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Magazine

LITERARY REVIEW

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WIDE ANGLE

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We're mapping Goa's ingredients to see what's disappearing due to climate change: Anumitra Ghosh Dastidar p8

COVER

IT'S SUNDAY. COUNT ON MEME

The meme, possibly the most democratic art form to come into its own in the 2000s, has played a great role in calming frayed nerves during this prolonged pandemic **p3**

last week

Blackboard jungle

The Union Cabinet approved a new 'toddler-to-college' National Education Policy that promises major changes at every level. Highlights include a standardised entrance test for universities, like the American SAT, and four-year undergraduate degrees. M.Phils have been dropped. The school system will change to a 5+3+3+4 structure, while the medium of instruction will be the mother tongue or local language till Class V.

Micro mystery

Scientists finally cracked a conundrum that has plagued humanity for eons: body odour. Specifically, the pungent smells that emanate from the armpit. They traced it to a particular enzyme in one of the microbes that inhabit the area. When these microbes consume an odourless compound released by our sweat glands, the enzyme causes them to produce the offending product — the smell-emitting thioalcohols.

More apps banned

A little over a month after the Union government banned 59 Chinese apps, including TikTok, Shareit and Club Factory, citing a threat to the "sovereignty and integrity of India", it banned another 47 apps developed in China, under the provisions of the Information Technology Act. While the list of the latest set of apps is not yet known, they are believed to be clones of the 59 banned initially.

Prime suspect

Najib Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia from 2009 to 2018, was convicted on all seven charges in the first trial linked to the multibillion-dollar 1MD scandal, one of the world's biggest corruption scandals, in which Razak and others are alleged to have embezzled vast sums of government money through a state investment fund. Facing 12 years in jail, he vowed to appeal the verdict.

Bubble games

The BCCI announced that this year's Indian Premier League would be held in the U.A.E. from September 19 to November 8, with precautions such as 'bubbles' for each franchise. Meanwhile, Sourav Ganguly's tenure as BCCI president officially ended due to a stipulated cooling-off period for cricket administrators, but with the Supreme Court due to hear a plea to amend these rules, his position remained unclear.

Running feud

The Congress government in Rajasthan, intent on demonstrating its majority after the rebellion by Sachin Pilot and his followers, pressed for a frash session of the State Assembly but had three proposals turned down by Governor Kalraj Mishra (above), citing the short notice, before he finally agreed to a session from August 14.

How to get your goat

Alarmed by the prospect of a surge in COVID-19 cases as Eid al-Adha approached, Pakistan's authorities encouraged the public to buy their sacrificial animals online, or at least wear masks when visiting the cattle markets, which are generally located in bustling urban centres. Many are now paying charities to slaughter animals for them..

Going nuclear

The world's largest nuclear fusion project began its five-year assembly phase in France. The 20 billion-euro Iter project, which includes a 23,000 tonne reactor, superconducting magnets and 200 km of cables, aims to prove that fusion power — which can provide unlimited, clean energy in theory but poses daunting technical challenges — is commercially viable. It's expected to produce the first batch of plasma in 2025.

Emmy nominees

The nominations for the 72nd annual Emmy Awards were announced. While Netflix dominated the nominations with a thumping 160 nods, HBO's *Watchmen*, a dystopian superhero drama, landed the most nominations of any series, with 26 nods. Amazon's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* came in second, with 20. The Emmy Awards will be hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, and will air on September 20.

3 billion affected

The bushfires that swept through Australia in 2019 and early 2020 have killed or displaced 3 billion animals, according to a report. These include over a hundred million mammals and birds, over 50 million frogs, and 2.5 billion reptiles. The deaths came not just from the blaze, but also from starvation and dehydration. "This ranks as one of the worst wildlife disasters in modern history," said Dermot O'Gorman, WWF-Australia.

Death should not be considered an isolated event, but as a journey for which we need to prepare

Live well DIE WELL

K. Ganapathy

Sigmund Freud had said that we are all convinced of our immortality. Discussing death is considered macabre, ghoulish and in morbid taste. But the unexpected deaths due to the pandemic are making us review our "this cannot happen to me" certitude.

A good death refers to one free from avoidable distress and suffering for the patient, family and caregivers; generally in accordance with their wishes; and reasonably consistent with clinical, cultural and ethical standards. Death should not be considered an isolated event – a moment in time.

It is a process, and like all journeys, we need to prepare by relinquishing roles and responsibilities, completing financial arrangements and saying goodbye. Wherever possible, should it not behove the attending clinician to consider patient preferences for treatment, a specific dying process, pain-free status, emotional well-being and dignity should be ensured.

Never in history have people lived as well as now. So why not focus on the quality of death as well?

To quote Shakespeare, "O, let him pass. He hates him. That would upon the rack of this tough world. Stretch him out longer."

A circle of support is relevant not just at the moment of death, but throughout the dying process. The journey towards death is as much about getting to know oneself as during any part of life. Learning to recognise our needs, be they medical, emotional or spiritual, becomes more relevant when we are closer to death. Earlier recognition is a major part of enabling a good death. Death is an inevitable part of life. Having the option to influence quality of death may generally suffice. Some wish to hasten the process. Several countries have laws allowing doctor-assisted active euthanasia. At no point in history have people lived as well as the present generation. So why not focus on the quality of our death as well?

A bad death is usually associated with violence, pain, dying alone, being kept alive against one's wishes, loss of dignity, and being unable to let one's wishes be known. Most individuals would prefer to die at home, at peace, with family members present. Do we want to be kept alive at all costs or do we not want to be resuscitated? Knowing our wishes makes it easier for the family and the healthcare provider.

Devastating loss

COVID-19 deaths could be considered a "bad death". It is devastating for the bereaved kin, whose grief is compounded by social isolation and inability to provide practical and emotional support.

The associated high stress is due to financial problems and worries about the health and quarantine of the whole family. Physical discomfort, difficulty in breathing, social isolation, psychological distress, lack of preparation, treatment falling short of expected respect and dignity, and lack of privacy supplement occasional ostracism.

The family members are deeply distressed when they cannot bid goodbye, when the death is unexpected, when it is perceived to be preventable and treatments did not comply with the patient's preferences. The last is often discounted particularly in a pandemic. Many of the face-to-face interactions that support older adults as they mourn, including time-honoured religious rituals and funeral services, are often prohibited, compounding the problem.

When in active neurosurgical practice, I had personally managed over 2,500 deaths. Primary importance was always given to the quality of life. Patient and family wishes took precedence over using tomorrow's "cutting-edge technology". Retrospectively, viewing things from the quietude of retirement, I wonder if the quality of death should also have been specifically discussed. In the 2015 Quality of Death Index Report by The Economist Intelligence Unit, India was ranked 67th among the 80 countries studied. Why should enabling good death be confined to palliative medicine specialists, a truly endangered species in India?

Should the "beneficiary" and the healthcare provider not discuss this every time along with management options? Many countries have death cafes where people drink tea, eat cake and discuss end-of-life care and death. Today, we have the choice of a good death. It is essential that we make a "living will" when we are in good physical and mental health.

Quality of death is as important as quality of life.

(The author is a past president of the Neurological Society of India)

drkganapathy@gmail.com

The house by the rail line

Sharada Sivaram

Growing up in middle class Mumbai in the 1970s and 1980s meant that often your house was adjacent to a railway track. Our morning alarm was the shrill whistle of an outstation train. Our favourite pastime was standing by the window and watch trains pass by and weave stories about the passengers. On days when train services were disrupted, my home would be a makeshift communications centre as people would call up constantly to know if services had resumed. I remember days when trains would break down opposite our home, and we would supply water and other necessities to the stranded passengers.

Our knowledge of train timings would put a railway timetable to shame. Our daily routine revolved around this timetable – breakfast when the Bangalore-Mumbai train passed our house, and afternoon tea when the Mumbai-Kanyakumari express trundled past.

After seeing off our loved ones from home, we would go and stand by the railway track at the appointed time to wave them another goodbye. Sometimes the trains would be inordinately late, but that posed no hassles for us as we were never ever hard-pressed for time. And when the train flew by, we caught but a glimpse of our friend or relative at the door waving frantically with a bright-coloured hanky. The joy that we gained in waving back was boundless. When it was our turn to travel, it was a matter of reciprocal courtesy that our friends wait to wave us goodbye.

This session of goodbyes continued till we grew up and bade farewell to our childhood homes and set out to explore a world where such simple pleasures had lost their meaning.

sivaramsharada@yahoo.com

Coming up short

The unpredictable happens on the beach, sometimes to hilarious remembrances

S.G. Vombatkere

Way back in the late 1970s, when I was posted at Madras (now Chennai), we lived in Besant Nagar in a flat less than 40 paces from the sands of the Elliot's Beach. Our sons were young (Asha and I too were!) and on Sunday mornings, we would swim in the sea.

I had taught all of them swimming in a regular pool and set out to teach them swimming in the sea, which is a bit different. The boys picked it up quickly, learning to duck under the water when a high breaker approached, because being struck by the edge of a fast breaker can be uncomfortable. Asha was, however, a bit unsure of herself.

There was then a sand bank about 50 metres from the beach, and when one stood on it, the water depth was less than a metre, with only the larger waves going across it to the beach. The water stretch between the beach and the sand bank was deeper and one needed to swim to the sand bank.

So one day, after Asha had practised on many weekends, I swam to the sand bank and beckoned to her to swim across to me. Beckoned, because the sound of waves masks even shouting.

In trouble

The boys were frolicking in the sea, and they paused to watch their mother swim across. She began well, and swam well until she was barely three metres from me, standing on the sand bank with water just up to my knees. At that point, when a breaker caught her unawares and struck her, she panicked. She began to flounder and thrash about in the water which was not more than a metre deep. I was shouting to her to stand up, but in her panic combined with the sound of the sea, she couldn't hear. She reached me and, still thrashing about, managed to grab my shorts with one hand. Now I too was in trouble!

Still shouting to her to stand up, I hung onto my shorts while she was hauling them down. Soon after, she got her other hand on my shorts, but providence decreed that she discovered that she was in shallow water, and in standing up, exerted even more pull on my shorts, while I was now holding onto them with all my strength. All this happened in full public view! The boys were in paroxysms of laughter as they watched me trying to save my dignity. When our sons saw the draft of this article, one said: "Now I know why we are electrical engineers – our mother taught us how to remove shorts!"

sg9kere@live.com

Doctors with a healing touch

Fortunately, the world has many of them. Long live their tribe

Sarangapani Bashyam

"Vaidyo Narayano Hari." Our culture places physicians in an exalted position. Between this status and that of a professional to the core, we come across a blend of humanistic and patient-centred doctors.

When I had fever for three days, I visited a doctor near my apartment. He diagnosed it as paratyphoid and put me on a course of medicines. Out of curiosity, I read the instructions of the drug manufacturer in fine print. Scared by the instruction that the medicine should be administered after blood test and further tests during the course of fever, I stormed into the consulting room and asked the doctor the reason for skipping the test. He smilingly asked me, "Do you want to get cured or the blood tests?" I was bowled over by his confidence. I got cured. Knowing that I play bridge, he invited me to his Sunday pastime, a break from his week-long practice. I enjoyed the coffee he brewed and his wit and learned to play bridge better.

