

magazine



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Lights, camera (Clockwise from left) *The Shameless* team; actor Naseeruddin Shah with film restorer Shivendra Singh Dungarpur and actor Prateik Babbar at the screening of *Manthan*; and actors Shahana Goswami and Sunita Rajwar with director Sandhya Suri (centre) for their film *Santosh's* outing. (GETTY IMAGES)



With eight films in showcase, including one in contention for the prestigious Palme d'Or, and the biggest-ever contingent of actors, filmmakers and social media influencers, India made a big splash at the world's foremost film festival

Meryl Streep in the house

Three honorary Palme d'Or were awarded this year. Accepting the award on the festival's opening night, actor Meryl Streep, radiant in a white Dior gown, got emotional speaking about the last time she was at Cannes. "I was about to turn 40 and I thought that my career was over." The second award was presented to Japanese animation Studio Ghibli, and the third honorary Palme d'Or was given to Hollywood veteran George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* franchises.



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INSIDE INDIA'S MILESTONE CANNES OUTING

Saibal Chatterjee

In terms of cinema, and cinema alone, India has made the kind of splash at Cannes 2024 that it has never done before. Eight Indian-produced or Indian-themed titles, including one in contention for the prestigious Palme d'Or and a 30-minute Virtual Reality piece in the festival's inaugural Immersive Competition, were strewn across various sections of the 77th edition of the film festival, which concluded yesterday.

"The Indian presence is extremely strong this year," said Cannes deputy artistic director Christian Jeune at the start of the festival. He should know, as he has been in charge of scouting Indian films for Cannes for over two decades. "India and China are important markets for films. They are making a strong comeback to Cannes," the festival's artistic

director Thierry Frémaux had said at the press conference in Paris in the second week of April to announce the official selection.

In the forefront, taking Indian cinema places with their work, were industry names such as Kani Kusruti, Divya Prabha, Radhika Apte, Mita Vashisht, Shahana Goswami, Chhaya Kadam (who has two films in the festival), Anasuya Sengupta and Omara Shetty. Never before have so many faces from the country's independent cinema space landed in Cannes with something to show for their effort. "I feel the more regional the treatment of a film is, the more it speaks an international language," said actor Kani in an earlier interview with *The Hindu*, after the selection of her film *All We Imagine as Light* for the Palme d'Or award.

In addition to industry people, this year also saw a rise in the number of Indian social media influencers as attendees on the red carpet and for seaside photo ops,

sponsored by cosmetics and fashion brands for the same [see page 4]. While Aishwarya Rai was at the Croisette as global spokesperson for L'Oreal Paris, fellow actor Kiara Advani was representing the country at the Women in Cinema gala dinner.

This was an interesting departure from the first 20-odd years of the new millennium, when India struggled for representation at Cannes and languished on the festival's fringes. With the tide now turning dramatically and a panoply of actors of quality rightfully walking the red carpet, the question would be: was this only a flash in the pan? Only time will tell.

Beyond underworld dramas
To be sure, the most noteworthy aspect of Cannes' Indian picks for 2024 was that they signified a marked shift away from Mumbai underworld dramas of the kind that Anurag Kashyap earned currency with. The selected films bore encouraging signs for the future of the country's indie cinema. Not only was the range of voices and visions on show instantly impressive, the artistic and cinematic merit of the films was beyond question because, for one, none of them was hobbled by market-imposed constraints. These films came from young directors endowed with unique sensibilities. None of them adheres

Payal Kapadia's directorial, *All We Imagine as Light*, tells the story of two Malayali nurses working in Mumbai, and it is the first Indian film to make the cut for the Palme d'Or since Shaji N. Karun's *Swaham* in 1994



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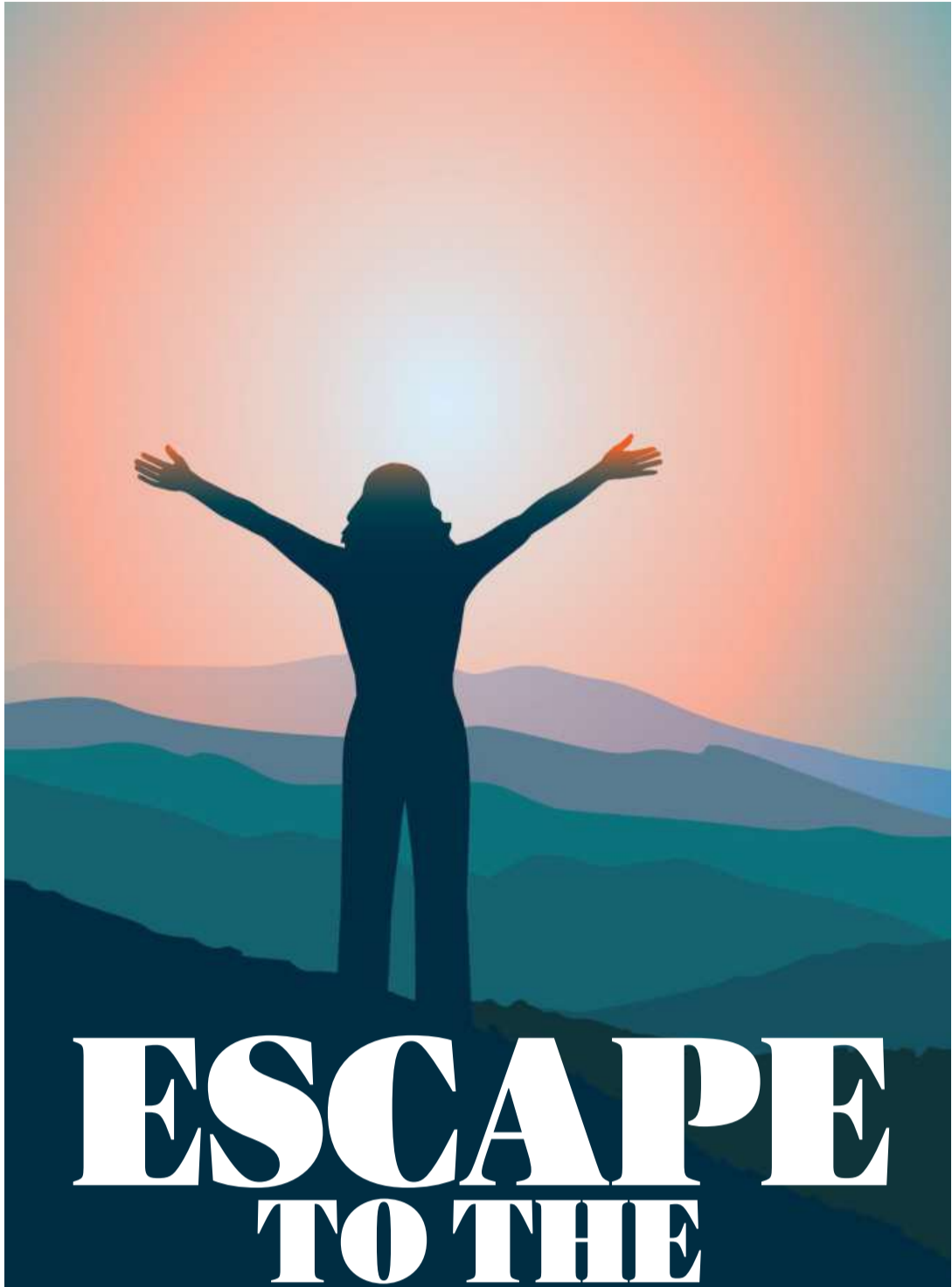
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Namita Gokhale’s skilful depiction of nature and other details lend an immersive quality to her latest novel set in the Kumaon Himalaya

Abdullah Khan

The beginning of Namita Gokhale’s new novel *Never Never Land* is marked by a poignant quote from the renowned Scottish novelist and poet, Muriel Spark. She reflects on the idea that the anticipation of death adds depth to life: “The prospect of death is what gives life the whole of its piquancy. Life would be so much more pointless if there were no feeling that it must end.”

Spark shared these words during an interview about her acclaimed novel *Memento Mori*. The Latin phrase *memento mori*, translated as ‘remember you will die’, encapsulates the fragility of life, serving as a reminder to appreciate each moment and acknowledge the inevitability of mortality. And, Spark’s profound insight resonates throughout Gokhale’s narrative, serving as its central theme.

Furthermore, Gokhale shares a strong bond with the Himalayas thanks to her roots in the Kumaon region, where she spent her formative years. This connection is evident in many of her literary works, where she tenderly portrays the tranquil foothills of the mountain range. In her latest novel, *Never Never Land*, she once again returns to her native place through the protagonist Iti Arya. Like many of her previous characters, including Priya and Paro, Iti too grapples with feelings of being a misfit, finding it challenging to relate to those around her or navigate the complexities of her professional journey.

In the company of women
Feeling lost and alone in her middle years, Iti decides to leave the bustling city of Gurgaon (Iti proclaims she can never call it Gurugram). And she seeks comfort in a quiet cottage nestled in the beautiful Kumaon region – a place filled with memories from her childhood. Surrounded by misty rain, Iti has the company of two amazing older women from her family: Badi Amma,

almost a hundred years old, and Rosinka Paul Singh, who’s even older at 102. With them is a young girl, Nina, whose background holds some secrets related to Iti.

Soon, Iti feels a wave of nostalgia as memories flood back. The tranquillity of the surroundings, away from the busy streets of Gurgaon, brings her a sense of peace, especially in the company of the women she loves. However, a lingering fear arises as Badi Amma and



**Never
Never Land**
Namita
Gokhale
Speaking
Tiger
₹499

Rosinka, having lived beyond the average human lifespan, approach the end of their journeys, reminding Iti of the inevitable separation to come. Additionally, Iti is curious to know if Nina is in fact her sister, and if that is why she wants to connect with her. But, Nina is indifferent to Iti. In fact, she is a temperamental and disturbed individual who is fighting her own demons.

The author has crafted characters from diverse backgrounds, each with unique traits and habits. Through her skilful prose, she brings these characters to life, engaging readers who can vividly visualise and empathise with them. For instance, Rosinka initially comes across as a harsh and aloof character, but when she unexpectedly reveals her empathetic side, we see the compassionate old woman that she is. On the other hand, Badi Amma has endured the trials and tribulations of life, but has now found peace living alongside Rosinka. While she harbours some resentment towards Rosinka, she now sees

herself as a caretaker, friend, and companion to her. The common thread between these two women is their love for Iti.

Sensory delight

One of the standout aspects of this novel is Gokhale’s skill at depicting everyday elements such as nature. She masterfully captures sensory experiences, in addition to visuals, immersing readers in the fictional world of the story. Incorporating references to local flora, real places, and geographical landmarks such as Nanda Devi, Chaukhamba, and Panchachuli adds authenticity and grounding to the narrative:

“There are so many smells in the air, of leaves and flowers and rain and rotting vegetation. It is not renewal, but revival.

And then this too will pass, and the tattered cycle of the seasons will reassert itself. The poinsettias will bloom, and then the rhododendrons. There will be mulberries and kaphal berries and then the strawberries will arrive with the summer.”

