARHOL	I J E P O E A

Answers

Down

1. Home match (4)

2. Nobleman seen in rear light (4)

3. Brook's features (11)

4. Informed of second loo, did you say? (5,2)

CM YK

Life in the times of AI

Artificial general intelligence with human-like consciousness and problem-solving abilities is on the horizon

Vishal Sharma

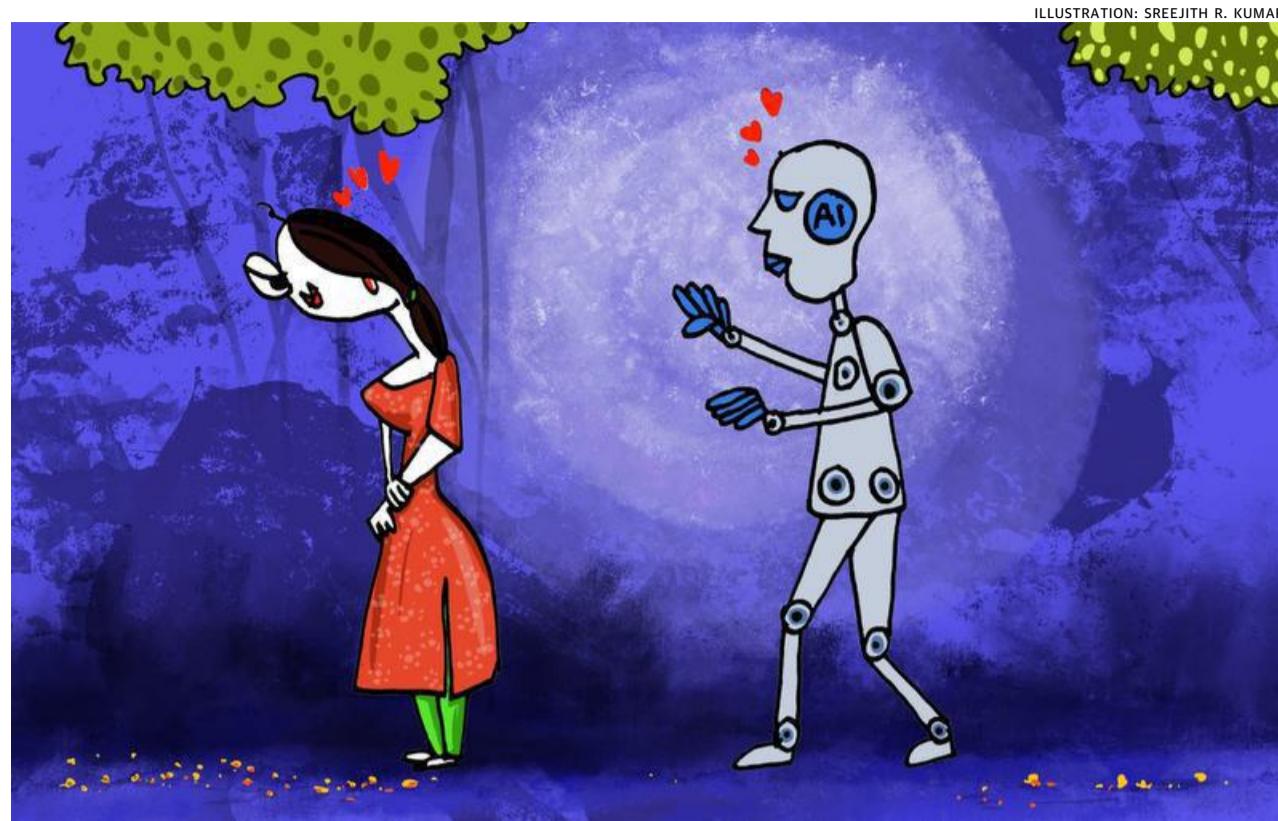
vishal.sharma@fulbrightmail.org

The rise of artificial intelligence has transformed every aspect of our lives and has even challenged our understanding of the mind, brain, and consciousness.

