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magazine

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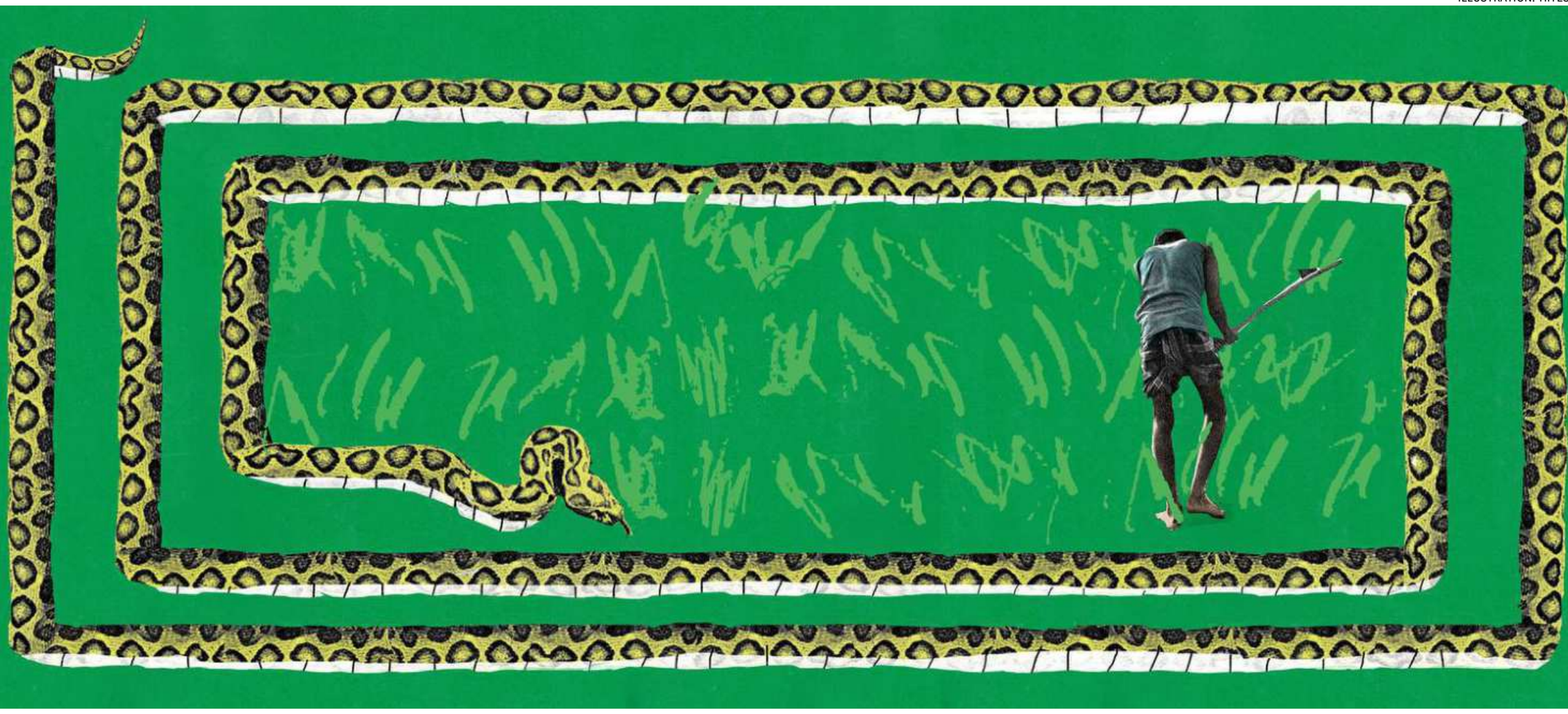


WORLD SNAKE DAY | JULY 16

With efforts to plug the data gap when it comes to snakebite fatalities, a National Action Plan, new serpentariums and promising research, India is set to modernise and improve the handling of this long-neglected problem

SNAKEBITE CAPITAL
WHAT INDIA MUST GET RIGHT

Indulekha Aravind

How do you know that a Russell's viper is knocked out from the anaesthetic it has been given, since snakes don't have eyelids that would helpfully close? You monitor the tail, always the last to stop moving, explains Lisa Gonsalves, curator at Karnataka-based The Liana Trust, a non-profit working on human-snake co-existence. She calmly strokes the sedated, highly venomous snake stretched out on a white table, its top half in a transparent tube. Once the tail stops twitching, Gonsalves and Gerard "Gerry" Martin, herpetologist and founder of the Trust, move swiftly to de-worm, measure and weigh the snake.

The next step is heart-stopping. Martin starts blowing gently into the mouth of the Russell's viper – the species responsible for the highest number of snakebite fatalities in India – through a straw-like instrument. This, he explains, is to flush out the anaesthetic. Soon enough, the snake starts to revive.

The rescued viper is now part of a first-of-its-kind, research-based serpentarium near Hunsur, about 200 kilometres from Bengaluru, which aims to research and improve the way antivenom is made in India and study the behaviour of snakes, which Martin says can be "a nightmare" in the wild. "Snakes are difficult to work with. We can't study them using camera traps like with other species, for instance."

The serpentarium houses seven venomous species and is set to have up to 400 snakes, with each individual in a separate enclosure designed to replicate its natural habitat to the extent possible, with lush flora and small pools of water in some, and enclosures with basking lights for species like the Russell's viper, which likes the warmth of the sun in cooler weather.

Set up by The Liana Trust with the Karnataka Forest Department, the serpentarium is one of several recent initiatives to mitigate the impact of human-snakebite conflict – responsible for the most number of human fatalities in India. Additionally, the WHO estimates that while 81,410 to 1,37,880 people die each year because of snake bites globally, it also causes around three times as many amputations and other disabilities. Survivors also have to struggle with the financial impact, from the cost of treatment of conditions such as kidney damage and amputation caused by snakebite, to loss of income, which can be debilitating for low-income families.

Ramesh M. (name changed on request), a native of Hunsur, is one such survivor. When the 33-year-old stepped out of his house late one evening to move a big drum of water barefoot, a snake nestled underneath darted out and bit him. Poor first-aid, delays in treatment, and an infected wound meant he could not return to his factory job in Bengaluru for three months. When he recovered, the company would not take him back. He now works in a hardware store back home and as a farm labourer. "From a salary of ₹35,000, his monthly earnings have now dipped to about ₹12,000. He has to support his family of four with it and also repay the loans he took for the snakebite treatment," says Bindumadhav.

Lisa Gonsalves of The Liana Trust examines a snake at the serpentarium near Hunsur, Karnataka. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Poor man's problem

Tackling snakebite envenoming – the technical term for the condition caused by the toxins in the bite of a venomous snake – poses a complex public health challenge which requires a sustained, multi-disciplinary endeavour.

In India, efforts to tackle snakebite are further complicated by the lack of data around it. Many victims die before reaching a hospital so no agency could capture the true burden, says Ravikar Ralph, professor, Clinical Toxicology Unit, at Vellore's Christian Medical College. Even when the deaths occur in hospitals, they would not necessarily be recorded with government authorities since snakebite was not a notifiable disease until recently.

Underpinning the invisibilising of the issue is the fact that victims typically live in rural areas and belong to low-income sections. "We have six deaths every hour. But snakebite is a poor person's problem so it gets little attention," says Sumanth Bindumadhav, director of wildlife protection at the non-profit, Humane Society International India.

Gap in data

The scale of India's burden came to light with the Million Death Study, first published in 2011. It estimated that India sees about 58,000 deaths a year, close to half the global toll. In contrast, the Central Bureau of Health Intelligence pegs snakebite deaths at 2,000 a year.

This lack of accurate data is now starting to get plugged, with the country's first National Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Snakebite Envenoming in India (NAPSE), launched in March 2024, advising all states to make snakebite a notifiable disease. Karnataka had already done so in February 2024 while a few others like Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya began later in the year. "It's one of the biggest impacts of the national action plan. This will answer a lot of our questions vis-a-vis deaths, bites, etc," says Jaideep Menon of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham in Kerala.

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4-5

In India, we have an extraordinary number of people coexisting closely with snakes. Several parts of Africa have more venomous snakes than India. But the numbers [of envenoming] are not as high there because of lower population density

GNANESWAR CH
Project lead-snakebite mitigation, The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust & Centre For Herpetology

We have six deaths every hour in India. But snakebite is a poor person's problem so it gets little attention

SUMANTH BINDUMADHAV
Director, Humane Society International India

ALIASGAR DHARIWALA/ ISSAI RECORDS

IN CONVERSATION

JEET THAYIL'S SENSE OF DUTY

The poet and novelist on his new book, *The Elsewhereans*, and why he considers it his job to tell stories, no matter what

Memory and soundscapes

Continuing his experiments with form and genre, Thayil recently released his second studio album, *Speak, Amnesia*. Written and recorded during the pandemic, in collaboration with producer Yashas Shetty and Bengaluru label ISSAI, the album features poetry readings as well as guitar and vocals by Thayil, themed on loss and memory. Drawing from his long association with language and sound, Thayil describes the album as "future ghost music" and "the soundtrack to an imaginary apocalypse movie". *Details: jeetthayil.bandcamp.com/*

Jerry Pinto

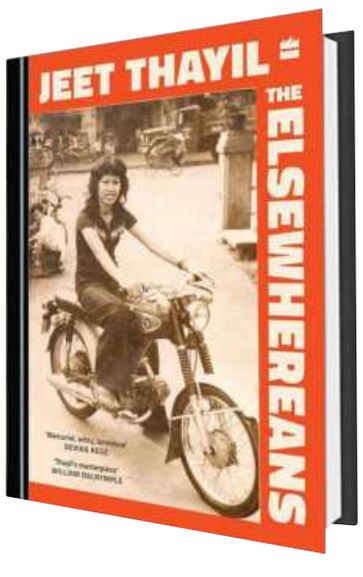
Jeet Thayil's new work, *The Elsewhereans* (published by Fourth Estate), defies genre, forcing readers to reconsider everything they think they know about literary strategies. The subtitle calls it a documentary novel but it is biography, autobiography, family history, ghost story, travelogue, *ityaadi*.