The novel concludes on a hopeful tone with the final paragraph: “It will be a long cold winter. But we will all carry on. Me, us, these mountains.”

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based screenwriter, literary critic and author.



Namita Gokhale

2024 INTERNATIONAL BOOKER-SHORTLISTED

Korea before the Hallyu

A close reading of Hwang Sok-yong’s political novel brings forth several parallels between Indian and Korean literature



Way of life A change of guard ceremony at the 14th century Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul, the main seat of the erstwhile Joseon dynasty. (GETTY IMAGES)

Saurabh Sharma

Hwang Sok-yong is one of the most widely celebrated Korean authors. With his latest, the multigenerational saga *Mater 2-10*, Hwang attempts to follow stories linking the exploitation faced by Koreans under Japanese rule and the mistreatment of industrial workers in post-independent Seoul. Deftly translated by Sora Kim-Russell and Youngjae Josephine Bae, *Mater 2-10* was a strong contender for this year’s International Booker. The prize, announced on May 21, went to Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Kairos*, translated by Michael Hofmann.

Mater 2-10 begins with a description of the everyday routine of a recently laid-off worker in his mid-50s, Yi Jino, who lives in the chimney of a factory, staging a protest against the employer’s oppressive mandates. As readers begin to familiarise themselves with the landscape where the story is set, Hwang leverages “*mindam* realism” – which seems like a cousin of magical realism but is essentially an “oral form of history-making” as the translators write in their note to the book – to steer it towards the pre-colonial period effortlessly.

Here’s how. When Jino is gazing at “the sea of clouds surrounding the chimney”, he sticks out “his right foot under the railing” and feels the air “solid somehow”. Then he begins “walking on a hard, dry dirt path”, and poof, one is in Joseon (as Korea was known under Japanese rule), getting introduced to Jino’s ‘Big



Mater 2-10
Hwang
Sok-yong,
trs Sora
Kim-Russell
and Youngjae
Josephine Bae
Scribe
₹699

Grandfather’ Yi Baekman. While the patriarch’s dead wife, Juan-daek, makes multiple appearances at crucial junctures throughout the book – a technique rooted in the rich myth and folklore traditions of Korea – the distinguished personalities of his two sons, Ilcheol (‘One Steel’, Jino’s grandfather) and Icheol (‘Two Steel’), become representative of the separate paths that different ideologies can take one through in life, establishing the influence of great classics such as *Moby Dick* and *Don Quixote* on the author’s writing style.

To engineer moral dilemmas and conundrums, however, a writer needs a concrete medium. Hwang does it by employing the construction of the railroad of Gyeongbu Line, which was built from “the blood and tears of the people of Joseon”, as Foreman Min notes in the novel.

Memories of occupation

Interestingly, the idea of writing *Mater 2-10* (*mater* is a Japanese abbreviation for mountain), which was a locomotive ‘captured during

the Korean War”, came from the author’s chance meeting in 1989 with “an elderly gentleman”, who was a locomotive engineer during Japanese occupation of Korea. Thus, this novel, which was “thirty years in the making”, is not only enriched with stories of such people passed down through generations but also encompasses bitter realities of the time, such as forcing women into prostitution, and the subtle use of metaphors such as slaughtering of pigs to draw parallels with the butchering of a nation.

A close reading of the work, however, can bring forth several parallels between Indian and Korean literature. For instance, while the translators’ note here is exceptional at highlighting the faultiness and challenges involved in attempting to translate a polyphonic work such as *Mater 2-10*, where the storytelling is hyper-local and both regions’ and characters’ names change frequently, the author meticulously centralises the notion of ownership, nationalism, and one’s duty in the face of challenging events, in a dialogic manner.

Sample, for instance, this conversation between Ilcheol and Kim – both Koreans working for the Japanese at the Gyeongbu Line – wherein the former notes that he has been thinking about “who the railway belongs to”, and the latter is ready with a response: “I mean, you know, we don’t have a country...” It ends with Ilcheol’s belief: “We may be serving others at the moment, but we’re still the owners. Let’s not forget that.” It immediately reminds one of the argument that’s often supplied in favour of the British colonial regime: “They built us the railways, didn’t they?” In Indian fiction, these commonplace rebuttals are missing but *Mater 2-10* does a deft job of channelling such conversations and memories to create an archive of a lost time, home, and country.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and freelance journalist. Instagram/X: @writerly.life

Colours of grief

In search of answers after the death of her twin, a young woman copes by remembering their life together

Nandini Bhatia

What if one half of a pair of twins no longer wants to live? What if the other can’t live without them?” asks Jente Posthuma in her International Booker-shortlisted novel *What I’d Rather Not Think About*, even before one enters its wistful pages. In the story of a faltering relationship between a brother and a sister, nicknamed One and Two, the latter meditates on grief that becomes an inseparable part of life when a loved one dies.

It is no secret that One has committed suicide, survived by Two, the sister, and the cats, Three and Four; although to the sister, the abrupt end of her brother’s life remains an inconceivable mystery till the end. She has been and will always be a little ‘less’ than her brother: a few inches shorter, vegetarian when he is vegan, depressed when he is suicidal. The 45-minute gap between the births of the twins seems to never fill, in life or in death.

As it often happens when one mourns, Two seeks comfort in the belongings of her brother. She remembers their childhood, their coming-of-age, the trivia contests, college days, and the distance; and copes, as she sifts through those memories for answers to her brother’s death and his days leading up to it. “My brother had gone and with him, all of my past. I came from nothing and was going nowhere,” she says.



**What I'd
Rather Not
Think About**
Jente
Posthuma,
trs Sarah
Timmer
Harvey
Scribe
₹699

Nonchalant humour

In perceiving the world through grief-tinted glasses, Two leans on the other tragedies of the world and their perpetrators to trivialise her own pain: the Holocaust and the cruel physician, Josef Mengele, obsessed with conducting experiments on twins; the 9/11 attacks and the destruction of the Twin Towers. Reading about the suicide of artists and celebrities, or about victims of Ponzi schemes, and songs such as ‘Help Me Scrape the Mucus Off My Brain’ (1996) by Ween, bring her an odd comfort, although they do not always seem relevant to the story. Neither does her brother’s brief obsession with Osho’s philosophy (rather his controversial, problematic sermons).

“After everything I’d heard, I was expecting a dense, sappy story but was surprised by the novel’s light tone,” Two reflects upon reading Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). The same applies to Posthuma’s book, as it masks the novel’s emotional

depth with a nonchalant, wry humour, much like Plath, though also very different. Two lacks Esther Greenwood’s intensity as much as she mimics her outlook in life. What also sets apart Posthuma’s novel, from others on fragile human relationships, is the medium she chooses. The intensity One and Two share – faintly similar to the fraternal twins in *The God of Small Things* (1997) – is rare in literature, often reserved for romantic, and not platonic, relationships. A twin’s obsessive need for validation from the other offers a fresh perspective.

Originally published in Dutch in 2020, *What I’d Rather Not...* is terse yet vivid; written in 140 diary entry-like episodes. The translator, Sarah Timmer Harvey, who learned the language after shifting to the Netherlands at the age of 19, has preserved the life between the sentences. It captures grief as the routine, quotidian thing it becomes, when one loses a family member, and at the same time, secures a balance between melancholy and gloom despite the omnipresence of death. Two is oddly familiar in her anonymity; her muse, comfortingly universal.

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on these 24x7 helplines: KIRAN 1800-599-0019, Aasra 9820466726)

The reviewer is a freelance feature writer. Instagram @read.dream.repeat

Biographer Nicholas Shakespeare on the enduring legacy of both Ian Fleming and his British spy

‘EVEN KENNEDY TOOK JAMES BOND CREATOR’S HELP’

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

Kindness is not the first trait that comes to mind when we think of James Bond, but it is telling how often this adjective is brought up in connection with his author. Nicholas Shakespeare’s biography, *Ian Fleming: The Complete Man*, attempts to decode the “enigma” who created one of the world’s best known fictional heroes, an English secret agent who has had a huge impact on the culture of the 20th century and onward. After all, five words – “The name’s Bond. James Bond” – are guaranteed to ignite a smile. In an interview on the sidelines of the Jaipur Literature Festival earlier this year, Shakespeare shed light on Fleming’s legacy, how he was an influential figure in his own right, and why Bond has endured. Edited excerpts:

Question: Your expansive biography of Bruce Chatwin pinned down an intrepid traveller and writer. What were your first thoughts when asked to write one of Ian Fleming?

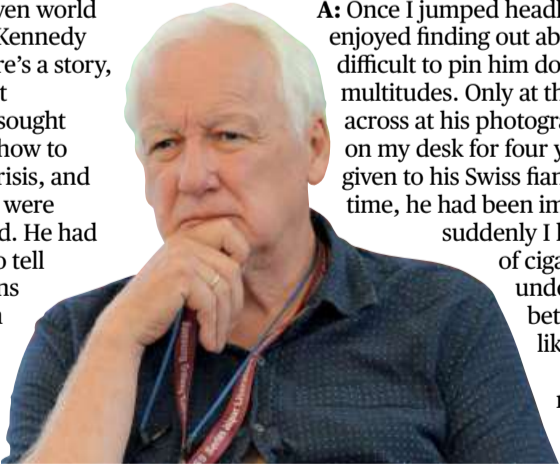
Answer: I was wary, though the Fleming Estate promised access to family papers that had not been seen before, because I wondered whether there was anything more to learn or say about Fleming that had not been told already. But as I did a background check, I found that under the bruising surface of his popular image, there was a different person – or people – and many stories. Almost everyone, including past lovers, vouched for his kindness; most agreed that he was “many people” in one. I found that virtually anything you can say of Fleming, the opposite is true too. Also, like Chatwin, he was restless, charming, attracted to both men and women, and pursued knowledge. For instance, he was an important book collector and owned the antiquarian quarterly, *The Book Collector*.

Q: Were you surprised that there’s a huge interest in James Bond, but a lesser interest in Fleming, the creator?

A: Yes, it is a bit strange because Fleming was a lot more substantial than his fictional character. As Hitler was coming to power, Fleming lived in Austria, Munich and Geneva, and he made a noteworthy contribution to World War II. For example, he organised covert operations in Nazi-occupied Europe and North Africa that helped to shorten the conflict. He was also part of the inner circle of the British powers-that-be and asked to help bring the U.S. into the fight. He worked to set up and then coordinate with the foreign intelligence department that developed into the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency].

Q: Fleming was part of important decisions but he couldn’t really write about it, could he?

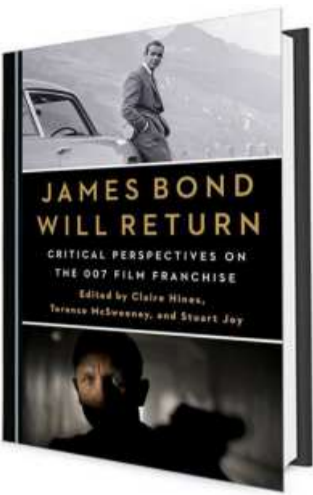
A: No. He was an influential figure in his own right and even world leaders like John F. Kennedy consulted him. There’s a story, not apocryphal, that President Kennedy sought Fleming’s views on how to handle the Cuban crisis, and some of those ideas were indeed implemented. He had fascinating stories to tell but security concerns prevented him from writing them.