Our patient-doctor relationship took the backstage.

In my job in a manufacturing organisation, the medical officer had an infectious smile. Asked about the secret of his demeanour, he would simply say, "Do not be serious always." I told him my health problem. While the world over people are finding it difficult to lose weight, I found it next to impossible to do the opposite. Listening to all the methods I had tried and failed, he suggested a different technique.

When this also did not work, he confided, "You are perfectly right to listen to your wife on all matters. But on this you simply disagree. Your health is good." We used to conduct training for employees with a talk on "Health and managing stress". After the talk, the doctor advised all participants, "Whenever you go on a holiday, make it a point not to lodge in company resorts."

He explained, "When you are lodging in company resort, the talk will be about the company, the bottom line, who got promoted and who missed. You will get back home more stressed."

I once decided to consult an Ayurvedic practitioner in his eighties, a physician very methodical in physical examination and recording symptoms.

Spirit of the Vedas

He knew the Ayurvedic texts in Sanskrit, would quote them and explain the treatment. Knowing my interest in the Vedas, he would ask me to join him in reciting a few lines related to health.

He would make the formulations himself, telling me, "I am not giving you drugs. These are food supplements to detox and revitalise your immune system. These are specific for you and not the disease." Even when leaving his clinic, I used to feel getting cured. Fortunately, the world has many such medical practitioners. Long live their tribe.

lakshmibashyam@yahoo.com

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in

Cover story

The cover story ('The invisible warriors'; Jul. 26) clearly showed that nursing is not just a career focusing on lucrative prospects but demands round-the-clock service that pushes personal life and physical exhaustion to the back seat.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN

■ Nurses are treating COVID-19 patients with selfless care, unmindful of the risk to their health. They should be given free medical and life insurance. Their role is next only to doctors.

K. PRADEEP

■ Other than nurses, invisible warriors indeed, there is another group of citizens, namely farmers, who have saved the country during this pandemic. Unfortunately, they have found little space in print or electronic media. Had it not been for their hard work, things would have been very different.

PROF. P. TAURO

■ The feature offered an insight into the gruelling daily routine of people whose jobs we often take for granted. Whether the nurses view each day as just another one or as a scope for rededication of their calling or simply oblige for the sake of duty, the fact that their presence makes a difference is the only thing that matters now.

SUMANA SINGH

■ From the safety of our homes we read about the tireless service rendered by nurses. Save one life, you are a hero. Save a hundred lives, you are a nurse!

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR

■ The cover story was tremendously motivating. We will surely win the battle against the virus with such soldiers at the forefront. While on the subject, I would like to refer to news reports that have described aggressive acts against these care-givers by some members of the public. I strongly hope this article comes as an eye-opener to those members of the public who have engaged in such acts.

V.V. KOUSHIK

Literary giant

A new generation has spawned since *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth (Reprise; Jul 26) hit the bookstands a quarter of century ago. Mira Nair and the BBC deserve to be complimented for paying cinematic tribute to Vikram Seth, who has by and large remained in oblivion. Our public is obsessed with cricketers and actors, while literary giants like Seth remain uncelebrated outside literary circles. *A Suitable Boy* has correctly been referred to as allegory of nationhood and should be part of college curricula.

CHANDER GUPTA

Art as critique

Artist Waswo X Waswo is no stranger to controversy. His staged studio photographs with their handsome, brown-skinned men have been critiqued for feeding into the Western stereotype of Orientals. But I find this simplistic. As an American settled in India, Waswo seems to be making fun of the way the average Westerner gazes at the East. Such a self-critical gaze is unusual. The self-satisfied way of looking at oneself is another monolith that needs to be toppled. This is what Waswo seems to be doing in his recent work depicting statues. ('They all get up again'; Jul. 26)

SHALINI SHARMA

■ Art and literature, science and sustainable technology are cultural templates that help evolve a new ethos and ethics. Art that is self-deprecating, like Waswo's, is rare. Post-modernism, deconstruction and intersectionality are various strands that have opened up new vistas of comprehending human nature and social behaviour. They act as mirrors to help us understand ourselves.

OUSEPH T.P.

More on the Web
thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Demystifying NGOs
As these organisations are engaged in COVID-19 relief, a look at their scope and activities
HIMANI DATAR

When children go online
They are exposed to various social networking tools and virtual content that are not designed for them
ANJANA JOSE VIMALASSERY & PARVATHI JAYAMOHAN

Not the end of the world
Instead of sinking into grief, we should pick lessons from failures and move on
RAMESHINDER SINGH SANDHU

A way with languages
Languages should not be treated as a barrier but rather as tools that add colours and shades to life
ASHOK BALAKRISHNA

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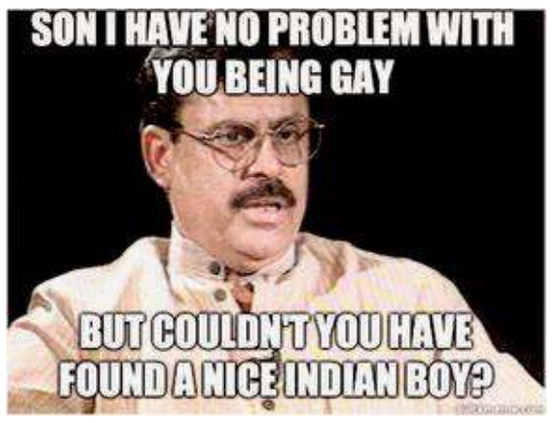
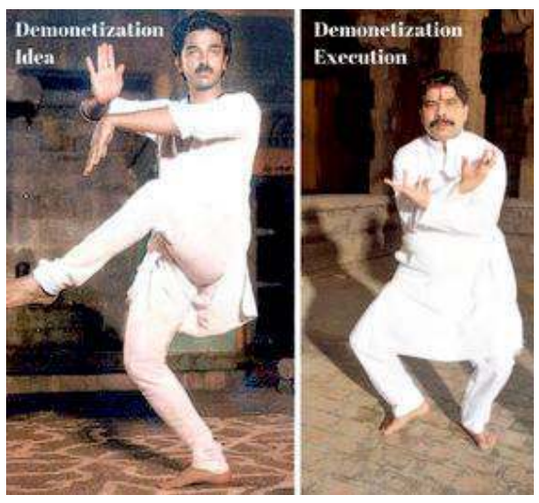
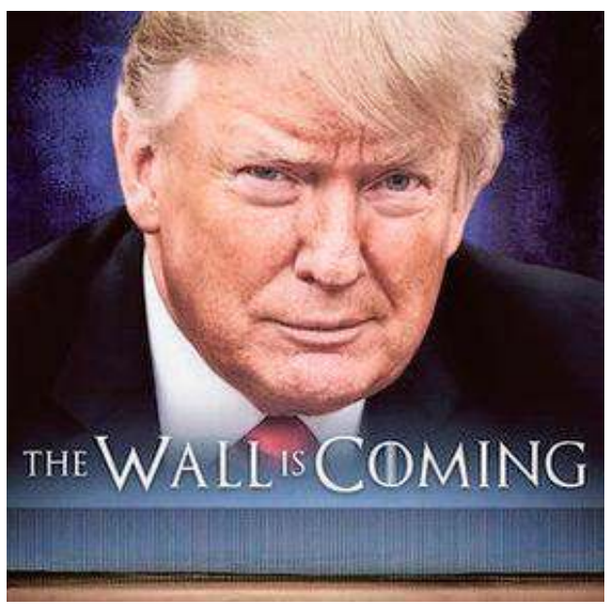


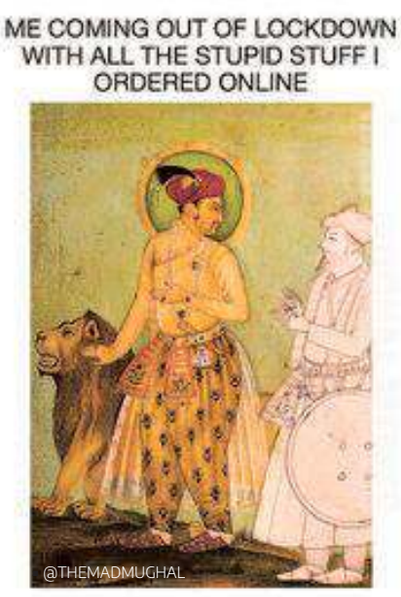




SOCIAL ART

From the #BLM movement to queer rights, from climate justice to pandemic relief, memes go for the jugular with their easy, direct and punchy wit

Meme me up, *Scotty!*



Trending The easy form and manner of the meme have made it vastly popular and probably the most legit representation of Internet culture. ▪ IMAGES COURTESY TWITTER, REDDIT, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Urmi Chanda-Vaz

As a xennial, I exist on a strange cusp. Having lived both the 'analog' and 'digital' life I've often swung between a quest for simpler, low-noise Gen X life, and a paralysing millennial dependence on the Internet. However, the lockdown during this mad year of the pandemic has landed me firmly on the web-side of the fence. For many of us, it was the Internet that kept us tethered to sanity while we lived in our lonely islands for months. Between the despair of doomscrolling COVID-19 news and endless, pantless Zoom calls, a joke here, a meme there kept things going.

Our collective uncertainties and anxieties encapsulated neatly into those top text-bottom text macro image WFH memes reassured us that we were not in this alone. Everyone was struggling, everyone was *crie*-ing. In fact, memes have been doing this noble job of lightening many of our existential burdens for a while. Their easy form and manner have made memes so vastly popular that they may well be the most legit representations of the culture of the Internet.

But how did this fascinating, now ubiquitous phenomenon come about? To who or what do we owe this super mix of information, humour, art, and subversion? The process is as interesting as the product.

Origin story

First things first: what is a meme? The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines memes as "an image, a video, a piece of text, etc., that is passed very quickly from one Internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous". The word has roots in Greek words such as 'mimeme' or 'mimeisthai', meaning 'imitation' or 'to imitate'.

Although this broad-spectrum definition seems to encompass most of what we consume on the Internet today, it hasn't always been the case. There are some definitive beginnings of this phenomenon, which psychologist and memeticist Susan Blackmore attributes to the poster boy of atheism, Richard Dawkins in her book, *Meme Machine*. The term first occurs in Dawkins' famous book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) about evolutionary biology, where he uses it to describe some modalities of genetic transmission.

It is interesting to look at the other definition of a meme in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, which says a meme is "an idea that is passed from one member of society to another, not in the genes but often by people copying it." The emphasis, in this definition, on the transmission not being genetic shows how the original context and usage (Dawkins') have changed, although the term remains the same. It is actually demonstrative of the life-cycle of memes themselves – ideas that start as something and turn into something else. Just as French-American painter Marcel Duchamp did to Mona Lisa. In 1919, he made a cheeky version of the painting on a cheap postcard that he called L.H.O.O.K. When he added a moustache, a goatee, and witty wordplay on what was arguably the world's most famous face, conceptual art as we know it was born. He called it ready-mades then; we call them memes now.

