THE HINDU

Magazine

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MUMBAI

Sunday, June 28, 2020

LITERARY REVIEW

Nuanced and resonant, Megha Majumdar's debut novel, *A Burning*, is the calling card of a significant new voice p4

WIDE ANGLE

The makers of *Panchayat* could not have anticipated the pandemic, but the timing of its release was serendipitous p6

QUIZ

Which instrument was used by a composer to introduce sharks and spaceships in Spielberg movies? p7

BACK PAGE

A narrative built over the years has painted Bengal-origin Muslims as aliens, says Aman Wadud p8

Love all A scene from Delhi Queer Pride Parade held every year since 2008 on the last Sunday of November. GETTY IMAGES

COVER

Pride & prejudice

As the recent death of Anjana Harish revealed, the dangerous practice of 'conversion therapy' for queer people is still going strong. This Pride Month, a new UN report urges governments to ban it **p3**

last week

Pilgrims don't progress

Saudi Arabia announced a ban on pilgrims coming in from abroad for the Haj this year, limiting access to a small number of Saudi residents who will follow social distancing measures and spend time in isolation before and after the pilgrimage. India's Minority Affairs Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi announced that the government had initiated the refund process for the 2,13,000 Haj applications received from prospective pilgrims this year.

Pricier than petrol

For the very first time, diesel became more costly than petrol in Delhi. After fuel prices were raised for the 19th day in a row on Thursday, the diesel price touched ₹80.02 per litre — the highest on record in the capital. The rate for petrol rose to ₹79.92 a litre in Delhi. On May 5, the Delhi government steeply hiked the VAT on diesel, from 16.75% to 30%. VAT on petrol was also raised to 30% from 27%.

Assam flooded

Following heavy spells of rain, parts of Assam were deluged by a second wave of floods, which killed two people and affected nearly 38,000 in scores of villages spread over the five districts of Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Majuli, and Dibrugarh. More heavy rainfall is expected in the State, with several rivers already flowing above the danger mark, including the Brahmaputra.

Still simmering

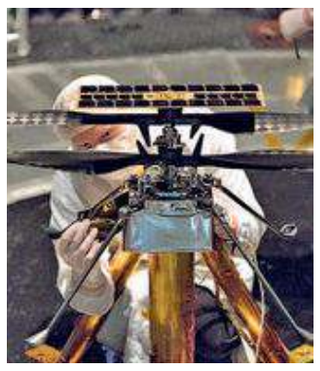
Even as India and China seemed to reach a consensus to disengage in Ladakh where the two armies are in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, satellite images showed that the Chinese outposts destroyed on June 15 in the Galwan area are back, just across the LAC in Indian territory. Meanwhile, Army Chief Gen. Naravane presented commendation cards to troops involved in the clash.

Took 74 days

The Delhi High Court granted bail to Safoora Zargar, a pregnant student of Jamia Millia Islamia arrested on terrorism charges in connection with the anti-CAA protests that preceded the Delhi riots. Zargar, now five months pregnant, had spent 74 days in jail before Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said he would not oppose bail on "humanitarian grounds".

Juggernaut moves

After the Supreme Court, which had barred this year's Jagannath Rath Yatra, reversed its stance, the 10-day festival began in Puri with restrictions in place; only priests and servitors tested for COVID-19 were allowed to participate. Nevertheless, the event was criticised as footage showed people thronging with little regard for physical distancing.



Ingenious

NASA's Ingenuity test helicopter got set to be ferried to Mars as part of the space agency's Mars 2020 mission, which will look for clues on whether life was ever possible on the red planet. Ingenuity, 50 cm high and solar powered, is fitted with cameras and will be the first such aircraft to fly on another planet. "Ingenuity is unlike any other helicopter ever built because powered controlled flight at Mars is unlike anything ever attempted," said MiMi Aung, project manager of the Mars Helicopter.

America first

The U.S. announced restrictions until December 31 — extending the 60-day ban that began on April 23 — on issuing certain categories of work visa, including the H1-B, popular among Indian I.T. workers, and the L-1, used for intra-company transfers. President Donald Trump characterised the move as protecting domestic workers. This will not affect already issued visas, or visa-holders who are already in the U.S.

Army doctors deployed

With 6,200 of the 13,400 allocated hospital beds in New Delhi occupied, the Union Home Ministry acted on Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's request and announced that around 20,000 new beds would be available at temporary facilities staffed by armed forces medical personnel. The makeshift sites include converted railway carriages and a 10,000-bed religious centre. Cases in Delhi crossed 66,000.

Mandir in Islamabad

Pakistan inaugurated the construction of Islamabad's first ever modern-day Hindu temple, the Shri Krishna Mandir, in a 20,000 sq.ft plot allotted to the Islamabad Hindu Panchayat in 2017 following an order from the National Commission for Human Rights. The government will bear the ₹10 crore cost. There are some pre-1947 temples in the area, but these have long since fallen into disuse.

Unheard and unprotected

Frontline corona warriors are struggling to feed their families despite putting their lives in danger

Veer Vikram Singh

While COVID-19 has exposed India's crippling healthcare system, the people at the forefront of the battle against the pandemic are underpaid, unprotected and unheard.

The spreading virus has come as a wake-up call for the post-modern world that is moving swiftly into the uncertainties of time. Along with lessons of gratitude and acknowledgement for our frontline heroes, the global crisis has revealed the "known unknowns". Workers who are considered "low-cost resources" have come to the front of the rescue lines. They include nurses, pharmacists, caregivers, teachers (as observers of quarantine centres), accredited social health activists (ASHAs), cleaning staff and gig and utility workers who continue to serve society with minimal payments and social security.

The pandemic has unmasked the shining gloss of India's social structure as a deceptive mirage

Behind the scenes A corona warrior who helps keep hospitals clean. ▪ SANDEEP SAXENA

Unthinking hierarchies

Despite the interminable round-the-clock dedication, empathy and sensitivity required for providing these services, these are still portrayed as second- and third-class jobs. These workers face social stigma while performing their jobs because of the fear that they may infect others. Acknowledgement of their work is important but not sufficient. To give meaning to recognition, there is a need to reappraise the way we treat them.

