

magazine



backpage
2025 and Abu Dhabi's
museum rush

GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
In conversation with pop
historian Yuval Noah Harari

GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW
The life and times of
filmmaker Amol Palekar

GO TO » PAGE 3

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

Serish Naniseti
serish.n@thehindu.co.in

The first time I visited the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, I was completely unaware of its grandeur. Sleeping inside the Vidarbha Express, I was jolted awake by a woman wielding a broom in the shunting yard. But as I stepped out into the gentle August sun, I was struck by the realisation that I was standing in front of one of India's architectural wonders. This awe-inspiring feeling is shared by millions of Indians as they step out of railway stations across the country, from the Indo-Saracenic Egmore railway station or the Gothic-Romanesque Chennai Central, the colonial Howrah, to the quaint town stations of Berhampur and Udhagamandalam, each built in a unique architectural style.

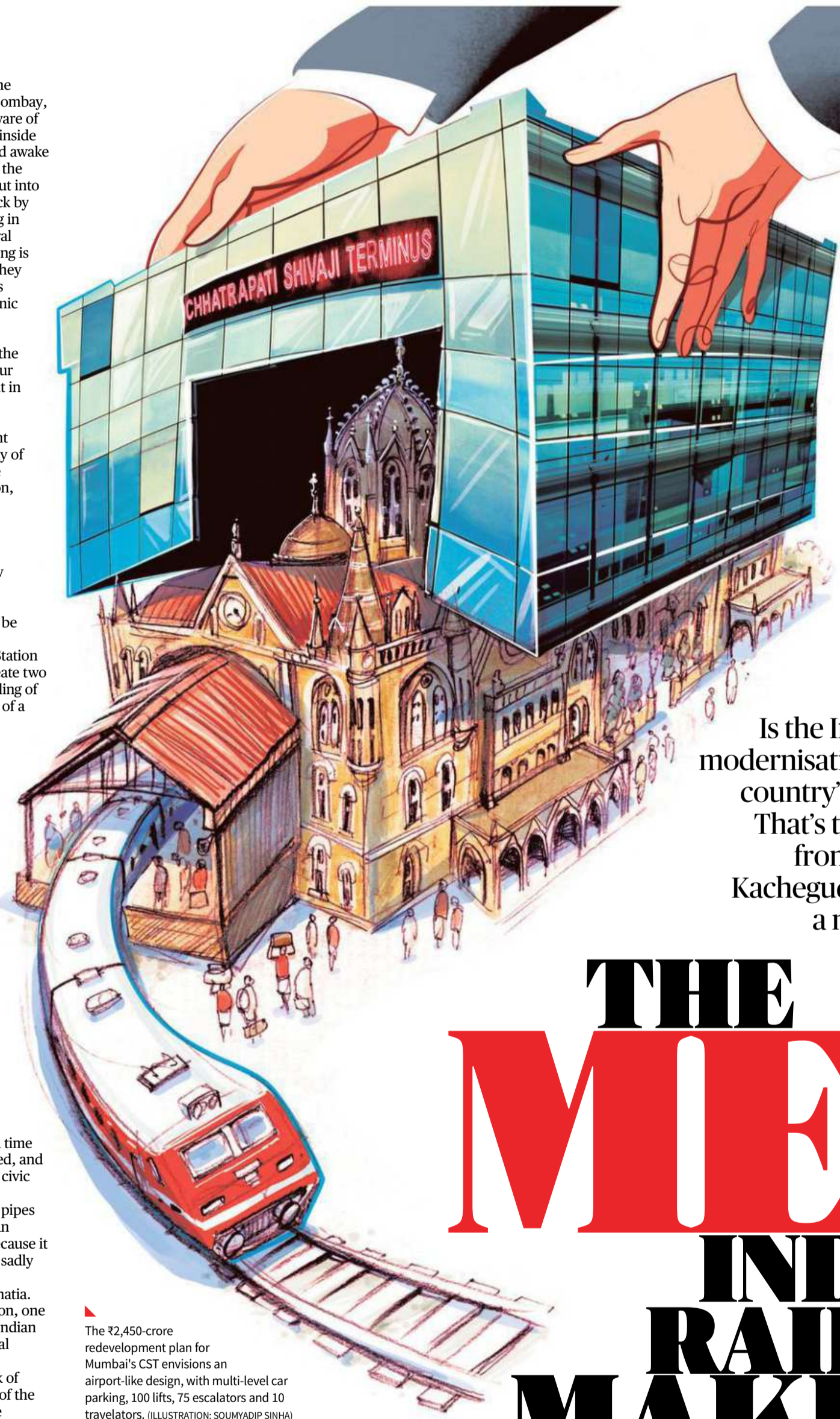
This centuries-old heritage is being threatened by the imminent demolition or diminution of many of these iconic railway stations. The 150-year-old Secunderabad station, for instance, is being dismantled piece by piece to make way for a ₹700 crore concrete, glass, and woven fibreglass structure. Architectural drawings show how Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CST), the erstwhile Victoria Terminus, will be dwarfed as part of a ₹2,450 crore project. The New Delhi Railway Station contract, at ₹2,469 crore, will create two huge blobs of glass. The remodelling of these renowned buildings is part of a larger project to transform some 1,275 Indian railway stations, at a staggering cost of ₹24,500 crore.

But is this a makeover or an erasure of railway culture? Is it the Stalinisation of railway history? That's the question as railway stations such as Gwalior, Dehradun, Hyderabad, Habibgunj, Ludhiana, Gorakhpur, and many others are set to vanish as landmarks that generations of Indians have loved and hated in equal measure. The images shared by different railway zones via the Rail Land Development Authority (RLDA) illustrate the extent of this transformation, or rather, erasure.

"I guess the day of the grand railway station is gone. VT and Howrah were rare gems built at a time when public architecture mattered, and could be identified as symbols of civic pride. Today, unfortunately, the pared-down architecture of steel pipes and glass could be mistaken for an airport, a mall, a school... and because it doesn't stain in the monsoons, it sadly doesn't even reveal its age," says architect and sculptor Gautam Bhatia.

Delhi-based A.G. Krishna Menon, one of the founding members of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, talks of how this modernisation drive shows a lack of imagination. "Keep the memory of the past and modernise. We have the resources, the technology, and the will. But instead, we are cutting off our noses to spite our faces. I've seen this in Delhi and other places, where I get the feeling that the more bizarre and bigger something is, the more grand and modern it is considered," says the architect, urban planner, and conservation consultant who has been practising in Delhi for over 40 years.

Railway stations, being more than mere transportation hubs, hold a prominent place in the collective memory of a nation. In India, they serve as portals to the past, and have been immortalised thus in countless movies over the years. From the inimitable Johnny Walker crooning 'Yeh Hai Bombay Meri Jaan' (C.I.D., 1956) at the iconic CST to Tamil comedian Nagesh's paen to Chennai in 'Madras Nalla Madras' (Anubavi Raja Anubavi, 1967) to the iconic Kajol-SRK scene in Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaayenge (1995) shot at Apta railway station in Maharashtra –



The ₹2,450-crore redevelopment plan for Mumbai's CST envisions an airport-like design, with multi-level car parking, 100 lifts, 75 escalators and 10 travelators. (ILLUSTRATION: SOUMYADIP SINHA)

these are moments forever etched in our minds. Students of generations past will recall the oft-asked question about the longest railway station in the country – Kharagpur at 1,170 metres, now Hubballi at a record-breaking 1,507 metres.

Showcasing diversity

No doubt, railway stations have undergone a gradual transformation over the years. Vasudevamurthy, whose father worked in the Indian Railways, fondly recalls Secunderabad railway station, which had only four platforms. "The other platforms numbered 5, 6, 7, and 8 were reserved for metre gauge and local trains," he says. Today, the station has 10 full-fledged platforms that can accommodate 24-coach trains. The experience of passengers has changed significantly, too. The frequent clack, clack, clack sounds inside the train have changed to a noiseless experience. The

German-designed Linke-Hofmann-Busch coaches have more comfortable interiors. Passengers take to social media the minute something is wrong – be it the dirty toilets inside Shatabdi Express or the late arrival of Gitanjali Express.

One of the first to receive this makeover was Bhopal's Habibganj, which has since been renamed Rani Kamalapati Railway Station. Originally designed by architect Uttam C. Jain, the station holds historical significance as the site from where the inaugural Shatabdi Express, commemorating the birth centenary of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was flagged off in 1988. Habibganj holds the distinction of being the "first railway station to be redeveloped through public-private partnership mode under the station redevelopment program of

Is the Indian Railways' ₹24,500-crore modernisation project signalling the end of the country's landmark heritage structures? That's the question as railway stations from Dehradun and Gwalior to Kacheguda and Egmore get set to witness a new era of transformation

THE MEGA INDIAN RAILWAY MAKEOVER

Indian Railways", as per RLDA. Supposedly modelled after Germany's Heidelberg, it is encased in plate glass with high-speed escalators, AC lounges, shopping areas, and play areas for children.

