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WHY GEN Z IS TAKING TO THE STREETS

Across the world, young people are protesting — against corrupt governments, growing inequality and a lack of opportunities. But can these mass movements, which often begin on social media platforms, bring lasting change?

Kunal Purohit

Sitting in his Kathmandu home, 22-year-old Nabim Regmi spent the last days of August scrolling through the furious memes and digital protests capturing the political decay in Nepal.

Studying for a Masters in International Relations, Regmi had his own reasons to be upset. Four years of a job hunt had got him nothing to show for it. His dream? To become a civil servant and fix this decay. "I wanted to work on making my country better from within the system," he says.

Watching the online uproar escalate, his frustration boiled over. He joined his friends in a social media campaign that soon spilled onto the streets and resulted in the overthrow of Nepal's government, got the Prime Minister to resign, and left the country's top offices, including the Supreme Court, charred.

For Regmi, the protests weren't a rebellion, but a last resort, a different means to the same end: a better Nepal. Regmi isn't alone, nor is Nepal, in seeing such a youth uprising.

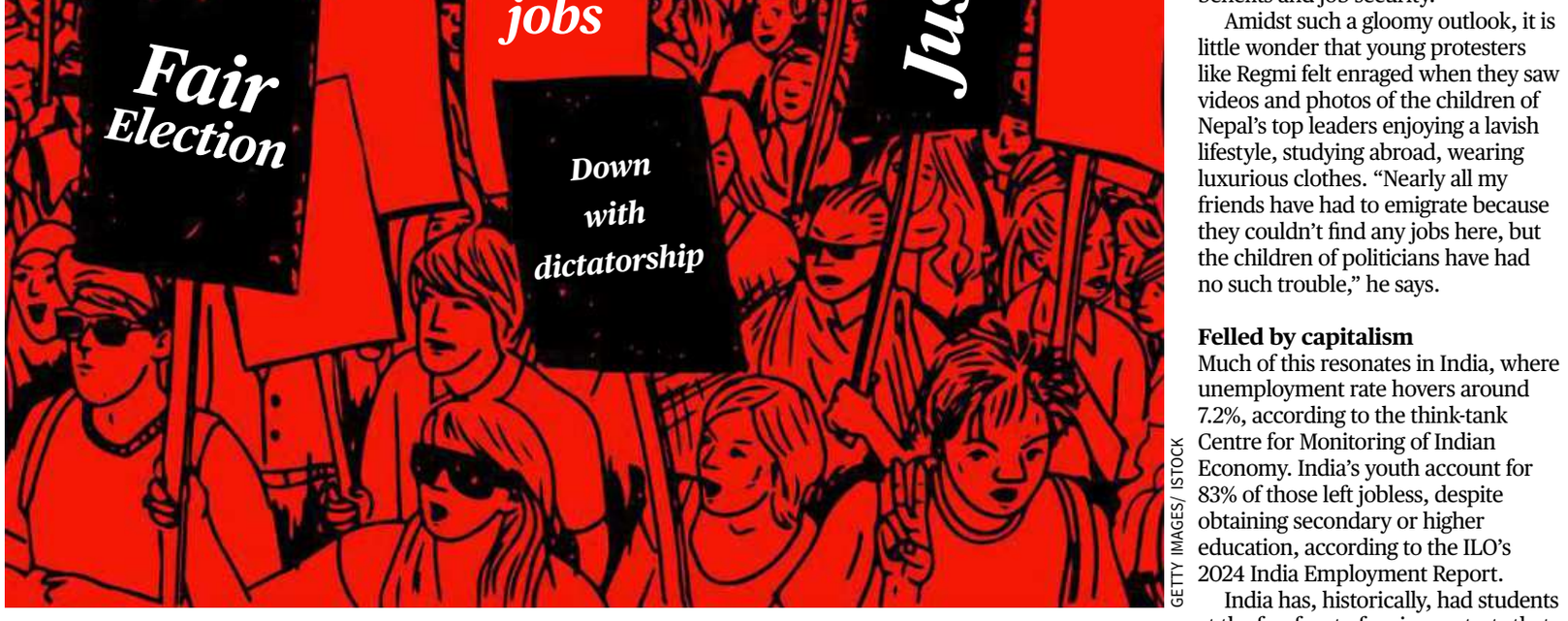
Over the last two years, millions of young people across the world have stood up to popularly-elected governments, and shown their unhappiness, anger and even contempt for the establishment's politics as well as policies. From the on-campus encampments across the United States and the United Kingdom to protest the government support for the war on Gaza, to anti-establishment agitations in Indonesia, Kenya, Turkey – all led by students and young citizens – to the uprising in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in 2022 and 2024, respectively, the young are angry and are demanding change.

Like in Nepal, where change came in just two days, the youth are impatient and unwilling to wait for tomorrow.

Disenchanted with democracy

The young have always been a catalyst for change. Think Nelson Mandela, who started off as a student leader and was even expelled from university for his involvement in a protest. Or Aung San Suu Kyi, Bill Clinton, Jacinda Ardern, all of whom started as student politicians.

Youth protesters have also been instrumental in shaping some of the most iconic moments in history – be it the unknown man facing down an army tank in China's Tiananmen Square (1989), or Hong Kong's citizens using yellow umbrellas as a symbol of their pro-democracy protests during the Umbrella Movement (2014).



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Political parties often believe that the youth lack maturity. Even though they all claim to want to fix the challenges that young people face, nobody has demonstrated a vision for it

DIPSITA DHAR
Politician and student activist

But, of late, something has changed. Young people are taking to the streets, increasingly, and have been impatient with democracy itself. A UNICEF report last year revealed that only 57% of 18- to 35-year-olds across 30 nations were satisfied with democracy, as against 71% of those in the age group of 56 and above. The same report said that student- and youth-led protests in the last two decades have risen to record numbers, with the number of protesters willing to participate at decades-long highs.

Some of this disenchantment was visible in the streets of Nepal this month, but it has been festering for a while now, say locals. "Over the years, many young people have been exposed to lifestyles abroad, either through their relatives or their own visits, and they keep asking, why isn't this happening here?" says Santosh Sharma Poudel, co-founder of Nepal Institute for Policy Research, a Kathmandu-based think tank.

The discontent has led them to ask hard questions of the ruling elite. "They saw that the system had been ruled by the same set of leaders for the last 30 years," Poudel adds, and yet, nothing had changed. In 2022, when Nepal was voting for a new government, online campaigns – including one named 'No Not Again' that asked people to not bring back established leaders across parties – tried to mobilise youngsters. Yet, the same parties and the same leaders were voted back to power. Nepal has seen two different alliance governments in the last three years.

Fighting the system

Around the same time in 2022, in Sri Lanka, many like 33-year-old Samith Bodhipaksa, an independent filmmaker and journalist in Colombo, had been experiencing similar disillusionment with their established elite – the Rajapaksa family that had been in power for over a decade-and-a-half. Some of it, he says, was pent-up frustration from having been "stuck in our homes for three years" due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. "Many young people had lost crucial years to the pandemic, and when they emerged from their homes, their aspirations rose meteorically but their means to achieve those aspirations didn't keep pace."

In 2024, Bangladesh too was roiled by mass agitations led by university students protesting what they believed was an unfair quota system in government recruitment. It snowballed into a nationwide agitation against the Sheikh Hasina government's authoritarianism. The protests succeeded in uprooting the government and forcing Hasina to flee to India.

Over the years, many young people have been exposed to lifestyles abroad, either through their relatives or their own visits, and they keep asking, why isn't this happening here in Nepal?

SANTOSH SHARMA POUDEL
Co-founder, Nepal Institute for Policy Research

In June this year, Kenya saw mass protests by students over police brutality, leading to the deaths of dozens of civilians. All these protests had angry youth lamenting the economic hardships and difficulties they faced.

Global data concurs with their assertions. The pandemic caused the largest setback to global equality since 1990, according to the World Bank. And even after the pandemic, though the labour market picked up and unemployment rates fell, an International Labour Organisation (ILO) report last year said more than half of the world's young workers were in informal jobs, without any benefits and job security.

Amidst such a gloomy outlook, it is little wonder that young protesters like Regmi felt enraged when they saw videos and photos of the children of Nepal's top leaders enjoying a lavish lifestyle, studying abroad, wearing luxurious clothes. "Nearly all my friends have had to emigrate because they couldn't find any jobs here, but the children of politicians have had no such trouble," he says.

Felled by capitalism

Much of this resonates in India, where unemployment rate hovers around 7.2%, according to the think-tank Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy. India's youth account for 83% of those left jobless, despite obtaining secondary or higher education, according to the ILO's 2024 India Employment Report.

India has, historically, had students at the forefront of major protests that have resulted in political change. In recent years, young protesters have been agitating against everything from leaked exam papers and bullying on campus to the rape and murder of a junior doctor in Kolkata. In late 2019, youth protesters also powered the agitation against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that engulfed the country, bringing out tens of thousands onto the streets.

Harsh Mander, former civil servant, human rights activist and chairperson of the Centre for Equity Studies, a New Delhi think tank, says these protests are the youth's response to a "deep civilisational crisis" they find themselves in. "Young people are, in the end, saying that you have stolen from us our future. The economic model is just not offering any jobs, inequality is growing to levels higher than in colonial times, the lifestyles of the elite have only grown more outrageously vulgar," he says.

Many like Dipsita Dhar, a former student leader at Jawaharlal Nehru University who co-edited a book, *Education Or Exclusion: The Plight Of Indian Students*, agree, and blame the current socio-economic order for the rage that her contemporaries like Regmi feel. "Earlier generations were mobilised by common goals, but now, capitalism has individualised us," Dhar says. She says this rhetoric works as long as people receive its benefits. "Now, when young people see that the promise of a good life has evaporated and that even good education can't guarantee jobs, they are mobilising and raging against these systems."