From the moment we wake up until we retire for the day, we encounter various AI tools that cater to our day-to-day requirements. From virtual assistants such as Siri and Alexa aiding daily tasks to recommendation algorithms on Netflix, personalised product suggestions on Amazon, predictive text on smartphones, navigation with Google Maps, fitness monitoring, fraud detection in banking, drone-assisted agriculture, personalised education platforms and chatbots such as ChatGPT, AI permeates every aspect of our lives, raising the fundamental question: "Are we propelling machines to mimic human beings, or are we transforming humans into machines governed by AI?"

It refers to the transformative process where machines, traditionally governed by programmed instructions, evolve to acquire artificial intelligence capabilities, leveraging machine learning, deep learning, and natural language processing to process vast amounts of data, recognise patterns, self-learning and make autonomous decisions, thus behaving more like human beings.

In the age of AI, machines embedded with electronic sensors now possess super senses



mirroring the perceptual abilities of humans such as sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, granting them the ability to perceive and understand their surroundings akin to humans' indispensable sensory capabilities. These sensors, ranging from infrared for dark environments to medical sensors monitoring health, not only mimic but enable them to acquire the abilities exceeding the traditional human senses, enabling machines to navigate and interact with the world more effectively than humans.

Furthermore, neural networks, a foundational concept of AI, inspired by the complex structure and function of the human brain, imitate the brain's interconnected neurons that communicate via chemical and electrical signals.

Recent breakthroughs from MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge, depicted that researchers have successfully created an artificial system of neural networks that not only simulates but also behaves like human brain. The research also discovered something really fascinating: the neural network figured out how to

use less energy but still do its job effectively, just like how humans have learned over thousands of years to solve hard problems with less mental effort.

The emergence of digital humans, an AI entity with human-like faces that mimic human communication, heralds a new era in human-computer interaction, offering emotional engagement and practical applications across various industries.

Lil Miquela, a virtual online influencer who has nearly 3 million Instagram followers, exemplifies this trend.

According to IBM, as AI progresses, there is a strong possibility of achieving strong AI, mimicking human emotions, creativity, and other traits, aiming for artificial general intelligence (AGI) with human-like consciousness and problem-solving abilities. This ambition raises concerns, with scientists such as Geoffrey Hinton, who is called the godfather of AI, warning that future AI versions could pose risks as they become self-aware, generate and run their own computer code and learn unpredictably from vast amount of data sets.

Who's afraid of old age?

George Netto

gnettomunnar@rediffmail.com

Many regard the onset of old age as a period of general physical and mental decline. This may be true to some extent but, overall, old age certainly does not incapacitate one as is generally feared. Far from doing so, it actually gives one a chance to relax and enjoy one's post-retirement life to the fullest, if one's blessed with a fair degree of health. As I see it, old age is just another phase of life like youth and middle age and should be treated as such.

As an octogenarian, experience has taught me that the first and foremost prerequisite to tackle ageing is a positive outlook coupled with an optimistic frame of mind. This will help see one through those difficult and trying periods that inevitably crop up now and then. To expect smooth sailing always is unrealistic.

I have found that an absorbing hobby is the best antidote to the ennui that often plagues the elderly with time hanging heavy on their hands. Spending one's time as productively as possible, pursuing a passion or pastime, does help to banish boredom. The key is to keep oneself fully engaged somehow.

Of course, the usual infirmities of old age will make their presence felt. As a freelance writer, cognitive decline often sees me groping long for an elusive word or phrase that earlier came to me easily. It can be quite frustrating to say the least. Yet, being passionate about – or, at least, committed to – one's hobbies and pastimes does give one a clear sense of purpose.

Sensible grand-parenting (without being overindulgent) is a fulfilling but often ignored option. Spending quality time daily with one's grandchildren, teaching them and helping out with their school lessons or homework, will help build a strong bond with them, besides easing the pressure on their parents considerably. For my wife and I, it's an integral part of our daily routine.