Child of the Internet

The form and name may have originated in Duchamp's studio and at Dawkins' desk, but the meme is truly the child of the Internet. Around the year 2000, when most xennials were still fighting with their dads to get that dial-up connection, obscure message boards had started spawning funny short format content that would become the precursor of memes.

Images, flash animation, snippets from video games, and demotivational posters started populating sites like Albino Blacksheep, Funnyjunk, 4chan and Reddit. The most memorable memes to have come out of these sites from the late 90s to the early 2000s were the Ugachaka Baby, LOLcats, Pepe the Frog and Rickroll, among others.

But it was the launch of Facebook in 2004 and YouTube in 2005 that truly changed the game. The ease and speed of creating and sharing that these platforms afforded not only democratised content-sharing but also changed the way we used the Internet. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the Internet went from being a largely formal medium of information exchange to a place of fun and entertainment.

Around 2011 these content formats came to be widely referred to as memes, and over the next decade, they became very common and continue to remain so. The top text-bottom text image macro came into full force at this time, and meme generator sites have ensured that this remains the most popular format.

In the last decade, Nyan Cat, Advice Animals, Success Kid, Doge, rage face, classical, deep-fried and movie-still macros have been among the commonest, abundantly and relentlessly flooding Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and messenger services like WhatsApp. Their simplicity – to the point of obviousness – makes them so replicable and shareable that they have crossed over into what are called dank memes.

The dank and destructive

In the memeverse, dankness is protean and often people on the far side of the xennial cusp are left wondering what some memes are all about. The Urban Dictionary defines a dank meme as "a meme in which the comedy is excessively overdone and nonsensical, to the point of being comically ironic." While the 'elders' don't get the context of some highly topical memes derived from sources after 'their time', the 'youngers' don't get the obsessive good morning messages (which, by the way, fit the meme bill). The arcane and the absurd both get clubbed into this category of dank memes, which sometimes raise giggles and sometimes eye-rolls.

However, the subculture – or shall we say the mainstream culture – of memes is not just fun and games. There are serious questions to be raised around toxicity compounded by their virality. In the darker, troll-infested corners of the Internet, the meme becomes a potent weapon of harm and can inflict severe mental and emotional damage on its targets. Their high relatability can and does affect values and vocabularies, especially among young users.

That said, there is an upside to the viral quality of (clever) memes. At a time when state censorship is beginning to pose serious problems in India and many other nations, memes are used as a medium of subversion and dissent. Done cleverly, the messaging of memes can be sharp, hard-hitting, and yet never amount to 'implicating evidence'. Because the tools of meme-making are so easy and accessible, the art is available for anyone who cares to make it. From the #BLM movement to feminism, from queer rights to climate justice, from the CAA-NRC protests to pandemic relief, memes are used to democratically communicate ideas, to challenge authority, and perhaps in the near future will even be used to bring down entire systems of oppression.

In 1919, when French-American painter Marcel Duchamp added a moustache, a goatee, and witty wordplay on what was arguably the world's most famous face, conceptual art as we know it was born

Art or not

With so much value riding on the cultural products that are memes, could one ask if it is time to elevate it to a proper art form? (It might make Duchamp happy!) If Banksy's meant-to-be-temporary graffiti art can find its way into museums on scooped-out walls, perhaps memes – at least the best ones – deserve to find their way into institutions too, or to be treated as commercially viable art objects.

In a recent online session organised by Avid Learning titled 'Meme Art and Art Engagement in the Post-Internet World', questions about unionising, monetising and copyrighting memes were raised. An argument against it is that it may destroy the very ethos of meme culture, which is free and democratic 'art'. Any form of institutionalisation entails hierarchy and elitism, which would defeat the very purpose of memes.

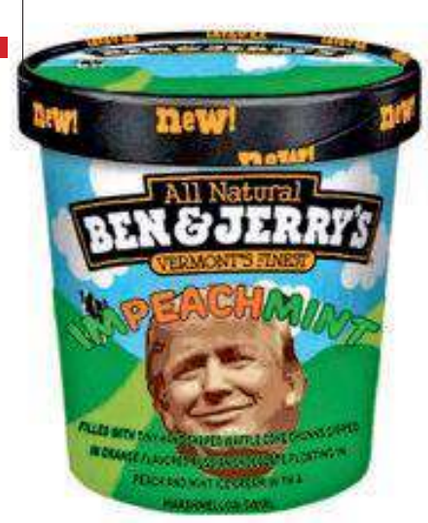
Their brief shelf life and campy aesthetic notwithstanding, memes are important cultural markers of our times and their museum-isation is underway, whether we want it or not. Virtual 'spaces' like the Slovenian Museum of Transitory Art and, closer home, The Meme Project by the Godrej India Culture Lab are dedicated to researching and archiving memes. Real-life counterparts include exhibitions like 'What Do You Meme?' curated by Maisie Post in London in August 2016; 'Two Decades of Memes' in Queens' Museum of the Moving Image, curated by the website Know Your Meme, in 2018; and an ongoing Meme Regime exhibition tour, curated by Anuj Nakade of Pune-based TIFA Working Studios.

Whether memes get that artsy upgrade on their evolutionary path remains to be seen, but that they will continue to exist is guaranteed.

How do we know this? Because of a reference Dawkins once made that sounds disconcertingly familiar today. He said: "In the original introduction to the word meme in the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a 'virus'. So, when anybody talks about something going viral on the Internet, that is exactly what a meme is..."

Need I say any more about living with a virus?

The author is a culture writer and an Interfaith Studies scholar.



At a time when state censorship is beginning to pose serious problems in India and many other nations, memes are used as a medium of subversion and dissent

ESSAY

‘Feminism needs tectonic plates to shift, not a trendy make-over’

Bernardine Evaristo’s Booker-winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other,* out in India now, is an exuberant celebration of black lives

Anjali Thomas

Just recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the head of the Church of England, said we have to reconsider the portrayal of Jesus as a white man with blonde hair and blue eyes. This is huge

In her fiction and poetry, British-Nigerian author Bernardine Evaristo celebrates the lives of people who have to fight to be heard: women of colour, gay, lesbian and trans individuals, immigrants, the people that history tends to ignore and whose voices our elected leaders do not hear.

Perhaps that is why, despite publishing several critically-acclaimed novels over decades, it took the Booker 2019 prize, awarded for her eighth work of fiction, *Girl, Woman, Other,* to make Evaristo a household name. She is the first black author to win the Booker 50 years after it was instituted, and she had to share it with Margaret Atwood. But the floodgates had been opened. In June this year, Evaristo and Candice Carty-Williams became the first black novelists to win the Author of the Year and Book of the Year titles respectively at the 2020 British Book awards. And now with quite a few coloured authors in the 2020 Booker longlist, the publishing world seems to have woken up for good.

Girl, Woman, Other is about 12 primarily black women who fight deep-seated prejudice and racism, who learn to develop their own brand of feminism, and wear their otherness with pride. People who are “proud of their multiracial social circles and bloodlines”. Their stories and lives – the women range from a teenager to a 93-year-old – are loosely interconnected, and centre around the lesbian playwright, Amma, whose hard-won success mirrors Evaristo’s own. Her play, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey,* will premiere at the National Theatre, as her work is finally embraced by the establishment.

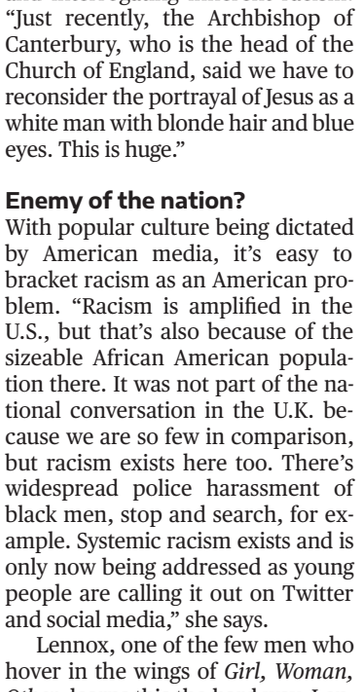
Black authors matter

“Events over the last two to three years have precipitated this, mainly Black Lives Matter, and before that, the MeToo Movement. Fiction written by women of colour is finally making it to bestseller lists and remaining there. But that does not mean that there are thousands of us telling stories.

There’s a lot of non-fiction work being published by women of colour, but we have a long way to go when it comes to fiction,” says Evaristo in a telephone conversation.

As the ripples caused by the death of George Floyd in the U.S. were felt across continents, thousands of people in Britain took to the streets demanding change and in doing so, brought to the fore the country’s role in perpetuating slave trade. The protests brought renewed interest in Evaristo’s work.

Even success in the white’s man world serves only to highlight the systemic racism in England’s class-conscious society. One of the characters in *Girl, Woman, Other*, Carole, who claws her way up to become vice-president of a bank – and turns her back to her roots while doing it – faces this every day. As she commutes to work in her perfectly tailored suits and discreet jewellery of



Proud A Black Lives Matter rally in Berlin. ▪ AP

platinum and pearls, she’s thinking, “he’d better not look at her as if she should be attached to a trolley bearing flasks of coffee, assortments of teas (herbal, green, grey, Ceylon) and those individually packaged corporate biscuits”. (Evaristo rarely uses full stops, and there are no capital letters. A new sentence begins with a new line, and this device brings a poetry-like cadence to the narrative.)

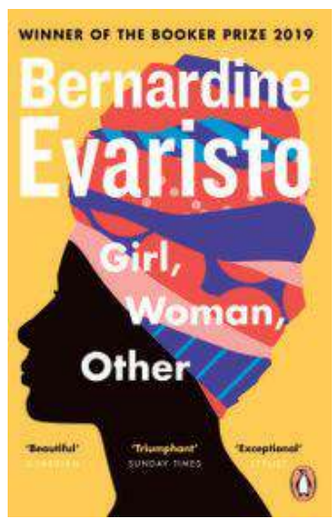
Evaristo says that the Black Lives Matter protests in the U.K. have resulted in people at a personal level as well as institutions introspecting on and interrogating inherent racism: “Just recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the head of the Church of England, said we have to reconsider the portrayal of Jesus as a white man with blonde hair and blue eyes. This is huge.”

Enemy of the nation?

With popular culture being dictated by American media, it’s easy to bracket racism as an American problem. “Racism is amplified in the U.S., but that’s also because of the sizeable African American population there. It was not part of the national conversation in the U.K. because we are so few in comparison, but racism exists here too. There’s widespread police harassment of black men, stop and search, for example. Systemic racism exists and is only now being addressed as young people are calling it out on Twitter and social media,” she says.

Lennox, one of the few men who hover in the wings of *Girl, Woman, Other*, learns this the hard way. Lennox believed that he could do better than his parents, but soon realises that he is “an enemy of the nation on account of his skin colour/ to be stopped and frisked by the cops”. He takes to wearing suits in the hope that the police will leave him alone.

If George Floyd was wearing a suit the day he was arrested, would it have saved him?