We meet Ammu and George in a village in Kerala and travel with and without them to Mumbai, Hanoi, Saigon, Hong Kong and Paris. On this periplus, ghosts surface and evanesce, skeletons tumble out of closets, one of which smiles at us from the cover. At the heart of this magnificent and compelling mélange, the narrator, Jeet *lui-meme*, forces us to decide: is this an unreliable narrator?

In my opinion, there is no such thing as an unreliable narrator because there are no reliable narrators; there are only compelling narrators and boring ones. Jeet is a compelling storyteller, descended from an ancient line of mariners – water plays an important role in this story. His first commitment will be to the story and so should ours be.

I believe that a family story that leaves the family happy will be boring; the real stories are the ones we hold close to our chests, the family's asps. (The more the writer bleeds, the better it reads.) To bring these stories out into the world, to talk about the failures and the addictions, the desires and the disappointments is to remind all of us that every family is a work in progress. Perhaps the first and most natural question to ask the author who turns his hand with elegance and strength to the forms of poetry, the novel and the anthology is about the risk a genre-agnostic book takes in a world obsessed with categories. Excerpts from an email interview:

Question: *This genre-shifting is an enormous risk in a world of categories. Did it happen organically or was it planned?*
Answer: It was very much an organic process. I started with a book that was twice the size, about 400 pages or more. Which might have been some form of Proustian anxiety, the obsessive compulsive need to record every passing digression. Then, in a moment of clarity, I jettisoned everything that didn't fit the single and singular story being told – and ended up with a leaner, tighter, better manuscript. The form revealed itself three or four years into the writing. It might have been the most crucial stage of the whole process, and the most difficult.



Q: *But at the heart of this magnificent mélange is Jeet Thayil telling us a story so close to him that we sense the vulnerability of the storyteller. Could you talk a little about the psychic cost of such writing?*
A: Since my parents are a part of the story, I had to ask their permission. It was only right. My mother gave her permission reluctantly, but there was never any question that she would refuse. She'd probably agree wholeheartedly with the epigraph that begins the book: 'When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished.' I guess the psychic cost is one every writer must confront: by telling your story, which is also the story of the people you have known, are you usurping or co-opting their voices? If there's a sense of guilt, a residual guilt, it is offset by a sense of duty. That it is your job to tell the story however the chips may fall.

Q: *As readers, we encounter a series of enigmatic and intriguing women: Ammu, Nguyen Phuc Chau, Da Nang, Lijia, Chachiamma, a dead wife, M. We half recognise these women from our own histories and yet they are completely new. Perhaps this question is about the choice of characters populating the book.*
A: It started with Ammu, and the novel ends with her. She died in January, at which point I knew it was time to bring this novel to a close. It was always going to be her story. Though I didn't realise until I saw your question that she is only one among half-a-dozen compelling women characters, and that the women own the book. This wasn't planned, but it seems absolute and inevitable. I come from a long line of strong women. There's no way to tell this story without acknowledging and honouring them.

Q: *You take for granted – and expect perhaps your reader to also take for granted – the osmosis between the world of the dead and the living. Our generation, I believe, was trained to be rational. Was this something you struggled with?*
A: We have been trained to be rational. We are told to believe half of what we see and none of what we hear. And at this point, in the age of AI, we can't believe much of what we see, either. I can't say I've ever struggled with the question of what is rational and what isn't. The rational world would have us endorse the viewpoint that when the dead die, they cease to exist. And yet, and yet. I've never had much doubt about where the dead go. I know they are among us, unable to fully be here or to fully leave. In that sense, the difference between the world of the dead and the world of the living is nothing more than a veil. All we have to do is look past the veil. It's a way of seeing, of believing in the world that lies beyond the waking world. Or to quote from *The Elsewhereans*: "This is where the dead go. To torment us in our dreams. They have nothing else to do and nowhere else to be."

Q: *Is 'Elsewhereanism' an inheritance? Or is it a choice?*
A: I'd say it's a state of being, and in that sense, it's an inheritance. But in every other way, it's an ongoing choice. Is it possible to live in the modern world and be of one place? Who can answer with one word the question, 'Where are you from?' Even if you've never left your place of birth, you may feel like a stranger at home. You may choose to believe that your hometown is wherever you happen to be. You are not of single origin, like a coffee varietal. You are from multiple places. You contain multitudes. Home is where you lay your hat.

The interviewer is a poet and novelist.

City verses

Poets John Kinsella and Jeet Thayil come together to offer a view of the urban landscape beyond cement and concrete, loss and loneliness

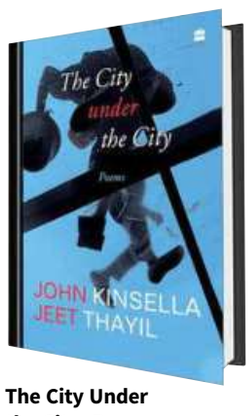
Chintan Girish Modi

If you are a fan of the dialogic epistolary novel, where a story unfolds through an exchange of letters between two characters, or the *jugalbandi* in Hindustani classical music, where two performers create a unique blend with their individual styles, do consider reading poets John Kinsella and Jeet Thayil's new book *The City Under the City*. It is a compendium of what they refer to as "call-and-response poems", birthed over two years across multiple cities.

The collection is dedicated to "cities that have welcomed us and turned us away", without allowing the specifics of autobiographical information to meddle with the reader's enjoyment. Bombay, New York, Perth, Amsterdam, Dhaka, Rome, Edinburgh, Jaffna, Wellington, Zurich, Paris, London, Galway, Johannesburg are among the cities that find a mention. On the one hand, this geographical expanse feeds the notion of the poet as a global citizen. On the other hand, it also underscores how the literary life creates opportunities for writers to travel and engage with unfamiliar worlds.

The two poets push readers to open their eyes and see what the urban landscape has to offer beyond cement and concrete, loss and loneliness. In a poem titled 'Dead Fingers', Thayil writes, *A blood moon pours raw honey/ over the dry land*. The image is tantalising because of the sudden burst of beauty and softness it evokes.

In 'How Many Shopping Days Before Christmas?' he writes, *Rain collapses into mud-red,/ like a butcher's soufflé*, goading the reader to dispense with old metaphors for natural phenomena. In 'Beckett Bridge', he recalls *long walks always at night* along the river Seine to relish *streets sacred in their emptiness* after the buzz of tourists and office workers in the daytime has died down.



The City Under the City: Poems
John Kinsella and Jeet Thayil
HarperCollins
₹499

Rare experiment

In a poem titled 'Small City', Kinsella writes, *The shadowed garden/ is full of insects and birds./ The small buildings in the garden/ hold echoes and prayers*. The desire to experience life outside a narrow anthropocentric universe resurfaces in his poem 'Reconfiguring Geometrics', where he writes, *I think we all have to conjure the gall/ to rethink what a city will be*. With Kinsella's "wish for a forest", one cannot help but think of what town planning in the future might look like if poets were invited to be a part of the brainstorming process.

Thayil was born near the river Muvattupuzha in Kerala. Kinsella, born in Perth, is a vegan, environmental activist and scholar, and an advocate for the land rights of indigenous people. His home is on Ballardong Noongar land at 'Jam Tree Gully' in Western Australia. These significant aspects of both poets' lives are reflected in the poems gathered here.

Poetry collections rarely carry footnotes or bibliographies, which are considered the domain of scholarly research. However, this book delights with the plethora of intertextual references woven into verse, including writers such as Eunice de Souza, Andrew Duncan, Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir, Daniel Defoe and Ezra Pound.

What one misses, however, is an introductory essay offering a glimpse of how the collaborative project came into being, was sustained, and then shaped into a book. One hopes that publishers will let go of limiting beliefs, and venture more confidently into such literary experiments that give readers a chance to be surprised by what words can do.

The reviewer is a journalist, educator and literary critic.

The literary brilliance of P. Lankesh

A new translated anthology makes for an ideal introduction to the journalist-activist's oeuvre comprising poems, plays and essays

N.S. Gundur

It is intriguing that P. Lankesh (1935-2000), an iconoclastic modernist Kannada writer and public intellectual, showed little interest in making his works accessible to a wider audience through translation. Unlike his contemporaries U.R. Ananthamurthy and Girish Karnad, who embraced global platforms and saw their works rendered into English, Lankesh, much like his kindred spirit K.P. Purnachandra Tejasvi, chose to be a local cosmopolitan.

Lankesh's life and writings, however, undeniably merit a wider reach. Thanks to Nataraj Huliyar and a group of excellent translators, the carefully selected and translated anthology, *The Sour Mango Tree*, makes for an ideal introduction to Lankesh's oeuvre. The collection features excerpts from his autobiography, *Hulimavina Mara*

P. Lankesh's poetry reads the world and literary classics differently.
(THE HINDU ARCHIVES)

INTERVIEW

THE MAKING OF MODERN ASIA

Sam Dalrymple on why the legacies of partitions linger in the subcontinent

Preeti Zachariah
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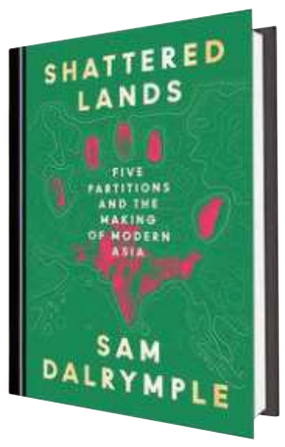
Mahatma Gandhi, writes Sam Dalrymple in his latest book, *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia* (HarperCollins), would be one of the last people to traverse the vast territory of the Empire, from Rangoon to Aden. "As recently as 1928, a vast swathe of Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, were bound together under a single imperial banner."

Yet, "less than five decades later, the same trip would cover 12 different nation states," says the writer, filmmaker, and peace activist over a Zoom call. *Shattered Lands* essentially charts this transition, chronicling the five major Partitions that splintered this single dominion into multiple nations. "And, above all, it is the story of how the map of modern Asia was made," writes Dalrymple. Edited extracts from an interview.

Question: *You talk about "historical amnesia" and how that impacts the way we remember our past and what we choose to forget. Can you expand on this?*
Answer: I think this holds true of state narratives, particularly in the subcontinent. The clearest example of this is the way that 1971 is treated in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In India, it is the third Indo-Pak War, and the whole liberation struggle of Bangladeshis gets somehow missed out.