Yet, Dhar says, India is unlikely to witness youth protests spilling onto the streets. "Structurally, our democracy is stable and people still have faith in the space the opposition occupies, so they don't feel the need to mobilise on the streets themselves," she adds.

Bonding over memes

Globally, these youth uprisings may have grabbed headlines and sparked some developments, but will they result in lasting change? Just a week into the uprising in Kathmandu, hope is starting to dissipate, bit by bit. Scepticism, second nature to many when it comes to politics, is creeping in. Will the Himalayan sun bring a new dawn? Or will the familiar clouds hang over the landlocked country?

Poudel, the Kathmandu think tank co-founder, is cynical already, after the interim government headed by former Nepal Chief Justice Sushila Karki announced that elections will be held in March, just six months from now. The uprising had raised hopes among people initially. "For the interim government to deliver within six months will be very difficult," he says.

Gen Z protester Regmi does not share Poudel's scepticism though. "I am certain we will see more young people entering the political fray in the next elections," he says. "Even within the existing parties, we hope that younger faces are brought forward."

In Sri Lanka, Bodhipaksa has a word of advice for his Nepali counterparts: patience. When the protests in Sri Lanka began, he and his friends started an outfit called 'All Party Strugglers' that pressed for reforms in the system, while also protesting on the streets of Colombo. "The approach paid off, and we are now seeing the slow transformation of the country's politics," Bodhipaksa says. His group continues to advocate for change and nudges the government to implement them.

He is critical of the violence that the Gen Z-led protests have caused in Nepal. "The problem is, Gen Z has knowledge of digital tools, but does not understand the ways of the world," says Bodhipaksa. "You need to work with the system and engage with it constantly."

Mander says that the examples – in Bangladesh, where the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islaami has been gaining strength, and in Nepal, where calls for the monarchy to be restored and for the country to be declared a Hindu Rashtra have been circulating for a while – show the dangers of such violent uprisings. "The young protesters are looking for somebody who cares about their future, about public health and education. Instead, these uprisings are souring into scenarios that are worse than before," he says.

History, Mander adds, serves as an important reminder in this regard. "After all, there is no example of a good society emerging out of such violence."

The Mumbai-based independent journalist is author of H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars.

LONGLISTED FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE 2025

Kafka in Budapest

What makes David Szalay's novel about the life of an ordinary man so deeply sensory?

Saikat Majumdar

What sets apart David Szalay's *Flesh* from the very outset is the way it carves atmosphere without any reference to time or place. We are in an unnamed city in an unnamed country. Nor is there any indication of the phase of human history we're in beyond the presence of flats and supermarkets and schools. Local markers appear much later, in sparse, scattered ways. Why would a work of fiction want to delete traces of topical reality?

I'm reminded of something the author Amit Chaudhuri wrote, about the curious lack of place and even character names in one of Hindi writer Nirmal Verma's "East European" stories: "By deleting certain fundamental specificities from his story, Verma is, paradoxically, denying it invisibility, and drawing attention to its midway state of being – its lack of location in any one canon or tradition."

Is this what the Hungarian-British Szalay is doing here – seeking to place his protagonist within a universal, existential condition, and his novel outside a particular cultural tradition? *Flesh*, longlisted for this year's Booker Prize, opens with the protagonist in the pronoun: "When he's fifteen, he and his mother move to a new town and he starts at a new school." Only at the bottom of the page do we get his name, István, which also happens to be a cultural marker.

It is more of a marker than the little things that denote the racial identity of Melanie Isaacs – the student violated by the professor David Lurie in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* – such as the nature of her hair. But few people who don't know South Africa through intimate lived experiences will catch these details. Again, what impels – or emboldens – a novelist to do this?

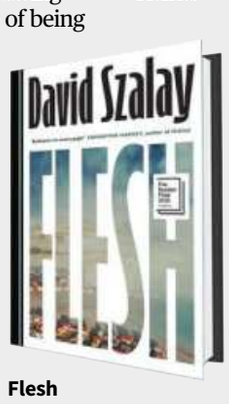
Distinguished by failure

The very first word that indicates location in *Flesh* is "lángos", on page 28: "They eat lángos while they wait for the bus back to the town." Szalay's novel has come to me serendipitously – shortly after I spend three months in Budapest. In the novel, the eating of lángos is not really an occasion – István and his companion eat it "while they wait for the bus". It is a Hungarian deep-fried bread that reminds me of the Indian *bhatura*.

But the curiously vacant cultural confidence of this novel indicates places with colloquial ellipses.

Such is how István suggests to Noémie, his cousin in whom he has an erotic interest, that they spend a day in "Balaton", which is how a local would call what tourists are likely to call "Lake Balaton", the largest natural lake in central Europe. This is the first firm indication of where the novel is set, quickly followed by the discovery of Hungarian metal tapes in the glove compartment, which indicate not only place but a general frame of time.

The novel's bravest attempt at universality is that it is about the life of an ordinary man. It is neither striking nor adventurous, though towards the end, it is marked by a series of events that renders his life tragic. This is not the classical tragedy of the exceptional protagonist but the modern, existential tragedy of the ordinary citizen – not Aeschylus but Kafka.



Flesh
David Szalay
Jonathan Cape
₹899

A bare animal

A curious ellipsis also frames the part of his life that could have been adventurous – István's military service in Kuwait – which has gifted him post-traumatic stress disorder. Ellipsis is not only a larger narrative strategy but it also frames the moment and the syntax. "István sits on a leather sofa, using an empty Red Bull can as an ashtray." Nowhere the vicinity are the words "smoking" or "cigarette" used, but they aren't necessary for a novelist like Szalay.

What makes this disembodied novel so deeply sensory? It is, quite literally, flesh. Erotically evoked sexual situations and acts string together István's life, often with the woman in a position of power over him – from the 42-year-old who initiates 15-year-old István into sex to the billionaire's wife who starts an affair with him while he works as her chauffeur. The latter blooms into a relationship which gives him a life that is snatched from him with the cruelty that matches the serendipity with which it arrived.

Back from this long and brilliant dream, our protagonist returns to where he started, reduced by tragedy to "the poor, bare, forked animal", as in the searing words of King Lear on the raging heath.

The reviewer is the author of five novels, most recently, The Remains of the Body.

In 2006, Kiran Desai won the Man Booker Prize for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

KIRAN DESAI'S DIASPORA EPIC

The Booker winner returns with a 'sad-happy' masterpiece, about two young Indians in the U.S. and their families, set against larger political changes

Mini Kapoor

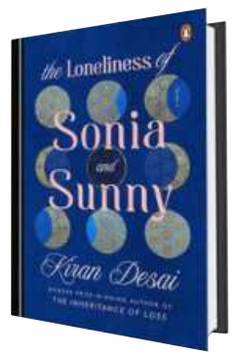
More than halfway through *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*, Sunny Bhatia, of the title, overhears a conversation at a Tibetan restaurant in New York's Jackson Heights. An Indian diner is telling a friend's daughter why he thinks "Indians cannot be cool". "The root of the idea of cool," he argues, "is not caring what other people think, following your own path, riffing to your own rhythm, but Indians can never be free of what Mummy-Papa, Nana-Nani, Uncle-Aunty think."

In Kiran Desai's sprawling new novel – weighing in at more than 600 pages and opening with the family trees of Sonia Shah and Sunny, as well as lists of their and their parents' intimate circles – what others think is obviously heavily detailed. The weight of history, class, race, religion, gender and migration is variously carried by each character as Desai passes along the story chronologically, with the interior thoughts of most, if not nearly each, of these characters.

It all starts in the December of 1996 with Sonia's loneliness. From Delhi, her father (Papa) calls his parents (Dadaji and Ba) in Allahabad to convey the news that Sonia, a college student in Vermont in the U.S., is depressed and lonely. Driven by grandparental duty, as too by an urge to rebalance a relationship for reasons of some *Kakori kebabs* and a failed investment scheme, Dadaji writes to his neighbour and chess partner. It is a marriage proposal for his grandson Sunny, a resident of New York City making his way as a journalist for a prized position with the *Associated Press*.

Writing and telling stories

How Sonia and Sunny eventually meet, and continue meeting, threads the story together. Sonia tries to beat her loneliness initially not by meeting Sunny, but by being drawn to a successful, flamboyant and narcissistic artist, Illan. She becomes his muse, but it's an abusive relationship that is destined to end badly.



The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny
Kiran Desai
Hamish Hamilton
₹999

And she returns, with an air of defeat, to an India where "there were no children in India anymore in the homes of successful parents of a successful class". From here begins Sonia's journey of self-discovery, of affirming her agency as a woman at the turn of the century, as an Indian conscious of privilege and prejudice, and as an artist finding her voice as a writer. In a true sense, Sonia learns to riff to her own rhythm.

"I am trying to write a book, in fact," she tells an acquaintance, "but I feel I am circling the story. I see a glimpse here and there, like a fin, a ripple, but I can't see the whole beast. I can't put the center in the center. I wonder if I will have to write all my stories to reveal it."

Desai writes all of Sonia's stories. The novel expands across time (mid-90s to early 2000s) and place (New York City, Vermont, Mexico, Italy, Allahabad, Delhi, Goa, Landour, the tourist circuit of Rajasthan). The lives of "other people" – the grandparents, parents, house staff, even friends, are captured – what is it that makes Sonia's mother Seher flee to the Himalayas, why is it that Sunny's mother Babita is convinced of impending danger, how does Dadaji-Ba's cook play a role in reconciliation?

Lives are recapped in the minutiae of their everyday developments against larger political changes, with humour and without glossing over biases and machinations. Landscapes are mapped, and as Sunny's friend Satya says in another context, "the whole world [becomes] home – present, past, and future [are] connected".

Myriad characters

Desai has reportedly spent two decades working on *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. It is in the running for the Booker Prize this year, with the shortlist expected on September 23, its publication date. She had won the prize for her previous novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, in 2006.