But racism is just one of society’s power structures that Evaristo’s characters interrogate. The politics of privilege, gender and feminism are as much at play. Amma judged her father as he failed to live up to her feminist expectations only to be questioned by her teenage daughter, Yazz, who finds her views outdated. Her closest friend, Dominique, who was trapped in a violent relationship with another woman, questions the commodification of feminism: “feminism needs tectonic plates to shift, not a trendy make-over,” she tells Amma.

Space for everyone

Evaristo skilfully shows how the definition of feminism changes with each generation: “When I was coming of age, feminism was for white middle-class women. I identified myself as a black feminist, because there was no room for us in the white feminist movement.”

She recounts the time when feminists were attacked to the point where women didn’t want to identify as feminists. This is changing only now: “I feel that every generation should define feminism for itself. Today’s definition is more inclusive, there is space for everyone.”

Evaristo draws on the concept of ‘intersectionality’, which was coined by the American law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in the late 1980s. “It’s about women’s rights as a working woman, as a black woman, as a disabled person, as a lesbian, and even transgender identities, which many older generation feminists did not subscribe to. It’s the intersection of one’s identities as a feminist. We need to have conversations about this rather than shouting at each other,” she says.

Is the change, however slight, that we are seeing now permanent? “I don’t know but I hope so. History has shown repeatedly that after an event, we return to the status quo,” she says.

A U.K. report, ‘Rethinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing’ found that even today, the publishing industry is run by the white middle-class and the perceived reader is a middle-aged, middle-class white woman. In the foreword to the report, Evaristo writes that books by writers of colour are still considered niche. She recounts her experience with her 2013 novel, *Mr. Loverman*, which was seen by a section of the publishing industry as triple niche because it was about an elderly, gay, black man. “But fiction has the power to transcend barriers. And a good story will find an audience anywhere,” she says.

Each of Evaristo’s novels tells a good story. For all the baggage that the characters carry on their shoulders and the battles they wage on every front, their stories have a celebratory note. They make you laugh and cry and cry and laugh all over again.

PLAYS

Difficult dramas

These two volumes of plays and performance pieces are testimony to Manjula Padmanabhan’s power as dramatist. Her commentaries on each piece are an added takeaway

Arshia Sattar

Manjula Padmanabhan’s collected works for the stage appear in two volumes, the heftier one (*Blood and Laughter*) subtitled ‘Plays’ and its slimmer companion (*Laughter and Blood*), ‘Performance Pieces’. Some of these are being published for the first time, others have had wide exposure on stages across the country and abroad. The plays and pieces appear to be distinguished from each other primarily by length but also, perhaps, by the complexity of the production they would require to be fully realised.

Blood and Laughter: Plays contains *Harvest*, a no-holds-barred exploration of the international trade in human organs. Set in a dystopic future which now seems all too close, it won the Onassis award in 1997 and catapulted Padmanabhan to international fame. But *Plays* also contains her first dramatic work, *Lights Out*, which remains my favourite. The tightly placed and paced work is based on a real-life incident in which an unknown woman is gangraped night after night on a construction site next to an upmarket apartment building. The residents of the building are deeply disturbed by this, but not in ways one might most immediately imagine. Padmanabhan captures bourgeois conceits, fears and apathy with startling veracity, turning a mirror to her audience such that they might recognise themselves.

But let not the obvious persuasions of these better known and fuller works distract you from the shorter pieces in *Laughter and Blood*, which contains monologues as well as multi-character pieces. These works are more overtly political in that they locate themselves inside the issues of our times – hierarchies of caste and class, gender relations, discrimination, displacement and migration, among others.

One of the joys of encountering Padmanabhan’s work is that she wears her heart on her sleeve, responding constantly to both an outer and an inner world, to the social forces of oppression and injustice as well as to personal emotions such as anger and frustration. This might make her work ‘difficult’ for some, as she seeks to disturb rather than to comfort, to confront rather than to appease.

Challenging A scene from *Reality*, a theatrical adaptation of five monologues. ▪ M. VEDHAN

One of the joys of encountering these works is that the writer wears her heart on her sleeve, responding constantly to both an outer and an inner world

Assured confidence

In whatever location or form or medium (and she works in many), Padmanabhan is essentially a storyteller. Sometimes, she speaks in pictures, at other times in newspaper columns and reports, and at still other times, she speaks in plays. The two volumes at hand amplify the latter voice, allowing us not only to appreciate her particular talents but also to remember the many ways in which stories can be told for the stage.

Padmanabhan writes drama with assured confidence, whether she intends to fill the stage with as complex and challenging a production as *Harvest* or whether she’s writing quieter monologues in which the sole actor must use all the resources at their disposal to inhabit the character. And it was in this regard that I was struck by Padmanabhan’s comment in one of her short essays that accompany the play texts. She says she has a comfort with dialogue because of her years as a cartoonist – it is where she learnt the skill of making things happen, of creating action, through people’s conversations with each other or with themselves.

A treat

One of the nicest things about these volumes is that they have allowed Padmanabhan to write short introductions to individual and grouped works. These short essays function as the playwright’s commentaries on her own work, most written long after the plays themselves. It’s always a treat to have a creative person speak about their own work, especially when they are as candid as Padmanabhan. She speaks of the plays that came easily and the ones that took years to find their voice, she talks of their successes and failures, their performance journeys, the parts that please her and the parts that remain less than satisfactory.

There is as much inspiration for a young playwright or actor in these essays and dramatic works as there is an articulation of the particular pleasures of the stage that can be shared by more experienced theatre makers.

Blood and Laughter & **Laughter and Blood**
Manjula Padmanabhan
Hachette India
₹499, ₹399

The reviewer works with myth, epic and the story traditions of the sub-continent.

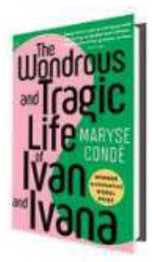
BROWSER

Estuary
Perumal Murugan, trs Nandini Krishnan
Eka
₹499
Perumal Murugan’s latest is an exploration of the human condition through the story of a father and son. In classic Murugan style, there’s a lyrical simplicity to the story that also sharply parodies the accoutrements of urban living.

The Pull of the Stars
Emma Donoghue
Little, Brown and Company
$28
Dublin, 1918. The Great Flu is at its height. In a maternity ward of a city hospital, Nurse Julia Power struggles to bring new lives to the world even as the pandemic rages. The nurse, a doctor and a young volunteer forge a deep bond of friendship in this world of fatigue, death, and unexpected love.

The Enchantress
Anuja Chandramouli
Rupa
₹295
Mohini’s mythical story is brought to life against the chaos and intrigue of a celestial quest for immortality. Mohini is part of Vishnu but also an autonomous individual of extraordinary beauty who takes both the gods and asuras for a ride as they fight over the nectar of immortality.

The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana
Maryse Conde, trs Richard Philcox
World Editions Ltd
₹1021 (Kindle price)
Burning issues are touched upon in this story about a pair of twins from Guadeloupe. Ivan and Ivana can read each other’s thoughts. One joins the police while the other is radicalised. They become both perpetrator and victim in a wave of violent attacks.



ENVIRONMENT

Beastly tales

From rats to bees, elephants to spiders, Janaki Lenin on discoveries in the wild

R. Krithika

A tiny tailor bird is a daily visitor to the hedge that grows next to my work area. As he struts around and picks insects off the leaves, he calls out piercingly. Sometimes, the calls seem rather hysterical and I often wonder what the fuss is all about. Is he calling for a mate? Has he seen a potential predator? Or is he just telling other birds that this is his territory and to stay away?

It was of this little fellow that I thought, as I read Janaki Lenin's latest book *Every Creature Has a Story: What Science Reveals about Animal Behaviour*. The book features a selection of 50 essays from her column in the online news portal The Wire. In her Introduction, Lenin offers an explanation for the diverse and disparate range of creatures featured. "...there are no discrete categories in Nature. It leaks, overflows, overlaps and intrudes across man-made boundaries," she writes.

Crooning nightingales

Lenin breaks down scientific information and research for a lay person in simple, easy-to-understand language. A couple of times, Lenin sent me off another kind of hunt. In the first chapter 'Good singers make the best dads' (a title that tells you exactly what the essay is about), she writes: "Nightingale songs don't only say – 'I'm a King Bee, Baby', 'Stay Out of My Territory', and 'Won't You Be My Love'." I chuckled and promptly began looking up the songs.

Every Creature Has a Story: What Science Reveals about Animal Behaviour
Janaki Lenin
HarperCollins
₹599

Of course, the pieces that dealt with creatures that I see around me everyday like the chameleon and bees were the ones I looked up first. 'The eye of the chameleon' makes for fascinating reading. Did you know that a chameleon can actually watch two things at the same time? "Each eye is controlled by the opposite eye of the brain so the brain's left hemisphere knows what the right eye is doing and the right hemisphere the left."

Another gripping one is about bees. Worker bees, she writes, "range far and wide to gather pollen and nectar" and pick up germs too. This pollen is used to create royal jelly but how is it that the bees are not infected. Lenin goes on to describe experiments that will not only increase the immunity of the bees but also "reduce threat to human food security."

Slave for a wasp

Other equally engrossing essays are about how temperature causes a sex change in the bearded dragons of Australia; the wasp that enslaves a spider to spin webs for it; the reason male sticklebacks hold back their urine for the length of their breeding season; and the parasite that alters animal behaviour. This is not to say that the other articles are not interesting.

The good thing is that one doesn't have to read the essays in any particular order. Lenin makes even rats interesting. I am wondering how I will react to the next one I see after reading the essay, 'Empathetic rodents'. Though, of course, she's talking about prairie voles and not the ones we consider a pest.

SOCIETY

A culture of violence

In a disturbing inquiry into the history of lynching, Aparna Vaidik finds an intolerant past and explains why it is up to the people to change this legacy

Suparna Banerjee

Scholarly discourse on Hindu majoritarianism and allied sectarian violence has generated many books, volumes that have traced the root of these evils to the rise of the political far-right in recent times. Aparna Vaidik's *My Son's Inheritance* goes deeper into Indian history and culture, and shows that instead of being a recent phenomenon, violence, physical and psychic, has been endemic to the Indian sociopolity since ages.

Fiction of peace

Addressed to her son 'Babu', the book's easy-flowing narrative presents violence as both a familial and a national legacy that cannot be wished away. Vaidik locates this violence in communal enmities between the Hindus and the minorities, particularly Muslims, which often validates itself as retributive justice. Deep psychic violence also operated, the author reminds us, among Hindus themselves. Many Indian Muslims and Christians, we are asked to remember, were Hindus of the lower castes, or 'non-Aryan' tribals, who converted out of Hinduism because of the torture of untouchability and ostracisation.

Vaidik links the continuance of this people-on-people violence (as distinct from state inflicted violence) to our denial of its existence – to the fiction that we create of the historically peaceful India, the land of the Ganges and of Buddha, wherein many diverse peoples have coexisted peacefully through centuries. "Our looking away from inconvenient truths,"Vaidik argues, is what "makes us either remain silent or glorify non-violence as our essence". This silence, this deliberate perversion of history not only lets violence go on unabated, it also corrodes us internally and "lynch(es) our souls".