Nicholas Shakespeare
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Daniel Craig as Bond A still from *No Time to Die*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



James Bond Will Return: Critical Perspectives on the 007 Film Franchise
Edited by Claire Hines, Terence McSweeney, and Stuart Joy
Columbia University Press
₹2,733 (Kindle)



Ian Fleming: The Complete Man
Nicholas Shakespeare
Harvill
Secker/PRH
₹1,399

Q: Is that one of the reasons he turned to fiction?

A: Well, he created his fictional hero in the last dozen years of his life – he died when he was only 56 years old – and almost as an afterthought. And yet, Fleming’s “fast-moving, high-living” character with his love for cars, women and Martinis, has acted as a lightning rod for generations and their understanding of politics, culture and sex. Fleming knew the undercover world intimately, and there’s a lot of Fleming’s real-life experience in Bond, but it will be fair to say that if Bond had not existed, Fleming is someone we should still want to know about.

Q: Graham Greene and John le Carré also knew the world of spies...

A: Greene and le Carré, like James Bond, were minor players in British Intelligence, unlike Fleming, who was in the inner sanctum of British covert operations. Ian, and his brother Peter, were part of a select group cleared to know the war’s top secrets, the decrypts from the code-cracking centre at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire: in April 1940, the list of those with access to this information, known as ULTRA, was restricted to less than 30 people.

Q: His novels, say ‘Casino Royale’, ‘Goldfinger’, ‘From Russia With Love’ et al, then are more than a series of sensational fantasies based on outlandish plots?

A: Yes. He wrote what he knew. They were grounded in reality and a truth that Fleming could not reveal but had intensely experienced. By converting his lived experience into fiction, and updating it, he released the burden of that knowledge. He had to get it out.

Q: Did you enjoy writing this biography? What are you working on?

A: Once I jumped headlong into the project, I enjoyed finding out about Fleming, but it was difficult to pin him down as he contained multitudes. Only at the very end did I glance across at his photograph, which had been on my desk for four years, and that he had given to his Swiss fiancée Monique; all this time, he had been impenetrable, but suddenly I looked through the veil of cigarette smoke and felt I understood him, and better than that, quite liked him. I am primarily a novelist, as you know, and am working on a new one.

PARALLELS WITH FRANKENSTEIN

A recent anthology offering new ways to view the 007 films is a wonderful read ahead of Ian Fleming’s birthday

Aditya Mani Jha

One of my favourite James Bond sequences in recent times is the interrogation scene from Sam Mendes’ *Skyfall* (2012). The film’s antagonist Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem) is being questioned by M (Judi Dench), the still-formidable head of MI6. Silva holds a grudge against M because when he was an active MI6 agent in Hong Kong under her command, she betrayed him and gave him up to the Chinese government who then tortured him horribly. Even when I had watched this scene in the theatre for the first time, it struck me that the dynamic between M and Silva was intended as a nod to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The name of the film itself is the name of the Scottish castle Bond grew up in – a classically Gothic setting, it has to be said.

This parallel between the film and Shelley’s novel is the cornerstone of Monica Germanà’s excellent essay ‘Sometimes the Old Ways Are the Best: Technology and the Body in a Gothic Reading of Sam Mendes’ *Skyfall*.’ The essay is a part of the recently published collection *James Bond Will Return: Critical Perspectives on the 007 Franchise*, edited by Claire Hines, Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy. This wide-ranging collection goes through the 007 canon in chronological order, starting with an essay about the first Bond film (*Dr No*, 1962) and ending with an essay about the most recent one (*No Time to Die*, 2021).

Clash between old and new
As Germanà notes in her essay, the Frankenstein parallels also work very well with the film’s other overarching concern: the clash between “the old ways” of spycraft and warfare vs the new ways (hacking, electronic surveillance). In the face of a technologically astute supervillain like Silva, Bond ‘recedes’ into a kind of defensive Luddism, abandoning the gadgetry that contemporary Bond fans would be used to. He even goes back to the Sean Connery-era classic Aston Martin, even as M turns up her nose at this ostentatious relic of a car. In the climax of the movie, as Silva uses his tech-wizardry in his relentless pursuit of M, Bond eventually kills his adversary with an old-school hunting knife. The essays are enjoyable not just because of



The book goes through the 007 canon in chronological order, starting with an essay about the first Bond film (*Dr. No*, 1962) and ending with an essay about the most recent one (*No Time to Die*, 2021)

the depth of the analysis but also for the way they bring together visual, textual and design elements in their readings of the 007 films.

Here, for example, is Germanà noting the visual resemblance between Silva and the real-life hacker Julian Assange, especially their blonde hair. “Seen as a reaction to MI6’s merciless exploitation of its own agents, Silva’s cyber-attack points to the subversive politics of data hacking, a fact underscored by Silva’s alleged resemblance with WikiLeaks hacker Julian Assange. As ‘illegal’ code-cracking juxtaposes ‘formal institutions... which were previously able to dominate access to information and... dissidents, who, with growing confidence, are able to circumvent traditional networks through technology,’ the film traces a fine line, arguably, between rebellious hackers and cyberterrorists.”

The editors have done a fine job in balancing the theory-heavy essays with other entries that are more focused on the praxis and politics around filmmaking. The Bond franchise itself, based on Ian Fleming’s novels, is a kind of convoluted metonym for Britishness, but the business of filmmaking is rooted

in Hollywood ethos – the resultant narrative tension is apparent in the films (especially in the 21st century when the scale of Hollywood means that producers are looking for ‘bankable’ stories). The British vs American clash of values is partly responsible for some of the franchise’s notable misfires, like *Spectre* (2015). James Smith’s essay ‘It’s Always Been Me: Spectrality, Hauntings and Retcon in *Spectre*’ expertly dissects some of the film’s narrative confusions and failures. ‘Retcon’ or ‘retroactive continuity’ is a term originating in the comicbook industry, used to describe a situation where writers on a long-running media franchise change previously-established truths or realities, thus ‘overwriting’ the works of their predecessors.

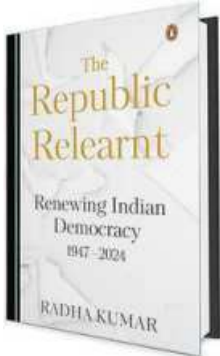
Why ‘Spectre’ misfired
Spectre’s retcon is clumsily done not just in terms of scale – every previous villain in the Bond era being revealed to be pawns of the same organisation – but also in terms of tenor. The overall direction of the Daniel Craig-era movies involved a resetting of 007’s more problematic gender-related and geopolitical themes. *Spectre* seems to want to undo that whole bloc of stories, but its execution is frequently subpar. As Smith writes, “The retcon is illustrated for the audience in other ham-fisted ways: Blofeld takes the trouble to decorate the ruins of MI6’s headquarters with A4 printout photos of Bond’s deceased friends and foes, unfortunately giving the sense more of a site-specific art project than some terrible act of revenge. His attempts to zombieify Bond meanwhile prove strangely ineffective, Bond jumping to his feet little the worse for wear even after having a hole drilled through his brain.”

Claire Hines, one of the editors of the book, is similarly astute in her own essay, a study of costumes and gender performance in *Octopussy* (1983), one of the most visually interesting films of the Roger Moore era. I also enjoyed Stuart Joy’s study of vendetta themes in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). For fans of the Bond franchise, *James Bond Will Return* is a must-read. For everybody else, it presents an intriguing starting point into Bond-lore.

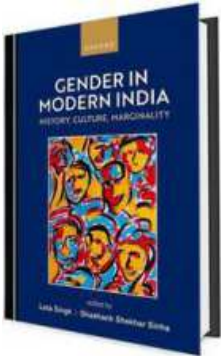
The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.

BROWSER

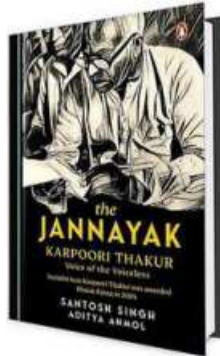
The Republic Relearnt
Radha Kumar
Penguin/Vintage
₹999
There’s a clear and present danger of a rise of totalitarianism in India, admits Kumar, but in her new book, she tries to look forward to “the moment when democracy is renewed” and ask “what lessons can be learned from past experience.”



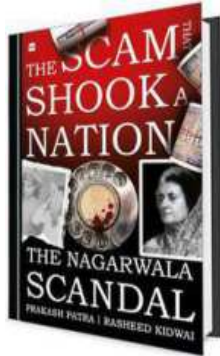
Gender in Modern India
Edited by Lata Singh, Shashank Shekhar Sinha
Oxford University Press
₹1,495
A collection of essays brings together research on gender issues in India from diverse geographies, the east, west, north, northeast and south, different communities, and marginalised socio-economic or “ethnic habitations” such as those of Dalits and Adivasis.



The Jannayak: Karpoori Thakur
Santosh Singh, Aditya Anmol
Penguin/Vintage
₹599
The seeds of EBC (extremely backward classes) empowerment were sown when Karpoori Thakur was chief minister of Bihar in 1970, but they took decades to bear fruit, say two writers who have profiled the iconic leader, awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously in 2024.



The Scam That Shook a Nation
Prakash Patra, Rasheed Kidwai
HarperCollins
₹399
On May 24, 1971, the chief cashier of SBI’s Parliament Street branch in Delhi handed over ₹60 lakh to a courier, ostensibly sent by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. But the cashier had been duped; the PMO confirmed no one had been sent. Two writers trace the ‘Nagarwala scandal’.



CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

India had a film in virtually every major section of the film festival but Payal Kapadia's directorial, *All We Imagine as Light*, was obviously the crowning glory. The trilingual film that tells the story of two Malayali nurses working in Mumbai is the first Indian film to make the cut for the Palme d'Or since Shaji N. Karun's *Swaham* in 1994.

For a change, the Indian contingent at this edition of Cannes was big enough, and visible enough, in the festival's 'official' spaces not to be dismissed as a fringe entity. One question that was certainly not being asked this year was: what were so many Indians doing here when the country had no films in the festival?

In Cannes Classics, a piece of New Indian Cinema history was celebrated with due pomp, at the well-attended screening of Shyam Benegal's 1976 film *Manthan* (The Churning), restored in 4K. Naseeruddin Shah, the only surviving member of the film's principal cast (Smita Patil, Girish Karnad, Amrish Puri, Sashi Kumar, Tanmay Dhanania, Rohit Kokate and Auroshikha Dey. "I feel it is a first step towards validation of my work." *The Shameless* is about a woman who flees a Delhi brothel after killing a police inspector and seeks refuge in a fictional North Indian town, starting a same-sex romance with a young girl from the community of sex workers. It had been in the making for over a decade.

