THE HINDU
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magazine

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LGBTQIA+ creatives share how they are reclaiming their identity in heteronormative spaces, and why there is a need for more conversations

QUEERING THE CULTURE

Jishnu Bandyopadhyay

For Navin Noronha, everything is grist for a joke – from his mother asking his vegan boyfriend how he got his 'protein', to sarcastic observations on how cool things historically happened to gay people, be it Grinder or HIV. And if it's insensitive, he isn't sorry. His lived reality is one where queerphobic humour is pervasive. "For the longest time [and even today], jokes at the expense of the queer community have not only been accepted by the masses, but are also encouraged by them," says the Mumbai-based comic.

A decade into his comedy career, he is one of the few openly queer comics in India. "Straight comics have long gotten away with the mockery of transgender and queer people. Yet, it's still controversial to tell jokes about political leaders or the government, or talk about queer sex on stage, without becoming a target," says Noronha, 33. So, in a crowd of comics who comfortably talk about their heterosexual relationships, he is not trying to be a 'queer comic' – just someone who can speak as freely about his life as anyone else.

In heteronormative spaces across the country, queer creatives are reclaiming their identities with flair and resilience. Despite a global resurgence of regressive policies impacting LGBTQIA+ individuals – from the U.S. administration's DEI pullback, which is having a ripple effect in India, to the country's denial of same-sex unions and adoption rights – a wave of queer artists, comedians, musicians, filmmakers, and authors have been telling their stories with hopes of a better tomorrow. This surge is propelled by a desire to reclaim spaces, create community, and use art as a powerful tool for activism and self-representation, especially in a post-Section 377 landscape where legal recognition for the community is still evolving.

> **The more we [the world] tend** to return to a heteronormative framework of living, thanks to the powers that be, the more powerful our [queer] stories have to become
>
> **JAYDEEP SARKAR**
> Filmmaker

"It is most important to tell our stories in times like these than at any other," says filmmaker and writer Jaydeep Sarkar, 44. Outside the checkboxes of pink-washing and capitalistic ideas of queerness, he believes people need to not only look at queer stories but look at the world through a queer lens. "The more we [the world] tend to return to a heteronormative framework of living, thanks to the powers that be, the more powerful our [queer] stories have to become," adds Sarkar, who walks the talk with his reality show *Rainbow Rishta* and campaigns with national dailies that aim to integrate queer identities into the mainstream.

> **The arts have always benefited** from queer ideas, work and labour. But it has never been ready to welcome us in positions of power or visibility
>
> **TRINETRA HALDAR GUMMARAJU**
> Trans actor and social media influencer

(Clockwise from above) Trinetra Haldar; Jaydeep Sarkar; Navin Noronha; and Priyank Sukanand.

Challenging the status quo

Society may be becoming more aware and accepting of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, but it's not enough. Filmmaker Kris has been frequenting the Bangalore Queer Film Festival for the last 17 years, but has never seen a lesbian love story with a happy ending. "Often, I saw gay men having a lot of fun on screen – sexually liberated and proud." This led her to want to tell a sapphic story that celebrated afab (assigned female at birth) identities without inhibitions.

"I rallied my friend, film director Mujeer Pasha, to teach me how to write the film I wanted to see," says Kris, 37. Her desire birthed Kris' debut feature, *Nisha*, currently in post-production. The film focuses on chosen family – the only place of support and community for many queer individuals who are not accepted by their blood relatives – without a tragic conclusion in sight.

Similarly, Vivek Tejuja, 43, wrote *So Now You Know: Growing Up Gay in India* because he did not see authentic queer stories spotlighted while growing up. The 2019 book went on to define the coming-of-age queer experience in India. "I feel like there are voices [now], but the publishing world needs to look beyond Pride month and promote queer stories throughout the year," says the Mumbaikar.

In Bengaluru, poet and musician Rumi Harish aims to do this, too. A trans man, he has found queerness adding value to his practice of Hindustani music. "Concepts of gender, caste, class and body have always been a point of exploration for me. And cis-het people have gatekept many parts of our culture that have always had space for queer identities," says Harish, sharing how there are *ragas* such as *Miyan ki Todi* and works by Sufi musician Amir Khusro, with same-sex intimacy, that people have conveniently ignored – and he is bringing back.

"Singing my *khayals* [a form of Hindustani known for its melodic improvisation], alternating between the roles of Krishna and Radha, allows me to play with gender without asserting one or the other identity to the audience." Harish is now building a small but strong community of queer people who have started exploring their own journeys with classical music.

> **With my work [at the** intersection of hospitality and education], I want to make room for complexity and contradiction, to create intersectional third spaces that put respect first
>
> **PRIYANK ASHA SUKANAND**
> Chef and Cordon Bleu alumnus

Being different in the mainstream

As Mumbai-based trans actor and social media influencer Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju says, "The arts have always benefited from queer ideas, work and labour. But it has never been ready to welcome us in positions of power or visibility, especially in post-colonial rule."

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4

PRIDE MONTH

GETTY IMAGES

IN CONVERSATION

POETRY'S ROLE IN QUEER VISIBILITY

Wonderful poems can arise from fear and codes, as well as from self-disclosure and pride, says Harvard professor Stephanie Burt

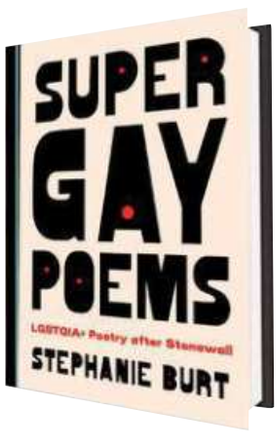
Saurabh Sharma

Stephanie Burt, the Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker Professor of English at Harvard University, has edited a new, remarkable anthology titled *Super Gay Poems: LGBTQIA+ Poetry after Stonewall* (Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press). Each of the 51 poems in this collection is followed by lucid, reflective, and insightful commentary by Burt, who sheds light on the transformation of queerness over the decades since 1969, the year of the Stonewall riots, which marked an important chapter in the history of the gay rights movement both in the U.S. and across the world.

In this interview, Burt shares not only the motivation behind collating this work but also discusses how the poems in this collection illuminate the shared queer futures that one had imagined ever since Stonewall, that quintessential moment in the history of transfeminism. Edited excerpts:

Question: *Anthologising is as much an art of record-keeping and celebrating, as it is of making selections based on constraints. What are some of the challenges you faced in putting together this book?*
Answer: As with most such projects, I ended up sad about the poems and poets I had to leave out. Maybe that sadness ended up as the biggest challenge. In practical terms, I had to work to catch up with the eras and kinds of LGBTQIA+ poetry written and published before I was old enough to read it, during the 1970s and 1980s, to ensure I had not left out anything crucial.

A few discoveries startled me, because in a just world, I would've known all about them already: Melvin Dixon, for example. Not so much a challenge as a lot of work I knew I'd have to do, and a lot of work I loved doing: finding more poems and poets written and published entirely outside the U.S. alongside poems about international diasporic experience. Stephanie Dogfoot (Stephanie Chan) is another example.



Q: *Given that these poems were written at a time when the world was more difficult to negotiate as a queer or trans person, I could see the secretive codes in which several poets told their histories, transforming acts of violence and lovelessness into literary devices. Your views?*
A: You're not wrong, although the closet, the maintenance of open secrets, and the need to protect an identity probably had much more influence on the queer poetry written *before* Stonewall – on the generations of Hart Crane, W.H. Auden, [and] perhaps Langston Hughes. *Super Gay Poems* begins with a Frank O'Hara poem ('Homosexuality'), published only in 1970, about queer lives as open, easily detected, and supposed secrets, about the risks that we take in order to feel loved. The next poem after that one (Judy Grahn's 'Carol, in the park, chewing on straws') has to do with coming out, with watching a lesbian announce, unmistakably, the shape of her life. Wonderful poems can arise from fears and codes, but also from self-disclosure and pride.

Q: *Can you reflect on the legal pushback against queer and trans people, the campaigns to take away their rights, and how the written word, poetry in particular, stands as a resistive force towards them?*
A: The farther we go, the more visible more of us get, and the clearer it gets – to cisgender people, to straight people, to people in or near positions of power – that we're just living our lives, that we can't go back, that we're not a threat to them ... [and] the harder it gets for sociopaths, bigots, and opportunists to hurt us.

Cisgender gay adults found legal protection in the U.S. after they found some cultural acceptance because people in power knew gay men and lesbians personally. It's one thing to outlaw a scary weird 'other'. It's quite another to tell your sister, your daughter, or your best friend's wife that you want to pass laws that could make them miserable, expose them to violence, or (especially in the case of trans children) kill them. I do think more visibility, sooner, helps keep us safe.

Literature, writing, and poetry – the shortest and most easily circulated of all literary kinds, maybe of all the art forms – have a part to play in that visibility. It shows us that we've got a history. That we're not just a trend. That we're certainly not alone.

The interviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and cultural critic. Instagram/X: @writerly_life

Poet and editor Stephanie Burt (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

After the retreat

An anthology of 24 writers from South Asia, following a residency, features stories of longing and marginalised identities

Kinshuk Gupta

One of the central lacunae in Indian queer writing is its sheer lack of rich regional voices. Not only does queer literature still remain largely Anglicised, but the parameters of its criticism are also dictated by Eurocentric notions, thereby gatekeeping local expressions and experiences.

To then read *On the Brink of Belief: Queer Writing from South Asia* is in fact to engage in a suspension of disbelief, as 24 freshly minted writers, standing at the intersection of their marginalised identities, narrate their stories of love and loss, longing and belonging, and the liminal, chaotic spaces that exist in between.

The idea for this anthology emerged after the successful conclusion of two editions of The Queer Writers' Room in 2023-2024, a joint initiative by The Queer Muslim Project and The International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Steered by Kazim Ali (also the editor of this anthology), among others, the week-long writing residency with two queer and trans writers each from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, has become a space for creative nurturing, quiet transformation, and critical interrogation.

The stories in this collection remain obsessed with *djinns*, *shaitans*, and *shakchunnis* – the ethereal, metaphysical, and perhaps queer beings in Islamic mythography that linger between faith and fact.

In her moving essay 'A Fever, a Djinn and the Collectibles of Grief,' Sara Haque draws parallels between herself and the 'rootless, bereaving djinn', after her *dadi*, 'shrunk and shrunk' till she vanished one fine day.

In Ipsa's flash fiction 'On This Afternoon, Like Every Other', the female lover becomes a *shakchunni* (spirit of a married woman), and the act of lovemaking becomes the 'cloying honey of *kolke phool*, being sucked like a fish bone' – the very things that repulse human beings. This coalescence of the divine and the devil finds resonance in another short essay, 'Even Shaitan Showers' by Begum Taara Shakar, where the bathroom, a place of shame, transforms into a place of security. Later, the protagonist wonders: 'I always thought God was in love with Shaitan. Did no one notice that a whole world was created to prove Shaitan wrong?'

Promising voices

This contradiction, this uncertainty, this perpetual state of questioning, for me, is the central tenet of good writing. With queer writing, this rift between being and non-being is accentuated, as the real world offers no refuge.

The beauty of queer writing, then, lies in its refusal to flatten difference and in its power to imagine radical, alternative futures.

