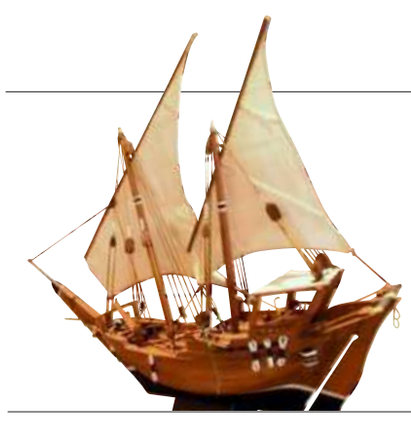
THE HINDU
Sunday, June 2, 2024

magazine



backpage
Boat-building in the South | A book and a tour

GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
Mumbai's gender blueprint has a lesson for other cities, too

GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW
Pride Month | A queer reading list from Africa

GO TO » PAGE 2

Track the latest stories via #ThMagazine on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) Get connected » www.thehindu.com

Rainbow screen time (Clockwise from below) Stills from *Human*; *Made In Heaven*; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*; *Rainbow Rishta*; and *The Shameless*; and actors Anasuya Sengupta and Omara Shetty at the Cannes Film Festival. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, AFP)

THE TRUTH ABOUT INDIA'S LGBTQ+ VOICES ON SCREEN

Queer stories may be increasing in Indian cinema and on OTT platforms, but true reflections of lived experiences are still rare. Filmmakers, actors and festival directors weigh in on why we need more normalised characters and storylines

Joshua Muyiwa

Last week, *The Shameless*, which centres on a forbidden love between two female sex workers in North India, competed in the Un Certain Regard category at the 77th Cannes Film Festival. The film by Bulgarian director Konstantin Bojanov, which touches on topics such as women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights, also won its main lead, Anasuya Sengupta, the Best Actress award.

The film spoke to her, says Sengupta, because "for women, sex workers, queer people, and other marginalised communities, every day is a series of obstacles; just living is being a hero. And they remain unsung for it". So, to get a chance "for a sex worker and queer woman to be a protagonist in a film, and the opportunity to add layers to the character was exciting", adds the actor, who dedicated the award to the LGBTQ+ community.

Coincidentally, earlier in May, Sanjay Leela Bhasali's *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* dropped on Netflix, creating debate. The ambitious series on an elite house of courtesans in British-ruled India attracted a lot of criticism for its misrepresentation of the *tawaif* culture and its characterisation (or lack thereof) of Ustaad *ji*, the pimp played by Indresh Malik. His identity – intersex, transgender or cisgender gay man – is never clarified, his queerness is used as a tool to portray his villainy, and his tragic story arc pushes existing stereotypes.

This dichotomy of representation is the reality of LGBTQ+ stories in India today. Queer characters are increasingly stepping out from the shadowy sidelines into more central roles in films, television and OTT – think recent titles such as *Badhaai Do*, *Made In Heaven*, *Kaathal* - The Core, and *Khufiya*. But as Kolkata-based writer and broadcaster Sandip Roy puts it, "Now, the problem is the reverse [as compared to the 80s, 90s and aughts]. It's not scarcity, but the fact that the room for normalised queer characters is small. Either one is overcompensating by making the queer person the most wonderful character, or harkening back to stereotypes. The thought process seems to be: 'If I am going to put in a queer character, I better get a good return on investment.'"

Nitya Vasudevan, one of the co-directors of the Bangalore Queer Film Festival, agrees. "There has definitely been more queer representation, but what form they take still has room to be fully explored," she states. "Queer characters in Indian films and shows still seem to address the institutions of family, marriage and law. Like in [Mammootty-starrer] *Kaathal - The Core*, where the protagonist's sexuality plays out in court within the triangle of these societal structures. The gay relationship isn't central to the storytelling."

Making space for queer narratives

The pandemic was a turning point for queer conversations in the mainstream. During the lockdowns, more people used social media to talk about their situations: be it loneliness, moving in with their partner, or being caught up in unhealthy situations, such as living with parents who are not queer inclusive. "As more queer conversations took the forefront, more people and creators [especially in OTT] saw these stories," explains Sakshi Juneja, the co-founder of Gaysi, a platform for queer expression and dialogue.

For Juneja, no matter how much is put in the 'queer' box, it is less. "I'll take whatever I'm getting on the big and small screens. Obviously, some work, some don't; it's a learning curve. But till you put it out there, you can't be corrected. So, it gives us a good way to mainstream conversations around a flawed character, such as in *Heeramandi*, and push narratives that are not on a superficial level." This Pride Month, Gaysi and filmmaker Jaydeep Sarkar are curating a two-day event at Soho House in Mumbai, bringing together queer filmmakers, scriptwriters, and non-queer people who have dabbled in queer content, to discuss possible next steps: how to move beyond coming-out stories, how to look at queer intimacies, and how to bring out meaningful stories that also keep the commercial element in mind..

A lot of the portrayals of queer and trans communities on screen are mere pinkwashing. We have multiple identities, just like cis-het folk. We have main character energy, too. You can't reduce us to caricatures. Why can't we have more nuanced portrayals? For instance, I'm working on a new TV series by BBC Studios and Applause Entertainment, called *36 Days*. I play a trans character who is normalised just like the other characters. She is a daughter, a sister and much more

SUSHANT DIVGIKAR
Actor

Myna Mukherjee, cultural producer and curator of the I View World film festival, underscores these sentiments. "Recently, there has been a range of queer characters added to the mix in surprising ways, but I find myself searching for density, layers and complexity in their character development, that I've seen in the films of the late Rituparno Ghosh," she says. Mukherjee recently brought Deepa Mehta's documentary *I Am Sirat*, which portrays the trans experience from multiple angles, to India. "Stepping outside of sensational storylines, telling stories that view sexuality outside of the male gaze, and bringing more queer people into writing rooms will produce less stories about fitting in and more about authentic, lived experiences."

One of the overriding criticisms against the much-lauded *Kaathal*, she points out, was that the Malayalam film had been stripped of any physical intimacy between the gay men, played by veteran actor Mammootty and Sudhi Kozhikode.

Diversity and representation

This "sanitisation", as Mukherjee frames it, and likely to continue for sometime, might have to do with the multiple platforms these films and shows traverse, from the big screen to the handheld. "India has moved forward, but in a small way," says film writer and director of the New York Indian Film Festival, Aseem Chhabra. "We are not there yet [at the level of world cinema or Hollywood], where we can do a *Brokeback Mountain* or a *Call Me by Your Name*. We can't compare ourselves to other countries because the feudal elements in our society are still strong."

Constant exposure and dialogue, however, could turn the tide. For directors, the opportunities to tell stories of queer lives have opened up through OTT services, especially post pandemic, and the striking down of Section 377. "Mainstream films and series with queer persons as central characters show that there is a great hunger and need for these kinds of stories," says Sarkar, the director of docu-series *Rainbow Rishta* on Amazon Prime Video, which highlights six real-life love stories. "Producers and OTT platforms have realised that stories need to be richer, contemporary. They are giving more space to diversity and representation."

Among the people in the community we spoke to, many picked out Karan of *Made In Heaven* (*MIH*) – *a* closeted gay man who doesn't perceive his sexuality as a burden, played by Arjun Mathur – as a normalised queer character. Trinetra Gummaraju, in *MIH* season 2, brought her trans identity onto the small screen with no stereotypical baggage. "I was told that the makers were mindful of having a trans actor as part of the filmmaking process, and approached it with sensitivity and from a place of inclusivity in front of the camera and behind it," says Juneja, who does sensitivity checks for scripts at Gaysi. *Human*, on Disney+ Hotstar, starring Shefali Shah and Kirti Kulhari, is another show Juneja believes has done a good job. "The two main leads are queer women, and I thought it was nice because it brought very grey shades of the characters to the forefront. Their queerness just happened to be a part of who they are."

But while the ground is fertile for queer storytelling, Sarkar warns there are many hurdles to overcome, the first being merely showing "the victim and the villain dynamic" – where tragic subjects or stories of victimhood float to the surface. The other is finding 'crossover' audiences for queer stories. "It's slowly growing, but it's going to take some time to break the mould of the boy-meets-girl trope."

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4

2024 WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION-SHORTLISTED

GETTY IMAGES

IMMERSIVE DIVE INTO MOTHERHOOD

Irish writer Claire Kilroy pens a deeply probing account of the joys and pains of a new mother, joining the ranks of Elena Ferrante and Rachel Cusk

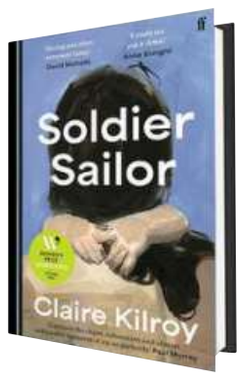
Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

Mummy sing a Gruffalo." Every mother will know that verbs are a child's weapon to use at will, especially when they are little. Sarah Moss drove home the point in her 2011 book, *Night Waking*, in which a mother struggles to keep her wits about her when her children are young and demanding. One of them, Moth, has woken up frightened, and when the mother rushes to his side, she is asked to "sing" from a favourite book. "Want Gruffalo," insists Moth, oblivious to his mother's pleas that Gruffalo is sleeping.

Irish writer Claire Kilroy's new novel, *Soldier Sailor*, shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, 2024, dives into this world of motherhood with an intense scrutiny of what it means to take care of a child in infancy, and what a struggle it can be, the joys notwithstanding. By investigating parenting deeply and writing about everyday things such as feeding, teething, changing a diaper, managing a buggy/ pram, entertaining a growing baby, and the toll it takes on the mother, Kilroy has deepened the experience.

Candid thoughts

Writers probing the life and tasks of new mothers is still a rare phenomenon in contemporary literature, barring a few such as Elena Ferrante, Helen Simpson or Rachel Cusk. Kilroy puts her name onto this overlooked space with an in-your-face chronicle.



Soldier Sailor
Claire Kilroy
Faber
₹599

It begins with the narrator, the Soldier of the title, and a new mother, addressing her baby, who she calls Sailor. It's past midnight and she is the only one awake in the house, taking a breather and admiring the sleeping child "who cause[s] me so much trouble but look at you". Candid in her recollection, she declares: "Chaos was the medium I inhabited once you entered my life, once you became it."

She describes the chaos in excruciating detail: "You did not want to be changed, you did not want to be dressed. I produced a shoe only to find you'd 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. Oh, it was all so stupid. People think that looking after an infant is basic. I know this because I once thought so myself."

The father question

Where is the loving father, readers may wonder. Well, Kilroy adds another layer to the story with the father missing in action, busy at work; the mother's career has been, of course, shelved for the time being. "What does he eat?," the father texts her, the one time he is left in charge.

She loves the child – "What can I possibly offer you? Nothing. Everything. The whole of my heart." – but she is also lonely and craving for some time when she can be on her own.

