magazine

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AI GENERATED IMAGE

Government issues advisory

The IT Ministry recently issued an advisory to generative AI companies that says, if they offer "under-testing/ unreliable" AI systems to Indian users, they must explicitly seek permission from the Centre before doing so and appropriately label the possible and inherent "fallibility or unreliability of the output generated". This, the advisory states, is to ensure AI doesn't generate any responses that are illegal under Indian law, or "threaten the integrity of the electoral process".

The advisory was met with severe backlash, from both national and international AI players, prompting Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar to clarify that it didn't apply to start-ups. Though this has come as a relief, Senthil Nayagam, founder of start-up Muonium AI, has put together an 'Ethical AI Coalition Manifesto' in the run-up to the elections.

It says: "We pledge to uphold the integrity of democratic processes by ensuring that AI technologies are not used to manipulate elections, spread misinformation, or undermine public trust in political institutions. AI tools deployed in the political arena must be transparent, accountable, and free from bias."

Nayagam says the manifesto is "a way to hold us accountable, and also assuage the concerns of the government". So far, he's reached out to around 30 companies, of which two have signed the manifesto and three are in the process of signing it, says Nayagam. Others are hedging their bets, waiting for regulations to evolve further. "Like any powerful technology, AI can be used for both good and bad. We want to ensure its use case is restricted to the beneficial, rather than the nefarious," says co-signee Varshul CW, founder of AI start-up Dubverse.

— Neha Mehrotra

ELECTIONS 2024

HOW FAR WILL AI GO?

Anyone with a laptop can make believable deepfakes, but most of the electorate are adopting a wait-and-watch approach. Meanwhile, experts warn against the prevalent menace of misinformation

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A day after Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in a liquor scam case, his wife Sunita read out a message from him on camera, in a video released by the Aam Aadmi Party online. But that was just one version of Kejriwal's message that went viral – an Artificial Intelligence-generated English translation of the incarcerated politician's communication followed, and then another Hindi version. "I'm neither shocked nor worried; all my life, I've struggled for a better society," these videos said, in Kejriwal's voice.

As India gets into election season, more and more examples of synthetic and realistic deepfakes of politicians have started appearing. There's one of the late M. Karunanidhi exhorting party cadre, as his son, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, looks on; a Tamil dub of Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing a gathering in Chennai; and videos of Madhya Pradesh leaders Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Kamal Nath

Tracking AI (L to R) Pratik Sinha, co-founder of Alt News; Sagar Vishnoi, political consultant; Jasmine Shah of the Aam Aadmi Party; and Abbin Theepura, political consultant. (VIJAY SONEJI, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA)

with doctored remarks. Anxiety about AI deepfakes in campaigning has heightened largely because making synthetic images and videos has gotten far cheaper – and better – from four years ago, when the Bharatiya Janata Party's Manoj Tiwari put out a low-resolution AI-generated Haryanvi dub of a video message in the run-up to the Delhi Assembly elections.

India's neighbours too have lent some legitimacy to these anxieties: voter suppression deepfakes with a "don't show up; the polls are rigged against us" theme have surfaced in the past year in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, where the targeted opposition politicians had to issue denials. With cheap mobile data and the highest smartphone penetration in India's history, concerns are rife that similar crucially timed deepfakes circulated via platforms such as

WhatsApp could sour voters on candidates, or convince them that their vote could be meaningless.

'Ethical' AI creations
Not all synthetic AI creations take the form of sinister opponent slandering. Some implementations, like personalised interactive phone calls, seem more like interesting novelties than threats to electoral integrity. While one-to-one calls

are not yet a reality in India, so-called 'blasters' with a synthesised candidate's voice speaking individual voters' names in a pre-recorded message have been sent out by the Congress party in Rajasthan and by the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi.

Divyendra Singh Jadoun, one of an emerging crop of synthetic media creators, has assembled half-a-dozen staff to train voice and video AI models and distribute them through phone calls and video messages, on behalf of political parties. While Jadoun, who operates under the name The Indian Deepfaker, refused to name the organisations, he said that at least four of his current projects are on behalf of political parties, with at least two mainstream organisations in the fray.

Jadoun says he restricts his firm's work to "ethical" AI creations such as authorised translations, revivals of deceased leaders (with the party's blessings), and one-on-one phone calls with chatbots synthesising tailored responses. He uses Mistral AI, which is based on open source models, to get around mainstream proprietary firms' refusal to allow their tools to be used in electioneering.

He claims to have refused unethical requests by parties to depict opponents saying things they never have; but notes that increasingly, parties prefer to not outsource deepfakes of rivals to external firms, instead taking the task upon themselves. "Anyone with a laptop now can make this stuff," said Karen Rebelo, a co-founder of the fact checking website BOOM, at a panel discussion this February. "You don't need to go to a specialised agency, or even to somebody who knows code." Rebelo noted a sharp increase in AI deepfakes already during recent Assembly elections in India.

Sagar Vishnoi who worked at The Ideaz Factory, the firm that made Tiwari's Haryanvi video in 2020, agrees that the technology has become much cheaper. Tiwari's lip sync back then was done over a day-and-a-half, and his voice was not synthetic – a mimicry artist had dubbed over the MP's video. "Now, the tech has changed. Voice training models have become available, not just lip syncing ones," says Vishnoi, who has since left the company and is currently engaged as a political consultant for a "huge" clientele that he declines to name.

Tackling misinformation
But even those wary of the fairness of Indian elections in recent times are not entirely convinced that deepfakes will affect the integrity of the poll process any more than the conventional strategies already at play. Says Pratik Sinha, a co-founder of fact-checking news website Alt News: "AI is an issue, but I don't feel as bothered about a new way of creating disinformation; the existing methods are working quite well."

Sinha, whose daily job involves flagging fake news and misinformation, is referring to the strategically clipped videos and inflammatory speeches that continue to be circulated by the dozen from ordinary citizens' smartphones. "What has changed from 2019 to now is the amount of hate speech has increased manifold," he says.

REPRISE

Erasure
by Percival Everett

The novel behind the Oscar-winning film *American Fiction* is as much about the impediments to making art as it is a meditation on life

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The literary world is abuzz with excitement about the new novel by American writer Percival Everett. *James*, a revisiting of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is told through the perspective of Jim, Huck's companion slave. Finding Jim absent for long stretches in Twain's tale, Everett wanted to give him an opportunity to be present in the story.

Everett is also in the spotlight for his 2001 novel, *Erasure*, which was brought to life on screen by journalist-writer Cord Jefferson, as *American Fiction*. The feature film won the Oscar for best adapted screenplay this year.

At one level, *Erasure* is about a writer who can't fit in; Thelonious 'Monk' Ellison – right away there are hat-tips to a path-breaking musician and a writer – is upset with how his published works are treated. They don't sell well and he is having trouble getting published in the first place because what he wants to write is not "black enough". His publisher urges him to try something like his *The Second Failure*, a 'realistic' novel that did rather well.

Monk cringes at the thought because he hated writing that novel about a young black man who cannot understand why his white-looking mother is ostracised by the black community; he hated reading the novel and hated to think about it.

Being black
But then, a fellow black writer, Juanita Mae Jenkins, is earning all the praise and the moolah – and space at the bookstore – for her novel *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, and Monk on a whim decides to write a novel on "which I knew I could never put my name". Thus is born *My Pafology*, later called F***, by Stagg R. Leigh, which has all the tropes perceived to be black.

It's the story of Van Go Jenkins, who in his 20s has already fathered four children by four different women and is trying hard to keep a job against all the odds stacked up against him. At one point, he is working for a certain Mr. Dalton, black and rich who lives in a mansion far away from the usual black neighbourhoods. "'It is a mansion, Mama,' I say. 'That nigger is loaded.' 'Don't be calling Mr. Dalton that,' she say. 'You call me that,' I say. 'Cause he gots bucks he ain't no nigger? Cause I ain't got nuffin, I am?'" Needless to say, this novel sells for $600,000 and Monk feels a "great deal of hostility toward an industry so eager to seek out and sell such demeaning and soul-destroying drivel".
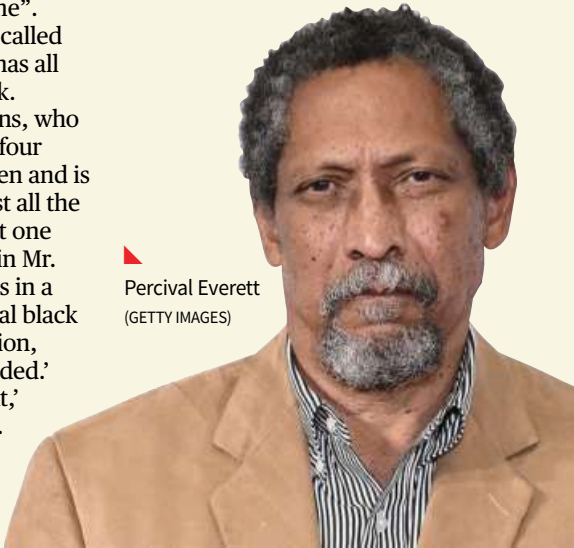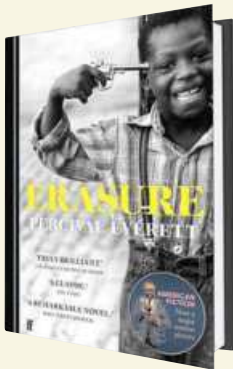
But this is an Everett novel; race, identity, inequities, history, politics are important; equally, it works on several other layers, and these nuances and its spirit, the language, touches of humour, irony and absurdity, have been wonderfully caught by Jefferson for the screen.

Monk hails from a family that is reasonably well off – his father was a doctor (like Everett's too), and his siblings are doctors. The conversations they have open readers up to a black world they are not used to reading about.

In interviews, Everett has said that *Erasure* "is about the impediments to making art that our culture puts in front of us". And that's what the 67-year-old, who teaches English at the University of South California, has pushed against in all his hard-to-categorise work. He has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2020 with *Telephone*, which has three versions, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2022 for the satire, *The Trees*. In an interview to bookerprizes.com, Everett said: "No one can control what minds do when reading: it is entirely private. We make of literature what we need to make. This is true of art."

Everett lives by this dictum in his writing – *James* is his 24th novel, and he has written short stories, poems and a children's book as well. He will not describe himself or his work, readers have to make of them what they need to make.

The writer looks back at one classic every month.

Percival Everett
(GETTY IMAGES)

Suresh Menon

When an author decrees that his unpublished works be destroyed, why task a family member or friend with the job when they are unlikely to carry it out? Vladimir Nabokov's wife Vera, and more famously, Franz Kafka's friend Max Brod both went against authorial instructions, giving us a peep into a creative mind, in the first case with *The Original of Laura*, and the classics *The Trial* and *The Castle* in the latter.

Vera Nabokov didn't burn the index cards on which Nabokov's novel resided, storing them in a bank vault instead. Their son Dmitri retrieved these a decade after her death and published the unfinished book. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's sons have done the same with *Until August* which had been nestling among his papers at the University of Texas in Austin.

The noble reasons for going against a writer's wishes are: to understand the creative process, to complete the oeuvre (even if the final work itself is incomplete), to preserve the author's reputation, to assist future scholars. The less noble reason is, simply, money. In the aesthetic versus economic argument, Nabokov lost out. His novel was panned by critics.