Whether *Loneliness* makes the cut for the prize is really immaterial. Desai has pulled off an astonishing feat – *Loneliness* makes you feel the diverse lonelinesses of her myriad characters in your bones, it makes you cringe as well as worry for the sprawling cast, and in the end, it leaves you with a sad-happy understanding.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based journalist and critic.

IN CONVERSATION

Unmasking the truth

By placing journalism within a novel, Natasha Brown plays with the fundamentals of trust, forcing one to question the very basis of society

Saurabh Sharma

It's rare to find a satire stylised so effortlessly – even in its physical design, with a bar of gold covering most of its cover – offering known hypocrisies and making people have a dialogue with one another to see how atomised they are in the larger scheme of things.

At the heart of the 2025 Booker Prize-longlisted author Natasha Brown's *Universality* (published by Faber & Faber) is a cult of 'Universalists' who think their ideology is superior to those who are set to destroy the natural world.

But there's a submission the novel makes: whose performance have you bought into – that of a capitalist, or a journalist who presents herself as a working-class woman, or the journalist whose magazine article this book begins with? Brown discusses what helped her shape the inner world of *Universality*. Edited excerpts:

Question: *Did beginning* Universality *as a magazine report give you the freedom to write the story the way you wanted, like reportage allows?*
Answer: Yes. I think we don't treat journalistic writing as a genre. Most people would struggle to define its quirks, clichés, or stylistic tics. Perhaps that's because of its authoritative voice – what American journalist Janet Malcolm called the "journalistic I"– which carries an enormous weight and influence. In a novel, however, there's immediate scepticism about the first-person narrator. Readers expect an "unreliable narrator". So, by placing journalism within a novel, we have an opportunity to exploit that difference in trust, allowing us to view journalistic writing in a new light.

Natasha Brown says she researched various cults for her novel, *Universality*. (GETTY IMAGES)

Q: *Which means that you were playing with the readers' expectations too.*
A: Absolutely. Varying what the first-person "I" represents can create a surprising effect for the reader. *Universality* begins with a journalistic article, a definitive account of the facts, which is then challenged and recontextualised by the following chapters through a range of perspectives and voices. I think the thriller genre is a great fit for this novel: thriller and mystery readers don't tend to accept the "facts" presented in a narrative. They question everything and trust nothing.

Q: *How did your experience as a finance professional inform* Universality*?*
A: I think my career gives me a familiarity with the broader economic shift that's taking place in our society – the increasing importance of the quaternary sector of the economy, and the corresponding STEM jobs.

These economic and technological changes affect many areas of society, for example, how the news media is funded. These days, most newspaper income comes from online advertising. Whenever a reader views an article, a high-frequency auction takes place to decide which advert to show and at what price – typically just a fraction of a penny. So, for newspapers to be profitable, they need millions of views. That's why most media organisations hire data scientists who use the exact same maths that's used by casinos, to keep readers *engaged*. It's often a part of the editorial process, encouraging content that keeps readers saying, "one more article" or encourages them to "share content".

Universality explores how this change to the funding model has shaped journalism, along with the people who are exceptionally good at operating within this engagement-driven environment.

Q: *The way the story unfolds also hints at the enterprise of truth, and the commoditisation of storytelling.*
A: When a news organisation's revenue comes from reader engagement, the product is no longer the truth, it is the *feeling* of truth. This creates a real tension between delivering what's profitable and what's informative. For the people working in the industry, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, who are paid very little, that creates enormous pressure to compromise on morals. Hannah, the struggling journalist in *Universality*, grapples with this dilemma.

Q: *Did you study several cults to write this novel, for the 'Universalist' cult appears to be a hybrid of Ayn Rand's 'objectivists' and the 'Rajneeshes' of Oregon?*
A: I researched quite a few cults, intentional communities, and general attempts to create independent societies, including one inspired by Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Many of these experiments fail, often due to disagreements over mundane responsibilities. Despite setting out with the best of intentions, it's difficult to hold such societies together. Perhaps they offer a microcosm of the challenges larger societies face.

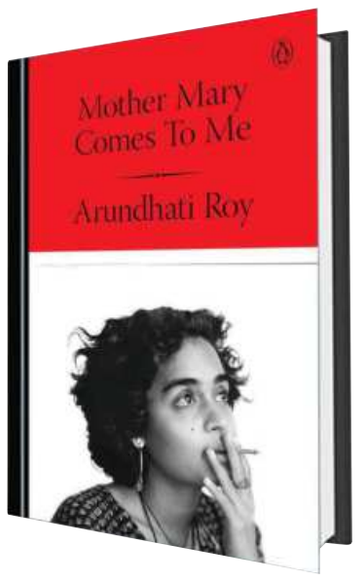
The interviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and cultural critic.

MARY, QUITE CONTRARY

Arundhati Roy's memoir is as much a study of Indian society as it is an unravelling of the tangled web of a mother-daughter relationship between two brilliant women

IMAGEING: XJG SATHISH AND GETTY IMAGES

Sumana Mukherjee



Mother Mary Comes to Me
Arundhati Roy
Hamish Hamilton
₹899

All books have covers that seek to convey or augment the content in some manner. Few do it as artfully as the Indian edition of *Mother Mary Comes To Me*. The book comes with half a dust jacket, with an arresting photo of the author in her youth, dreamy-eyed and dense-browed, drawing thoughtfully on a burning cigarette. Her wild curls are cut short but there's no hiding the fact that they have a life of their own. On the back cover, her mop of curls is noticeably grey, the look in her eyes more speculative, the exquisite bone structure somewhat more rounded. When the dust jacket slips off inadvertently though, it reveals perhaps something even more significant than the passage of time between the photos: there, against the red, is a moth, evoking the formaldehyded insects mounted and framed by hobbyists and scholars back in the day.

This moth is symbolic not of her Imperial Entomologist grandfather, who died the year Roy was born and whose Ooty house homed her family when they had nowhere to go. It represents the child Arundhati's "frightened heart... (her) constant companion". Of all the lush imagery in *Mother Mary*, the pitch-perfect articulation, the impeccable use of language and punctuation – all hallmarks of Roy's writing, so much so you can almost hear her speaking through the book – the moth is the one that flies out of the pages and settles somewhere in the reader's own heart, evoking the terror, perhaps, of losing sight of one's parent as a five-year-old, or of witnessing an event a seven-year-old is unable to process. It is in these all-too-identifiable themes of abandonment, of feeling, of sensing, of un-understanding that Roy makes her story universal.

Objectively speaking, of course, Mary Roy deserved her own biography the day she opened her first classroom in Kottayam. To introduce non-conventional methods of school education in a sleepy Kerala town in the 1970s was not the act of an ordinary person. To make it a success, to take parents along and produce generations of well-rounded students, is an achievement by itself. Add to that her triumph in overturning the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916, ensuring no other Christian woman in Kerala would be denied their share of parental property, and her immortality was assured.

No ordinary mother

But because Mary Roy was no ordinary person, she begat Susanna Arundhati. And there ceased to be any question of who the biographer would be. As a result, *Mother Mary* – an ironical title, if there was one – is the story of two brilliant women, sharp and multi-faceted like diamonds, each creative, prickly, proud and bound together by something stronger and more elemental than an umbilical cord, something less amorphous than what they call love.

All stories of parents and children are underlined, of course, by a power imbalance. It is a while before we recognise it and, if we're lucky, the balance evens itself out; frequently, it is the other parent who provides the counter-weight. But Mary Roy was no ordinary mother: she left her drunken husband (dismissed in the book as "the Nothing Man") with little more than a degree in education, two small children and chronic asthma, and started out on her own at the other end of the country. She was also manipulative, abusive, cruel, hateful, often a downright monster. (Dido is particularly hard to forgive.)

Short of silence and space, children have few defences against their parents. And so Roy fled claustrophobic Kottayam as soon as she finished high school, having discovered a love for architecture while following the legendary Laurie Baker around as he was building her mother's school. Two years later, she stopped returning home for the holidays; the stasis continued for seven years before there was some kind of reconciliation.

Not once though, during or after these seven years, according to *Mother Mary*, did the mother ever enquire about the daughter's whereabouts or well-being.

The few gruff acknowledgements that come Roy's way – "Well done, baby girl" after she'd won the Booker – recall the spare praise millions of Gen-Xers grew up with. Roy's tender generosity, this attempt to understand a parent without judgment, is perhaps the healing we all need in an India that thinks love is a sin, and loving bravely foolish

When Roy wrote her exceptionally sophisticated, phenomenally successful debut novel *The God of Small Things* at the age of 36, she dedicated it to "Mary Roy... who loved me enough to let me go". In *Mother Mary*, she admits it was "a lie. A good one. She quoted it often, as though it were God's truth. My brother jokes that it's the only real piece of fiction in the book".

Tenderness, a constant

And yet, and yet. The tenderness that lines the pages of the book – possibly the most constant of emotions in *Mother Mary* – is as real as the unnameable panic symbolised by the moth. The few gruff acknowledgements that come Roy's way – "Well done, baby girl" after she'd won the Booker – recall the spare praise millions of Gen-Xers grew up with. Roy's tender generosity, this attempt to understand a parent without judgment, is perhaps the healing we all need in an India that thinks love is a sin, and loving bravely foolish is as much a study of Indian society as it is an unravelling of the tangled web of a mother-daughter relationship. If her childhood marks the birth of a freethinking feminist, Roy's later experiences in Delhi – relationships, drift, work, fame, wealth, politics, activism, aloneness – depict a womanhood that is ahead of its country. And yet, it's undeniable that just as Mary Roy walked so that Arundhati could run, Arundhati ran so a Purulia-born Anuparna Roy could make movies and win international awards (as happened within days of the release of *Mother Mary*). If you need only one takeaway from this remarkable work of memory and love, it's this: India needs to grow up for its women.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based writer and editor.