The other Indian film, Suri's *Santosh*, was also in development for many years. The project went to the Sundance Directors Lab in 2016. "The idea for *Santosh* was triggered by an image," said Suri. "It was a photograph of a policewoman facing a crowd of protesters after the horrific 2012 Delhi gangrape." She was working with a few NGOs to probe the violence against women in India when she saw the photo. "I would not have had

INSIDE INDIA'S MILESTONE CANNES OUTING

prestigious film festival," said Bojanov, director of *The Shameless*, starring Mita Vashisht, Anasuya Sengupta, Omara, Tanmay Dhanania, Rohit Kokate and Auroshikha Dey. "I feel it is a first step towards validation of my work." *The Shameless* is about a woman who flees a Delhi brothel after killing a police inspector and seeks refuge in a fictional North Indian town, starting a same-sex romance with a young girl from the community of sex workers. It had been in the making for over a decade.

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access to the Indian police for a documentary. So, I chose fiction," she added. Suri's first film, *I for India*, a documentary, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival nearly two decades ago. "Developing *Santosh* was a long and plodding process," she continued. "It felt really good that it got selected at Cannes."

Cheering for Kapadia It can only be a matter of time before the future of Indian independent filmmaking when a 38-year-old Indian woman filmmaker goes up against world cinema heavyweights such as Paolo Sorrentino, Jia Zhang-ke, Yorgos Lanthimos, Jacques Audiard and David Cronenberg. Kapadia, a Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) alumna, was in

Cannes for the third time. She won the best documentary prize in 2021 for *A Night of Knowing Nothing*. Four years earlier, her short fiction *Afternoon Clouds* was a part of Cinefondation (now La Ciné), Cannes' competition for film school students.

FTII too occupied centrestage at Cannes this year. The institute's student, Chidananda S. Naik's *Sunflowers Were the First Ones to*

Counting influencers

This year saw an especially large contingent of Indian influencers make their Cannes debut. This included Nancy Tyagi, the Delhi-based fashion influencer, who made both her festival outfits, one of them a gown made from 1,000 metres of fabric and weighing almost 20 kg, on her own sewing machine. Once bodyshamed for her slender physique, Tyagi rose to fame courtesy her 'outfit from scratch' series, where she recreated famous outfits of stars such as Deepika Padukone and Aishwarya Rai. Among the others were male-beauty influencer Ankush Bahuguna; content creator Viraj Ghelani, who had been invited to attend a screening of *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* and who posted selfies with Chris Hemsworth; RJ Karishma, who was quite busy sharing her views on the film *Kinds of Kindness* and its star Emma Stone; and chef Sanjot Keer, who in recent times, has been posting videos of Ed Sheeran (making *misol pavu* no less) as part of his 'Your Food Lab' series. Most were there at the behest of the official media partner of the Cannes Film Festival, while others were invited to attend film screenings. Nevertheless, social media was rife with people expressing annoyance at Cannes becoming a fashion, rather than a film, spectacle, with one X user wondering 'what influencers are doing at Cannes... they probably can't tell a camera from a camcorder'.

film before. *In Retreat* is an unadorned but richly cinematic exploration of the notion of home and belonging. The film tells the minimalist story of a man who returns to Leh after a long gap only to find himself balking at the idea of reconnecting with the place that was once home.

"I was clear that I wanted the innards of the place, its interiority. I was not interested in pretty images," he said. "We've seen a certain kind of imagery of Ladakh on screen. I wanted to avoid that. To my mind, the mere display of culture has no artistic merit. I wanted to show places that I have personal memories of."

Another India-themed entry was in the newly-introduced Immersive Competition for XR (Extended Reality) projects. *Maya: The Birth of a Superhero*, is centred on the coming-of-age of South Asian women fighting off shame and fear in their quest for freedom. It is helmed by Kolkata filmmaker Poulomi Basu and C.J. Clarke, and written by them together with British-Indian writer Manjeet Mann. Cannes proved that 2024 could well be the breakout year for Indian independent cinema.

The writer is a New Delhi-based film critic.

Aswathy Gopalakrishnan

The blue fluid that aesthetically drips into a sanitary napkin is most likely the first lesson on menstruation that young people who grew up in the post-television era received. Under many layers of euphemisms, taboos, and norms of decency, the blood and pain that come with periods are hushed and hidden. This distance society demands from menstruating women is what *Maya: The Birth of a Superhero*, a new interactive Virtual Reality (VR) work or film, wants to breach. The viewer, with the help of a VR headset, enters a scarlet fantasy world where they confront tampons, female bodies and demons of pain.

Created by Kolkata-born artist and photographer Poulomi Basu and British filmmaker C.J. Clarke, *Maya* was one of the eight Extended Reality (XR) works competing in a new category, Immersive Competition, at the just-concluded Cannes Film Festival. While films that use XR or immersive technologies have been a part of the festival before – in 2017, the festival featured Alejandro Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena*, a seven-minute-long VR work – its promotion to the competition lineup signals that the film industry can no longer overlook the scope of this medium. This year's selection was eclectic, ranging from an augmented reality (AR) work on civil war to a location-based VR project exploring loneliness, and an installation placing the user inside the human body.

Maya, a 33-minute English-French film, follows a young woman who goes from shame to empowerment when she encounters a superhero in



STEPPING UP THE XR GAME

Kolkata filmmaker Poulomi Basu's *Maya* is one of the eight projects at Cannes Film Festival's new Immersive Competition category

her dream. Tapping into VR's inherent ability to bend time and space and induce claustrophobia, Basu walks the viewer through the shame and isolation experienced by her protagonist, a South Asian girl living in London, who has just had her first period. (The character is voiced by British actor Charithra Chandran who played Edwina Sharma in the second season of Netflix series *Bridgerton*.)

Pushing the boundaries "As an interdisciplinary artist, I move between mediums. For me, the tool or technology is not so important as the story. But in this case, the medium itself becomes

agent provocateur," says Basu. "The proximity of shame is so present and intimate in VR. This medium is also very suited for dream narratives. You are so close to it and that is not possible to achieve in any other medium. The audience is a participant in the storytelling."

The erasure of the distance between subjects and the onlooker is, perhaps, the strongest aspect of XR. It transcends and expands the spatial limitations of traditional two-dimensional cinema, granting the audience a profoundly visceral and sensual experience. Originating in the 1960s, particularly with the

invention of Sensorama by cinematographer Morton Heilig, immersive cinema is driven by a set of rapidly evolving technologies. It was well-absorbed into the gaming and entertainment industries, as well as the education sector and social activism. The United Nations began using VR almost a decade ago to create immersive films about refugee camps and crisis zones, dubbing the medium an "empathy machine". While whether VR can consistently produce empathy is a matter of debate, the objective in all these cases is similar: to provide the viewer with a life-like experience of being in another place and in another person's shoes.

In *Maya*, the place is a state of mind. "The feeling experienced in a situation such as getting your period for the first time in a classroom closely mirrors the trapped and isolated sensation of immersing oneself in a headset," observes Alap Parikh, the project's technical director, who recalls how the team produced *Maya* over three years:

New medium A poster of *Maya: The Birth of a Superhero*; and (below) the directors Poulomi Basu and C.J. Clarke.

"In this medium, idea and technology are very closely intertwined. You learn some things only when you actually start creating the piece. As a result, plans and script change constantly, and also the technology itself, and sometimes this results in complete chaos."

Cost-intensive venture

Both Parikh and Basu agree that XR works require substantial funding – "a deceptively large amount of funding for a very small work" – which is often the greatest hurdle for an artist working in this field. Setting up interactive exhibitions are expensive too, which is where high-profile carnivals such as the Cannes Film Festival come in. "The financial support the festival offers to set up the installation is pivotal," says Basu. "Besides, being at Cannes, the most important film festival in the world, gives our stories the much-needed visibility."

Maya will be released globally on Meta Quest on May 30, and the team is also planning museum and gallery exhibitions in various locations. This is an exception, as the distribution of interactive XR works is highly limited. "The global north has

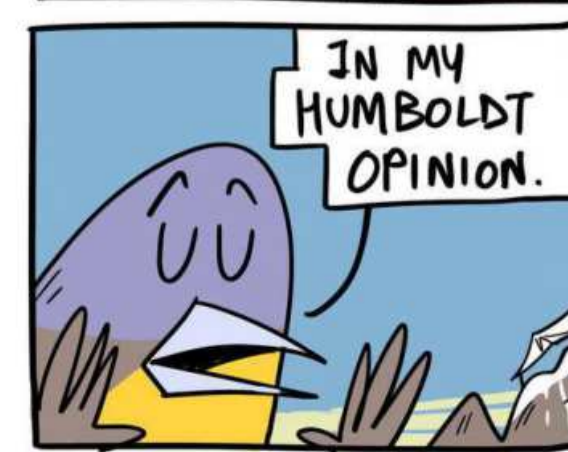
started to see a few companies that partner with venues and bring specialised knowledge to effectively manage the distribution of XR pieces. I hope this will come to India eventually," says Parikh, who moved to Goa a few years ago after living and working in New York.

While interactive installations continue to be few and far between in India, the country saw a wave of VR filmmaking in the middle of the last decade, with news companies, new media studios, and mainstream film companies dabbling with the technology. "But it is now passé," says Niraj Gera, a Mumbai-based sound designer who was part of the three-member team that created *Jettlag* (2014), one of India's

first VR films. "This is a rapidly evolving environment. Users demand more than 360-degree VR. Maybe you need to gamify it, explore the sonic possibilities," Avinash Kumar, an independent filmmaker and video game artist, notes that it is the niche nature of the medium, rather than infrastructure, that slows down its growth. "Headsets aren't exorbitantly expensive any more. But globally, it remains a niche medium, used more in other industries than in art. In India, XR is employed in military and space research, by architects and educational institutions, more so than by artists. Grants from institutions and corporations remain the sole source of funds for these projects, which rely heavily on an international circuit of film festivals and galleries," he laments.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