The architects who designed the original station are not pleased with the changes. They find it disappointing that the station's historic architecture has been destroyed, diminished, and obscured in the name of modernisation. "Railway stations serve as anchors for cities, representing their cultural, geographical, and historical context. However, many new public buildings, including the railway station, are homogenised, out of context, and out of scale," says Chirag Jain, of the architectural firm that executed the first project. The

once-graceful station building with graduated arches is topped by a signboard that says 'Bansal Group Welcomes You', as if it is a mall and not a railway station.

Lee Yuan Kew, considered the father of Singapore's economic transformation, famously wrote: "India is not a real country. Instead, it is 32 separate nations that happen to be arrayed along the British rail line." India's railway stations have showcased this diversity, which has always been worn as a badge of honour. However, monocultural buildings, clad in glass and fibreglass, are now replacing them, even in places like Puducherry, which is prone to ferocious cyclones.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4

GRAND PLANS

Indian Railways has identified 79 heritage railway stations so far, of which 29 have been shortlisted for modernisation under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme. In all, the scheme envisages upgradation for 1,275 railway stations. Some highlights:

● **Byculla railway station, Maharashtra:** A Grade I heritage structure, this was one of the first stations when the Bombay-Thane rail line was inaugurated in April 1853. Allotted ₹35 crore under the Amrit Bharat (AB) scheme.

● **Kacheguda railway station, Telangana:** Completed in 1921, this is among the three main railway stations in Hyderabad. Designed by Vincent Esch in Indo-Saracenic style, it used to have a walled entrance called the 'purdah siding' for women. The modernisation and development of a multifunctional complex will take place adjoining the station building.

● **Bilaspur Junction, Chhattisgarh:** Built in 1890, it is the headquarters of the South East Central Railway. Under the AB scheme, ₹435 crore has been allotted for a 6,000 sq.m. concourse with waiting capacity for 800 passengers, parking space for over 1,000 vehicles spread over 28,000 sq.m., three foot-overbridges, 22 escalators and 30 lifts.

— Maitri Porecha



Stanley Carvalho

Acclaimed Malayalam writer V. J. James too, like some famous authors, had a tough time finding a publisher for his brilliant debut novel *Purappadinte Pustakam*. Eventually, his perseverance and belief in his work paid off when, after 12 years, it saw the light of day in 1999. It was declared the best novel among 161 entries for the DC Books Award that year.

From then on, there's been no looking back. James has authored seven novels and as many short story collections.

Interestingly, albeit belatedly, after 25 years, his debut novel has been translated into English by Ministhy S., titled *The Book of Exodus*.

James's books have predominantly dealt with nature, people in the countryside and the struggles of the marginalised. Add to that folklore, myths and stories of birds, animals, rivers, seas, forests and mountains he has encountered on his travels.

Lauded as among the finest works in Malayalam literature, the novel chronicles the milieu of a small rural community living in communion with nature on an island far from Kochi in Kerala. Potta Thuruthu, the isle of reeds, is untouched by development, with life cruising along, similar to the nameless river skirting it – slowly, at times quickly, sometimes changing course and often throwing a dark surprise or two.

In the vein of Marquez

The story is told mainly through the protagonist Kunjootty, a government clerk, who is also struggling to write a book by the same name to tell the stories of the island and its people.

The non-linear narrative oscillates between the local stories – happenings on the island, the complexities of village life, the little joys, struggles and tragedies – and reality and mysterious myths, reminding one, inevitably, of some tales of Vijayalam novelist O.V. Vijayan and Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

ISLAND OF MYSTERIES

Oscillating between local stories and reality, V.J. James' novel is able to weave the strands together into a web of connections and relationships

Interwoven within the larger story of Potta Thuruthu are several smaller stories with a cast of many intriguing characters who enter and exit like crucial punctuation marks. "Here, anyone could get lost in a fissure of the universe, without leaving a trace of evidence. If this pattern was going to be repetitive, who would be the next one to go missing?" Deaths, disease, despair, uncertainty and calamities are par for the course in the isle.

The novel begins with Kunjootty recuperating in a shelter home, with his parents and friend Isaac keeping him company. His childhood friend and lover Susanna has gone missing and

the police have launched an investigation. Her disappearance remains a mystery until the end when Kunjootty himself reveals the truth. This bizarre incident is to have a life-changing impact on him.

Kunjootty's story resonates with the biblical Book of Exodus. While contemplating the meaning of life and struggling to cope with his existential angst, he embarks on a journey – a journey of understanding life; a journey to the land of his ancestors.

"Kunjootty felt that his ancestors and their flight of escape were stepping back into the scene. These were the times when the seeds for multiple exoduses were being sowed. His mind whispered that those would soon ripen in the forms of murderous mobs in boars, brandishing burning torches. Would that

form another black chapter in the Book of Exodus?"

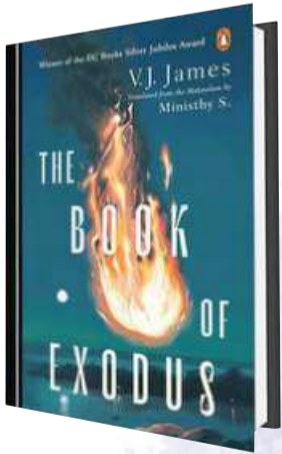
The novel is made engaging by the many, diverse characters, each helping to advance the story and evoking varied reactions. Kunjootty's parents, the pious Eli and the detached Zavaras; the poison healer's son Koppan and his adulterous wife Unnicheera; the uncanny Ezuthassan who leads a solitary life; the elusive Chiriyantan David and his blue-eyed French-speaking daughter Anita; Murali, the flautist friend of Kunjootty; the three maverick nomads who dealt with monkeys and serpents; the mysterious monster Koyal Potten... And, indeed, the philosophy of existence that forms the core of the book.

Retaining the essence

A dense book, spanning 380 pages, it is not easy to keep track of the many characters and curious happenings and simultaneously immerse oneself in the rich, bucolic imagery.

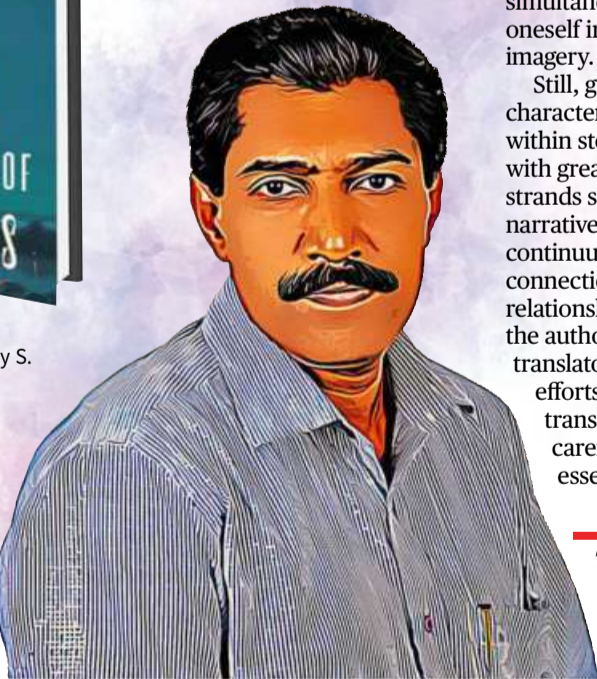
Still, given the spectrum of characters and the stories within stories, the author has, with great alacrity, woven the strands seamlessly into the narrative, creating a continuum, a web of connections and relationships. In the preface, the author salutes the translator for "her untiring efforts in beautifully translating the book and carefully retaining its essence".

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist and writer.



The Book of Exodus
V.J. James, trs Ministhy S.
Penguin
₹699

Author V.J. James



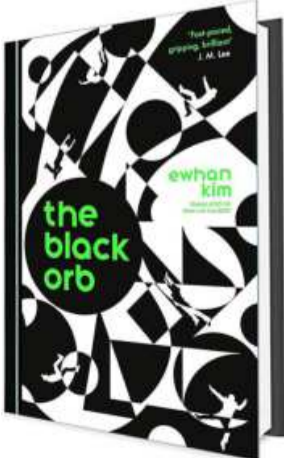
Apocalypse now

This speculative thriller is not a patch on the dazzling array of doomsday novels

Anil Menon

Imagine you are setting out to write a novel about an apocalyptic event. You are not sure what the event is, so you call it X. It could be a zombie infestation, it could be a virus, it could be a robot rebellion. Once X starts, there is no stopping it. Now you have

to describe how people react. How would they react? Well, there would probably be a lot of panic, people trapped in traffic trying to escape, murderous gangs preying on the weak, but also cases of people helping each other. The army would try to keep things under control for a while, but this is an apocalypse, so you can't just bomb it into



The Black Orb
Ewhan Kim, trs Sean Lin Halbert
Serpent's Tail
₹699

submission. Eventually, society collapses.