Demonstration held in Chile to honour the memory of people who were detained, disappeared, and executed during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship.(GETTY IMAGES)

On Pinochet's trail

Philippe Sands' new book on self-delusional tyrants is history, reportage, moral investigation, memoir, and legal chronicle

Suresh Menon

Tyrants shouldn't die in their beds. But many do, often taking advantage of the legal system they had ignored when in power. Since Nuremberg, lawyers with a passion for justice have tried to bring charges of genocide and crimes against humanity against despots with a passion for cruelty.

Philippe Sands' *38 Londres Street* – the title refers to a building in Santiago used for torture – the story of Chilean President Augusto Pinochet's arrest and trial in London, argues for the connection between him and Walther Rauff, the Nazi who developed the mobile gas chamber (vans that killed by internally-fed exhaust fumes), directly responsible for the death of 90,000 Jews. Rauff escaped Nuremberg, met Pinochet in Ecuador and later used his expertise in Chile for the torture or death of Pinochet's rivals. He also helped build a Nazi-style prison camp. "The barracks were an extermination centre," one of the guards said, "To leave, you had to die."

The Pinochet-Rauff link

Many of Pinochet's victims were ferried in refrigerated vans; the poet Pablo Neruda wrote, "There is no denying this man understands vans." Sands examines the Rauff-Pinochet connection with the rigour of a scientist, and the persistence of a historian.

He has given us a comprehensive and comprehensible (given the legal issues) study of the steadily closing distance between impunity and immunity, although it's unlikely that the despots of the world will pay. *38 Londres Street* is a book of staggering erudition written with remarkable fluidity. In 2003, Pinochet said, "I am an angel." A quarter century earlier, Rauff had declared, "I am a monument." Tyrants tend to be self-delusional, too.

While Rauff claimed he was only following orders, Pinochet insisted he didn't know what his subordinates were doing. There is enough evidence that he personally chose the victims and approved the brutal methods. The idea of a former head of state and a serving senator being arrested in another country at the behest of a third (Spain, where a lawyer said, "We wanted to do to Pinochet what we weren't able to do to Franco") for crimes committed in his own country expanded the ambit of crimes against humanity. The concept of universal jurisdiction was strengthened.

For the U.S. and Henry Kissinger, Pinochet was a hero for leading the coup against the left-wing leader Salvador Allende. His support for Britain and Margaret Thatcher during the Falklands War made him a friend of the Conservatives there. Years later, Jack Straw, the British Foreign Secretary who sent Pinochet back to Chile, said he regretted the decision. "I could have left it to the Spanish courts," he told the author, "I wish I had..."

Personal history

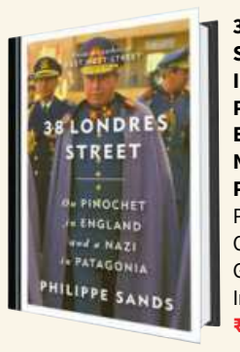
Sands' two earlier books on the Nazi 'rat trail' and the evolution of crimes against humanity both had personal aspects to them, as does this one. A cousin was killed in one of Rauff's vans while a relative of his wife's was killed by the Pinochet regime. When Pinochet's men approached Sands to act as his lawyer, his wife said she would divorce him if he accepted. Sands, instead, advised the prosecution as a Human Rights lawyer.

All these elements work together to make *38 Londres Street* a book of history, reportage, moral investigation, memoir, and legal chronicle. The style borrows from a fast-paced thriller, obscuring the enormous research and enhancing the sheer unexpectedness of events like the ruling in the House of Lords. The fairness of the British law shines through, although it is the pragmatism of British politics that decides the outcome. Whatever the understanding between Tony Blair's government and Chile, and despite evidence that Pinochet was faking his illness, it was decided that he was medically unfit to stand trial in Spain. Pinochet returned to Chile where he got off his wheelchair and walked. Five years later, he was deemed fit to stand trial.

It is possible that parts of the book abound in details that slow the flow, but Sands lets the narrative speak for itself, without giving into the temptation to hammer the evil into our consciousness. Pinochet is the substantial figure in the story, Rauff a more ghostly presence, living through the memories of others, including his family. Neither showed any remorse. Rauff's extradition to Germany was disallowed because of the statute of limitations on his crimes.

Pinochet remained under house arrest for almost 18 months in the comfortable surroundings of the Wentworth estate, and lived to be 91, dying at home. Rauff who lived under the protection of the Chilean government died at 78 of natural causes. Miguel Schweitzer was a student when he helped his father write the opinion that led to Rauff's freedom. Years later, he handled the Pinochet case.

"The law is never a given," writes Sands; the magic of words in a treaty or statute is open to a multitude of interpretations.



38 Londres Street: On Impunity, Pinochet in England and a Nazi in Patagonia
Philippe Sands
Orion Publishing Group/Hachette India
₹899

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

The party I didn't throw

Why do many of us end up hosting evenings we don't enjoy and spending energy on performance?

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Rajitha Chandrasekar

I dread Saturdays. Not because of work. In fact, I often work through them, at least, in part. But because Saturdays have somehow become the unofficial day for social obligation. The kind that arrives via polite group chats, gentle nudges, or photos of themed potlucks you weren't part of. You don't decline anything, but somehow, you're already behind.

My husband and I are both bureaucrats who recently moved to Delhi. He joined a badminton group at a Delhi club, a lively mix of serving and retired officers. From what I hear, it's not just a game. It's an event. They play, they laugh, they celebrate birthdays right there on the court with *samosas*, cake and spirited group selfies. There's a WhatsApp group where the energy continues long after the match is over.

I'm not in that group. I've never met most of the people involved. But I hear about them often. The jokes, the birthday rituals and the casual expectation that we'll host something soon.

To host or not to host

Lately, those "gentle reminders" aimed at my husband have morphed into cheerful bullying. All in good humour, of course, the kind that expects you to take the hint.

My husband, who considers 10 p.m. a reckless hour, looks angsty every time the group teases him about not hosting. "Let's just host something and get it over with," he says now.

And so, here I am, facing the question: to host or not to host?

I haven't said yes. Not because I dislike people. But because I dislike pressure disguised as friendliness. The kind that insists we all participate equally in a rhythm we didn't necessarily choose. The kind that implies you owe something to the group even if you're not part of it, simply because your life now brushes up against it.

What complicates it further is the deeper social script many of us carry, especially women. That we must be warm. Welcoming. Up for it. That if we don't host, attend, coordinate, or celebrate with sufficient enthusiasm, we're somehow failing at community. That being seen as boring or "not a sport" is worse than being tired or uninterested. And so, many of us end up hosting evenings we don't enjoy, cooking for crowds we didn't invite, spending precious energy on performance – all because we don't want to seem like the only one opting out.

Quiet Saturdays

But I've reached a stage where I'm done performing.

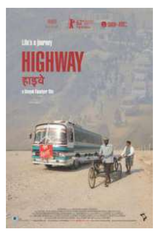
I have a demanding job. I have children in intense academic years and a home that, like most, runs on invisible labour. I don't have an empty weekend to spare. And even if I did, I might just want to do nothing with it.

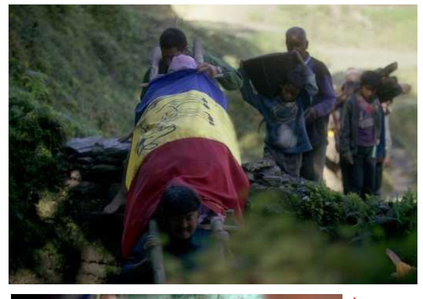
I also know myself. I like quiet Saturdays. I enjoy my own company. I have a small circle of close friends who are calm, intelligent and not in competition over how often we meet or how well we host. I don't need a group to feel included. And I don't think social obligation should masquerade as belonging.

If I ever throw a party and I might, it will be because I want to. On a weekend that feels like it belongs to me. With people I genuinely want to feed, not impress.

Until then, I'll be at home. Drinking tea. Reading something I didn't need a group to recommend. Taking a nap that I won't apologise for. And no, I will not be hosting anything next Saturday.

The writer is a commissioner of Income Tax and presently posted as spokesperson, Central Board of Direct Taxes.





NEPAL: WHERE REEL BECOMES REAL

An award-winning filmmaker on the recent Gen Z 'revolution' in his home country and the strong parallels with his political movies

Deepak Rauniyar

As thousands of Nepali youth – Gen Z (and the powerful extras) – captured government buildings in Kathmandu, assaulted the former prime minister and sitting foreign minister in their homes, and set ministries, court, and a media house on fire – smoke felt like a new sky, and someone wrote to me: "Gen Z's protest felt like *White Sun*'s climax. While grown-ups fight, the kids carry the body to the river".

My 2016 film *White Sun* – Venice's Interfilm Award winner – is a story about a mountain path, a dead father and two sons from opposite sides of our war. Adults argue whether to take the body out a window or the door, carry it with a flag that represents the King or without, as two sons beat each other; elders refuse help from "lower castes"; police and rebels aim guns; the body lies there like a country nobody wants to claim. Till the children – quietly – drag the body to the river.

I set it in 2015, when Kathmandu lit candles for a new Constitution while in the southern plains, where I am from, families lit pyres. On paper, we became secular, federal, democratic; in daily life, the ghost of the old order still slept in our rooms.

I should be happy now – with this Gen Z "revolution" and Nepal's first woman prime minister. The photograph of her taking oath – one woman among men – looked like a frame from *Pooja, Sir* (Venice Film Festival 2024 premiere). My heart knows to celebrate; my head has questions.

Living through revolutions

I was born under autocracy, saw war and "revolutions", and watched democracy get hijacked more than once. I am Madhesi. In Kathmandu, that often makes you "Indian": to be stopped, questioned, laughed at, refused. The bullying began before I understood what my surname or skin colour announced.

When I was growing up, every neighbourhood of ours had a small 'king' (an unofficial head who decided who walked free after a fight).