A meeting with an old friend, who is also babysitting three children as his wife is at work, redeems her faith in men somewhat. Kilroy doesn't let any sexual tension seep into this relationship: "I didn't want my friend to be my husband. I wanted my husband to be my friend," says Soldier.

The narrator's cry to her husband – "Why can't you help? Why is the duty of care entirely on me?" – will remind readers of Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin's words in *Career & Family* (2021), that though women can now have families *and* careers, it's still a long road to couple equity at home. Written with brutal honesty, *Soldier Sailor* is a must-read not only for women, but for men too so they can do better.

Women left behind

Anne Enright tells a tale of intergenerational trauma in this unassuming novel about mothers, daughters and an absent father

Sharmistha Jha

Family saga Man Booker Prize winner Anne Enright (bottom) writes about growing up in Ireland, and about old age and young love in her latest. (GETTY IMAGES)

Irish writer Anne Enright's eighth novel *The Wren, The Wren* is a tale of love and the suffering of those abandoned by a loved one, and the emotional rubble that multiple generations have to live with. The book has been shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2024.

Told through the alternating narratives of Carmel and Nell, this is the story of three generations of women who live in the shadow of a man who abandoned them. Famous poet Phil McDaragh leaves his wife Terry when she falls ill from cancer. Their daughters, Carmel and Imelda, are left to care for their mother alone. Years later, Carmel decides that she does not need a man's involvement in her life and raises her daughter, Nell, by herself. "When Carmel had her baby, many years later, she did not give it to any man. That would be like holding it out at an arm's length and dropping it right there, on the concrete... Because this baby was hers, and hers alone."

Nell is the kind of young woman you may find in a Sally Rooney book. She experiments with her career and her writing, and finds comfort in her grandfather's poetry. In a very Rooney fashion, Nell says, "What I wanted more than anything was uninterrupted crying time. I had a screaming need to be alone. I did not say this to Lily, I told her I needed to write a book. Which, when you think about it, is probably code for the same thing."

Soured relations

Through Nell's character, Enright, whose fourth novel *The Gathering* won the 2007 Man Booker Prize, gives us a glimpse into modern relationships and the casual normalisation of sexual aggression among young males. Nell, after distancing herself from Carmel, is in a relationship that is harming her but thinks she can fix the problem by talking to the man who creates the problem. She cannot talk to her mother about this because Carmel would never understand, she never had a great romance.

Enright writes about growing up in Ireland, about old age and young love. Through Nell, she writes about sex that is bad for women, and only for the pleasure of men. There are also little acts of aggression in the book – the physical pain Imelda inflicts on her younger sister, Carmel; the violent fight between the two over the division of assets after their mother's death. "It was a year where the sisters did not speak except through the costly and forbearing Mr. Ledwidge who said later he had never seen anything like it, and he has seen them all," writes Enright about the fissures the mother's death creates in the sisters' relationship with each other.

The world admires Phil McDaragh for his poetry. Scholars and readers romanticise the relationships he has had with women. They adore his ability to see beauty in Ireland's nature and her creatures while on the other hand, Phil fails to see the beauty inside his home – of three women who love him and need him. "Later again he would say – as though he could not hear his own words – that his wife got sick and his marriage did not survive. He said this as though everyone listening would know that, when a woman gets sick, the marriage deteriorates, clearly, the relationship cannot be sustained."

The Wren, The Wren is a portrait of pompous poets and their misogyny. At the same time, it focuses on marriage, motherhood, and the emotional life of women.

The independent reviewer and editor is based in New Delhi.

The Wren, The Wren
Anne Enright
Jonathan Cape
₹799

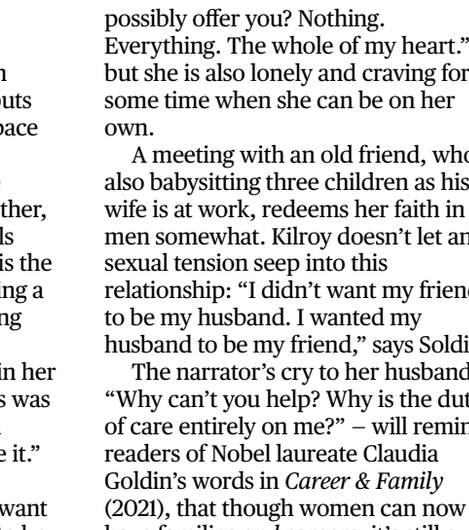
African Lit: a reading list by Mark Gevisser

Chittajit Mitra

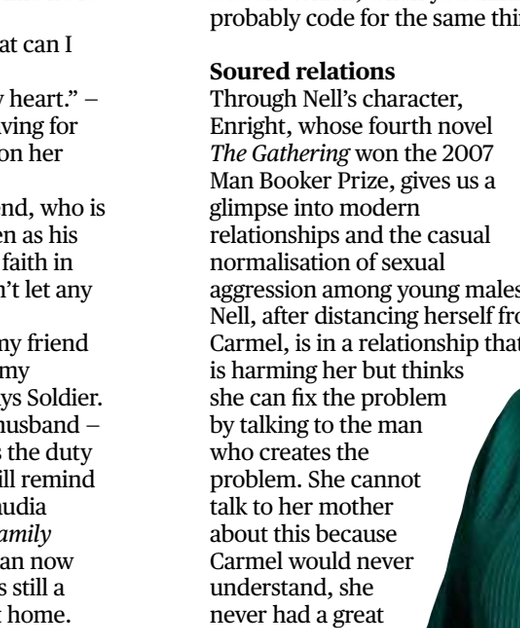
In his 2020 book *The Pink Line: Journeys Across The World's Queer Frontiers*, South African journalist Mark Gevisser explores identity politics, gender ideology, human rights and geopolitics to chart the journeys that queer people and the gay rights movement have made across the world. Despite the progress, queer stories largely remain unexplored by the average reader, says Gevisser, recommending a list of must-reads from African literature in time for Pride Month.

1. *As You Like It: The Gerald Kraak Anthology Vol. II*: An anthology covering topics of gender, human rights and sexuality, this collection also includes the prize-winning essay 'Africa's Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men'.

PRIDE MONTH 2024



2. *African Sexualities: A Reader*, edited by Sylvia Tamale: A groundbreaking book, accessible but scholarly, by African activists, this volume examines dominant and deviant sexualities and investigates the intersections between sex, power, masculinities, and femininities.



3. *God's Children Are Little Broken Things* by Arinze Ifeakandu: With nine exhilarating stories of queer love in contemporary Nigeria, this book announces the arrival of a daring new voice in fiction.

4. *An Arab Melancholia* by Abdellah Taïa: Irresistibly charming, angry, and wry, this autobiographical novel spanning 20 years traces the emergence of Taïa's identity as an openly gay Arab man living between cultures.

5. *The Death of Vivek Oji* by Akwaeke Emezi: The heart-wrenching tale of one family's struggle to understand their child, this novel shares with us a Nigerian childhood that challenges expectations. It is a celebration of innocence and the optimism of youth.

The queer writer and translator from Allahabad is a co-founder of RAQS, a collective working on gender, sexuality, and mental health.

BROWSER

Fool Bahadur

Jayanath Pati, trs. Abhay K.
Penguin
₹250

This is a story about a young law officer in colonial Bihar, who hustles his way through bureaucratic corridors, negotiating corruption to win the coveted British title of Rai Bahadur. The satire is a fictional spin on the author's own experiences, and reflects on the state's erstwhile society and bureaucracy.

Blue Ruin

Hari Kunzru
Simon & Schuster
₹699

After graduating from art school in London, things go downhill for Jay, when he finds himself living in the U.S., undocumented and delivering groceries for a living. But when he runs into his former lover, Alice, and she invites him to stay with her, it sets in motion a reckoning decades in the making.

Long Island

Colm Tóibín
Picador
₹750

The sequel to Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, the plot revolves around Eilis and Tony, who are 20 years married with two children, living a happy life in Brooklyn. But when a stranger with an Irish accent knocks on their door, Eilis starts questioning whether she did right to leave Ireland all those years ago.

Black Shield Maiden

Willow Smith and Jess Hendel
Del Rey UK
₹799

Amid the world of the Vikings, there is another story lost to time: that of Yafeu, a defiant yet fiercely compassionate young warrior stolen from her home in the Ghanaian empire and taken to the North as a slave. But when she comes across the shy princess Freydis, she meets a kindred spirit.

Africa, through the Coca-Cola lens

What the popularity of this ubiquitous drink says about globalisation, development and capitalism

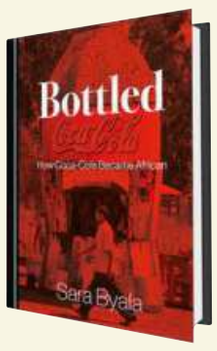
Sudhirendar Sharma

Cities across the world are suffering from a severe water crisis as climate change fears turn real; there's also a huge pushback against the use of sugar with diabetes on the rise. Yet, travel to virtually any place on earth, and one is likely to find a bottle or can of Coca-Cola. How has this carbonated drink become ubiquitous across the water-stressed world, and whose primary constituent is locally sourced water only?

The story of Coca-Cola reflects the entrenched realities of globalisation, development and capitalism, and Sara Byala's *Bottled* tells it from the perspective of Africa where the sugary drink is available everywhere, when most life-saving medicines are not. "In its profound breadth and depth, Coca-Cola offers an unequalled lens onto modern Africa," she writes.

Kola nut to Coke

Yet, as Byala points out, "there would be no Coca-Cola without the African kola nut", and she begins her story with how America got enamoured with the west African tree and its seed which has a caffeine-yielding stimulant. "In May, 1886, as Europe was scrambling to carve up the African continent, John Pemberton [in Atlanta, America] created the earliest version of a beverage that would soon be called Coca-Cola, a drink whose name and whose origin, came in part, from Africa."



Bottled: How Coca-Cola Became African
Sara Byala
Hurst
£30

Coca-Cola, says Byala, narrates its African story as one of "unstopped progress" that began with its first bottling in South Africa in 1928, and is now present in every African nation as the continent's single largest private employer "with a multiplier effect".

Byala, a senior lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania, provides an in-depth assessment of how a global beverage brand adjusted its marketing strategy to the socio-political demands in conquering a continent. While she undertook fieldwork in eight countries, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, Byala guided research assistants to conduct interviews in several nations.

From Cape Town to Cairo – the accompanying illustrations and photographs, including one of a Coca-Cola stall in front of the Sphinx, Egypt tell a thousand words more – the company aligned with everything from education to the anti-apartheid struggle in locating the beverage in the lives of people. "The more I researched and spoke to people, the more the story of Coke appeared as a parable for late capitalism, full of both cause for concern and seeds of optimism," she says.

Fringe benefits

By 2020, more than three quarters of a million Africans were being supported by Coca-Cola, not to mention that 10-12 indirect jobs were being created in related industries. It is a familiar narrative on how corporations contribute to solutions while generating problems in the first place.