In Bangladesh, it is seen as a liberation war, with the foregrounding being a struggle of freedom from Pakistani rule, with the nuances of the parts of the population who still felt Pakistani often brushed over. And then within Pakistan, it's seen as the fall of Dhaka and the



dismemberment of the nation, leaving aside the reasons why Bangladesh wanted to become independent.

When you put it all together chronologically, it's clear what's happening here. However, each of the three countries has been able to form completely different narratives of the same series of events, foregrounding themselves often and leaving out the complete picture of what's going on in the whole subcontinent.

Q: *While this is a work of narrative nonfiction, oral history occupies a substantial portion of the book. Can you talk about the criticality of oral history to the larger narrative?*
A: There's this general assumption, often, that oral testimonies are somehow less valuable than written testimonies, which, of course, isn't the case. The crucial thing is that with oral histories, you can get the stories that no one would ever write down – stories from those who weren't literate or thought their stories weren't dramatic enough for a memoir. If you do it at the right time, you can record a whole swathe of society whose stories would otherwise be left out of the history books. Also, there are details and imagery you can get from oral history that are often left out, like the colour of the car that someone was driving.

So many of our questions were about what life was like before Partition, trying to recreate that world. And you'd get accounts from northwestern Pakistan or stories from Balochistan about how festivals like Diwali or Holi were celebrated in these regions. They create a picture of a place that no government archive will ever be able to put together.

Oral history forms a massive bedrock of this whole book, which has interviews in eight languages and all sorts of countries. But it gradually turned into narrative history when I began to try to write it. The ideal situation is when you've got oral testimony, government records, memoirs, etc., and you can piece together something amazing.

Q: *How did your background as a filmmaker shape your approach to writing about characters like Nehru, Gandhi, and Jinnah?*
A: In documentary and good history writing, when introducing characters, you want to quickly sketch out their character. In my experience, the best way to draw a pen portrait is to draw out the contradictions in any person. For instance, Nehru was a bit of a champagne socialist, who was not very revolutionary at all. Until the day he sees General Dyer, who was behind the Amritsar massacre, walking off a train in his pink-striped pyjamas, casually talking about wiping Amritsar off the face of the planet. And he is so horrified that it radicalises him. I saw that scene when trying to draw out Nehru's character. Seeing history in scenes is helpful, just in the same way that it is in a documentary.


Sam Dalrymple


Indian soldiers in France in 1940. (GETTY IMAGES)

Lost in memory

Ghee Bowman brings to light the story of Indian prisoners of World War II who fled from a German camp

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I'd never heard of these POWs before – all those Great Escapes & never a brown face among them." This line in the Epilogue of Ghee Bowman's *The Great Épinal Escape* perfectly expresses a reader's state after finishing the book. The tale of over 500 Indian prisoners of war escaping from a German camp during World War II has lain buried in various archives and libraries until unearthed and excavated by the historian and author. But this book is more than just a story of an escape.

Theatres of action

Bowman opens with an overview of "an army in transition, from a country in transition" in which he sketches the reasons for young men to join the army and the impact of India's freedom movement on recruitment. He moves across the various theatres of action to show how widely spread the Indian soldiers were across Europe and Africa, and how many were taken as prisoners by the Germans.

Even before he gets to the great escape, Bowman showcases characters such as Shriniwas Raghavendra Kulkarni, a clerk in the Mobile Workshop Company of the Ordnance Corps, who was captured in June 1942 in North Africa. He escapes, is captured, escapes again, hides in an Arab village, disguises himself as an Arab, trudges across Italy and finally falls in with New Zealand troops. A performance that was awarded the Indian Order of Merit.

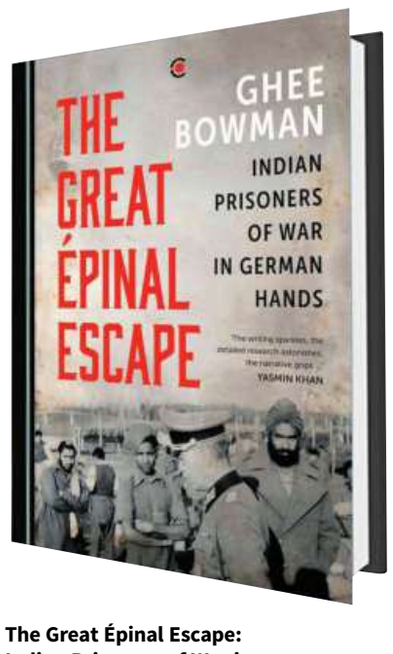
But not all prisoners were as lucky. Bowman offers a detailed account of the life of a PoW in a German camp with extracts from letters written by the men. As Havildar R.P. Shirke of the Postal Service writes: "It seemed that Man had jumped from the civilised 20th century back to the Stone Age ..."

The escape

The second part of the book is devoted to the escape. On May 11, 1944, American planes dropped bombs in Épinal in northeastern France to destroy the railway lines. With some bombs falling on a PoW camp and destroying its walls, the prisoners took the opportunity to grab "everything we could by way of food, blankets etc ..." and escape. When you stop to think about this, it boggles the mind.

Strangers in France, not knowing the language or customs, visibly different from the locals, without money or any papers... yet they did not hesitate. There's a heart-warming incident of two soldiers returning to the camp to rescue a friend before continuing on their way to freedom. In this, the attitude of the French also played a big role: whether it was feeding the escapees, hiding them, guiding them in the right direction, and hoodwinking the Germans. Yet things could get complicated, given the nature of the Swiss border, which meandered into France and Germany. Bowman narrates one story of a group of prisoners who lost their way and returned to the farm they had been sent on from.

Once in Switzerland, they were free but it was of a limited nature. Bowman writes about the racism – overt and covert – with which the Indians were treated and of their return to India. The Epilogue looks at what the Épinal episode had done to the men. Bowman also points out that while those who fought in the Indian National Army are being feted, those who served in the British army are "not well remembered. They should be. They are no less worthy of record than the Americans and Britishers at Colditz and Stalag Luft III. For the sake of their families, and to set right the historical record, their stories should be told and retold".



The Great Épinal Escape: Indian Prisoners of War in German Hands
Ghee Bowman
Context
₹699

(*The Sour Mango Tree*), two plays, *Giliyu Panjaradolilla* (*The Bird is not in the Cage*) and *Gunamukha* (*Recovery*), besides select short fiction, prose, and poetry.

Lankesh was a politically committed writer who, more often than not, practised what the Greeks called *parrhesia* – telling truth to power structures. Apart from expressing his thoughts and worldview through works of art, Lankesh actively critiqued his era as the editor of *Lankesh Patrike*, a weekly tabloid, from 1980 until he died in 2000. The *Patrike*, a runaway success, became a platform for literary activism, fostering emerging voices such as Huliyar, Sara Aboobacker, B.T. Lalitha Naik, Vaidehi and Banu Mushtaq, among others. Its influence profoundly shaped the sensibilities of an entire generation.

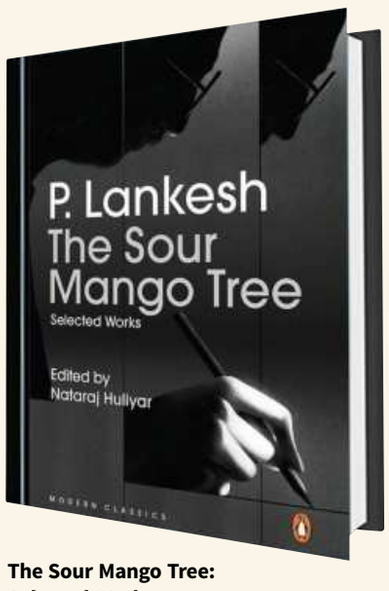
Taking caste head-on

This anthology includes essays from Lankesh's acclaimed 'Teeke Tippani' (Comments and Notes) column penned for the magazine. Spanning politics, literature, sports, philosophy, and figures such as the Buddha and Ambedkar, these pieces shaped the political consciousness of readers while refashioning Kannada prose as a tool for social criticism.

Gandhi and Lohia indeed loom large in the unconscious of Lankesh's writerly life. One standout essay, 'Us and Them', translated with sensitivity by Lankesh's close associate Basavaraj Urs, offers a Gandhian perspective on the Ayodhya and Babri Masjid conflict, written two years before the mosque's demolition.

As a Lohiaite socialist, Lankesh grappled with the phenomenology of caste practices. His searing short story 'Muttisikondavaru' (The Touch) confronts untouchability, using illness as a metaphor – where physical affliction mirrors a deeper spiritual decay. Basalinga, a simpleton farmer, gets his ailing left eye operated on by Doctor Thimmappa, who is a Dalit. On learning about the doctor's caste, his mental ailments begin, tortured by the impurity of touch.

This story illustrates how caste practices deeply entrenched in Indian ethos become natural essence, overriding reason and rationality. Basalinga's troubled eye cannot see the doctor's expertise but his caste identity. Lankesh's framing of social ills as universal tales of the human condition, in which, he believed, man is inherently evil, reminds one of Saadat Hasan Manto, who transmuted the trauma of Partition into metaphysical irony and dark humour.



The Sour Mango Tree: Selected Works
P. Lankesh, ed. Nataraj Huliyar
Penguin
₹399

A female pseudonym too

The mastery of this framing is on full display in his play *Gunamukha*, a tour de force based on Persian emperor Nadir Shah's life in Delhi. The physical illness of the emperor becomes a lens for his mental torment, born of his hubris. When Nadir Shah summons Alavi, a *hakim* (healer), to treat his ailments, the healer diagnoses the root cause of his illness: the emperor's arrogance that renders him deaf to people's suffering.

The way Lankesh dramatises the exchanges between both characters, especially the last scene excerpted so well in this book, remains unmatched in modern Indian theatre. Though *Gunamukha* could not amass the power of performance in the national theatre, commanding stages like Delhi's Purana Qila, it is no less a classic than Karnad's *Tughlaq*.