One night, as I washed plates and a Brahmin mentee poured water, a kick sent me flying; and a drunk king chased the Brahmin boy through the village. That is the picture of "law and order" in my head.

I was 12 during the 1990 People's Movement. I remember the small changes: no Sanskrit class, no 'Long live the King' anthems. But soon the same kings were re-elected village chiefs; people like my father – an orphan who carried sugar sacks across rivers – were beaten or jailed; the school still had no wall; progress felt far.

I went to college, wrote for a local paper, then national, then Radio Nepal. When I returned, the chief who once made my ribs ache invited me to dinner. That's when I learnt the soft power of media.

Through the lens

Our cinema, however, made me angry. Our lives weren't on screen; Madhesis were a joke. There was no film school, no connections. So, I wrote about cinema just to stand on the sets. Nabin Subba's *Numafung* (2001) gave me my first film job; Tsering Rhitar Sherpa's *Karma* (2006) became my film school. In those edits, I found Asha Magrati – my love and collaborator. We started Aadi Films and kept going.

The civil war widened (1996-2006). The royal family was massacred. Dictatorship returned as King Gyanendra. I lost friends. Over 17,000 lives were lost in the war. Then came 2006. People rose. I filmed the revolution. On the surface, it looked civilian; on the frontlines, you could see Maoist cadres. Parliament returned. The crown left the palace.

We felt like winners: a secular, federal, democratic republic – at least, on paper. A Madhesi (ceremonial) president. The Maoists won. But, as *White Sun* shows, change born under guns invites pushback. Not everyone was pleased. Across the border, political voices such as Yogi Adityanath's asked to bring the king back.

In Janakpur, while filming *Pooja, Sir*, I saw things I couldn't unsee: saffron flags, boys drilled like cadets, police trying to stop Hindu-Muslim clashes, journalists scared or disinterested. Philosopher Frantz Fanon wrote: "the colonised dream of taking the colonist's place". I saw it at home. Leaders who toppled the monarchy began playing king.

Censoring voices

My three features since 2012 – *Highway*, *White Sun*, *Pooja, Sir* – are a post-war trilogy. From my first short, *Chaukaith* (2008), I've faced heavy censorship. For *Pooja, Sir*, we got 19 cuts: pull an archival clip of K.P. Sharma Oli, mute the "prime" in prime minister, avoid Hindi and "India". Black frames where memory should be – that's violence, too.

So when Gen Z protests began – against a social-media ban and corruption – I wasn't surprised. Then, the morning of September 8 shook me. Dozens killed by police firing. The city burnt: courts, homes, a media office swallowed by smoke. A flood of claims followed – late-night meetings at army headquarters, a televised address before a royal portrait, talk that the presidency came under pressure, and reports that leadership and dissolution decisions emerged from closed rooms. Images showed a controversial royalist alongside the army chief; some Gen-Z figures said they boycotted talks; others said they were bypassed.

A city of lights

I've seen 10 years of war and months of protests in the plains – hundreds of thousands in the streets – and nothing moved. Now, a small, mostly unarmed crowd overturned so much so quickly? If intervention was coming, why so late? Why was so much already broken – especially with regiments posted on those government grounds? Where was the chain of command? Who gave which orders? When so many young lives were lost in the centre of Kathmandu – violence we'd learnt to expect along the plains' long roads, not on the capital's doorstep – the questions deepened. An army leaflet swept across our phones; to many it explained timing, not responsibility.

Perhaps, a silver lining: without this rupture, we might have waited decades for a woman to hold the post of prime minister. We seek a State that understands dissent is love with a rough accent, and for our children – Pahadi, Madhesi, Janajati, Dalit – to walk to school without fear. I make films as small torches. I want a city of lights.

If the children in *White Sun* dragged the body to the river, maybe Gen Z lit the pyre. Now comes the smoke in our eyes, the ache in our chests, the knowing that something has ended, and the fear it will be reborn. Can we let the old ghost go? May the reel stay real this time?

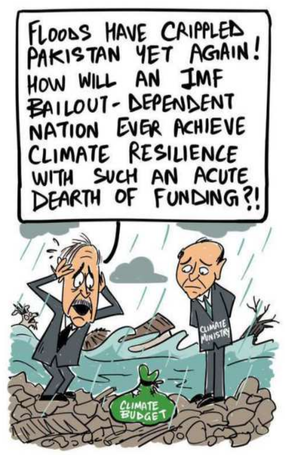
The writer is a Nepali filmmaker and Associate Professor of Practice at Boston University.

(Clockwise from left) Filmmaker Deepak Rauniyar; and stills and posters of his post-war trilogy.

We seek a State that understands dissent is love with a rough accent, and for our kids – Pahadi, Madhesi, Janajati, Dalit – to walk to school without fear as their first subject. I make films as small torches. I want a city of lights

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



BEHIND *LOKAH*'S ₹30-CRORE SUCCESS

Leveraging cutting-edge digital filmmaking and collaborative work, the superhero fantasy proves why Malayalam cinema continues to thrive on challenges

Aswathy Gopalakrishnan

On August 28, director Dominic Arun had already left for Dubai when word began to spread about his second feature, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*. The film, headlined by Kalyani Priyadarshan, slipped quietly into theatres worldwide that morning, jostling for Onam footfalls against heavyweight releases starring Mohanlal and Fahadh Faasil. When the crew gathered in Dubai to greet audiences, they were stunned by the roaring reception, enough to move producer Dulquer Salmaan to blurt out in wonder: "What is happening!"

"No one had an inkling the film would shoot through the roof," Arun recalls. Within two weeks, *Lokah* was inching towards the ₹200-crore mark globally, with unprecedentedly strong reports from regions such as the U.K. "The collection numbers are incredible," says Anil Thomas, president of the Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce. "Never in recent times have I seen so many late-night show add-ons for a movie. We think it will soon surpass *Thudarum* [the 2025 revenge drama]."

Malayalam cinema has pulled off similar surprises before. Over the past decade, films such as *Premam* (2015), *Drishyam* (2013), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), and more recently *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) and *Manjummel Boys* (2024) have redrawn the industry's creative and commercial horizons. But *Lokah*, a rare female-superhero fantasy thriller, is not only attracting a pan-Indian audience but also unsettling assumptions about what regional cinema can be. Made on a ₹30-crore budget, it arrived in the shadow of two of the year's most-hyped releases: *Coolie*, Lokesh Kanagaraj's Tamil spectacle with Rajinikanth, and Bollywood's *War 2*, both of which came with massive budgets (₹350 crore and ₹400 crore, respectively), publicity machines, and a cavalcade of pan-Indian male superstars, and yet fell flat with critics and the audience.

Lokah, by contrast, placed its bet on its vision built steadily from the ground up, backed by the collaborative labour that has carried Malayalam cinema through cycles of boom and bust. It departs from the realistic, quotidian characters, situations, and formal styles that have long defined Malayalam cinema, and instead stakes its claim in a new wave of "genre cinema". These films, such as *Gaganachari* (2024), *Bramayugam* (2024), and the comic-book visions of filmmaker-cinematographer Krishnand, click neatly into one another, using the conventions of science fiction, fantasy, and horror while staying rooted in Malayali landscapes and concerns. Made by crews who grew up on torrents of global cinephilia, these films leverage the cutting-edge machinery of digital filmmaking.

'We thrive despite the limitations'

Lokah draws its characters from *Aithihyamala*, a collection of ancient Kerala fables, and relocates them to the neon nights of Bengaluru, a city that has long reshaped the lives and aspirations of migrating Malayali youth. "We started off thinking we were making an experimental film, and slowly, the budget swelled," recalls Santhy Balachandran, actor and the film's co-writer and dramaturgist. "We were aware of the risks involved, so we prepared thoroughly, without leaving space for confusion during the shoot."

While Balachandran perfected the overarching narrative that upends a patriarchal legend and recasts it as the story of a female superhero who does not want to be saved, Arun threaded humour and pop-cultural references into the screenplay. "We had a great collaborative equation," she says.

The success of *Lokah* has reignited a familiar question: how does Malayalam cinema do what it does, within tight budgets? Beyond the socio-political conditions of Kerala – its film society movement, political consciousness instilled by leftist struggles, the waves of migration that widened its horizons and gave its people early access to global media, and its secular demographic fabric – lies a crucial structural factor: its modest market size. "If the biggest Tamil blockbuster grosses ₹800 crore, our films rarely cross ₹250 crore. Film production here is a highly risky business," remarks screenwriter and producer Syam Pushkaran, whose Bhavana Studios bankrolled last year's runaway rom-com hit *Premalu*. "There is no magic happening here. We thrive despite the limitations," he says.

The industry, mindful of its challenges, operates like a village where cooperative labour becomes essential for sustenance. This indie spirit proved invaluable during the pandemic years, when crews continued to work under severe restrictions and yet produced acclaimed works such as *Joji* (the 2021 crime drama). Constraints shaped their working ethos, says Pushkaran. "Our filmmakers had to learn to work fast and smart, out of necessity. And we have always had brilliant technicians, from Santosh Sivan to Nimish Ravi, who help create a high-quality look and feel on small budgets," he says. Ravi puts it more bluntly, "We work harder, longer. Sometimes, we work through the night without proper sleep. I wouldn't say it is healthy."

Actor-producer Tovino Thomas, who appears in a stunning cameo in *Lokah*, reflects on his own experience of working in (and as) *Minnal Murali* (2021), Malayalam cinema's first full-fledged superhero film, which was made on a budget of approximately ₹18 crore. "Basil Joseph [filmmaker] relied on innovative, practical effects instead of VFX in many portions of *Minnal Murali*. The efforts of the art direction team gave the film a unique texture, and I believe this approach saved us money and time at that time. CGI can be expensive and time-consuming," he says, adding that severe constraints and restrictions made them more creative.