But, wait. These are all just reports of cascading events. In other words, news. No one likes to read the news. We need the human-sympathy factor to keep readers interested. Very well, you introduce a hero. The hero has a simple, easily understandable goal. Of course, the hero has to be attractive. And no long poetic sections about the weather or landscape or all that boring jazz. Action, that's the key. Things are always happening: a raid from an enemy gang, an explosion, a new mutant zombie, something is always

happening. How else will we know we're alive?

The Black Orb is a fill-in-the-blanks novel. In lieu of X, there is a mysterious black orb. In his author's note, Ewhan Kim makes it clear that he set out to write an allegory; what he has achieved is a pastiche. The black orb chases and swallows people. Why? Because. A single orb is just comical, hardly dangerous. So this orb splits into two, then four, then eight, until there is an epidemic of these darned things. The hero is, yes, attractive, and he's given a simple goal: get to the city where his parents live and save them.

Missing nuance

The writing is very bland. Perhaps it's pure poetry in the original Korean, but in the English translation by Sean Lin Halbert, the sentences are flat, factual and sleep-inducing. We know what is going to happen next, and it happens next. The characters react to events melodramatically, with little nuance in the emotional responses. The hero is also homophobic. There are a couple of scenes where he goes ballistic on a friend – much younger to him – for making a sexual advance. The author provides a backstory that attempts to generate some sympathy for the hero's sexual

anxieties, but it still feels like a culture-specific reaction.

I am surprised this novel got translated into English. Its writing suggests an author whose entire literary experience has been a surfeit of watching B-grade apocalyptic movies. There is indeed an impending apocalypse, but it is not of the world. It has to do with the emergence of a generation of minds, devoid of much comity or hope and who really do see the world as a kind of movie that has already been watched.

The reviewer is an author, most recently of *The Coincidence Plot*.

Poemlets and extinctions

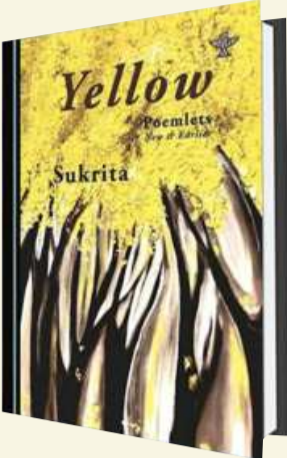
Rooted in nature, these two collections of verses offer those rare moments of clarity

Amlanjyoti Goswami

Sukrita Paul Kumar's new book of poems, *Yellow*, speaks of the interplay between darkness and light, where darkness swallows whatever little light there is. Attempts at creating lucid romantic moments of Buddhist peace, with rustling leaves and general piety, are quickly overshadowed by a deeper appeal to the forces of dark. This is not a twilight zone where the day turns to evening, but rather a pervading feeling of night in the middle of day. *When my shadow overtook me*, the poet reflects, *i knew i had crossed the sun*. Yet elsewhere, the poet finds *the darkness swallowing/ all shadows/ left by the sun*. This is a world where *the darkness may seize us/ we didn't trust light*.

When the weather gets cloudy, the reader hears of *rains/ hissing and/ lengthening/ in the fog of silence* and then *snakes waking and rising out of my soul*. The quick mind is a *hiss/ a dart/ a lethal bite*. Soon one moves into realms of inner weather when *each day as i dress up/ my phantom flees into the woods*. The physiological becomes psychological, when the poet discovers that *the womb is a natural gufa of creation* and yet promptly turns into *a tomb of all memories*. The urge towards the reptilian reveals startling metaphors when *the sun shines/ on his yellow shirt/ and butterflies fly out/ of his eyes... till he opens his heart/ to show the reptiles gnawing at his insides*.

The poet calls these fragments 'poemlets' instead of poems, perhaps to indicate a sense of fledgling incompleteness. These are not haiku because they are not yet whole. They do not have the rhyme of a quatrain or the rhythm of a *ghazal*. Perhaps they are the poetic equivalent of bonsai, where the words exist as fully grown abstractions, while one seeks a longer form. Attempts at a post-colonial reimagination do not take off as intended, even as there



Yellow: Poemlets
New & Earlier
Sukrita
Sahitya Akademi
₹200



Eartha
Vinita Agrawal
Sahitya Akademi
₹160

are allusions to Wallace Stevens, Langston Hughes and T.S. Eliot. The crow is a black bird even in America but an ancestor in these parts. The poet finds *my soul lies deep in your waters/ o ganga* but the Ganga doesn't answer the call. Tongue in cheek, the moon whispers *i am not an etherised patient* but the rebellion against Eliot doesn't last very long, for soon it starts raining on a flower, as it does in London all year long.

Beyond the human gaze

Vinita Agrawal's *Eartha*, as the title suggests, delves into wounded earth and the disappearance of various species. While the theme is environmental, the eye is still anthropocentric, the gaze all too human. Sometimes the landscapes appear bare and striking. *Cirques of clean-shaven*

mountains/ spread their arms out wide/ as if they own the planet/ But not a bird in sight. Speaking of a splendid poison frog (now extinct), the poet asks: *What time exactly/ did you hop over/ to where nowhere exists?* At times, the tone gets moralistic and devoid of poetry. However, when feeling is allowed to seep into the heart of the matter, the lines come home. *Eartha, you're wounded*, the poet sighs, *allow me to wrap a shawl around you/ Not a shahtoosh/ the antelopes won't make it if I do*.

Ecopoetry is more than poetry about ecology. At its most sublime, poetry becomes perception that transcends the human gaze or any reasoned critique of climate change. Basho's haiku about the frog plopping into an old pond, revealing the sound of water, conveys more meaning than platitudes written about planet earth. In *Eartha*, such moments are rare but sometimes found by accident in sudden moments of insight: *how nice to become a stone... or when I travel, I meet myself*. The poet finds redemption in rain, that arrives after long arid summers, for *rain is that brilliant liquid/ shimmering in dreams/ that women would trade with their blood. But clouds are deserts here, deserts in the skies*.

Ecopoetry generally works well when there are moments of startled recognition, when stone and person become one, our fate rendered common and the air is all there is. *Eartha* speaks of extinctions but not liberations, of human conquest but not frailty. Sometimes the morning is more than just a change of light. *Mornings mean less as we grow older*, the poet reflects, *it is enough/ that we collect our aching bones/ in the bag of our skin, wake up/ to wake the others up*. In such moments of clarity (and not morality), the page shines through.

The reviewer has written two books of poetry, *River Wedding* and *Vital Signs*, published by Poetrywala.



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

‘Not a rebel by birth’

Amol Palekar, who has always challenged established conventions, on how life shaped him

Anuj Kumar
anuj.kumar@thehindu.co.in

An artist who has straddled the world of visual arts, theatre, and cinema with distinction, Amol Palekar’s *Viewfinder* is a fascinating account of his creative journey.

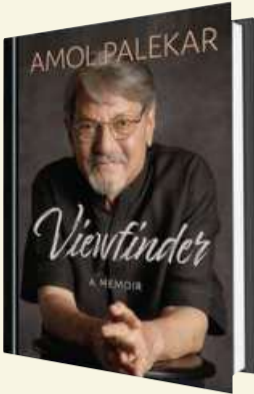
In an industry where people revel in holding on to a popular image, Palekar has invested a lifetime challenging established conventions and norms. Days after the Supreme Court decided to examine his seven-year-old plea questioning pre-censorship in films, Palekar hopes it will be taken up soon. “I hope it is heard when I am still alive,” the 80-year-old deadpanned, for his separate petition on pre-censorship in theatre has been pending in the Mumbai High Court since 2017.

‘Protect art and the artist’
Known for his committed stance on social issues, Palekar says it is the government’s “duty to protect the art and the artist” and tell those “creating nuisance to shut up.” “The government can’t give in to trolls on social media and absolve itself from its duty to safeguard the freedom of expression,” he contends.

Though he never wanted to be stuck with the boy-next-door image of *Gol Maal*’s protagonist, the title of his memoir reflects his deep association with director Hrishikesh Mukherjee. The “viewfinder” refers to Bimal Roy’s device, which Mukherjee, Roy’s disciple, passed on to Palekar to discover his cinematic universe.

Palekar was more fascinated by the kaleidoscopic view from a young age and created his own *Daayraa* (*The Square Circle*, 1996). “How with a simple twist, the pattern inside changes attracted me. Similarly, with limited permutations and combinations, the perspective of text changes dramatically, and the same emotion becomes much more interesting and vibrant.” His eyes light up when asked to recall some of his struggles with himself, and the outside world, in breaking away from the mainstream. “Isn’t that how life is? Complex, multi-dimensional, and full of dilemmas?”