Coca-Cola's sustainability initiatives around water, carbon use, and waste recycling have been talked about. The company promotes healthy, youthful, and active living in its marketing campaigns but never in its century-old history has it ever suggested how much of its intake will be enough for a healthy body.

Like elsewhere in the world, Coca-Cola's century of existence in Africa is not without its fundamental share of contradictory compromises. While increased consumption of the global beverage is not without serious ecological and biological impacts, its missionary endeavour to plough back a small portion of its profit back into social emancipation is anything but greenwashing – justifying capitalism's logic of insatiable growth against what the ecosystem can sustain.

Bottled is as much a social history of colonisation by a beverage company as an expression of self-determination and acceptance of modernity by an unsuspecting mass of people across the continent. Byala highlights how Coca-Cola positioned itself differently in each country, bending to consumer power in generating a distinct narrative focused on its sale. While it does help enhance an understanding of a globalised and integrated world it also raises a critical question: at what cost can the planet and human body endure it?

The reviewer is an independent writer, researcher and academic.

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY: JUNE 5

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

HOPE FLOATS

As another day for global awareness to protect the environment dawns, Hannah Ritchie argues why it may still be possible to save the planet

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

This summer, scientists in Antarctica noted a rise of 38.5 degrees Celsius above seasonal average. Climate experts say temperatures are moving into uncharted territory. It feels as if the world has crossed a tipping point.

Hannah Ritchie's *Not the End of the World* comes with a message of hope based on data: that it may still be possible to achieve a sustainable planet. Hannah Ritchie is a member of the young generation she speaks for. At Oxford University, she is lead researcher at Our World in Data, an initiative to compile long-term evidence about the world's most critical problems.

First, how the world has done so far on other critical challenges? Rather well, actually – as Swedish public health expert Hans Rosling showed: reducing child mortality, maternal mortality, and extreme poverty; improving education; and increasing life expectancy.

And yet much more needs to be done. Every effort, collective or individual, seems too little, too late. Ritchie quotes researcher Max Roser: "The world is much better; the world is still awful; the world can do so much better."

The balancing act

Ritchie is not a climate denier. It is now established that human emissions of greenhouse gases are causing climate change. Drought, floods, and "extreme weather events" are now uncomfortably frequent in many parts of the world.

However, we need constructive action to plan for the future even after the 1.5 degree threshold. Policy, action, and cooperation can limit rising temperatures. The real question is whether, while doing so, the world can also reduce poverty, create resilience, and build adaptation.

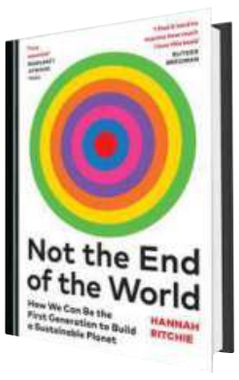
As Ritchie points out, the world has earlier found solutions to daunting environmental challenges such as acid rain and ozone layer depletion. Air pollution causes up to 9 million deaths every year; but first London and then Beijing have shown that clean air can be achieved. In 1900, the U.K. and the U.S. emitted 10 and 14 tonnes of emissions per capita. Peak world emissions per capita were 4.9 tonnes in 2012; since then, they are falling.

Impact on growth

Technological changes can greatly reduce the carbon footprint. Ritchie notes that domestic and consumption-adjusted emissions can fall without slowing economic growth. While historically, energy transitions have taken decades, recently the levelised costs of different energy options have dramatically reduced. In a dramatic example, solar panels were hugely expensive in the 1960s, but survived as the only option in outer space for satellites. Now they are cheap and ubiquitous. In terms of Moore's Law, better technology leads to falling prices – which can let countries leapfrog to affordable clean energy without taking the fossil fuel route. Low carbon can be the economic choice.

Across the world, policy action has led to change. People's action has led 127 countries to commit to net zero. Transport contributes a sixth of greenhouse gas emissions. In 2022, 14% of cars sold globally were EVs. Two years prior, it was just 2%. Cycling, pedestrianisation, and high-speed public transport can further reduce emissions. Low carbon innovations are still needed for cement, steel, and long-distance transport.

Ritchie is cognizant of the risks of simplistic solutions. Impactful changes include electric vehicles, car-free choices, better public transport, taking fewer flights, using low carbon energy; supporting refurbishing and circular economy strategies. Adaptation is not a distraction to reducing emissions. Necessary steps include poverty reduction; crop resilience; emergency communications networks; and building climate defence infrastructure.



Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet
Hannah Ritchie
Chatto and Windus
₹1,299

The inequality question

Questions remain in my mind. First, about rising global inequality; second, how much time there is to bring positive change; third, whether rich countries will help poorer regions navigate climate change. For some of the most vulnerable communities in the world, it may already be too late.

Yet as Ritchie shows, challenges are not insurmountable. Countries can work together to do hard things. Individual and collective choices can influence markets and policy, making the transition easier for others. The goal is to reach net zero not at the last possible moment, but by reducing progressively.

Rising temperatures need not be the world's destiny. The future can be shaped; it is not futile to care. Climate action makes a difference; policies matter. The cost of not doing anything can be far worse. As Ritchie notes, "In a world without climate policies, we'd be heading towards [an increase of] 4 or 5 degrees Celsius at least."

The reviewer is in the IAS.

The politics of exclusion

Janaki Bakhle explores Savarkar's ideas in his writings and how he shaped the Hindutva blueprint

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

Noted historian Janaki Bakhle's book, *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva*, was supposed to be a quick follow-up to her earlier work, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*, but it got delayed for all the right reasons. A dozen of her friends and intellectuals read and weighed in on her manuscript and this undoubtedly added multiple layers, ensuring the book stands out as probably the most detailed and dispassionate analysis of the ideals of Savarkar.

Many may disagree with some of her denunciations and conclusions. Yet, though Savarkar has received abundant belated attention in books and cinema, Bakhle's work considerably enriches the discourse, going beyond the usual binaries associated with Savarkar.

Premise of hate

The book opens with a detailed account of Savarkar's extradition from England. It is an interesting springboard to dive into the life of the man who considered the Revolt of 1857 as the First War of Independence yet did nothing to hide his animosity towards Muslims. Bakhle recounts his escape from London: "On July 20, 1910, *The* (London) *Times* reported a daring escape by a young Indian law student being extradited to India to stand trial on charges of treason and abetment to murder. When the *SS Morea* docked near the port of Marseilles, the student squeezed himself out of a porthole near the ship's bathroom and swam to the shore. He requested asylum as a political prisoner but was returned to the British detectives in charge of him... The twenty-seven-year-old student was then brought to India, where he was tried and sentenced to an unprecedented two life terms of banishment to a penal colony... His name was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an Indian revolutionary nationalist who believed uncompromisingly that armed struggle was the only way for India to free herself from British colonial rule."

War path People beside a huge rangoli of Savarkar, in Mumbai. (GETTY IMAGES)

While he was deported from England for supplying pistols for political assassinations back in India, Savarkar had found himself on the wrong side of the law early in his life. He made no attempt to hide his hatred for Muslims under the euphemism of prejudice. After his release from the Andamans, in 1928 he began penning *Majhya Athavani* (My Recollections) and wrote without a trace of remorse about the fight he had engineered with Muslim children in Bhagur, his ancestral village. Savarkar, born in 1883, once wrote, "Between 1894 and 1895, in Bombay, Pune, etc, in a number of places, there were terrible riots between Hindus and Muslims. In *Kesari*, *Pune Vaibhav* we would be so eager to read the news, we would wait for them to arrive by mail for hours... When Muslims initiated riots and defeated Hindus, we would be dejected... Suddenly, Hindus reacted and defeated Muslims and our elation would reach the skies."

In boyhood itself, Savarkar decided to avenge a perceived insult to the community by organising a band of Hindu boys. Savarkar wrote, "I gathered my boyhood friends and decided that in Bhagur we would avenge this national insult and was there any better way to do that than to attack the only mosque located outside the village boundaries... One evening, like the stealth of enemies, we staked out the mosque. There was not a single person there... so we ransacked and vandalised it to our heart's content."

Birth of an ideology

He lived with the same persistent hatred for anything non-Hindu, particularly, Muslims. In 1923, he demarcated Essentials of Hindutva under the pseudonym A. Mahratta. It was, as Bakhle writes, a "celebration of the Indian territorial nation", and was to go on to become the blueprint for exclusionary Hindu nationalism that we often hear about today. This essay added the term Hindutva to Hindu right-wing ideology, and was the first attempt to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens on the basis of religion.

To Savarkar only those whose 'pitrabhumi' (fatherland) and 'punyabhumi' (sacred land) were within the geographical confines of India were its natural inhabitants. He saw support for the Khilafat Movement in 1919 as a repudiation of love for India. Mahatma Gandhi's role in the Khilafat stir greatly upset him.

The exclusionary ideology was to reach its peak in 1937 when Savarkar, much like many politicians today, claimed, "Hindus had been cruelly tortured and massacred for not embracing Islam". By this time, as Bakhle points out, "he seemed far more concerned with Muslims than the British". Which was a pity considering Savarkar was also a poet, a playwright, and a polemicist who fought many a battle with the might of his pen.

Three categorisations

So was Savarkar the father of Hindu majoritarianism? Bakhle isn't telling. She does, however, explain, "Savarkar's Muslims fell into three stereotypical groups, ungrateful liars who demanded and received special treatment from the Indian government; violent and base Muslims so monstrous that they routinely raped and murdered Hindu women and children; and Muslims who walked all over Hindus who endured this treatment because over the centuries they had allowed themselves to be emasculated by Muslim men."

If Savarkar wore his hatred for Muslims as a badge of honour, this book is a remarkable exercise to present a well rounded view of the times in which Savarkar lived, the man he was, the leader he could have been.

Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva
Janaki Bakhle
Princeton University Press
₹999

Making space Women travelling on Mumbai's suburban rail network; and (below, L to R) Nandita Shah, Prachi Merchant and Smruti Koppikar, who collaborated on the gender plan.
(PAUL NORONHA AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

MAPPING MUMBAI FOR WOMEN

There is a lesson here for other Indian cities to push the gender agenda in urban planning

Reshmi Chakraborty

After living in Guwahati and Delhi, Dhritee Bordoloi finds Mumbai to be the safest place in India. But the 24-year-old continues to be cautious when looking for accommodation in the city. As a freelance assistant director, Bordoloi's hours are erratic and she often returns home late at night. Her priority when house-hunting is a place close to a busy road or highway. "If a flat is too deep inside a maze of lanes, autorickshaw drivers often refuse to come and I may need to walk to the apartment at night," she says. Quick access to the metro or train stations is another must, she adds.

Each time she relocates, Bordoloi has to stretch her budget to find accommodation that checks these boxes. Her male friends renting in the city have no such worries. "In fact, many of them take apartments a bit further away from the main road to save on rent," she says. Mimi Sarkar, 30, often thinks of giving up on her Mumbai dream and moving back to her hometown in West Bengal. "The rent is eating into half my earnings and I have no savings," she says. Working women's hostels could be a cheaper option but Sarkar says the waiting list is long.