He was overcautious
It is easy to pan such efforts, though, for last works generally tend to be below par. It is easier still with *Until August* because Marquez himself had said, "This book doesn't work. It must be destroyed." He had neatly anticipated the future, mocking time as playfully as he did in his novels. But he may have been overcautious.

The ethical question involved in the posthumous publication of *Until August* is separate from the literary one. The sons of the great Columbian Nobel laureate say in the Preface, "In an act of betrayal, we decided to put his readers' pleasure ahead of all other considerations." When the public's keenness to know comes up against an individual's right to privacy, the latter stands no chance.
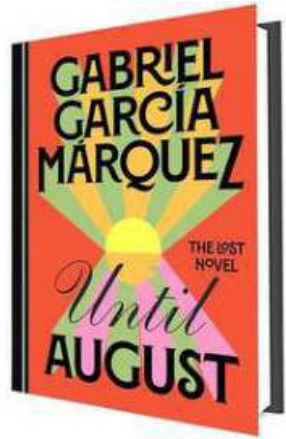
Marquez died 10 years ago, his final days and dementia movingly described by his son Rodrigo in *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes* (2021). Rodrigo quotes his father as saying, "When I'm dead, do whatever you want." In another chapter, he says, "(My father) was firmly against showing or preserving unfinished work. Many times during our childhood, my brother and I were summoned to sit on the floor of his study and help him rip up entire previous versions and throw them out..."

The sons were covered either way. As the novelist became aware of his mind slipping away, he said, "Memory is my source material and my tool. Without it, there's nothing."

Convenient excuses
In publishing *Until August*, the sons decided that the dementia may have affected Marquez's judgement of this book too. It is a convenient justification, but posthumous publication needs no justification. Authors know if they want to destroy their work they have to do it themselves, as Thomas Hardy and Henry James did. Keepers of the flame have their own reasons to publish or not to.

Until August is most profitably read as a novella; it is coherent and consistent as it stands. It is far from perfect, however, although had it been written by someone else it might have been hailed as superb. But 'superb' is a comedown for a great writer, and that's Marquez's fate here.

"My work on this edition has been that of a restorer facing a great master's canvas," explains Marquez's friend and editor Cristobal Pera in an afterword. Pera did the restoration while consulting Marquez's five versions. The story makes up in an affectionate illustration of time passing routinely what it lacks by way of the rambunctious and the anachronistic as denoted by the term 'magic realism'.

To stay with Pera's analogy, this is a maquette for a larger work, a novella that contains a full novel waiting to be sculpted. We should be grateful that the sons disobeyed the father.

Until August can be seen as a companion to Marquez's last novel *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2005) which begins, "The year I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin."

First female protagonist
Here, a middle-aged woman in a happy marriage visits a small island every August to place flowers on her mother's grave. The ritual incorporates another ceremony – a sexual encounter with a stranger each time, each disappointing in a different way. Guilt leads to discovery of her husband's past infidelity. Occasional sentences are embarrassing (one lover gives her "a supernatural pleasure that left her threshed and burning") as well as delightful ("they all became old friends at first sight").

On earlier visits, she had stayed at a hotel where the blades of a ceiling fan "barely stirred the heat". Years later, she has to figure out how to use a key card and complains about her room, "I don't have the slightest idea how this spaceship works." A later chapter begins: "When she disembarked on the island, she saw her taxi was more dilapidated than ever and decided to take a new air-conditioned one." Progress in the island is contrasted with her lack of it.

The story is mostly all surface. Things merely happen. The reader thus becomes a character in the narrative, investing it with purpose. And filling in the fictional characters' motivations depending on their own temperament. The author is non-judgemental, standing outside the story. This deprives it of the intimacy and casual insights into human frailty that mark Marquez's great works.

Melancholy is a theme – patently in the title of the previous book, as the old man searches for his lost youth. In this one, the female protagonist, Marquez's first, is less sure of her impulses. She is affected by the experiences only once, the first time when the lover leaves a $20 bill before leaving. The satisfying denouement is recognisably Marquezian.

In *Melancholy Whores*, Marquez quotes Cicero: *No old man forgets where he has hidden his treasure*. It could have been about his own genius as writer and storyteller.

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

Resurrecting
Marquez

Published posthumously, the Nobel laureate's 'last novel' *Until August* is far from perfect. But we are grateful his sons released it

Until August
Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Viking
₹799

Back in time Author Gabriel Garcia Marquez with his wife Mercedes and sons Gonzalo and Rodrigo in Rome, September 1969. (GETTY IMAGES)

Suhit Bombaywala

Another international milestone was crossed recently by Indian poetry for English. An English publisher, Pippa Rann Books and Media, has chosen to publish, and make available for distribution in and outside India, an annual compilation of poems in English written by Indians and those from the Indian diaspora. The *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2023*, now in its fourth year, comprises around 200 poems chosen through 'blind selection' by a panel of distinguished poets, publishers and other literati. In an email interview, the yearbook's editors and poet-scholars Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal speak about what readers might expect from the volume, tentatively set to be released in September. Edited excerpts:

Question: *What does the* Yearbook *present a response to?*
Answer: The *Yearbook* is a concerted response to bringing quality English poetry, penned by Indians, under one roof so that the poetry vibe of the country can be accessed through a single book. India, as a uniquely diverse country, with a rich tradition of multilingualism, has been a fountainhead of literary panoramas. The *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in* *English*, as a series of anthologies published annually, is a compendium of calibre poems of a given year. We hope that it will eventually prove to be a fertile ground for establishing the aesthetics of Indian poetry in English and serve as an archive of published poetry in and from India. In a larger sense, the exercise of compiling the *Yearbook* is also a marker of the sensitivities and uncertainties experienced in contemporary life.

Q: *What surprises might a non-reader of Indian poetry in English expect from this yearbook and previous ones?*
A: As always, the 2023 *Yearbook* will reflect noteworthy, outstanding poems written by Indians. By writing about things happening around them, poets become the litmus test of a society with all its diversities. That is what could take a non-reader of Indian poetry by surprise. For instance, in the previous volumes of the *Yearbook*, poets expressed their sensibilities towards home, identity, language, ecology, gender, mental health, to name only a few themes. It would be fair to say that the reader can expect the 2023 *Yearbook* also to cast back whatever life has thrown at them.

Q: *What trends have revealed* themselves in previous editions?
A: The first *Yearbook* happened when the world was reeling amidst the pandemic. The edition clearly recorded and projected the consequent bewilderment, suffering, mass migration of labourers to their homes and the threat of death looming over people. This is how history gets inscribed into poetry and literature in general. It is in the second *Yearbook* that there is a mood of reflection and empathy. There is also room for a bit of experimentation with form and we see more concrete poetry here. However, the third edition documents a freer spirit, a settled mood but also quite a variety of themes and styles of writing poetry.

Q: *In particular, do the* Yearbooks *reflect your previous observation that the English used in Indian poetry is "very Indian" and is "homed comfortably" among the bhashas?*
A: When Indian poets write in English, their use of the language is anchored to the region to which they belong. Unfortunately, these aesthetics of poetic language have not been documented and some work needs to be done to establish a critical study of this arm of Indian poetry. Indian poets freely use a plethora of words from Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu and other *bhashas* in their poetry to get the *bhav* or emotion across. These words are so easily integrated into the English language that, English, we realise, has homed comfortably as one of the many *bhashas* in India. Clearly, we have done away with the colonial yoke and embraced the language in a unique manner.

Q: *There seems to be a widespread label, attached to poetry in general and Indian poems in English in particular: they are called overly sad.*
A: Poetry has always been considered as the natural vehicle for grief. Often, deep sorrow that cannot be adequately expressed through prose is conveyed piercingly through poetry. Perhaps that's why a melancholic demeanour exists in poetry per se. There is a noticeable dearth of humour in contemporary poetry across the world. However the presence of wit, irony, mockery and sarcasm have kind of made up for the lost ground.

The interviewer's writing has appeared in publications in India and abroad. @suhitbombaywala

Matter of verse Editors and poet-scholars Sukrita Paul Kumar (left) and Vinita Agrawal; and (below) the 2022 edition of the *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English*.

IN CONVERSATION

English as one of our many *bhashas*

The editors of the *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English* on how contemporary poets have ditched the colonial yoke and embraced the language

Hungry tides

Yuvan Aves on the need to hold on to the fraying wealth of connections between humans and the natural world
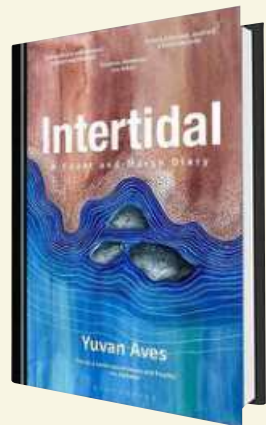
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On one side lies Yuvan Aves' *Intertidal: A Coast and Marsh Diary*; on the other is an advertisement for a township proclaimed to be "Chennai's Switzerland". The words that catch my eye are "100% Flood Free Area".

Since the floods of 2015, the citizens of Chennai keep a wary eye on the sky every time clouds gather. Often, when talking about heavy rains, local weather bloggers will add a "will not cause flooding" clause. But the intertidal is an area that undergoes periodic flooding during high tides. Aves compares this with the flooding of the human mind, as he combines his explorations of the coastal and marshy areas of the city he calls home with his growth as a teacher, nature educator, activist and author.

Period of healing

I am almost reduced to tears by his opening passages describing the Urur Kuppam beach, where I spent quite a bit of my childhood. The Prologue is hard to read; the account of the physical and mental abuse Aves endured as a child is stomach churning. When he turns 16, Aves decides to run away. Fortunately, he makes his way to his school director, who offers him a way out. The next five years, which he spent at Pathashaala School, were "a period of healing but also of recasting the meaning of my own suffering and changing its architecture within me."

Interestingly, the chapters all have the word 'meditation' in the title: Ocean Meditation, Tree Meditation and so on. As you read, you can see why. While recording his observations, Aves also offers readers a way to engage not just with the book but also with the world around them. Even as you enter a world you have probably never seen before through his words, you can also recognise the impact of your own actions on that world.

Take, for example, this passage about decorator worms: "I find another worm in Velan's boat with a different sense of style. It has used a bit of green plastic from a single-use bag; blue plastic from a tarpaulin sheet; thick clear packaging from an Amazon parcel; black plastic from a meat bag; a piece of betel-nut sachet and a Sunsilk shampoo sachet; then some shell fragments, sea-fan bits and nylon strands. It wears

Intertidal: A Coast and Marsh Diary
Yuvan Aves
Bloomsbury
₹699

what it has found and liked in its corner of the seabed. The fashion sensibilities of the decorator worm are changing." A telling statement on plastic pollution in the marine environment.

'Rain meditation'

An evocative passage takes me back to my early days in Anaikatti, when the power would go off during the rains and I would practise what Aves calls "rain meditation". I make a mental note to try it again and then it strikes me: I don't have to wait for the rain. This is a form of meditation that can be practised any time. What it involves is to slow down your thoughts and enter the world around by opening your senses.