The anthology also reinforces the fact that queerness is not constrained to the choice of a partner, but extends to include political engagement, modes of kinship, and everyday resistances. The shifting world order, the metallic claws of capitalism, and the ghettoisation of communities remain overarching themes in stories such as 'Keithal da Eramkhi' by Mesak Takhelmayum, 'Silver' by Kahless Jaden Hameed and Tanisha Tekriwal's 'American Embassy, 2046', where the city is 'lit [not] by the moon but by oil refineries, their silver chimneys keeping the dark a half-dark'.

While the anthology introduces some new, promising voices, it unfortunately delivers more misses than hits. Many of the stories could have been salvaged by skilful editing. These writers are trying hard to cut a new path. Time will tell where it leads them.

On the Brink of Belief
Ed. Kazim Ali
Penguin
₹499

The reviewer is the author of the Hindi short story collection Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chor Darwaja.

GETTY IMAGES

A subcontinent of self

This warmly written bildungsroman deftly navigates the last 50 years of India, with a mix of the personal, the social and the political

Stanley Carvalho

A few friends from school decide to visit another of their ilk in London for a reunion. Amid all the sight-seeing, laughter and nostalgia, the men, now in their 50s, persuade their friend Sandeep to write a book about India.

Thus was born the idea of this warmly written bildungsroman that follows the protagonist and his friends from their innocent, playful school days of the 70s in Delhi to the complexities of being senior professionals in 21st century contemporary India.

The narrative is held together by the two main characters, Devavratt (Dev) and Eklavya (Luv), as the novel juxtaposes description with a conversational style of writing.

The 70s was a testing decade of political and economic upheaval in India, marked by significant social changes and a search for self-definition. The story begins with the author recounting his school and college days in a series of flashbacks about friendship, pranks, teachers, girlfriends, families, festivals, triumphs and failures, while deftly weaving in the changes wrought by the transition from socialism to a market-based economy.

These chapters also stir up memories that many of us grew up with – buying half a loaf of bread, drinking Campa Cola or savouring Nirula's ice-cream, watching family dramas such as *Hum Log* or *Ramayana* on colour TV for the first time, driving a Maruti 800, the rise of cricketer Tendulkar, the Emergency, Indira Gandhi's defeat, and so on.

Force of change

In the 90s, when economic liberalisation was sweeping India, Dev and his contemporaries were early-career professionals, chasing their dreams, travelling across the country on work. The book captures their career graph as they ambitiously juggle work and family as well as the larger cultural and economic changes in all its beauty, diversity and irony.

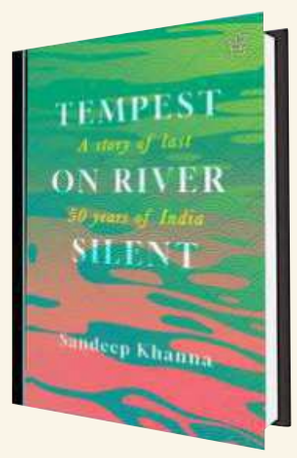
Nationalism, spirituality, materialism, happiness, loneliness and death are deliberated and argued upon when the friends meet, as they strive to strike a balance. During one of their spirited discussions about 'right and wrong', Luv concludes they are both machinations of the mind. Dev concurs, asserting that "right and wrong cannot be cast in stone".

Through the protagonist's journey, the book explores change and the challenges it presents; modernity vis-à-vis tradition, time-tested values versus pressures of modern life, home-life balance against professional success.

Dev's dilemma, seemingly, is reflected in the book's title, *Tempest on River Silent*, a metaphor for the unsettling forces of change (tempest) and everlasting tradition (silent river).

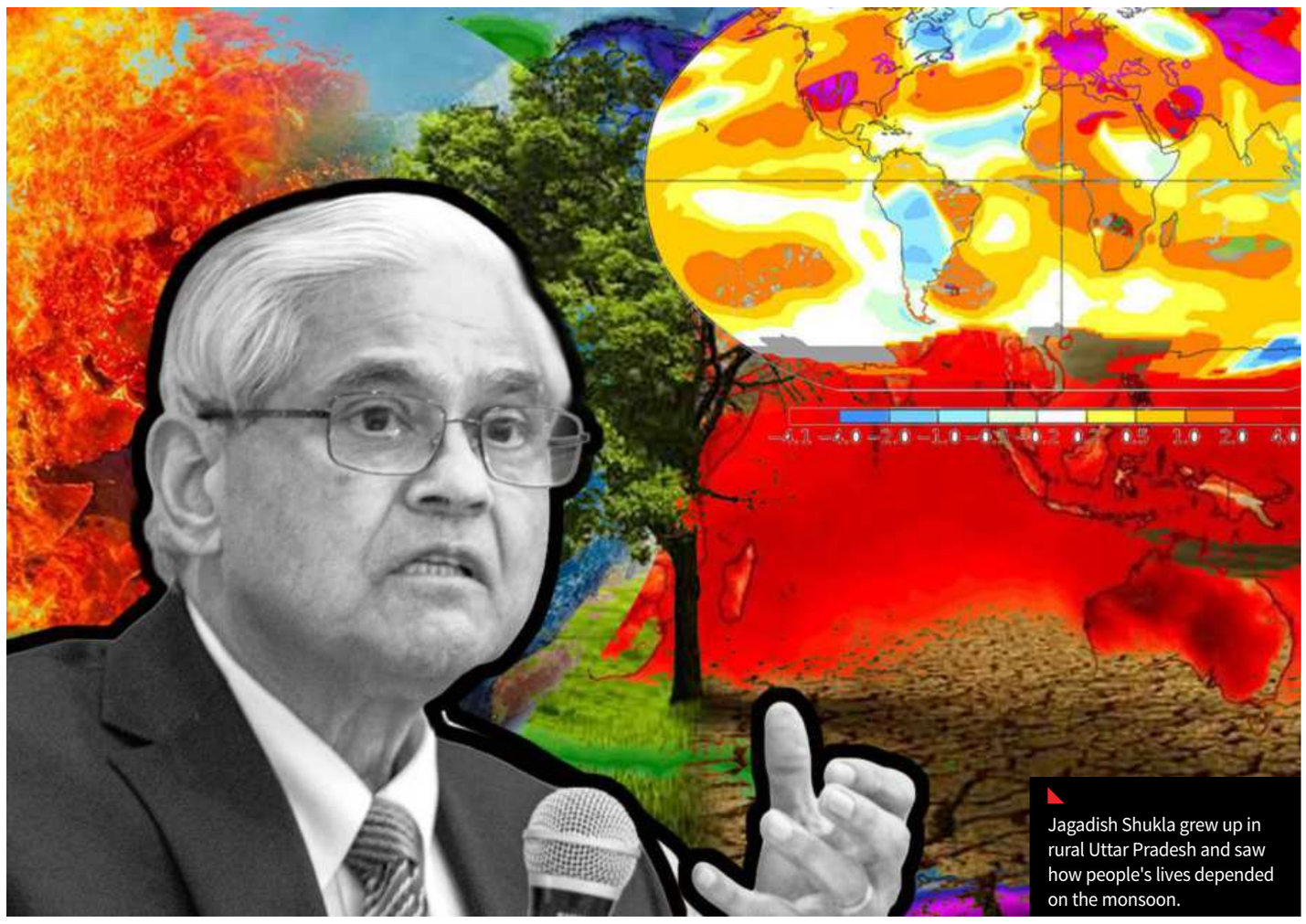
Will the normally phlegmatic Dev be able to face the tempest of change? Or will his life remain a calmly flowing, silent river?

The author, a management professional with a penchant for sports, poetry, history and travel, has endeavoured in writing a book covering the last 50 years in India, elaborating on what he and his friends would often discuss – "the change we have experienced in India in our lifetime has been breathtaking". The unrestrained details – about college life, work and more – can be tedious in spots, however, making the book a bulky read at 640 pages.



Tempest on River Silent
Sandeep Khanna
Niyogi Books
₹850

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist.



Jagadish Shukla grew up in rural Uttar Pradesh and saw how people's lives depended on the monsoon.

INTERVIEW

CHASING THE MONSOON

Jagadish Shukla on the vagaries of weather and why forecasts need to improve

Sunil Rajagopal

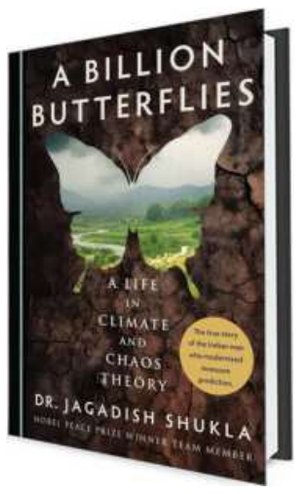
Eminent climate scientist Dr. Jagadish Shukla has devoted a lifetime to improving seasonal weather predictions, and especially monsoonal predictions for India. He grew up in rural Uttar Pradesh and seeing how people's lives depended on the monsoon and information around it, made it his mission to forecast seasonal weather events. In doing so, he has changed the course of modern weather prediction. He tells the story in his new book, *A Billion Butterflies: A Life in Climate and Chaos Theory* (Macmillan), a personal memoir as well as a log about the course weather and climate science has taken. Edited excerpts from an interview.

Question: *One of the things that makes your book fascinating is that it deals with a topic that people talk of daily, but has a limited understanding of. A fascinating line says, "Climate is what you expect, weather is what you get." What does that mean?*
Answer: All that it means is that long-term average weather is climate. Typically, a 30-year average of values is considered as climate. So what you expect to happen on a certain date is based on this, and what actually happens – weather – is over and above that. The reason it is important to understand this is that we tend to think climate is fixed, but it is not. It is changing every day and changing in a well defined manner and it is also different over different places.

Q: *The title of the book and your area of study refer to the chaos theory and thereby the butterfly effect. When applied to climate science, does it really mean that we are looking at the variables that go into the forecast models?*
A: First of all, the equations that define weather and climate are the same; just that weather does not consider some big factors like chemistry, aerosols, etc. The butterfly effect is all about weather. Predictions are based on what happens today and the equations chosen. However, these predictions hold good only for a few days.

Even with improvements in computing and satellite observations, accuracy begins to get tricky after 10 days. This is because the equations which do the prediction are non-linear and small errors on the first day can lead to very large variations a few days ahead. And that's the origin of the word "butterfly effect" as defined by one of my advisers, Professor Edward Lorenz from MIT. What is even more interesting is when he first spoke of this effect on forecasts, he used the analogy of a seagull flapping its wings over an ocean. The butterfly terminology came much later because the actual graphical result of his paper resembles a flapping butterfly!

My motivation when studying



> **First of all, the equations that define weather** and climate are the same; just that weather does not consider some big factors like chemistry, aerosols, etc. The butterfly effect is all about weather. Predictions are based on what happens today and the equations chosen

the monsoon was to find exceptions to the butterfly effect and I found it eventually – it was the ocean temperatures. Science is not just about experiments and ideas; it is also about communicating those ideas. My work showed that once ocean temperatures are included as a factor, even a billion butterflies flapping their wings could not affect it significantly.

Q: *It is evident from your work that meteorology and forecasting has improved dramatically, including in India. How are we placed in terms of how we look at climate change?*
A: The very first supercomputer that came to India in 1989 was for weather. While we have kept pace since and our weather forecasts are comparable to what is happening globally, our monsoon forecasts still need work.