Experiences such as Bordoloi's and Sarkar's, and of other women in similarly challenging situations, are why a group of working women came together in an almost decade-long effort to include gender in the Mumbai development plan (DP). In 2020, Mumbai became the first Indian city to include gender in its urban plan, the Revised Draft Development Plan (RDDP) 2034, through land reservations in the city's 24 wards to create physical-social infrastructure for women. On Women's Day in March this year, the first tangible result of that effort – a multipurpose housing unit (MHU) for working women – was launched in Goregaon, a suburb in the west of Mumbai. Two dozen more MHUs are expected to come up, along with several other facilities such as skill development centres, and childcare and senior-care facilities.

Beyond the male blueprint

This inclusion was the result of efforts by the Women and DP Group – a group of women (from the fields of media, architecture, gender studies, law, to name a few) who worked pro bono and pushed the gender agenda through to the city's development plan. A few of them are now members of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's (BMC) six-member Advisory Committee on Gender (ACG) to ensure implementation. "Gender mainstreaming, that is incorporating gender concerns into city planning, is crucial to address issues of access, affordability, and equity," says senior journalist and urban chronicler Smruti Koppikar. Both Koppikar and Nandita Shah, co-director of Akshara Centre, a not-for-profit working for the empowerment of women and girls in Mumbai, assert that women's groups across the city had been talking about including gender in city planning for several years.

What does including gender in urban planning really mean? It acknowledges that men and women use urban spaces differently and cities can no longer be designed as per the standard male blueprint. Most Indian cities lack equitable infrastructure, making it difficult for women to move around freely. If you've ever tried getting into a bus with a toddler and bags in tow, you'll know it wasn't designed with women in mind.

"Urban design must cater to specific parameters in gender inclusive planning to make cities accessible to women and inclusive," says Prachi Merchant, senior urban planner at BMC. These parameters include lighting, openness, visibility, crowds, security, walk path, availability of public transport and gender diversity.

As the Women and DP Group pushed forward, they needed to break down their concerns into tangible elements in city planning. "Our biggest challenge was being heard," says Shah. It involved campaigning, writing and petitioning by women's groups across the board. Shah says having bureaucrats and urban planners within BMC aligned to their needs helped. "There was a willingness to find solutions."

Reservation of 90 land parcels

Women in the workforce was at the heart of the group's efforts. "The most critical factor we were looking at was how in a financial city like Mumbai, the workforce participation of women was so low. It was around 16% in 2018," says Shah. "We started looking at how we could change that."

"How could a working woman with domestic responsibilities go to work when there are very few childcare and senior care facilities," asks Shah. This led to the idea of reserving space where amenities for working women across both formal and informal sectors could come up – transit housing, emergency shelter during a domestic dispute, reskilling centres, and vending zones for women in the informal sector.

Real estate is a prized commodity in Mumbai. So eventually the gender inclusion boiled down to land reservations catering to women's needs. It helped that the group included retired additional chief secretary Chandra Iyengar, who helped translate the group's concerns and demands into the language of policy and rules. The result: the reservation of 90 land parcels in all of Mumbai's 24 wards in the development plan. Each ward has a plot of land exclusively for women's facilities, as the plan stipulates. "This has not happened in India before and that is the significance of it," says Koppikar.

Globally, there has been a conversation around feminist urbanism, with a focus on women and sexual minorities who have historically been left out of consideration in city planning and development. One famous example is Spain's Catalan Neighbourhood Law of 2004, wherein women helped in listing their needs and the gender perspective was included in urban design and aspects of city planning. "If it is safe for women, it is safe for everyone. Because if you're catering to women, you're catering to the differently-abled, older people and children. Civic bodies in Indian cities are yet to recognise this from a gender lens," says Merchant.

But there is hope. Plans are afoot to replicate the Mumbai model in other cities across Maharashtra, and to also build a guide for other Indian cities – to make our urban spaces inclusive and truly welcoming to women.

The writer is a freelance journalist and the co-author of Rethink Ageing *(2022).*

(Clockwise from far left) Jaydeep Sarkar; Sakshi Juneja; and a still from *Rainbow Rishta*

THE TRUTH ABOUT INDIA'S LGBTQ+ VOICES ON SCREEN

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

"And I don't know if we are ready yet for a gay romance film to be the next *DDLJ*," Sarkar says.

Importance of film festivals

For queer stories, the film festival space continues to be an important medium between the market and the mainstream. "Through our film selection, we try to move out of representation alone and also screen films that allow for queer people to swim in and out of moments and experiences," says Vasudevan of the Bangalore Queer Film Festival. "Last year, we screened *La Reproduction* by Jean-Marie Villeneuve, which follows a man jealously looking at another man across the street through his camera and binoculars, photographing different parts of his body. For us, it was queer because the film was about a man's gaze on another man." Such films allow the LGBTQ+ community to see themselves in the world through other means "escaping the solidification of queer identities created with representation alone".

Film festivals are also bellwethers to the potential shift in the kinds of stories being told, and give hope for more inclusive ones. Sengupta, who created history by becoming the first Indian to win an acting award at Cannes, says it isn't just the "recent complexity" of queer characters in Indian films and television shows that is exciting, but also that change in the industry. "The change is palpable but not nearly enough," she says, speaking from her experiences of working as a production designer for the past 15 years. "But I love the growing momentum of it. It isn't just representation on screen but also behind the scenes, there are more women, queer people and others on the margins on sets, but there could always be more."

The author is Bengaluru-based poet and writer.

– With inputs from ***Surya Praphulla Kumar***

The missing element

According to Sakshi Juneja of Gaysi, the involvement of queer people in the making of shows is still largely missing. "While a lot of attention is given to the people on screen, a lot more focus should be given behind the scenes, too," she says. "Making up a queer-included production is key because they will bring their sensibilities. And if you are looking at true allyship and contributing to the art and culture space, it is also about bringing in skill-building. Production houses can partner with support groups, NGOs and other queer content creators to do workshops. This is happening, but it could be done a lot more."

All aboard Women at a menstrual awareness drive in Kovalam, Tamil Nadu; and (below) Shivani Chopra.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

PERIOD AWARENESS ON A BICYCLE

Celebrating Menstrual Hygiene Day (May 28) with the story of a Delhi lawyer who cycles across Indian states, distributing menstrual cups and destigmatising periods

Sweta Akundi

For nearly two months, 44-year-old Shivani Chopra would wake up at 3.30 a.m., when the roads were still dark and loud, heavy-duty lorries claimed the highways. She would have a cup of coffee, load her Trek bicycle with 25 kg of luggage, and get ready for over 30 km of cycling. Her mission: to distribute menstrual cups and discuss period hygiene in small towns and villages.

The solo journey that kicked off in Chennai on February 11 concluded in Puri on March 28, covering 1,200 km, and traversing the towns of Nellore, Ongole, Machilipatnam, Kakinada, and Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. It was part of the 'Freedom Ride' initiative by Mogra, an NGO founded by Chopra, a Delhi-based lawyer, to help underprivileged women. "During the pandemic, I initiated a menstrual awareness drive where we distributed 2,000 sanitary napkins in under-served communities. But that made me realise I wanted a more eco-friendly and sustainable solution," says Chopra. Over the next two years, she began making menstrual cups accessible, starting with a collaboration with an independent cup manufacturer from Karnataka. In the last two months, she has been gearing up for her next awareness drive – in Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh, where she will distribute cups at a Buddhist monastery.

"Before I reach a particular place, I try to courier menstrual cups to the village with the help of local facilitators. So, once I reach, we distribute the cups and have discussions about them," says Chopra, who has been doing long-distance cycling since 2016.

Tackling mindsets

She has held discussions in schools, colleges and even public places in the towns she visits. "We are conditioned to believe that it's dirty to touch our own waste. We need to change that mindset. So, we talk about what menstrual cups are made of, how to use them, and their benefits," she says.

The questions Chopra encounters often reveal a lack of understanding of the female anatomy. "One of the most common questions that comes up time and again is, if the cup has to be removed when going to the bathroom. The answer is obviously no," she says, explaining how these discussions help girls understand their bodies better.

Although the discussion spaces are largely fostered and populated by women, men too have volunteered, Chopra says. "Once, we organised a drive at the Yamuna flood relief camp in Delhi, and when one of my guy friends started talking, the women actually sat down because they were so surprised that a man was talking openly about female hygiene. They [male volunteers] were breaking barriers."

Unexpected encounters

Freedom Ride also opened her up to a new community of women. "When I arrived in Nellore, after 35 km of cycling, I found out that it was wedding season and all the hotels were booked. I thought I would have no place to stay, but someone I never met – a university professor who was helping me distribute the cups – offered her home to stay," she says.

Her most treasured moment on the ride though came on the highway in Mandapam, Tamil Nadu, where she met two young girls under the age of 10, who were very excited to see a woman cyclist. "The joy in showing them that a lone woman can cycle across states was truly special," signs off Chopra.

The writer is based in Chennai.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Mansukhbhai Khatri, who at one point threw sacks of his wooden blocks into the Saran in despair, has now found purpose for this forgotten craft from Kutch

BELA'S LAST CUSTODIAN

Azera Parveen Rahman

On April 30, *ajrakh*, the widely known craft of resist-dyeing from Kutch, got a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, a mark of authenticity that provides legal protection to arts from specific geographical regions. While this is cause for celebration, another lesser-known craft – *bela* block printing – from the same region, continues to languish in obscurity.

At one point in time, Bela, a village in the Rapar block of Kutch in Gujarat, was a flourishing hub for the block printing trade. In an undivided India, Bela would be teeming with traders and camel carts ferrying people between Kutch and Sindh in present-day Pakistan. For craftsmen practising *bela* block printing on textile, business was good. Things changed dramatically over the years, and today, there is a risk of the craft being lost altogether, but for the efforts of its sole custodian, Mansukh Pitambar Khatri.

Gradual decline

Mansukhbhai, now in his late 50s, was just eight when he first learnt how to make graphic prints on cloth with organic colours and carved wooden blocks. As children, his elder brother and he would sit and watch their father hard at work. "All the members of the family would be involved in the printing processes – the washing, printing, dyeing," he recalls. "I found it all very fascinating. How a plain piece of cloth would turn into something so beautiful. It was because of my interest that I learnt the craft." Unfortunately, their father died when Mansukhbhai was still very young and so he turned to his brother to learn the nuances of the art form.

Holding the fort (Clockwise from left) Mansukhbhai Khatri at work; blocks used for printing; and a *bela* block-printed fabric.
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The beauty of *bela* printing lies in its bold designs. According to Mansukhbhai, while *ajrakh* is all about thin lines and mostly geometric or floral designs, *bela* involves thicker lines with motifs that include animals such as elephants and horses. "There is a difference in the process, too," he says. "The resist that *ajrakh* uses is a mix of lime and gum; in *bela* we use *mitti* wax, a mix of mud and *bajra* flour. This paste is thick."