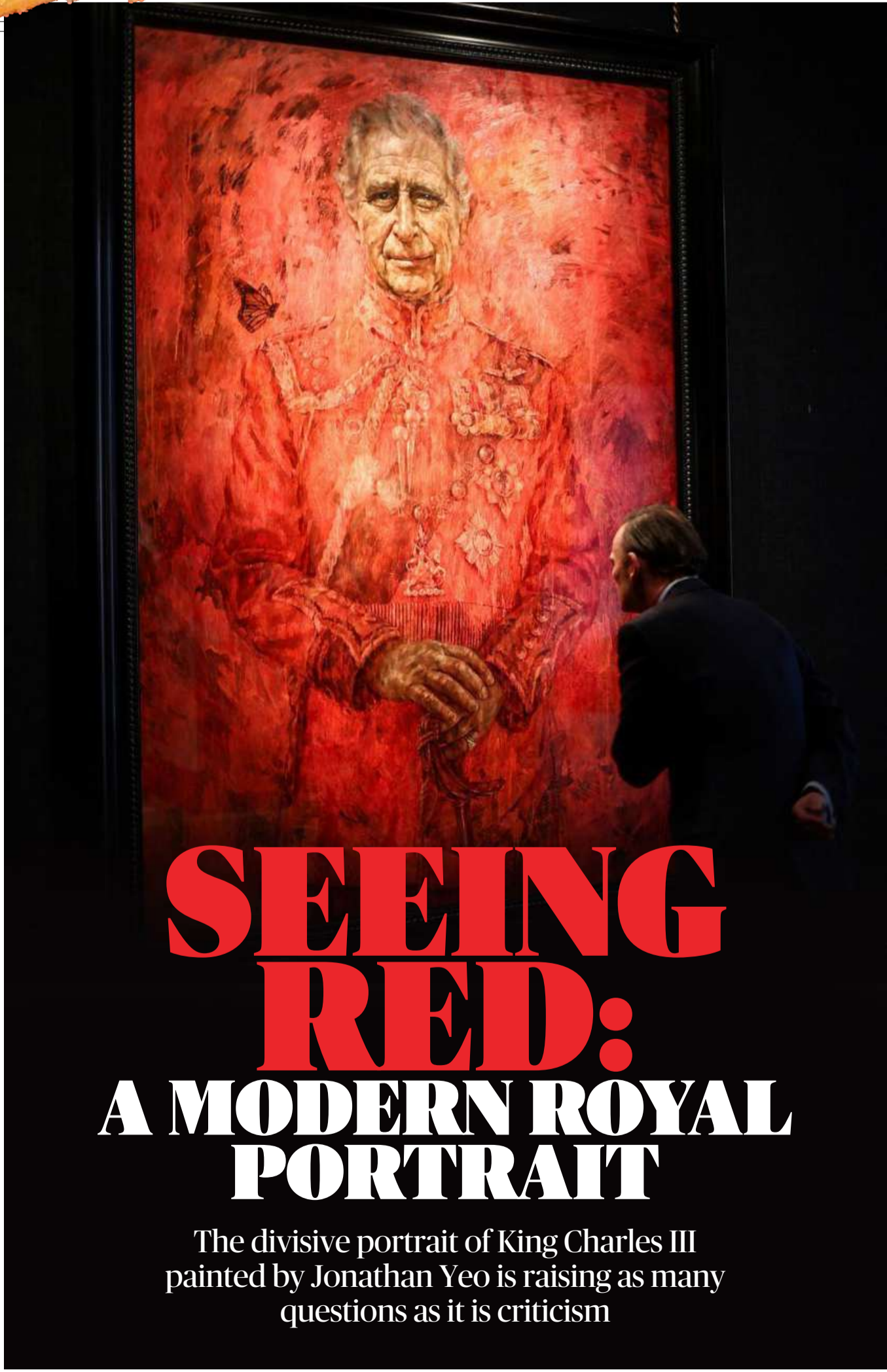
Ranjit Hoskote

The furor over a recently unveiled portrait of King Charles III seems to belong to a previous century, when sovereigns could exercise real powers of life and death over their subjects and painters could play the part of public figures moulding opinion or, sometimes, prejudice. Strictly speaking, of course, this is not a royal portrait. Rather, it was commissioned by The Most Worshipful Company of Drapers, an influential charitable institution with which the monarch has been associated for more than 50 years. In keeping with this context, the portrait, painted by the 1970-born artist Jonathan Yeo, represents the monarch in the ceremonial red uniform of the Welsh Guards. So far, so good – appropriately to his status as Prince of Wales, Charles III had served in this regiment as a young man.

Had he left it at that, Yeo might have escaped the slings and arrows of outrage and controversy. What has enraged the artist's detractors is that the painting is suffused with clouds of various rather lush and lurid shades of red, a choice of palette that generates a harsh visual contradiction between the flamboyance of the artistic approach and the reticence of its subject. Some of these irate critics have asked vocally whether the painting's high-keyed colour refers to hellfire and damnation, and whether the artist's true intention was to hold the monarch to ridicule.

Melodramatic as such readings of the image and its motivations may sound, one cannot really disagree with such criticism. It is possible that the painter intended to suggest the battlefield, with its torrents of blood and smoky artillery explosions, but the general effect of Yeo's rendering is to make Charles III look rather like a genteel fireman wondering how best to make his way out of a blaze.

A Chrysalid Charles? Matters are not vastly improved by the monarch butterfly hovering at Charles III's right



SEEING RED: A MODERN ROYAL PORTRAIT

The divisive portrait of King Charles III painted by Jonathan Yeo is raising as many questions as it is criticism

A fumble or an enduring frame? The new portrait of King Charles III displayed at Philip Mould gallery in London; and (below) artist Jonathan Yeo with the monarch at the painting's unveiling at Buckingham Palace. (GETTY IMAGES)



shoulder. The artist's explanation is that this bright insect is an emblem of the sovereign's long-standing environmentalist commitments as well as symbolising his passage from prince to king. Right, Chrysalid Charles at 75. Nice try, visual pun and all that, but not quite. At every level, even a neutral viewer comes away from the work with the impression that an artistic imagination, more at home with digital interfaces and virtual space has tried to liven up the consecrated medium of oil on canvas with a special effects vocabulary. This playfulness may have been singularly misplaced, as the largely negative public response shows. Perhaps some genres, especially if they promise a timeless stability that has vanished from a collective life that grows increasingly precarious, should not be tampered with.

To be fair to Yeo, it is almost impossible to paint a persuasive portrait of a reigning monarch today. All such rulers are constitutional figureheads whose chief role is to uphold a soothing fantasy of continuity for citizens frayed by the rough-and-tumble of democratic change. In the public interest, they need to be all sleek surface, undisturbed

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and perennially consoling in their composure, their grace unflinchingly maintained under pressure. These demands, made of rulers such as Charles III by the nation-states they technically head, stand at the opposite pole from the requirements of a successful portrait. Or, at least, a successful modern portrait, which explores precisely the interplay between the sitter's inner life of temperament, motivation, anxiety, dilemma, desire and attitude on the one hand, and his or her outer life of

prescribed role and public function on the other. How can an artist paint a sovereign when his or her inner life is meant to remain invisible, radiantly eclipsed by the mandate of a ceremonial rulership?

Privacy and public revelations

With Charles III, of course, this imbalance between privacy and the public aspect is complicated by the fact that his private life has, for several decades, been the stuff of public revelations, uninhibited gossip, laid out in newspapers, magazines, and even in Netflix's drama series *The Crown*. Might Yeo have looked more deeply, beneath these layers of scandal and speculation, at the thoughtful personality concealed by the title he bears?

At the man whose architectural preferences, long dismissed as cranky obsessions, underwrite a deep commitment to a renewed medievalist vision of urbanism. Or the man who was preoccupied with the problems of ecological degradation and sustainable consumption – and, again, viewed as a crank – long before environmentalism took centrestage in public discourse. Or the man whose long-term commitment to creating opportunities for children belonging to vulnerable ethnic groups has been an experiment in healing and redress. Or the man who, 24 years ago, articulated this critique of extractivism in a reflection on the role of human beings as stewards of the earth: "I believe that if we are to achieve genuinely sustainable development, we will first have to rediscover, or re-acknowledge, a sense of the sacred in our dealings with the natural world, and with each other. If literally nothing is held sacred any more... what is there to prevent us treating our entire world as some 'great laboratory of life', with potentially disastrous long-term consequences."

Contemporary portraits are going to have to try harder than Jonathan Yeo to engage with such complexities.

The writer is a poet, art critic and cultural theorist.



POP-A-RAZZI

Politics of sweet nothings

Movie stars are a big draw at election time but beyond photo-ops and memes, what do they have to offer?

If Mathura has its Dream Girl, Hooghly in West Bengal has its 'Meme Girl' this election. Actor, television anchor and one-time Miss Beautiful Smile winner Rachana Banerjee is the Trinamool Congress candidate. The incumbent MP there is another actor – Locket Chatterjee of the Bharatiya Janata Party. On paper, Rachana had sounded like an excellent choice. She was the host of a hugely popular reality show called *Didi No. 1*, a game show targeting women. Many of her guests came from smaller towns outside Kolkata and have inspiring stories – the woman who carried gas cylinders on her back delivering them house to house or the woman who was abandoned by her husband but is now a successful entrepreneur. Rachana has a genuine rapport with them, a 1,000-watt smile and an easy laugh. Like a good politician, Rachana could mix with all kinds of people.

But on the campaign trail, Rachana has become the face that launched a 1,000 memes. After having *doi* yoghurt in Singur, Rachana said the *doi* was so good because the milk was excellent. The milk was excellent because the cows ate only the best grass. The grass

was so green because the soil was superb. The irony is Singur is where the Tatas had tried to set up a factory on what had been farmland, an issue that helped propel Mamata Banerjee to victory in 2011. Now the farmers have gotten their land back but they complain the soil is no longer as fertile. Many say the government has forgotten them. Rachana's opponent Locket Chatterjee caustically retorted, "She is right. Only cows graze in Singur, only grass grows there."

Unfazed, Rachana tried to prove there's plenty of industry too. "Who says there's no industry? Why, when I first came here, all I could see was smoke and smoke. The roads were dark, only smoke coming out of chimneys!"

The memes exploded again but Rachana sportingly said, "Hats off to the meme makers. Any publicity is good publicity."

Special appearance The celebrity-fication of Indian politics has a long history. In his book *Neta Abhineta: Bollywood Star Power in Indian Politics*, Rasheed Kidwai notes that "Indian cinema, since its inception, has been deeply influenced by politicians, beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi."

Raj Kapoor films were very much selling the Nehruvian utopia.

What's more recent is film stars jumping into retail politics. When Amitabh Bachchan ran against the veteran Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna in 1984, according to Kidwai, Bahuguna derisively scoffed it would be a "no contest" election showing how little he understood about the power of popular culture. Then Bachchan's political career imploded, showing how little he understood about the treacherous political quicksand. Since then, some like N.T. Rama Rao have taken politics seriously as a career though many have just dabbled or party-hopped like Shatrughan Sinha. Dev Anand tried to launch his own party, as a crusade against corruption, saying, "If MGR could spell magic in Tamil Nadu, why not me in the whole country?" It flopped resoundingly.

Many celebrities just seem to be doing photo-op cameos in politics. Mathura's MP Hema Malini kicked off her re-election campaign by posing in the fields with a sickle. Asked what she had done for the constituency, she said: "I have visited Mathura

Popular faces (L to R) Rachana Banerjee, Kangana Ranaut, Hema Malini. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

250 times... it is not an easy job to come all the way from Mumbai. Coming and going... coming and going."

In the rough-and-tumble of a political campaign, even the most polished actors can go off-script. But women have it harder. Sexism in politics is par for the course as a Mayawati or a Mamata Banerjee know only too well. But an actress in politics is an even more tempting target. Everyone has their knives out to prove that she must be a dumb doll or *gungi diudiya* as Indira Gandhi's enemies once called her. When Kangana Ranaut was announced as the candidate from Mandi in Himachal Pradesh, social media was immediately flooded with old images of her in skimpy outfits, something that would never happen to a male star.