Of course, there's nothing like occasional socialising to enliven the usually humdrum lives of the elderly. Besides being relaxing, it enables us to keep abreast of how our contemporaries are faring health-wise and otherwise. And, indeed, it gives one an opportunity to indulge in nostalgia – so dear to oldies – about one's younger days when life was so radically different.

Epistolary endeavours

A letter is a work of art. The paper, pen, and handwriting, paint emotions that a digital missive will fail to convey

Arun Sahu

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"**W**ho writes letters these days?" It crossed my mind as I opened the airmail.

It was from Roger, an old neighbour in Canada, where I lived for a few years as a diplomat. Roger and his sister had a fascinating Indian connection. Their parents served in the Royal Indian Air Force in British India, based in Kolkata, and after their service, they settled in Canada instead of the U.K. It was a two-page postcard. As I read through the handwriting, I could feel Roger's presence and hear his

voice. His lines of the alphabet were wonky, as was his speaking style. It returned memories and retold stories of humans in other parts of the world. It felt warm.

When I was young, I wrote letters to make penfriends in distant places. However slim the chances of getting a reply to a letter might be, one was always excited to introduce oneself to an unknown identity in anticipation of reciprocity. Initially, these were postcards, then inland letters and finally envelopes. Once one posts a letter, the wait for a reply begins. The postman becomes integral to one's world of uncertainty,



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anticipation and imagination. It doubles if the letter is to a potential friend of the opposite gender. I made a few friends in this process.

A letter is a work of art – the paper, pen, ink, handwriting, the content, emotion and sentiments painting vivid emotions. As one writes, one keeps in mind the recipient and the impact the words will have on them. Sometimes, it could be a painstakingly laborious process. There could be a fear of losing a friend because of misuse of words, or one may

unintentionally hurt the other's sentiment.

My father used to say, "Good handwriting represents a propensity for knowledge and creativity." He wrote hundreds of letters when I was in high school and college, all exceptionally thematic, on life, growing up, hope, aspiration, success and failure. As a child, I believed my father and tried to develop a neat and organised handwriting style. The communication between the hand muscles and a fountain pen nib is that of control and to be controlled, which is guided by one's thought process. Ink adds colour to one's writing.

Digital devices with digital pens and styluses in the market vary in look and comfort. I have tried a few but have yet to find one that can replicate that feeling of using a fine writing instrument.

I wondered whether Roger's digital communication could have triggered the same intimacy as his letter.

The digital learning curve

It takes time and patience to master the use of certain tech tools, especially if the person is a digital immigrant

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As computers were not used for office work when I was in service, I had to pick up, post-retirement, some simple operations such as typing letters using MS Word and creating an email account.

Though there were voluntary organisations in my neighbourhood offering training for seniors on using digital and communication tools, I depended mostly on my smart grandchildren who offered to make me digitally literate, gradually.

Having learnt the ropes of the use of some of the



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digital tools, I occasionally ventured to handle things independently outside my home. But tasks that would be a child's play for many, proved difficult for me mainly due to anxiety and minor age-related

physical challenges. Recently when I wanted to buy the monthly milk cards, I was taken by surprise when I was asked at the cash counter to make the payment only by "card" or using QR code. I could not do so in the absence of my debit card. I was not in the habit of taking it when I went out, for fear of losing it.

Once, at an ATM, my first few attempts to insert the debit card in the slot failed. Only with the help of another ATM client, the card could be inserted. When I was asked to enter my PIN, I keyed in the four digits that I recalled and lo!, it was rejected. After three failed attempts, I was flummoxed on

learning that my card was temporarily blocked.

On another occasion, I had to change my address in the Aadhaar card. I went to a service centre where I was asked to give my previous cellphone number linked to my Aadhaar card. Having got it, the gentleman asked me to give the OTP which I would be getting on my previous cellphone. I could not do so as I was no longer using that defective instrument. Perhaps I had consigned it to a box in a corner of my shelf. I returned home with the pious resolution that I should fish out the cellphone and activate it with the help of somebody.