The pandemic has unmasked the shining gloss of India's social structure as a deceptive mirage. It has exposed the predominant social inequalities among the working classes, and the loopholes in our healthcare infrastructure and planning, as millions of workers are still navigating the crisis without a safety net. ASHAs, a crucial element of India's community health programmes, are visiting homes for educating families about physical distancing and monitoring symptoms. They lack masks and personal protective equipment and are struggling to feed their families, putting their lives in danger on exiguous incomes.

Unlike other COVID-19 warriors, many sanitation works lack basic knowledge of how the virus spreads.

These extraordinary times requires much more than mere public appreciation and recognition as there is an absolute need for policies and insurance to end their social and financial hardship. These are essential to motivate them to remain in the workforce. The political needle needs to move to bring forth new pay proposals and social security measures instead of forcing the workers to reach collective bargaining agreements.

To give meaning to recognition, there is a need to reappraise the way we treat these workers

Each of us deserves equal access to quality living and opportunity. In line with the adage "every problem is an opportunity in disguise", the global crisis can be tapped for its potential to make a paradigm shift in this social bailiwick.

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Food for thought at a grand buffet

'To eat well, shun social niceties in a subtle manner'

S.R. Raghu Ram

It was 1959, and I was at the reception hosted by the President on Independence Day eve.

We were a bunch of youngsters who, in their white trousers and black *bandhgalas* looking strikingly like penguins, were wandering hither and thither like Hansel and Gretel lost in the forest.

Trainees at the IAS Training School in Delhi (which later morphed into the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie), we were soon corralled into an informal group for President Dr. Rajendra Prasad to meet us. The kind President graciously made a few enquiries and moved on to the other groups.

The well-stocked buffet tables at the reception were groaning under the weight of the victuals and viands that were stacked on them.

We had been informed that when the President left after the National Anthem, we could help ourselves to the sumptuous feast. So soon after the President departed, all of us rushed towards the tables.

But by the time we reached there, there were only a few stale samosas and soggy sandwiches left. As we nibbled at these meagre left-overs, one of the senior officers came across and asked who we were and what we were doing in this distinguished gathering.

When we identified ourselves, he looked pityingly at us and said that the only way to enjoy such repasts in "high-profile" parties was to totally shun social niceties, but in a subtle unobtrusive manner, and take "guard position" at the buffet tables.

Having given this sage advice, he continued rather sardonically to add that this homily would be wasted on us as the next time we would be eligible for an invite to the reception would be after 35 years or so when we would be sufficiently senior in the official hierarchy.

But I had no occasion to make use of the advice as I bade goodbye to government service midway through my career.

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A plane note of Partition

Walls break in a flight aisle, helped on by the smile of a little one

Rishabh Kochhar

Having grown up listening to stories of how my family migrated from Pakistan to Independent India, I often wonder about the cruelty of Partition.

A few months ago, just before the lockdown, it took a three-year old boy to remind me once again of this cruelty and the humanity inside each of us. As the captain announced the departure of my flight from Washington to Dubai, my eyes fell on the toddler sitting diagonally opposite my seat, laughing innocently with his parents as our flight climbed rapidly. Two hours later, the boy was still smiling and playing with his toys as the aircraft flew across oceans.

It was during a short walk up and down the aisle to stretch my stiff legs that I met Mahad properly, accompanied by his doting father, who had taken up the responsibility of taking him for a short walk. Mahad, meaning the Great One, did not speak a word, but had the most infectious smile I have ever seen.

I tried grabbing his attention, to play with him and it wasn't long before he came to my arms of his own accord, pulling my long, unkempt hair. He unknowingly slapped my face, all the while laughing, and reached out for my spectacles, as my nieces and nephews do. I held Mahad delicately, afraid of hurting him and taking away his smile.

It was by a sheer stroke of bad luck that Mahad and I were born

in different nations which were once a single force to reckon with. As Mahad wrestled playfully against my grip, I got talking to his father, who turned out to be from Karachi. And a very unique history of our ancestors unfolded.

Cross currents

Here was Mahad whose ancestors had fled the United Provinces to go to the newly formed Pakistan, while my ancestors had moved from Sialkot to what remained of India. Perhaps our ancestors crossed paths while going to their new homes, or perhaps they did not. Perhaps they helped each other, perhaps they did not. But I sure hope that they did not inflict violence upon each other.

In 2005, when the Pakistani cricket team toured India, Mahad's parents visited their neighbouring country to follow their passion for cricket. But most astonishingly, when they came down to Chandigarh to watch the Test at Mohali, they stayed just a lane away from my house, with a family I know very well. The world is indeed small.

Mahad does not know which country I belong to, or what my faith is. The child was just happy to have found another person to play with. Neither his family nor I thought twice before embracing a person from a country often branded as the enemy. It took a plane ride at 30,000 feet on no man's land, taking us back to our respective "homes", for two "could-have-been" compatriots to meet.

Happy encounters

I have had pleasant encounters with Pakistanis in New York, Vienna, and even remote places such as Bogota. But I never thought that a smiling three-year-old child who cannot even speak would leave behind such an indelible impression on me.

As our flight prepared to land at Dubai, before Mahad and I boarded different flights to India and Pakistan, I wished his family good luck. We exchanged notes on places to visit in both our countries. I got an enticing offer to visit Karachi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while I made them a standing offer to take them around Punjab the next time they visit, though the coronavirus has ruined the plans for now.

But it was all because of a young boy that I had such an encounter, which left me with a warm feeling unlike any other. And in that moment, there was only love.

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An expert's cloak

Put on a faintly bored expression, and unleash an abstract profundity

Jairam N. Menon

After observing life for years, I have stumbled upon a secret: the cushiest job in the world is that of an expert. In this rough and tumble journey that we call life, they are the ones who travel first class.