My Son's Inheritance
Aparna Vaidik
Aleph
₹499

In support of this argument Vaidik presents illustrations of sectarian violence in the Indian past. She also shows, through examples drawn from her own family and neighbourhood, that the seeds of communal hatred and prejudice are often transmitted inter-generationally, if also unwittingly, among even educated Hindus, and that to this day those germs continue to spawn much wilful misunderstanding and negation of facts.

Cultural nationalism

Vaidik devotes a full chapter to the phenomenon of 'cow protectionism', tracing it back to its roots to pre-Independence India, thereby seeming to implicate a certain strain of the freedom struggle in the growth of cultural nationalism in the country. But perhaps the most telling section of the book is its Epilogue, which illustrates the wide prevalence at one time of animal-centred lifestyles among tribal Hindus and the attendant violence to animals, including cows, that would make today's *satvik* Hindu nationalists squirm. The graphic descriptions – for example, of *raktis* or roasted films of goat blood, or of a dish made of the first thick milk of a cow who has just given birth – seem designed to elicit gut-level reactions, and they do. The point – that of the acceptance of cruelty to animals in Hindu lifestyles – is unmistakable.

Vaidik does not end pessimistically, despite her thorough unmasking of the 'invisible' presence of violence in the Indian past. In the Epilogue she points out to Babu that he "is free to choose the elements of his inheritance" that he wishes to "own, to discard, ...or even to fight." It is this implicit message that we have the power to acknowledge and get beyond our legacy of violence that is the crux of the book.

Busting myths

In a volume centred on the idea of violence as a manifestation of power one would have liked some discussion of how a patriarchal social structure generate and sanction gender violence and how violence is often markedly gendered. Vaidik comes close to this issue when she points to the symbiotic relationship between religion and politics, something that people often (choose to) ignore. That religion as a power-system is endemically patriarchal and, therefore, a bed-rock of gender oppression is a well-established fact; one wishes this interesting book took a quick look at this issue vis-a-vis Hinduism.

Vaidik shows, through examples drawn from her own family and neighbourhood, that the seeds of communal hatred and prejudice are often transmitted inter-generationally

In all, Vaidik does a rather good job of busting the myth of India's inherently peaceful and inclusive (Hindu) culture, and the book's unconventional structure will ensure a wider readership than a straightforward scholarly book normally gets. On the flip side, there is a danger that the story-like format and the designed-to-be understood language of the book would keep it from being taken seriously by scholars of history and Asian studies. That would be unfortunate, for the book has the potential to make an important intervention in the shaping of scholarly conceptualisations of our ancient land.

The writer is an academic and a commentator based in Bengal.

One voice
People come together to protest against mob lynchings and communal violence.
▪ VIJAY SONEJI

PROFILE

A rare political memoir that does not read like public relations

The working class of America may need someone like Minnesota Congresswoman Ilhan Omar to fight strongly on its behalf

Aditya Mani Jha

It's hard to imagine a memoir that has the odds stacked against it quite so much as *This Is What America Looks Like* does. To begin with, it belongs to a genre (the political memoir) that produces PR tomes more than anything else. It is a pleasant surprise, then, that this memoir by 37-year-old Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar, one of America's best-known progressive politicians, is not just good – parts of it are inspirational.

Meteoric rise

Since 2019, Omar has served as the U.S. Representative for Minnesota's 5th Congressional District. The Somalian-born Omar's meteoric rise (notably, as part of 'the Squad', the progressive lawmaker quartet that also includes Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Presley and Rashida Tlaib) has, inevitably, also made her a target for American conservative media outlets and supporters of President Donald Trump – given the current political climate in the country, it's no wonder that a strong black Muslim woman is seen as a threat.

The opening chapters of the book tell us the story of how the Somalian civil war upended Omar's life. Alongside her father and brothers she fled to Kenya where the family lived in a refugee camp for four years.

A series of coincidences later, they applied for American citizenship through the United Nations. "Only in America will you ultimately become an American," Omar's father (who passed away recently) said.

Combative teenager

Arriving in Arlington, Virginia in 1995, the young Omar was bullied at school because of her hijab. A combative teenager, she got into some fights and "spent a lot of time in detention".

All that time spent studying in the detention room meant that by 16, Omar became a really good student, graduating from North Dakota State University with a degree in political science.

Unlike a lot of politicians, Omar is straightforward about her failures and vulnerabilities. The language does not have the tell-tale signs that identify the PR-statement-by-proxy. She admits to going through "a Britney Spears-like" breakdown wherein she shaved her head. She's honest and pragmatic about the challenges of being a young parent who also happens to be absolutely committed to her job. There's little to no varnish in these revelatory sections and there's no false modesty either.

'Overblown' controversies

There's a fair bit Omar has to say about the various controversies that have dogged her, most of them ridiculously overblown, like accusations of anti-Semitism that began soon after she commented on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Omar has made no secret of her pro-Palestine stance, much to the annoyance of both Republicans and Democrats (older Democrats are unabashed Israel supporters, for the most part).

This book, too, contains passages that may be similarly misinterpreted. Like a passage where Omar expresses an admiration for Margaret Thatcher as a strong woman who navigated the male-dominated corridors of power. Even though she prefaces her remarks by distancing herself from Thatcherism, there have been out-of-context quotations already – remarkably, from critics on the Left.

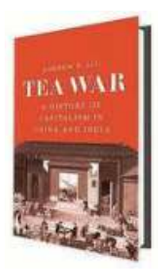
Clearly, Omar attracts both devoted following and flat-out ad hominem criticism. Given her popularity among the new generation of Democratic voters, we're going to see a lot more of her.

She has proven to be a vocal proponent of free and centralised healthcare, large-scale climate change measures, police reform, tighter gun control legislation and humane immigration policies – all the issues that Republicans hate and older Democrats dilly-dally on, anxious not to upset white centrist voters. The working-class people of America need someone to fight vigorously on their behalf, and Omar is ideally suited for that fight.

The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.

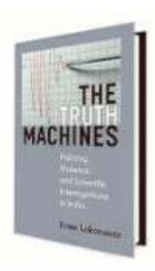
This Is What America Looks Like
Ilhan Omar, Rebecca Paley
HarperCollins
₹1,155 (Kindle price)

Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India
Andrew B. Liu
Yale University Press
₹3,807
At the turn of the 20th century, tea represented the largest export industry of both China and colonial India. The writer argues that traditional technologies and practices were central to modern capital accumulation across Asia.



Hinduism Before Reform
Brian A. Hatcher
HUP/Harper
₹699
Focusing on two early 19th century Hindu communities, the Brahmo Samaj and the Swaminarayan Sampraday, Hatcher explores how urban and rural people thought about faith, ritual, and gods. He sketches a radical new view of the origins of contemporary Hinduism.

The Truth Machines: Policing, Violence, and Scientific Interrogations in India
Jinee Lokaneeta
Orient Blackswan
₹795
This volume examines the emergence and use of three scientific techniques — lie detectors, brain scans, and narcoanalysis (the use of truth serum) — in the Indian criminal justice system.



Intimations
Zadie Smith
Penguin Random House
₹299
This book of six new essays was written during the early months of the lockdown for COVID-19. Smith explores ideas and questions prompted by an unprecedented situation. What does it mean to submit to a new reality — or to resist it?

LOOMSDAY CLOCK

A devastating catalogue of cloth

Ahead of National Handloom Day, it seems apt to recall the man whose pioneering catalogue led to both the recognition and destruction of India's rich textile history

Kaamya Sharma

'It must not be thought that the Taste of India takes delight in what is gaudy or glaring...such combinations of form and colour as many of these specimens exhibit, everyone will call beautiful, and that beauty has one constant feature – a quietness and harmony which never fail to fascinate...'

The unexpected author of these admiring sentiments was John Forbes Watson, a botanist-physician who was appointed director of the India Museum, London, in 1858. The specimens in question were not paintings or sculptures, but yards and yards of fabric.

Watson was part of a group of Victorians such as George Birdwood and Owen Jones who admired Indian textiles, especially for their harmonious use of design and colour. His 18-volume series, *The Collections of the Textile Manufactures of India*, remains an enduring testament to the diversity and originality of Indian textiles, yet it set in motion a chain of events that would eventually threaten their very existence. In the run-up to National Handloom Day on August 7, it is fitting, perhaps perversely, to consider a man, a collection and a legacy that played a vital role in catalysing India's Swadeshi movement.

700 samples

Colonial catalogues of the 19th century have provided us with significant historical insights into the imperiled products and skills of the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps nobody in the Victorian era embodied this cataloguing zeal more than Watson. His *Collections*, first published in 1866, consisted of 700 textile samples intended to be representative of Indian artisanship from various parts of the subcontinent. Typical of how collections travelled and were repurposed, many of these samples were taken from the 1855 Paris International Exhibition and 1851 Great Exhibition in London.

Watson's botanical pursuits drew him towards the study of cotton varieties, culminating in an aesthetic and mercenary interest in textiles. When putting the *Collections* together, he cut up the fabrics into smaller swatches, an act of blasphemy by contemporary standards of curation. Instead of treating textiles as samples of 'pure art', he made notes on the type of fabric, wearer, style of drape, length of measurement, cost of production and such. Textiles, in his view, were not mere museum relics, but items of utility and commerce. He believed that British students and manufacturers should study and replicate Indian tastes, especially in matters of 'ornament'. This was evident in his insistence that British manufacturers attend to how design would show itself off in a draped saree.

Intricate weaves (Clockwise from left) An artisan in Jaipur uses a wooden block for printing; pages with cut cloth samples from Watson's volume on Indian textiles. ▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Impact of imitations

Several copies of the *Collections* were dispatched to schools of art and trade locations in various parts of Britain. Even as an ardent admirer of Indian aesthetics, Watson was ruthless in his pursuit of British commercial interests, supplying the mills in Liverpool and Manchester with the samples they needed to replicate Indian textile designs. As a result, cheap, mass-produced, British replicas of these samples inundated the

Indian market within a decade. These were print imitations of intricate weaves whose technique had been developed and perfected by Indian weavers over several centuries. The cheaper prices of British textiles had a predictably devastating impact on Indian handlooms.

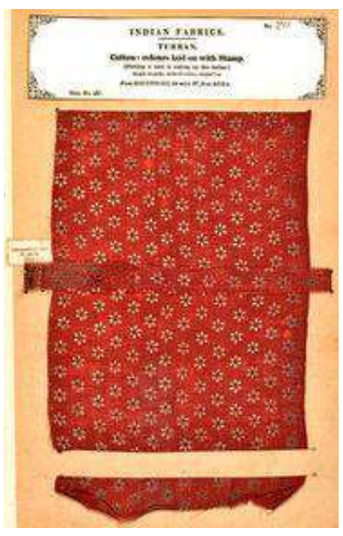
As markets died and weaves went obsolete, whole artisanal cultures comprising not only prized production techniques but tastes and sensibilities well-versed in colour and design, were also lost. The *Collections* reveal, for instance, that Thanjavur had its own 'kincobs' (Indian brocades) to rival those of Banaras. Thanjavur's brocades have now virtually vanished while the Banarasi saree struggles to remain alive. Today, the ability to distinguish between a tie-dyed cloth from the Watson collection and a printed mill-made British imitation juxtaposed against each other has become the province of the textile connoisseur, removed from the realm of common knowledge. The Watson catalogues were thus a catalyst in the destruction of India's material history while becoming, ironically, a key source of insight for textile historians and craft revivalists today.