Lankesh's prose further illuminates his brilliance, offering fresh perspectives on texts like Babur's *Babarnama*, Tejasvi's *Carvalho*, and writers, including Bertolt Brecht. His poetry, too, reads the world and literary classics differently. In one of three poems on *Anna Karenina* included here, he thus illuminates: *Helen and Anna/ Karenina turned/ adultery into love/ shaped yearning into/ a basic emotion*. His 'Neelu' poems, short poetic lines composed under a female pseudonym, are arguably naughty but aesthetically appealing and thoughtful.

While Lankesh's political outlook inspires us to be critical of our times, his literary corpus makes him one of the masters of Indian literature. His relevance, therefore, compels us to demand comprehensive translations of his works, particularly his autobiography, fiction and *Gunamukha*.

The reviewer, a NIF Translation fellow, teaches English literature at Tumkur University.

(Clockwise from right) An awareness session with farmers in Andhra Pradesh; Gerry Martin of The Liana Trust; Martin demonstrates venom extraction at the Hunsur serpentarium; and conservationist Romulus Whitaker with a spectacled cobra. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & JANAKI LENIN)

CONTINUED FROM
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SNAKEBITE CAPITAL
WHAT INDIA MUST GET RIGHT

Dr. Menon began studying snakebite deaths in the early 2000s, and is separately leading an Indian Council of Medical Research survey on the incidence, mortality, morbidity and socio-economic burden of snakebites across 14 states, another first-of-its-kind effort which will improve understanding of the issue.

Close to 70% of snakebite deaths occur in nine states, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, according to a 2020 study on trends in snakebite deaths in India. However, it's yet to be declared a notifiable disease in these high-burden states.

In Madhya Pradesh, it is treated as a "local tragedy", and compensation is disbursed for loss of life. The Uttar Pradesh government, in 2021, declared deaths due to snake bites as a state calamity following a significant number of fatalities recorded between 2016 and 2021. Families of victims are eligible for a compensation of ₹4 lakh, which must be provided within seven days of the death.

Confluence of factors

While snakebite envenoming is a global challenge, with the World Health Organization declaring it a neglected tropical disease in 2017, the number of deaths and cases of long-term disability are higher in India due to multiple factors. "We have an extraordinary number of people coexisting closely with snakes, especially in rural and semi-rural areas," says Gnaneswar Ch, project lead-snakebite mitigation at The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust & Centre For Herpetology in Tamil Nadu. "Several parts of Africa have more venomous snakes than India. But the numbers [of envenoming] are not as high because of lower population density."

Secondly, medical treatment is often delayed, either due to lack of access to healthcare facilities in rural areas, poor availability of anti-venom or, as it often happens, because patients first approach traditional healers. Gnaneswar recalls a recent incident where a farmer from Kanchipuram who was bitten by a Russell's viper first went to a faith healer. "The healer gave him something to put in his mouth, something to put in his eyes, then took him to the spot where he was bitten and conducted a ritual, all of which took an hour-and-a-half. When the victim lost consciousness, the healer said it was not his responsibility," he says. The farmer was finally rushed to the hospital but by the time he reached, he was brain dead.

Even when the patient manages to reach a healthcare facility in time, other complications can arise. Administering antivenom quickly is the universal life-saving treatment for snakebite envenoming. But because antivenom is made of antibodies generated in an animal, it can trigger adverse allergic reactions in humans, which can sometimes be severe, even life-threatening. "The fear of developing an allergic reaction is heightened in a small hospital in the periphery," says Dr. Ralph. Doctors then end up referring patients to larger facilities, which means precious time is lost. Many primary health centres (PHCs) also don't have qualified doctors, says Priyanka Kadam, founder of Mumbai-based not-for-profit Snakebite Healing and Education Society (SHE-India).

When Dr. Sadanand and Dr. Pallavi Raut opened their clinic in Narayangaon in Maharashtra in the mid-90s after the former witnessed an eight-year-old girl lose her life to snakebite, these issues were rampant. "Doctors at PHCs and medical centres in our area were initially reluctant to give antivenom because of the risk of anaphylaxis and death," says Dr. Sadanand. But years of working with communities, building awareness and giving training has made a difference in the area, he says, underlining the importance of scaling these measures. "Critical patients now come to us within 20 minutes and the survival rate is 100%." Kadam says her organisation is training ASHAs (accredited social health activists) in places like Bastar in Chhattisgarh to spread the message that victims must immediately go to the hospital.

One size doesn't fit all

Antivenom everywhere is made using the same century-old method: by injecting tiny doses of venom into a large animal like a horse and then using the antibodies that are generated. Antivenom can be monovalent, targeting a single species, or polyvalent, for multiple species. In India, antivenom is made using the venom of four species considered responsible for most cases of envenoming. Termed the 'Big Four', these are the common krait, the Indian cobra, the Russell's viper and the saw-scaled viper.

But this approach is now being questioned, particularly since there are regions where other venomous species dominate and where the current antivenom is less effective, as multiple studies have now shown.

Venom also varies within species, depending on age and climatic conditions, recent research has shown. A study conducted among snakebite victims in Rajasthan published in January this year found poor antivenom response, because the venom of the saw-scaled viper in the region was more potent than its counterpart in Tamil Nadu, from where much of the country's venom is sourced.

One solution is to have antivenoms for different regions instead of a single one for the whole country, an approach the national action plan now recommends. Different research groups are working on this, including the Evolutionary Venomics Lab at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru, which has been testing regional antivenoms for western India with an antivenom manufacturer. Results are set to be published soon. Another group in Tezpur University is working on an antivenom for the Northeast.

Quality issues

But Indian antivenom also suffers from quality issues. At present, the bulk of venom is collected by the Irulas, a marginalised tribal community in Tamil Nadu historically skilled at catching snakes. With the help of conservationist Romulus Whitaker, they formed the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society and are today licensed to catch snakes for venom. The Irulas keep the captive reptiles in pots in sand pits, milk them for venom to sell to manufacturers, and then release the snakes back into the wild. However, this process does not adhere to WHO protocols and good manufacturing practices, which impacts the venom quality, says Gnaneswar. Humane Society's Bindumadhav says there is a big policy gap in the fact that the antivenom used in India has never undergone clinical trials and there are no minimum quality standards.

This is one of the issues The Liana Trust's new serpentarium aims to tackle, by taking venom from snakes housed in the facility in controlled, hygienic conditions to be supplied to antivenom manufacturers for free. "This will set a precedent for region-specific antivenom centres. It will also help us understand the local venom landscape," says Martin.

Tamil Nadu, too, is considering setting up a modern serpentarium, though Gnaneswar says progress has been slow. The most ambitious of the new facilities will be the Venom Institute for Snakebite Health and Advanced Medicine (VISHAM) coming up in Bengaluru, funded by the Karnataka government and developed in collaboration with the Evolutionary Venomics Lab (EVL) at an initial cost of ₹7 crore. Kartik Sunagar, associate professor at IISc and head of EVL, says the serpentarium aims to be one of the best globally, housing species from across India, and producing high-quality venom. "We will also have labs for collaborative research with manufacturers and an incubation centre that will house startups interested in working on antivenoms," says Sunagar.

Modernising treatment

Critically, Sunagar and his team are also working on bringing snakebite treatment into the 21st century. Last year, scientists at EVL along with researchers at Scripps Institute in the U.S .and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine published their discovery of a new recombinant antibody (produced using genetic engineering; it was tested and selected from a "library" of millions of lab-made antibodies), which can neutralise a whole group of toxins across multiple species, holding out promise of a universal or at least pan-continental antivenom.

While progress will take time, Sunagar's team is working on other synthetic antibodies specifically against Indian snakes. Since these antibodies are not generated in animals, it will also minimise adverse reactions. "Regional antivenoms can at best be a stop-gap solution – we need modern solutions, which will be more effective," says Sunagar.

The other promising avenue is repurposing existing drugs such as varespladib and marimastat, found to be potent inhibitors of specific toxins in snake venom. Success would mean a drug that can be taken orally as opposed to antivenom given intravenously in a healthcare setting. This will at the very least buy victims time to reach a hospital. U.S.-based Ophirex is currently conducting trials in India and the U.S. Sunagar is separately set to publish results of trials of orally-administered drugs in Russell's viper bites, which successfully neutralised venom in mice. A diagnostic test to identify a Russell's viper bite, which would help in targeted treatment, is also in the works.

Rescue app

Others are using technology to mitigate the conflict between snakes and humans. For instance, the Sarpa (short for Snake Awareness Rescue and Protection App) app, which has enabled the rescue of 50,000 snakes in Kerala, connects the closest snake rescuer with those who need one, much like an Uber or Ola connects passengers to taxi drivers. Says founder Jose Louies, who is also CEO of Wildlife Trust, "We can keep track of what species we've found in which season, in an area. We can also generate predictive data." Other states have expressed interest in replicating this model, adds Louies, before cautioning that apps should not be seen as a magic bullet. "It's the system and networks behind it that make it work."

The best mitigation, says conservationist Whitaker, is prevention. But that's difficult in India, where people work in fields barefoot and with bare hands, and step out at night without a flashlight. "Education and awareness are key. The government would only have to spend a fraction of what it ends up paying as compensation," he suggests.

Being at the frontlines of human-snake conflict, Martin says the challenges often seem formidable. "But the momentum is growing and the problem is getting acknowledged. Every step forward is heartening," he says.

We need to acknowledge that humans and snakes will always share space, adds Bindumadhav. "There will be coexistence, so it's very important to figure out how."

The question gathers urgency if India is to meet the WHO target of halving snakebite mortality by 2030 and adapt to the impact of climate change.

With inputs from Mehul Malpani (Madhya Pradesh) and Mayank Kumar (Uttar Pradesh).

The Bengaluru-based independent journalist writes on gender, labour, ecology and business.

Lethal strike

- Snakebite kills about 58,000 people a year in India, close to half the global total.
- Snakebite deaths are more common (48%) during the Southwest monsoon (June-September)
- Russell's viper contributes to most deaths at 43%, followed by unknown species (21%), krait (18%), and cobra (12%).

(Source: WHO; Indian Million Death Study; Trends in snakebite deaths in India, 2020)

Know your viper

India has more than 310 species of snakes. Of these, 66 are labelled venomous or mildly venomous. The 'Big Four' were considered responsible for most venomous bites in the country, but newer studies show other species also contribute to the snakebite burden, particularly in the Northeast.