In the days of the angry young man, when the country was charmed by his alternative everyman image in *Rajnigandha* (1974), *Chhoti Si Baat* (1976), and *Chitchor* (1976), Palekar was gung-ho about portraying grey characters in *Gharaonda* (1977) and *Bhumika* (1977). Few know that the banker-turned-actor would do a social audit of his villainous parts before signing up. Always interested in exploring what goes on beyond the words, as a director, he reinterpreted texts of literary giants to create formidable works like *Ankahee* (1985), *Thodasa Roomani Ho Jayen* (1990), and *Paheli* (2005) without trampling



Viewfinder:
A Memoir
Amol Palekar
Westland
₹999

on artistic egos of original creators.

Several teachers
“Of course, I am a non-conformist but I am not a rebel by birth. Occasions and personalities shaped me. Where to stand by your belief and where not to get bogged down by it is something I learned while working with Satyadev Dubey, Basu Chatterjee and Hrishikesh Mukherjee.”

A young Palekar had a strong conviction that he didn’t need the permission of the writer to make his work concise or to interpret its context. “I got this perspective from playwright Badal Sircar when I took a different look at his play *Pagla Ghoda*. He said, ‘Why discuss with me? I reserve the right to say in public that you murdered my play, but that doesn’t stop you from making changes.’”

Vijaydhan Detha allowed him similar leeway with *Duvidha*, on which Palekar’s *Paheli* is based. In Detha’s story, the village girl falls in love with a ghost who assumes the body of her husband. When the real husband returns, society consoles the girl that it was the ghost who cheated on her and the girl meekly accepts it. In the film, she tells her husband that the ghost didn’t cheat her and that she chose to allow the

ghost into her intimate space. It was not that the husband was a bad person. In fact, when Palekar explained to Shah Rukh Khan that he needed an actor who could “nuance both roles with subtle variations of goodness,” he got invested in the role.

Gender dynamics
From *Akriet* (1981) to *Anaahat* (2003), the exploration of gender dynamics and female desire has been a running theme in his filmography. Palekar says his understanding of women evolved with time and has to do with strong women in his life: “They have been instrumental in making me understand how a patriarchal society does not even consider the existence of a woman, forget about treating them with due respect.”

Never considered for a Padma award, Palekar points out that he remained an outsider, both in theatre and cinema. Looking back, he says he evolved as an artist as he was not afraid of taking risks.



Amol Palekar will be in conversation with film historian and author Balaji Vittal, in Bengaluru, at *The Hindu Lit For Life Dialogue* on December 20.
Scan the QR code to register for the event.



THE ANTI-BHAKT

Anand Teltumbde warns against the deification of Ambedkar by the right and by political parties cynically seeking the Dalit vote

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

The most iconic image of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar depicts him holding a copy of the Constitution. We know why this is so. But in 1953, during a debate in the Rajya Sabha, in response to a comment that he was the architect of the Constitution, he exploded: “I was a hack. What I was asked to do, I did much against my will... Sir, my friends tell me that I have made the Constitution. But I am prepared to say that I shall be the first person to burn it out. I do not want it.”

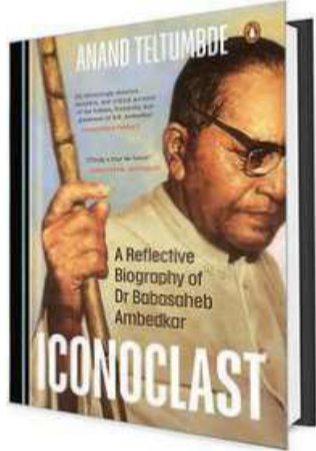
Was this an isolated outburst, an anomaly? Not at all. He said it again in 1956, a few months before his death. Why did the man hailed as the father of India’s Constitution feel compelled to publicly disown it? And if Ambedkar was just a “hack”, then who were the real makers of the Constitution? Anand Teltumbde, a leading authority on Ambedkar, raises several such discomfiting questions in *Iconoclast*, a “reflective biography”.

Filtering a story
Teltumbde isn’t interested in “the pretence of presenting any new facts.” Rather, his objective is to filter the story of Ambedkar’s life “through a sieve of rationality” so that people are awakened from what he describes as “their state of devotional inebriation”. Indeed, exploding the cultishness around Ambedkar is the driving force behind the author’s “comments, questions marks and discussions” that constitute the “reflective” dimension of this biography.

The biggest component of the Ambedkar iconography is his mythologised role as the architect of the Constitution, and Teltumbde has plenty to say on the subject, starting with how he became Chairman of the Drafting Committee - it was thanks to Gandhi and the Congress, two adversaries who



Reflective dimensions
(From top) Followers of Ambedkar pay homage on his death anniversary, in Mumbai; and Ambedkar being sworn in as independent India’s first Law Minister, on May 8, 1950.
(GETTY IMAGES AND WIKI COMMONS)



Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar
Anand Teltumbde
Penguin/Viking
₹1,499

have copped the most bitter of his many tirades. “It is only Gandhi who could see the strategic value of Ambedkar...for the longevity of the future constitutional State, which would be insured if a multitude of people, particularly its potential victims, especially upheld it... If Ambedkar, already a demigod for Dalits, is projected as the maker of the Constitution, the Dalits and potentially the entire lower strata, would emotionally defend it.”

What would an impartial assessment of Ambedkar’s legacy look like? Of course, no assessment could possibly be harsher than Ambedkar’s own, for he believed he had failed to achieve his goal of securing a political future

Not a free agency
Not surprisingly, Ambedkar did not enjoy much freedom chairing the Drafting Committee. Teltumbde cites historian Granville Austin’s pioneering work to buttress the point that the Drafting Committee was never a free agency and that “every word that entered the Constitution was controlled by the Congress... led by an ‘oligarchy’ of Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and Maulana Azad.” This is a critical aspect to bear in mind when right-wing commentators cherry pick self-serving quotes from Ambedkar’s speeches in the Constituent Assembly debates, especially on topics like secularism. As Teltumbde observes, in many of these debates, Ambedkar was not expressing his own opinions but ‘lawyering’ on behalf of the Congress-controlled draft amendments, which explains his ‘hack’ remark.

The ‘real’ Ambedkar, as Teltumbde shows in this meticulously researched book, was a man of contradictions, a flawed individual who made errors of judgement, and did not always transcend the prejudices of his time, all of which not only do not detract from his greatness but rather

add to it by rendering him as an all too human figure that ordinary people could relate to.

‘Too Mahar-centric’
Speaking of Ambedkar’s errors of judgement, Teltumbde is most unforgiving about his eschewal of class politics and the Mahar-centricity of the various institutions he set up, which also explains his failure as a builder of organisations. He attributes Ambedkar’s “strategic incoherence” to the deep influence of John Dewey’s pragmatism, which led him to dally with diverse ideological streams. The bottom line: no clarity on what exactly constitutes ‘Ambedkarism’, not that he intended any ‘ism’ as his legacy.

What would an impartial assessment of Ambedkar’s legacy look like? Of course, no assessment could possibly be harsher than Ambedkar’s own, for he believed he had failed to achieve his goal of securing a political future (separate electorates) and social guarantees for Dalits. For Teltumbde, however, it is the iconisation that is the most problematic element of his legacy, for it has “led to the competitive allurements of Dalits by all political parties using the Ambedkar icon as a proxy... disorienting the Dalit masses further into an identitarian morass.” In such a scenario, a radical praxis inspired by Ambedkar’s life (as opposed to ‘Ambedkarism’) demands breaking through the iconisation to connect with the Ambedkar of flesh and blood, the breaker of chains, the mocker of traditions, the iconoclast. For those keen on such an intellectual and political project, this book is an invaluable resource.

BROWSER

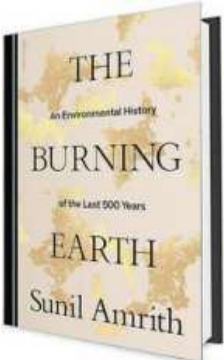
Gujaratis: A Portrait of a Community

Salil Tripathi
Aleph
₹1,499
After a lifetime of observing the community he was born into, a journalist and writer profiles the Gujaratis, and explains what makes them astute business people and politicians. Tripathi dissects the Gujarati presence in both India and abroad.



The Burning Earth: An Environmental History of the Last 500 Years

Sunil Amrith
Penguin Random House
₹2,060 (Kindle)
Taking stock of what humans have done to planet earth, a historian writes about the missteps and the way forward. It’s a book for “an urban, globalised, and divided planet,” from a “position of empathy” at a time when dreams of a fossil-fuelled escape lie in ruins.



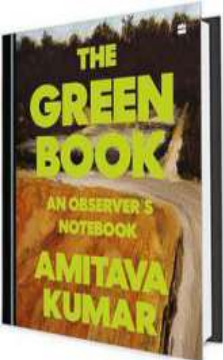
Nehru’s India

Aditya Mukherjee
Vintage
₹499
A writer argues that Nehru fought for values like sovereignty, democracy, secularism, and a modern scientific outlook during the freedom struggle and also played a pivotal role to implement them in the newborn nation after independence. Six decades after his passing away, do Nehru’s principles still hold water?