The power of cooperative labour

"Having worked across different languages, I feel each industry has its own strengths, but Malayalam sets have a warmth and a sense of family between cast and crew," says Kalyani Priyadarshan. "Historically, we have never had the luxury of endless resources. Instead of holding us back, the restrictions made us sharper and more thoughtful in how we plan and execute things, because we can't simply solve problems later by spending more."

Her words underline the years the *Lokah* crew invested in pre-production. Cinematographer Ravi, Arun's long-time collaborator, was part of the film from its inception. "By the time filming began, we had almost everything ready in our hands," he says. Arun had mapped out shot divisions during the writing phase, and once the script was locked, he and Ravi, with the help of Ajmal Haneef, an AI visualiser, worked on a meticulous lookbook and miniatures. This became the team's bible, drawing everyone into *Lokah*'s kinetic, sweeping world.

Three Kerala-based studios executed the film's seamless visual effects work. "Productions often make the mistake of waiting until the last minute to work on the VFX. This time, we brought in the VFX team right from the shoot. We gave them time, and they delivered," says Ravi.

The production was smartly executed. During the unbroken 94-day schedule, the crew pulled through gruelling night shoots in unison. Priyadarshan arrived on the sets well-trained for action sequences. A housing colony was converted into the streets of Bengaluru, while the interiors of Chandra's and Sunny's apartments were shot in Kochi. And Dulquer's role as a producer proved pivotal. "He knew this was not going to be a low-cost film. In fact, he understood the necessity of investing more money in certain areas, and suggested it himself," says Arun. Dulquer's association not only elevated the film, bringing high-profile cameos, but also ensured traction in Tamil and Telugu-speaking regions where his name commands a significant fan following.

For Tovino Thomas, *Lokah*'s success feels personal. "With this success, suddenly, a universe has opened. We now know that the audience isn't averse to genre experimentation." He describes his cameo and participation in promotional events as a gesture of solidarity. "When friends are trying to expand the borders of our cinema, you have to show up."

The writer is a film critic and independent researcher.

Setting benchmarks Kalyani Priyadarshan in *Lokah*; and (below) Dominic Arun, Santhy Balachandran, and Nimish Ravi. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Productions often make the mistake of waiting until the last minute to work on the VFX. This time, we brought in the VFX team right from the shoot. We gave them time, and they delivered

NIMISH RAVI
Cinematographer

Severe constraints and restrictions made us more creative. Malayalam cinema produced *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984), India's first 3D feature film, when the rest of the country couldn't even think of such a technical experimentation

TOVINO THOMAS
Actor

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

POP-A-RAZZI

Truth is a slippery slope

On Arundhati Roy's new book, the challenge of family memoirs and a mother who swore by Isabgol

It has become the mother of all literary accessories. Almost every day, someone on my social media feed shares a picture of their copy of *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Arundhati Roy's latest book, with a mini review.

Every now and then, I also see a post by a man (and it's almost always a man) announcing proudly that he will neither buy nor read the book. The first rule of Indian uncle-dom has always been to hate Arundhati Roy.

I diligently skip the reviews and interviews because I have not yet read the book. But I read the un-reviews because there is no danger of a spoiler. The haters have many reasons to hate the book though they have not (and will not) read it. They hate her politics and her guts. They never liked her Booker-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997).

And they complain that in the name of honesty, Roy, in her new book, has eulogised but also bashed her mother who isn't here anymore to tell her side of the story. I do not know how Roy has navigated it, but family is always a minefield for any writer.

When American author Augusten Burroughs wrote about his chain-smoking, sexually experimenting mother who sends him to live with her psychiatrist in *Running with Scissors* (2002), I was both aghast and transfixed. The book became a *New York Times* bestseller.

The rapper Eminem's mother sued him, claiming he defamed her by portraying her as a bad mother in his lyrics. When the French writer Michel Houellebecq wrote about his "old slut" of a hippie mother, she shot back with her own memoir calling him a "liar, an imposter, a parasite".

A family memoir should neither be a mawkish eulogy nor an act of revenge but truth is a slippery slope and memory is treacherous especially when it comes to those closest to us. As Ammu warns in *The God of Small Things*, "When you hurt people, they begin to love you less. That's what careless words do."

Gut matters

I always tried to be careful when I wrote about my mother. Her love for saris was safe territory.

In an old family album, there are black-and-white pictures of my mother in France in the 1960s. In one, she's sitting in a train with a box of Black Magic chocolates open on her lap. In another, she's at a restaurant in Paris, a waiter with a bow tie hovering in the background.

In both pictures, she's wearing a sari as she is in every picture from her years in Europe. "Your mother has such good taste," friends and relatives would marvel.

They were right, but what they did not know is she was just as obsessed with matters that were far more crude. Like bodily functions. Indigestion, to be precise.

Once, an aunt told my mother she had a dream about her own mother. She woke up and went around the house looking for her until her son shook her and said, "Ma, look at me. I am your son." That snapped her out of her trance.

"Perhaps my time is nigh," she told my mother worriedly.

"I am getting a summons from the other side."

My mother said thoughtfully, "Well, I think it might be gas."

She was not being unsympathetic. As she aged, a good life was as much about a peaceful stomach as it was about a beautiful sari.

Defining a memory

I did not think of my mother as some kind of Goddess of Good Taste. To me, she was just a Bengali of a certain generation with very Bengali tastes – *Rabindrasangeet*, Uttam Kumar, fish-head. But she also loved Ingrid Bergman, Camay soaps and Godiva chocolates. Along with Carmozyme, Isabgol and Zintac – the holy trinity of digestive aids that Bengalis swear by.

They too are a part of the taste palate of the Bengali, not as celebrated as Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore, but the yang to their yin.

My mother swore by Isabgol or psyllium husk. I once wrote about it, gently poking fun at her Isabgol loyalty. My mother was probably not as pleased as when I wrote about her saris.

My mother died this year. When I look at her recipe book, the pages falling apart, I miss her presence. Every time I open her cupboard and see shelf after shelf of her neatly stacked saris, I feel wistful.

But what really gives me a pang is the unopened box of Isabgol sitting on our kitchen shelf. That too defined the woman she had been. The saris might have an afterlife. Perhaps someone else, someone of good taste, will love them.

But the Isabgol, unopened and untouched, feels orphaned. Like me.

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

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

THE HORSEMAN OF KANCHI

Equestrian attire to tools, what the details in temple carvings reveal about foreign influence on Indian history

Dual impact Two sides of the horseman at Varadharaja Perumal temple in Kanchipuram. (B. VELANKANNI RAJ)

At the Varadharaja Perumal temple in Kanchi (or Kanchipuram), there is an image of a horseman that is rather peculiar. On one side, it appears to be a South Indian Nayaka king, but on the other side it resembles a foreigner wearing trousers and a tunic. A foreign temple guardian, or mercenary, either Portuguese or Turk.

The horsemen were known in Tamil Nadu as Ravuttan (horse riders), a term based on Rajput words such as Rawat and Raut (chieftain). Such guardian images are found in many temples of the Arcot and Mysuru regions. This may have inspired the "horse dance" known as "*Poikkaal kuthirai aattam*", as well as terracotta horse image offerings to please folk deities such as Ayyanar.

Carved in the 17th century by Nayaka kings, it reminds us of a time – until the 19th century – when horses were imported in vast numbers to India from Central Asia, Persia and Arabia. The '*vilayati*' (foreign) Turki horses came by land for northern markets. North Indian kings would not allow horses go south to their rivals below the Vindhya mountains. So the south imported the '*bahari*' Arabian horses by sea (*bah'r* means sea in Arabic).

For over 3,000 years, horses were imported into India. They were critical to govern empires and, therefore, were always in demand. But a little known fact is that horses are difficult to breed in our country, which explains the need for annual imports.

Local horse breeding did occur in pockets of Gujarat and Rajasthan about 800 years ago. This was to satisfy the demands of the Delhi sultans, when supply from Central Asia was cut following Mongol invasions. However, the local breeds (such as Tattu) were always considered inferior to the foreign ones (Turki, Tajiki). Kathiawar was one of the few places where foreign breeds could thrive in India.

An import with impact

The *Rig Veda* contains some of the oldest horse poetry in the world. The horse is mentioned 200 times. It is a reminder that the poets were familiar with this foreign animal that had been imported into the subcontinent from a faraway land. There are no horses in Harappan cities because horses had not been domesticated when these cities thrived.

In the Bronze Age, we do not find horses in Egypt or Mesopotamia or China or the Harappan civilisation of India. However, by the Iron Age, horse-drawn chariots were found everywhere as indicated by artworks in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and burial sites in China. This is when they entered India and inspired the Vedic hymns.

Genetic evidence now shows that horses were fully domesticated north of the Black Sea in 2000 BC. These were tiny animals that couldn't be ridden. They could not pull heavy-wheeled wagons either. So, that led to a new invention: a light spoke-wheeled chariot that could carry two men – the charioteer and an archer. This was the greatest military invention of the times, immortalised in the *Mahabharata* as Krishna and Arjuna (with his Gandiva bow) on the chariot pulled by four horses at Kurukshetra.

Chariot-riding was replaced by horse-riding around 700 BC and became the norm when Alexander, atop a horse, defeated the chariot-riding Persian emperor around 331 BCE. The Indo-Greeks (Yavana), the Saka-Pahalava (Scythian-Parthian), and the Kushan (Yuezhi) controlled the horse-trade from 200 BC to 200 AD. Mauryan kings imported horses and exported elephants. Prince Siddhartha leaves his palace riding a horse, but there is no horse rider in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* indicating that the epics are older stories, though the manuscripts were composed much later.

The *Rig Veda* contains some of the oldest horse poetry in the world. It is a reminder that the poets were familiar with this foreign animal that had been imported to the subcontinent from a faraway land

Story of the stirrup

If one travels to Sanchi and Bharhut, one can see images of men riding horses on Buddhist sites. They do not have saddles or foot stirrups like the ones we find on the Varadaraja Perumal temple horsemen. They have 'toe-stirrups'. The iron stirrup and wooden saddle were later inventions that came to India with the Turks, after 1000 AD.