Several factors contributed to *bela*'s decline, besides the border drawn between India and Pakistan and the slow drying up of the open trade route. Take the advent of power looms and screen printing, for instance. The traditional craftsmen stood no chance against the pace and price of these fabrics. "We had about 40-50 Khatri families involved in *bela* printing; now there is just mine," says Mansukhbhai. "Moreover, at about 180 km from Bhuj, we are not at the centre of the tourist map. So tourism has not helped us like it has other craft forms closer by." Most families earlier involved with *bela* printing, including Manuskhbhai's relatives, have now turned to other businesses such as sweet-making.

> I found it all very fascinating. How a plain piece of cloth would turn into something so beautiful. It was because of my interest that I learnt the craft.
>
> **MANSUKH PITAMBAR KHATRI**

Rescuing the blocks

Mansukhbhai too had abandoned this craft for a brief two-year period – his business with a select few traders did not suffice the family's needs. Then around 2013, Khamir, an NGO that works on preserving local crafts, convinced him to take up the block once again. "We supported him in re-learning the dyeing process, taking up indigo dyeing, and introduced some new designs," says Ghatit Laheru, director of the Gujarat-based Khamir. "Just before COVID-19 hit, he requested some space in Khamir itself to do his work, which we gladly obliged. Now he spends most of his time here, working on both old as well as new designs." Slowly, Mansukhbhai's work got the platform it needed, with a wider audience and a greater demand.

"I remember throwing sacks of wooden blocks into the Saran [river] because there was barely any work for us," he recalls. Showing a block with the carved figurine of a woman and a tree, he says, "I did save some, like this one. It was made by my grandfather and is at least a 100 years old. Khamir made a longer replica of this so my work becomes faster." Traditionally, the Khatris would make different designs for different communities. For instance, one community would wear prints with horse and horsemen, and another with elephants, and you could tell the community a person belongs to by the clothes they wore. Many of these designs now come together on saris, *dupattas*, and unstitched fabric– of horsemen, trees and elephants.

Bela has also been listed as an endangered craft by the office of the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts, the national agency that works for the promotion and export of Indian handicrafts, says Laheru. "This is positive news because there is now the impetus to reach more people through government-sponsored exhibitions and other support."

The last year has also seen Mansukhbhai's younger son showing interest in taking up the craft. "He knows the craft but because of the way things were, he had taken up a job in a shop in Bhuj instead. Now he is keen on coming back to Bela," Mansukhbhai says, with growing hope that he may not be *bela*'s last custodian after all.

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Kutch.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

ALLEGEDLY

Inking the deal

Have you even voted in these elections if you don't have a finger selfie to show for it?

It's been such a long time since I last took an inked finger selfie," Wife said, holding up a finger. It was Friday, the night before voting day in New Delhi.

"That's because Lok Sabha elections happen only once in five years," I said, shovelling a spoonful of curd rice into my mouth. "And for your information, that's the wrong finger."

We were at the dinner table, discussing the logistics for our participation in the Dance of Democracy.

"You sure mobile phones aren't allowed?" she asked again. "Nandini went to Mumbai to vote, she got back yesterday and said no one checked her for a phone."

"Shouldn't you be more focused on the actual election issues instead of obsessing over selfies and mobile phones? Do you remember the name and party symbol of your candidate?"

"I don't have time to memorise all that information," she said. "Won't they be written on the EVM? You just have to click on it, right?"

"Press, not click," I said. "God save Indian democracy."

"Anyway, I don't want to bake in the sun at 10 in the morning. Let's reach by 5.30 a.m. so that we are back by 6."

"Madam, the polling centre opens only at 7 a.m."

"There's a heat wave predicted tomorrow! This is terrible planning," she said. "Let's reach the booth by 6.30 a.m. at least. We should be first in queue. Set the alarm for 6."

Sleep mode

Now, trying to wake her up any time before 8 a.m. is like starting an old Lambretta scooter – it takes a long time, and your patience will be severely tested by multiple relapses into sleep mode. I didn't want to throw away my Saturday morning REM sleep for nothing. In any case, the polling centre was just two minutes from our place.

"I've set it for 6 a.m. sharp," I said, setting it on my phone for quarter to seven.

The next morning, to my utter shock, not only did Wife wake up to the alarm, she was ready in five minutes.

"I know you cheated on the alarm," she said, as we walked out. "It's already 7. There are so many people on the road. If there's a long queue, you've had it."

"*Arrey*, these are morning walkers – they are not necessarily going for voting."

"We'll see," she said, picking up her pace to pull ahead of a slow-moving gaggle of retirees. As we turned a corner, we saw half a dozen couples hurrying towards the government school-turned-polling centre. Wife, transformed into an Olympic walker, overtook all of them, while I scrambled to keep up.

Thankfully, the line wasn't long – five in the 'Gents' line, four in the 'Ladies'. The two queues approached the booth from opposite sides. In about 25 minutes, Wife and I found ourselves face to face at the entrance. By then, our lines had grown by about 20 people. "The difference between us and them," Wife said, nodding at those behind us, "is that they are people who decided to have tea before starting."

Her turn came first, and a few minutes later, I went in. A woman checked my name, marked a cross on a register, and asked for my hand. She daubed the iconic ink on my finger and directed me to the holy cubicle.

I was in and out in less than a minute, and Wife was waiting outside. I proudly held out my forefinger. She looked down at her own hand and gasped, "Oh damn!"

"What happened?"

"They haven't inked my finger!"

"How is that possible?"

"That woman forgot!"

"You didn't remind her?"

"Me remind – what?" She was too upset for words.

"But your name was on the roll? You voted, right?"

"You saw me!"

"Then relax, it doesn't matter."

"Of course, it matters! Now no one will believe I voted!"

"That's ridiculous," I said.

Proof of vote

But Wife was right. The next day we met Nandini, her friend and Insta rival, for lunch, and she wouldn't believe her.

"Who did you vote for?" Nandini said. "Ermenegildo Zegna?"

"I swear I voted," Wife said.

"Look at this," Nandini brandished her inked forefinger. "Let me see yours."

"I'm telling you, they forgot to ink my finger!"

"Yeah, right!"

"Sampath is a trusted journalist. Ask him." Wife turned to me. "You tell her. Didn't I vote?"

For some reason, at that precise moment, my inner Supreme Court woke up. "I'm sorry," I said, "A hands-off approach has to be adopted."

"You're throwing me under the bus?" Wife was incredulous.

"The voting is over," I said. "The matter is now infructuous."

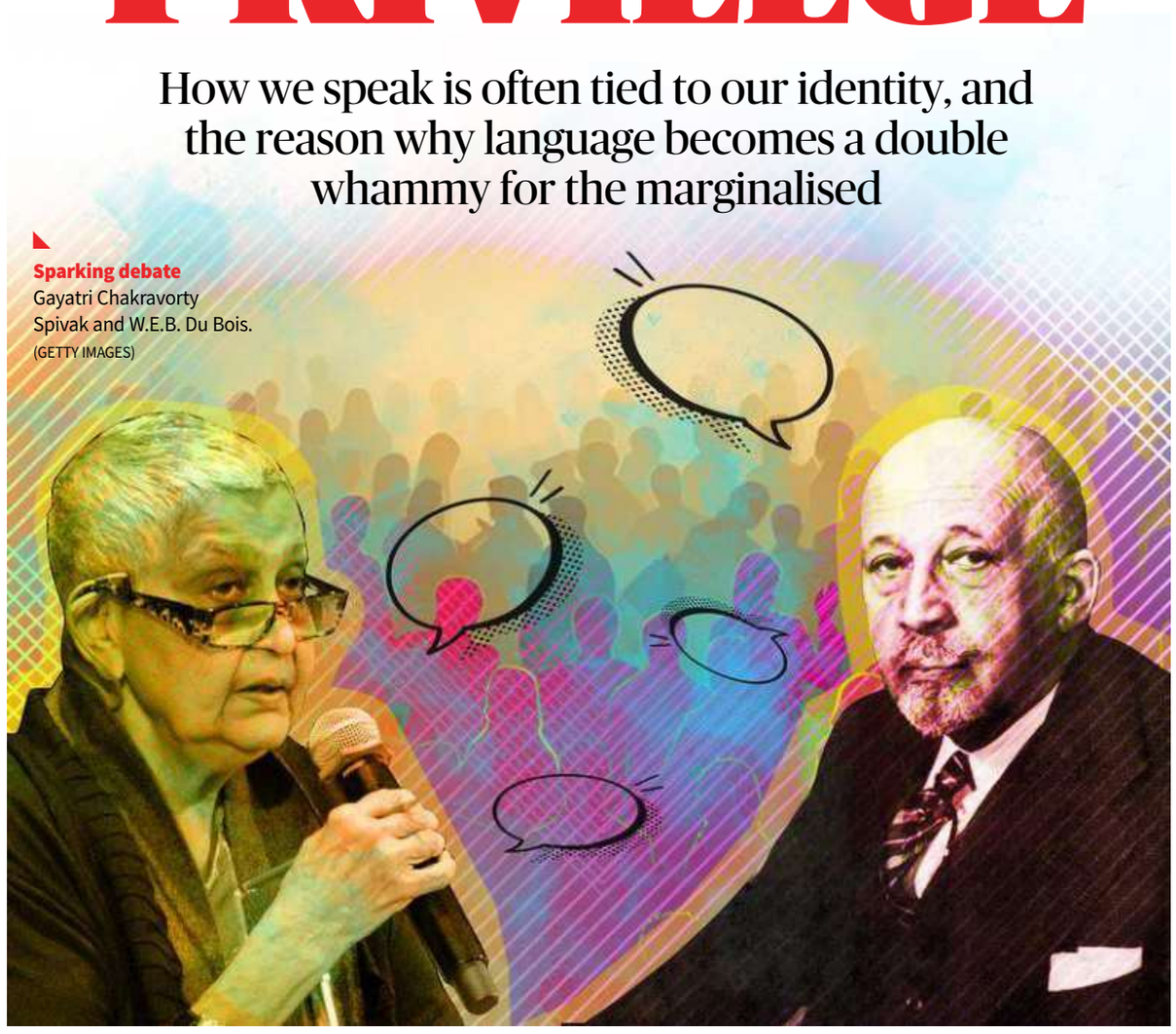
***G. Sampath**, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor,* The Hindu.

THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, June 2, 2024

MODERN TIMES

PRONOUNCING PRIVILEGE

How we speak is often tied to our identity, and the reason why language becomes a double whammy for the marginalised



Sparking debate Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and W.E.B. Du Bois. (GETTY IMAGES)

An obsession with correcting other people's pronunciation, especially words of foreign origin, is a favourite hunting game of a certain kind of Indian. I know because I have met many people like this. The worry about mispronouncing words, especially those of foreign origin, is a relentless source of stress for a certain kind of Indian. I know because I am one.

These two sets of people are constantly bumping into one another in the small bubble that is English-speaking India. The usual vibrations that this produces became a loud buzz recently when renowned academic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and a student at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University engaged in a stand-off over the name of American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois.