Despite the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation on Chennai's landscape, Aves' accounts show us the wealth of connections between humans and the natural world. Connections we are letting go off. This book is a reminder to hold fast to those fraying threads and to strengthen them so that we preserve not just the earth but also our own sanity.

Mixed emotions (clockwise from left) Muslim women getting flags ready ahead of the elections, in Ahmedabad; School students in Patna pay tribute to Karpoori Thakur; and a Dalit faces discrimination at a public well. (VIJAY SONEJI, ANI, AND GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

The die is
caste

A compilation of essays on the role of hierarchies in Indian society is well-timed and a valuable reference book

Manoj Mitta

A 660-page compilation of essays on a hot-button issue, by academic experts from India and abroad, *The Oxford Handbook of Caste* could not have been timed better. Its publication fortuitously coincided with the political buzz generated by Bihar's caste census followed by the Bharat Ratna for its social justice pioneer Karpoori Thakur. Though this treasure trove omits to mention Thakur, let alone his impact on the Hindi belt, one of its 42 essays is titled "Census, Caste Enumeration and the British Legacy".

Since its focus is, however, on tracing the colonial history of the caste census until the last one that took place in 1931, this essay has nothing about the abortive attempt to revive such enumeration at the national level in the 2011 census, a precursor to the ground broken by Bihar in bringing out its report in 2023. Similar is the omission of any reference to Karpoori Thakur, a member of the lowly caste of Nais or barbers, despite at least two essays being devoted to reservations. One of those essays is specifically on the concept of "backwardness", the very context in which the former Bihar chief minister happened to be posthumously honoured for introducing reservations in 1978 for not only "other backward classes" (which included dominant castes from among Shudras) but also "most backward classes" (which included some Muslim categories).

Ambitious effort

To be fair, the omission of such topical aspects of caste does not detract from
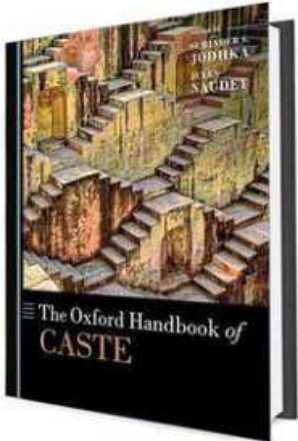
The Oxford Handbook of Caste
Edited by Surinder S. Jodhka, Jules Naudet
Oxford University Press
₹999

the credit due to its editors, Surinder S. Jodhka and Jules Naudet, for this ambitious compendium. Topicality can hardly be the yardstick for evaluating a book that is clearly for the ages. Even so, its staggering range of essays does include other topical aspects of caste. Take the section of five essays labelled "Caste and the Religious Realm", a subject that has gained greater traction in the wake of the Ayodhya temple inauguration. While one of those essays deals with "Hinduism and Caste System", another delves into "Caste and Hindutva".

The Hindutva-related essay authored by American anthropologist Joel Lee could well be taken as representative of the quality of the insights offered by the compendium. Lee brings out three texts that

"illuminate the role played by caste" in shaping both the ideology and practice of Hindu nationalism.

The first is *A Dying Race*, a pamphlet composed in 1909 by retired military officer U.N. Mukerji. To begin with, based on "an uncritical reading" of the previous decennial census, Mukerji concluded that the rate of increase of Hindus compared with that of Muslims was "extremely small". And then, the bulk of the pamphlet was devoted to what he diagnosed as the ultimate cause of Hindu diminution: "our caste system". In Mukerji's view, caste was "an insuperable bar" to the attainment of the kind of unity and solidarity that was exemplified by Muslims.

The Hindu angle

Lee writes: "In conjoining an argument animated by the enumerative logic of the modern state, a narrative of Hindus threatened by Muslim growth, and a naming of caste division as an existential threat to the Hindu 'race', Mukerji articulated a discourse from which Hindu nationalism has continued to draw ever since."

This is borne out by the text that followed in 1926, *Hindu Sangathan: Savior of the Dying Race*. Its author Swami Shraddhanand, an Arya Samaj and Congress leader, proposed a Hindu consolidation by replacing the

> Topicality can hardly be the yardstick for evaluating a book that is clearly for the ages. Even so, its staggering range of essays does include other topical aspects of caste

multitude of castes on the ground with the four-fold Varna system valourised by the scriptures. A corollary to such a "return" to an idealised Vedic past was a switch from birth to "character and conduct" as criteria for determining one's Varna.

The most influential text is of course V.D. Savarkar's *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* published in 1923. Savarkar too prized the Varna system although it undermined his contention in the same text that Hindus constituted a single race. If he believed in the "common flow of blood from a Brahmin to a Chandal", it was because he held that all that the Varna system had done was to "regulate its noble blood". This is how Joel Lee summed up Savarkar's endorsement of miscegenation: "Noble blood, that is, is a gift of the higher Varnas to the lower, retained and distributed according to judicious principles favouring the overall health of the race."

Such fascinating content notwithstanding, it's not an easy book to read. This is not only because of the sheer volume of information packed into it or the inherent complexity of the subject. The essays are all by academics and for academics – so they tend to be theoretical and abstruse. As the editors put it, they tried to provide "a comprehensive account of the available social science research" on caste in the hope that it would "help orient future research". All the same, even for laypersons, this tome is a reference book of immense value.

The reviewer is the author of the recently published Caste Pride: Battles for Equality in Hindu India.

Letters from a rebel icon

The translated collection of the personal correspondence of Ismat Chughtai carries the hallmark of her unapologetic writings in Urdu and the beauty of her language

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Translator, writer and clinical professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University, Tahira Naqvi says in her introduction to *Ismat Chughtai In Her Own Words: Letters & Interviews*, that letters by writers have little meaning unless read in tandem with their works. And that reading someone else's letters becomes a subtle act of voyeurism for nosy readers who were not meant to be privy to the author's inner life.

The letters written by rebellious Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai to her family, friends, editors, and other associates, actually enables readers to develop a connect with the people she is writing to. Her candour and outspokenness that made her the one-of-a-kind literary icon, are definitely not worth missing.

Fearless expressions

Chughtai's words breathe power; her imagery, description, style and fearless expressions seamlessly build the narrative of the times she lived in, even though the carefully curated collection contains letters from different decades and many that were left incomplete or not posted. It exposes the conflicts and tension

between men and women created by society and how only those who could break free from social conundrums moved forward.

Succinctly translated by Naqvi from Chughtai's original Urdu letters, the compilation draws an interesting canvas about life in an upper middle class progressive Muslim family in early 20th century. There is a delightful amount of revelation packed in the 275 pages of

Ismat Chughtai
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the comprehensive volume that contains eight interviews and more than 50 letters written over a 30-year period.

Written or spoken, words that flow out of Chughtai are full of uncanny wisdom, wit and sarcasm. Her letters are moving and admonishing at the same time, sometimes funny, but consistently reveal her deep love for her family and her involvement with their

problems. The texts are conversational, informal and filled with everyday reflections. With same gusto, she could shock people with her frankness and also show empathy with her literary preoccupations.

Lessons for feminists

The doyenne of Urdu literature was ahead of her times. Chughtai's towering status as thinker-writer endeared her to her followers. The

Ismat Chughtai In Her Own Words: Letters & Interviews
Translated from the Urdu by Tahira Naqvi
Women Unlimited
₹625

interviews about her life and work are marked by truthfulness, honesty and spontaneity and her audacious approach when she was charged with obscenity for her story *Lihaaf* and other strident writings, is a learning for all those who embrace feminism, socialism and secularism.

Included in the carefully curated collection is an unposted letter to actor Saira Bano whom she reprimands for her failure to fight like a wild cat for her rights when her marriage with Dilip Kumar was failing. Chughtai's advice, "don't make people pity you", underlines her dislike for women sacrificing or succumbing to societal pressures.

Taken together, her letters of encouragement to friends or family to cheer them up during partition or her angry exchanges with Urdu editors in India and Pakistan over joblessness and violence, her endearing deals with her grandson over movie time, detailing her visits to villages, capture reality and provide a collective update on history. The reader's assessment of Ismat Chughtai, a fiercely independent and self-assured woman who told things the way they were, can only be further illuminated because reading her is a journey to reason, much like her life.

HOW FAR WILL AI GO?

Abbin Theepura, a veteran political consultant who has worked extensively with social media, says that AI technologies are still "nascent". More than synthetic media, the challenge today is the automating of distribution of content through micro-targeting, something tech firms have already been working on perfecting for a decade. "It's not like AI is helping me automate the content," says Theepura. "That still needs to be generated in the first place."

Political observers are, however, looking closely at what the BJP, in particular, might get up to, for a simple reason: the party's early lead on using technology in past elections. The BJP's well-documented and extensive use of social media was underway even in the 2014 elections, before smartphone penetration was anywhere near the levels today. Opposition parties have had to play catch-up in the following years. If nothing else, what kind of experiments the ruling party runs will be useful in assessing what techniques it adds to its armoury.

Translation into multiple regional languages is obviously a big use case: while the Prime Minister has used the government's Bhashini app to do live translations of his speech at a meeting last year, real-time speech recognition in Indian languages is not perfect, and neither is translation technology. Vetted translations synthesised into a dub track that are distributed much after a speech has been delivered can get the message across fairly cheaply – without ringing any alarm bells *a la* deepfakes. Jadoun says that translations are typically put through a quality analysis and manually verified before being fed into the software.

What could ultimately determine the level of impact of any sort of AI-enabled campaigning tool, though, is distribution – another strength buoying the BJP with its large presence in States, offline as well as on social media. Opposition parties are at a financial disadvantage here, and they argue, suffer from retaliation that the ruling party does not. "Technology like AI conversation [phone] calls will become very common as more vendors start making them available to political parties," says Vishnoi. "If you already have a distribution network created, it becomes very easy" to dominate the field. "The BJP has a strong and structured distribution network," as do some other dominant regional parties, he adds. Vishnoi cites Tamil Nadu's ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and its rival, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, as organisations that have garnered an early lead.

But opposition parties continue to remain wary of the reach and result of their messaging in the face of widespread misinformation and fake news. "I can share a list of YouTube channels that are only peddling fake news day in and day out and that [are] retweeted by members of a certain political party," says Jasmine Shah, an Aam Aadmi Party appointee chairing the Delhi government's Dialogue and Development Commission. "But obviously no action" is taken against these. He compares this to when Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal got slapped with a defamation notice in 2019 after he retweeted a video by YouTuber Dhruv Rathee about the BJP's IT cell. (Shah spoke in February, a month before Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate.)

In other words, the playing field is uneven if a party decides to play dirty. Vishnoi says it would be ideal if all political organisations came together to declare a common list of principles on AI use, such as labelling of synthetic content and avoiding depictions of opponents.

Before things get there, though, parties appear poised to see what this technology can or cannot do in furthering their ultimate objective: winning the election. "Whatever tools are coming, we will experiment," says Theepura. Whether or not they have an impact, the AI techniques deployed this election season may well show us a glimpse of what digital campaigning will look like in the coming years.