Which field do you become an expert in? Well, at the office, you can take your pick from corporate strategy, brand management, Artificial Intelligence, social media... At home, the palette is even wider. No traditional home is complete without an aunt who is an expert in mango pickle, and an uncle who speaks the Queen's English or has mastered astrology. If neither seems cool, get trendy by becoming an expert in pandemics.

Actually, it matters little which domain you choose, because the steps to becoming an expert are more or less the same. Is it hard work? The short answer is that it's up to you. If you choose the straight and narrow path, you will need to invest long hours in study despite an uncertain outcome. Or else, opt for the most popular method: simply assume you are one.

Cleansing the minutiae

If you choose to become an expert at the office, you can get colleagues of a lesser god to do the heavy lifting for you. Minions will fact-check, proof-read, arrange for coffee and take care of the million little things that you the expert can't be bothered with. Similarly, if you can ace a pickle, you are automatically absolved of the duties of preparing lunch. This cleansing of the minutiae of life frees up your mind for the grander things no one else is equipped to perform.

Experts also speak a different tongue from the herd. You don't try and guess what's going to happen in the future. Instead, you "study trends and develop a probability matrix". You don't just surf the Net and download useful stuff. Instead you "carry out a comprehensive survey and offer an assessment". And you never say that you got lucky with a sudden idea. You thought about it long and hard to discover what lesser minds had missed.

A vital skill in being regarded as an expert is learning to speak without giving too much away. Suppose you the gardening expert are asked by admirers gushing over your chrysanthemums about the best way to get these blooms in their backyards.

Your response shouldn't dwell on the nitty-gritty of soil, seed or season. Instead, you will put on a faintly bored expression (to convey that you've been asked this question a million times by your fans), and unleash an abstract profundity. "Learn to talk to your flowers, my dear," you say, and stretching the dramatic pause to the limit, add, "Then listen till they talk back to you."

If you are not one for lofty generalities, you can opt for the opposite strategy: numb your audience with numbers. Instead of saying that productivity has fallen due to the pandemic (anyone could have said that), you say that it dropped by 84.7% in the last quarter. Never mind if things don't go by script and fact checkers nail your errors. Simply Trump them!

Right now, the world has room for experts in combating the aftermath of COVID-19 and resuscitating the economy. Make your move, guys.

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FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

It is not the elephant or lion that crosses railway tracks; it is the railway tracks that cross the forest. ('The jungle rail'; Jun. 21) Accidents on the tracks don't happen; they are caused.

K. PRADEEP

■ Like a good appetiser, the cover story with its wonderful sketches and funny telegrams made me yearn for more. It would be great to have access to the railway magazines referred to in the piece. I recalled the story 'The tiger's claw' from *Malgudi Days,* where the talkative man spends a night in 'the most obscure' Koppal station near Mempi forest, tiger in tow.

RAJESH SANKARANARAYANAN

■ I am a retired railway official, aged 77, and I was deeply touched by the cover story. I remember the sacrifice of hundreds of railway men while laying new tracks in the middle of forests with neither protective gear nor proper communication facilities. The ordeals of the line staff maintaining tracks day and night, come rain or shine, are not known to much of the travelling public.

N. SUBRAMANIAN

■ Man-animal conflict has been a major concern in recent years and it raises important questions. Perhaps one major reason for the persistence of the conflict is that humans encroach into forests with no knowledge about the behaviour of animals and their movements. More investment in research to develop coordinated, systematic and shared approaches to forest use is needed.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR

■ Considered nature's 'gardeners', elephants are key in shaping the landscape, in pollination and germination of seeds. In tropical forests, 30% of gigantic tree species depend on elephants for seed dispersal. Turning forests into farming and mining sites has pushed elephants closer to human habitations. Besides Plan Bee, biofences can also be brought in by the Railways to avoid accidents.

KUMARIKA ROY

■ The cover story was so thought-provoking. The animals who died protecting their forest against a powerful enemy (humans) must not go unnoticed in history books. The article gave us glimpses of a time when our forests were filled with diversity. We must learn from the past and try to bring an equilibrium between nature and our greed.

AVIKSHIT SURYANSH

■ In 1960, when I was a surveyor in the Railways, I went to Kuppam station, in a forested area in the Jalarpet Bangalore section. In those days, coaches were hauled by steam engines and watering locos was a constant problem. When I finished work near the outer signal, about half a kilometre from the station building, it was 5 p.m. Suddenly the points man came running and literally dragged me away with him. When I turned to see the spot where I had been working a few minutes ago, a tiger was majestically crossing the track. I was left trembling all over.

D. SETHURAMAN

Precedents

The only way to stop or lessen mass migration of workers is to mitigate their troubles on an urgent basis ('The Peshwa's tax holiday'; Jun. 21). Mughals and Marathas have set fine examples of benevolence, reminding present regimes of their duty. The pandemic can be a lesson to work on better infrastructure for workers.

HUSSAIN AHMAD SIDDIQUEE

Correction

Thank you for publishing my letter ('Crocodile tears'; Jun. 21) critical of David Frum, the Republican Party member. However, I had made it clear in my letter that the speech Reagan gave was in the lynching heartland of Philadelphia in Mississippi, not to be confused with Philadelphia in the state of Pennsylvania.