In the viral video of this event, Spivak, who is famously the author of a seminal work, 'Can the subaltern speak?', stops the student mid-question and insists he pronounce Du Bois' name correctly before proceeding with his question. In this interaction, both Spivak and the student are curt with one another, and arguments (about the specific circumstances of the lecture) can be made on both sides to justify their behaviour. But this confrontation in itself is an interesting illustration of class war, because disputes of pronunciation are not usually about names or words, they are about the chasm between privilege and aspiration.

Indulging the foreigner

In India, we are indulgent of outsiders who mispronounce our names and words. Check out social media accounts of foreigners, especially Caucasian women tourists in India attempting to speak an Indian language, and you'll see the comments are all about how cute they sound. We love that they are making an effort. However, we do not extend this courtesy to ourselves and any mispronunciation in English or a foreign language by an Indian is immediately pounced upon for a rigorous bout of trolling and teasing.

In order to know how a word is pronounced, you should have heard it spoken. For most people who have learned English by reading, this becomes a stumbling block. Despite being a competent speaker of the language, I too have spent many nights cringing about my terrible mispronunciation of a word earlier in the day. For example, for many years, I said the word 'segue' as it is spelt and not 'segway' as it is supposed to be pronounced. I was horrified when I later discovered the correct pronunciation. I wish someone had pointed it out to me earlier, than teased me about it behind my back.

Sometimes there are words I know the correct pronunciation of, but cannot get my tongue to move in the manner required to be able to say it. The word 'queer', for instance, completely defeats me, because I just cannot say it without a prominent Malayalam-accent barrelling in. Now that I am older and less worried about people's opinion of me, my way of dealing with this is by owning up to it before saying the word. "I just can't say this word properly," I say and then go on to spell it. But for a younger person, this can often be a debilitating experience. As for people's names, my philosophy is that if I am speaking to them, I ask how their name is pronounced, but if I am speaking about them, I don't worry about accuracy.

Passing judgement

Spivak's insistence on Du Bois' name being correctly pronounced is because of the intricate and important ways it ties up to his identity. This is significant because how we speak too is a substantial part of our identity. You need to listen to only a few words in order to make fairly accurate assumptions about a person's class, region of origin, and level of education. Implicit in this understanding is also a kind of judgement. It helps us figure out how we should deal with this person and assess whether they are deserving of our time and respect. We can be dismissive of the rustic, devoted to the refined. And yet, we hate it when someone puts on an accent. If they stay the same, we disrespect them; if they try to do better, we mock them.

In the class system based on language competence, I have realised, there is no winning for the people who are not at the top. No matter how much you practise the right way to say Du Bois' name, the subaltern's cover will likely be blown at some point, and their true origins will be revealed. It is a pointless exercise. You may as well be yourself.

Veena Venugopal *is the author of* Independence Day: A People's History.

GOREN BRIDGE

Small Miracle

Neither vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

South in today's deal was American expert Owen Lien. The auction is not known to us except for the two no trump opening and the final contract. We offer the auction above, featuring a common bidding tool in the modern game. The three-spade bid showed some slam interest with one or both minors. The five-club continuation showed a one-suited hand with clubs and South, with great cards for slam, carried on. South had the right high cards for slam, but not the right low cards. An extra low club instead of a low card in any other suit would have made the slam reasonable. Lien needed a small miracle to bring this one home.

West led the ace of diamonds and shifted to the queen of spades. Lien won in dummy with the ace and cashed three high hearts to discard the remaining diamond from dummy. He led the king of diamonds, on which both West and dummy shed spades. Lien ruffed a diamond in dummy as West shed another spade. Lien led a club back to his ace, pleased to see the jack from East. Lien ran the 10 of clubs, successfully finessing against the queen. He then ruffed his last heart in dummy and led a spade back to his king. In this two-card ending, Lien led his remaining spade and picked up West's remaining trumps with a classic trump coup. Beautifully done!

NORTH
♠ A 5 3
♡ 9 5
◇ 10 4
♣ K 9 8 7 4 3

WEST
♠ Q J 6 4
♡ 10 7 4 2
◇ A
♣ Q 6 5 2

EAST
♠ 10 7 2
♡ J 8 3
◇ J 8 7 6 5 2
♣ J

SOUTH
♠ K 9 8
♡ A K Q 6
◇ K Q 9 3
♣ A 10

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2NT	Pass	3♠*	Pass
4♣	Pass	5♣	Pass
6♣	All pass		

*One or both minors

Opening lead: Ace of ◇

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Popular patents

Berty Ashley

1 On this day in 1857, James Gibbs of Virginia obtained a patent for his invention. The original machine had been invented by Elias Howe but was cumbersome and slow. Gibbs patented his technique called 'Chain Stitch', which was based on the craft of using looped stitches. This allowed the machine to make designs more easily. Which machine was this, which changed the livelihoods of millions of women?

2 On this day in 1875, this person made the very first sound transmission. With both his mother and wife being deaf, he was motivated to figure out ways of communication. He started experimenting with acoustic telegraphy and eventually developed an instrument. Although Antonio Meucci had already filed for a similar patent, he didn't have the $10 needed to finish the process. Who was this person, who got his machine patented before Meucci?

3 On this day in 1896, this person applied for a patent for his wireless telegraph that led to him winning a Nobel Prize in 1909. He was the first person to make modern, mass communication truly global. It all started when he learnt how to send a signal across his parents' attic. Who was this person, thanks to whom any two people at any two places on the planet could communicate?

Taking notice Professor Eric Laithwaite at the Royal Society of Arts, London. (GETTY IMAGES)

4 On this day in 1903, Japanese American chemist Takamine Jōkichi got his patent for a hormone he had managed to isolate from some glands above the kidney. This hormone plays a huge role in regulation of blood pressure and is responsible for increasing both, blood flow to muscles and cardiac output. People who are allergic to certain items (e.g. prawns) need this on hand in case of emergencies. What hormone is this, which is responsible for our survival?

5 Eric Laithwaite had invented full-size linear induction motors, and he recognised that they don't need physical contact with a metal track to work. In 1967, two researchers at Brookhaven National Laboratory applied for a patent for a 'Maglev ___', which generated "a suspension force for floating a ___ above the ground". What was the patent for?

6 One of the most instantly recognisable modern devices has a very simple patent. The 2007 document just says 'ornamental design of an electronic device, as shown and described'. It was not the first of its kind, nor was it a revolutionary technological change. The basic design and simplicity made it unique. What device is this, which is in its 15th version now?

7 The very first version of this device was invented by Nicholas Yagin in 1890, who called it an 'apparatus for facilitating walking'. Over the years, it has evolved all the way to the ReWalk patent in 2014, which is used in rehab centres, and allows people with lower paralysis to walk and even climb stairs. What is this device, that powers and strengthens the body from the outside?

8 In 1962, Edward Vanderlip, an engineer for Piasecki Aircraft, patented a mechanism to allow a helicopter's instruments to continue functioning in the event of a power failure. He then incorporated the same system into a remotely-operated aircraft. This led to the first patent for what device, which can be used both as a fun toy and a dangerous military weapon?

9 Issued in 1986, this patent was for an apparatus that produced objects by stereolithography, or light-solidification of resin. Liquid resin is solidified layer by layer with a UV light to make forms. What technology is this, that is used to make everything from pens to houses?

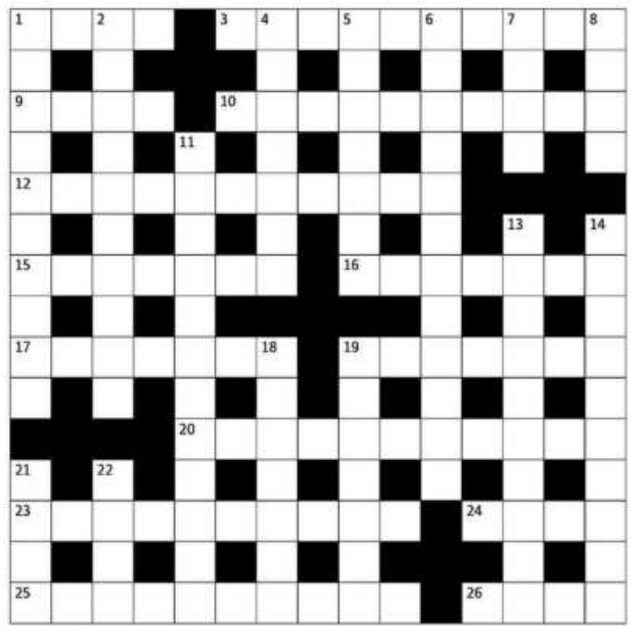
10 Jaap Haartsen invented this technology, the patent for which is called, "Peer to peer information exchange for mobile communications devices". It is named after an ancient Scandinavian king who brought Norway and Denmark together, and who had a certain nickname because of a dental issue. What technology is this, that all of us encounter on a daily basis?

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. Sewing Machine
2. Alexander Graham Bell
3. Guglielmo Giovanni Maria Marconi
4. Adrenaline (Epinephrine)
5. Train (Magnetic Levitation Train)
6. Apple iPhone
7. Exoskeleton
8. Drone
9. 3-D printing
10. Bluetooth

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3309



Across

1 Invent a herb (4)
3 What may be seen in Manhattan is a film about greed (4,6)
9 We're told of SE Asians' connections (4)
10 Goth prayed desperately for source of support(7,3)
12 Greens' constituent circulated cute leaflet(7,4)
15 Murder a pizza? (7)
16 Very hot Norwegians, A-ha: randy (to some extent) (7)
17 List includes duck – but you want another bird ... (7)
19 ... a small company, and you want credit note up-front? Sauce! (7)
20 Cockney retained her provision for baking – and something for liqueurs? (11)
23 Thomas perhaps embracing trendy field of research (10)
24 'A bore'? Tolkien creature? That's not on (4)
25 Daffy old boater's one swinging more than one way (6,4)
26 Judas Iscariot, within: unaltered (2,2)

Down

1 Dodgy stimulator for agents of unwelcome change (10)
2 Tangled knotweed? No, only if necessary (4-2-4)
4 After injection of iodine, a thorax is most sore (7)
5 Large prison officers failing to open smallish rooms (7)
6 Leading lady to see where appetisers appear(3,2,3,4)
7 Disasters Leonidas dodged regularly (4)
8 Country 15? (4)
11 Funny, mirthful Noel, OK? (3-2-3-4)
13 Everyman regularly gets into these arguments (10)
14 Incites, in middle of open court, displays of fury (10)
18 Cooked but not good: dotted with holes (7)
19 Lad caught by Dorothy's dog somewhere in North America (7)
21 Tosses in a turgid offhand prècis ... finally (4)
22 America is a revolutionary, enormous mass of land (4)

SOLUTION NO. 3308

(ARUNA CHANDARAJU)

Avakaya and a Telugu summer love story

With May comes mangoes in plenty and a beloved summer tradition. This year's controversy about adulterated spice powders also encouraged many to go back to the old ways of pickling

Aruna Chandaraju
arunachandaraju@yahoo.com

It's pickling season in the Telugu States, and while Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are known for quite a few varieties, the *avakaya* is king. The fiery raw mango pickle made with dry Guntur chillies is stored in ceramic jars for consumption all year round.