> **Technology like AI** conversation [phone] calls will become very common as more vendors start making them available. If a political party already has a distribution network created, it then becomes very easy for them to dominate the field
>
> **SAGAR VISHNOI**
> Political consultant

Mission democracy People with disabilities take part in a voter awareness rally in Bengaluru. (PTI)

Special digital series

This election season, misinformation has a new face. While the 2019 elections were no stranger to hate speech and disinformation campaigns, the technology that enables this ecosystem has revolutionised at warp speed. In our ongoing digital series, we at *The Hindu* decode how the nature of election-related misinformation online has evolved, from social media bots to deepfakes. The articles will include interviews with legal experts and activists who will throw more light on the following topics:

- What regulations did and didn't work in the pre-generative AI era, circa 2019
- How algorithmic and social media design changes in the last five years have fuelled the misinformation landscape
- Why social media platforms such as X, Meta and YouTube are struggling to contain fake news and propaganda
- The emerging market and technology of deepfake makers and their political 'content'
- What tech companies are doing to combat AI-generated misinformation
- What effect AI can have on the global electoral landscape

The series will be a handy toolkit for the Indian voter; a guide that attempts to make sense of the synthetic chaos that undermines trust and truth in a democracy. Scan the QR code to know more.

> **Anyone with a laptop** now can make this stuff [deepfakes]. You don't need to go to a specialised agency, or even to somebody who knows code
>
> **KAREN REBELO**
> Co-founder of fact-checking website BOOM

Anirudh Suri

Primary voters in New Hampshire got a robocall from U.S. President Joe Biden asking them not to vote in the primaries. During the recent Pakistan elections, Imran Khan was in jail but his party still managed to circulate a video of him delivering a 'victory speech'. The day before the 2024 Indian elections, millions of voters got a WhatsApp video message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi cautioning them against voting the next day due to a national security threat.

Only two of the above three stories are true. No prizes for guessing which two. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are being used – and misused – widely by candidates and political parties around the world. This year, with over 50% of the world scheduled to vote, the fear is that AI tools could undermine democracy globally.

AI tools can help peddle lies as the truth, and even the truth as a lie. Some have termed this 'the liar's dividend'. Liars, and those looking to confuse or just convolute things, could have a field day with today's new technology. No wonder that many world leaders, including Modi, have specifically identified deepfakes as a threat to democracy. (Deepfakes are videos created using AI tools that are hard to discern as fake.)

Amplifying the threat

How big and real is this threat? Is it being blown out of proportion? AI tools are not necessarily a new threat. Marketers and campaign managers have propagated fake videos and spread disinformation in the past as well. So what is different this time? AI is being seen not as a new threat, but a 'threat amplifier'. It allows even small teams of individuals to 'turbocharge' their efforts to deceive voters by creating fake content much faster and in potentially a more targeted manner.

Here is a simple example of how it might play out. The day before the election, you get a robocall, stating your name, polling booth and address of the polling booth you are supposed to vote at. Except, the polling booth name and location have been purposely mis-stated, so you end up at the wrong booth. You might even get an official-sounding WhatsApp message with the same fake information. A few thousand voters – likely to support an opponent – are specifically picked by an AI engine based on a sentiment analysis of their social media activity for this highly targeted exercise. Repeated in various Indian languages across different constituencies, it can change the election outcome.

The manipulation may also originate outside of India. Technology has become intertwined with geopolitics, as I have argued in my book *The Great Tech Game*. The geopolitical risks of AI-driven disruption to Indian elections are also very real. China, for one, has not shied away from leveraging technology to further its geopolitical objectives. The last few years of a frosty relationship with India might tempt China to fray the Indian electorate using AI-powered influence operations as well as deepfakes. Even if it is not capable of changing the outcome, an autocratic China would not want to miss the opportunity to create fissures and sow discord in a democratic India.

So, is it inevitable that 2024 will be the year of 'deepfake' elections around the world, including India? No, not necessarily. Acknowledgement of the threat is the first step towards finding a solution. But many key players will need to come together to tackle this problem.

Exploring the #AIforGood formula
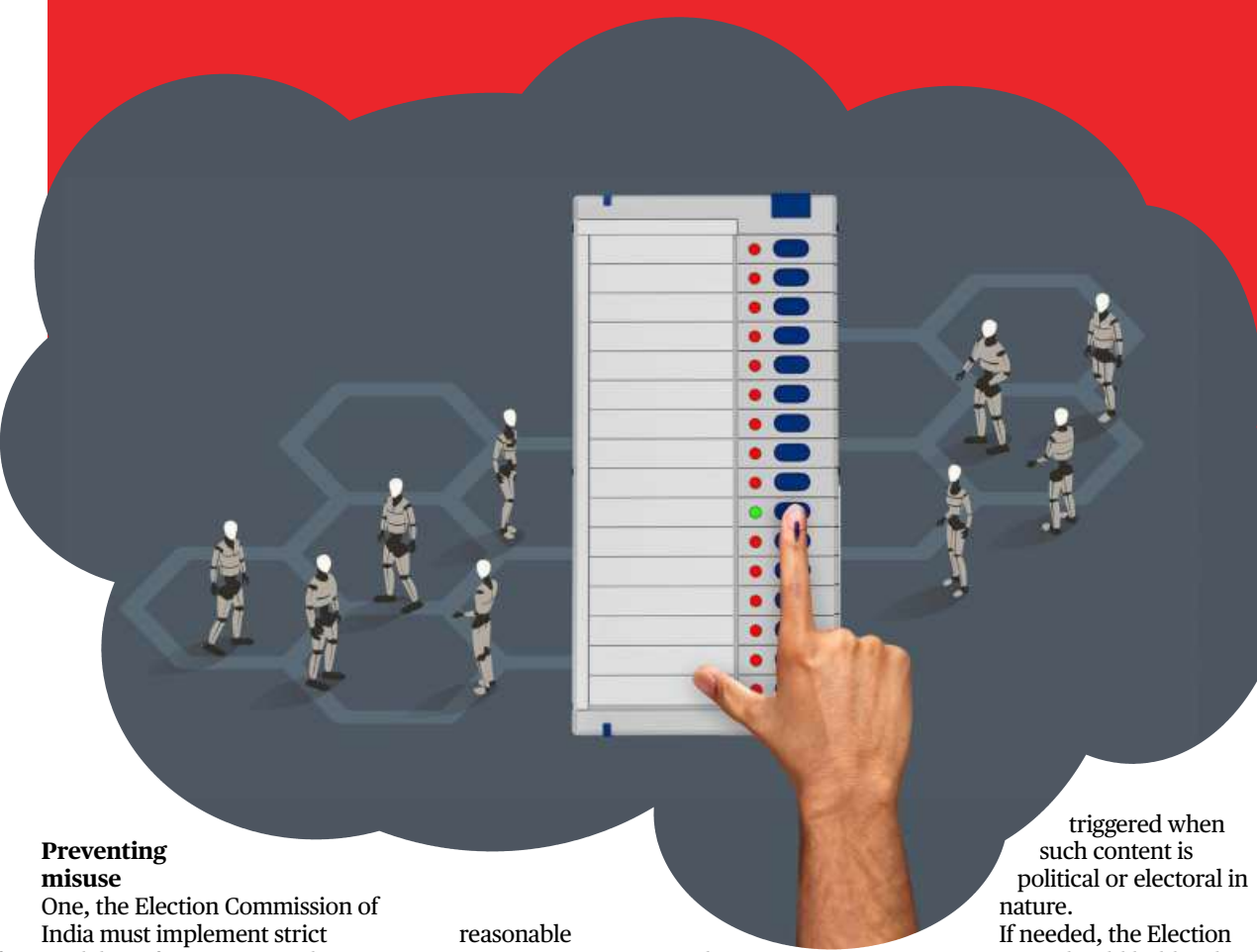
Preventing misuse

One, the Election Commission of India must implement strict guidelines for creation and distribution of such AI-enabled deepfakes in the run-up to the elections. While this accord was seen by critics as insufficient and lacking in teeth, it was a good first step. Their election teams must work with their engineering and AI teams to develop guidelines and technical tools to prevent the widespread distribution of such content.

Two, Big Tech must play a proactive, constructive role in mitigating the threat. At the Munich Security Conference in February, several tech firms pledged to take reasonable precautions to prevent the misuse of AI tools in the upcoming elections. While this accord was seen by critics as insufficient and lacking in teeth, it was a good first step. Their election teams must work with their engineering and AI teams to develop guidelines and technical tools to prevent the widespread distribution of such content.

Three, governments must introduce necessary legislation to give teeth to such precautionary and punitive actions.

Four, political parties and candidates themselves must also sign voluntary pledges this year to not use deepfakes.

A final point. The current national AI strategy of India highlights a key theme: #AIforGood. That is, India wants to use AI for the public good. There couldn't be a better public good than for everyone to come together to find ways to use #AIForGoodElections.

Tech-savvy India

Like any other powerful technology, AI can be leveraged for good or evil, depending on the intentions of the people using it. AI tools can deepen our democratic ethos and make our political discourse more representative. It can be used to better identify issues that matter to different segments of voters. Politicians can use AI tools to communicate in languages beyond just the mainstream or official ones. AI can be used for fraud detection at the booth level. It can be used for better mapping and location of election booths across the country, not to mention make them more accessible for the differently abled. The list is endless. People naturally tend to focus on the dangers of new, emerging technologies. But the last decade has showcased India's confidence with technology adoption, as evidenced by the successful penetration of smartphones and UPI. In 2024, the public discourse in the country must encourage and incentivise key players, including tech start-ups and entrepreneurs, to leverage AI to make elections more democratic, not less. That would make the world's largest democratic exercise a truly path-breaking one, and inspire democracies around the world.

The writer is a non-resident scholar at Carnegie India and host of The Great Tech Game podcast.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

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A few days before the release of *Swatantra Veer Savarkar* on March 22, actor-director Randeep Hooda courted controversy, stating, "If [activist and politician Vinayak Damodar] Savarkar had his way, our country would have become independent 35 years earlier. It was because of Mahatma Gandhi that we got freedom later."

The statement didn't go uncontested. Gandhi's great-grandson Tushar Gandhi said: "It is a classic case of fictionalisation of history." Noted historian Aditya Mukherjee chips in, "Savarkar is the fountainhead of Hindutva ideology. A few years ago, they would not have dared to posit him against the Mahatma. A film like *Savarkar*, and Hooda's statement, is an attempt to nibble at the stature of the Mahatma. By the way, three decades before Independence, Mahatma Gandhi was not quite on the scene [Champaran Satyagraha was his first mass movement in 1917] and Savarkar was in jail."

Hooda tried to course correct soon after, stating how he had come to respect Gandhi more after the film. But it couldn't save *Swatantra Veer Savarkar*. It opened to 12% footfall in Delhi, prompting many to joke that Savarkar drew more from the British through his pension.

'The maths isn't working'

But Hooda's film was never expected to be strong on facts or provide a comprehensive picture of the man whose legacy – as one of the pioneers of the Hindutva ideology – is much contested. It is part of an avalanche of Hindi cinema facilitating the spread of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindutva-driven politics. Historicals, biopics and political dramas are all skewed to seamlessly forward a communal political narrative.

A cursory look at the names of some of the films either released in the last few years or waiting in the wings and one understands they target the Left liberals, the Muslims, or the Congress, the three favoured recipients of animosity of Hindutva proponents.