In terms of climate, it is disappointing that developed countries like the U.S. has shown great reluctance to accept the reality of climate change. India requires a national effort towards climate assessment and adaption for buy-in and action from policy makers and effective governance.

Q: *You were the lead author of the IPCC assessment report that shared the Nobel Peace Prize along with Al Gore in 2007. Do you think it was a kind of a global turning point in terms of climate change discourse?*
A: I think so. And it had one good effect as well as a very bad one. The good part was that this was the first time scientists could conclusively state and prove that human activities are negatively affecting global climate. Eight years later at the Paris climate change conference (COP21), nearly 200 countries agreed to a legally binding international treaty to make efforts to limit global warming and temperature rise.

The bad news came from the U.S. and perhaps elsewhere. This was the point where the fossil fuel industry stepped up their attacks on actively trying to disprove climate science through both overt and covert means. It really is the worst combination of politics and profit motives undermining one of society's greatest challenges.

Q: *It almost seems as if your life is driven forward by destiny. And you keep referring to the monsoon. How much of a critical part was it in your early life and in shaping your career?*
A: As far as my personal life was concerned, especially early on, it just felt like things were happening on their own; with many things being beyond my control. It was much later that I started making my own decisions.

So far as the monsoon is concerned, that certainly has been the central part of my journey. In my village Mirdha, monsoons or its failure, had a profound effect on life, including the food on your plate. And so, I went to MIT with a very clear aim – to be able to predict the monsoon. Because that was the way I felt I could help my village, my country, the agricultural community. Twice in my life I was very close to shifting to other spheres of work, but my interest and efforts remained focused on the monsoon.

The interviewer is a birder and writer based in Chennai.

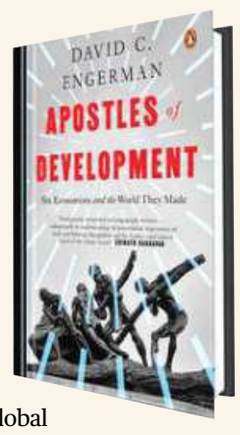
IN CONVERSATION

'Reforms are both economic and political'

Historian David C. Engerman on what he learnt about development from the lives and work of six South Asian economists

G. Sampath
sampath.g@thehindu.co.in

The idea of 'development' is a highly contested one, a site of intense ideological and policy debates. But as an idea, it has shaped the lives of billions in the Global South. In his new book, *Apostles of Development: Six Economists and the World They Made* (India Viking), economic historian David C. Engerman tells the story of international development and development economics through the lives and work of six stalwart economists, all from South Asia: Amartya Sen, Jagdish Bhagwati, Manmohan Singh, Mahbub ul Haq, Lal Jayawardena and Rehman Sobhan. In an interview with the *Magazine*, Engerman spoke about the ideas in his book, the challenges he faced, and why he picked these six 'apostles' in particular. Edited excerpts:



Question: *What prompted this book project?*
Answer: I wanted to write a global history of international development, and experimented with a couple of ways of doing it. When I found that some of the people I was interested in had all attended Cambridge, I started digging, and found there were six South Asian economists who were there between 1953 and 1957. All of them had long, illustrious and highly varied careers, which allowed me to tell a surprising amount of the history of international development and of development economics through their lives and work.

Q: *You are trained as a historian, but your book discusses some complex economic concepts. Did you get some training in economics as well?*
A: At Yale I received a fellowship that allowed me, for a semester, to take courses rather than teach them. I used that to take courses in development economics, although even with those under my belt, I am no development economist.

Q: *Why limit yourself to six economists from South Asia? Did you not consider some from Africa and Latin America as well, given that the book is telling a story that concerns the Global South as a whole and not just South Asia?*
A: I did, but the problem was I could never answer why I chose that particular set of six economists. I did look at the Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, the Saint Lucian W. Arthur Lewis, and the Taiwanese economist, S.C. Tsiang, but I could never get them all in the same room or the same frame. I was also surprised, as I looked into the lives and work of these six South Asian economists, how much they connected with these other economists. For instance, both Lal Jayawardena and Manmohan Singh worked with Prebisch in the course of the 1960s, and they both represented their countries in IMF and World Bank circles over many years. So I felt that, yes, it's a South Asia story, but also a global one. I look forward to the person who writes a similar book about Latin America and Africa.

David C. Engerman.
SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Q: *How long did it take to write this book? What was most challenging and most easy about this project?*
A: It took me six years. One year of that was during COVID, which had both disadvantages and advantages. For a historian, going to the archives and seeing the primary sources is the sine qua non of historical scholarship, but that was impossible for a couple of years. On the other hand, people were sitting at home and available. Even someone with as rigorous a travel schedule as Sen was sitting in Cambridge, happy to speak. So I conducted almost a 100 interviews with the four 'apostles' who were living when I started the book, with the widows of the others, with family members, students, with colleagues, with friends, with rivals, and I built this whole base of oral knowledge that became indispensable for my understanding of these folks. This was the easiest. For a historian who is used to staring at documents, to interact with people, including the very subjects I was writing about was an honour, a privilege and plain fun.

The hardest part was understanding the economics, especially the work of the two academics in the mix, Bhagwati and Sen, and to understand it enough to be able to convey it to readers equipped with even less economic expertise than I do. Here I had a lot of help from other economists and colleagues, and I hope I have represented their work for its intellectual rigour as well as contributions to how we think about and act on development.

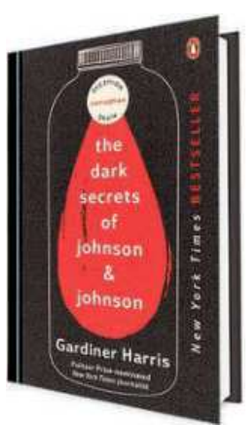
Q: *How much of the credit for India's economic reforms should go to Manmohan Singh, how much to Narasimha Rao, and how much to the World Bank and IMF?*
A: I would leave the World Bank and the IMF mostly out of the picture. Successful reform, especially something as radical as that, is both an economic and political project, and Narasimha Rao was a master politician, managing to work with a difficult party and a divided Parliament in order to usher these policies through. He could not have done it without the economic leadership of Dr. Singh, but the opposite is also true. Dr. Singh told me that he cut a deal when Rao invited him to be Finance Minister. He told him, "To do these reforms, I want your support. If the reforms fail, I'll fall on my sword and take the blame, and if they succeed, then you can take the credit for it." What kind of politician wouldn't want a deal like that?

Scan the QR code to watch Engerman in conversation on magazine.thehindu.com

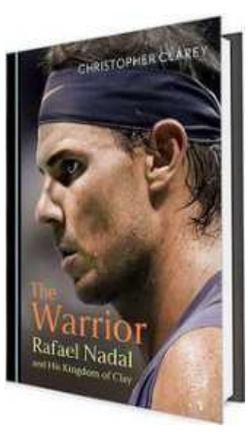
BROWSER

Exploring the Poverty Question
Utsa Patnaik
Tulika Books
₹995
In her new book, Patnaik questions the claim that Asia has seen a large reduction in poverty. Using data from India's National Sample Survey, she says that when a constant nutrition standard is applied over time, poverty is seen to have worsened considerably.

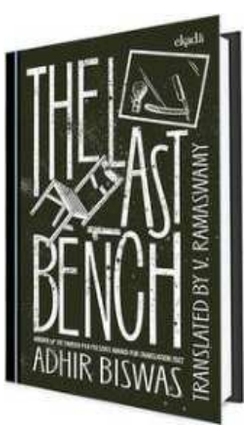
The Dark Secrets of Johnson & Johnson
Gardiner Harris
Ebury Press
₹899
This volume exposes decades of dangerous corporate practices of one of America's most loved baby brands. Johnson & Johnson was marketed as safe, but Harris notes that all the while it was selling a deadly product and implants that broke down inside bodies meant to heal.



The Warrior: Rafael Nadal and His Kingdom of Clay
Christopher Clarey
Hachette India
₹799
Rafael Nadal had a mind-boggling 14 French Open titles when he announced his retirement from professional tennis last year. Roland Garros paid a wonderful tribute to the Spanish star last month, making it the perfect time to read about Nadal's journey and legacy in Clarey's new book.



The Last Bench
Adhir Biswas, translated by V. Ramaswamy
Ekada/ Westland
₹399
First published in Bengali as three separate books, Adhir Biswas' childhood memoir has been translated into English by V. Ramaswamy. Hailing from a family of barbers, Biswas writes about being "invisible in an unequal society". The family had migrated to West Bengal from then East Pakistan in 1967.



QUEERING THE CULTURE

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

The 28-year-old's character Meher in the Amazon Prime series *Made in Heaven* has probably been the most genuine representation of a transwoman in mainstream media, yet she says it is still difficult to navigate an entertainment industry that would readily offer queer roles to straight or cisgender actors.

"I have been very fortunate to transition young, and be in the right place at the right time, but that is not the reality for most trans people in the country." And she is pushing the narrative in her new show, *Kankhajura*, based on *Magpie* by Adam Bizanski, a rural thriller revolving around a group of childhood friends. "The idea of queerness is still depicted as this urban, elite concept. That's just not the case," says Gummaraju, whose roles have been widely talked about – starting a conversation on why non-tokenistic representation is so important for young queer folx growing up in uncertain times, with extreme political upheaval all around them.

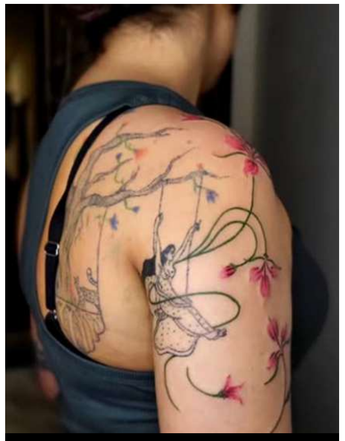
(Top to bottom) Priyanka Divaakar; Rumi Harish; and Simranh Kakkar. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Advocating in diverse fields

Move away from the arts, and one could argue the challenges grow. But it's not without its success stories.

Radio jockey Priyanka Divaakar joined the industry around 15 years ago when "nobody was talking about transgender issues, let alone a trans person". Her show in Kannada – on CR Radio Active, a community channel for marginal groups – helped her enter the *Limca Book of Records* as India's first trans radio jockey.

"In the beginning, the audience criticised my show. They said I sounded like a man, and people would run away when I would try to interview them," she recalls. Divaakar worked on her voice modulation and won over her listeners with her steadfast focus on highlighting grassroots stories that extend beyond queerness. Over her career, she has established herself as a voice for the LGBTQIA+ community. "There are more platforms today, but trans people are still denied work day in and day out. How many transgender and intersex people do you see in any given corporate space? Probably none. I want to see that change and shift," she says. "Once people are around us for long enough, they tend to get comfortable and we become less of this scary thing that is somehow challenging your structure of man, woman, straight, gay."



Behind the tattoo gun

Simranh Kakkar, a tattoo artist based in Bengaluru, thinks that many creative spaces can be quite encouraging of queer identities. But not her field. "Tattoo studios in India can be jarring and hostile spaces for women and queer people, not just for artists but also for clients," she shares. "If you look at history, most traditional tattoo artists were women. But this inherently female art form has been reinterpreted as this masculine art practice." Most studios are still hesitant to hire a woman, let alone queer artists. "I am lucky to have found other queer artists now, who see the art of tattooing as this meaningful and powerful tool and not something that stands for aggression, or unchecked power," says Kakkar, whose bold, vibrant hand-poked designs are made to flow with the body and depict strength through an intrinsic softness.