Surya, the sun god, was first shown riding a chariot drawn by four horses at Buddhist sites such as Bodh Gaya, inspired by the Greek sun god Helios.

While images of Surya with seven horses are based on older Vedic descriptions (1000 BC), that he is shown wearing boots indicates the Kushan influence (200 AD).

Surya's son, Revanta is always shown as a horse rider, with a dog and hunting boars. His images do not have iron stirrups, indicating they emerged before 1000 AD. Iron stirrups are also seen in the horse riders of Varadharaja Perumal temple. Thus, we find horse art revealing an aspect of foreign influence on Indian history that will rarely make it into textbooks.

Devdutt Pattanaik *is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Clarification

Neither vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Many experts, especially American experts, use a lead agreement known as "third and fifth". They lead their third best card from a suit with an even number of cards in it and their lowest card from a suit with an odd number of cards, regardless of honor strength in the suit. When this deal was played in a team match, both West players led their third best seven of diamonds.

Declarer at both tables played dummy's king of diamonds, losing to East's ace. East knew that West held the queen of diamonds. South would have played the nine from dummy on the opening lead if South held the queen. At one table, East returned a diamond to West's queen at trick two and West had to decide how to proceed. He made the wrong choice and led a third round of diamonds. Declarer ruffed and took the rest of the tricks when the spades split 3-3.

At the other table, East was

NORTH
♠ A K 9 4 2
♡ 8 5
◇ K 10 9
♣ J 8 7

WEST
♠ 10 8 6
♡ 10 4
◇ Q 8 7 4
♣ A Q 9 6

EAST
♠ J 5 3
♡ 6 3 2
◇ A J 6 5
♣ K 3 2

SOUTH
♠ Q 7
♡ A K Q J 9 7
◇ 3 2
♣ 10 5 4

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♡	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♡	Pass	3♡	All pass

Opening lead: Seven of ◇

American expert Jeff Aker. He solved the problem neatly by returning the jack of diamonds at trick two. When West followed with the four, he knew that partner started with four diamonds and there was no future in the diamond suit. He shifted to a low club and the defense, with partner on the same wavelength, took three club tricks to defeat the contract. Had West followed to the jack of diamonds with the eight, Aker would have known that the defense had another diamond trick coming. Nice play.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about mnemonics

Getting the guitar to sound right can also come with some word play. (GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

Berty Ashley

1 September 21, 1411, is the birthdate of Richard of York, who was the Lord Protector of England. He died during the Battle of Wakefield in 1460 while fighting to claim the throne, and his family were executed. This event is immortalised in British geography textbooks as 'Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain'. What does this help geography students remember?

2 In 2006, the IAU changed the definition of a group of things, which led to students around the world having to re-adjust their ways to remember the new order. The most popular mnemonic now used is 'My Very Excellent Mother Just Served Us Nachos'. What does this help students remember?

3 Two of the most important reactions to understand and remember in chemistry are oxidation and reduction. Oxidation involves the loss of electrons, whereas during reduction, electrons are gained. By what mnemonic is this known that references an offshore fossil fuel industry?

4 The helix of a thread can twist in two possible directions, but by common convention, all of these items have a right-handed thread. A phrase that helps one remember an important act is 'Righty-tighty Lefty-loosey." What is this mnemonic for?

5 Many words are spelt differently in British English and American English, and the former is sometimes much tougher to remember. To remember what word do students use the mnemonic 'Dash In A Real Rush! Hurry, Or Else Accident!'?

6 In mathematics, the order of operations dictates which operations to perform first to evaluate a given mathematical expression. If the popular mnemonic for the same in commonwealth countries is BODMAS, what does it stand for?

7 Certain 'order of things' have multiple mnemonics around the world. For this particular activity, the statement 'Every Average Dude Gets Better Eventually' is very fitting as it reflects the nature of what the dude/dudette is about to do. What popular hobby is this statement a reference to?

8 Visual mnemonics work by associating an image with the characters of the objects that have to be memorised. One of the most famous is the way to differentiate between two species of a certain animal. One evolved bigger ears to dissipate heat in the warm climate, and hence, fan out more. The other has an ear which is more triangular, like the shape of India. Which two animals are these?

9 There are plenty of mnemonic techniques to remember this particular entity. The most popular being "Now I need a drink, alcoholic of course, after the heavy lectures involving quantum mechanics." It can go all the way up to a 10,000-word novel, *Not A Wake*. What entity is this, which has competitions to remember the most?

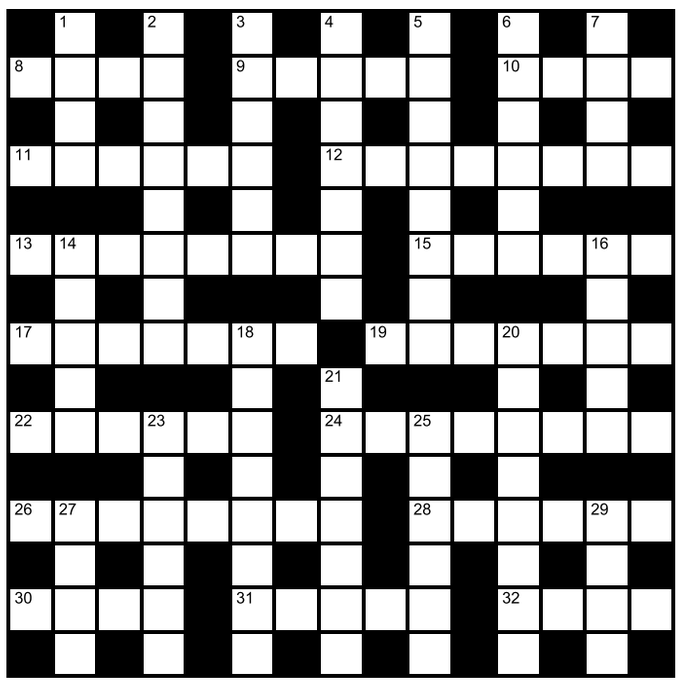
10 What does the following important mnemonic help one recognise the signs of? FAST - Face (Has the victim's face fallen on one side?), Arms (Can the victim raise both arms and keep them raised?), Speech (Is the victim's speech slurred? Can they repeat a simple sentence?), Time (It is time to contact emergency services).

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

Answers

1. Colours of the rainbow (ROYGBIV or VIBGYOR)
2. Order of planets
3. Oil rig
4. Tightening of screws and nuts
5. Diarrhoea
6. Brackets, of (fraction), division/multiplication, addition/subtraction
7. Tuning of guitar strings
8. African and Asian Elephants
9. The value of pi (3.14159265358979)
10. Stroke

***THE HINDU* SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 22** (Set by Incognito)



Across

8/12 E-tag for barging in without invitation (4,8)
9 Entertain Aligarh Muslim University students at first with sweetheart (5)
10 Initially, Assam state police station gets snakes (4)
11 Bachelor gets divine gift for monkey (6)
12 See 8
13 Engage one top performer to follow a couple of females around mid morning (8)
15 Peter's urn (3,3)
17 Hen can't run around and bewitch (7)
19 Around one, President, gets a bit of hope for resounding victory (7)
22 Nearer shutter (6)
24 Twirl fine rope and start shooting (4,4)
26 Monetary incentive for arranging cab and shack (8)
28 Hot goods dealers from marshy lands around church (6)
30 Embrace, with love, author Victor (4)
31 Europeans captured by Sudanese (5)
32 Long dash with setter's award (4)

Down

1 Kathak academy's ceremonial war dance in New Zealand (4)
2 Destroy dilapidated limo shed (8)
3 Criminal adopts a new name and gets a big gun (6)
4 Follow and win (7)
5 Person mending relationship between spouses at odds with one another? (8)
6 Irishman, Chinese and Pashtun (6)
7 Rotate rolling pins (4)
14 Last part of fish is with a student (5)
16 Uttar Pradesh person without issue gets part of shoe (5)
18 Average student leaving New York around beginning of day for French region (8)
20 Baseless! Losing nothing and getting no monetary allocation! (8)
21 Actor Anthony jumps around relatives (7)
23 Where many fish learn? (6)
25 Channel fishes, to some extant, can be small (6)
27 A peculiar flowering plant (4)
29 The Spanish manuscript for trees (4)

SOLUTION NO. 21

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

TOUGH PARENTS, soft grandparents

With time on their hands and experience in raising children, grandparents are better equipped to handle young tantrums

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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R KUMAR

"You did not want to be changed, you did not want to be dressed. I produced a shoe to find you have pulled off your sock. I put the sock back on while you pulled off the other one. I put that one back on while you pulled off the first," says Claire Kilroy in her widely acclaimed book *Soldier Sailor*. And such have been the travails of every parent who has taken the responsibility of bringing up a child.

Immediately after the birth pangs, parents see the angel whose future they visualise the moment they set eyes on it. The child should be good, beautiful, brilliant – as ideal a child as possible. They place their trust in the divine, the ultimate dispenser of all destinies.

But children are not all sweetness and light and as they crawl, toddle, grow up, parents witness the temper tantrums of the terrible twos, teenage angst, and growing grouses. They see their wilful and angry sides and wonder about the change. No rulebook on childcare or parenting provides all the answers. There are no rules to the game, and then parents see their tender side.

After the initial euphoria, parents are confronted with changing nappies, feeding even in inconvenient hours, rocking the baby to sleep, and carrying it around. No outing can be peaceful as the baby occupies all mindspace, Simultaneously, parents juggle the needs of the rest of the family, workplace imperatives, and career aspirations as the child takes centre stage. Even with all this, parenting may not be perfect. Some are often impatient, not always understanding, and even careless of the child's psyche. Many are guilty of foisting their own ambitions and dreams on their children. Adrienne Rich, American poet, says of motherhood, "A sense of insufficiency to the moment and eternity."