The Green Book

Amitava Kumar
HarperCollins
₹799
The third book in the series, that started with *The Blue Book* and *The Yellow Book*, gives readers a peek into the mind of a writer who is a keen observer. Kumar’s jottings include writings by Virginia Woolf and John Berger, Gandhi to Shiva Naipaul.



Lions have long been symbols of royalty across the world. In India, kings sat on lion thrones (*simha-asana*), and Durga, the patron goddess of royal households, is shown riding into battle on a lion. Uniquely, in our country, lions are also linked with ascetics and their guardian goddesses. Both kings and ascetic were called *shardula*, a mythical being that is part lion, part tiger and even part elephant.

The motif of the lady on the lion originated not in India, but in the Middle and Near East. Its emergence and popularity across Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism reveals how ideas travel across geographies in history.

Take the case of Singapore, in the Malay peninsula. The city is named after the lion, even though the big cats never existed in Southeast Asia. Legend says that a local prince saw a lion there in the 13th century – an idea that could have come with Tamil sailors. The people of Sri Lanka call themselves Sinhala, or the lion people, even though there are no lions in the island country. The name is traced to their first king, Vijaya (descendent of lions), who migrated from India.

In fact, some historians wonder if lions are native to India. No Harappan seal shows the animal; they only depict tigers. The first mention of lions are found in Vedic texts and probably carry memories of Central Asian beasts. The lion capital of the Mauryans may have been inspired by Persian royal art that showed kings hunting the animals. And most lions in the Mughal period were likely imported by royalty, to hunt in sport.

The Asiatic lion, in all probability, lived west of the Hindukush, across



FROM CULT TO CULTURE IN THE LION'S ROYAL SHADOW

From Sri Lanka's Sinhalas to goddesses Durga and Ambika, the king of the jungle has held sway over religion and seats of power



Tracking the big cat A painting of Durga fighting the bull, Mahishasura; and (below) an 8th-9th century carving of Ambika on a lion. (WIKI COMMONS)

the Persian plateau, and a few must have made their way to Gujarat and central India. Mesopotamian cities have a long history of images of heroes such as demigod Gilgamesh wrestling lions, and the goddesses of love and war Ishtar riding atop them. Asherah, the wife of Yahweh, an ancient Levantine deity, was linked to lions and trees around 1,000 BC. Her memory has since been erased by those who wrote the Hebrew Bible.

Kingship comes with a mane

It is in ancient Egypt, nearly 5,000 years ago, that we find the earliest association of kingship and the lion. The king wore the Nemes crown, which framed his head like a lion's mane. He was protected by Sekhmet, the lion goddess, who was also Hathor, the cow goddess. Around 3,500 years ago, artworks show the Egyptian pharaoh riding horse-drawn chariots while hunting lions.

Similar depictions of Persian kings were seen on public monuments around 2,500 years ago. They were also shown seated on thrones designed to resemble lions. About 1,700 years ago, in the Udayagiri caves of Central India, we find the earliest images of Vishnu as the man-lion Narasimha. It is also seen in Kondamotu, Guntur, in coastal Andhra, around the same time. Both these regions were centres of Buddhism and the newly emerging Puranic Hinduism.

Jains also claimed the lion as the

symbol of their last Tirthankara, Mahavira. The royal symbol was thus a symbol of ascetic power, too.

Goddesses tame the big cat

In Hinduism, Durga rides a lion and kills the buffalo demon. Her story is found in the *Devi Bhagavatam*, composed 1,500 years ago. In early images, however, from the Kushan period (100 AD), and even in the rock-cut Udayagiri caves (300 AD) in Madhya Pradesh, the goddess is shown killing the buffalo, but there are no lions.

The large cat appears later at rock cut sites Aihole, Karnataka (600 AD) and in Mamallapuram (700 AD). The imagery of a goddess who rode a lion was probably brought to India by the Kushans, a nomadic people from the north Central Asian steppes who controlled trade routes across the Hindu Kush.

While the Hindu goddess on the beast embodies military power, the Jain goddess on the lion embodies resilience. Known as Ambika, she is a *yakshi*, guardian of Tirthankars, and her images appear with great frequency after 800 AD. The lion is no demon here, but her husband, who regretted abusing her when she served Jain monks before serving him. She holds no weapons, and she is depicted sitting under a mango tree with two children. She is thus linked more with fertility, like the lion-riding goddesses who were worshipped long ago in the Middle and Near East.

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

GOREN BRIDGE

Misfit magic

East-West vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

We've been featuring some of Italy's star players this week and we continue today. Norberto Bocchi was South, in today's deal. Misfit hands often produce a painful auction and an unhappy ending is common. Could Bocchi bring home his unlikely slam? Bocchi won the opening

spade lead with his ace and led the king of hearts. East won and returned a spade, ruffed by Bocchi. It seems impossible to take 12 tricks unless the diamond suit comes home. Bocchi showed us otherwise. He started to run his heart suit, leaving this position with one heart to go: (grid two)

Bocchi cashed the five of hearts and West and North both shed clubs. East, who had to keep his diamonds, also discarded a club.

NORTH
♠ Q 9 8 4 2
♥ Void
♦ A K J 10 7 5
♣ J 2

WEST
♠ K 5 3
♥ 10 7 2
♦ 4 3 2
♣ 10 9 7 6

EAST
♠ J 10 7 6
♥ A 8 4
♦ Q 8 6
♣ Q 8 4

SOUTH
♠ A
♥ K Q J 9 6 5 3
♦ 9
♣ A K 5 3

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1♠	Pass	1♥	Pass
1♠	Pass	3♥*	Pass
3♠	Pass	4♣	Pass
4♠	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♠	Pass	6♥	All pass

Opening lead: Three of ♠

Bocchi led a diamond to the ace and cashed the king, discarding a club from his hand. Poor West could not defend the

position. West had to let go of another club and Bocchi's three clubs took the last three tricks. Beautifully done!

NORTH
♠ Q
♥ Void
♦ A K J
♣ J 2

WEST
♠ K
♥ Void
♦ 2
♣ 10 9 7 6

EAST
♠ Void
♥ Void
♦ Q 8 6
♣ Q 8 4

SOUTH
♠ Void
♥ 5
♦ 9
♣ A K 5 3

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has December 15 ever given us?



Breaking down barriers A poster of American DJ Alan Freed with his band. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

Born this day in 37 AD in Italy, this person was one of the most controversial emperors of all time. To maintain power, he orchestrated the deaths of many, including his close family. Who was this notorious ruler, who was also supposedly responsible for the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD?

Holland granted a patent to Cornelis van Uitgeest on this date in 1593 for a crankshaft that converted the horizontal power of wind into a vertical sawing motion. As a result, his sawmill could convert logs into planks 30 times faster than before.

This led to the popularity of what structure that has become iconic for the country?

This French civil engineer, born on December 15, 1832, co-designed two of the most iconic monuments in the world. After building bridges for the French railway, he designed a tower for the Exposition Universelle of 1889 and then a centennial gift for the United States. Who was this engineer, whose name has been immortalised by the tower?

Henri Becquerel, born this day in 1852, was a French scientist who shared the 1903 Nobel Prize in physics with

Pierre and Marie Curie. He had been inspired by Röntgen's discovery of X-rays to study more about emission of light. His work led to the discovery of a phenomenon that played a huge role in history. What did he discover that has his name as its SI unit?

Czech composer Antonín Dvořák's 'Symphony No. 9,' a.k.a 'New World Symphony,' premiered in New York City on this day in 1893. The first few bars are two notes on a cello that are played and become faster, giving it a menacing tone. Known for being used for the villain in a Spielberg movie, it became more famous as the first notes of a children's song that hit 10 billion views on

YouTube in 2022. Which song that features the same villain is this?

Italo Marchiony, a food cart vendor in New York, received a U.S. patent on this day in 1903 for inventing a machine that makes an edible container that we are very familiar with. He used to sell lemon ice in small glass dishes, which people either kept breaking or forgetting to give back. What did his machine make that solved his problem?

Max Yasgur, an American dairy farmer, was born this day in 1919 and owned a 600-acre farm outside of New York. When some producers approached him for hosting a music festival, he obliged, wanting to bridge 'the generation gap'. The result was a historic moment in pop culture. What iconic festival eventually took place for three days in 1969 on his farm?

Born this day in 1922, Alan Freed was an American DJ who used to work on the Armed Forces Radio. He later worked on public radio, where he became popular for playing hot jazz and pop. He was responsible for popularising a term about the then new genre of

music, which was fast and had a big beat. What term is this that features in the titles of many songs now?