These were but a few such incidents which were somewhat discouraging. Yet, I was not deterred. I considered such experiences as stepping stones on the road to digital engagements.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The Rubik's Cube, introduced as a simple teaching device, has come a long way and remains one of the best selling puzzles of all time. ('50 years of the cube'; June 16)

It being a stressbuster and facilitator of visual spatial functioning of the brain, we should encourage the formation of more cubing clubs and cross-cultural cubing communities. **N.S. Reddy**

languages as well as possess a flair for literary writing. **Kosaraju Chandramouli**

Reading on-field

R. Ashwin, a great off-spinner, took the lead of his friend, journalist Sidharth Monga, to tell his story to the world. ('Ashwin's web'; June 16)

Thousands of aspiring cricketers will be inspired and guided by his book. **M.V. Nagavender Rao**

Cubical representations

The Rubik's Cube has been skilfully employed in movies and pop culture as a metaphor for life. ('From Sheldon to Spidey and WALL-E'; June 16) In the movie *Karthik Calling Karthik* (2010), a Rubik's Cube sits on a shelf, each layer being solved consequently, to reflect different aspects of the protagonist's life being sorted out. **Pranati R. Narain**

Parsi greats

Parsis, mostly great industrialists, have been instrumental in boosting our economy. ('Tracing Parsis and their monotheism'; June 16)

They exude bonhomie and their generosity is praiseworthy. **Ratna Naidu**

Correction

According to poet Timmanna's 'Theft of a Tree', an agitated Sathyabhama's foot inadvertently touches Krishna's forehead when she moves, and not as mentioned in the article titled 'Pole-vaulting translators'; June 16) A successful translator needs to be a master of the idiom of both the original/ source and target

— Editor



MORE ON THE WEB

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Path-breaking flights

With private spaceflight a reality, the know-how to replicate the technology in the future is available

R.K. Menon

A majestic presence

The bull is frequently connected to fertility and abundance in Indian mythology

Hilal Ahmad Tantray

The tricks of the trade

The clever lines used by sellers of yore to lure you into buying their wares

Saraswathi Narayanan

Inseparable ties

Remembering a handyman who was full of vim and vigour

J.N. Sinha

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Strike a balance
(Clockwise from left)
Fevicol's funny fishing ad; Nike's 'Dream Crazy'; Thai Life Insurance's humorous 'Unsung Hero' ad; Bodyform's 'Womb Stories'; and Calm's 'The Last Photo'.



Humour cuts through the noise. We live in a state of constant assault on our senses, but if something is funny, you'll seek it out. It doesn't mean we shy away from tough stuff, humour is one of the best ways to deal with rough things going on in the world

KENAN THOMPSON OF SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE,
SPEAKING AT CANNES LIONS 2024



Compton don't play tennis. They own it.

CANNES LIONS 2024: HUMOUR MAKES A COMEBACK

People are ready for some levity, and the international advertising festival's new 'Humour' category is an acknowledgement

Aarushi Periwal

It's like when Gretchen in *Mean Girls*, the iconic teen-flick parody, said, "That is so fetch!" and Regina, the film's queen bee, bursts her bubble, "Gretchen, stop trying to make fetch happen! It's not going to happen!"

In advertising, humour is 'fetch,' and global award juries seem to be Regina. Why else would Cannes Lions announce a humour category across disciplines starting this year? It's because advertising is having a hard time laughing. Remember how hilarious ads were a couple of decades ago? Fevicol's fishing rod was particularly a favourite in my household, followed closely by Asian Paints' 'Naya ghar.. badiya hai'. It was powerful when ads made you laugh.