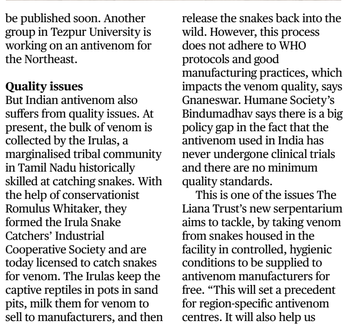
BIG FOUR

- **Russell's viper:** triangular head and yellow-brown body with dark patterns
- **Spectacled cobra:** distinct spectacled mark on hood; can grow to 1.5 metres
- **Common krait:** Blue or black in colour, with light cross-bands
- **Saw-scaled viper:** Grey, brown or olive body with dark patterns; grows only up to 0.6 metres

THE OTHERS

- **Salazar's pit viper:** bright green body; found in Arunachal Pradesh
- **Hump-nosed pit viper:** pointed, upturned snout, with a tail tip that's often yellow or reddish; found in Kerala and Karnataka
- **Sind krait:** glossy black body with narrow white bands; found in Rajasthan, Punjab and Gujarat
- **Mountain pit viper:** grey-brown with a short snout and darker brown blotches; found in the Himalayas and the Northeast

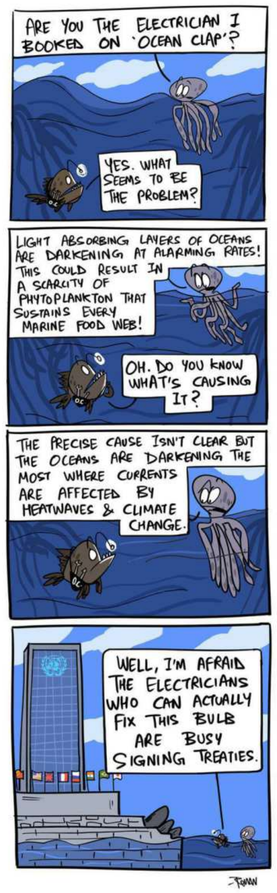
Lore and legends Snakes occupy an important place in Indian culture and mythology. (Right) A carving of Nagaraja, king of snakes, in Badami caves, Karnataka; and (below) a statue of Mahishasura with a snake at Chamundeswari Temple, Mysuru. (WIKI COMMONS & GETTY IMAGES)



Scan the QR code for a walkthrough of India's newest serpentarium.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



Shunali Khullar Shroff

FRIDA KAHLO:
A CONTESTED MEXICAN ICON?

The painter, whose 118th birth anniversary falls today, has a complex legacy in her homeland

It's my first time in Mexico City and I am excited to visit *La Casa Azul* (The Blue House), Frida Kahlo's former home, which is now a museum. Years ago, a glimpse into her personal life through her art and belongings, exhibited at the Victoria and Albert museum in London, drew me into Kahlo's world, and with good reason. Her artistic journey, defiance of convention, and stormy relationship with her husband, artist Diego Rivera, made for an undeniably compelling story.

This February morning, I step into the cobalt house in the neighbourhood of Coyoacán with a sense of expectation. Walking through the sun-dappled garden and from room to room, I catch glimpses of the artist as daughter, lover, patient, and wife. On display are Kahlo's childhood photos, letters, and a bed with a mirror fixed above it, which allowed her to paint self-portraits while recovering from a bus accident.

I pass her brace, the custom-made shoe for her polio-affected leg, and paintings about her miscarriage. The kitchenware, the collection of indigenous sculptures, the quirky papier-mâché Judas skeletons hanging in different rooms, her wheelchair parked quietly in her studio, her once-banned still life, rich with symbols of female desire – all bear witness to the life she shared with Rivera.

I wonder about the mythologisation of Kahlo, the Mexican artist who now stares back at you from cushion covers, beach towels, coffee mugs, and tote bags across the world. Hailed as a global icon, how does her own country view her?

Pain and passion

Kahlo's personal life was filled with pain, which she channelled into art. Afflicted by polio as a child, she met with a bus accident as a teenager. While recovering in a body cast, she began focusing on painting. In her lifetime, she underwent 30 operations.

Her marriage to Rivera was tumultuous. He had several affairs, but when he had one with Kahlo's younger sister, it broke her heart. She went on to have several affairs herself, including a rumoured relationship with Leon Trotsky and even a few women.

Hailed as a feminist for her portrayal of the female form and experience, and celebrated for her self-portraits, Kahlo's art still resonates with audiences everywhere. And India is no exception. "For the world, Kahlo is a female icon and path-breaking artist. She lived and painted on her own terms. Her bohemian lifestyle challenged family norms, which unsettles society even today. But before judging, we must ask, who is writing history and who is reading it," says Aparajita Jain, co-director of Nature Morte Art Limited, an art gallery in New Delhi.

Artist Dhruvi Acharya feels Kahlo was one of the first artists to make both her inner and outer worlds visible on canvas. "Her honest work has been influencing artists to express themselves without feeling constrained by artistic traditions or norms," she says.

Relevance in her homeland

For the world, she remains an eminent artist – a tragic, resilient icon, made of equal parts suffering and defiance. But do Mexicans view Kahlo similarly? "Mexicans weren't prepared for the way people see her now," says Lorena Vazquez, 42, an archaeologist and guide. The turning point came in the 1990s, when Madonna purchased a Kahlo painting. It catapulted her from being known as the partner of Rivera (considered a national treasure) to a global phenomenon who eclipsed his fame, she says.

"To me, Frida is a powerful example of a woman who dared to be different – not just because of the trauma she went through or the accident that changed her life, but because she lived life on her own terms," Lorena adds. Kahlo didn't produce a very large body of work – fewer than 150 paintings, most of them self-portraits – largely because of her health issues and the accident that confined her to bed.

Lorena's husband, Hector Vazquez, 45, feels Kahlo is an overrated artist. "Her art isn't particularly impressive," says Hector, who believes her fame comes more from her association with Rivera, accident and eccentric life. "Her art is unique and eccentric, and that's what makes it appealing. But from a technical standpoint, I don't think her work is particularly strong."

But others outside the country differ. "Art isn't just about brush strokes – skill is only part of it. Higher intellect and artistic expression, and the willingness to adhere to your expression despite challenges, define true art," says Jain.

Branding Kahlo

Hector says Kahlo is celebrated globally because her family turned her name into a brand after Madonna brought attention to her work. They built a mini empire around it, but he believes the media ultimately shaped her image.

However, Alejandra Martinez Gallardo, an art historian and partner at Somos Arte Experiencias, a travel and concierge service in Mexico, believes that her art has its own merit. "Kahlo's work is technically sophisticated and emotionally raw. Her ability to fuse surrealism with Mexican folk art and unflinching portrayal of identity, gender, and pain distinguishes her as a significant artistic force," she says.

Gallardo believes young Mexicans feel a connection to Kahlo because her themes of identity, gender, and self-expression align with contemporary issues. "Rivera's work resonates less directly but remains an important historical and artistic touchstone. Many young people see them as foundational figures who laid the groundwork for modern Mexican cultural identity," she says.

Cynthia Gomez Tagle, 54, partner at Somos Artes Experiencas, agrees Kahlo is more popular abroad. "Rivera's work has come to be perceived as a historical manifesto from another era, while Kahlo's work is perceived as more current," she adds.

At the V&A, surrounded by immersive projections of her life in objects, I thought I understood Kahlo's world. But in Mexico City, hearing the voices of those who have grown up in her shadow, I realised that no single version of Kahlo exists. The world sees her as a symbol – Mexico still grapples with the woman behind it.

Rivera's artistic legacy is unmatched but the world seems to be obsessed with Kahlo. I admire her more as a person than as a painter. She lived a radically different life at a time when open marriages weren't accepted. Even in betrayal, she found a way to rewrite the rules, and create a new relationship that worked for her

LORENA VAZQUEZ
Archaeologist and guide

The writer is a Mumbai-based author and podcaster.

Glimpse into the past (Clockwise from left) La Casa Azul; Frida Kahlo; the artist's outfits; her bed with the overhead mirror; a still life; Aparajita Jain of Nature Morte; and Kahlo's wheelchair. (GETTY IMAGES, SHUNALI SHROFF)

BINGE WATCH

Power of micro-dramas

Why studio executives are betting big on this radically condensed storytelling format

In February this year, Kuku FM launched Kuku TV, a new vertical dedicated to micro-dramas – short-form TV shows with episodes lasting just a couple of minutes, shot entirely in vertical format for smartphone consumers. The platform features a vast catalogue of dubbed micro-dramas from around the world, alongside original in-house Hindi productions with titles such as *Rented Husband*, *Revenge of My Fake Boyfriend*, and *Gumshuda Waris (The Missing Heir)*.

Micro-dramas have emerged as a significant trend in the world of streaming since their inception about six years ago. According to a 2025 study by Omdia, Asia's top five micro-drama apps, for instance, reached a cumulative MAU (monthly active users) total of 150 million.

Today, most major streaming platforms have micro-drama projects in the pipeline, with smaller players like Kuku – and their American predecessors such as DramaBox and ReelShort – joining the fray. With attention spans shrinking in the age of endless scrolling, it's easy to see why studio executives are placing big bets on this radically condensed storytelling format.

Data-driven dramas

How did creators and producers discover the potential of micro-dramas? It all began with data. After the initial streaming boom between 2013 and 2016, platforms took a step back to analyse vast amounts of viewer data collected over the years. They asked: what are people watching during the day, at night, during commutes, or just before bedtime? At what exact moment were viewers tuning out? How long do typical binge-watching sessions last? What's the maximum episode length before viewership starts to drop? This treasure trove of data allowed streamers to come to certain 'organic' conclusions about our collective viewing habits, paving the way for the current wave of micro-dramas.

In Hollywood, this business model gave rise to Quibi (2018-2020), a startup that has since become a cautionary tale in the streaming industry. Quibi experienced exponential subscriber growth in its first year, focusing on high-quality short-form content designed for on-the-go consumption – the name itself derived from "quick bites." In 2018, its founders raised over a billion dollars from industry giants such as Disney, WarnerMedia, and Sony. The service launched amidst much fanfare, with original programming that included *Most Dangerous Game* by Nick Santora (creator of Amazon's hit *Reacher*) and the horror anthology *50 States of Fright*, featuring renowned actors like Rory Culkin and Rachel Brosnahan in standalone episodes under 10 minutes.