G. PARAMESWARAN

More on the Web

thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Travails of the migrants

On the platform, with bags and water bottles in their hands, they wait patiently in front of the coach

ADITI SAINI

Era of information overload

Filtering out inessential information and settling for just what is required can be a marvel

RADHIKA MURUGESAN

Compliments, comments and criticism

Seeing through the three Cs and giving an appropriate reaction to them will help us stay afloat

PRAJWAL K. RAJESH

New horizons of technology

AI is being used by us in every step of our lives, making the use of technology easier

SHIVANI WAIKAR

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

SEXUALITY

It is dangerous and unethical, but queer people continue to be subjected to the discredited practice of 'conversion therapy'

DON'T SET US STRAIGHT

The Turing Effect

In January 1952, English mathematician Alan Turing, who played an important role in breaking German war codes during WW II, was charged under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885 for being in a sexual relationship with a man. Turing, who would later become famous as the father of modern computer science and artificial intelligence, was convicted. He was made to undergo hormonal therapy or chemical castration for one year, which reportedly made him impotent and led to the formation of breast tissue. Turing was also barred from continuing his government work. In June 1954, two weeks before he turned 42, Turing was found dead at home, by apparent suicide, although subsequent reports claimed his death may have been due to accidental poisoning. Turing's path-breaking research and his persecution were the subject of the 2014 Oscar-winning film, *The Imitation Game,* starring Benedict Cumberbatch *(in pic)*. In December 2013, Queen Elizabeth II overturned Turing's conviction. And in September 2016, the U.K. government said it would extend the retroactive exoneration to other men convicted similarly, under a new 'Alan Turing law'.

Navamy Sudhish

Rihaan* came out to his parents in the summer of 2008 – three days after they created a profile for him on a matrimonial site. His conservative upper-class family in Pune reacted badly. There was confusion, rage, tears. "My father begged me to meet a psychiatrist, who instantly diagnosed my 'condition' as mother-fixation." Rihaan's 'treatment' started the same week. First it was coercion and counselling; then he was given medicines and dragged to brothels.

"Then came the final sitting to 'reverse my orientation and cure the disorder'. I was locked into a room wallpapered with pictures of nude men and they gave me some injections that made me throw up. I retched the entire day, collapsing in between, then waking up covered in vomit. Two days later the session was repeated and I was shown gay porn." Within a couple of weeks Rihaan was a defeated man. "Panic rose in my chest even at the mention of same-sex attraction. My parents were summoned and officially informed that my 'conversion' was complete. I lived like a zombie those days. I was heavily dependent on medicines and each time I tried to stop, I was ravaged by withdrawal symptoms. I contemplated suicide. Then, before I knew it, I was married to a cis woman."

Rihaan's marriage lasted five months, but more than 10 years later, he still gets panic attacks. He has no career or confidence. "I am unable to have a meaningful relationship and at times the shame and pain are unbearable," he says. Now, Rihaan is finally on the road to recovery.

'Curing' queerness

Not everyone is so lucky. Anjana Harish, the 21-year-old queer student from Kerala who was found dead in Goa last month, was also subjected to conversion therapy. Her friends say that Harish live-streamed a video revealing the torture she had to endure from pseudo-therapists.

Disturbingly, it looks like the discredited concept of conversion therapy is still being practised. Claiming to "cure" queerness, it can involve everything from shock treatment to exorcism and hormones to psychotropic drugs and kindling a sense of shame. According to medical experts, it causes irreparable damage to the mental health of victims.

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community say conversion therapy is practised in stealth. The 'patients' are taken to psychiatric wards in hospitals or de-addiction centres with falsified files. When Jay*, a trans man from Ahmedabad, consulted a psychiatrist at a government facility for sex reassignment surgery, the doctor insisted that he go through conversion therapy first. "I am a 43-year-old gazetted officer and I went there with some community members. If they could try to coerce me, think about what they must do to younger people with no support," says Jay.

Quacks and clerics

This so-called 'therapy' is dished out not just by unscrupulous health professionals but also by preachers, naturopaths, shamans, and religious establishments. When Marie* told her parents in Coimbatore that she was a trans woman, they asked her to attend a course at an ashram the family used to frequent. "On the second day of the course, I woke up in another place where I was held prisoner for two months," she says. "I was slapped, body-shamed and sexually abused for being a 'sinner' and acting against the 'divine plan'."

Realising there was no point in fighting, Marie stopped reacting and convinced them that she had changed. "I was sent home where I continued the charade for two more months. At the very first opportunity, I fled and never went back." Marie has since undergone sex reassignment surgery and works as a doctor in a hill station where nobody knows her past. "I survived because I stayed vigilant from the beginning. Once they break your spirit, there is no going back."

Salma's* relationship with another girl became a scandal that rocked her hometown, Lucknow. It was a cleric who advised the family to keep her in isolation; she was raped multiple times by a close relative, a man she called *kaka* (uncle). In India, religious institutions and representatives play a big part in promoting conversion therapy. In the West, groups like Exodus International openly promoted conversion therapy across nearly 20 countries, but it has been more hush-hush here, with saints, pastors and babas doing it on the sly. Organised groups operate as de-addiction centres, prayer groups or ashrams.

Precious lives (Clockwise from right) A participant at a pride march in Bengaluru; queer people are routinely subjected to bullying and harassment; at the Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk; and Anjana Harish, the queer student from Kerala who was found dead in Goa last month.
▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Against the law

"We condemn conversion therapy. It's unlawful," says P.K. Dalal, President, Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS). IPS has taken a strong stand against it. "We have a protocol when it comes to such cases and we will soon be coming out with a statement," he adds.

Although there is no specific law prohibiting conversion therapy, legal experts emphasise that the practice violates the Right to Privacy enshrined under Article 21. "If sexual abuse is involved, it's an IPC offence anyway and now we have the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, that gives a lot of agency to individuals," says Sandhya Raju, an advocate at the Kerala High Court and a member of the Human Rights Law Network. "Once mental health review boards are constituted as part of enforcing the law, the community can use it to protect their rights."

If the practice is used against children below 18, the law is even more stringent. Parents can be booked under Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. Prijith P.K., president of the Thiruvananthapuram-based Queerythm, which operates a 24x7 helpline for LGBTQIA+ people, says, "Very often parents are involved, and doctors claim the treatment is for depression or schizophrenia." He thinks new legislation is needed to address the issue. "While transpersons are protected under the NALSA judgment, other segments – including gays, lesbians and bisexuals – have no legal support. Same-sex marriages are still not legal in India. We talk about inclusivity and awareness, but legal backing is very important to achieve that goal. When the discrimination ends, the rest will follow," he says.