Pressing issues

Interestingly, this has been a campaign where women's issues have often unexpectedly taken centrestage. Rape, sexual harassment and molestation charges have rocked campaigns from Karnataka to Delhi to West Bengal. But no one really cares about women's safety per se, only the political career to be gained by tarring opponents. While clashes broke out in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali over allegations of sexual exploitation, former actor Nusrat Jahan, the MP, posted Valentine's Day photos of herself in a red gown. She was later dropped from the candidate list.

No wonder a Rachana Banerjee prefers to talk sweet nothings about *doi* and chimney smoke instead. As a smoke and mirrors trick, it's perfect for selling us dreams of milk and honey.



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

The morbid maths is seared in Iqbal Mamdani’s memory. “Only 20% of Mumbai’s 80 or so crematoria were working. Each had two electric furnaces that worked in shifts,” he says. “There were too many bodies and too few machines.”

Like many people all over the world, Mamdani’s second life began during COVID-19, amid the flames of loss, desperation and unforgettable life lessons. “We are always taught that the bond between parents and children is the strongest, but I saw parents refuse to claim the bodies of their children and vice versa,” says Mamdani, 54.

Shortly before the pandemic barrelled through our lives in 2020, he had exited a decades-long career as a crime reporter to join his brother’s travel business in Mumbai. When a Muslim taxi driver died of COVID-19 and was cremated as per the municipal rule, instead of being buried, the community protested. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) quickly revised the rule to allow burials. But who would do the job?

Right to dignified death

Many extraordinary groups across the country performed the last rites for strangers during the pandemic. The beauty of Mamdani’s story is that, even after the Coronavirus subsided, his team kept working. They had seen first-hand how migrants from across the country were drawn to the City of Gold, the name given to the megapolis by British writer and historian Gillian Tindall in his 1982 biography of the city. Tindall’s story too was about dreams and death. “So far, we have either buried or cremated 6,000 bodies,” he says. “The unclaimed



PERSON OF INTEREST

IQBAL MAMDANI: BIDDING THEM FAREWELL

Since the pandemic, Mamdani’s team has ensured dignity in death for 6,000 Indians, Hindu and Muslim alike

are mostly from villages but even when the police manages to contact their families, they often don’t have the money to come.”

Mamdani also realised that many migrants, who had travelled to the city to educate their children or younger siblings, ate only once a day so they could send more

money home. “They may eat a banana flattened between two slices of bread or Parle G biscuits with tea as the day’s only meal.” It was this that prompted his team to start distributing 400 food packets every day.

During COVID-19, the right to a dignified death was an endangered

idea, prompting several high courts to remind people that the right to a decent funeral was enshrined in Articles 21 and 25 of our Constitution. “The traditional belief in our country is that unless the last rites are performed before the burial/cremation, the soul of the deceased shall not rest in

▲ **Last rites** ‘We were always told that the city and country you stay in is yours, that you should live together in harmony,’ says Iqbal Mamdani. (EMMANUAL YOGINI)

peace. This belief... also has an emotional and sentimental aspect,” the Calcutta High Court said.

Mamdani and his friends sourced abandoned ambulances, which they hauled to mechanics and, with help from the police, soon had a fleet of eight charity ambulances. “Four were for patients and four for the dead,” he says. Some 200 Muslim volunteers worked in shifts, spreading themselves across the length and breadth of the city, from Churchgate to Palghar and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) to Talaja and Kalyan-Dombivli.

Beyond religion

At first, the group catered to only Muslims, but someone noticed the other unclaimed bodies in hospitals. The staff said many families were scared and refused to cremate their loved ones. Cooper Hospital was the first to use Mamdani’s help. A senior police officer ordered police stations to cooperate with the team and they quickly learnt about the cremation practices of India’s majority community. The police and the railway police were grateful for the help.

Now, the 12-member team cremates or buries 100-125 bodies every month. About 80% are Hindus. It says a lot about prevailing societal divisions that Mamdani feels it necessary to

specify that though the bodies are taken by Muslim men to the crematoria, the last rites for Hindus are performed by Hindus. It is also evidence of the fact that the two communities are closely bound in almost every aspect of daily Indian life, from birth to death.

Mamdani always sees the bright side. He is ‘*bade papa*’, the oldest among four brothers in a joint family that looks up to him. His parents were always helpful souls, his mother continues to aid those in need. “We were always told that the city and country you stay in is yours, that you should live together in harmony, that you don’t harm your family even if you disagree. You take your family along with you,” he says. “Our team is very far from the divisive discourse. We believe that it is our duty to offer our help to all human beings. All citizens should help each other.”

The smell of decomposing bodies in hospitals and mortuaries is an all-pervading, unenviable part of this work. The day we speak, four bodies have come in, all of Hindu men. “8/4/2024, 26/1/2024, 16/4/2024 and 18/4/2024,” he says, listing the dates of demise. Yes, sometimes it takes four to six months for the police to trace a family.

The only perk in this job is the blessings and gratitude from people. And the good wishes of those who have passed on. “We get *dua* from the dead,” Mamdani says.



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

GOREN BRIDGE International defense Neither vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

At the recent North American Championships in Chicago, Italy’s Aldo Gerli and New Jersey’s John Overdeck combined to put up this nice defense. We have no idea as to whether they are a regular partnership or if they just met in Chicago. West, Gerli, thought that partner probably had a short suit for his pre-empt, so he led a

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

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1♥	3♣	Pass	4♣
Dbl	Pass	4♣	All pass

Opening lead: Five of ♦

diamond. South rose with dummy’s ace and led a spade to his king and West’s ace. West continued with another diamond. South could have

saved a trick by taking the finesse, but he reasonably rose with dummy’s king. Overdeck ruffed and under-led his clubs to Gerli, who cashed the queen of

diamonds and led a fourth round of the suit. Should South ruff low in dummy, East would score the nine of spades. A ruff with dummy’s queen would give West a trick with the jack. Down two after a lovely defense.

Against the same contract at the other table, West led a club. East won and shifted to a diamond and got a diamond ruff when West won his ace of spades. There was no third spade trick at this table, and also no diamond loser. Making four for a big gain!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has May 26 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1805, Napoléon Bonaparte assumed the title of ‘King’ of a country he had just conquered and was crowned at its famous Gothic cathedral. Prior to this, the many territories had different flags; he united them all under one. Called the ‘*tricolore*’, it had three horizontal stripes in the same fashion as the French flag, but with one difference: Bonaparte’s favourite colour green replaced the French blue. Which country’s flag is this?

2 On this day in 1896, Nicholas II was crowned as the last monarch of Imperial Russia. The specific title for ‘King’ in Russia was derived from the Latin title for all Roman emperors, ‘Caesar’. What title is this, which can either start with a C or a T?

3 On this day in 1897, Irish author Bram Stoker had his most famous book published. Seven years earlier, he visited the tiny town of Whitby, went to the library and picked up a rare book called *The Accounts of Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia*. The note he wrote down was ‘___ in Wallachian language means ‘devil’’. He went on to write a book that also referenced the life of Count Vlad the Impaler. What was the title of his book?

4 On this day in 1899, five lifts were opened for a recently constructed monument. This brand-new invention now offered an alternative to the 1,710 steps



▲ **Feet up** American jazz musician Miles Davis in 1984. (GETTY IMAGES)

that visitors had to take to get to the top. Built into the four pillars thanks to the forward-thinking engineer, after whom the monument is named, they were only updated next in 1987. Which monument is this?

5 On this day in 1923, the very first race of this kind was held at *Circuit de la Sarthe* in the city of *Le Mans* in France. A feat of endurance, it is one of the most prestigious events in motorsport. The circuit itself is 13.6 km long and allows speeds of up to 400 kmph. What defining feature also lends the event its name?

6 Born this day in 1926, Miles Davis was an American jazz trumpeter who was very influential to 20th century music. In 1957, he released an album

Birth of the___, which had tracks with a more subdued approach to the complex bebop music of that period. The title referenced a word used by African American musicians to mean ‘very good’ as well as ‘relaxed’. Till date, this word is used in the same context. What is the title of the album?

7 On this day in 1927, the last car of this revolutionary model rolled off the assembly line after a production run of 15,007,003 vehicles. At the time, it was the very first mass-affordable automobile because every other automobile was handcrafted. Which car was this?

8 On this day in 1986, this flag became the official flag for around 440 million people. It consists of 12 golden stars forming

a circle on a blue field. It represents the constellation of Corona Borealis, and stands for the stability of government. This is the flag of which supranational entity?

9 On this day in 2000, Arthur C. Clarke was knighted for his incredible contribution to science fiction. Known as the ‘Prophet of the Space Age’, his works inspired an entire generation in science. As he was unable to travel to the UK due to being confined to a wheelchair, the knighthood was brought to the city he had made his home for many years, where he also received the honour ‘Sri Lankabhimanya’ in 2005. Which city is this?

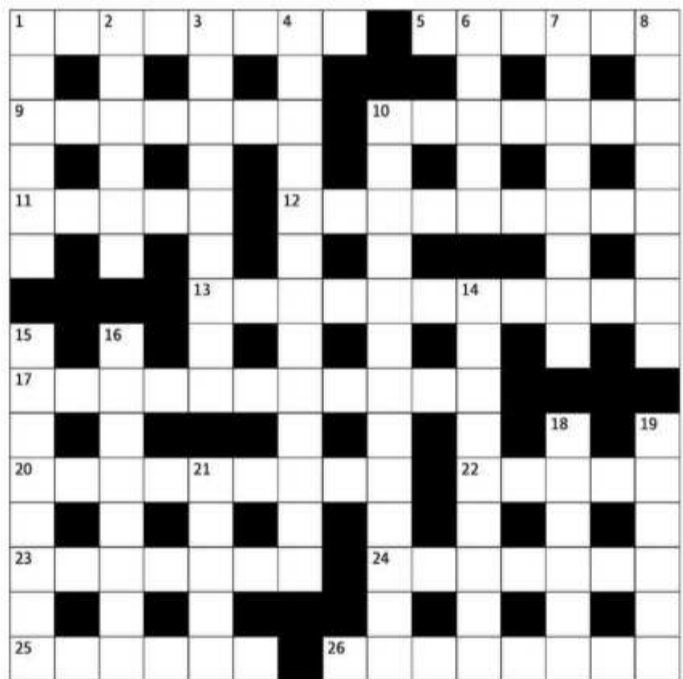
10 This day is celebrated all over the United States to commemorate one of the simplest yet most satisfying toys. Events are held where participants make their own designs and compete under two categories, ‘Distance travelled’ and ‘Time in air’. What toy is this, to design which, one only needs to know how to fold stuff?