And with all this, loving them, making them individuals, and leaving them alone to become independent are a challenging task. Children's colonisation of our hearts and our powerlessness to always protect them overwhelm us.

Meanwhile, time is on its relentless march and one graduates from parenthood to grandparenthood, an awakening all its own with one looking at grandchildren in ways he or she had not seen children. Being grandparents is a different ball game altogether. More tenderness, more of a sense of vulnerability. Time was at a premium during parenthood, in the middle of crowded lives where competing claims jostled for attention. Now that one has hung up the boots and is more relaxed with more flexible schedules, there is time to revel in their smiles, to humour them in their tears, and generally enjoy their innocence.

Grandparents have the time to listen and become part of the stories of the children, their little joys and sorrows. All the efforts of the past in raising children has turned to experience and grandparents are better equipped to handle tantrums and spirits, creaking joints notwithstanding, as well as share their ecstasies while they are chasing a butterfly or marvelling at the plop of a raindrop. That is what being a grandparent is all about, to understand childhood the way one had not understood it and walk backwards into innocence.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

Watching cinema is far more than just for entertainment — it's an immersive sensory journey where light and sound transform storytelling into magic. ('Fixing the light bulb'; Sept. 14) Yet, outdated projectors and weak audio systems often break the spell, leaving viewers disappointed. To match the filmmakers' vision, and provide world-class cinematic experience to the audience, theatres must embrace cutting-edge projection, state-of-the-art sound, and flawless calibration.
N.S. Reddy

With the advent of numerous OTT platforms, the habit of visiting movie theatres has reduced. Furthermore, theatres are not well maintained. And, movies today carry no message but are fully packed with violence or romance.
N.R. Ramachandran

Growing polarisation

Ravi K. Mishra's book, while empirically sound, tends to overlook the key aspect of India's asymmetric federalism. ('The population challenge'; Sept. 14) The impending delimitation exercise offers an opportunity to assuage the concerns of southern states in an already polarised political discourse. In this context, the reviewer's suggestion of equal representation in the upper house deserves serious consideration.
Rohit Kaushik

Praiseworthy win

Anuparna Roy's comments on the rights of Palestinian people have overshadowed her breaking of new ground by winning a prestigious award for her film Songs of Forgotten Trees, which is a testament to the times we live in. ('A quite rebellion wins big in Venice'; Sept. 14) Although it may seem ironic, she has garnered more admirers for her courage to advocate for important issues and for humanity as a whole.
Deepak Taak

Helping girls

Kudos to Safeena Husain. ('Safeena Husain: bringing girls back', Sept. 14). Her non-profit Educate Girls is changing the lives of many girls, and it brings a smile on our face to read about her work.
Saira Banu

Safeena's work is inspirational. Her efforts in the field of education for girls are saving numerous lives in rural India.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Fashion icon

Giorgio Armani took fashion to the realm of philosophy. ('Master of subtraction'; Sept. 14) His simplistic yet classic outfits helped him carve a space for himself amidst the global phenomenon that is Italian fashion. He is an artist and his art speaks for itself.
Rohith Varon S.S.

Risen from the ashes

The restoration of the iconic Notre Dame in Paris has brought back to life a splendid testimony to architectural genius, history, and shared memories. ('Queuing up for Notre Dame'; Sept. 14) The monument is more than just a tourist attraction. It is a space where culture, art and faith fuse together.
Praveen Kiran Martis

Public speaking in the always-on smartphone era

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In the era of smartphones, keeping an audience's attention during a speech has become a daunting task. Notifications and pop-ups continuously compete for eyeballs, and asking them to switch off their phones often results in disengagement or even exit from the hall. This digital distraction has made public speaking more challenging than ever.

Public speaking is fundamentally an art, requiring skill and strategy to captivate and connect with listeners, especially when the audience is large or the subject matter is complex or needs immediate attention. The true measure of a speaker's success lies in whether she has managed to inform, persuade, or entertain her audience as intended. Achieving this, however, is no simple feat.

Seasoned orators consistently succeed in holding their audience's attention because they study their listeners in advance and tailor the delivery of their speech accordingly. They meticulously research their topics, anticipate possible reactions, and even develop contingency plans should the presentation veer off course. Despite this thorough preparation, they still sometimes fall short often due to inattentive audiences or external distractions, particularly when listeners are easily diverted by their mobile devices.

Today's younger speakers, particularly millennials, are influenced by the fast-paced, informal style of social media influencers, often delivering speeches that are rushed and lacking depth. Their focus sometimes drifts from educating or informing to simply grabbing attention and racking up likes or upvotes. This trend can erode the quality of public discourse, as important topics are glossed over quickly and vital nuances are lost in the pursuit of brevity and popularity. As a result, younger speakers lose the formality and thoughtfulness traditionally valued in public speaking, which risks diminishing the impact and meaning of their messages.

In summary, public speaking in the smartphone era is becoming more complex, but the foundational principles remain the same. Preparation, knowledge of the audience, strategic use of humour, and a focus on clarity and substance are still vital. The challenge is greater, but so is the opportunity – to inform, inspire, and connect.

Generation gap and grocery apps

With everything just a click away, the human connection is sadly missing

Seetha Jayakumar
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"The delivery should be here any minute," my college-going daughter tells me, her eyes glued to the phone. It's a Sunday, and she had ordered some exotic veggies, some of which I have never seen before, to try out a recipe she found online. "Don't buy anything that we can't even pronounce," I tell her hinting at the growing invasion of "foreign" vegetables in our home lately.

"How difficult is it to say zucchini or bok choy," she retorts. The delivery arrives on time. A young man, probably in his early twenties, hands me the package and runs down the stairs, not waiting for my thank you. I stare at the vegetables. They look lifeless. "I think we should stop ordering fruits and vegetables online and instead buy fresh ones from the market," I say.

"This is Mumbai city. Why would you want to waste time and petrol getting stuck in the traffic," she asks.

"But look at these vegetables! They look like they haven't seen water or sunlight in days."

"They look fine to me," she says.

"I miss the good old home deliveries, you know, the ones we had back home in Kerala when I was a kid," I tell her rinsing the veggies for what feels like the 10th time.

Better and smarter

"You had home deliveries back then," she asks half-amused. I decide to ignore the insinuation that I belonged to some primitive era. "Better, smarter deliveries," I shoot back. "The vegetable vendor, the fisherwoman..."

"Nostalgia makes everything looks better," she says. "Maybe. But they had warmth. Human connection. Not like this faceless exchange. How I miss that," I tell her with a sigh.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

"But who even wants to build a connection with a random stranger who comes to deliver things. That would be so weird. I think you people had too much time on your hands then," she says rolling her eyes.

"True, we had time on our hands – not phones in them like your generation," I feel good about making a valid point.

"We also had fresh vegetables. Yam, pumpkin, spinach... The plantain the vendor brought was from her own backyard... They were local, seasonal, organic, sustainable – though nobody used those words then."

"Speaking of old times, can I borrow your *set-mundu* for the ethnic day at college tomorrow," she asks.

"One day to celebrate your roots," I tease her. "Feel free to borrow my new one."

"I also need jasmine flowers, for my hair. Let's go to market after lunch and get fresh ones, just how you wanted," she says with a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

I glance out of the kitchen window. The sky looks grey and ready for another burst of rain, and the thought of braving the afternoon traffic and muddy roads to a crowded market makes me instantly tired. All for a small jasmine string.

"Maybe later. I feel a headache coming on." I feign a sudden weakness. "Let's order online."

"Wow! After all that *gyan* you gave me a while ago, I didn't expect that." She says in a half-joking, half-serious tone.

"It's only flowers." I try to justify, trying to make a quiet exit from the scene.

Children in war zone

For them, war lands without warning; their plight makes haunting images

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From their knee-high world, everything looks upside down. The sky, once a canvas of clouds and kites, now spits fire. Thunder no longer brings raindrops but missiles. Streets, once so familiar, twist into mazes of rubble. For children, war arrives without warning. One day they are in school; the next, in chaos; hungry, afraid, and alone.

The rhythm of life – warm hands at breakfast, the ring of school bell, evening games under fading light – vanishes like breath on glass. The child's small universe, once stitched together by routines, tears apart at the seams.

Their world shifts in a blink: from the clatter of lunch boxes to the clang of tin roofs in refugee camps, from chalk-dusted hands to bloodied fingernails, from bedtime stories to sirens of death. Until yesterday, violence meant a toy snatched away or a scraped knee. Not this. Not the sky on fire. Not the quiet after an air strike.

Scary childhood Palestinian children queue in front of a charity kitchen in the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza. AFP

Ironies strike hard. The same adults who once scolded them for petty fights now unleash destruction with clinical detachment. And the guardians they trusted to protect them stand helpless. Elders, once oracles of answers, now whisper in fear or stare in silence.

The most haunting images of war are not always fallen buildings or mangled metal; but children. The Standing Boy of Nagasaki, with his dead baby brother strapped to his back, waiting silently at a cremation ground. The Napalm girl from Vietnam, fleeing, arms outstretched like broken wings, her scream scorching the air. These children did not cry for cameras. Their silence has echoed through generations.

Today, the story repeats.

To a child, war isn't history or politics. It isn't strategy or slogans. It is hunger. Pain. Loss. A terrifying game played by grown-ups; without rules.

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When a woman boards a bus
She is not escaping, she is arriving into a version of her life not bound by vermilion or silence or sacrifice
Ishika Chaudhary

Making the bed
If you want to change the world, it's the first step
Falguni Chakravarty

When motivation dithers, discipline handholds
As an emotion-proof, sustainable, and trusted tool, discipline is our all-weather friend.
Ram Krishna Sinha

Golden Madras days
Back then, the streets were alive but spacious, and bustling but unhurried
J. Clement Selvaraj

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