While most such practitioners are quacks, there are some who strongly believe they are offering a 'service'. A Kerala-based psychiatrist who practises conversion therapy said, on condition of anonymity, that his patients "undergo the treatment willingly" as it's "easier to live as a heterosexual individual".

According to him, many of his patients now have a family and children. But he admits that many of them return due to marital discord and are on endless medication for depression.

A Hyderabad-based sexologist is equally confident. He offers different programmes tailored to 'the severity of queerness' and says, "You can fix most homosexuals with hormone therapy. Psychiatric interventions have been successful in most cases I've treated. For example, testosterone injections can reverse same-sex desire to a great extent while some people respond to behavioural therapy."

He refuses to share his methods and says sexual deviance often springs from childhood sexual abuse and conditioning. He believes he is "helping" queer people by "reaffirming their real orientation or gender identity, making them acceptable, and protecting the honour of their families."

Hypnotised, lobotomised

The origins of this clandestine practice date back to the 19th century, when 'deviant' sexual orientations were considered sinful or criminal. One of the first documented cases comes from the accounts of Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, a German physician who reportedly used hypnosis to 'cure' homosexuality in the 1890s.

By the early 1900s, practitioners worldwide began to use hypnosis as well as electroconvulsive therapy and sometimes surgical procedures like lobotomy. People were tortured, castrated and subjected to sordid corrective measures. Aversion therapy, of the kind Rihaan underwent, was portrayed in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*.

In India, the Department of Psychiatry at AIIMS, New Delhi, conducted a study to reverse sexual orientation between 1977and 1982. The subjects were six homosexual people, who were administered electric shocks using an aversion therapy apparatus set at 50 volts to control their homoerotic fantasies. The report claimed that four persons were successfully reoriented. By the 2000s, several doctors and healers had popped up across the country.

In May this year, the U.N. published a report cataloguing the severe and everlasting impacts of conversion therapy. The report says, "Attempts to pathologize and erase the identity of individuals, negate their existence as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or gender diverse and provoke self-loathing have profound consequences on their physical and psychological integrity and well-being." It urges governments to ban conversion therapy. So far only five countries – Germany (for under-18s), Malta, Ecuador, Brazil, Taiwan – have drawn up bills making it illegal, but efforts are on in other countries too.

At the most basic level, conversion therapy is unethical and a human rights violation. Even after the Supreme Court decriminalised consensual same-sex relationships by striking down Section 377 and came out with the historic NALSA judgment to protect transgender rights, Indian society is far from queer-friendly: LGBTQIA+ individuals still face violence, hostility and stigma. And a very real threat to their mental and physical health.

**Names changed to protect identity.*

Salma's* relationship with another girl became a scandal that rocked her hometown, Lucknow. It was a cleric who advised the family to keep her in isolation; she was raped multiple times by a close relative

REUTERS

REALISM

Girl, abandoned

Carefully sculpted, emotionally resonant, and replete with telling detail, *A Burning* is the calling card of a significant new voice. But there's a tiny problem

Tabish Khair

There is a deadly fire on a train in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*. Jivan, a Muslim girl allegedly recruited online by Islamist terrorists, is arrested on the charge of having planted the bomb.

As this gripping novel proceeds, we learn more about Jivan, as well as a hijra called Lovely, who is training to become an actress, and PT Sir, instructor in the school that Jivan used to attend. There are also 'interludes,' in which other related stories, such as the 'beef lynching' that PT Sir witnesses, are narrated. And there are crisply etched minor characters like Jivan's mother; Sonali Khan the film producer; Bimala Pal, the populist political leader and, in due course, the new Chief Minister of the State. But the pillars of the narrative are Jivan, Lovely and PT Sir.

Rare pupil

Jivan, it turns out, is the only child of a poor couple, dislocated by a government-supported corporate land-grab, and newly moved to the metropolis. The mother earns some money by selling vegetables. The father, once a rickshaw-puller, is ailing, largely because he was badly beaten up by policemen during the eviction. Jivan has had a bit of luck; she was admitted to a middle-class girls' school by a good Samaritan. She has just passed Class X with the lowest percentage in her batch, for all her classmates come from English-reading families while Jivan has painstakingly taught herself to read and write both Bangla and English. PT Sir remembers her as that rare pupil, a favourite of his, who took sports seriously.

Jivan is not unhappy. She knows that she can now get a job as a salesgirl, and that is what she proceeds to do. She has been teaching English to Lovely, who is doing all she can to improve herself in preparation for possible stardom. Jivan decides to give all her Class X books to Lovely – this is why she is crossing the station with a bundle when the train blast takes place.

When Jivan is arrested, not only is she prejudged by all who do not know her, but even people who know her fail to come to her aid

A Burning
Megha Majumdar
Penguin Hamish Hamilton
₹599

But when Jivan is arrested, not only is she prejudged by all who do not know her, but even people who know her fail to come to her aid. PT Sir uses, at first reluctantly and then with greater dexterity, his association with Jivan to sculpt a career in politics – while patriotically condemning his ex-student. Lovely, who is initially sympathetic, abandons Jivan for a break in the film world. The journalist Jivan entrusts with her account allows his editor to slant her confession in such a sensational way as to implicate her further. The judge's sentence – like so many other things in this novel – is an echo from outside the narrative: Jivan is condemned to death by hanging to assuage "the conscience of the city, of the country." One of the remarkable strengths of *A Burning* is Majumdar's ability to illustrate how easily we abandon others for our own convenience.

Outside the ordinary

Carefully sculpted, with no word wasted, emotionally resonant, and replete with telling detail, *A Burning* is the calling card of a significant new voice. It is an excellent novel and an impressive debut.

If Majumdar was an ordinary talent, I would have stopped with the above remarks. But Majumdar is a talent that should not be lost in the lush deserts (or are they arid gardens?) of New York and London publishing, that glittering global machine. Hence I need to say more.