The films, however, mostly aren't faring well. For every successful *The Kashmir Files* (2022), there are half a dozen *Bastar: The Naxal Story* (2024). Noted documentary filmmaker Rakesh Sharma, whose feature-length film *Final Solution* was based on the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, says, "The maths isn't working out. Those who thought their movies will mint money if even 20% of the 22 crore BJP voters buy tickets are disappointed."

Main Atal Hoon, a biopic on the life of former prime minister and BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, with popular actor Pankaj Tripathi in the lead, released to a lukewarm response this January. A month later, Yami Gautam's *Article 370*, based on the abrogation of Article 370 (which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir) in 2019 by the BJP government fared better, collecting ₹75 crore in the first month of its release. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself gave the film a fillip, stating at a rally in Jammu, "[The film] will be useful for people to get correct information."

Another release before the general elections was director Sudipto Sen's *Bastar*, which collected merely ₹3 crore in the week of its release in March. Its poor box office returns matched those of Sanjay Puran Singh's *72 Hoorain* last year. Interestingly, a large section of India's media had pronounced it "a serious take on terrorism" within a couple of hours of *72 Hoorain*'s release. Ashoke Pandit, the co-producer, said, "I have no time for those who call it a propaganda film. They are insecure people. Films like *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story* and *72 Hoorain* show a truth our film industry was shy of showing until recently. We have not made the film for those who consider a serious take on terrorism as propaganda." *72 Hoorain* collected just ₹35 lakh in its opening day.

Deep Sanghi pockets

Hindi cinema has often been hated by those uncomfortable with the industry's pluralist ethos. Almost every film is made with a cast and crew that includes members of all religions, castes and regions. But in the last decade, as Tushar Gandhi puts it, "Hindi films have drastically changed. They have become mildly communal. They often promote fascist tendencies".

Documentary filmmaker Sharma agrees. "Sangh Parivar has always seen Bollywood as the last of the secular bastions. A fort that they think they can now breach," he says. "I hear whispers of funding for culturally and politically 'appropriate' projects by Sanghi sympathisers, both *desi* and NRI. Rewriting history is a favourite Sanghi pastime." Moreover, films like *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* were strongly promoted by the Hindutva regime, and movie tickets were declared tax-free in BJP-governed States.

A closer look at those involved with the production and promotion of many of these films tells a tale of politics and cinema. Arun Govil, who starred in *Article 370*, is now contesting from the Meerut Lok Sabha seat on a BJP ticket. Kangana Ranaut, who released the trailer of *Razakar: The Silent Genocide of Hyderabad*, is contesting from Mandi on a BJP ticket.

> **Hindi film producers and production** companies seem to think that the surge in political support for Hindutva right-wing will also translate into great numbers of cadres and supporters flocking to the theatres. That's why we are seeing a flood of films that want to cash in on jingoism, pseudo-nationalism, faux-history, revisionist narratives and such like
>
> **RAKESH SHARMA**

As the general election approaches, Bollywood has become a critical vehicle for upholding anti-Muslim tropes in the country. "Hindi film producers and production companies seem to think that the surge in political support for Hindutva right-wing will also translate into great numbers of cadres and supporters flocking to the theatres," says Sharma. "That's why we are seeing a flood of films that want to cash in on jingoism, pseudo-nationalism, faux-history, revisionist narratives and such like."

Now lined up for release before the political slugfest are films such as *JNU*, *Main Deendayal Hoon* (a biopic on the leader of Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the forerunner of the BJP) and *Dr. Hedgewar* (biopic of the founder of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), each likely to take forward a particular political narrative. In fact, *Dr. Hedgewar*'s trailer focuses on Muslims as the 'other' – much like the multilingual *Razakar*. Also slated for release is *The Sabarmati Report*, based on the Godhra tragedy of 2002.

It seems the show, however vituperative and jingoistic, will go on.

The large number of government-friendly films releasing ahead of the upcoming general elections tells a tale of politics and cinema

SAFFRON ON THE BIG SCREEN

A skewed narrative (Clockwise from left) Stills from *Razakar*; *The Kerala Story*; *Main Atal Hoon*; *The Kashmir Files*; and *Article 370*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Voices (Top to bottom) Rakesh Sharma; Tushar Gandhi; Ashoke Pandit; and Aditya Mukherjee. (GETTY IMAGES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Sashi Kumar

KUMAR SHAHANI (1940-2024)

FROM ONE KUMAR TO ANOTHER

A friend and colleague looks back on his time with a pioneer of India's parallel cinema movement

With Kumar's passing, the conversation has been disrupted.

A protean conversation whose theme dealt, in one sitting or call, with the entire civilisational sweep of cotton – and how to embrace it, and make meaning and art of it, in celluloid.

In another, with the lambent edifying articulation of the Indian Constitution – and what fascinating form it can take on the screen.

In yet another, with how ellipsis sublimates a filmic movement, much as a touch of pitch imperfection, a note of 'besur' brinkmanship, gives a Hindustani classical vocal rendition the ineffable touch.

Or, with the urgent concern about the subjunctive mood becoming endangered in language and literature.

Or again, most recently, with the strike by scriptwriters in Hollywood evoking euphoric memories of 1968.

And repeatedly, through all this, invoking the genius of Marxist historian and polymath D.D. Kosambi to buttress a point.

These were not so much separate conversations as a continuing discourse, each engagement as if picking up the thread from where we had left off the last time. His probing, artistic imagination was at once captivating and formidable. The gentle smile that lit up his face and infected his voice was an invitation to share his restless ardour, to feel guilty about complacence.

Breaking ground

The conversations, for me, began in real earnest about 16 years ago, although I knew Kumar from much earlier. Around 2008, there was this grand and daunting idea – grand for Kumar, daunting for me – of setting up an institute of aesthetics in Kerala. In our brainstorming, Kumar would unleash a torrent of exceptional thoughts, which I had to harness into a discipline that lent itself to further artistic exploration in an institutional framework. I sought and got the help of art and culture writer and critic Sadanand Menon in shaping the material we had into a proposal we could submit to the government of Kerala to set up an institute. 'School of Higher Learning in Art, Aesthetics and Culture' was Kumar's working title for it.

M.A. Baby, who was Kerala's Culture Minister then, was supportive, which helped the proposal gain initial traction and move forward. We stayed with it for a few years, trying to navigate it through the bureaucracy, before our resolve petered out.

The sheer scale of the project was perhaps its undoing. But, thinking back now, there was probably another element that worked against it. Kumar, it seems to me, unbeknownst to himself, had this innate rebelliousness against institutionalising art. If this can be called a paradox, it wasn't the only one, as I discovered during the years we were grappling with this ambitious project.

Digital enthusiast

For one whose cinema has often been described as 'epic' in its idiom and formal structure, Kumar had an intuitive understanding of digital technology, its liberative impulse and aesthetic possibilities. Lateral thinking and hypertext-mode leaps from idea to idea took him all over and into areas as seemingly far-fetched as medicine, biology and sport. It would seem that in his urge to move beyond the 'unidimensionality of the signal' and past the 'multivalency of signs', the allure of the dispersed, pixelated digital realm was strong. He was fascinated by the new age techno-aesthetic waiting to be tapped. But at the same time, he was appalled by the impermanence, the truncation of continuity, the erasure of memory, even identity, that digitisation augured. The digital seemed to him at once apotheosis and apocalypse.

I do not know if he reconciled these paradoxes in his own mind. We didn't have the opportunity to delve into this at length these last few years before he left us. The conversation has been disrupted. But we continue to be in communion.

The writer is a journalist, filmmaker, media entrepreneur and Chairman of Asian College of Journalism.

Expansive life Kumar Shahani's probing, artistic imagination was at once captivating and formidable.

Amal Allana

Edward Bond first attracted attention with *The Pope's Wedding* and *Saved* in the 1960s. A playwright, theatre director, poet and dramatic theorist, Bond, obsessed with the question of responsibility, confronted his audiences with violence and cruelty around themes such as imperialism, economic exploitation, war and apartheid. This was reflected in plays such as *Saved* and *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. With Bond's passing on March 3, at the age of 89, theatre has lost a highly controversial writer, whose radicalism about modern theatre and society, as well as his dramatic theories, won him an esteemed place among 20th and 21st century dramatists and theorists.

After *Look Back in Anger* written by John Osborne in 1956, it was Bond's *Saved*, written in 1965, that took England by storm, making it a searing critique of a government unable to live up to the promises it had made after World War II, of offering a beleaguered nation a stable economy and future. *Saved* was set in the poverty stricken districts of post-war South London, where the youth lived off dole and lacked direction and purpose in their lives. The play centred around Len, a young working-class man struggling to find hope as the girl he loves, Pam, gives birth to another man's unwanted child. Pam's baby is born into a loveless and hopeless world, coming to a brutal end when it is stoned to death by local ruffians in a public park – as a dazed Len looks on, unable to stop them.

Courting controversy

Produced in 1965 by the Royal Court Theatre, the play shocked and outraged audiences by the mindless manner in which youngsters had partaken of such a brutal and violent act. This scene became reason enough for Britain's censorship board to ban the production. In his own defence, Bond stated, "I write for human salvation... drama is about justice, about social justice".

Theatre stalwarts like Laurence Olivier intervened, condemning the censorship. In a letter to the press, Olivier stated, "*Saved* is not a play for children but for grown-ups, and the grown-ups of this country should have the courage to look at it." Though the Royal Court Theatre lost the case, in the long-run, *Saved* created waves that led to the abolition of stage censorship in Britain altogether in 1968.

One often asks whether art has any real power or agency to bring about a change in society. In the instance of *Saved,* we find that Bond's efficacy lay in his unrelenting resistance to any cuts in either the production or the printed version. He remained committed to his beliefs, winning the day with theatre companies across the world choosing to stage *Saved*, including a brilliant production by the young German director Peter Stein, at the Schaubühne in Berlin. Its theme undoubtedly spoke to the hopelessness and helplessness that prevailed across Europe during the 60s and 70s.

Indian ripples

Closer home, as a young director, I chanced upon a script of *Saved* and felt compelled to stage it. It was August 1975. There was a sense of unease across the country as Emergency had been declared a few months earlier in June. A lurking sense of fear of being exposed to unknown forces made one anxious. This was one of my reasons for staging this play at the time. The young actors of Ruchika Theatre Group who had asked me to direct a play for them, seemed to have the requisite spirit, and an immediate understanding of the uncontrolled hysteria that overtakes the play. Alok Nath, Mona Chawla, Arun Kukreja and Kusum Haidar brought the play alive, while the acutely angled levels that rose up from the stage floor, the battered sofa, the strange 'nets' that were suspended from the flies, were elements of Nissar Allana's surreal set that provided the spectator with images of a tentative and unstable world, one that reflected the precariousness of the times.

Another Bond script that was staged in Delhi was *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, directed by Ebrahim Alkazi at the National School of Drama (NSD) in 1973. A satirical play on the British Empire, it was a political parable set in Japan in the Edo period, dealing with the poet Basho and the changing political landscape over 35 years. Told with Brechtian simplicity, here we saw the conflict between two worlds: an extravagant world where Britannia ruled and the cool samurai deliberation of a traditional Japan. Raising moral issues, Alkazi's production highlighted satirical references to historic events at a time when we in India had begun to reinvestigate our experience of colonialism.