In hospitality, chef Priyank Asha Sukanand, a Cordon Bleu alumnus, has faced similar challenges. "I have seen how kitchens uphold cis-het ideals of authority, success and communication. As a queer person, I have had to do more than find space – I have had to create it," says Sukanand, 32. Today, he works at the intersection of hospitality and education, and has created a cooking space that is not toxic, but joyful. He is encouraging more trans and underprivileged people to get access to professional cooking, and is focusing on techniques that keep neurodivergence in mind. "With my work, I want to make room for complexity and contradiction, to create intersectional third spaces that put respect first," says Sukanand.

For all these professionals, creative or otherwise, sticking by their queer sensibilities means disrupting systems that reward only certain kinds of narratives. And the disruption has never been more important than in this age of supposed progress where the resurgence of right-wing ideologies globally is actively dehumanising queer lives.

Let's highlight the need for Pride – beyond just the vibrant celebrations and ubiquitous rainbow flags. Queering spaces is about the community, but it is also about liberating everyone who doesn't want to live life like it's a rigid performance of gender and sexuality.

The Mumbai-based writer, artist and editor reports on fashion and culture.

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Many hues Scenes from Pride marches in Pune; and (below) Bengaluru this month. (PTI, SUDHAKARA JAIN)

PRIDE OVER PERFORMANCE

Over the years, the spotlight on Pride marches has increasingly shifted towards fashion and presentation, with many queer persons talking about the pressure to conform to a particular image

On June 30 last year, when IT professional Kavya, who identifies as omnisexual, was leaving her apartment in Chennai to go join a Pride march, she was stopped by members of her housing association. The residents criticised her bold make-up and attire, and also threatened to reveal her queer identity to her house owner.

A week later, she was asked to vacate the flat. "It was a nightmarish experience," says Kavya. "It was a breach of my privacy. I thought the apartment was my safe space where I could express myself."

For Ayushi Mathur of Pune, Pride has always been a deeply emotional space – equal parts celebration and protest. "I remember my first march vividly: the nerves, the rush, and an overwhelming sense of belonging. There's a beautiful power in being surrounded by people who reflect different fragments of yourself. Fashion has often been my refuge when words have failed me. I've used it to carve a space for myself, especially in environments that feel rigid or heteronormative."

But it's a double-edged sword, Mathur says. "At some Pride marches, I've felt quiet, like my look wasn't 'loud enough' to be queer or 'bold enough' to belong. There's sometimes this invisible yardstick about how 'queer' you're allowed to look, which feels ironic in a space meant to celebrate individuality."

Pride marches are both acts of protest and expressions of queer joy, demanding visibility, equality, and safety. According to some members of the LGBTQIA+ community, however, the spotlight has increasingly shifted towards fashion and performance over the years, with performative queerness often taking centrestage.

Stylised ideal

Kavya Dharini, a Hosur-based psychologist who identifies as gender-fluid, talks about the unspoken pressure to be either a "rainbow-drenched" symbol of Pride or to appear as a "respectable, digestible" queer person for cis-het audiences. "I've felt caught between both. As someone who doesn't always want to be on either extreme, I've often felt like I'm not 'queer enough' or 'visible enough'," she says.

Mathur agrees that there is this curated image of queerness that's become "market-friendly". "I've felt the pressure to be either the glitter-covered extrovert or the buttoned-up queer. But the truth is, queerness isn't one aesthetic. It's a spectrum of expression. The pressure to conform – especially within a community that celebrates diversity – is a painful contradiction," she says.

Psychologist Aanchal Narang, founder of Another Light Counselling, adds that a lot of younger queer people who are new to the community are often the ones to feel the weight of perception. "It is also internalised, in the sense that if you have grown up in a particular way for years, and if you suddenly see a bunch of people going around dancing, wearing feathers or extravagant make-up, there's this distance that you want to keep between them and you."

Narang adds that a lack of spaces for the queer community, apart from drag shows, marches or Pride parties, may lend an added sense of pressure and social anxiety.

"When queerness becomes performative or tokenised, it often excludes those who don't fit the mainstream, whether due to class, caste, neurodivergence, or simply by being less visible," says Kolkata journalist and writer Sohini S. "Pride began as protest, but in many places, it now feels like a fashion show led by the most privileged. We need to make space for all queer experiences, not just the loudest."

While she is glad that she has stepped into her bolder self, Kavya admits it wasn't entirely by choice. "I'm introverted," she says. "But being queer in today's world is political. Even in progressive spaces, people assume you're outspoken just because you're queer. That expectation pushed me to perform a version of myself that wasn't fully me. I'm proud of who I've become, but it's disappointing that I had to change to feel accepted."

Using the platform

For Leel Krishna, 20, a stylist from Chennai, Pride is anything but alienating. He describes his first Pride march in three words: "magical, belonging, and emotional". "It evoked a deep sense of belonging, which emotionally empowered me to be openly proud" he adds.

Jaya, who identifies as a transwoman, is the general manager at Chennai NGO Sahodaran, which works for the upliftment of LGBTQIA+ persons. She is also one of the volunteers of the Tamil Nadu Rainbow Coalition, which organises Pride marches in the city. She calls it a celebration. "It is our festival. We show the world our struggle and fight in the form of celebration and festivity. Just like one dresses up for a festival, we too dress up for ourselves on that day." Jaya says a lot of people use the march as a platform to show the world who they are, and to show their solidarity and their identity.

Whether styled up or dressed in a simple *kurta*, one cannot deny that Pride marches provide a space for the queer community to express themselves and foster a sense of belonging. Its ethos – of a liberating and judgement-free space – must be safeguarded at all costs, say LGBTQIA+ members, without succumbing to the pressures of commerce and representational politics.

On-screen identity

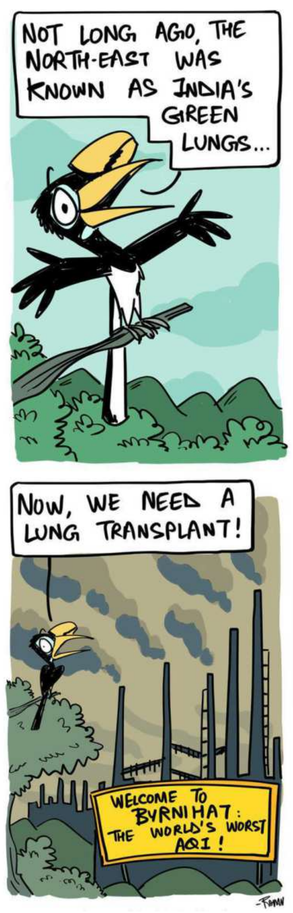
Pride marches alone don't add to the unseen burden of performative or visible queerness — films and social media do it, too. Movies that show being gay as bold, glamorous, and extroverted also limit the experiences of queer folx to a curated and consumable aesthetic.

"Years ago, when I was attending a gay group meeting for the first time, I spent more than 30 minutes trying to find the brightest shirt. It took me a long time to realise that this doesn't define the community. It was just the pictorial reference point we grew up with because we only turned to American cinema then," says Sharif D. Rangnekar, former journalist and human rights activist. He adds that the fashion and aesthetic in shows such as the hugely popular British series *Sex Education*, for instance, may be bold and vibrant, but not every queer person is like that. "Many have simple or quiet fashion preferences, and that should be valid too," he says.

However, the new wave of OTT offerings offers hope. "Conversations around LGBTQIA+ issues in films and OTT have changed drastically over the last four to five years. I see that change more so after the reading down of Section 377 in 2018. There have been more positive portrayals in the OTT space — for instance, *Made in Heaven*," says filmmaker Sridhar Rangayan. He adds that in all his films, he has worked with trans actors playing trans parts, as they bring authentic 'lived' portrayals to the screen.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



WIMBLEDON 2025

WHO'S IN THE ROYAL BOX?

Beyond the appeal of great tennis, Wimbledon's real attraction remains its steadfast adherence to tradition

Gautam Bhatia

The first Wimbledon Championship in 1877 was played on grass; the players wore all-white so as not to detract from the game, and strawberries and cream were served to the spectators. Almost a century-and-a-half later, Wimbledon is still played on grass by players dressed in all-white, strawberries and cream are still served, if not in china dishes, in plastic cups. The Crown remains a patron of the club. As the saying goes, the more things change outside the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, the more they stay the same inside its gates.

Beyond the appeal of great tennis, Wimbledon's real attraction is its singular and steadfast adherence to tradition. Some years earlier, when my wife and I returned home after attending the tournament, we were flooded with questions like: did you have strawberries and cream; did you see David Beckham in the stands; who else was there in the Royal box. The value of the event was only gauged by visible celebrities, food, styles and dress codes. No one asked about Federer or Nadal, or about the tennis itself.

However silly and patently ridiculous many of the game's cultural quirks and customs, the truth is they help link the sport to its origin, and act as an important reminder of where and when it began. The only big tennis event on grass, Wimbledon remains much like the 1877 inaugural tournament when 200 spectators paid a shilling each to watch Spencer Gore win the final in 48 minutes and receive his prize money of 12 guineas.

The Open Championship of golf similarly continues to be played at its original windswept treeless location in St. Andrews on the Scottish coast, the way it was in 1860 when professional golfer Willie Park won the first Claret Jug, and also received a Moroccan leather belt. And Lord's – what to speak of the home of cricket. Opened in 1814, and still owned by the Marylebone Cricket Club, it remains to this day a playfield with a pavilion rather than an impersonal oversized stadium. Tradition finds its own way of doing things.

Holding on to history

Yet, however endearing such allegiance to centuries-old history, for many ultra-modernists, Wimbledon, Lord's, and the Open Championship are seen as regressive and alien in a world rapidly moving on. Every few years, football stadiums, for instance, are expanded and made afresh, and celebrity players are sold and exchanged between clubs in a high-stakes trade.

The sport's technology is so advanced that, short of embedding microchips in footballers' feet, the beautiful game is now a sensory exhibition of the highest order, on television and on the field. Like professional basketball and auto racing, football is a hotbed of high finance, sporting politics and big business.

Tennis, on the other hand, tries hard to stay as far away from technology as possible. For many years, tournament organisers refused a roof over Centre Court because it defied the natural conditions of a game meant to be an outdoor sport. When the management ultimately relented, it took three years to erect a retractable glass structure that functioned so slowly, the grass was soaking wet by the time the roof had moved across the full court. Rain delays and wet grass were a part of tradition, and the $100 million roof expense only helped to keep intact that piece of Wimbledon history. Everyone was happy.

Far away from London

Till now, people over machines has been the preference, but things are about to change. Line judges have been generally elderly and overweight. Since their only task was to determine whether a ball was in or out, other than a short focus on the white line, no physical effort needed to be expended. When English actor Peter Ustinov was once invited to be a line judge at Wimbledon, he politely refused, commenting wryly that he would be no good because he could still see the ball. This year, after one-and-a-half century, humans are being replaced by electronic line judges.