I will do so by noting a small matter: the Muslim girl is called Jivan. This is an unusual name for a Muslim girl, though, especially in Bengal, poorer Muslims can sometimes have Hindu names, or (most often) nicknames. I have not met any – out of the thousand plus Muslims I have met until now – but sociology assures me that this happens.

Mixed up

What is less likely to happen is that people will accept a Muslim girl's claim that her brother is named 'Purnendu Sarkar', as they obviously do in the novel. But even this would not matter if there wasn't a tradition in metropolitan colonial and post-colonial writing in English – even in major novels by non-white authors, such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* – of mixing up Hindu and Muslim names. And even that could be ignored if the details of Muslim living, and festivals, were not so glaringly absent in a novel that, otherwise, pays careful attention to small details.

I grew up a Muslim who knew much about Hindu details of life but met excellent, well-meaning Hindus, including some of my school friends, who seemed to know nothing about Muslim details of life. And hence, I cannot help but notice this aridity in *A Burning*. And because the author of *A Burning* is a person of unusual talent and empathy, I want to bring it to her notice. Because the aridity is more significant than it seems, and because it won't be pointed out to her by the publishing and critical sheikhs who rule over our Indian English destinies from the lush deserts of London and New York.

The writer is an Indian novelist and academic who teaches in Denmark.

LEATHER BOUND

The Chanakya of Florence

Is morality a necessary part of politics? No, said Machiavelli, thereby starting an argument that rages to this day

Niccolò Machiavelli is to Europe what Chanakya is to India. He stripped governance of morality and looked at it purely from the point of view of strategy. Victory in politics and warfare was not about good and evil, not even about right and wrong. It was about how to win, and if winning means backstabbing and deceit, well, that's just the way the world is.

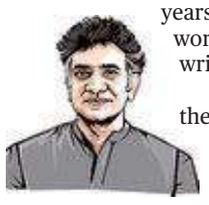
Viewers of *Game of Thrones* would be familiar with characters who would hold such views. Of course, for us in the modern world, what Machiavelli is saying is hardly scandalous. But he was the first to articulate this clearly in Europe. In 1513, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, which was addressed to a prince of the Medici clan in Florence. It's his most famous work but not the only one. There is another called the *Discourses*, which is also didactic for rulers.

Lessons in amorality

Whether *The Prince* is still relevant today is dependent on whether or not we concede that morality is not a necessary part of politics. We want to think that morality is needed, and no ruler will say otherwise. However, without amorality there is no politics. This is an eternal truth and the reason why Machiavelli is relevant and read even today.

Machiavelli says alliances are between allies, not friends. The adversary is an opponent, not an enemy. Statecraft must be approached as by chess players and not as actors in *saas-bahu* serials. "It is not a wise course," he says, "to make an alliance with a ruler whose reputation is greater than his strength." This brings a name but no protection. He asks, and this is a relevant question today, "whether it is better, when threatened with attack, to assume the offensive or await the outbreak of war."

Having asked the question, Machiavelli assesses the merits of both sides of the argument. He looks at the history of such things from Hannibal (who invaded Rome in the second century BC) to Charles VIII, King of France, who died only a few years after the work was written.



He admits there are advantages and disadvantages to both sides. His conclusion is that a nation well-armed and equipped for war should wait at home for the enemy. However, if the nation is weaker than the other and unused or unprepared, it is better to engage the enemy at a distance, away from the nation.

Unemotional theory

Machiavelli was widely read in the classics of Europe and could reach to examples from the history of ancient Greece and Rome to illustrate his point. This makes him attractive to read, and in many ways (not in the content, of course), his style reminds me of that of Michel de Montaigne, who was Machiavelli's contemporary in France.

I said Machiavelli is like Chanakya but one thing that separates them is time. Chanakya came 1,500 years before Machiavelli. He was talking about the same things, stripping morality from statecraft and looking at it purely from the point of view of outcomes and how to achieve them, but he was doing so at a time before the Church.

Machiavelli says alliances are between allies, not friends. The adversary is an opponent, not an enemy

The question is why India was fertile ground for such an unemotional theory so long before Machiavelli, who was writing close to the modern age, at a time when the scientific temper was almost fully in place. The answer must have something to do with the people of India and the nature of its rulers.

Machiavelli and his theory shocked Europe so much that we still use the word 'machiavellian' in a negative way. The dictionary describes it as being "cunning, scheming and unscrupulous, especially in politics." I don't think Machiavelli would disagree with the definition. He would be rather amused with the moral emotion loaded into it.

And Chanakya would agree with him in full.

Unscrupulous? A 16th-century portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli by Santi di Tito. ▪ WIKI COMMONS

Aakar Patel is a columnist and translator of Urdu and Gujarati non-fiction works.

ESSAY

A mind with a difference

Kannada playwright H.S. Shivaprakash is a man of extraordinary scholarship. But he is first and foremost a poet

N.S. Gundur

Kannada poet and playwright H.S. Shivaprakash is not only one of our finest minds, but also a mind with a difference. By profession he is an academic, working and living on the JNU campus, but his writerly self is not defined by the characteristics of his profession. He is first and foremost a poet, and one of India's finest playwrights.

Shivaprakash grew up in urban and modernist Karnataka, but is intimate with medieval and pre-modern India. He is a cosmopolitan not just because he often travels across the globe but because his mind accesses diverse cultural resources, combining the pre-modern, modern, Western, Indian, mystic, folk and many other traditions.

The Word in the World: Essays and Lectures on Indian Literature and Aesthetics – a collection of his speeches, lectures and writings, edited commendably by scholar-poet Kamalakar Bhat – bears testimony to his wide-ranging scholarship. The Preface says that he "was not keen on publishing them in a book form, and he would rather invest his energy on a poem or a play than on an editorial adventure." That is the guide to reading this volume.