Another Bond play, *The Fool,* was directed by Barry John for the NSD Repertory. It is interesting to note that since the early 70s, Bond was one of the few playwrights who wrote long prefaces to his plays that contained his meditations on capitalism, violence, technology, and the postmodern imagination. These essays can be viewed as Bond's comprehensive theory on the use and means of drama.

The writer is a theatre director and author of Ebrahim Alkazi: Holding Time Captive.

And action English playwright Edward Bond; and (below) a production of *Saved* in New Delhi in 1975, directed by Amal Allana, starring Kusum Haider and Alok Nath. (GETTY IMAGES, ALKAZI THEATRE ARCHIVES)

EDWARD BOND (1934-2024)
'DRAMA IS ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE'

With Bond's passing, the world of theatre has lost someone whose radical ideas and dramatic theories sparked outrage as well as inspired dramatists in India

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GOREN BRIDGE

Who needs support?

North-South vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

North was stuck for a bid after South bid two spades. South's cue bid might be made with several different hands, the most common being a hand with a very big suit. North was trading on that when he bid three diamonds. South continued by bidding four clubs.

North's support for clubs was no better than his diamond support, so North went back to diamonds. South continued by cue-bidding four spades - a clear slam try.

North had shown very little about his hand, other than he held a heart suit, and he had quite a useful hand for slam. North reasoned that if South was looking for slam, he was in! He jumped to six diamonds, giving us a most unusual auction.

South had only bid his suit once, and North, with only two-card support, had raised the suit twice and then jumped to slam in the suit! It was terrific bidding.

There was nothing to the play on a heart lead. South won in dummy, ruffed a spade to his hand, and led a low club. He was soon scoring up his slam. A trump lead would have worried declarer, but he would still have made his slam.

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

WEST
♠ A Q J 8 7 5
♥ Q 10 8 6
♦ 5
♣ A 10

EAST
♠ K 10
♥ 5 4 2
♦ 9 6 4
♣ 9 7 5 4 2

SOUTH
♠ Void
♥ 9 7
♦ A K Q J 8 3 2
♣ K J 6 3

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♦	1♠	Dbl*	Pass
2♣	Pass	3♦	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♦	Pass
4♠	Pass	6♦	All pass
*Negative			

Opening lead: Six of ♥

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Dizzying heights!

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1889, this monument officially opened to the public. Built for the Exposition Universelle, at 300 metres, it held the record for the tallest man-made structure for 41 years. Known as the 'Iron Lady', it was meant to be dismantled after 20 years, but when a radio antenna was added to the top, they realised it was a valuable transmission tower. Which monument is this, that has become a symbol of its country?

2 The Tokyo Skytree is the tallest tower in the world, standing at 634 metres. This tower was built in 2011, to replace the older Tokyo Tower, which had started getting dwarfed by a slew of new skyscrapers. What use was this tower, built to ensure citizens could enjoy a certain pastime?

3 The Merdeka 118 is a 118-storey skyscraper in Kuala Lumpur, and is the second tallest structure in the world, behind the Burj Khalifa. The building design resembles the profile of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of Malaysia as he stood on stage and chanted '*Merdeka*' seven times. If this historical event happened on August 31, 1957, and is celebrated every year, what does '*Merdeka*' mean?

4 The Azadi Tower in Tehran, Iran is a beautiful piece of art, 45 metres tall and completely clad in marble. It was built to open in 1971, to celebrate 2500 years of the Persian Empire. Since then, it has become geographically significant as the point from which all distances are measured in the country. What is this point known as, the Indian version of it being in Nagpur?

5 The Two Towers of Bologna are a set of prominent towers built in the 11th century, and originally used as a prison and look out. In the 16th century, they were used by scientists to study the Earth's rotation. What peculiar property do both towers share with another, more famous tower that is 180 km away in the same country?

6 This observation tower in Seattle, Washington has been an iconic part of the city's landscape since 1962. Standing 184 metres high, it even has a rotating restaurant with a view for miles. It was designed in a futuristic way, to look like a flying saucer tethered to the ground. What is the name of this tower?

7 The Strat Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas is a hotel that also has the tallest observation tower in the United States. Standing at 350 metres, the tower has a revolving restaurant and thrill rides. It was officially called 'Strat' in 2020, an abbreviation of its original name that comes from the world of geography. What was the original name?

8 The Lotus Tower at 351 metres is the tallest self-supported structure in South Asia. Designed to look like the bud of a lotus symbolising the country's development, its observation deck and hotels are made from pink-tinted glass, while the outside has LEDs that change colour. The tower was built during the tenure of a president who resigned in 2022 after protestors stormed his palace, and was eventually charged with corruption. In what country is this tower?

9 The tallest free-standing structure in India is a TV Tower built by Doordarshan as a broadcast tower. Standing at 323 metres, it was built in 1995 and could broadcast even to the country in the previous question. In which city, known for its mythological and floating railway bridges, is this tower found?

10 The tallest military structure in the world is a VLF-transmission facility built by the Indian Navy in Tirunelveli. The umbrella antenna peaks at 471 metres, which allowed India to have Very Low Frequency (VLF) communication capability. It is named after an 18th century king in Tamil Nadu, who bravely fought the British till he was captured and hung. By what name is this colossal tower known?

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

Look up The Two Towers, Asinelli (97.02 m) and Garisenda (48 m), are from the 11th century. (GETTY IMAGES)

Answers
1. Eiffel Tower
2. Television Broadcasting
3. Independence
4. Zero Mile / Zero Kilometre Marker
5. They both lean
6. The Space Needle
7. Stratosphere
8. Sri Lanka
9. Rameswaram
10. INS Kattabomman

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3300
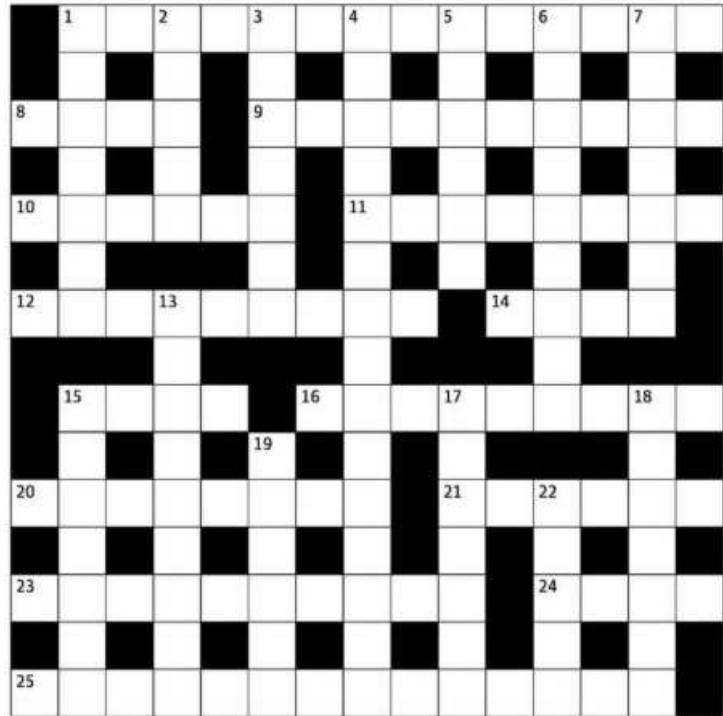
Across
1 Stuttering, so we mangled these? (6,8)
8 Footwear from scaly reptile (4)
9 The Spanish tucked into chocolate snack before tango with songwriter(6,4)
10 Sixth to recognise fool's gold, somewhere in the Bahamas (6)
11 Malicious, up itself play (8)
12 Theatrical farce no one gets rid of (though second character cut) (6,3)
14 In announcement, name location on the web (4)
15 Fry – and damage (4)
16 Humiliated Head of Communications was anxious (9)
20 Advise against ructions (in part) (8)
21 Some out-drank a rake in Turkish city (6)
23 Playwright's retrospective to depict old, cold Spanish kingdom (4,6)
24 A wading bird in a bar (4)
25 Cut-off trousers and vest are, surprisingly, items of great value (8,6)

Down
1 What's travelled quickly, leading to stir? (7)
2 Thieves in prisons (5)
3 Marks given to Mötley Crüe? (7)
4 Equipment swap? Quite the reverse! (5,2,3,5)
5 Everyman increasingly intoxicated, overheard in warmer part of Europe (6)
6 Bill reduced slightly, Morse's colleague (Geordie) wanting cheapest plonk (5,4)
7 Find new direction for overture, not very flowing (2-5)
13 Still, I can dance a little (9)
15 Honesty also seen in court? Not quite (7)
17 Smear last bit of oil into power tool (7)
18 Secretly listens in on (bugs) (7)
19 Both sides of Atlantic flipping over party puzzle (5)
22 Kinaesthetically immaculate Russians' orchestrated variations, primarily? (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3299

COAGULATES EDAM
BLUBBERERS ASAP
SKIPPINGROPE
REPOSES GROUNDS
SOCIALS VERMEER
KALEIDOSCOPE
MITE OPENSECRET
OUST POLYESTERS

Valuable learning tool

Simulation-based training in healthcare offers a safe, effective way to hone skills, bridging the gap between theory and practice

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ILLUSTRATION: SATHEESH VELLINEZHI

Simulation, in simple terms, involves artificially recreating real events and processes in controlled conditions. It has opened a new avenue of teaching critical medical practices while giving the space to students to safely make mistakes.

Simulation recreates a real-time experience to attain educational objectives through experiential hands-on learning. This is helping in reducing the dependence on traditional bedside learning from patients.

Concerns of patient safety, growing patient awareness and litigation, busier hospitals, shortage of resources, bigger training groups, and lack of hands-on learning opportunities have all been compelling reasons to look for better alternatives to bedside learning. The pandemic has also forced us to reduce dependence on real patients to pick up skills.

Historically, teaching and trial of new techniques happened directly on real patients. Today, recreating scenarios in a simulated environment offers an opportunity for students and clinicians to acquire, adjust, and master expertise in the field until the desired outcome is achieved. Recreation of real-life patient experiences in a simulated environment is now offering a great alternative to conventional methodologies. The solutions in simulation training start with simple skill training models and go up to super speciality simulators.

Learning the skills on a training model bridges the gap between theory and practice. These training models offer the liberty of repeated practice and assessment in a safe and effective manner.

Simulation brings alive the knowledge acquired from books and lectures before experiencing it with a real patient.