However, Quibi's rise was short-lived. The company expanded too rapidly without a clear strategy for sustainable revenue generation. It soon folded, and in 2021, its entire content library was acquired by the streaming platform Roku.

TikTok did it first

Like any disruption to an established ecosystem, micro-dramas come with both benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, they offer a valuable crash course for emerging actors, directors, and crew members. They learn to shoot quickly and efficiently – often on shoestring budgets – since elaborate sets aren't necessary when even the sofa the character sits on is barely visible. The rate at which smartphone cameras have advanced has helped the micro-drama thrive. Editing also becomes especially crucial in this format, providing young editors with a unique opportunity to hone their skills.

However, the downsides are equally apparent. Aside from a few notable exceptions, many micro-dramas suffer from amateurish execution. The acting is over the top, the editing is frenetic to the point of being a seizure-risk, and the overall tone sometimes resembles adults trying to watch cartoons with a straight face.

It's a shame because the amateur Indian productions that predated (and undoubtedly influenced) today's micro-dramas were often far more imaginative, both in storytelling and performance. Several western creators have even acknowledged the influence of these early Indian TikToks, known for their brevity and fast-paced thrillers. In my view, those videos (now defunct since the app is banned in India) were superior in almost every way to the professionally produced mini-dramas currently circulating.

If the likes of Amazon and Netflix are indeed looking to make micro-dramas a part of their libraries, I feel like they'd do better (especially outside of the metros) if the products are a little rough around the edges, a little 'amateurish' on purpose. After all, it's not just the brevity that makes these two-minute dramas and thrillers work; it's also the DIY ethos of it all. Unfortunately, that aspect is often the first to go out of the window once corporate behemoths enter the picture.

***Aditya Mani Jha** is working on his first book of non-fiction.*

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 13

ULTIMATE LIFE GOALS

'99% of all Indian people on LinkedIn have one particular complex ambition'

Hello readers, *enthaanu visheshangal*? I hope your Sunday is proceeding in a felicitous manner.

Your favourite weekend columnist is currently on extended leave from work and other livelihood-related shenanigans. Things have been very busy indeed for the last many months. And I thought it was time to take a well-earned break to rest and recuperate. (If anyone reading this is looking to hire a handsome Malayali youth – a Mamdani from Malabar if you will – with an eclectic resume and reasonable salary expectations, please contact me immediately.)

And how have I been spending this hard-earned period of professional respite?

Yes, exactly. I have been lavishing away hours on end browsing LinkedIn. I am trying to figure out what all my long-forgotten best friends and sworn enemies – from secondary school, bachelor's, all the way up to master's – have been up to in their careers.

Am I doing this in order to come up with characters for my next novel? How dare you? Do not insult me with such baseless allegations. (Yes.)

But friends, let me ask you one question: what is your ultimate ambition in your professional life?

I am a child of the 1990s. I grew up at a time when there was no Internet, most telephones were rotary, Indian bowlers were only fast if they were travelling by train, and one's greatest source of entertainment were latest Malayalam films.

My professional ambitions when I was a child were simple: become any type of engineer except Civil, any type of doctor except surgeon, or, like Mohanlal in *Yoddha* (1992), travel to Nepal and become a warrior-monk who rescues the next incarnation of the Buddha from the clutches of a dark wizard before romancing the heroine. Ideally Simran, but Manju Warrier is also okay. Not a deal-breaker.

But friends, as I have spent more and more time on LinkedIn, I have come to realise that 99% of all Indian people on LinkedIn have a particular ambition. It is a complex ambition. And it very much deserves a word by itself in the English dictionary.

First, let me explain this ambition.

Fauxsperity

/ˈfoʊspɛrɪti/
noun
plural: fauxsperities (or fauxsperists for the people)
Definition: The practice of simultaneously displaying one's prosperity while performing elaborate demonstrations of humility and simple values, typically on professional social media platforms.

The ambition is in two parts.

The first part is to get a high-profile job in a high-profile company. It should come with a glamorous title and corporate travel. Once you get this job, you will share all kinds of glamorous details of your lifestyle on LinkedIn. You will share pictures of conferences in Kuala Lumpur, award ceremonies holding certificates, and intense pictures of intense office meetings where you discuss intense things with your intense colleagues. Of course, you will also share pictures of yourself on holiday with your family in assorted domestic and international locations.

Now you might think: wait this is a perfectly fine ambition. In fact, this is my own ambition.

Let me explain the second part of this ambition: to also relentlessly convey the fact that you cannot afford anything because you are simple and humble and will not spend money.

Friends, this combination is the ultimate ambition of 99% of Indian people on LinkedIn:

1. To be able to indicate that you have a lot of money: "Guys, just feeling so blessed today that I could book Chinnaswami Stadium for a simple private ceremony to celebrate my appointment as Chairman and Managing Director of Labour Price Arbitrage Software Corporation of India. I just want to say thanks to my wife who you can see in the photo sitting on her diamond."
2. But to also then say that your quintessential Indian values mean that you will not spend a single rupee on anything due to intense humility and simple upbringing: "Guys, I was leaving the First Class lounge at Heathrow last night, and then had to run back because I left my Rolex on the table. But I fell down and broke my water bottle. But did I buy a new one? Never. I am not one of those western decadents. Instead, I asked the lounge for a simple Bisleri bottle and reused it for 12 hours. This is a picture of the humble water bottle held in my hand wearing a Rolex. It reminds me every day to keep my Indian feet on the ground."

I have come up with a term for this absolute shenanigans: fauxsperity.

Example sentence: "Rajesh's latest post about flying business class to Singapore but still eating dal-rice from tiffin box because of his village upbringing was peak fauxsperity."

Are you someone whose ambition is to achieve fauxsperity in your life? Do you know any fauxsperous people yourself? Immediately send me their LinkedIn profiles, along with Internet banking login and password, if possible.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Good card reading

North-South vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

South probably overbid his hand by a little, but North might have had a much better hand than he did. South won the opening diamond lead in hand with the king and paused to plan his play. The dummy was a disappointment, and he did not like his chances, but he asked himself why West had not led a spade. He would surely have led a spade if he held the king-queen-jack. As West had shown at least five spades with his overcall, it was likely that East had a singleton spade honor. South found a line of play that would take advantage of that.

South drew trumps in two rounds, led a diamond to dummy's ace, and ruffed a diamond. The ace and then the king of clubs eliminated the minor suits from each hand. South led a low spade from the board and was happy to see the queen from East. South played low from hand and the defense was helpless. Should East win the trick, he would have to yield a ruff-sluff. West could overtake the queen with the king, but he would be in the same boat, with the additional option of leading a spade away from his jack. Very nicely played.

NORTH
♠ 7 5 3 2
♡ K 10 7 6
◇ A 9 4
♣ K 5

WEST
♠ K J 9 8 6
♡ 2
◇ Q J 10 2
♣ Q 10 2

EAST
♠ Q
♡ 8 5
◇ 8 6 5 3
♣ J 9 8 7 6 3

SOUTH
♠ A 10 4
♡ A Q J 9 4 3
◇ K 7
♣ A 4

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♡	1♠	2♠*	Pass
4NT	Pass	5♡**	Pass
6♡	All pass		

***Heart raise, invitational or better**
****2 key cards, among the 4 aces and the king of hearts**

Opening lead: Queen of ◇

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about flags

Berty Ashley

The 204-year-old flag last flew on the HMS Spartiate during the Battle of Trafalgar, which showcased British naval supremacy. (GETTY IMAGES)

1 Born July 6, 1907, George Stanley was a soldier and historian who designed the national flag of his country. He wanted a flag that avoided any symbols that were of a divisive nature. His design had a red field, a white square and a leaf from the Acer tree. Which country's flag is this?

2 On July 6, 1947, the Avtomat Kalashnikova went into production in the Soviet Union. It remains one of the most easily recognisable items of its kind till date. It played such a huge role in independence struggles that it is even found on the national flag of Mozambique. By what name is it better known?

3 There are only three national flags that have a unique feature. These are the flags of Moldova, Paraguay and Saudi Arabia. When they are hoisted, it is necessary to ensure that the obverse side is always with the hoist (flag pole) on the left. What is special about these flags?

4 In 2009, a Union Jack flag was sold at an auction for 384,000 pounds (₹4.5 crore). The 204-year-old flag last flew on the HMS Spartiate during the Battle of Trafalgar, which showcased British naval supremacy. The flag commemorates a special British victory in a series of wars named after which emperor?

5 On June 14 every year, some boy scouts in the U.S. are given a very specific duty. If a flag is found to not be in a condition to be displayed, then it must be retired in a 'dignified way'. So, how do the scouts retire thousands of U.S. flags on this date?

6 There is always a flag flying over the Buckingham Palace in London. It is either the Union Jack or the Royal Standard. What does it indicate if the Royal Standard is flown?

7 The only national flag in the world that is neither rectangular nor square is the flag of Nepal. The double triangular flag is the only one that is given an exception by an international organisation that has a strict rule that all displayed flags must be in a 2x3 ratio. Which organisation is this?

8 In astronomy, an 'occultation' is an event where one celestial object appears to pass in front of another. Nine national flags, including Algeria, Maldives, Pakistan and Tunisia, depict this astronomical phenomenon. What two objects take centre position in these flags?

9 Every state in the United States of America has its own 'state flag', and the people of Texas even pledge allegiance to their flag. There is only one state, though, which has the Union Jack in the corner, to reflect the historical relationship with both the U.S. and the U.K. Which state is this that was the last to be added?