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

- 1. Italy
- 2. Czard or Tsar
- 3. Dracula
- 4. Eiffel Tower
- 5. 24 hours (24 Hours of Le Mans)
- 6. Birth of the ‘Cool’
- 7. Ford Model T
- 8. European Union Flag
- 9. Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 10. Paper Airplane (National Paper Airplane Day)

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3308



Across

- 1 Covers loosely with cropped top and trousers (8)
- 5 Printed – and hightailed it(3,3)
- 9 Musical aces exhibiting supreme talent regarding instrumentation, primarily? (7)
- 10 Round child tucked in to cheese roll (7)
- 11 Decipher crossword’s clues? Only about five (5)
- 12 Attracted by quirky demeanour (9)
- 13 Ken sends urn toppling in debauchery (11)
- 17 Everyman has room for improvement, reader: honestly! (1,7,3)
- 20 Central character in Dungeons & Dragons? (9)
- 22 Manages nuts and loaves (5)
- 23 Desserts with flirts (7)
- 24 Land – ground – earthier – not hard (7)
- 25 Vacantly idling in vehicles: they’ll produce smoke (6)
- 26 Some priest ran Georgia, leading to disunite (8)

Down

- 1 Live around flightless birds in muddle (9)
- 2 Nicks from old swords caught(6)
- 3 Scoundrel and lunatic brought up in N Sea port(9)
- 4 Alcoholic drinks, assuredly not some 1917 reds (5,8)
- 6 Old soldier and mother heading up to

- see friend in Seville (5)
- 7 Took place in company, rising, better – about right? (8)
- 8 Tricky; finished struggling (8)
- 10 Pleased by ‘cake’ that’s reconstituted pulses (5-4,4)
- 14 Less well behaved; more like Fanny Adams? (9)
- 15 Performed with a cold jerk that’s preachy (8)
- 16 On LSD, that’s staggering (8)
- 18 President’s computer working to suppress resistance (6)
- 19 Avoid dunce’s cap, excelling (though only somewhat) (6)
- 21 Governor that’s needed by draughtsman (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3307



Women and the vote

In several States, their turnout is higher than that of men; a study looks at the rural-urban differences in aspirations of women voters and expectations from the electoral process

Suhaani R.L. Singh
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Elections in India are a carnival of colour, emotions and heated (in more ways than one) campaigning. As a 16-year-old with my family roots and home in Uttar Pradesh and my schooling in Delhi, I have always felt I live in, and have the perspective of, two worlds. It's this which drove me to examine the intricate dynamics of voting patterns among young women voters with a specific focus on the influence of geographical factors, namely rural versus urban environments.

I set out to carry out my own research, exploring the nuanced factors shaping electoral decisions among young women in the rural town of Padrauna in Uttar Pradesh, and the urban landscape of New Delhi. In the vast landscape of Indian democracy, a noteworthy shift has taken place – the increasing influence of the “woman factor” in electoral dynamics. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, more women voted than men. The Assembly elections in States such as Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have also seen this trend, intensifying the competition for the crucial woman vote among political parties.

According to the Economic Survey, 2022-23, 65% of India's population resides in rural areas, with women constituting 48%, underscoring their growth as a political constituency with their own specific aims and aspirations. My research included surveys of over 500 young women voters to gather primary data. Direct contact was crucial to get reliable results. Hence, independent samples were used to avoid any external influences.

A series of steps were taken to minimise bias. First, the surveys were anonymous, and any doubts participants had were clarified while assuring them of confidentiality. The surveys focused on women aged 18 to 23, who were high school graduates and included participants from Padrauna and Delhi, taking into account different socio-economic backgrounds.

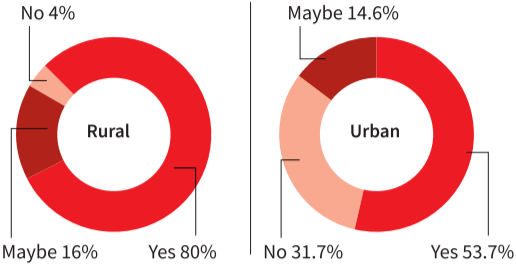
The findings were fascinating, highlighting significant disparities in voting intentions and

Women power

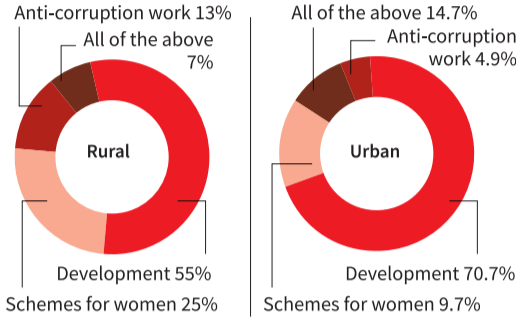
Here are the results of a study of women in an Uttar Pradesh village and New Delhi



Will you be voting in the upcoming elections ?



What factors do you consider before voting for a particular party/ candidate?



considerations between rural and urban women and underscoring the pivotal role of education in enhancing women's political engagement. While women from rural India exhibit a stronger commitment to voting, influenced by factors such as community ties and local engagement, women from urban India prioritise development-related concerns owing to the complexities of urban living and heightened awareness of inequalities.

In rural India, the survey shows that voting goes beyond personal choice; it becomes a potent instrument for societal change. This is evident as a striking 80% of respondents from rural areas expressed their commitment to voting. In contrast, urban respondents, standing at 53.7%, lag behind their rural counterparts.

The dynamics in rural areas often place women at a crossroads of tradition and modernity, where political decisions have a direct impact on their daily lives.

This trend is consistent with earlier research, such as Siddharta Mukherji's “Understanding urban-rural patterns of BJP campaigning in U.P. (Lok Sabha Elections 2014)”, which found a consistent higher voter turnout among rural women than their urban counterparts. In rural settings, women grapple with unique challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

Consequently, the electoral process becomes a crucial avenue for them to voice concerns and advocate for policies addressing their needs. The survey's next question, “If yes, why will you vote?” uncovered a fascinating facet of rural voting

dynamics. Remarkably, half the surveyed rural women expressed a specific candidate preference, revealing the nuanced factors shaping electoral decisions in these communities. In rural settings, where personal connections hold a substantial sway, women tend to base their voting choices on a blend of personal relationships, trust, and familiarity with candidates.

Conversely, the survey conducted in urban India revealed dissatisfaction as a prevalent reason for voting. This distinction between rural and urban perspectives can be attributed to diverse challenges and opportunities. In urban India, rapid development coexists with heightened competition, resource scarcity, and infrastructure constraints, contributing to a general sense of discontent.

A similarity was found in question 3 as the majority of responses from both rural and urban India were that people do not vote as a result of lack of information. In both urban and rural India, women voters face a major knowledge gap that affects their capacity to make informed decisions during elections. Women's access to information about political candidates, their policies, and the voting process may be hampered in rural areas by low literacy rates and restricted access to educational resources. Furthermore, women's engagement in public areas may be restricted by cultural norms and societal expectations, which could limit their exposure to political campaigns and discussions. In urban India, there seems to be a growing trend that as a result of social media, there is an abundance of information. However, there still seems to be a lack of factual, unbiased information. What was very heartening to see was the responses to a survey question which asked, “What factors do you consider before voting for a particular party/candidate?” Among urban women, 70.7% said they voted based on development schemes, while 50.5% of rural women said they would vote based on development.

Last, asked what they thought would encourage more women to vote, both groups said education should be focused on creating more awareness. Education promotes civic participation.

For me, the experience of carrying out this research has been an eye-opener. It emphasises the critical need for tailored approaches to women's empowerment that address the unique challenges and aspirations of urban and rural Indian women. There should be more inclusive policies and actions informed by a deep understanding of the diverse realities faced by women across the urban-rural spectrum.

However, what struck me the most was the positivity and enthusiasm I found among young women in Uttar Pradesh and that was a stark contrast to urban women. As I interviewed Anjali, just 18, who had never travelled outside her village, she told me why voting was important to her. Toilets have come for the women in our village, clean cooking gas and free rations, she said, that is the power of my vote.

Hope, optimism and a determination to succeed against all odds – that was the common mantra for the girls I met in Padrauna. In contrast to women in urban areas, their lived reality is different and challenging – from economically weak backgrounds and facing a lack of education and job opportunities as well as outdated mindsets but their self-belief and visible confidence in India's development is what is driving women empowerment in India. India's *Nari Shakti* is thriving in our villages.

A minuet that is out of step

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In the ancient dance of roles, men and women twirled to a tune dictated by perceived capabilities. Women swayed gracefully in domestic realms, while men took centre stage in the great outdoors. Fast forward to today, and the melody has evolved, but an unyielding rhythm persists, especially when it comes to the household hustle.

The classic narrative is of a father returning from the daily grind while the mother orchestrates the culinary symphony. Nostalgia aside, let's talk about the plot twist we are witnessing. Women are now rocking the professional stage, and men are tapping into domestic beats. Yet, in the kitchen, society still insists on a solo act starring women, as if culinary prowess were coded in their DNA.

Our societal scriptwriters seem to have inked expectations with a gendered pen. Childhood play scripts are carefully curated, with boys getting toy cars and girls practising door-opening skills. Fast forward to adulthood, and men dream of conquering big houses and flashy cars, while women are almost penned into a narrative of cosy homes and family-centric lives.

But let's zoom in on the domestic drama. While women are conquering boardrooms, they are expected to continue their reign in the realm of chores. It's a balancing act fuelled by societal expectations, often pushing women into a tightrope walk between career aspirations and domestic duties. The struggle is real, and it's high time we rewrite this script.

Motivate and be damned

There is no escaping the ubiquitous dumbed-down motivational content vying for eyeballs on social media sites or in the pages of self-help clutter

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Every now and then, I come across motivational content, whether from social media or self-help books, about subjects as diverse as entrepreneurship and working out. Producing such content is a lucrative business with implications at a time when toxic success culture has resulted in behaviours such as *jouhatsu* and *hikikomori* in Japan and elsewhere. These involve people disappearing from society to escape its judgmental attitudes.

As motivational content is almost everywhere, it's practically ineffective. Over time, we become less sensitive to those stimuli which are too frequent. The worst thing about this type of content is that it's addictive as it involves adrenaline and dopamine. Most of it tries to make us release some “feel-good” hormones for the time being to feel “pumped up”. The exhilaration ceases after some time and it makes us seek that experience again and again.

The problem begins with the stereotypical definition of “success”. According to many motivators, success lies in money, power, prestige and such attributes. But for others, success may be the peace of heart or anything else they prefer. Success is subjective. We could be successful in one thing and a loser in another. Life is not so simple to be defined in a binary of success and failure. We make trade-offs – win some, lose some. We sacrifice dreams to pursue other dreams. If



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

we win according to our priorities and lose things that do not matter, then we are successful. Success is about winning in the most important aspects of life.

Most of the motivational content comes uncultured. Everybody is capable in his or her own way, but motivators often reinforce the stereotypical success norms. Consequently, most people are only extrinsically motivated. In the long run, it becomes burdensome to carry a load of extrinsic motivation because the things that excite us today may not move us tomorrow.