In 1954, four engineers were working on a top secret mission at General Electric labs called 'Project Superpressure'. Using extremely high temperatures and pressures, they were able to create a blob. On December 15, they reported that the blob had destroyed all their polishing wheels. What had they been able to create for the first time?

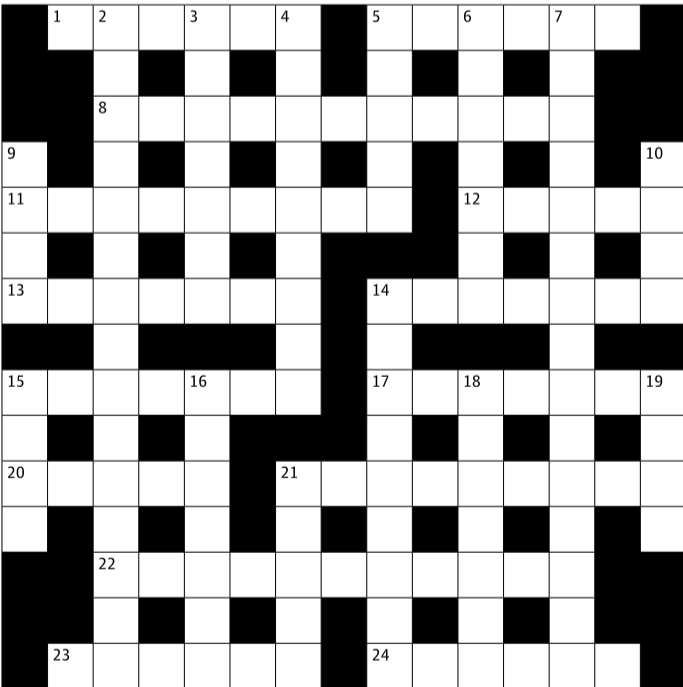
This gentleman, born on December 15, 1976, is an Indian footballer and was the first Indian player to sign with a European club. He was known as the 'Sikkimese Sniper' because of his shooting skills. Who is this iconic footballer?

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

1. Emperor Nero
2. Windmills
3. Gustave Eiffel
4. Radioactivity
5. 'Baby Shark'
6. Ice cream cones
7. Woodstock
8. Rock and roll
9. Artificial diamonds
10. Bhairav Bhutia

Answers

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3336



Across

- 1 Chubby harpist, Edenic resident – unearthly being, primarily! (6)
- 5 Tiny something taken by secretary (6)
- 8 Jack's obstacle making Cedric and Les tickled in part (11)
- 11 Everyman's going to heads, having complaints (9)
- 12 Express view in ode to a Christmas tree? (5)
- 13 Slapdash, a bit, UEFA's only partly regular (7)
- 14 Leaves by swish old railway (7)
- 15 Kind of tense? Ideal (7)
- 17 Twerp in middle of heath finding track (7)
- 20 Coat chicken? (5)
- 21 King, extremely stuck up, beheaded: most awkward! (9)
- 22 Oath: if doing, perform honestly (2,4,5)
- 23 For himself, the king's – that is to say – casual apparel (6)
- 24 Cheers! Drink, then eastern casserole (6)

Down

- 2 Fruit, N. European, for Tom Sawyer's pal (11, 4)
- 3 Ken Starr not quite liberal, extremely gross (7)
- 4 Bastille's stormed, tougher than the rest (9)
- 5 Biblical lawgiver saunters with yen to depart (5)
- 6 Book with the writer supporting N. African

- capital – not about Kenyan city (7)
- 7 Inane, thick tot – he misbehaves – grin and bear it (4,2,2,3,4)
- 9 Drug-addled greeting heard (4)
- 10 Tax riverside protection in announcement (4)
- 14 Stop using smartphones, laptops etc? As if (4,3,2)
- 15 What the crossword setter sees as exquisite, friends! (4)
- 16 Tangled dungarees abandoned by Dutch causes vexation (7)
- 18 Taking home fishing kit (7)
- 19 Schedule a hill to climb (4)
- 21 Merry after skipping starter: broken bread in Scandinavia (5)

SOLUTION NO. 3335

LADYGODIVA CART
I E U O T U R
SPECIALISM EDGE
P D L P T S I S
W O T L E B E S O U P
N W O T L E B E S O U P
EVERTOWN ENVILOUS
G S T I L O S
ANTENNA SICKLE
T A I R L O S
INFINITELOOP
V R G D O N D O
IRIS SECONDDINDO
S C C N E S E
MEAD CONSTRUCTIS

The lost art of writing

Shivangi Sinha
11shivangisinha@gmail.com

If the Elizabethan era was the golden age of literary brilliance, the present age might well be its dark counterpart. Shakespeare's eloquence and Austen's wit led to prose that challenged minds and expanded vocabularies. Fast forward to today, and our collective writing skills seem to be on an extended sabbatical, but this one doesn't promise to rejuvenate us. Instead, it signals a growing cultural decay.

AI is now making its way into the world of literature, stirring both intrigue and concern. In a recent experiment, author Stephen Marche released *Death of an Author* under the pseudonym Aidan Marchine, blending human input with machine-generated text. This murder mystery, a scholar's quest to solve the death of a literary icon, showcases just how far AI has come in writing fiction. With 95% of the novel generated by AI, Marche acted more as an editor than a traditional author.

As a writer, it scares me to see what AI is becoming increasingly capable of. Professionals like me – including creative writers – are now facing the uncomfortable truth that AI is not just a tool; it's evolving fast. While we like to tell ourselves that AI cannot write like humans, the reality is that it's getting better every day. What's more unsettling is that content writing, which many writers take on to kick-start their careers, is already a low-paid gig. Now, AI tools are flooding the market with instant content, making it even harder for writers to earn a decent living.

Writer Paul Graham has warned of a future divided into two camps: "writes" and "write-nots". "Almost all pressure to write has dissipated. You can have AI do it for you, both in school and at work," he notes. "The result will be a world divided into writes and write-nots."

As AI advances, it could permanently alter the relationship between humans and the written word. With the ability to generate essays and stories in seconds, students may avoid learning the craft altogether. Loopholes in plagiarism detection tools make it easier to evade scrutiny, blurring the lines between authentic and automated work. This reliance on AI extends beyond the classroom into professional spaces. From marketing emails to business reports, employees can use AI-powered tools to handle communication tasks. The pressure to develop writing proficiency, already waning, diminishes further.

In a world increasingly governed by algorithms, the choice to write may be the ultimate defiance. The question is: will we let machines do our thinking for us, or will we reclaim the pen and safeguard the art of expression for generations to come?

Contemplating the end

What will change if you knew your last day?

N. Anand Venkatesh
anaushram44@gmail.com

Imagine waking up one morning, coffee in hand, only to find a note on your bedside table revealing your exact date of death. Suddenly, every mundane task feels like a race against time. You might turn into the world's most enthusiastic bucket-lister, sprinting to the travel agency to book that Himalayan trip you always said you would do "one day". Family gatherings become a hilarious game of "Guess who's still alive?", and you may even start throwing extravagant parties for yourself, complete with a cake that says, "Happy last birthday!" Friends will likely roll their eyes as you insist on documenting every moment with selfies captioned "Living my best life – until further notice!"

Life becomes one big comedy sketch where you are the star, determined to make every day count. The idea of knowing one's date of death can be both unsettling and enlightening. While many might initially react with fear or anxiety, this knowledge can lead to profound changes in how we approach life, relationships, and our own mortality.

Embracing the reality of our finite existence can inspire us to live more fully, prioritise meaningful connections, and cultivate a deeper understanding of our spiritual beliefs. As the author Haruki Murakami once said, "Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it."

Understanding that our time is limited serves as a powerful motivator. It encourages us to prioritise what truly matters in life. With the knowledge of our impending end, we may feel compelled to pursue our passions and engage in activities that bring joy and fulfilment. This urgency can push us to set aside trivial distractions and focus on what enriches our lives. Steve Jobs famously remarked, "If you live each day as it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right."

This mindset fosters a sense of purpose that permeates every aspect of our existence.

Imagine waking up each day with a clear understanding that your time is limited. This realisation can inspire you to seize opportunities that you might have otherwise overlooked. Let it be travelling to a dream destination, rekindling old friendships, or finally starting that long-desired project, the knowledge of your impending end can ignite a fire within you to make the most of every moment. After all, life is not



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

measured by the number of breaths we take but by the moments that take our breath away. Relationships often deepen when we confront the reality of death. Knowing our date of death may prompt us to cherish our connections with family and friends more profoundly. Instead of allowing petty grievances or misunderstandings to fester, we might choose to express love and appreciation openly. The urgency created by this knowledge can lead to heartfelt conversations and shared experiences that strengthen bonds.

As George Eliot wisely stated, "Our dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them." This sentiment highlights the importance of nurturing relationships while we have the opportunity. It can inspire families to come together in ways they never anticipated.