▪ S. RAMESH KURUP

Military to spiritual hero

The 35 articles in the book are divided into four categories: 'The Bhakti World', 'The Kannada World', 'The World of Drama' and 'The World of Indian Cultures and Literatures'. The essays on Bhakti literature and culture offer rare insights into Tamil Shaivism and the Kannada Vachana movement. He conceptualises Suguna Bhakti of Tamil Nadu and Nirguna Bhakti of Karnataka as binaries (no, there's no trace of a post-structuralist critique here) to capture the nuances of these two cultural practices.

This serves as a framework for further investigations into South Indian Bhakti culture.

The essays in this section contain seeds of thought that can be developed into book-length treatises. While describing the poetic theory underlying Bhakti poetry, Shivaprakash shows how with historical changes came cultural transformation, replacing a military hero with a spiritual hero.

The essays in 'The Kannada World' engage with medieval and modern Kannada literature. The essay, 'Modernism and After: Some Reflections on the Contemporary Kannada Poetry,' which explores the journey of Kannada poetry from being transitive (addressing an audience) to intransitive (mediated only by the book), is a powerful one. The arguments presented here compel us to think differently about our literary histories and reshape our understanding of literature.

Points of departure

Shivaprakash is at his best in the section 'The World of Drama': he is evidently at home here. He explains how he made the concept of rasa uniquely his own in poetry and drama in the essay, 'Rasa Production: A Poet's Perspective.' As he seamlessly connects global theatre with Indian classical theatre and folk performance, we realise that here it is the artist rather than the art critic speaking about his art. The stress on the performative aspect of theatre shows us how a text is reimagined each time it is enacted.

He is a cosmopolitan not just because he often travels across the globe but because his mind accesses diverse cultural resources

The fourth section, 'The World of Indian Cultures and Literatures', holds up a mirror to Shivaprakash's multilingual engagement with different Indian cultures and aesthetics. His views on diasporic writing and translations are useful.

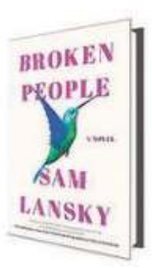
Shivaprakash is pre-eminently a poetic genius, as Manu V. Devadevan mentions in the Foreword; the source of his creativity lies in his disorganised thought and expression. It is difficult to assess the prose writings of a poetic genius. Perhaps the essays would have stood better if they had been rewritten for this volume.

That said, the essays are essential reading for those interested in understanding medieval and Bhakti cultures, and those hoping to research modern Indian theatre and literature. Some of the essays can be points of departure for larger projects.

The writer is Chairman, Department of English Studies, Davangere University, Karnataka.

BROWSER

Broken People
Sam Lansky
Hanover Square Press
$12.99 (Kindle price)
A globe-trotting shaman in Hollywood Hills claims to fix emotionally damaged people in three days. For neurotic, depressed Sam, the possibility of transformation is tantalising. He signs up for a weekend under the shaman's care, and so begins his journey into the nature of truth and fiction.



Legend of Suheldev: The King Who Saved India
Amish
Westland
₹399
1025 AD. Indian kingdoms are battling the Turks, most unsucessfully. When the Turks destroy the Shiva temple at Somnath, a warrior rises. He is King Suheldev. This fictional tale based on real events recounts the story of Suheldev and the battle of Bahraich.

Blue Ticket
Sophie Mackintosh
Doubleday
$13.99 (Kindle price)
This is set in a world where women's fates are decided by a lottery: a white ticket grants you marriage and children, a blue ticket grants you a career and freedom. But Calla, a blue-ticket woman, begins to question her fate and decides to run away to escape her destiny.

Home Before Dark
Riley Sager
Dutton
$13.99 (Kindle price)
Maggie Holt's father had made their residence, Baneberry Hall, a crumbling Victorian estate, famous by writing a book about the hauntings there. Years later, Maggie returns to the house to restore it. Is the place really haunted by evil forces, as her father claimed? Or are the secrets more earthbound?

MEMOIR

About a place called home

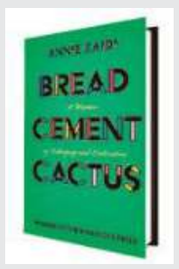
Exploring the idea of belonging, Annie Zaidi reflects on burning contemporary social issues like citizenship rights

Sudipta Datta

Why does where we live mean so much? In a country as diverse as ours, the first thing we often ask each other is 'where is home?' As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across India, and the government imposed an intense lockdown, thousands of people walked back to their 'native' places many miles away from the cities where they had been working. To explore the idea of home and belonging and answer the question – 'Is there still no place like home?' – journalist and fiction writer Annie Zaidi wrote a 3,000 word essay, winning the Nine Dots Prize in the process, before expanding it to a book, *Bread, Cement, Cactus: A Memoir of Belonging and Dislocation*.

A million anxieties

Once at a literary festival Zaidi found herself at a stall selling posters and a line from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* caught her attention, albeit written in Urdu "with its curlicue graces": A person doesn't belong to a place until someone beloved is buried there. Though her family hails from north India, the notion of belonging was always a fraught question for Zaidi, because she had lived at many places. This is true of so many other Indians, migrants all, whose janmabhoomi (place of birth) and karmabhoomi (workplace) are often different. Zaidi works in Mumbai, a migrant hub, and is anxious about many things, from the National Register of Citizens, land rights, campus violence to the rise of Hindutva and the end of liberalism.



Bread, Cement, Cactus: A Memoir of Belonging and Dislocation
Annie Zaidi
Cambridge University Press
₹237 (Kindle price)

The first three words of the title tie her to a remote industrial township in Rajasthan, JK Puram, flanked by the Aravalli hills and a cement factory, where her mother shifted with her two children to put bread on the table after quitting a bad marriage. The wonderful illustrations accompanying the book are by her mother. For Zaidi, one of the first memories of that place is cactus – there was enough around to suggest a desert and be associated with thorny memories. She heard stories about the Bhils who lived in the hills beyond and could snatch valuables from children. Twenty years later, she returned to JK Puram and looked at it with "grown-up eyes", and understood who the outsiders/usurpers really were and what happened to the original inhabitants and their land.