(Clockwise from right) Novak Djokovic; Carlos Alcaraz; Coco Gauff; strawberries and cream; and (below) the Royal Box at Wimbledon 2023. (GETTY IMAGES)

In social and cultural matters however, Wimbledon remains remote and insulated. It reflects nothing of the international multi-cultural character of London. Players are still predominantly affluent and white; ball boys and girls selected from local schools are also essentially white with a smattering of brown and black faces, the numbers in tune with prevailing race statistics. No form of advertising is displayed on court. Players entering centre court must still bow towards the Royal Box if any member of the royal family is present. With security tight, the grounds are a virtual fortress. It is unlikely that the tournament would be disrupted by a streaker, even less likely that some labour union protest would mar the matches, or that an anti-Brexit supporter would parachute into centre court and hold royalty hostage.

Some things never change

As the 2025 Championship begins this week, the club will be a frenzy of heightened activity. Truck-loads of strawberries will arrive from nearby Kent, and be set in cups; cartons of cream will be on order. Acres of hydrangeas will be readied to line the courts, yew hedges trimmed. Grass on the courts will be clipped to a precise 8 mm height, the court lining machine will spill out chalk on 50 mm wide lines, while electronic measures will calibrate net heights throughout the complex. 256 of the world's best players – among them Alcaraz, the recent French Open winner, Sinner, Sabalenka, Gauff, and the ever-present Djokovic – will arrive for a prize money share of $68 million, and an expected world audience of 50 million viewers.

But who cares. The main question is whether King Charles and Queen Camilla will be present. Will this year's crop of strawberries be ripe and juicy, and the cream fresh. Who else will be there in the Royal Box? Some things are not meant to change.

The writer is an architect.

Kunal Ray

Sebastião Salgado's shot of Mumbai; and (below) the photographer. (KUNAL RAY & GETTY IMAGES)

TRIBUTE (1944-2025)

Sebastião Salgado: A life in images

Why a personal encounter with the legendary photographer's work, which also featured Indian cities, felt both special and powerful

In June 2022, I arrived in Paris for a conference. I landed a few days early and indulged in the usual delights – eating, walking, and visiting museums. A friend who lived and worked in the city was immensely generous in his hospitality and offered to show me around. One day, as I stepped out of the metro station, my attention was drawn to a bamboo structure in the middle of a fairly large public square, surrounded by towering buildings. The square was alive with activity – employees leaving work, travellers entering or exiting the metro station, families out for a stroll, and immigrants selling Paris-themed merchandise. The bamboo structure was an anomaly.

When I went closer, I saw the name Sebastião Salgado written in bold. My questions were partially answered and I slowly realised where I had accidentally arrived. I had almost forgotten that Paris was, after all, Salgado's city, a place he called home after leaving Brazil in 1969 in protest against the military dictatorship.

Economist turned photographer

Born on February 8, 1944, in Aimorés, Salgado earned a Ph.D in economics in Paris before becoming a full-time photographer. Celebrated for his black-and-white images of humanity and nature, he died of leukaemia in Paris on May 23, 2025, at the age of 81. He developed the illness after contracting a particular type of malaria in 2010. Salgado is survived by his wife, Lélia, their two sons, Juliano and Rodrigo, and two grandchildren, Flavio and Nara.

The story goes that Lélia gifted him his first camera. Salgado would later say that photography gradually "invaded" his life, eventually leading him to end his career in economics.

I was thrilled at the chance to see Salgado's work up close. Until then, like many of his admirers in India, I had only seen his photographs in books or digital reproductions. In Paris, museum visits and exhibitions are usually booked months in advance. But here I was in the middle of nowhere, watching the work of one of the most well-known photographers in the world without any prior planning. Anybody who was interested could walk in. There were no long queues, just an entry ticket. It felt like a powerful example of art reaching out to people beyond the confines of elite institutions. And this is something that Salgado believed in.

Documenting nature and humanity

Lest we forget, it was his frequent trips to Africa and Latin America during his stint as an economist at the International Coffee Organisation in London that turned him into a full-time photographer. He began photo-documenting coffee production in Africa and Latin America, and this made him leave his job, and become a freelance photographer with the photo agency, Sygma.

Social documentary was at the core of his practice. His largely black-and-white photographs captured a wide range of issues: economic adversities, the impact of climate change on mankind, shrinking natural habitats, among other socio-economic challenges plaguing the world. Critics often accused him of 'aestheticising misery'. In an interview with *The Guardian* last year, he said, "Why should the poor world be uglier than the rich world?... I came from the third world... The pictures I took, I took from my side, from my world, from where I come."

As I moved through the exhibition, the intention behind its design and curation became increasingly clear. The bamboo structure housing Salgado's photographs had been designed by Colombian architects Simón Vélez and Stefana Simic, both renowned for their work in sustainable architecture. The exhibition itself was curated and designed by Salgado's wife and long-time collaborator, Lélia.

Timeless monochromes

The central theme of the exhibition was water. As with his previous work, all the photographs were in black and white. This aesthetic echoed his other major projects, including his Amazon series and the large-scale reforestation initiative in Brazil, where he and Lélia oversaw the planting of more than 2.5 million trees on degraded land.

And there are many more – *Workers* (a series on manual labour), *Migrations* (on people displaced by socio-economic and environmental factors), *Other Americas* (lives of peasants in Latin America) and his photographs of gold mine workers in Brazil. Here was an artist who was a tireless commentator and documentarian. *The Salt of the Earth* (2014), a biographical documentary directed by Wim Wenders and Salgado's son, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, offers a beautiful portrait of the artist and his work.

The pavilion built to exhibit Salgado's work was directly conversant with the photographs on display, evoking the need for ecological balance and preservation. There were photos from across the globe, with water as the central metaphor. India was prominently represented too, with scenes from Mumbai, Varanasi, Kolkata, and parts of Rajasthan. Standing there, surrounded by these powerful images in the heart of a foreign city, felt like a profoundly special moment.

I returned to the exhibition several times, lingering before each photograph to take in the intricate details – the people, the ecosystems, and the habitats that Salgado had so meticulously documented. His deep humanism radiated through every frame. With Salgado's passing, the world has lost a great chronicler of our turbulent times. The truest tribute to his legacy is to embrace his message – one of compassion, conservation, and co-existence.

The writer is a critic and cultural commentator, and teaches at FLAME University, Pune.

Stirring memories and moral questions *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*; and (left) a chalk portrait of Caravaggio.

CHASING CARAVAGGIO: FROM ROME TO BENGALURU

Lover, murderer, artist — the Italian may have been cancelled had he lived today, and yet there's so much more to the painter. A 'fan' goes behind his work and his notoriety

Suresh Menon

I have visited Italian painter Caravaggio in many cities – London, Florence, Rome, Venice, Paris. Now here he is, returning the visits, a guest in my hometown Bengaluru, where *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* is on display at the National Gallery of Modern Art. Caravaggio had carried the painting with him while escaping to Naples after murdering a man at a tennis court in Rome. This was in the 17th century, but the question, can you separate the art from the artist, continues to trouble us.

Caravaggio painted people from the streets (upsetting people by using a prostitute as model for the Virgin Mary). But he is said to have painted the Bengaluru work (in a manner of speaking) from memory; the memory of a love affair with a prostitute, Lena. She is imagined with her head thrown back, hair loose and shoulder exposed, fingers clasped and lips parted in ecstasy. A teardrop has begun its journey. This, in response to a resurrected Christ revealing himself. It is a picture of abandonment and loss, too. Caravaggio's loss of his love. In combining the personal and the universal, Caravaggio pointed a way for all art.

Everything we know about Caravaggio, born Michelangelo Merisi, comes from police reports and court records of the many crimes of the artist that French writer Stendhal called "a wicked man". Contemporaries writing a decade after his death – self-serving narratives, according to a recent biographer – give us some events. He died at 39, either murdered, or following malaria, of syphilis, or owing to lead poisoning from his paints. There are 70 or 89 or 106 paintings of his in existence – uncertainty hovered over his life, work and death.

Painting the action

Caravaggio was born in 1571, seven years after Marlowe, Shakespeare and Galileo. He was the first modern painter, creating the new world of art, literature, and science with his contemporaries.

He was a pioneer of modern cinematography, too. Director Martin Scorsese has acknowledged his debt to the artist who chose to paint a moment not at the beginning or at the end of an action, but "during the action... it was like modern staging in a film. It was as if we had just come in the middle of a scene and it was all happening", as he said.

Caravaggio was his paintings. I first saw him at the National Gallery in London where his *Supper at Emmaus* draws you in, making you a participant in the tableau. Two disciples have walked into an inn with a man they befriended along the way. When the stranger blesses and breaks bread, they suddenly realise he is Christ. Caravaggio paints that moment of recognition. The foreshortening of the outstretched arms of one disciple and the perspective of the other about to rise abruptly make it look like a modern photograph (photography wasn't invented for another two centuries). There is a halo over Christ cast by the light from behind the innkeeper. A basket of fruits on the edge of the table is about to tip over. A split second has been eternalised.

Over the years, I have spent hours sitting before the painting. Whenever my wife and I went to London, we joked that it was as much to see our son as to visit the painting. On our bucket list is a visit to every Caravaggio on display. It is a blessing that so many works are in churches, virtually free to view. Occasionally, you dropped a coin into a slot to light up the work as some are in dark niches.

At Rome's Capitoline Museum, there is an unusual Caravaggio – later critics called it a 'genre painting' – *The Fortune Teller*, where a young man looks pleased to get his palm read by a girl. What he doesn't notice, and we do, is the girl removing his ring as she does so.

Perfection of life or work?

Caravaggio was unique. According to a biographer, he had the advantage of not having been taught, which meant he had nothing to unlearn. He had no studio in the conventional sense. He did not draw. He never established a workshop with assistants who painted the boring stuff, he had no circle of pupils.

Yet he influenced every artist who followed. And possibly every viewer, too. It is impossible to stand outside his canvas and not feel the energy, the power and the passion within. It hits you with the force of a falling building or a charging horse.

The Caravaggio Conundrum – how do we weigh an artist's accomplishment against his personal wickedness? – haunts us today as we contemplate the works of Roman Polanski, Woody Allen, and a host of others who provoked the cancel culture. As the poet Yeats wrote: The intellect of man is forced to choose/ perfection of the life, or of the work...

It is a choice individuals have to make for themselves.

The painting is on display at the National Gallery of Modern Art till July 6.

The writer is a prominent journalist and author.

GOREN BRIDGE

Hall of fame worthy

Neither vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

South in today's deal was Larry Cohen, from Delray Beach, Florida. Cohen, an ACBL Hall of Fame member, is retired from competitive play. This is a deal from several years ago.

Cohen won the opening club lead with dummy's ace. shedding a heart from his hand. A diamond to his ace was followed by a diamond ruff in dummy. Cohen ruffed a club in his hand, noting the play of the five from West, and ruffed another diamond in dummy. He cashed the king of hearts and led a heart to his ace. He ruffed another diamond as West discarded a heart. This was the position:

Cohen ruffed the jack of hearts and then ruffed the jack of diamonds with dummy's king of spades as West helplessly under-ruffed. Cohen ruffed a club with a low spade. West over-ruffed but then had to lead a trump into Cohen's ace-jack and the slam came home. Very nicely played.