Open discussions about mortality may initially seem uncomfortable, but often lead to a greater understanding and empathy. When faced with the reality of loss, families may find themselves more willing to engage in meaningful conversations. This vulnerability creates an environment where emotional expression is encouraged, fostering stronger connections.

The power of knowing one's date of death extends beyond personal relationships; it also has significant implications for productivity. The realisation that time is finite often leads individuals to become more focused on their goals and aspirations. This clarity allows for better decision-making as people align their daily actions with their long-term objectives. The urgency that accompanies this knowledge transforms procrastination into

action, inspiring one to tackle tasks previously avoided.

As we navigate life with an acute awareness of mortality, we are invited to embrace authenticity. Many individuals find themselves shedding societal expectations and embracing their true selves when confronted with the reality of death. This authenticity allows for greater self-expression and fulfilment as people pursue creative endeavours or engage in honest conversations without fear of judgment. In the words of Ian Fleming, "You only live twice: once when you're born and once when you look death in the face." This perspective encourages us to live boldly and fully.

The spiritual implications of knowing one's date of death are equally profound. Confronting mortality often leads individuals on a journey of introspection and exploration of their beliefs about life and what lies beyond. For some, this knowledge reinforces faith in an afterlife or higher power, providing comfort amid anxiety about death. Engaging in spiritual practices such as meditation or prayer becomes a way to connect with something greater than oneself – a source of strength during challenging times.

And so I conclude with these heartfelt lines: In each fleeting moment, a treasure we find/In each whispered heartbeat, our spirits entwined. With laughter like sunlight, let joy be our guide/With courage as armour, we must not divide. Embrace every heartbeat – our time's running wide!

(The author is a judge of the Madras High Court)

Chindu Sreedharan
chindu@gmail.com

I have always thought of elections as messy stories: big, sprawling narratives with plots and subplots and thousands of characters, told in bits and pieces by narrators far from omniscient – never unified, scattered across media platforms, history books, and the vagaries of memory.

Journalists piece together such stories. With visuals, out in the field, in newsrooms, and in broadcast studios. Their storytelling often borrows from fiction to add depth and nuance. But today, journalism stands on the brink of something stranger... something perilous but also potentially richer: the creative possibilities offered by AI.

What do I mean by that? AI is no longer merely a tool for automation. It is emerging as a canvas for journalistic creativity, offering ways to tell stories we hadn't quite imagined.

What if journalism could wear a digital face? Or sing? These are no longer fanciful questions. During the recent U.S. election, I worked with a team of young multimedia journalists at Bournemouth University

The tales AI can tell

With its tools, a small team can create quality content; but the real challenge lies in creating meaningful, resonant stories

exploring how AI might enhance storytelling. We called it Project L. We tested digital avatars – animated versions of real experts delivering sharp, engaging election commentary that felt at home on social media. We used AI-generated music to report on the tension in the swing States and the resumption of polling after bomb scares in Georgia and Michigan. Trump's victory speech and Kamala Harris's concession? We turned those into animated music videos, blending verse and visuals.

This is where you might be wondering: why? Why go to such lengths?

These experiments were not about jumping onto the grand bandwagon of gimmicks that accompany every disruptive technology. Nor were they about producing more content. Project L was about creating different content – stories designed to resonate, connect, and reach audiences in ways traditional formats



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

may not. While much of the conversation around AI focuses on automating news production to cut costs, we wanted to explore how this disruption could reimagine storytelling itself. AI does not just change how stories are told; it redefines what they can be.

But there's a catch. Isn't there always? Every technological disruption brings opportunities and challenges. With AI, the most

immediate concern is job displacement – automation that replaces, rather than enhances, human storytellers.

Take the AI avatars we experimented with. In theory, their use democratises production: no studio, no expensive equipment. Just a good script and a laptop. A small team can create quality visual content, in multiple languages, at a fraction of the cost. But this efficiency carries a risk: content fatigue. There's only so much of content a viewer, an audience segment, can consume – a threshold that AI provides us the capability to surpass all too easily. But just because we can produce more content does not mean we should. The real challenge lies in using AI to create meaningful, resonant stories – not adding to the noise.

Human factor

So, how do we ensure AI enhances storytelling in journalism rather than diluting it? The answer lies in purpose, the why of our journalistic content. AI should not be a replacement for human creativity; it should be a tool for enhancement. By taking over repetitive tasks, it frees journalists to focus on

imagination, nuance, and connection – the things machines cannot quite replicate. This liberation allows us to ask: what stories could we tell if we were not bound by traditional formats and constraints? How might we leverage avatars, music, or interactive narratives, or investigative opportunities, or personalisation possibilities to connect with audiences in ways we have never tried before?

That's the potential AI offers. Used responsibly, guided by ethics and a sense of purpose, it can be a powerful tool to enhance creativity. Journalism has never been just about delivering information. It's about forging connections: telling stories that challenge us, inspire us, and remind us of our shared humanity. The question is not whether AI can help us tell stories – it most certainly can – but whether we use it to tell the ones that truly matter, in ways that remain unmistakably, defiantly human.

(The author is the Professor of Journalism and Innovation, and the course director of MA Multimedia Journalism at Bournemouth University, U.K.)



FEEDBACK

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

- ▼ **Cover story**
- Co-living spaces are not only free from the hassle of managing the household, and affordable, but also give a feeling of living in a microcosm of society, where one can have social interactions with people from different backgrounds. ('Co-living: a hit with Gen X-Y-Z'; Dec 8) **Kosaraju Chandramouli**
- ▼
- The co-living concept invokes a sense of familial bond among youngsters. This opens up space for exchange of knowledge between the young and experienced in different fields of work, enabling better networking opportunities as well. **Sukanya Saha**
- ▼
- Despite all of its advantages, the concept is still new and evolving in India. Since the co-living sector is largely unregulated, operators tend to compromise on service quality or exploit residents in a variety of ways. **Kamal Laddha**
- ▼
- It's fascinating to witness the resurgence of the joint family system with a modern twist. The new generation of co-living spaces, blending Gen X, Y, and Z, will effectively help in bridging the generation gap. In an increasingly polarised society, these co-living environments offer an opportunity to bring together people from diverse backgrounds under one roof. This concept deserves to be more widely embraced. **Haneefa Puthuparamb**
- ▼
- Tree tales**
- It is indeed unfortunate that so far, little attention
- has been paid to historic or iconic trees in India, though we are aware of a few due to their religious significance, like the sacred mango tree in the Sri Ekambareswarar temple in Kanchipuram. ('75 silent sentinels'; Dec. 8) The need of the hour is to have a national register of iconic trees so that in-depth studies can be conducted. The register would also help in identifying if these tree species are under threat. **N. Rama Rao**
- ▼
- Top-notch satire**
- I have been a regular reader of *The Hindu* since 1973. G. Sampath's impressive articles remind me of Art Buchwald's works, which were regularly published in the newspaper earlier. ('My family and other animals'; Dec. 8) **Mohammed Ubedulla**
- ▼
- For the love of art**
- This book gives justice to all those artists who cope with their struggles while pursuing art. ('Ready reckoner to Indian art'; Dec. 8) From a research point of view, to publish something on such a large scale is a great determinant of one's inclination towards the arts. **Priya Priyadarshini**
- ▼
- Introducing 300 Indian artists through a single book is not an easy task. Bina Sarkar Elias has spent a lot of time talking to the artists to elicit little known facts about them. It is an incredible exercise to produce credible output for the benefit of people outside the art community. Her success is a sure recipe to motivate similar endeavours. **Prajet Dev Boinapally**



MORE ON THE WEB
www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

- ▼ **Mind mental health**
- Physical and mental health are equally crucial for a wealthy and wise life **Cheera Das**
- ▼ **Unfurl the umbrellas**
- They have always been emblems of love and affection **Rishi Kanna**
- ▼ **Chin-Chin Chu**
- Qamar Jalalabadi had written the unique lyrics of the song **J.V. Yakhmi**
- ▼ **Bright days**
- From yellow to white, the changing spectrum of home lamps and progress **Nikhil Narayanan**

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

Surya Praphulla Kumar
surya.kumar@thehindu.co.in

Four women in black *burqas* look up, heads cocked, at *The Funeral of Mona Lisa*, artist Yan Pei-Ming’s monumental installation at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. A European painting reinterpreted by a Chinese-born artist within the setting of the Middle East, it is a stunning study in contrasts – as an Instagrammable photo and the museum’s ambition to build dialogues between cultures and broaden the art history canon.

This is reflected in the museum’s acquisitions and exhibitions, including its latest, *Post-Impressionism: Beyond Appearances*. Walking past the delicate stippling of Neo-Impressionist painters Georges Seurat and Léo Gausson, and the lush brush strokes of Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh, you could be forgiven for thinking it is yet another Eurocentric curation of the period. But as you move deeper into the gallery, a fresher global perspective becomes apparent. Especially how Asian art had an impact on the artists.