Mobile museum

One of Watson's most inspired ideas was that of the mobile trade museum, a portable collection of textiles that could travel places, performing the dual role of education and inspiring commercial imitation. Encased in glass and mounted on revolving stands, the textile 'specimen' displayed thus would enable the spectator to undertake a minute inspection of the object.

Museum-going is frequently associated with connoisseurship and the performance of elite tastes, yet Watson intended his mobile museum to cater primarily to manufacturers and tradesmen. As he wrote, 'what is wanted, and what is to be copied to meet that want, is thus accessible for study in these Museums'. He reimagined the spectatorial gaze and the museum space to accommodate the commercial interests of the British mill.

Even as an ardent admirer of Indian aesthetics, Watson was ruthless in his pursuit of British commercial interests, supplying the mills in Liverpool and Manchester with the samples they needed to replicate Indian textile designs



Handlooms are often romanticised through associations with rural, artisanal utopias that are seen as the cure for the ills of industrialised mass manufacture. Watson's catalogues are a reminder that our legacy of colonisation and industrialisation is more complex than these binaries allow for. Looking through the catalogues, I have been disarmed by his unvarnished admiration of Indian textiles, yet I have resented his presumption that they could be so easily replicated.

Today, the Indian craft world is broadly framed by the same competing tensions: democratising the consumption of craft through greater affordability while preserving the artisanal practices which constitute craft production. Even amidst measures such as the Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, 1985, the Make in India campaign and the Geographical Indication tag, printed 'ikat' and 'bandhani' designs, for instance, saturate the Indian retail market.

These printed textiles (more affordable than their handwoven counterparts) make participation in a 'crafts' aesthetic accessible to a larger population even as they undermine such exercises in authentication. Though a product of the taxonomical obsessions of the Victorian era, Watson's somewhat heretical notion of the mobile museum recognised that our clothes do not exist in an aesthetic vacuum – indeed, they are part of a lively palette of public tastes.

In a fine case of retrospective irony, an article in *The Edinburgh Review* of July 1867 expressed Britain's debt to his collections, stating, 'we may never supplant the Indian handloom weaver, but we may at least compete with him in many simple articles of attire...'

The writer is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at IIT, Jodhpur, and works on digital interventions for craft production and consumption.

GREEN HUMOUR BY ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY

ALLEGEDLY

How to be a con man

If you have any suggestions on who I should hire as my conning coach, do let me know

▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Okay, don't get your hopes – or your hackles – up. I know that you know that I know who popped up in your head when you saw 'con man' in the headline. But this column is not about that person. Sorry to disappoint you, but I do plan to live out my full quota of life expectancy.

And I won't ruin that plan with stupid assumptions. Such as, for instance, that freedom of expression is protected in Indian democracy. Please don't think I am insulting Indian democracy – I apologise if you thought I was. Dissent may be protected in India. No, I am sure it is. I have complete faith that our honourable judiciary will come to the aid of anyone whose right to dissent is under threat. For the record, I hold in contempt anyone who casts aspersions on Indian democracy or its chest size.

So my interest is quite genuine and heartfelt: I really want to learn how to be a good con man. Why? Because I see nothing wrong in it. Every era of human civilisation puts a premium on certain talents. During the Stone Age, the ability to use stones to make fire was a big deal. Subsequently, during the time of Genghiz Khan, the talent for killing people while riding a horse was highly prized. Then, around the time of the Industrial Revolution, the talent for money-making became hugely profitable.

Prized skillsets

Today, the ability to bump someone off and the talent for making pots of money are both highly prized. But neither will take you far without the one skill that's critical in our age: getting people to believe anything you say. The true mark of a genius con artist is that the wilder his lies, the stronger the people's trust in him. Can you see the limitless potential for GDP growth here? That's why I am shocked that conning skills find no place in the government's Skill India programme.

The true mark of a genius con artist is that the wilder his lies, the stronger the people's trust in him. Can you see the limitless potential for GDP growth here?

Even today, most Indian colleges, with the exception of those that offer degrees in entire political science, don't expose youngsters to the opportunities that await those with good conning skills. Just to give you an example, one of my mates from college, who never sat for any exams, is now a Senior Vice President at a top consulting firm. He advises companies on how to cut costs by sacking people, and the fee the companies pay him for his cost-cutting advice is several times the costs they save by sacking people. Another friend of mine, an atheist, is now a successful godman. He owns 22 mansions in different parts of the world and top politicians seek his advice on when is the most auspicious time to topple a government or launch a new lie.

Everywhere you turn, successful con men are ruling the roost and enjoying life. If you take healthcare and our pandemic response, it is thanks to the Covid Rapid Action Propaganda kits developed by hardworking con artists that we are regularly able to churn out statistics that can prove, even to the WHO, that we are the best.

Chinese whispers

Or take history. India has little by way of recorded ancient history. But our new historians are so good at their job that today the entire nation is proud to be a nation whose ancestors invented not only zero but also Botox and Boolean algebra, and owned nuclear-powered hovercraft with missiles that had a range of 500 light years.

If you take geography and geopolitics, India has con men of such calibre that the Chinese can walk into your home, sit at your dining table, eat up all your idlis, not sparing even the koththamalli chutney, and you'll be like, "Look, our corps commanders and their corps commanders are using compass and divider to draw a circle on the Line of Actual Control that will determine the radius of the buffer zone in Galwan Valley where India and China will hold hands in such a way that Finger 4 of Pangong Tso will interlock with Finger 8 of your right hand to determine the Quad of the BRI in CPEC so that the geo-strategic ramifications of the Daulat Beg Oldi Road in sub-sector North at the eastern end of the southern tip of the Shyok river, as evident from the satellite imagery of the area between the Indian perception of the Chinese perception of the Line of Actual Control and the Chinese contraception of the Indian apprehension along the Line of Actual Control prove not only that India, by banning 59 apps, has given China a bloody nose on its Aksai Chin, but also that the Chinese are not at our dining table and not eating our idlis, with or without koththamalli chutney. And for the record, our dining table was made in China."

Now, that's the skill level I'm looking at. If you have any suggestions on who I should hire as my conning coach, do let me know.

G. Sampath is Social Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*.

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

Kibber's snow leopards

Today, they are social media hits and the foundation for a thriving winter tourism industry

Charudutt Mishra spent years living in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, without catching sight of a snow leopard. Perhaps Kibber village where he was based wasn't good habitat. By the 1990s, more people had gone in search of the mystical animal in its mountain fastness than had seen one. Only one photograph, taken by biologist George Schaller in 1970, circulated for more than 20 years. Catching a glimpse of one was like being granted a benediction.

Not everyone ached to see a snow leopard. To resident communities, the animal brought bloodshed and loss of domestic animals. Over the years, they retaliated with preemptive violence, killing any that became trapped within livestock enclosures.

While conceding that 'do not kill' is one of the precepts of their Buddhist philosophy, a village elder said, "We don't have the ability to live with them and the damage they cause." This admission opened Mishra's eyes to their reality. "It isn't enough to preach tolerance of predators," he says.

Like other researchers studying the losses borne by communities, Mishra calculated the economic cost of livestock lost to predators. It took him a while to understand money wasn't the only driving force of villagers' antipathy.

Women, in particular, spend a lot of time tending to their animals and caring deeply about their welfare. When snow leopards kill one of these animals, they feel as devastated as those who lose their pets.

Mystical A snow leopard with its kill. ▪ KARMA SONAM

Wild prey

Both villagers and scientists were under the impression that domestic animals were the cats' main sustenance. Mishra and the research team from the Snow Leopard Trust and Nature Conservation Foundation investigated. Snow leopard poop was chock-full of the fur of wild prey such as bharal and ibex. Since the predators didn't take domestic animals often, securing livestock wouldn't deprive snow leopards.

With shepherds watching over cows, goats, and sheep as they graze in the meadows, snow leopards dare not take any but the occasional straggler. But they inflict severe damage at night when they occasionally sneak into poorly built enclosures. The jostling of animals in a confined space sends the cats into a killing frenzy, and the owner may find his entire flock dead at dawn. Mishra and his team help reinforce these indoor pens to keep out the predators.

Creative solution

Protecting yaks that free-range in the pastures throughout the summer months called for a creative solution. Bringing them back every evening posed practical difficulties. Nor could someone keep an eye on them. It was inevitable that predators would kill a few. The team suggested an insurance scheme might help offset the losses, but it was up to the villagers to frame the rules and operate it (See 'Making Peace with the Shen', June 10, 2017).

The conservation team suggested the villagers set aside a tract of pastureland as a reserve, where the snow leopards' wild prey can thrive. All these efforts helped people accept snow leopards and gradually the animals grew in number. Despite the researcher's initial misgivings, the area was in fact fine habitat.

Mishra saw his first snow leopard 10 years after he first stepped foot in Spiti. While skipping from rock to rock across a fast rushing stream, he lost his footing and fell into the freezing water. He bashed his head against rocks before his colleagues dragged him ashore. Bleeding and exhausted, he followed the others up the steep incline. When he paused to catch his breath, a rock moved. Snow leopard! The dream had taken a decade and a gash in his head to finally come to life.

Back in Kibber, when he narrated his adventure, one of his friends joked, "If this is the price you had to pay to see the snow leopard, you should have jumped into the river 10 years ago."

Today, the village's snow leopards are social media hits and the foundation for a thriving winter tourism industry. Luckily, tourists don't have to fall into a river to spot the mystical snow leopard.

Janaki Lenin is not a conservationista but many creatures share her home for reasons she is yet to discover.

HIGH NOTES

New times, new venues

A music festival in the Swiss Alps had the unique idea of a drive-in audience to beat the lockdown

In a superbly imagined adaptation to the pandemic, honking horns and flashing headlights made for a different kind of applause last week at a Swiss classical music festival that was staged before a drive-in audience in the heart of the Alps.

The Festival du Lied, which for nearly two decades has brought symphonies and concertos to the region, hit on the drive-in format as a way to allow concert-goers to attend safely during the coronavirus pandemic. Last Sunday, dozens of cars filled a large lot in the idyllic village of Charmey in western Switzerland with the Alps providing a dramatic backdrop.

With their windows rolled down, some occupants closed their eyes while others were brought to tears by renowned tenor Ilker Arcayurek's moving rendition of Schubert's Fruhlingsglaube.

"This is an extraordinary concept," said Willy Boder, speaking through his car window. A retiree, he is considered at risk of complications if he contracts COVID-19, and had remained stuck indoors for months. "Here, I had the opportunity to come and see a concert without risking going into a concert hall," he said. "It is really very well done." Marie-Claude Cudry, a middle-aged journalist and film director, agreed. "A lot of people, myself included, have really missed live music," she said. "It is such a treat being here."

Cars were allowed to have no more than four occupants, who were asked to stay in their vehicles, while up to another 100 people could opt for seats, spaced far apart, to enjoy the concerts in the open air.