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

WEST
♠ Q 10 8 7
♡ 9 6 5 3
◇ K 8 3
♣ 7 5

EAST
♠ Void
♡ Q 8 2
◇ Q 7 6 5
♣ K Q 9 8 6 3

SOUTH
♠ A J 6 5 3
♡ A 7 4
◇ A J 9 4 2
♣ Void

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♠	Pass	4◇*	Pass
4♡	Pass	4♠	Pass
6♠	All pass		

*Splinter bid: at least 4 spades, shortness in diamonds

Opening lead: Seven of ♣

NORTH
♠ K
♡ J
◇ Void
♣ J 10 4

WEST
♠ Q 10 8 7
♡ 9
◇ Void
♣ Void

EAST
♠ Void
♡ Q
◇ Void
♣ K Q 9 8

SOUTH
♠ A J 6 5
♡ Void
◇ J
♣ Void

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What are the odds?

Berty Ashley

1 In 2002, the largest currency switch in the world brought to light a statistical anomaly. This process, which traditionally has a 50% chance of either result, was shown to be 56% in favour of one side in Belgium. This was due to the embossed image of King Albert on one side. What is this statistic about?

2 Only 10% of the population has this genetic trait. Interestingly, it is far higher in certain groups: 26% of U.S. Presidents, 30% of Grand Slams in Tennis and a staggering 40% of top batsmen in test cricket. What 'sinister' trait is this?

3 The odds of this happening to an average person are one in 1.2 million per year. The odds increase for hikers, golfers and people living in Florida. Although there is a 90% survival rate, if it does happen, it leaves a scar that looks like the event. What event is this?

4 In probability theory, this particular statistic is counter-intuitive, as a surprisingly low number of people are needed for this to happen. Only 23 people need to be together for the probability to exceed 50%. This means they will share what detail?

5 The odds of getting a specific arrangement when doing this activity is 1 in 8x10^67 (1 followed by 68 zeros). The formula for this is 1 in 52 factorial. The odds of finding a specific item are extremely low and hence when it is done, the feat seems magical. What activity is this?

The odds of this accident happening are rare, but hikers, golfers and people living in Florida are at a higher risk. What is this phenomenon? (GETTY IMAGES)

6 A staggering 90% of the human population contributes to this statistic. Of this, 58.7% are in one single geographical area. Above what imaginary border does 90% of the world live, and of that, where are they most concentrated?

7 The odds of this happening in the wild are one in 3.75 million, but because of a 1975 Steven Spielberg film, there is a lot of fear among tourists. In fact, it is a horrific statistic the other way around, with the subject of the statistic having a one in 10 chance of being killed by a human being. What animal is this about?

8 In 2022, a New Jersey couple on a date were enjoying their seafood dinner when the man felt something rolling around in his mouth. Thinking it was a tooth, he unexpectedly found something precious. What was this 1-in-a-million chance find?

9 Statistically, this is the hardest word to guess in a game of Hangman. This is due to the combination of uncommon letters, with 75% of the word made up of the least common letters. What is this, which is also a complicated form of music?

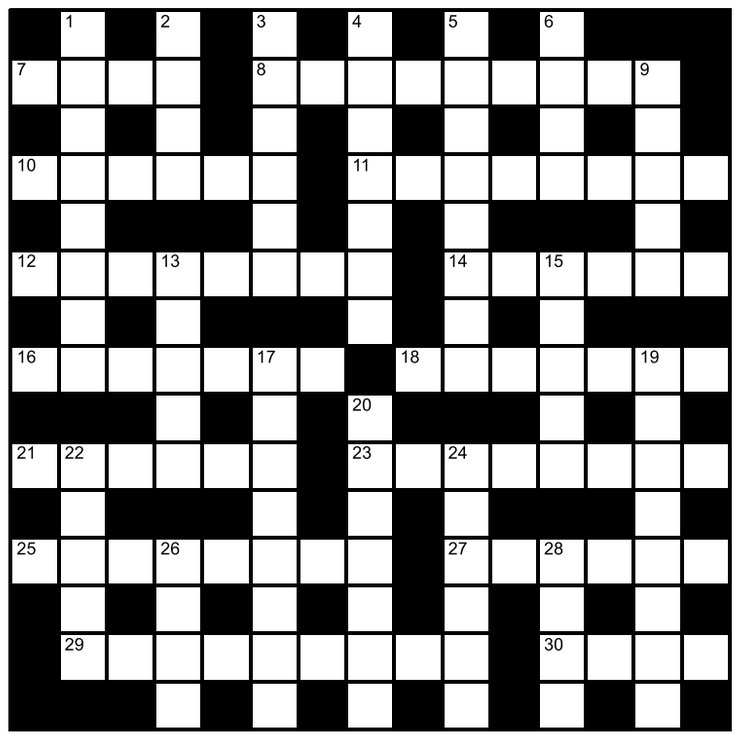
10 In 1998, Bill Morgan almost died in a car crash in Melbourne and then unexpectedly recovered. Believing himself to be lucky, he tried out something for the first time and won. Two weeks later, a news channel asked him to recreate the scene for them, and in doing so, he won again. What did he win (twice) in this one-in-a-trillion event?

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. Flipping a Euro coin
2. Left-handedness
3. Lightning striking the same place twice
4. Have the same birthday
5. Shuffling a deck of cards
6. Above the Equator; Asia
7. Sharks
8. A pearl in an oyster
9. Jazz
10. Won a lottery ticket

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 10 (Set by Incognito)



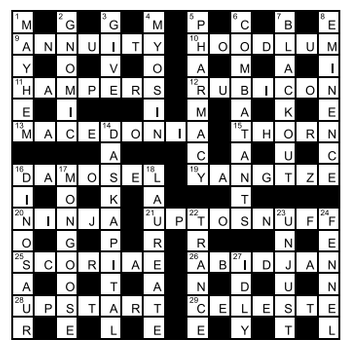
Across

7 Author had rejected student (4)
8 Behind vehicle enclosure, attempt woodworking (9)
10 Beat male entering harem wrongly (6)
11 Tool produced from ear swabs (5,3)
12 Fauna file? (8)
14 Spread nets on wooden projections (6)
16 For example, girl mentioned in echoing song drinks (7)
18 University representative is protecting engineers and referees (7)
21 Beg drunken pal to eat legume (6)
23 Female monsters violently gore second son bearing pole (8)
25 Remove and execute (5,3)
27 Fasteners used in window elsewhere (6)
29 Says, "Fast trains" (9)
30 Dancing one step after releasing pet's snout (4)

Down

1 Guy growing old is running (8)
2 Best platinum ain't missing (4)
3 Tax return on investment after tenth month (6)
4 Plane landed badly destroying car garage (7)
5 Brave Tim translated word for word (8)
6 Eye discomfort from pen point (4)
9 Long pine (5)
13 Study directions, stupid! (5)
15 Fixes unguises (5)
17 Ran leaving first sweetheart... girl ran away to wed (8)
19 See gal breaking initially stunningly superb monocle (8)
20 Voldemort is extra-ordinarily concealing recess (7)
22 Aircraft from Nepal circling (5)
24 God with plate gives vegetable (6)
26 Part of peri-peri is ready to eat (4)
28 What an indecorous person breaks from day after victory? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 9



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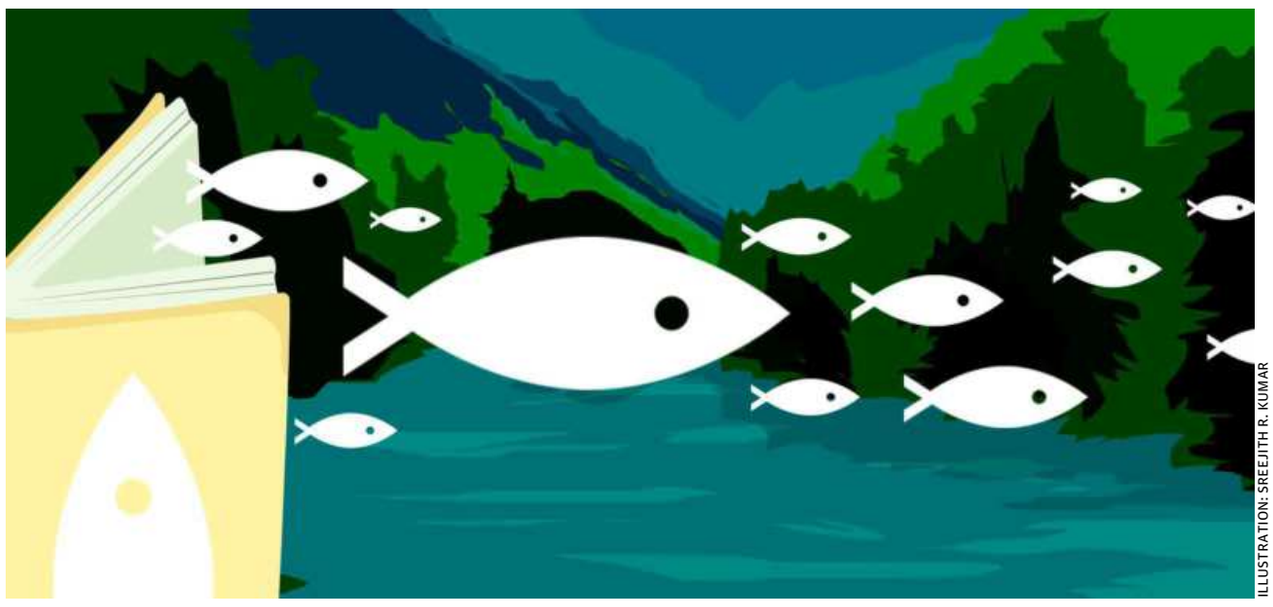

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Fish, friendship, and a fudge

Adventures along the Giri river in Himachal as it hurtles towards the Yamuna carrying with it the dust of mountains, breath of forests, and fragments of stories

I once read an old English book on fishing, one of those charmingly archaic volumes filled with both practical advice and poetic digressions, which mentioned a guest house on the banks of the Giri river, about 10 kilometres below Solan towards Rajgarh. The memory of that book stayed with me, tucked away like a forgotten map. Years later, it resurfaced at just the right moment. It was near midnight, and we were descending from Himachal Pradesh, weary from the road and in search of a place to rest. I remembered the book and its quiet recommendation, and so, guided by instinct and half-remembered lines, we found our way to that very guest house on the river, a favourite quarry of British anglers of Mahaseers, an angling challenge.

It was just as the author had described: a simple, lovely place nestled beside the Giri, where the river widened into a calm pool. The surroundings were clean and undisturbed, with low hills gently enclosing the valley, as if sheltering it from the rest of the world. A place utterly still, yet brimming with quiet life. Literature, after all, has long borne witness to rivers not just as locations but as moral and symbolic thresholds, from the meditative solitude of Izaak Walton's *The Complete Angler* to the spiritual journeys across the Ganga in Indian mythology. Rivers are indeed not merely backdrops but undying protagonists.

Modest in form, the Giri carries the soul of a river, ancient and awake. It flows down through Himachal's foothills, like a whispered hymn, to join the Yamuna at Ponta Sahib, that old, sacred town of pilgrimage and memory, a site where literature, history, and faith intertwine. And from there, its waters merge with the great Yamuna, which eventually pours into the Ganga, India's most timeless river steeped in reverence and legends. To sit beside the Giri, then, was to be part of that immense journey, a thin stream flowing into the heart of the subcontinent.