Biases and stereotypes are rampant in such content. Motivators often present their personal opinions as “facts”. Especially, in muscle building, I have frequently encountered unscientific platitudes. This results in an unhealthy obsession which has mentally affected many. The “never give up” attitude should not blindly instigate us, as sometimes, we have to take a step back to make a longer leap. The

difference between motivation and instigation is that the former gives us reasons to act but the latter is just a stimulation of our temptations within. Few motivators exploit this and behave like the rabbit who tricked the lion into jumping into the well.

It has been a time-tested trick to first create the problems and then provide solutions. So, motivators will create problems and make money. Then, therapists and spiritual gurus will provide solutions and make money. Motivational content surprisingly ignores the role of probabilities and privileges in anybody's success. The focus on individual heroism deviates us from the discourse on systemic barriers to development, which are often a result of the policies. What we need is a society based on acceptance and care, not a crowd of people judging based on materials. Perhaps we do not need somebody to push us across the cliff; rather we need somebody to catch us when we fall.



FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Forest fires play a phenomenal role in rejuvenating the landscape. (‘Inferno rising’; May 19) The blending of traditional practices with innovative thermal imaging techniques, along with the involvement of the local population, is the greatest weapon in the arsenal of fire fighters. Academia should be involved in R&D activities too. We shouldn't be wholly dependent on firefighters. **Viveka Vardhan Naidu Bhyripudi**

Growing number of forest fires due to global warming and human negligence has become a big concern. Roping in native tribes, covering vulnerable areas with fire resistant varieties, sensitising local farmers and tourists with latest techniques can help in preventing wildfires. **N.S. Reddy**

Forest fires are caused mainly by human error. Also, the forest department does not have adequate staff, and the absence of seasonal rains due to climate change is yet another hurdle. Udhagamandalam recorded the highest temperature this year since 1951. These bottlenecks should be overcome. **Sravana Ramachandran**

What distinguishes the student protests in universities across the U.S. is the fact that both Democrats and Republicans are on the same page in supporting Israel. (‘Inside the ‘Liberation Zone’; May 19)



MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Dwindling islands of peace

The quest for quiet spaces in a vast ocean of hustle and bustle **Sivaraman Natarajan**

Living walls

Those sepia-toned photos were a reminder of where we came from and the people who shaped us **J. Clement Selvaraj**

Women at the centre

For real progress, policies need to be more inclusive and progressive **K. Parimalarani**

More than entertainers

Exploring the cultural prominence and influence that *tawaifs* once enjoyed **A.K. Gandhi**

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

Designer Aratrik Dev Varman’s extensively researched project for *Marg*, on Tripura’s humble breast cloth, shows the way for other guardians of textiles to tell their stories

RISHA: WOVEN BY PEASANTS AND PRINCESSES

Pramod Kumar K.G.

For a land that celebrates the unstitched cloth, it is surprising that the Indian subcontinent has produced scant work of any length on anything besides the sari. In a welcome first step, a small but significant course correction has occurred by the publication of the latest *Marg* issue focusing on *The Risha, History in a Narrow Weave*. The fact that a narrow length of woven breast cloth shoulders this task is to the credit of the issue’s guest editors, Aratrik Dev Varman, founder of Ahmedabad-based design studio Tilla, and designer Jisha Unnikrishnan.

The *risha* from Tripura in northeastern India is a salient example of the use of unstitched cloth off the loom and ready to wear. The woven textile joins the illustrious list of other ubiquitous unstitched garments that most Indians are familiar with: the sari, turban length, shoulder cloth, *dhoti*, etc. What this book succinctly brings to light is the centrality of cloth in the cultural life of a people. From the colonial horror of the exposed native’s body, to the politics of who can and is allowed to wear what. Stratification also gets inherently built into cloth – cotton for ordinary folk and silk for the palace born. Today, within urbanised environments and amidst political strife, communities have lost many a meaning of motif and pattern and are now left with just a ritual understanding of cloth, while distinct identities by way of traditional textiles have given way to



homogenized apparel. Textiles as our Independence movement has taught us is as much about cloth as it is about freedom.

From the womb loom

The back strap loom seen across most cultures worldwide is amongst the oldest and simplest forms for weaving cloth. The tightly woven nature of the resultant fabric is a by-product of the loom being held together by the weaver’s lower back and hence by body tension. This act has been imaginatively called the womb loom, since the cloth produced emerges from the weaver’s torso mimicking the time-honoured action of birthing a child. The loom’s flexible structure also impacts the size of the textile produced.

The *risha* is seldom wider than 10 to 28 cm and goes up to lengths between 140 and 160 cm –



principally five times its width. Its woven structure is of a warp faced fabric (warp yarns covering the weft) with patterns created using supplementary weft insertions. Regional and tribal variations contribute in large measure to a wide array of designs and patterns that are culturally identifiable by local communities.

The contents of this book frame the discourse of textiles between its use in the village and at court. These remain vestiges of a colonial gaze that we still struggle with. A subsequent deep dive by way of material and structures is much more useful, and the book admirably looks at various structural permutations and combinations allowing for a more in-depth view of the wide variety of *risha* produced. Rich visuals allow us to see a panoply of patterns, including



Stories from the margins (Clockwise from above) A Tripuri woman weaving on a backstrap loom; Monmohini Devi, Bir Chandra’s third queen, in a silk striped *risha* and plain *aanchal*; designer Aratrik Dev Varman; a cotton *risha*; and a silk and *zari risha*. (B.K. DEB BARMA, JISHNU DEV VARMA, AND ROHAN DOSHI)

impressively detailed butterflies and paisleys besides peacocks and elephants in a face-off, a delightful reminder of shared lexicons with other parts of the country. For me, the imaginative construct of a ‘seed within a flower’ of abstracted floral patterns, and objects from everyday life – bent iron, wings of a fly – are what truly reveal the liminal quality of artistic expression and sophistication that we seldom associate with weavers from tribal cultures. These designs, interestingly, were woven for personal consumption, for the *risha* was seldom for commerce. Even royalty wove their own, albeit in silk.

Many styles recorded

The emergence of photography in India in the 19th century has allowed for a rare level of documentation of sartorial styles across the country’s topography. This is particularly useful when popular media plays up just one visual narrative. The works of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (r.1862-96) of Tripura, an early photographer, allows us a rare

glimpse of ladies at court wearing different kinds of clothing that also chronicle an evolution of *risha* wearing styles. Amidst a beautiful group of portraits are tantalising glimpses of the *risha* in plain sight and sometimes behind diaphanous gauze-like *aanchals*.

The effective and abundant use of sketches, drawings and photographs brings alive the complexity of the *risha* and is a delight to behold. The very useful glossary of motifs and terms, besides a table of primary colours, is indicative of the great care and thought that went into putting this volume together. A conversation between two weavers from different generations tells us of the contemporary position of the *risha* and its status in Tripura today – where a steady income is not assured because “one never knows when the next order will come”.

In the end, the value of this book fundamentally lies in its ability to use a narrow strip of cloth to explain a far wider context of culture and people woven into the kaleidoscopic landscape of India. Tripura is but one cog in the mosaic that makes up this country. One hopes that this is the first of many more publications on the nuance and narrative yet to be explored within Indian textile traditions.

The writer is the co-founder of Eka Archiving Services, India’s first museum and cultural advisory firm.

A few days after I got married a curious thing happened. I was instructed by a number of relatives that I should stop addressing my husband by his name and instead show him respect by calling him ‘doctor *saab*’. Initially, I thought it was a joke (in poor taste, but a joke nonetheless) but it soon became clear that this was not the case.

During one conversation with an elderly aunt, I enquired as to why me calling him by his name was not respectful enough? And was it not the same when he called me by my name? Should he not call me ‘Saba ji’? I was met with silence and frowns.

I tried to ignore these assaults on my fragile boundaries as best as I could, but after a week or so I knew this would need addressing. It is custom in Kashmir that when a girl gets married and moves in with her new family, relatives from her parents’ side visit for the first week to see how she is settling in. It was luck or divine intervention that the next day Phuphee arrived with one of my aunts.

Once she had had a cup of tea, she told me she had seen a particularly handsome walnut tree in the garden and if I would show it to her. It was warm and balmy, and I instantly felt better, a little stronger, as we took a stroll, but I realised that it had more to do with Phuphee than anything else.

‘Let’s sit,’ she pointed at the foot of the walnut tree.

‘I always feel my mind is sharper after I sit under the shade of a walnut tree,’ she said, taking out a small wrapped parcel and placing it in my hand. She then fished out her cigarette box and popped two cigarettes in her mouth.

‘Right,’ she said, after taking a



A LITTLE LIFE

Marriage is like a *tanga*

Phuphee breaks down why the institution needs “two wheels”, otherwise it is just a crazy bull wandering around aimlessly

couple of deep drags, ‘What disturbs the peace of my *gash* [light of my eyes]?’

I explained what had happened.

She asked me to open the parcel. Wrapped neatly inside a small muslin kerchief were toasted walnuts dusted lightly with confectioner’s sugar.

‘When I got married, things were different. Women didn’t have a

voice. For us, it was difficult to say anything because we were constantly told that ‘*sabr*’ [patience, endurance] is the most important virtue in a woman. I settled in easily when I got married, but after I had my first baby, things changed. There were now more demands on my time than I had ever imagined. Before the baby, I would sit with everyone to eat. After, I would end

up serving everyone, then going back to feed the baby, and coming later to eat cold, congealed food on my own. I don’t know why, but of all the injustices, this one really got to me the most. Perhaps it was because I put my heart and soul into preparing the meals only to have all the pleasure of eating them taken away.

‘But I didn’t know how to

address this. So, one day I told your uncle about how I felt. After I told him, however, I regretted it. How could he possibly do anything to change the situation? For a couple of weeks, things continued as they were, until one day, at dinner, after everybody had taken their places, your uncle took the baby and told me, ‘Tahira, you eat first while the food is hot and I will hold

baba till then.’ For a second I thought I was hallucinating. His parents and the rest of the family were too stunned to speak, and before they could, I sat down and ate my dinner.

‘That became the foundation of our marriage. Whenever I am troubled by things that are beyond my power, your uncle will always try to come up with a solution. A marriage is like a *tanga* [bullock cart], it needs two wheels, otherwise it is just a crazy bull wandering around aimlessly pulling on a broken wheel. Now, eat your walnuts and put your grey matter to good use. Marriages are always unequal for women but that doesn’t mean you accept them as they are. Go change the world a little bit,’ she said, winking at me.

I thought about this for a while and then told my husband about the situation. He didn’t say anything, but after a few days he started addressing me as ‘*myoan zuv*’ (my life), which was completely unheard of. A husband addressing his wife in public so intimately and affectionately was simply not done. There were sighs and frowns and comments about how the world was getting closer to the end, and how shame and modesty had been lost. While all that may be true, a small battle had been won and today a story is told in hushed voices in a small village in Kashmir about a man who held a baby so his wife could eat in peace and a man who chose the love of his wife over the ways of the world.



Saba Mahjoor, a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life’s vagaries.