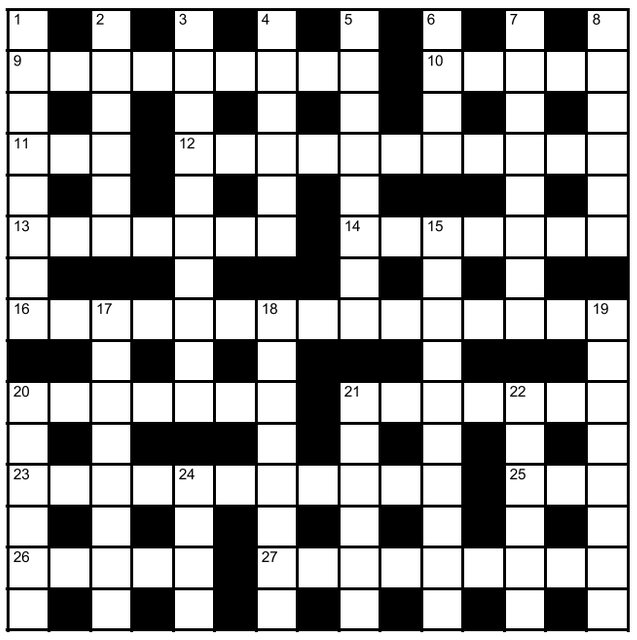
10 From 1814 to 1830, the period in French History is known as the 'Bourbon Restoration'. It followed the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte and was a period of peace after many wars. This is reflected in their official flag. What was the flag of France for these 16 years?

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. Canada
2. AK-47
3. They have different front and reverse sides.
4. Napoleon Bonaparte
5. By burning them.
6. To show that the king or queen is in residence.
7. The Olympics
8. The crescent and star
9. Hawaii
10. A pure white flag

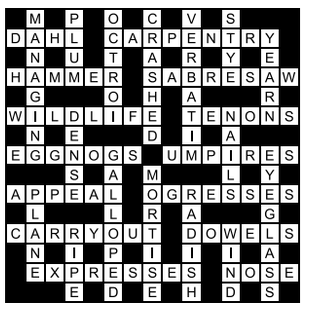
THE HINDU **SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 11** (Set by Vidwan)



Across
9 Small, very small rent, covers scarp of common cereal (5,4)
10 Bold monk left France and rose (5)
11 Vision spanning twenty-one years (3)
12 Common craft for tactics (11)
13 Honest, as guards are faceless (7)
14 Quickly, evenly, penetrates practically at the heart (7)
16 'Ron there in India'....absolutely correct! (5,2,3,5)
20 Standard place mostly for arriviste (7)
21 Hot beverage with hint of tonic water at French country house (7)
23 Cite one reel about campaign (11)
25 More than some bitcoin (3)
26 Courts, say working for prosecution (5)
27 Spontaneous devil's caper on Tuesday (9)

Down
1 One examines donkeys' spoors regularly (8)
2 Humble faculty head admitted me (6)
3 Crawler, horny and old, hosting grand social event (4,6)
4 Couple introducing individual resident of city (6)
5 Fix unopened core and one missing edge (8)
6 Adam's boy basically, turned out evil (4)
7 The genie belted a number (8)
8 Power line runs right (6)
15 Fellow citizen and leader of clan running away from small quarrel (10)
17 Reading about a yellow flower (8)
18 Unhealthy, unstable, unerotic (8)
4 Couple introducing individual resident of city (6)
5 Fix unopened core and one missing edge (8)
6 Adam's boy basically, turned out evil (4)
7 The genie belted a number (8)
8 Power line runs right (6)
15 Fellow citizen and leader of clan running away from small quarrel (10)
17 Reading about a yellow flower (8)
18 Unhealthy, unstable, unerotic (8)
19 Active address of second person, scratching backside of the most rich (8)
20 Buried men with a remarkable disinfectant (6)
21 Disturbing doctrine, mostly hollow pruriency (6)
22 Release reins carelessly for experiments (6)
24 Side said to be prolific (4)

SOLUTION NO. 10



Thriving stereotypes

Just because they are not always visible does not mean they have ceased to exist

Tharsni M.
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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJIT R. KUMAR

I had a casual chat with my seven-year-old nephew that left me stunned. I asked about his sister's presence, and he said that she had gone for tuitions. We continued the conversation about her studies. He said, "She gets second rank, but once she's married, she will kiss her husband." Before I could react, he added, "Yes, she will cook and clean the house."

This reply left me even more stunned. I gently explained to him that women are not just homemakers, and gave the example of his mother, who works. But I am pretty sure by his reaction that he has not been convinced. This made me wonder how early these biases take root.

I believed that stereotypical notions about women's "roles" had diminished over time. I thought we, as a society, had made progress. However, this brief interaction with my nephew, who lives in a semi-urban area, left me wondering about the situation in rural areas. Perhaps, for those of us living in cities, such outdated notions seem invisible, giving us a false sense of progress. But in villages, these stereotypes may still persist, quietly shaping young minds. Just because these biases are not always visible does not mean they have ceased to exist. Isn't it?

As I reflected, my mind wandered to Periyar's *Why Were Women Enslaved?* – a work written decades ago, yet painfully relevant today. Women work, earn, and excel, but do they truly own their lives? Take contraception, for instance. Why is it almost always a woman's responsibility? Birth control pills, intrauterine devices, sterilisation – women bear the risks and side effects. Meanwhile, vasectomy, a far simpler and safer procedure, is rarely encouraged for men on the pretext that it diminishes masculinity.

Another burden forced on women, another freedom denied. And what of chastity? A woman's worth is still shackled to her "purity". Virginity is sacred. Male promiscuity? Just boys being boys. In marriage, his infidelity is excused, while hers becomes a scandal. Chastity is not a virtue – it's a weapon of control. If it's so noble, why aren't men held to the same standard?

A divorced woman is a "failure". A widow is "inauspicious". A childless woman is "selfish". A working mother is "neglectful". When does a woman ever get to just be? From marriage to motherhood, from career choices to ageing, society weighs women down with impossible standards while men walk free. A divorced man remarries without judgment; a divorced woman is pitied or shamed. A widower moves on; a widow is expected to disappear into mourning. A child-free man is making a "personal choice"; a child-free woman is "unnatural".

Even in grief, inequality thrives. Women are barred from performing last rites – because tradition decrees that only sons can carry a legacy. Daughters who dare to claim this right face outrage, as if love has a gender. Dowry may be illegal, but its shadow lingers. A woman's marriage still comes with a price tag – sometimes literal, always societal. A man who "accepts" her without dowry is hailed as noble. The woman? She is just fulfilling her duty.

Deeply ingrained

We pretend we have progressed, but the truth is in the whispers. This conversation with my young nephew may have seemed small, but it was a glimpse into how deeply ingrained these beliefs still are. Progress is not about a few success stories. This is not progress – it's oppression in polite disguise. We are told we are equal, right after being reminded of our place. We are encouraged to dream big, as long as we know our limits. They celebrate our strength, yet expect us to suffer in silence. We are free to choose – only from the options given to us. Our success is praised, but only if it does not overshadow theirs.

We are taught to be independent, yet expected to depend on others. They call it duty, we call it control. For too long, women have been told where to stand, how to speak, and what to endure. But enough. We are not vessels of sacrifice or symbols of purity or equal to God – we are just humans and obliged to be the force of change often. No more waiting, no more whispering. The world will shift, not when it allows us space, but when we take it without asking.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The article has underscored the need for cultural protection of the LGBTQIA+ community. ('Queering the culture'; June 29) Surely, films, literature and the arts are powerful tools to build emotional connections and empathy about the queer community.
G. Ramasubramanyam

Changing impact

In our pursuit of development, we are destroying the ecology. ('Chasing the monsoon'; June 29) The endeavours of climate scientist Jagadish Shukla and his contemporaries are more important now than ever before.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Honouring the past

Wimbledon isn't just a tennis tournament but a cultural institution steeped in tradition. ('Who's in the royal box?'; June 29) What sets Wimbledon apart from the other three Grand Slams isn't just its age, but the reverence with which it honours its past.
Ranganathan Sivakumar

'AI is not a replacement'

AI is a powerful tool but it's not a replacement for the fundamentals of great marketing. ('Cannes Lions and the AI reality check'; June 29) There are three things no machine can replicate: human leadership, customer empathy, and a strong brand voice.
K.M.K. Murthy

Acknowledge grief

Phuphee teaches us that grief has no timeline, and healing is not a linear process. To feel deeply is not weakness, it is evidence that one is still alive.
Anusha Pillay

MORE ON THE WEB
www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Enjoyable unpredictability

You never know which song will play next on the radio and that is a pleasure
Rajagopal C.V.

Arthropod anarchy

For superhero moms, mosquitoes have proven to be worthy adversaries
Krithika Senthil

Harmful words

Unlike a burn or a cut, the damage from words does not heal with time alone
Sathappan N.

An open question

Questioning, if taken in the right context, is always constructive
Sundar S. Nathan

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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Warm welcome in a forest village

The accommodating villagers eagerly shared customs and practices

Sujith Sandur
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Years ago, as part of a project, we embarked on a visit to a cluster of villages nestled deep within the forests. Our mandate was to gather information from the forest dwellers to assess their socio-economic status, their dependence on forest resources, and the condition of the forest.

While we were excited and curious about exploring unfamiliar places, many of us felt apprehensive about spending extended time there after work hours. To boost morale, I told my team during a pep talk that we might be reluctant to leave once our assignments were complete.

We set off on a foggy morning and arrived at a village known for its prominent temple.

The village elders, accompanied by women and young girls, welcomed us with great pomp and gaiety.

Their heartfelt hospitality quickly helped us integrate into the community. The villagers, warm and accommodating, eagerly shared their customs and practices. The ease with which every team member, especially the women, mingled with them was a testament to the charm of the people and the place.

Our cook and assistant found little to do, as households insisted we join them for meals. Feeling at home, we often turned our lunch sessions into informal interviews, using questionnaires to gather information.

The villagers' enthusiastic and sincere participation made our work smooth, allowing us to complete our assignments ahead of schedule. The team, initially eager to leave, now urged me to request an extension to stay longer for data analysis and report writing. When permission was granted without hesitation, both guests and hosts were equally pleased.

The silent power of proximity

It's emotional osmosis, resonance; it doesn't seek performance or words

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alsharada518@gmail.com

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

It's a fact that we rarely articulate: we are drawn to the presence of certain people simply because of how they make us feel. Not through conversation, action, or advice – but just by being. Their proximity reassures us, comforts us, and somehow makes the world feel safer, calmer, more aligned.