'Syllabus-ification' of creativity
Those of you familiar with the advertising award landscape have seen trends come and go, and would know why I refer to humour as a thing of the past. Part of that is genuinely funny work not getting the

From the French Riviera

2024's humour category attracted 798 entries, including CeraVe's campaign with Michael Cera and Knorr's 'Bouillon Bag'. According to Marian Brannelly, the global director of awards for Lions, this demonstrated "a shift in tone and the rise of effective commercial work designed to entertain".

biggest nods on global stages; causevertising has taken its place. It's understandable; the global zeitgeist is not in a great place. We're currently in the middle of two global conflicts, polarised political opinions, confusing social codes, and to top it all off, a pandemic that shaved off three-ish years of laughs.

Don't get me wrong, the world undeniably needs powerful and impactful work such as Bodyform's 'Womb Stories' in 2023, which dealt with the emotion, grief, and excitement that often comes with

being a woman; Nike's 'Dream Crazy' in 2020, that focused on brands being agents of change; or Calm's 'The Last Photo' from last year, a campaign for suicide prevention. Even the 'Unfiltered History Tour', a guerrilla tour of the British Museum's stolen artefacts – which landed India its first 'Agency of the year' title at Cannes Lions last year – was as purpose-led as it gets.

But not all such campaigns are executed with the same sincerity. Wokewashing is as deadly as being tone-deaf. As more brands embraced purpose and action, few remained committed to their causes. This has unfortunately led to a 'syllabus-ification' of creativity where purpose and humour aren't mutually exclusive. I agree with what Andrew Robertson, CEO of BBDO Worldwide, said last year at Cannes Lions: "There's a sort of misguided belief that brand purpose needs to be presented in a very serious way. And I don't think it does... If brands are truly looking to make the world a better place, we could do a lot worse than make people laugh."

Let's laugh again

Laughter is not the opposite of sadness. Happiness is the opposite of sadness. Laughter is a reaction, and it can exist in both situations – a neglected truth pointed out by Daniel Sloss, a Scottish comedian. When the world goes up in flames, it still needs a jester for hope. Every laugh then becomes a tiny revolution.

Bouncing back

According to Kantar, a market research platform, humour in advertising has been in decline for a while, with major dips around the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Things started turning around, however, in 2022, and last year, at the Cannes Lions, 52% of the film category winners were intentionally funny. The Grand Prix in the film category, in fact, was awarded to Apple's 'RIP, Leon,' a funny ad about a dead lizard and human error.

So, why not award more funny ads? Why do we need a separate award category for it? Picture two scenarios in a jury room: one, where some jurors feel they're unable to award humour-led work because of purpose-led work dominating, and two, where jurors feel humour-led work is getting 'over-awarded' despite the lack of a precise category fit. Whichever side you're on, a separate category for humour feels like a win-win.

Brands and creatives have been given their holy trifecta – love, laughs, and roars. It's the fiercest opportunity to stop underutilising the inventiveness of humour. And contrary to the worry that it is harder to make humour work across multi-platforms, I'd say humour is like a Swiss army knife that cuts through platforms. It can turn puns into PR, like CeraVe's campaign with Michael Cera, rewrite the rules of hospitality as seen with Artole Group's 'Rockstar Status', and even make hyaluronic acid funny, as demonstrated by The Ordinary's 'Science over Celebrity'.

So what can we expect from this

new category in the years ahead? I'm thrilled at the prospect that the next decade of advertising could be a multinational collaboration, where we borrow and learn from Thailand's exaggerated, slapstick humour, such as Thai Life Insurance's 'Unsung Hero', or South Africa's political satire with campaigns like Nando's 'Last Dictator Standing'.

Imagine defying the dichotomous nature of humour in South Asia too – the kind where we crack jokes in 'safe places', not public spaces because we think it is 'anti-culture'. For instance, ours isn't a region that's used to being sold anything via sarcasm. But as the region rapidly changes, our appetite for new genres of humour could proportionally rise. The last few years have shown us the kind of brilliant, funny work we can make. Will those make us proud on the world's biggest stages? It's exciting times ahead, and that is so fetch.