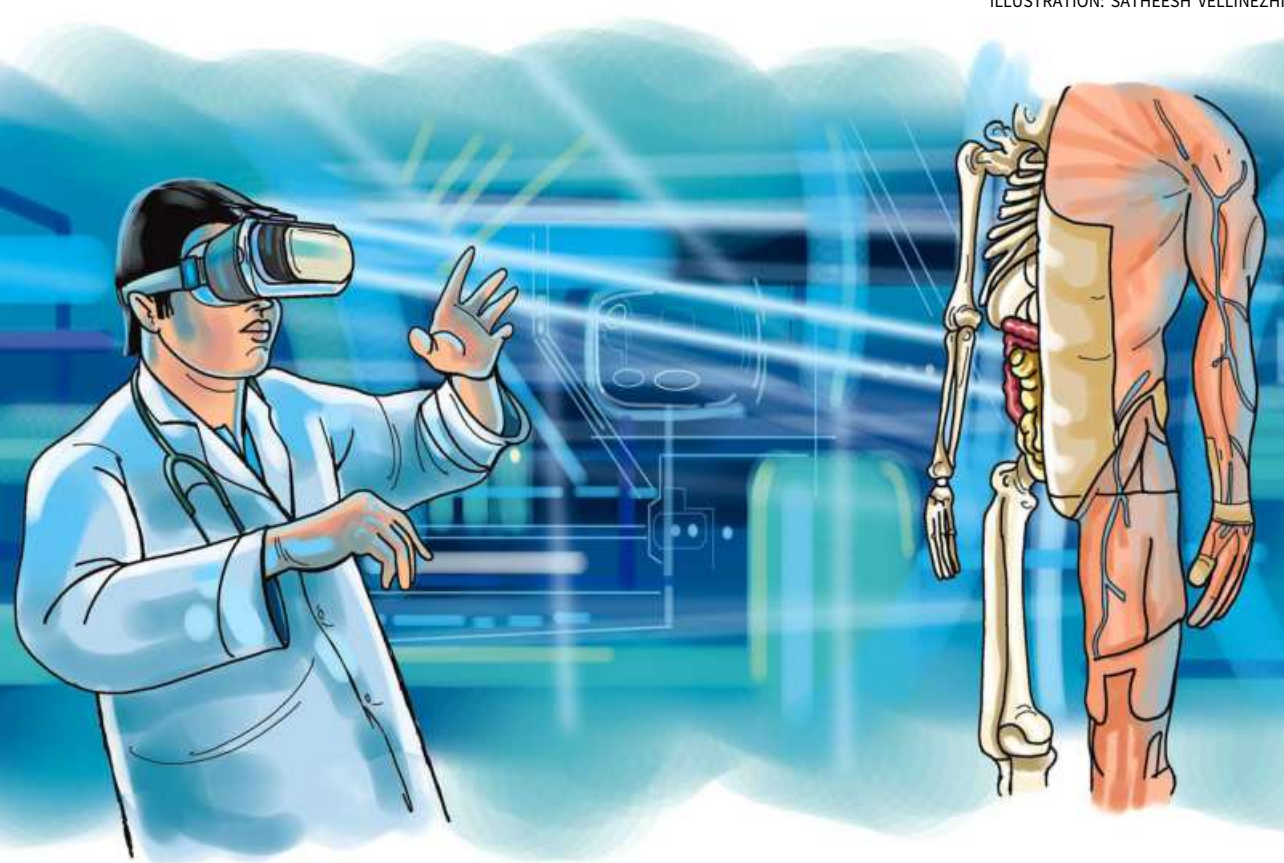Technological advancement has broadened the training possibilities of simulation in super speciality courses like arthroscopy, endovascular surgery, urology, gynaecology, robotic surgery, endoscopy, ultrasonography, and many more.

The order and complexity of clinical procedures are often presented to the trainee in a random manner, which gives suboptimal and inefficient learning opportunities. Virtual reality offers potential for training, assessment, and rehearsal of such procedures outside the operating room in a safe environment.

Procedures can either be simulated using cases on the simulator, or by using real anatomy derived from imaging methods such as computed tomography angiography (CTA) or magnetic resonance angiography (MRA). Such training will now play a very crucial role in education settings and in certifications. Similarly, professionals can now be trained on a simulator on the various complications they may encounter in an intensive care unit (ICU) or an operation theatre.

This is changing the way healthcare is taught and how students and professionals acquire and enhance their skill. Learning on simulators or in a simulated environment also offers an opportunity to enhance decision making, communication, leadership, and teamwork. It also helps in addressing a key challenge of medical errors causing harm to real patients because of various factors during the caregiving process.

Simulation centres, equipped with these training models and simulators, offer a real hospital-like atmosphere.

They provide an opportunity to experience rare situations that students may not encounter during the tenure of their programme.

The centres also provide multidisciplinary team training, which is a rarity in conventional healthcare curriculum. This addresses the challenges of healthcare providers from different disciplines working as a team.

Professionals and students in medical, dental, nursing, and allied science programmes are all going to benefit through this simulation experience. The growing acceptance of simulation in healthcare is now driving the incorporation of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality into the field. This will help to provide the trainees with the most lifelike simulation products and solutions.

Simulation-based training has become an indispensable component of healthcare education, offering a safe and effective way to train and assess healthcare professionals across various disciplines. The emphasis on practical skills, patient safety, and multidisciplinary collaboration positions simulation as a cornerstone in modern healthcare education.

(The author is Vice-Chancellor, The Tamilnadu Dr MGR Medical University)

Taking care of Pothosu

A journey of a plant killer turned plant lover

Savitri Murty
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I got a small indoor plant as a birthday gift from my friend. Only she did not realise that I am a plant killer, despite my best efforts to grow them. I fell in love with the small plant with heart-shaped leaves. The Internet tells me it is called Pothos. I decided that little Pothosu would live and thrive in my house come what may. Pothosu? Yes, the South Indian system of nomenclature runs strong in my genes – add a 'u' or an 'n' to names and own them.

My father was a government servant and we lived in small towns in big houses with gardens and backyards. My best memories of childhood are the hours spent with siblings and friends under the shade of trees or sometimes sitting on some low branches. We named the trees. Some were good, some evil, and some (the Mango tree) magical. The Jamun tree was a favourite – it would cast a spell on us with its fruits and rustling leaves.

Unfortunately, this affinity with plants faded with time. My lack of gardening skills and life in concrete jungles cut out plants from my life. Or so I thought until I got my gift.

I decided that I would protect and preserve my gift. I did the intelligent thing and consulted two advisers – the friendly neighbourhood gardener and Google guru. When all the stars were aligned propitiously, Pothosu was installed near the French window where it would get the right amount of sunlight (no chance of too much sunlight as I live in Bengaluru). I measured the amount of water that I would pour gently at regular intervals.

Many people believe that plants are sentient beings. They talk to their plants. They say that their plants wilt when there is tension in their house.

You may call me whatever you want – but I talk to Pothosu and find it therapeutic. I know she smiles when I tell her something funny.

Sustainable fashion

Thrifting offers affordable choices and helps reduce the carbon footprint

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Thrift culture is slowly gaining popularity in our country, especially among the youth.

Thrifting refers to the practice of purchasing pre-owned gently used products, mainly clothing.

Thrift wear or upcycled products are those that are already used by someone, cleaned, retouched and, if needed, embellished and sold. These clothes are sold at a comparatively lower price than the original ones. Thrifting is more common among the Gen Z as it combines fashion and sustainability. It also does not burn a hole in the pocket.

It serves a larger goal of environmental protection. The fashion industry produces more than 150 billion pieces of clothing a year globally. About three in five of these clothing products become waste within years of production; they end up in landfill sites or incinerators. A dress made of polyester, a form of plastic, could take up to 200 years to decompose completely.

Thrifting and upcycling serve the purpose here. Second-hand clothes are eco-friendly as they are being reused with little or no modifications, thereby reducing the carbon footprint.

The damage caused by the fast fashion industry is a driving force behind the shift towards thrifting. This mode of fashion is pocket-friendly. It saves money.

The thrifting culture saw a huge rise during the pandemic when the world was going through economic turmoil. Thrift wear costs much less than new clothes. There are also ample options.

Due to a change in the mindset, thrifting has become more acceptable in India, where wearing second-hand clothes was once looked down upon. While there are a few physical thrift stores in the country, online stores are more popular.

Unlike Western countries, where thrift shopping is quite common and there are large stores dedicated to it, the concept is relatively new in India. But with a steady demand, physical thrift stores have started coming up in Tier-1 cities. Physical stores are helpful because the clothing can be checked for fit before buying.

Thrifting will continue to thrive and it is in the best interest of people and the environment.

K.R. DEEPAK

Going Right or Left

Can one be politically ambidextrous in a world where the gap is widening?

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Of late, politics has become a great entertainer! From the Presidential debates in the United States to the Right-Left divide in our own motherland, politics can give Hollywood and Bollywood quite a run for their money.

For example, the politics of the Left versus Right has always amused me.

I am not a student of political science and wouldn't know the academic definitions of left-wing or right-wing ideology, but what I understand from the political discourse that is out in the open is that the Leftists consider themselves more reformed and liberal and, according to them, the Rightists are conservative and regressive. The Rightists consider themselves to be nationalist and custodians of tradition and heritage. The Leftists, according to them, are anti-national.

Don't birds and aircraft need wings on both sides to fly? If a businessman, with alleged Left leanings, were to start an aviation business, will he have a fleet of left-winged aircraft only? Can we not have a leader or a political entity that is able to integrate and balance seemingly opposing ideologies, policies, or interests? Such people are accused of being ambiguous in their thinking and non-committal and termed Centrists!

In this melee, the one is who is eternally trying to find the middle ground is the common man. I was reminded of my habit of switching between left and right hands when I used to do my schoolwork. My father noticed that my right-handed work was good and insisted that I stick to the right hand. My mother used to say, "Allow him to experiment and maybe over a period of time, he will become ambidextrous!" I do not know whether my father was a Rightist and my mother a Centrist, but the big question that lingers and continues to remain unanswered is can you be politically ambidextrous.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Cover story

Commercial Ayurvedic products trigger a deep-rooted fascination in consumers. ('Is this the year of A-beauty?'; Mar. 24) Call it sweet nostalgia for reverting to traditional ways. But even today, people consume them without proper knowledge of the ingredients, which can be harmful. Consumers need to be made aware of this.
Nimit Suri

The efficacy of Ayurvedic medicine depends purely on one's metabolism. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach for this traditional branch of medicine. Allopathy is different. For instance, Dolo-650 can provide instant relief to anyone who has a headache.
S. Ramakrishnasayee

Facts and friendship

Gopalkrishna Gandhi has provided an honest review of Mani Shankar Aiyar's book on Rajiv Gandhi. ('Rajiv, in admiration'; Mar. 24) Not to throw light on the Bofors case is like writing the *Ramayana* without Rama. Knowing Aiyar's connection with the Congress party, one has to infer that he has opted for the safer route.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Literary genius

'Behind every successful man there is a strong woman.' ('Spouses and muses'; Mar. 24) Though that might be true, one wonders what it would have been like, if only the roles were reversed, and wives were "allowed" or had chosen to pursue their dreams and the husbands had been pillars of support, as in the case of Virginia Woolf. Unfortunately, many talented women have willingly or otherwise remained spouses or muses.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

The complex power dynamics in a marriage between two artists has resulted in several gifted women missing out on the recognition they deserve. One hopes that an increasingly progressive society enables women artists to flourish, thereby enriching our experience of art.
Anusha Pillay

'Extortion and bribery'

G. Sampath has done a commendable job creating this satire. ('Bias against electoral bonds'; Mar. 24) Moreover, it is helpful to make people aware of one of the most important issues facing our country: corruption.
Rahul Kumar

G. Sampath is known for his satirical take on political situations. But in this case, I didn't much enjoy him making fun of the Vedas.
Sonia Sharma

For the people

"India is the refuge of the afflicted," said Mahatma Gandhi. ('Aman Wadud: Assam's advocate'; Mar. 24) Where will those who have settled in Assam for over decades but have no proof of identity go, if they are shunted? They should not be deported. That said, the future influx of people across the border has to be kept in check.
K. Pradeep

Aman Wadud's pioneering work in assisting Indian citizens who were left out from the NRC in Assam is commendable. His providing legal assistance to people back home, while disregarding the money-minting profession he is in, is inspiring.
M.B. Zahir Abbas

Stories in metal and enamel (Clockwise from below) The Museum of Meenakari Heritage; an enamelled necklace; Usha Balakrishnan; Digvijay, Sunita and Niharika Shekhawat; visitors at MoMH; a *sarpech*; a tiger head bracelet; and a turban ornament. (@MAYANKMANSINGHKAUL, KEWAL CHHOLAK, MUSEUM OF MEENAKARI HERITAGE)

Sunita Shekhawat's Meenakari museum that opened this week celebrates an ancient craft that was introduced by the Portuguese in Goa

MOMH: JAIPUR'S NEWEST GEM

> The role of a curator is to present a narrative, drawing upon images and objects. The historical reproductions we have done for the museum might be considered modern today, but will be historic in the future!