The festival, created in 2001 by mezzo-soprano Marie-Claude Chappuis, was reimagined to fit the new COVID-19 reality. "It is very important to continue making music, but also to continue being careful," Chappuis said, adding that the organisers had striven for a balance between the two.

Drive in At the Festival du Lied in the Alpine heights. ▪ AFP

The programme this year included international artists such as opera stars Rachel Harnisch and Marina Viotti, and baroque recorder virtuoso Maurice Steger. Traditional chants in local dialects as well as jazz classics by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone were also in the line-up.

The vehicles cars drive into a parking lot used in winter for skiers waiting to be taken up the mountain towering above. A large outdoor stage has been supplemented by a giant screen to ensure that performances are visible to all.

"It was important to find a beautiful place for the drive-in," she said, insisting the beauty of classical music required a setting that was more than "asphalt and cars".

– *AFP*

GOREN BRIDGE

Play or defend?

Both vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

NORTH
♠ 5
♡ A K Q 4
◇ A K 6
♣ K Q 8 5 4

WEST
♠ A Q 7 6 3 2
♡ J 9 3
◇ 8
♣ A 10 2

EAST
♠ 9 4
♡ 10 8 6 5
◇ Q 10 9 7 2
♣ J 9

SOUTH
♠ K J 10 8
♡ 7 2
◇ J 5 4 3
♣ 7 6 3

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠	Dbl	Pass	2◇
Pass	2♠	Pass	2NT
Pass	3NT	All pass	

Opening lead: Six of ♠

Have a look at today's deal and decide whether you would prefer to play or defend three no trump after a low spade lead. The opening spade lead goes to the five, nine, and jack. A low club to dummy's king wins the trick and declarer continues with a low club, hoping that West's ace is now bare. No luck as East wins with the jack and returns a spade. West cashes two spades and continues the suit while he still has the ace of clubs. South discards all of dummy's clubs on the spades while he wins the fourth spade in his hand. He cashes all three high hearts in dummy and one high diamond. This gives South a perfect count on the hand, so he continues with a fourth heart to East, who must lead away from his queen of diamonds to give South his ninth trick.

Do you choose to declare? Not so fast. West should watch what South discards from dummy on the queen and ace of spades. West should play a fourth spade only if dummy has shed both low red cards. Just one club discard from dummy and West should cash the ace of clubs and lead a red card himself to defeat the contract. We defend, right?

No, we don't! As the cards lie, South can always prevail by continuing with the queen of clubs from dummy after the king holds. We choose to declare!

Week 3. And Mr. Mathrubootham is still missing. This is becoming quite uncivil on his part now. Surely a gentleman who writes letters to the editor should have the courtesy to inform the paper when he decides not to write one? Think of all the sub-editors, not to mention readers, who keep waiting for it to land. We are considering registering a complaint with Kamalam. Meanwhile, dear reader, do pray to Guruvayurappa for quick relief from this misery.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

We are symbols, and inhabit symbols: Ralph Waldo Emerson

Berty Ashley

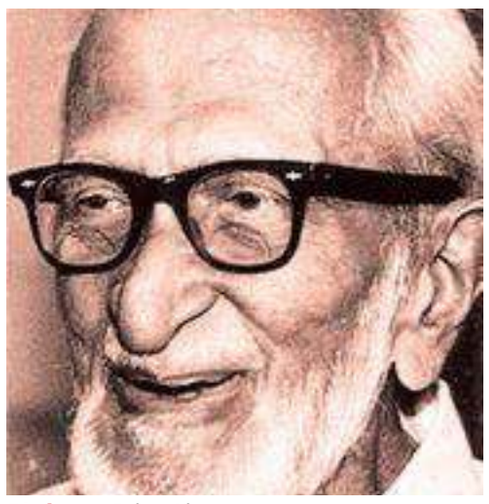
1 Born on August 2, 1876, Pingali Venkayya was a geologist and agriculturist who set up an educational institution near his home town. He was a freedom fighter who deserved a place in Indian history for creating something that flies high, but was forgotten for many years. He was eventually honoured in 2009 with a stamp that displayed his creation. What iconic symbol of the nation did Venkayya design?

2 Dinanath Bhargava was an art student at Shantiniketan, known for his wash paintings. Nandalal Bose, his principal at that time, was working on the Constitution of India and gave him a task to complete. To ensure he got his art as realistic as possible, Bhargava studied the behaviour of certain animals at the Calcutta Zoo. Eventually, what he designed and incorporated into the Constitution was given a special status. What did Bhargava design?

3 Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya was an educational reformer who founded Banaras Hindu University. In 1918, during his second term (of four) as president of the Indian National Congress, he popularised a certain line from an ancient Sanskrit Vedic text called the *Mundaka Upanishad*. When India became a Republic, this line was given national status. What line is this, which translates to 'Veritas Vincit' in Latin?

4 *Anandamath* is a Bengali work of fiction set in the background of the Bengal famine and Sannyasi Rebellion in 1770. Published in 1882 and translated as *The Abbey of Bliss*, it became synonymous with the struggle for Indian independence. The novel features a song that is translated to 'I bow to thee, Mother' that inspired freedom fighters. The first two stanzas of this song gained national importance in 1937 and then became a national symbol. What song was this?

5 On April 1, 1973, the Indian government launched Project Tiger at the Jim Corbett National Park to save a fast dwindling population of tigers. At that event, the Royal Bengal Tiger was picked as the national animal of India. Prior to this, another animal held that position. One of the reasons given was that the previous animal was found only in one state, but the tiger was found in 16 states across India. Which animal is this?



Bird man Salim Ali

6 *Ficus benghalensis* is the national tree of India. Some of its specimens have the largest canopy coverage in the world, including one in Andhra Pradesh that covers more than four acres. It is easily identifiable by its aerial roots that grow down from the branches and then become trunks themselves. It is considered to be a sacred tree across the country and is said to have been instrumental in helping the 24th Buddha and the first Jain Tirthankara attain enlightenment. How better do we know this tree that is native to India?

7 *Platanista gangetica* was chosen as the national aquatic animal of India in 2009. This species was first discovered in 1801 and was found to be unique as it can only live in fresh water and is essentially blind, hunting using ultrasonic sounds. Unfortunately their habitat is one of the most densely populated and highly polluted areas of the world. With only around 4,000 individuals remaining, they are endangered. What animals are these that were officially declared 'nonhuman persons' in 2013?

8 This word is supposed to have come from the Sanskrit word for 'wrought silver', which in turn is thought to have come from another word that meant 'shape' or 'image'. The first instance of this term being used in its current sense was during the rule of Sher Shah Suri. It was then standardised by the Mughal Empire. What term is this that is also officially used in Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Seychelles, the Maldives and Mauritius?

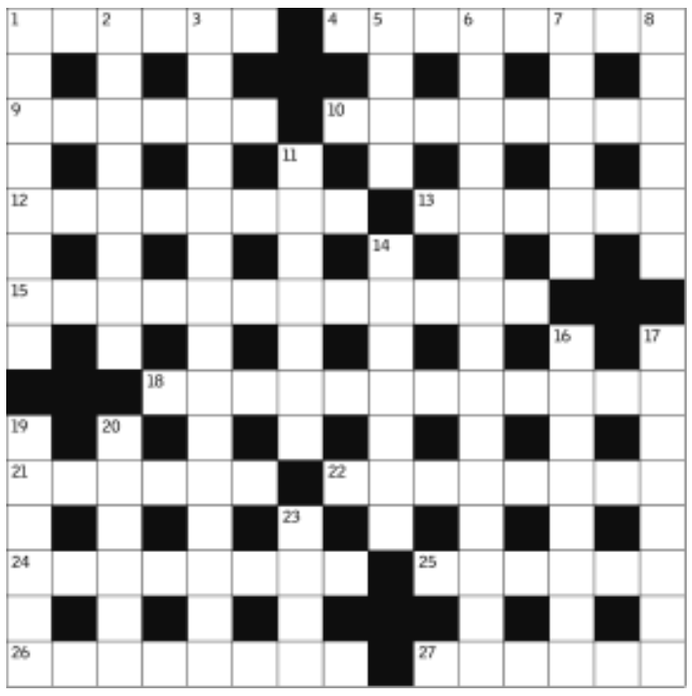
9 The great 'Birdman' Salim Ali was given the task of choosing India's national bird. He heavily favoured a lovely creature that is one of the heaviest flying birds in the world. Unfortunately, it lost out to the peacock because its name could too easily be mispronounced as a term of slander. With only about 150 individuals remaining now, which critically endangered species is this that almost became our national bird?

10 The Imperial Library was formed in 1891 by combining a number of secretariat libraries in Calcutta. After Independence, its name was changed and shifted to the Belvedere Estate, which used to be the residence of the Governor-General of India. Currently, it has more than two million books and is designated to collect, disseminate, and preserve all printed material produced in India. By what name is the library known now?

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. The National Flag
2. The Ashoka Lion Capital — Emblem of India
3. Truth Alone Triumphs
4. Vande Mataram
5. Asiatic Lion
6. Banyan Tree
7. Ganges River Dolphins
8. Rupee
9. The Great Indian Bustard
10. The National Library of India

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3111



Across
1 'Unit of energy'? ... 'inert gas'? ... technical gibberish (6)
4 Trump's, perhaps, after getting elected: 'Bigly!' (2,6)
9 They loathe seeing radiators losing energy (6)
10 Perhaps pen letters in Athens describing 'the empty pasty' (4,4)
12 Revolutionary in charge, suppressing Polish: sweet (8)
13 Lager, one repeatedly called for by Brando (6)
15 Found the goat striving to run amok (3,3,2,4)
18 Beast that's not spotted in the wild, clapboard elk (5,7)
21 Chorale not about to be arranged for Asian city (6)
22 Italian physicist, with anger, becomes prolific essayist (8)
24 Waiting, backed up; EU repeatedly getting into N. Ireland question; good! (8)
25 Brief pint, drinking 'Queen & Country' (6)
26 Yech! I'd nastily consume beasts like anteaters (8)
27 What drug pusher might say at entrance: 'Sweet dreams' (6)

Down
1 Avant-gardist seen in can, euphemistically (prison) (4,4)
2 Perhaps gîtes in the Dordogne to be overrun with vermin (8)
3 Novel, one that's familiar to you and Everyman (3,6,6)
5 Not a single American displays common sense (4)
6 Blasted horns, portent before goal for team (7,5,3)
7 Primarily, delay a while, delay, loiter endlessly? (6)
8 Arrangement with cheap horn for Spooner (6)
11 Desired broccoli, essentially producing wind (7)
14 Most ayatollahs brought up a vegetable (7)
16 Largely unadorned little Italian church? Actually, for starters, it's anything but! (8)
17 Head after comic figure, sloth (8)
19 It commemorates an unpleasant mixture of bacteria and saliva (6)
20 Beat with run in the silence (6)
23 Ancient empire where bionic man oddly not seen (4)

Solution No. 3110

▪ ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

60 MINUTES WITH ANUMITRA GHOSH DASTIDAR

'In Paris, I showcased nine kinds of rainfed rice from India'

The chef and restaurateur on how she is making indigenous produce the centrepiece of her cuisine

Swapna Majumdar

She has a Ph.D. in cognitive linguistics and has worked across the globe – but not as a linguist. Anumitra Ghosh Dastidar is a professional chef who can conjure up mouth-watering plates of food with ingredients that are fast disappearing.