But this year, the start of the season coincided with the news of adulterated spice powders. Amid countries imposing bans and restrictions on the import of Indian masalas, it impacted the summer tradition of *avakaya* making. Especially because, over the past few decades, most urban households have moved away from homemade spice powders to rstore-bought ones.

On the bright side, the news did get many families to call up their elders who still make the pickle the traditional way. It is the method that many of us grew up watching and enjoying as children. Even today, it remains the biggest food-related event of the year in the region – with Telugu households making large volumes of various types of mango pickles: *Magai* (with sundried mango), *Thurumu Magai* (grated mango pickle), *Bellam Avakaya* (a sweet, jaggery-infused version), and *Pachcha avakaya* (a yellow-tinged version made with the more expensive Gollaprolu chillies).

When green becomes red

In my family, it was one of the most awaited annual rituals every April and May, when everyone landed in our maternal grandparents' home, in the heart of the picturesque Godavari delta area in Andhra.

My grandfather would order home sacks of freshly harvested raw mangoes such as the sour *kothapalli kobbari* and *pedda rasalu*. The taut green fruits would be washed, wiped dry or briefly sundried, and cut into even-sized pieces by skilled workers who were available in plenty during this season back in the 1960s and 1970s. The pieces would then be placed in large vats or vessels, and cold-pressed sesame oil – so fresh you could see the foam on top – would be mixed in, along with home-pounded Guntur red chilli powder, salt and mustard powder. Like most great cooks, my grandmother never bothered with exact measures and, instead, worked by instinct. After a thorough mixing, the pickle would be transferred into large ceramic jars and their lids secured with white muslin cloth. It would last a year or two.

The tradition continues

But it can also be eaten a few days after preparation, and there is nothing like fresh, spicy *avakaya* with rice. I remember all the cousins gathering around my grandmother as she emptied steaming hot rice into a large vessel. Large spoonfuls of *avakaya* would be ladled evenly over it. Then, she would reach into a nearby earthen pot for freshly churned butter to add to it. After mixing it well, she would make small balls of *avakaya* rice and place them in our outstretched palms. Nothing before or since has tasted better!

Those summers also had another constant: my grandmother's loud complaints to my grandfather. "This year too, the quantity of pickle will be half of the mangoes you ordered because your grandchildren, much like their mothers, spirited away the sliced raw fruit to eat when I was not looking." And his response would never change: "Well, I ordered double the quantity for exactly this reason!"

After my grandparents, the tradition was carried over to my maternal aunt's home for many delightful summers. Today, across Telugu homes, the ritual endures in rural and urban households. And for those who cannot find the time or the people to cut the mangoes, local markets are a boon. For the past two decades or so, during this season, one finds women cutting mangoes (*chinna rasala*, *gulabi* and *jalaalu*) for customers to take home by the kilo. They toil in the open or under a tarpaulin sheet, cutting between 3 kg and 5 kg of mangoes (and charging ₹3-₹6 per mango) an hour. Men sometimes share the labour, and visit city homes to help those who want to make *avakaya* the traditional way.

The humble hand-held faucet is a blessing

Susie Samuel
doctorsusiesamuel@gmail.com

Growing up, I was taught that the greatest invention that changed the world was the wheel. Nearer life's exit door, I know that the wheel has serious competition.

Recently, I had to visit the restroom in a public place. As you get older and everything travels south, these visits are no respecter of time or place.

When you have to go, you have to go.

A few minutes after I had slipped the bolt, I realised that the dark, damp and dingy 4'x4' hole-in-the-wall had no hand-held health faucet. What I did have was a bucket with stagnant muddy water and a rusty dipper that had a distinctly defiant "take it or leave it" air about it.

Pre-faucet days

My memory has blurred and mercifully blocked out the gory details of the pre-faucet days when we had to hoist up six yards of starched cotton saris during squats, even as we held the pleats between the chin and the sternum to get both hands free.

Success was getting the water from the bucket to the anatomy using the dipper without slipping, spilling, or messing up the sari or petticoat. Now imagine this on a moving train!

Then one morning a kind person, who loves his mother, sister or daughter dearly, designed a hand-held faucet – a distant cousin of the French bidet.

Indian women have blessed him daily and never looked back even as they forgot him.

Till they are trapped in a toilet without one.

Mind the mental clutter

Just as we keep the inbox clear of junk mail, garbage in and around the human system needs to be discarded to prevent dissonance and chaos

Ram Krishna Sinha
rkrishnasinha@hotmail.com

Similar to how we keep our mail inboxes and computer discs free of clutter, we need to keep our internal world – mind, heart and soul – free of chaos for the sake of health, happiness and peace.

Our computers have folders for unwanted files named "junk" and "trash".

Email apps restricts unwanted mail from coming into our inbox and directs them to the "junk" folder. The trash folder has the mails we delete. In any case, we want them to stay away. Clearly, inbox is an important space in the Internet system, and thus, it is natural that we constantly try to keep it clean.

As junk and trash, there is a lot of garbage in and around the human system as well. They need to be identified and discarded as soon as possible. If not done in time, they cause dissonance and chaos in our physical, mental and emotional space.

Slow accumulation

Identifying junk is not always easy though. Take physical clutter, for instance. It gets accumulated slowly and silently.

Helped by the modern consumer culture, it keeps piling up. Though large part of it may be useless, we don't discard them. Lack of mindfulness, indecision, procrastination, laziness or sentimental attachments could be some excuses or reasons. As visual noise, they diminish our focus and productivity, and snatch our serenity. Preventing us from finding what we need, they distract us from what we want to do.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Yet, clutter is not all about physical possessions. It could be our emotional ties to a person or desire, to a time gone by or a worry of tomorrow.

As emotional baggage, it occupies our mental space as grudges, regrets, hurt and pain and constantly drains us.

Unless we are mindful, we may gather emotional noise through social media as well. Seduced by the possibility of unlimited friends in a virtual world, the obsession often assumes insane proportions. In the process, we also risk diluting our network of friends. Instead of nurturing the ties which enhance emotional well-being, we dissipate our vital resources of time, energy, and emotions in superficial connects, and invite anxiety and toxicity.

In this information age, bombardment of information could be yet another source of junk. Sure, we need information. But the consumption of information needs to help the process of "character building" and "man-making", as Swami Vivekananda envisioned. "Education is not the amount of information that is put into brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life."

Blind to the trivial

The seduction of information blinds us from differentiating "triviality" from "value" in information.

Amid the undigested, undistilled sea of information, we get clueless about information that carry meaning and value.

It is then difficult to identify misinformation and disinformation, fake news and hate news, rumour and propaganda, and isolate or discard them.

Similar to how we keep our inbox clean, we need to keep our mind and heart also free of clutter and chaos, for the sake of health, happiness and peace.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover Story

India bagged a Grand Prix for the film *All We Imagine as Light* at Cannes 2024, perhaps the first award at the film festival since Independence, after *Neecha Nagar* in 1946. ('Inside India's milestone Cannes outing'; May 26) Though India produces hundreds of movies and documentaries commercially, there are few movies eligible for Cannes and the Oscars. The Indian film industry must produce movies that have high quality in all spheres and grab the centrestage.
R.V. Baskaran

The role of Indian movies in global communities and their improving hold on film festivals signal a rising interest in Indian movies and the inflow of youngsters into movie-making. The blend of new talent with immersive technologies helps in exploring every nook and corner, leaving no place or genre unturned. Funding reinforcements are the need of the day to avoid bottlenecks to Indian cinema reaching global platforms.
Viveka Vardhan Naidu Bhyripudi

Political stardom

Nowadays, political parties seek out famous movie stars for their campaigns just to draw big crowds. ('Politics of sweet nothings'; May 26) When issues such as women's safety and unemployment are rife, it is laughable that these beauty stars talk about *doi*, cows and grass. Beyond photo-ops and publicity, movie stars would be of little help to political parties.
D. Sethuraman

Dignity in death

When the pandemic was sweeping across the country, even the kith and kin of those who had lost their lives were not allowed to conduct the last rites of their loved ones. ('Iqbal Mamdani: bidding them farewell'; May 26) At such a crucial juncture, Mamdani and others like him ensured that the departed were given a decent farewell, and this is really commendable. The spirit of service displayed by Mamdani and his team transcends all barriers.
C.V. Aravind

Weaving lives

The Risha history seems to be a magnum opus on the traditional garment of Tripura that symbolises their indigenous history. ('Risha: woven by peasants and princesses'; May 26) It is good to learn that the publication is well supported by rare photographs from the turn of the 19th century. Marg and the designers, Arartik Dev Varman and Jisha Unnikrishnan, who had researched the subject, deserve our heartfelt accolades.
N. Rama Rao

Egalitarian romance

The story evocatively tells us how patriarchy was won over by a young bride in her in-law's house without bad blood. ('Marriage is like a *tanga*'; May 26) It underscores what novelist Mary Wollstonecraft said: "I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves."
A. Raveendranath

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Can't we keep the noise down?
It's a free-for-all in generating high-decibel sound in any public place in India
Viji Narayan

Being patient
There are several things in life which cannot be sped up to our needs and foibles
Rishi Kanna

A solitary election campaign
He didn't seem like a politician. He just seemed to be a common man in a car, who we saw and smiled at
Simran Sidhu

Nurturing empathy
In an era marked by polarisation and intolerance, it's a virtue that serves as a powerful antidote
Vinit Mishra

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

BOATMAKERS OF THE SOUTH

Standing the test of time
(Clockwise from right) Sathyan Edathodiyil standing next to an *uru*; a small *uru* anchored outside M/S Haji PI Ahmed Koya's long yard; and P.O. Hashim at his *uru* museum. (K. RAGESH)

DON'T LET THE BEYPORE *URUS* SINK

The boat-making craft from Kerala has remained unchanged for centuries. But lack of opportunities and new craftspeople could scuttle it

Sruthin Lal

A warm summer evening breeze wafts through the workshop in Beypore, where two colossal wooden boats, nearly as tall as a coconut tree, tower over the workers resting on the floor. Through the labyrinth of wooden planks and thick ropes, Sathyan Edathodiyil, the master carpenter or *maestiri*, makes his way, carrying a jug of lemonade for the men.

Constructing the two vessels, *or urus* as the locals call them, has been challenging for the third-generation *maestiri*. The project, commissioned by a businessman in Qatar, should have taken less than two years, but has stretched to five – delayed by the 2018 Kerala floods and the pandemic. Now, with monsoon approaching, he has to wait a few more months to get the clearance to take the boats to Qatar.