Hosted in collaboration with the Musée d’Orsay and art consultancy France Muséums, the exhibition features more than 100 artworks, including paintings, works on paper and textile, by leading figures of Post-Impressionism. The art movement, which began in France and developed between 1886 and 1905, saw artists moving away from naturalistic depictions to a more personal style that was a window into their minds.

Global influences

Van Gogh’s *The Bedroom at Arles* (1889) has never been a favourite. Until I see the painting, and co-curator Jean-Rémi Touzet asks me not to “look at it with the rules of perspective in mind”. The *conservateur peinture* of Musée d’Orsay, instead, shifts my attention away from the awkwardly slanting blue walls (darkened over the years from its original lilac) and the confusing scale of the chrome yellow chairs and bed, to what the Dutch artist wanted to convey: absolute restfulness. It is also an attempt to share a slice of his life with his family – a ‘Look mum, here’s my room with its scarlet blanket’ painting.

More interesting, however, is the Asian influence to be seen in the work by this canonical European name. Touzet points out how van Gogh “suppressed the shadow, and painted it in

flat tints like a Japanese print”. This is also where the exhibition deviates from many earlier Post-Impressionist curations. It has the works of two Japanese artists whose art is believed to have inspired the painter: Utagawa Hiroshige’s *Plum Garden at Kameido* (1857) and *Sudden Shower on Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake* (1857), and Katsushika Hokusai’s *Yōrō Waterfall in Mino Province* (1830-1834).

Among the nine sections of the show – divided to highlight the distinctive journeys of the Post-Impressionists – other Asian, Polynesian and Middle Eastern influences gradually surface. Be it Paul Gauguin’s journey to Tahiti, where he depicted life as an untouched paradise in paintings such as *Arearea* (1892), or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters such as *Divan Japonais* (1892) that feature simpler elements, a departure from the more elaborate European traditions.

Towards the end of the exhibition are two paintings by Egyptian artist Georges Hanna Sabbagh, *The Artist and His Family at the Church of La Clarté* (1920) and *The Family: The Sabbaghs in Paris* (1921). His work, with a contrasting colour palette drawn from his homeland, was heavily influenced by the Nabi movement, a branch of Post-Impressionism. As Jérôme



New insights (Clockwise from left) Henri-Edmond Cross’ *The Evening Air*; Georges Seurat’s study for *The Circus*; de Toulouse-Lautrec’s *Divan Japonais*; van Gogh’s *The Bedroom at Arles*; and Gauguin’s *Arearea*. (COURTESY DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND TOURISM-ABU DHABI)

teamLab Phenomena Abu Dhabi, Natural History Museum Abu Dhabi, Manarat Al Saadiyat art gallery, and Berklee Abu Dhabi open on the island.

“It’s exciting to have this kind of momentum in West Asia with the building of new outposts of western museums, which gives locals as well as people in the region access to institutions that they may not have otherwise. Also, given the increasing global strife, it’s important to have these cultural linkages – in the absence of a shared narrative when it comes to media and entertainment,” says Gayatri Rangachari Shah, a journalist and art aficionado. “These institutions act as vital resources to bring people together and foster greater understanding of each other.”

The Guggenheim – with its asymmetrical cluster of galleries of varying heights and shapes, designed by architect Frank Gehry – is visible from the sun-scorched terrace of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. It will house art from the 1960s onwards, with a dedicated focus on the Gulf and West Asia, North Africa, and South Asia.

Once completed, the museums and galleries will be a short bike or car ride from each other, and will help boost each other’s numbers. “Last year, 1.2 million people visited Louvre Abu Dhabi, which is the highest so far,” says the museum’s director Manuel Rabaté. “We are already at this figure now, so we will cross it by the end of 2024.” Their upcoming roster of global programming – *The Kings and Queens of Africa* in January 2025; a show inspired by Asian trade routes; and a possible exploration of work by Arab artists who settled in Paris and built a new tradition of art – will ensure the number continues to ascend. “We are the first universal museum of the Arab world. By showcasing a variety of topics, we hope to engage different audiences and rebalance global narratives. We are trying to bring everyone to the table,” Rabaté concludes.

Post-Impressionism: Beyond Appearances is on till February 9, 2025, at the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

The writer was in Abu Dhabi on invitation.

FINDING THE ‘ASIAN’ IN POST-IMPRESSIONISM

Two reasons to head to the UAE in 2025: Louvre Abu Dhabi’s latest *Post-Impressionism* exhibition, which highlights some unexpected perspectives, and a slew of new museum openings, including the Guggenheim



Farigoule, chief curator at Louvre Abu Dhabi, explains: “He went to Paris [to École du Louvre]. He was a pupil of Félix Vallotton and Paul Sérusier, and learned from the pictorial lessons of Paul Cézanne. He was a bridge between the East and the West.”

\$27 billion game plan
Fostering local talent has been a mainstay of the United Arab



Emirates since the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan established it in 1971. Emirati artists went to Cairo to study art in the 1970s, and from the 80s, they began travelling farther, to countries such as the U.K., the U.S., and Russia. Once back home, they set up institutions such as the Cultural Foundation to grow the local art scene.

Louvre Abu Dhabi fit into this, as one of the early initiatives in the region to be a point of convergence between the UAE and the rest of the world. It opened in 2017, a little over a decade after Abu Dhabi’s Department of Culture and Tourism decided to develop Saadiyat Island, just off the coast of the capital city, into the Saadiyat Cultural District – as part of a plan to diversify the emirate’s economy and establish the city as a major cultural destination.

And now, as its neighbour, Saudi Arabia, signs deals with countries such as the U.K. to share cultural and creative expertise, and promotes the heritage of the AlUla region with immersive on-site museums, UAE is approaching the final stages of its \$27 billion cultural and tourism game plan. The next few months and years will see Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Zayed National Museum,



Barry Rodgers
barry.nathanie@thehindu.co.in

In South Mumbai’s ‘Heritage Mile’, home to many colonial buildings, there’s a hidden gem. It is Sarmaya’s new outpost, which opened last month on the second floor of the 146-year-old Lawrence & Mayo building in Fort.

The 3,500 sq.ft. space, once home to a bank, now houses the decade-old hybrid museum’s archive – a repository of art, artefacts, and living traditions from across the subcontinent. With large arched windows, floor to ceiling bookshelves, exposed wooden beams, and comfortable chairs strewn about, it is cosy and welcoming. A gorgeous Gond painting on the wall looks on as

Sarmaya debuts on the Heritage Mile

The hybrid museum has a new home, in a century-old building in South Mumbai

visitors quietly research or browse the pieces on display.

Founded in 2015 by Paul Abraham, art patron and former COO of IndusInd Bank, Sarmaya is designed to be a haven for research and exploration. Their collection features modern and contemporary art, indigenous and community art, photography, numismatics, and

rare books. “We also have rare maps, prints, and engravings,” says Abraham, who has been collecting for over four decades. And while they hosted exhibitions, talks and walkthroughs at their Dadar archive, he felt it was time to expand, “invite more people in” and allow a new generation to interact with the objects.

Personalised (Clockwise from left) Sarmaya at Fort; one of the archive’s artefacts; and Abraham and Rajaram. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



Restoration and micro-curation

Abraham and his partner Pavitra Rajaram, of the Mumbai-based practice Pavitra Rajaram Design, discovered the derelict space in January. “Pavitra saw beyond the peeling paint and dusty floors, focusing on the potential to create something meaningful,” he says. Sustainability and repurposing were important to the couple, so the goal was to honour the building’s history.

“As we worked on the renovation, we uncovered beautiful Burma teak [on the ceiling and arches] and Maillart stone [on the wall], bringing out the character and integrity of the original structure,” shares Rajaram. “The central area is inspired by communal courtyards, designed to be an inviting, peaceful place that encourages interaction and quiet reflection.”

One of the main reasons

Abraham decided to invest in a dedicated space was to try something different. “You have the big museum model, with everything displayed and just a bit of information, and then there are the galleries with shows that come with a commercial angle,” he explains. “With Sarmaya, we wanted something distinct.”

Their approach is all about micro-curation. Rather than staging large-scale exhibitions, they focus on tailored experiences. “If someone walks in without any idea of what they want to see, we’ll guide them through a sample of our collection,” he says. “But if you have a specific interest, we encourage you to let us know in advance [through the website]. Then, we’ll pull out relevant pieces for a more personalised experience.”

Shared stories

Historian Manu S. Pillai and author Ira Mukhoty were among Sarmaya’s inaugural guest speakers this month, as part of Sarmaya Talks. Starting early 2025, Sarmaya will also host exhibitions.

Currently, only 20% of Abraham’s private collection is on display at Fort, with plans to rotate the collection quarterly. To preserve these precious items, Sarmaya ensures that the objects are kept in temperature- and humidity-controlled environments. “This helps maintain the integrity of our collection so that these stories can be shared for generations,” Abraham says. And enable deeper, meaningful engagement with India’s diverse cultural stories.