The writer is a founding member and creative at Talented advertising agency.

Shailendra Bhandare

As India's instant payment tech, UPI, conquers new international markets, it evokes a sense of déjà vu in those of us who study the history of money. Today, countries like Singapore, France, the UAE and Sri Lanka are using the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) to simplify trade. In centuries past and under the colonial apparatus, the rupee was used for much the same reason.

Even until the 1960s, you could take your rupees and spend them in the Gulf countries, just like you would at home.

The history of how the national denomination of India originated, circulated and was consolidated to emerge as a 'global' currency is fascinating. The rupee is widely believed to be an 'invention' of Sher Shah Suri (ruled 1540-1545), the Afghan sultan of Delhi and founder of the short-lived Suri kingdom, although the etymology of the word 'rupiya' itself can be derived from the Sanskrit *rupa* or *rupya*, which meant either 'fashioned/wrought silver' or 'a form or impression'.

Suri organised coinage into two denominations: the silver *rupiya* weighing one *tola* or 11.66 grams and the copper *dam*, weighing 20 grams. Forty copper *dams* made a silver *rupiya*. The sultan then established mints across his kingdom, which ensured sufficient



Global reach (L-R) Akbar, painted by William Daniell; silver rupees from Akbar's Agra mint, German East Africa, Dutch East Indies, and others; and a one rupee note issued for use in the Gulf. (SARMAYA ARTS FOUNDATION)

flow of coins for use, and mandated that the states under him would make and receive payments in coins, rather than commodities.

Worth its weight in silver

It was the sagacity and foresightedness of Akbar (ruled 1556-1605) that ensured the rupee's position as a pre-eminent Mughal currency. Akbar continued with Suri's reforms and monetary policies. When he expanded the empire of Hindustan from Kabul to Chittagong and from Kashmir to the

Deccan, he set up mints across this vast expanse. Traders could trust that coins from Mughal mints would be of consistent weight and purity, so this form of currency became popular across the subcontinent. Incidentally, it was during Akbar's reign that the word 'rupiya' first appeared on Indian currency.

The bulwark of Mughal currency was a steady supply of silver brought to India by trade-hungry Europeans in the 16th century. In order to buy spices, gems and textiles, the British, Dutch, Danish and French 'East India Companies' had to turn their silver into a currency that was trusted and accepted everywhere. Enter the rupee. By the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the Companies made the Mughal rupee a 'trade coin' – it was exported to territories under their control, such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and used in local circulation. The design of the rupee became so familiar in these countries that when they started minting their own coins, they kept the distinct Mughal imprint, complete with Farsi inscriptions.

From Africa to the Gulf

In the 19th century, European powers launched currencies in the

colonies to further their own agenda. Since the rupee had already been a familiar trade currency on the East African coast, the newly established colonies of German and British East Africa, Italian Somaliland and Portuguese Mozambique all started to issue their own 'rupees'. The British enforced treaties to make the rupee legal tender in the Arab sheikhdoms of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the 'Trucial States' (the forerunners of modern UAE) and the Sultanate of Oman.

In fact, in 1956, the Reserve Bank of India launched a series of special notes to circulate exclusively in the Gulf. It was only in the 1960s, when the rupee was severely devalued, that the Arab kingdoms abandoned it and launched their own currencies. The last to abandon the Indian rupee was Oman in 1972. But five decades on, in 2022, things came full circle when the Sultanate of Oman embraced another Indian money innovation: a tech-enabled echo of the historic original called Rupay.

The writer is curator of South Asian and Far-eastern Coins and Paper Money at Ashmolean Museum, the U.K.

The fifth in a series of columns by sarmaya.in, a digital archive of India's diverse histories and artistic traditions.

LIVING ARCHIVE

When the rupee ruled

From Akbar's rupiya to the Rupay app that's going international, tracing the adventurous run of India's currency