Urus are large wooden dhows (one- or two-masted ships) built by skilled artisans in Beypore, a sleepy town to the south of Kozhikode in Kerala. Built by hand using traditional methods passed down through generations, they were once highly sought-after trading vessels by Arab traders. While dhows are made in Salaya and Mandvi in Gujarat, and earlier in Mangaluru, the *urus* are renowned for their superior craftsmanship and durability.

"I am perhaps among the last five or six remaining carpenters with the full knowledge of making the craft," says the 59-year-old. His white shirt and *lungi* are liberally dusted with wood shavings and stained with soil. His soft voice is dejected as he adds, "I don't know what will happen after us."

No bride, no job security

Beypore, on the banks of the Chaliyar River, rose to prominence in boat-making in medieval times. The town's superior craftspeople, availability of good quality timber from nearby forests, and its proximity to the bustling Kozhikode port, which, under the rule of the Zamorins (from the 13th century) was a major hub of international trade, all helped.

Some historians argue that the Arabs, who were active seafarers with their own dhow-making traditions, introduced this particular style of ship-building to local Hindu craftsmen of the Asari community, who then further developed it indigenously. Its uniqueness is that the *maestiris* build the ships without blueprints. Traditional knowledge is passed on through apprenticeships. "But today there is no job security, or even a certificate if youngsters take it up," says Edathodiyil, who has been building *urus* for over four decades. "They might not even get a bride if they become boat builders." His son didn't want to follow his path and is pursuing chartered accountancy. Diversification could be a solution for the community. Also, as Edathodiyil states, "The government should do something to promote *urus*, and the communities associated with it."

Success on the other side

Across the river, P.O. Hashim, who runs the only other *uru*-making yard in Beypore, has a different story to tell. His family business is doing well. There is a 100-ft *uru* anchored just outside his long yard, ready to set off for Qatar. Two smaller *urus* are nearly finished. The latter is his innovation – to expand to newer markets such as Europe, as they can be easily carried there on container ships.

Sitting in his office, Hashim, 69, shares that helming the 140-year-old, family-run boat-building company is a matter of prestige. "At our peak, M/S Haji PI Ahmed Koya used to make 15 to 20 *urus* a year," he says. This reduced when the demand for cargo *urus* declined. So, Hashim diversified. He saw an opportunity in making vessels for luxury and tourism. Today, he focuses on building *urus* with ornate designs for premium clients in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Dubai. According to industry sources, *urus* can cost over ₹5 crore, depending on its size and level of craftsmanship. The smallest *uru* made in his yard is 20 feet long and 4 feet tall, and the largest – used as a floating restaurant – is 140 feet long and 25 feet tall (more than half the length of a football field).

Hashim is also an ambassador for *urus*. He travels extensively in the Gulf region, gives interviews to Arab television, and has an active presence on Instagram. "I have got orders through them [social media]," he reveals. He has a first-of-its-kind private *uru* museum in the city and represents India at the International Dhow Festival in Qatar. One of his *urus* was showcased at the Cultural Village during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. But in the years to come, the industry will need a more concerted push to stay alive.

Need for private entrepreneurship

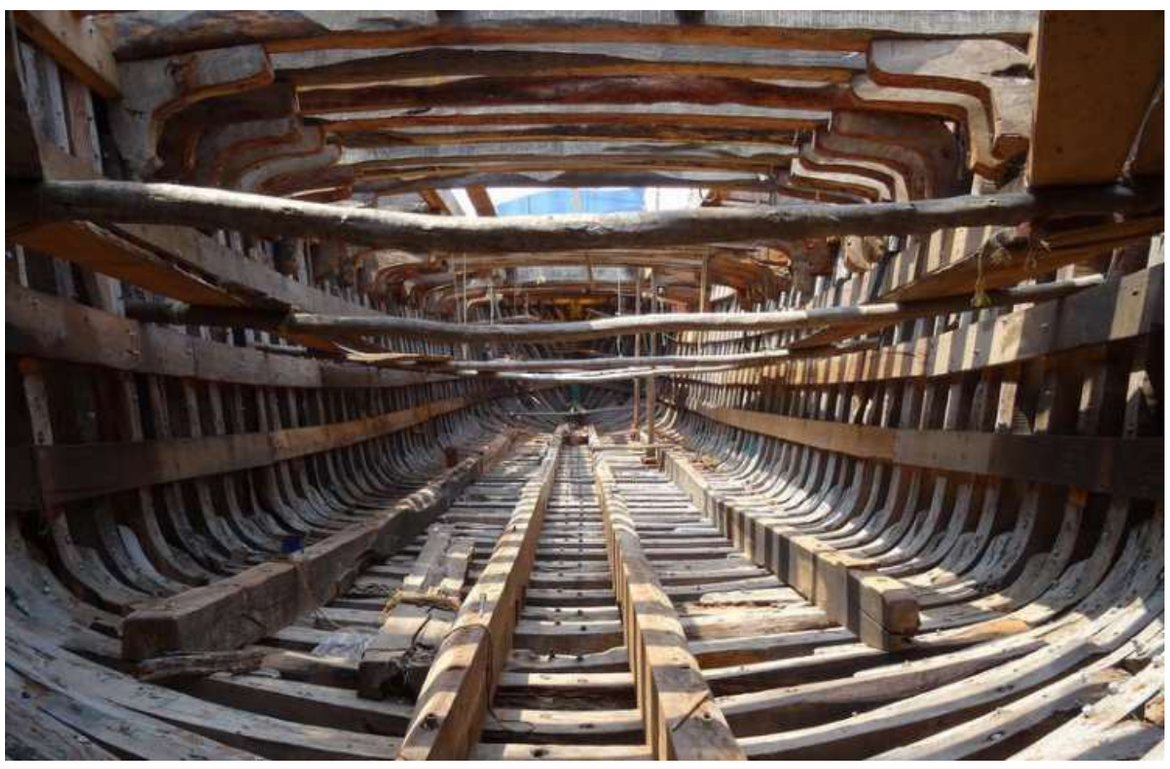
While wooden ships have disappeared from Indian coasts, there is still a thriving dhow industry in West Asia. DP World, Dubai, for instance, handles 1.3 million metric tonnes of goods through dhows annually. "Dhows are a greener and cheaper option to transport cargo, even for India," says Krishna Prasad, a shipping professional with a Ph.D in modern dhow shipping and its relevance to India. "We can tap their potential if there is a push from the government." Meanwhile, the Kozhikode District Tourism Promotion Council is trying to organise the carpenters to get the craft a GI tag.

Private entrepreneurship is another solution. "In the 1990s, an entrepreneur spotted the potential of Kerala's inland cargo boats. Now, houseboats are one of the most iconic things that defines the State's tourism," says Rajkumar K., CEO of Kerala Tourism Mart. "If entrepreneurs tapped into the potential of these historic boats, new possibilities could open up."

The writer is the co-founder of ARPO, an organisation that promotes culture and heritage.

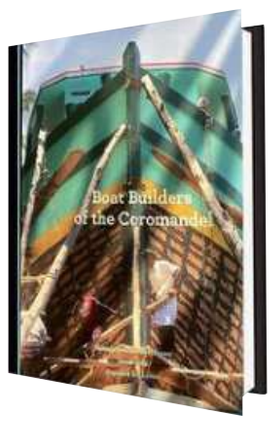
A communal ecosystem

Uru-making involves several communities. The businessmen (or agents, as they are called) have historically been Muslim, mostly of Arab ancestry, while the carpenters are Hindu. A unique community that is completely dependent on the *uru* industry is the Mappila Khalasis. Traditional dockyard workers and the second highest-ranking members on a building yard, their expertise lies in moving weights and launching the boats on completion. "Currently, there are less than 20 of us. And all of them are around my age," says Ummer, who is in his 70s.



Mistris of Thaikkal

With a decade-long research backing it, Tara Books' new title delves into Tamil Nadu's traditional boat yards



Menaka Raman

These days, 'making something' can be as easy as opening an AI generator, keying in a few phrases and hitting enter. But of course, one cannot predict or comment on the quality of what is made. *Boat Builders of the Coromandel* (Tara Books) deals with something that is at diametrically opposite ends to this kind of assisted creation. The book – by Balasubramanian Dhandapani, a research engineer; Denis Vidal, a social anthropologist; and Gopinath Sricandane, a visual documentation specialist – is a study in patience, skill and craft.

The creators spent years researching and documenting the work of close to 300 artisanal boat builders in Thaikkal, a small hamlet near Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu, for a project on the relationship between 'low' and 'high' technologies. They approached Tara Books to help turn a decade's worth of interviews, research and photographs into a book. "As researchers, it is our responsibility to share our findings with society," says Dhandapani over email. In addition to the book, a documentary film, *Of Wind and Wood - Sustainable Cargo Ships in France and in India*, has been screened at festivals across Europe and in Puducherry.

I'm no boat enthusiast and yet I found myself drawn to Thaikkal's history, the chaotic boat-building yards, its people, and the very act of boat-building itself.

An apprenticeship model

A colonial port, Cuddalore once saw small crafts called *vattai* ferry goods between ships docked at mid-sea and the shore. Fishermen discovered they were good business and invested in them, over time intuiting the need for larger wooden boats that could carry heavier cargo. "We were interested in this evolution and how traditional forms of craftsmanship have not only been preserved but also renewed and redeveloped locally," says Dhandapani.

Handmade on the coast
(Clockwise from above) Workmen splitting wood; the frame of a boat being built; and a worker applying tar as waterproofing. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

While the majority of boats are commissioned by the shipping industry for commercial purposes, some clients order them as memorials to honour family elders. The boats are built by maritime carpenters, the majority of whom belong to the fishing community. Doubling up as sailors, caulkers, and *mistries*, they have acquired their skills over years. Some start young, and become apprentices after dropping out of school to support their families. Kathiravan Mistri, one of the builders, says that all apprentices begin with sundry tasks such as cleaning, fetching tools. "You don't start out with a chisel. You earn your way towards it," he says.

The builders follow a 'plank-first' approach. The sides of the boat (the planking) are built using wood imported from Southeast Asian and Central African countries. Teak and *iluppai* are preferred for the frames, as they are hard and can withstand salt water, and are sourced locally.

Unsung talent

The authors observe that the builders do not hold on to customs rigidly. Instead, they are "flexible and open" in their approach, adapting their ways of working to the task ahead. When motorised boats became the norm, they adapted their techniques and changed the size and design of the boats. No doubt, this approach has helped the small industry remain relevant even today.

Making by hand is a long and enduring tradition in India and yet, as the authors say, "In a caste society like India, a lot of respect is given to text whilst practical work that requires hard labour is devalued. None of the boat builders in Cuddalore have a formal education in naval architecture, but the vessels they build cross the seas, provide livelihood and contribute to the economy."

One of the quotes in the book that stayed with me was from Anotoni Ignaci, a Tuticorin *tindal*, who says, "Nobody knows about what we do. Or that we have this talent for building boats." Hopefully, this book will change that.

The writer is a children's book author and columnist based in Bengaluru.