Blissful days

We spent three blissful days upriver from that sacred site, a fleeting spell of unbroken serenity full of sunlight and quiet rapture. We basked by the water, swam in its cold blueish-green clarity, cast our lines for the elusive Mahaseer, and relished long, simple meals under the sky. Every afternoon and evening featured fish, either those we had (miraculously) managed to catch, or, more often, the result of a more pragmatic solution.

One morning, as we descended from the guest house to the water's edge, we came upon a local fisherman who had already laid claim to the day's abundance. While we enacted our slow-motion drama of enlightened angling, he skipped straight to success without props or pretence. He had stretched a wide net across a narrow bend in the river, and when the early morning fish swam unsuspectingly into it, he hauled in nearly two dozen hefty, slippery Mahaseers without the ancient meditations of bait and stillness. Beautiful tough creatures, golden monsters in their own right, the "tigers of the river".

We hadn't caught a thing ourselves. But drawn by the sight, and driven by appetite, we asked if he would part with four of his catch. He agreed readily, seemed pleased in fact, and took half a rupee for the lot. It felt like a small betrayal of the sport, of the quiet ethic to catch a fish, not trap and slaughter it in cold blood. There was something crude, almost violent, in that indiscriminate haul, a kind of rupture in the intimacy between angler and fish. I thought of my days in Cambridge, fishing in the River Cam and how, as the fishing principles dictate, we would unhook the fish and let it go back into the river. Understandably, the ethics of fishing, of sportsmanship, restraint, respect for the life one draws from the water, haunted us gently, never enough to stop us from eating, but always enough to make us think. Hunger won over principle that morning. Unlike hunters returning from a thoroughly undeserved triumph, we shuffled back to the guesthouse, fish flapping, egos inflated, and mischief bubbling under the veneer of modesty. We told the others that we had caught them ourselves, a harmless fiction, and the breakfast that followed was among the finest I remember. Simply boiled potatoes, fresh grilled fish, and that shared sense of satisfaction that only a river morning can give.

And so the days passed. Morning swims, afternoon naps, evenings of firelight and laughter. Our modest attempts at fishing continued, more for the pleasure of the ritual than the hope of success. And the fisherman continued his efficient work upstream, which we disapproved of in principle but quietly relied on in practice. The Mahasheer, grilled and spiced, always made its way to our plates. Fishing for Mahaseer is, indeed, less about the catch and more about the journey. Immersed in tranquil landscapes and flowing mountain rivers, the experience offers a deep connection with nature. The excitement of encountering such a powerful fish adds to the thrill, but even without a catch, the adventure, the serenity, and the sheer beauty of the surroundings make it unforgettable.

In the end, it was not just the fishing or the setting that made those three days special. It was the feeling of being out of time, of living by the pace of water, sun, and hunger. Of watching a small, unassuming river move with quiet purpose toward the sacred confluence with the Yamuna at Ponta Sahib, and then onward, toward the Ganga, carrying with it the dust of mountains, the breath of forests, and the fragments of stories like ours. Standing on the banks, a thought came to my mind that rivers are not only geographical features, but carriers of civilisation, memory, and language.

FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The visa curbs clearly point to the racial profiling and prejudice prevalent in the U.S. ('Adrift in America'; June 22) It is time India provided excellent higher education in the country and upgraded existing institutes with international tie-ups.
Rohith Varon S.S.

It was shocking to read that a student's visa was revoked because of a fine for catching a wrong-sized fish. The article was an important read as it shed light on the plight of Indian students in the U.S.
Sruti

The revocation of student visas in the U.S. has led to significant mental distress, including anxiety, fear, and feelings of isolation, among Indian students. Many of them now face uncertainty about their future, impacting their academic performance, and causing emotional turmoil. The lack of clarity around these revocations only exacerbates the situation, leading to a sense of betrayal and a breakdown in trust.
K.M.K. Murthy

Literary icon

Benyamin has earned more than a niche for himself in Indian literature particularly through his iconic novel *Aadujeevitham*. ('Christ the reformer'; June 22) His penchant for diving deep into cultural history, including politics, has earned him some much-deserved popularity.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

The Iron Lady

Srinath Raghavan deserves kudos for penning a book on Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister of India. ('The PM and her long decade'; June 22) To manage the political scene of a vast and diverse country with a huge population is not an easy task. In a country entrenched with gender discrimination, a woman was elected as head of state, and it is no small feat.
Atheerath Naineni

Uncanny sense of humour

The satirical piece on the proposal to restrict the temperature range of air conditioners in India was hilarious. ('AC Control Bill, 2025'; June 22) G. Sampath has an uncanny way of bringing an issue into the public domain through his humorous write-up.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

An inspiration

Krishen Khanna's vast oeuvre delineates the human condition with sensitivity. ('100 years of Krishen Khanna'; June 22) Every brushstroke on his canvas is akin to poetry in motion. His zest for life at the age of 100 is truly worthy of emulation.
Anusha Pillay

Correction

A line in the article 'Biblical tales in the Puranas' by Devdutt Pattanaik (published June 15) should have read: 'The second yuga, Treta, was dominated by solar kings and Rama of Ayodhya. The Dvapara yuga was ruled by a lunar king ending with the infamous Mahabharata war'; and not as mentioned. The error is regretted.
— Editor

Black coal and white teeth

Pulluru Jagadishwar Rao
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In the past, people used to clean their teeth preferably using charcoal. But the practice ended with the arrival of toothpaste and toothbrush.

I recall how we struggled to make charcoal powder for brushing teeth during my school days.

Every Sunday, a fistful of charcoal was collected from the kitchen after cooking breakfast and allowed to cool.

Then coal lumps were finely powdered in a grinding stone using a pestle-like object or on a flat stone surface.

A pinch of salt was added to it before it was stored in a small container for ready use.

Once, while pounding the coal, I got my finger crushed yet I kept silent for fear of facing the wrath of my parents.

Unlike now, children were not pampered in those days.

Endless supply

There was no dearth of charcoal as cooking in every household was done with firewood and cow dung cakes.

For some reason, if charcoal powder runs out, raw lump charcoal was used by making a paste after wetting it with water. Besides, ash from burnt cow dung cake, salt, limestone powder and even clay brick powder were used in emergency situations.

Neem tree twigs were another preferred choice for some for cleaning teeth.

When coal was used as tooth powder, tongue becomes black. But the same black coal was used by people to make their teeth sparkling white and to prevent tooth decay.

So the simple charcoal lumps took care of dental hygiene of mankind for thousands of years. It is slowly fading away, unknown, unsung and unappreciated.

How life was simple and practices were environment friendly in those days!

Is it providence or just chance?

One life spared in a plance crash, do we rejoice in his survival or mourn the loss of hundreds of others?

Jayanthi Rangarajan
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A profound quote often shared by my late father-in-law, a double graduate of his time with a balanced perspective, comes to my mind. "There is the hand of providence even in the falling of a sparrow." The recent air crash, which shook us to the core, seems to echo this sentiment. Not that I subscribe to his view, but amid the devastating explosion, a solitary survivor emerging unscathed, walking out with an almost surreal sense of normalcy, despite cameras swarming around him. Was it a miracle, the hand of providence, a stroke of luck, or the precisely timed mechanics of the machine and human resilience? Whatever the reason, it's truly wondrous. As we witness this one life spared, do we rejoice in their survival or mourn the loss of hundreds of others?

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

If it's providence then why only the choicest one? Do any of us have any answers? Close on the heels was another sorrowful one of a multibillionaire celeb dying after swallowing a bee. Death is a certainty but the modes and time are so unpredictable and weird.

The mysteries of fate and the unpredictability of life. Why do some lives seem to be spared while others are cut short? Why do circumstances beyond our control shape our destinies? These are indeed profound and complex questions that have puzzled philosophers, theologians, and everyday people for centuries. The contrast between the air crash survivor and the sudden death of a celebrity due to an unexpected incident, like swallowing a bee, highlights the capricious nature of life. These events remind us that, despite our achievements, wealth, or status, we are all subject to the uncertainties of life.

Ultimately, the human experience is filled with mysteries that may never be fully understood. Perhaps the key lies not in seeking definitive answers but in embracing the complexities and fragilities of life, and finding meaning and purpose within them.

Whither America?

Freedom of expression and fairness of opportunity seem to be in danger in U.S.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Sudha Devi Nayak
sudhadevi_nayak@yahoo.com

Quo Vadis? While we were growing up, America was the El Dorado, where every dream could turn into a reality with effort and enthusiasm. Those who left for those pastures came home to tell us that the country was one of immense promise for the young and inspired. They spoke of the universities with their libraries, research facilities, state-of-the-art laboratories, and wide campuses with students streaming in from all parts of the world in search of knowledge. A veritable repository of learning and opportunity.

America has been the land of the immigrant from the moment the first immigrants stepped off the *Mayflower* on to American shores. With imagination and creativity, grit and struggle, with encouragement and opportunity they carved out lives for themselves and contributed to the idea of America, and its ideals of freedom and diligence.

Today, owing to the exclusionary vision of the powers-that-be, international students are barred from the universities, Green Card holders are under threat, and migrants are treated without humanity. So many individuals of different origins have made the country great in all fields of learning and culture and it is not worthwhile to go back to the drawing board.

It is disappointing that the very ideals of freedom of expression and fairness of opportunity that America stood guardian for since the founding fathers should be under siege now. What the celebrated writer Toni Morrison said, "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate," seems to ring true today. It would do well for America to hark back to the voice of Benjamin Franklin who said, "God grant that not only the love of liberty but a thorough knowledge of the Rights of Man may pervade all the nations of the Earth so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on its surface and say, 'This is my country.'"

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Bureaucratic workarounds
On foreign trips, how some used to the stretch the dollar
V.K. Agnihotri

Walk the thought
Are we less demanding for better roads and parks?
Saraswathi Narayanan

The art of becoming a mother-in-law
Striking the right amount of distance and closeness with a child's spouse
Suchanda Dutta

A misogynistic social construct
The self is throttled each time one is reminded of belonging to a particular gender
Shambhvi Agarwal

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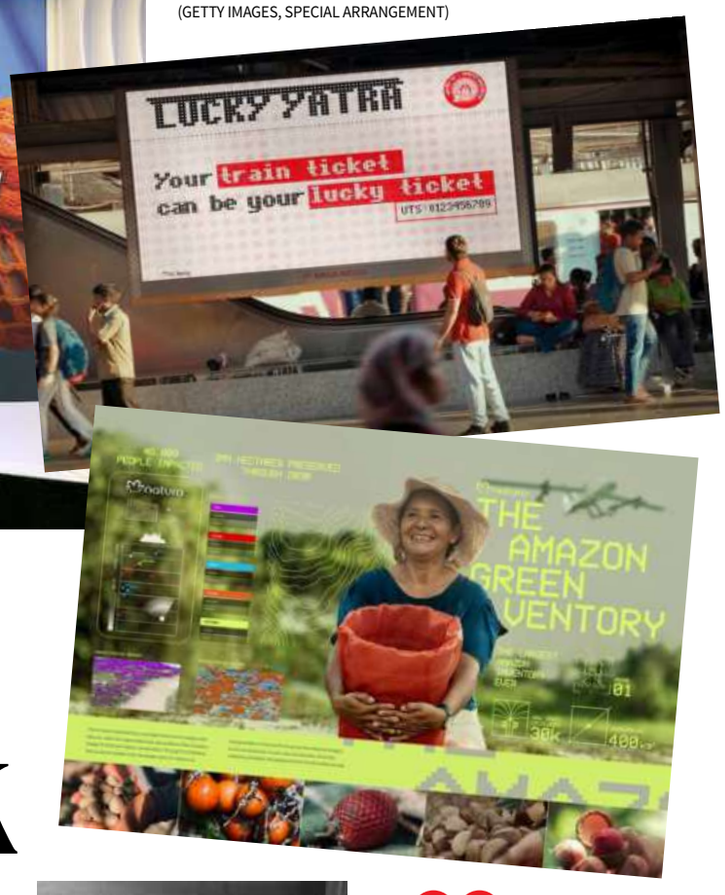


(Clockwise from left) The TikTok booth at Cannes Lions; 'Lucky Yatra' campaign; 'The Amazon Greenventory' case study; Thomas Kim; and team FCB India after their win.
(GETTY IMAGES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

CANNES LIONS AND THE AI REALITY CHECK

Artificial intelligence can encourage democratisation, but also amplify sameness. Experts weigh in at advertising's biggest show

Leena Gupta

Last year at Cannes Lions, the advertising industry was collectively patting itself on the back. The mood was upbeat, the rosé was flowing, and the AI conversation was comfortably naïve. The consensus was simple: AI can't feel; humans will remain essential for creativity. It was a soothing lie.