I remember how, during our visits to my mother, most of our time would be spent shopping or catching up with friends. She would often complain, "You say you've come to visit me, but you hardly spend any time with me." At the time, I brushed it off. Years later, I found myself echoing the same complaint to my son. He would call me over with much enthusiasm, only to remain immersed in work on his laptop. I finally voiced my frustration – only to be met with quiet clarity. "Mom," he said, "I just like having you around." That was it. No elaborate bonding rituals. No intense conversations. Just presence. And in that, was love.

Unspoken magic

Sometimes, we misunderstand proximity as needing interaction or attention. But more often than not, its magic lies in what is unspoken. Like sitting beside a loved one on a garden bench, saying nothing, simply sharing the stillness. It is in these moments that we feel most grounded – not because someone is doing something for us, but because they are simply there.

Proximity to children, too, brings this strange healing. Watching them play in a park, full of abandon and joy, reminds us of a time when we too lived without layers of expectation. Their innocence seeps into us quietly, peeling away the burdens we carry and replacing them with a fleeting but beautiful sense of lightness.

Our elders would often insist we spend time in temples – not merely to offer prayers, but to just sit. At the time, it seemed a passive ritual. But later, I understood.

What proximity offers, then, is far beyond physical nearness. It is emotional osmosis. It is resonance. And most beautifully, it doesn't demand performance, declarations, or even words. You don't have to do anything. You just have to be.

(Clockwise from left) The saffron *jama*; Deepshiikha Kalsi at work; the conserved *jama* with its 201 *kalis* or panels; delicate restoration; and the white muslin *jama*.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

DUNGARPUR'S PHANTOM THREADS

Two stunning 150-year-old royal muslin *jamas*, a restoration that took years, and a showing at the palace museum

Avantika Shankar

Textile conservation is not for the faint of heart. When Deepshiikha Kalsi describes the intensive process she had to follow to restore two 150-year-old *jamas*, fine muslin garments worn by men, comprising 201 *kalis* or panels, for the Maharawals of Dungarpur, she likens it to performing surgery.

When they came into her practice, the Textile Conservation Studio in New Delhi, both were worn and discoloured, heavily caked in centuries-old dirt and insect fracas. One was soft white muslin, but had been stained with rust and dye migration from another garment in storage; the other, which she got in 2020, was saffron muslin embellished with silver gilt *gota*, or silver ribbon plated with gold. The conserved *jamas* – each measuring more than 50 metres in circumference at the hem – were earmarked for showing at The Ajaibghar museum at the Udai Bilas Palace in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, this year. "But before anything else, they needed to be stabilised and cleaned," explains Kalsi, one of India's leading textile conservationists.

A delicate process

While the saffron *jama* could only be dry cleaned, the white muslin piece had to be painstakingly handwashed by a team of six people, working almost without a break for 20 hours straight. "I had to do mock drills with them, as the fabric when wet becomes extremely delicate and prone to further damage due to mishandling. It was important to establish the role of each member of the team," she explains. "We started at 6 a.m. and finished at 2 a.m."

And this was just the preliminary step; the actual restoration process was a far longer affair. "We had to secure the weak areas where there were holes and tears, but any support patch underneath was too visible," Kalsi recalls. "Even the finest of muslins failed, so eventually we used Stabiltex [a sheer, lightweight, open weave polyester fabric used as a support backing for covering fragile textiles], which beautifully integrated with the fine muslin."

From planning to execution, the white muslin *jama* took six months to complete.

The saffron piece, which Kalsi's team has been working on for over two years, is waiting to be mounted for display, when the museum reopens after renovations later this year.

Conservation with foresight

"We have a large collection of textiles, and the *jama* will be one of them [on exhibit]," shares curator Pramod Kumar K.G., co-founder of museum advisory Eka Archiving, pointing out that what's most impressive is not just the collection, but the foresight with which it was preserved in airtight, humidity-free conditions over the last two centuries. "We have elaborate court costumes, animal trappings for elephants, horses, and even camels. A lot of extraordinary garments have survived."

The court has very stringent methods in terms of how it maintains records and textiles, Kumar explains. "In addition to garments, we also have surplus material acquired for the making, in case they needed to be darned or repaired in the future. So, we have an extraordinary privilege that 150 years later, we can still use that to repair this, should we ever need to."

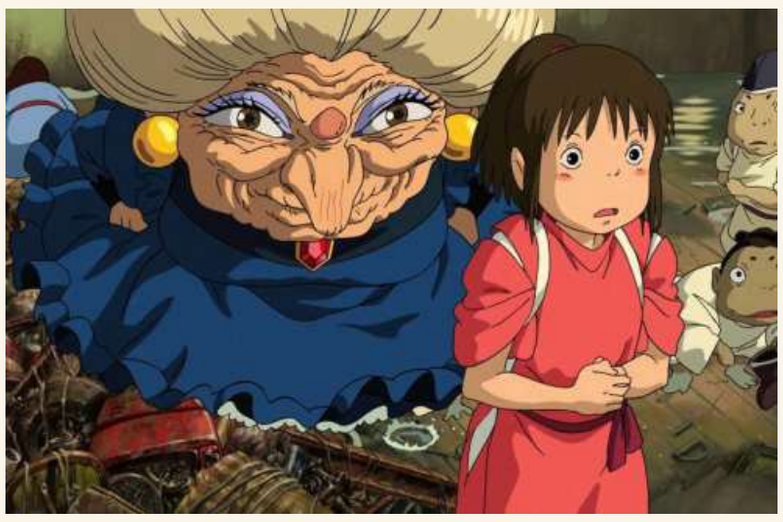
As the Maharawals of Dungarpur – who have an extensive collection of vintage cars, and recently converted one of their private airline hangars into a restaurant – make efforts to preserve the material culture they are custodians of, they allow future generations to appreciate these heirlooms as authentically as they can.

The freelance writer and playwright is based in Mumbai.

The wonderful world of Studio Ghibli

As the Japanese animation film studio co-founded by Hayao Miyazaki celebrates its 40th year, a look at what makes its films so unique and memorable

Rudraa Abirami Sudarshan



(Clockwise from far left) Chihiro from *Spirited Away*; a man seated next to the character No Face; and Hayao Miyazaki.

Studio Ghibli films have always had a special place in the childhoods of those who grew up watching them. Whether it was hopping on a Catbus on a rainy day (*My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988), soaring above the clouds on a broom to deliver freshly baked goods (*Kiki's Delivery Service*, 1989), or warily eyeing the pigs outside a bathhouse (*Spirited Away*, 2001) – these are the images that stay with you long after the screen goes dark.

The animation studio, which recently turned 40, continues to be in the spotlight. Recently, Studio Ghibli's popularity has skyrocketed and, like most animated styles, it has progressed into mainstream media. AI can now mimic the style with unsettling accuracy. The irony – that every Studio Ghibli film takes years to bring to life, with each frame painstakingly hand-drawn, and that Hayao Miyazaki himself is famously anti-AI – seems to be lost on users as they upload their photos for a Ghibli-style render.

Behind the longevity

But what is it about Studio Ghibli's creations that captures public imagination? Is it the animated worlds that are simple and uncomplicated; the protagonists who are easy to empathise with; intricate depictions of sweeping mountains, mechanical castles, and lush green forests; or the unmistakable expressions of joy, sadness, anger, frustration, and disappointment etched into the expressive faces of its characters?

There is no black and white in Ghibli's worlds – the villains have their reasons and are always redeemable. Maybe it's the feeling of nostalgia, the sense of familiarity, the childhood memories stored deep in the recesses of your mind, and the emotions they evoke.

And perhaps it's because beneath the deceptively simple narratives lie deeper themes that offer profound philosophical food for thought.

Miyazaki and modernisation

Miyazaki's disdain for technology and modernisation is evident throughout his films. He has famously stated that "modern life is so thin and shallow and fake – I look forward to when developers go bankrupt, Japan gets poorer and wild grasses take over". While this vision may not reflect reality, he weaves this imagery into his films, particularly in *Princess Mononoke, Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* and *My Neighbour Totoro*, where forests abound and grasslands stretch endlessly.

Princess Mononoke centres on environmentalism, portraying it in a way that forces the viewer to confront the inevitability of industrialisation. As much as one may not want it to happen, it must – and finding a middle ground becomes the only viable solution. Nausicaä, meanwhile, navigates a world transformed into a toxic wasteland, as she searches for a solution.

Both San (*Princess Mononoke*) and Nausicaä inhabit worlds scarred by war. While San, the wolf princess, fights to protect her beloved home from further deforestation and industrialisation, Nausicaä takes a more peaceful approach. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, themes of pacifism are more explicit, set against the constant echoes of war that linger throughout the film.

Strong, fearless women

Most of Ghibli's films feature female protagonists – whether children like Satsuki and Mei (*My Neighbour Totoro*), Kiki (*Kiki's Delivery Service*), and Chihiro (*Spirited Away*); young women like Nausicaä and San; or even Sophie (*Howl's Moving Castle*), who ages and then returns to youth.

Unlike Disney's princesses, they are their own knights in shining armour, facing the world head on. All of them demonstrate resilience, courage, and an unyielding hope. No matter how daunting the task or how bleak the future, they either find a silver lining or create one themselves.

The younger protagonists especially show wisdom beyond their years, yet paradoxically retain their innocence and wide-eyed wonder. It is not that Ghibli lacks male protagonists, but rather that they inevitably fall short in comparison.

Drawing from life

Miyazaki, like many artists, often draws inspiration from real-life experiences. For instance, he travelled to Alsace, France, to study European architecture and aesthetics for *Howl's Moving Castle*. He also sent his animators to the vet to observe how to give medicine to a dog, which they then translated into animating a dragon in *Spirited Away*.

There's a recurring theme of chronic illness in several of Miyazaki's films. In *The Wind Rises*, we meet Naoko, who suffers from tuberculosis. In *My Neighbour Totoro*, Satsuki and Mei's mother is hospitalised while the sisters explore Totoro's forest. This mirrors Miyazaki's own childhood experience, when his mother was hospitalised due to spinal tuberculosis.

Contrary to rumours of his imminent retirement after *The Boy and the Heron*, Miyazaki, now 84, shows no sign of slowing down. Since his films are hand-drawn, it's understandable that they take years to complete. If Clint Eastwood can continue directing films at 95, then what's stopping Miyazaki?

The writer and journalist is based in Mumbai.