Always interested in local produce, Dastidar's desire to focus on them gained force after she trained in Italian, Japanese and Thai cuisines, and learned how chefs in those countries promoted grains from their own regions. She quit her job as a sous-chef with Diva, a popular Italian restaurant, to research, collect and archive different varieties of indigenous rice. And what better way to share this knowledge than serving it hot? Edible Archives, her newly opened restaurant in Goa, showcases local produce and knowledge through inventive recipes. "Goa is losing its biodiversity. We are mapping the local ingredients and will be able to find out what is disappearing because of climate change. We want to promote love for regional diversity, not just through rice, but even indigenous vegetables and preparations across the country," she says.

I found that Kerala had 40 indigenous rice varieties that even the people in the State don't know about. One such variety is called Tavalakkannan, or frog's eyes

Safety first

But in March, just as her restaurant was beginning to make its presence felt, Dastidar had to shut up shop as the country went into lockdown. Luckily, Goa soon eased its restrictions and restaurants were allowed to reopen a month later in April.

However, although other eateries opened, Dastidar kept Edible Archives closed. "The safety of my staff was more important. However, Shalini Krishnan (co-owner) and I decided to open only for takeaways, something we had never done so far," she says. Adapting to the new situation was necessary, not just because safety concerns were paramount, but also because the lack of revenue during the lockdown had hit the business. Now working with reduced staff strength, Dastidar is considering salary cuts for the coming months until the situation stabilises.

- Has a Ph.D in cognitive linguistics
- Started working with Japanese chef, Tamura, in Delhi while doing her Ph.D
- Ran a pop-up called Bento Bong in Delhi for two years before opening The Big Bong Theory
- Travelled around the country for nearly three years with Shalini Krishnan, collecting rice varieties for their 2018 Biennale exhibition.

Her dream of putting indigenous food back on the table has been the driving force behind Dastidar's career choices. After beginning her culinary journey in a Japanese restaurant in Delhi and learning the ropes for a few years, she realised it was time to do her own thing.

A learning experience

She opened the Big Bong Theory, a small restaurant in Delhi, to showcase homemade Bengali food in a more professional setting. However, when this move didn't work out as well as she wanted, Dastidar joined Diva, the popular Italian restaurant owned and run by chef Ritu Dalmia in the capital. Here, she learnt the intricacies of fine dining and worked on modern interpretations of classic Italian food.

During this stint, Dastidar had opportunities to travel across Asia, participating in various food exhibitions and sharing the taste of India. At one such show in Suzhou, a Chinese city west of Shanghai, Dastidar was fascinated by a book given to all the participants. The book highlighted how the city had revived its indigenous water plants and the importance of these plants in protecting biodiversity.

"It inspired me to start exploring the rich biodiversity of India. In Paris, I showcased nine kinds of rainfed rice from India. These are indigenous plants which do not use groundwater. But these varieties are not popular in our country because the government hasn't taken the initiative to popularise them. Instead, hybrid rice has been promoted because it is easy to harvest. Although it is claimed that hybrid rice has greater yield, this is a myth. Bohuroopi, an indigenous variety of rice, has much more yield. Yet, it is not being promoted. We once had over one lakh varieties of rice , but since the seeds do not stay forever, they have to be preserved properly. We have lost 90% of our indigenous seeds since the 90s," contends Dastidar. While she was mulling over how she could raise awareness of these forgotten and rapidly disappearing varieties of rice, Dastidar received a phone call that was to provide the answers. "When I was invited to co-curate Edible Archives, a food project at the 2018-19 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, I gave up my job at Diva. While working on Edible Archives, I found that Kerala had 40 indigenous rice varieties that even the people in the State don't know about. One such variety is called Tavalakkannan, or frog's eyes. By the end of the Biennale, after creating 108 different menus for 108 days of the festival, I knew I was going to open a restaurant to showcase indigenous produce," says Dastidar.

Vanishing diversity

When she chose to open her restaurant – also named Edible Archives, aptly enough – in Goa in December 2019, it wasn't just because she wanted to tap into the huge numbers of tourists the State attracts, or the local food lovers. It was also an opportunity to highlight the State's depleting biodiversity.

"There are documents showing that 30 types of mushrooms existed 13 years ago. But in 2019, we found that more than half of the varieties had disappeared. The knowledge of which of these mushrooms are edible is also being lost. The chewy jhall found in Bengal is an edible creeper. But if we didn't know that, it would be considered a weed and never get on our plates. So we work with tribal women who have knowledge of the biodiversity of Goa, and try to incorporate it into our food," states Dastidar.

As the name of the restaurant suggests, diners are served not just a variety of food using local and native ingredients, but also a helping of history. Dastidar reveals that along with creating cultural and food memories, Edible Archives shares nutritional information about the produce and the rice of the day. "We did this at the Biennale to dispel the myth that rice is just a bad carbohydrate. For example, Kattuyanam and Seeraga Samba are two varieties from Tamil Nadu, a State where rice is the staple food. Kattuyanam has a low glycemic index that makes it ideal for diabetics, and Seeraga Samba is a source of high fibre and rich in selenium to fight colon and intestinal cancers. Many people are unaware of their good properties. For Edible Archives, spreading knowledge of this indigenous produce is the main goal, not merely consumption."

The independent journalist writes on development and gender.

▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

NOSHTALGIA

Baba's Sunday mutton curry

My father would start adding and frying the masala in an order reminiscent of a military march-past

Sailen Routray

Like most Odia families, for us Sundays meant mutton. For my sisters and me, it also meant having our father at home for the whole day; dedicated government servant that he was, we hardly saw him on other days of the week. As for Ma, it gave her a short respite from the kitchen. Before we woke up, Baba would have come back from the market with the mutton, and Ma would have started grumbling about its quality. It was very easy for vendors to dupe him; he would often be saddled with stale fish, rotting vegetables and undesirable cuts of meat.

Before leaving for the market, Baba would have soaked a few garlic cloves in water. After coming back, he would first grind a few pieces of turmeric and red chillies into a fine paste on the mortar stone. Then it would be the turn of cumin seeds, followed separately by onions, and then ginger-garlic; and finally, it would be coriander and poppy seeds. Each set of masalas would be ground one by one and kept aside singly as a ball on a thali.

While grinding the masala, the hard masculinity of his habitual presence would be gone; his wrists would have the grace of an Odissi dancer . He would again seem to me an affectionate man, who used to laugh like a baby when as a child I would stop pretending to sleep and jump on his back when he came to our bed to set the mosquito net late in the evening.

But while cooking, his face would be grim with concentration; most answers to questions would be in the form of grunts. After washing the potatoes, he would cut each one into evenly sized pieces with the skin on. Then in a wok, he would heat some mustard oil on a medium flame, add the potato pieces, sprinkle some salt and cook these till half-done.

Step by step

Baba would hedge his bets regarding the quality of the mutton he had bought by chopping the cuts into evenly sized chunks around three centimetres long. He would put these pieces in a big wok with a litre of hot water, salt, ground pepper and turmeric powder and stew for around 90 minutes on a slow flame with a lid covering the vessel.

When the mutton got tender, he would scoop the pieces out and keep the stock with the melted fat aside. We children would then be called to sample 'khaasi sijhaa' – boiled mutton – in three separate small bowls. Each would contain three to four bits, with the younger ones getting the juicier, easy to chew portions.

Then Baba would heat mustard oil in a big wok. When the oil started smoking, he would throw in some sugar. It would soon caramelise, the oil turning the colour of molten sunsets. Into this river the colour of diluted blood, Baba would add a couple of bay leaves, followed by a pinch of cumin seeds. Then he would start adding and frying the wet masala in an order reminiscent of a military march-past. First, the onion paste would go in, followed by the ground turmeric and red chillies; then the ginger-garlic would be thrown in, followed by cumin paste, ground coriander and poppy seeds. He would sauté each paste for 4-5 minutes, then add the next one in sequence; no shortcuts for him. By this time, he would be sweating profusely and the masala would be the colour of the Amazon in full spate, and smell like a tropical paradise.

While grinding the masala, the hard masculinity of his habitual presence would be gone; his wrists would have the grace of an Odissi dancer. He would again seem to me an affectionate man

Lunch at last

To this sautéd masala, he would add the fried potatoes and cook on a low flame. By now we children would be hungry and pester him to finish soon. But he would braise the potatoes in the spices with intermittent stirring for about a quarter of an hour, sprinkling water every minute or so, to ensure that the masala did not burn or stick to the bottom of the wok.

When the potatoes were almost done, he would add the boiled mutton and continue to simmer while slowly smattering the wok with the mutton stock. With all the stock gone, he would add half a litre of hot water and boil the tarakari for a few minutes to get a very thin and watery gravy.

It would be well after 1 p.m. by the time he was done; the regional film might have started on Doordarshan by the time Baba finished concocting his mutton curry. When he finally joined us after his post-cooking bath, we children and Ma would be almost halfway through the lunch of usuna (parboiled) rice and khaasi maangsa tarakari, as we sat in a half circle in front of our black-and-white Konark TV, enjoying the finesse of Baba's hands finally getting the better of the gaucherie of his eyes.

The writer is an author and researcher based in Bhubaneswar.

SUNDAY RECIPE

Khandayat style mutton curry

(Serves four)

Ingredients

800g mutton including portions of the legs, ribs, liver and some fat
2 medium-sized potatoes
10 tbsp mustard oil
3 medium-sized onions
A 2-inch-long piece of fresh raw turmeric
15 cloves of garlic
4 big red chillies
2 half-inch pieces of ginger
10 black peppers, dry roasted and ground into a fine powder
2 dried bay leaves
1 tsp sugar
1 tbsp turmeric powder
3 tbsp cumin seads
2 tbsp split coriander seeds
2 tbsp poppy seeds
Salt to taste

Method

1. Grind all the masalas separately. Stir-fry evenly diced potatoes in two tablespoons of oil with salt till half-done. Boil the mutton with salt, a teaspoon each of pepper and turmeric powder, in a pot with a litre of water, for 80-90 minutes on a low flame, with the lid partially covered.
2. Heat eight tablespoons of oil in a wok. Add sugar to the hot oil. After it caramelises, decrease the flame and add bay leaves followed by a pinch of cumin seeds.
3. Add the ground paste/wet masalas in the specific order provided, frying each spice/mix for 4-5 minutes: onion; turmeric; red chillies; ginger-garlic; cumin; coriander; and, poppy seeds.
4. After the masala is done, add the fried potatoes, mix evenly and stir, sprinkling a couple of spoons of water intermittently, for 10-15 minutes.
5. Add the boiled mutton pieces and mix. Add the stock slowly in half-cup measures over 15 minutes. After the masala is dry, add half a litre of hot water to the vessel, and let it simmer for 5-7 minutes.