Fast forward to 2025, and the on-ground reality hits like a tidal wave. AI isn't at the door – it's in the house. Layoffs are rippling across agencies, in-house teams, and production companies. The 'co-pilot' AI promised last year has, in many cases, started flying the plane. The myth that human creativity is untouchable has shattered.

In one of the most important speeches of this year's Cannes Lions, Apple's vice president of marketing communications, Tor Myhren, offered the room a reality check. "AI is here. It's mind-blowing. It's revolutionary. It will radically disrupt every single industry faster than any technology before it, including ours," he said. But he wasn't another doomsayer. Myhren balanced the alarm with a challenge: "The good news is AI isn't going to kill advertising. The bad news is AI isn't going to save advertising. We've got to save ourselves."

'Human touch is our superpower'

The uncomfortable truth is this: AI may not yet write the next 'Just Do It', but it can write 10,000 headlines in the time it takes a creative team to agree on lunch. For an industry obsessed with speed, scale, and efficiency, AI isn't a nice-to-have – it's a default setting.

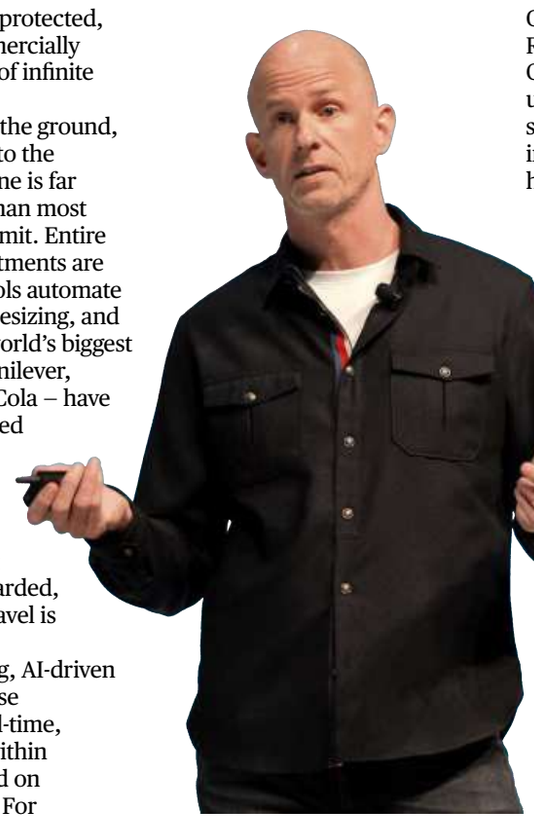
If the shift wasn't clear, the activation tents and kiosks across the Croisette underlined it – AI-first brands such as Writer.AI, Braze, Sprinklr loudly occupied space in the same place as Meta, Spotify and Pinterest. Even legacy holding companies are making their move. Havas, for instance, announced its proprietary AI platform, Converged, earlier this year, designed to integrate AI-driven content creation, media optimisation, and data intelligence into a single system. It is already being piloted with key clients across Europe and North America, positioning the multinational advertising as one of the first major networks to develop a homegrown AI solution.

But amid the anxiety, there are flashes of optimism and pragmatism. Take Thomas Kim's thought-provoking Cannes session on protecting creativity in the AI age. The chief creative officer at Seoul-based agency Paulus introduced Ark.Works, a blockchain-powered AI tool designed to verify and protect original work. The platform has already onboarded over 500 creators and boutique agencies globally, offering a tangible layer of copyright protection in an environment where attribution often gets lost in the algorithmic churn. It's an important evolution: the AI conversation is no longer just about what machines can generate – but how human originality can be protected, owned, and commercially valued in a world of infinite replication.

India's wins

According to reports, India finished with 32 Lions. FCB India emerged the top winner, with 10 wins, including the Grand Prix, for 'Lucky Yatra', a campaign for the Indian Railways.

> The good news is AI isn't going to kill advertising. The bad news is AI isn't going to save advertising. We've got to save ourselves
>
> **TOR MYHREN**
> Apple's VP of marketing communications (below), in his speech at Cannes Lions



Meanwhile, on the ground, AI's integration into the advertising machine is far more aggressive than most want to openly admit. Entire production departments are shrinking as AI tools automate asset versioning, resizing, and translation. The world's biggest FMCG brands – Unilever, Nestlé, and Coca-Cola – have all publicly explored generative AI pilots across marketing functions. While exact daily output figures remain guarded, the direction of travel is clear.

In media buying, AI-driven algorithms optimise placements in real-time, shifting budgets within milliseconds based on engagement data. For performance marketers, AI is an invisible colleague making hundreds of micro-decisions faster than human teams ever could. In creative development, campaign concepts start with prompt engineering, visual mood boards emerge from generative image models, and copy drafts are now shaped by machine learning outputs before a human ever polishes the final line.

Democratising yet amplifying sameness

While AI is democratising certain aspects of production – reducing barriers for smaller agencies or resource-strapped teams – it is also amplifying sameness. When thousands of brands feed similar prompts into similar AI tools, the result is an ocean of homogenised, frictionless content – technically competent, emotionally forgettable.

This is where the human edge still matters. Myhren captured it well: "The human touch is our superpower. To build brand love, it's not enough for marketing to simply make you understand something – it's got to make you feel something." And while AI can't yet originate culture, some of this year's most celebrated campaigns show how machine intelligence is shaping award-winning technology work.

'The Amazon Greenventory' by São Paulo-based Africa Creative DD, for lifestyle brand Natura, used AI to map deforestation patterns and create an interactive, real-time environmental impact tracker – winning a Grand Prix in Sustainable Development Goals. And Dove's 'Real Beauty Redefined for the AI Era' by Ogilvy tackled algorithmic bias, using AI both as a storytelling subject and a tool to champion inclusivity, earning top honours in the Media category.

The agencies and creatives who thrive won't be those who dismiss AI, nor those who blindly automate – but those who ask better questions. How does this tool make my idea sharper? How do I protect my originality? How do I ensure my work stands apart in a flood of algorithm-generated content?

The Croisette is wide awake now. And the race has begun.

The writer is a Founding Member & Creative of Talented.

A LITTLE LIFE

For grief's sake

Sorrow needs attention, says Phuphee, or it can be like a neglected child

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

I had never really known grief, not the real kind anyway. I had known heartbreaks and disappointments, but most of my life I had somehow managed to stay away from grief. I can tell you one thing about it though, even if it arrives by simply ringing the doorbell in a polite manner, by the time it leaves, it will have done its best to raze the house to the ground.

On a cold January morning, nearly a decade ago, grief arrived and pitched its camp in my home. My maternal grandfather passed away early in the morning. He was in his late 80s and had, over the last years of his life, become unwell. His passing wasn't wholly unexpected and yet it felt like it was. It is difficult to explain how I felt but it was like after deciding to rise that morning, the sun had thought that this world really didn't deserve it anymore, and at around 10.30 a.m. it had dived back into bed, plunging the world in complete darkness.

I don't have many clear memories of the aftermath; mostly I remember sleeping. I would wake up from time to time to eat something and then I would sleep again. The minute I would be awake, the fact that he was gone would hit me and I would feel like I was falling through a dark tunnel. Sometimes I would think that it would be a relief if at the end of this fall, I too could just die and I waited for that to happen. But it didn't. It frightened and angered me that I could carry so much grief and pain, and yet my organs still had the audacity to keep doing what they were supposed to.

I spent weeks falling through this dark tunnel, hoping and wishing for an end, but it never came. Instead, one day the doorbell rang and though I tried to ignore it, it rang incessantly until I opened the door and in walked Phuphee.

She said she had come because she had missed talking to me after I had refused to speak to her on the phone. I understood that the rest of the family must have told her. After settling herself in, she came into my room with a bowl of *paachi ras* (soupy stew made from lamb trotters) and asked how I was doing. I tried to lie as much as I could, but then I remembered how futile it was to lie to this woman and stopped talking. She brought a spoonful of the steaming soup up to my lips and said 'drink'. I did as she asked and before I knew it, the bowl had disappeared.

I cried as I drank, the salt of the tears mixing with the salty goodness of the soup. When I had finished, she wiped my face with the sleeves of her *pheran* and held me as I cried. I told her how I felt and how nobody could understand how much pain I was in, and that was when she told me about Parveen. I hadn't known of her existence before that day.

Before Phuphee had had her other children, she had a daughter named Parveen. She was three years old when one day she became unwell. She was running a high fever and had a terrible cough but by the time the doctors had picked up on how serious her infection was, it was too late. Phuphee was told to take her home and make her as comfortable as possible.

'I held my beautiful little girl for four days and then she left,' Phuphee said, her voice almost a whisper, 'and I stopped being a person after that. Months went by but I had stopped moving and then one day Aapa [her maternal grandmother] arrived, and held me exactly the way I had held my beautiful Parveen just before she left and said, 'You cannot ignore your grief, Taahira. It will wait for as long as it needs to – to be acknowledged. If you can give it the attention it needs, it will start going about its own business soon. But if you ignore it, it will fight with you needlessly like a neglected child. You have to lean into your grief Taahira, do you understand?''

'I didn't really understand, but I knew Aapa would guide me. She would sit with me and we would talk about Parveen. At first it made me howl with pain, but slowly I found myself leaning into every memory I had of her. In my mind, I thought of her as a soft pillow on which I would rest my weary heart and somehow I started becoming a person again. I knew I would never be whole again and I knew I would never be the same person again, but I knew I would be a person again. And that was enough. Do you understand, *myoan gaash* [light of my eyes]?'

I didn't understand but I trusted her wisdom that had come to her through many generations of women, which had led me so far. Over the next few weeks, I started talking about my Daddy (that's what we called our grandfather). I would sit there and imagine leaning my head against him, and my grief would feel a tad manageable. Slowly but surely, I started becoming a person again, not the same person I was before he left or a whole person, but a person nonetheless. And I accepted that somehow that had to be enough.

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