USHA BALAKRISHNAN
Curator

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Is there a better time than Holi to launch a new jewellery museum? Not if you are in Jaipur, where the country's annual celebration of spring is celebrated by the city's royals with bonfires, singing, feasting and a lot of colour. And not when the museum is dedicated to 'meenakari', an ancient enamelling technique brought to India 500 years ago by the Portuguese. Under the guidance of trailblazer Sunita Shekhawat, whose eponymous jewellery brand owns The Museum of Meenakari Heritage (MoMH), the colour palette of this jewellery technique has in the last decade blazed past the usual 20-25 shades to about 360. "Variation in temperature during the "*firing*" gives *vitreous* enamel its final visual appearance and defines its colour. It is a laborious process. As you become successful, you get the confidence to experiment," says Sunita, 60, the only woman in her gemology class in Jaipur when she signed up decades ago. She has since gone on to become one of the country's most successful jewellery designers and is hailed as the "Modern Meenakaar" of India.
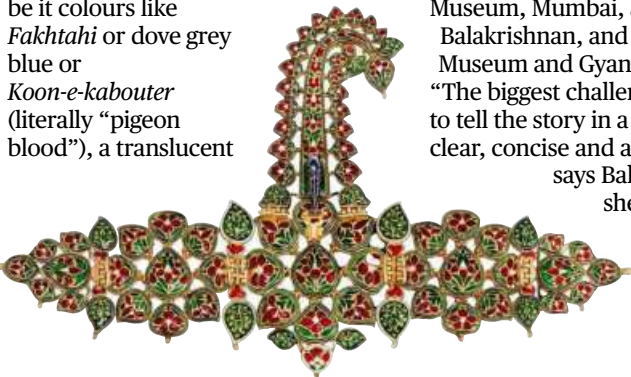
The walkthrough

At the 2,200 sq.ft museum, part of a red sandstone haveli designed by Studio Lotus that also includes a retail division in the basement and a management floor, you embark on a journey that begins in the 15th century, meticulously curated by art and jewellery historian Usha R. Balakrishnan. Designed by Siddhartha Das Studio, the museum shows to advantage over 300 images sourced from museums and private collections and about 120 reproductions of Indian jewellery pieces that are now in international institutions such as the British Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum.

"Enamelling is not a jewellery manufacturing technique that is indigenous to India. But suddenly it flowers with the coming of the Portuguese to Goa," says Balakrishnan, expanding on the great revival in enamelling in Europe at the time, and its impact on India, which was the centre of gem trading in the world. She highlights how Goan jewellers were sent to Portugal to learn jewellery setting techniques, and that raw materials came here from Europe, especially the vitreous glass from Murano in Venice. At the time, jewellery was being enamelled in the front and back in Europe. But as gemstones were becoming popular, soon enamelling got relegated to the back of the pieces.

At this cultural space, visitors can by appointment also brush up on their Meenakari vocabulary, be it colours like *Fakhtahi* or dove grey blue or *Koon-e-kabouter* (literally "pigeon blood"), a translucent red coloured enamel that can be a challenge to create, says Sunita. Techniques range from *Ab-e-lehr*, a gold base asymmetrically chased and engraved in the form of waves, to *Boond tila*, the chased and engraved gold base with translucent enamelling. As for the images, Balakrishnan says it took close to two years to get permissions because of the COVID shutdown of museums around the world.

One of four

For a country known for its jewellery heritage, India has few museums dedicated to it. MoMH joins the Jewellery Gallery in the CSMVS Museum, Mumbai, also curated by Balakrishnan, and the Amrapali Museum and Gyan Museum in Jaipur. "The biggest challenge for a curator is to tell the story in a manner that is clear, concise and accessible to all," says Balakrishnan. That she has succeeded is evident at the launch, as jewellery aficionados linger over each display case. The panel of florals used in Meenakari is especially memorable as it lists seven of the most common blooms, from the lotus to the oleander, sourced from the Dara Shikoh Album of miniatures (now in the possession of the British Library, London) and matched with both images of jewellery and reproductions.

"The history of Meenakari in India, spanning more than 500 years, is a complex history of global connections, influences, transfer of technology, reinterpretation and indigenisation," says Balakrishnan, commending the craftsmen at the Sunita Shekhawat atelier. Her personal favourites at MoMH are the European horse (see box) and the Sarpech, which are "outstanding testimonies of the genius of India's artisanal skills". Meanwhile, Sunita, who is ably supported by her family at work - her daughter Niharika and son Digvijay take care of logistics and sourcing, respectively - says the next step at the permanent gallery is to organise an audio guide. And as not everyone will be lucky to get a walkthrough by Balakrishnan! "It would be fantastic to have Naseeruddin Shah," pipes in Niharika. Anything is possible.

Of horses and crowns

Enamelled pendants of dragons, horses and dolphins acted as charms for sea-faring people in Europe in the 16th century. On display at MoMH is a reproduction of a pendant with a prancing horse from Spain or Germany (1600-1625) studded with gold, diamonds, rubies, pearls and enamel. It utilises the complex *émail en ronde bosse* technique and while the method is uncommon in India, it has been accurately reproduced at the Sunita Shekhawat atelier, observes Balakrishnan. "It is the continuity of skills over 400 years. The craftsman had never done anything like this and it is almost like he had it in his DNA," she says. Miniature paintings throw up much evidence too, especially from the court of Jehangir. There is an image of him wearing a pearl necklace with a cameo pendant. Or Shah Jahan holding a pendant with a miniature portrait of himself. All set in an enamelled frame. There are miniature crowns used back in the day for the Infant Jesus, and pendants where gems are set using the Konkan technique.

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

A LITTLE LIFE

When Phuphee became a 'village'

With the birth of a baby you gain something precious, but you also lose something of yourself. This is when support and a sisterhood are essential

Six weeks after the birth of my second baby, I was diagnosed with postpartum depression. Even now, after having recovered to a large extent, I can't think about it without feeling sad and overwhelmed. One of the earliest things that I remember is feeling anxious, and not the low-key 'I-can-set-it-aside-if-I-want-to' anxiety but the kind that feels like someone has thrust a large knife deep into your gut and periodically decides to twist it.

Towards the end of the fourth week, this crippling anxiety turned into feelings of hopelessness. I would look at my beautiful baby waiting for the feelings of joy and happiness to surround me but they wouldn't come and this in turn would lead to feelings of guilt. Maybe I didn't deserve my bundle of joy, I thought. How awful a mother must I be, I thought, to feel no joy on seeing my baby? And on the days that I didn't feel sad or hopeless, I felt rage – like I had never known before.

Like a pendulum, I got caught between these two extremes and each day became an exhausting exercise in trying to exist. One day when my husband came back from work, he found me sitting on the floor weeping. He picked me up and said, 'I think we need some help.' And he called Phuphee.

'*Dappsaa mae soarie* [tell me everything],' she said. I heard her light her cigarettes and inhale deeply.

'You will see a doctor first thing tomorrow,' she said, 'and I will be with you as soon as I can.'

Over the next few weeks I saw a doctor, started medication and prayed for Phuphee to arrive. The day she reached was the first time in weeks that I slept longer than three hours. The relief I felt at having her in the house made me feel so at ease that for the next few days I felt slightly sleepy every time I sat with her. Phuphee would make me go for a short walk every day while she watched over the children. At first I was anxious to leave them, even for a short while, but each time at the door, she would wink at me and say, 'I have raised three successfully. I promise to guard these two with my life.'

Every morning, she would make a large breakfast. The comforting smell of ghee would waft through the whole house as she made *rotis* and *parathas* as eggs and *nun chai* (salt tea). She would make *dodh kahwe* (milk *kahwa*, a hot drink with cardamom, cinnamon, green tea and milk) in a large stockpot and leave it on simmer for the rest of the day, doling out the concoction every so often. Sometimes, she would add a few strands of saffron to it or crushed almonds and dates. Each cup was a balm for every single hurt or ache I felt and with each sip the hurt receded. When I felt a little more confident in myself, I started walking to school with my elder one. The sadness, the hopelessness and the rage started to ebb away. I started to feel like myself again.

'I feel like I am the weakest person alive right now,' I said to Phuphee one day, while she was oiling my hair.

'I know you do,' she said, 'but you are not weak. You are vulnerable, and vulnerability is not the same as weakness. Becoming a mother is a terribly hard thing. You have just spent nine months growing another human being. Then you have had to cut that human being out of your body and now you are expected to keep that human being alive with food from your body. It's not just a baby who was born, a mother was born, too. Who you were before the birth has been completely destroyed, decimated.

'The odd thing is that this is probably the only role in the world where you are annihilated and yet you are expected to rejoice in the annihilation. I think sometimes after we give birth, our bodies go into mourning for the women we used to be. Maybe that is why we become so sad and angry. Accept your sadness and anger, and in the same way you would not judge another for their grief, don't judge yourself for yours. With the birth of every baby we gain something precious, but we also lose something of ourselves.'

She talked about how in her time she hadn't had to even boil water for the first six months after the birth of her children because she had an army of women surrounding her, a sisterhood, a village.

I sat there thinking about why I didn't have a village. I lived a privileged life and yet I was expected, like many women I knew, to do this on my own. Where were these villages? What would happen when my daughter or nieces would decide to have babies? Who would they have?

'What can I do? How do I help my little girl when it is her turn?' I asked, overwhelmed by these thoughts.

'By passing on what you know and by simply being there, by being present,' she replied.

It is the first time I understood her wisdom immediately and not in some distant future. What had saved me was simply her presence. Her reassuring presence had allowed me to have a small but life-saving pause, much in the same way a marathon runner slows down at the drinking stop, where you can replenish yourself for the next part of the marathon. And though Phuphee was just one person, in that moment she amounted to a village, at least for me.
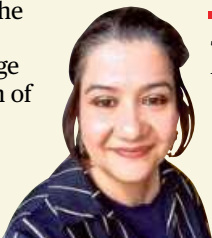
Saba Mahjoor, a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life's vagaries.