Bias in everyday life

Zaidi is keen to tell the stories of people who lose power, and then have to give up ground. The migrants who live on the margins; the Adivasis, who "displaced often, end up in cities where they are reduced to penury and homelessness"; and minorities, including Muslims who face bias in everyday life.

So, this safe place called home, does it exist? For her, a home is where she wants to return to, the heart being a compass. Sometimes, she thinks of home as morning mist, wispy and beyond her grasp.

Though the world around us may change, "something of home remains within." She ends on a beautiful note: "This too is a way to define home – as that which we have lived and that which will not leave us: the love that will not quit on us, our social habits, our sources of self-esteem, hunger, shame, genes, fragments of solidarity, refuge, and undisturbed rest."

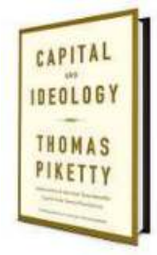
SOCIETY

Inequality and redistribution

In his new book, Thomas Piketty explains why human societies have always been unequal and points out that the need of the hour is a politics of social justice

G. Sampath

In his bestselling opus *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), French economist Thomas Piketty argued that capitalism necessarily increases inequality, and unless this tendency is checked by a welfarist state, rising inequalities of wealth and income would lead to social instability. His latest work *Capital and Ideology* is an ambitious sequel that explores the history of inequality with the objective of answering three questions: how have societies justified inequality to themselves, what lessons can we draw from this history, and how do we apply these lessons in the political struggle for a more just society?



Capital and Ideology
Thomas Piketty
Translated by Arthur Goldhammer
HUP/HarperCollins
₹2,499

At nearly 1,100 pages, *Capital and Ideology* is a monumental work of interdisciplinary scholarship. It straddles history, economics, political geography, sociology, electoral analysis, anthropology, and even literature. Piketty's thesis rests on a couple of self-evident truths: human societies have always been unequal, though in varying degrees; all unequal societies, to be sustainable, need a justification of this inequality. This justification is what Piketty terms "ideology".

He describes six kinds of ideologies as having played a dominant role in history: proprietarian (private property is sacred), social-democratic, communist, trifunctional, slaveist, and colonialist ideologies. Among these, the most long-lasting has been the trifunctional society. Most pre-modern societies were trifunctional. They consisted of two elite classes that jostled for supremacy – the clergy and the nobility – and a third set subservient to the dual elite, the workers.

Unfettered capitalism

Piketty documents how colonial expansion, industrial revolution, and the rise of capitalism in Europe changed trifunctional societies (where the propertied elites exercised juridical power over the labouring masses) into proprietarian ones, where the elites ceded their juridical powers to the State in exchange for guaranteed protection of their property. Contradicting the claims of Hayekian market fundamentalists, Piketty shows, through page after page of charts, graphs and histograms, how unfettered capitalism in 19th century Europe led to levels of inequality not seen anywhere except in quasi-slave societies. Societies built on such extreme inequality were bound to collapse, and they did, with the two World Wars.

However, the three decades after World War II saw the greatest reduction in inequality in recent history. And then, from the 1980s onward, inequality began to increase again. How do we understand these trends?

Death of the welfare state

Piketty answers this question by linking the shifts in income distribution to the prevailing ideology regarding inequality, which invariably determines public policy. He argues that the steady decrease in inequality during the 1950s-80s – a time when the idea of the welfare state was hegemonic – was the result of redistributive policies such as progressive taxation. The collapse of Soviet communism and the conservative revolution during the Thatcher and Reagan era inaugurated the simultaneous dismantling of both the welfare state and the ideological hegemony of social democratic politics.

Much of the blame for this collapse of welfarism, according to Piketty, lies with the social democratic parties themselves (in India, that would primarily be the Congress), who not only failed to challenge the revival of "neo-proprietarian" ideology, but proactively implemented regressive policies derived from it. By neo-proprietarianism, Piketty means not only the sacralisation of private property, but the relentless extension of legal infrastructure aimed at instituting private property regimes in every domain of human activity.

Piketty argues that the disappearance of redistributive politics is at the root of the resurgence of identitarian politics all over the world. With redistribution off the agenda, people's anxieties are channelled towards issues of identity and borders - be it the anti-immigrant politics of Europe and the U.S. or the majoritarian politics in India that seeks to redraw the 'internal borders' of the national community on the basis of religious identity.

Innovative proposals

Hence, a politics geared towards reducing inequality is vital on two grounds: social justice, since a more equal society is also a more just society; and social stability, for identitarian cleavages can only be countered through a politics of socio-economic inclusion. Piketty offers several innovative proposals for a new redistributive politics – from capping large-shareholder voting rights and a "universal capital endowment" to forms of social federalism where fiscal governance structures at the trans-national level help curb tax evasion by national elites.

For far too long, developmental economics has focussed exclusively on poverty alleviation. But poverty is only a symptom. Its cause is multidimensional, structural inequality, a phenomenon that doesn't seem to concern economists too much. As Piketty puts it, "Some of today's democratic disarray stems from the fact that, insofar as the civic and political sphere is concerned, economics has cut itself free from the other social sciences."

The singular value of this book may well be its power to revive research and activism that re-embed economic problems in a social and civic substrate.

All for one
People's anxieties are channelled towards issues of identity and borders. ▪ AFP

POLITICS

Looking back at Emergency and a turning point in the Congress

A historian argues that during the Indira Gandhi years, the party witnessed a downfall of the hegemony it had maintained after the formation of the Indian republic

Janam Mukherjee

In *The Paradox of Populism: The Indira Gandhi Years, 1966-1977*, historian Suhit K. Sen traces the downfall of the hegemony that the Congress party system had maintained in the decade after the formation of the Indian republic. The consensus that had operated under Prime Minster Jawaharlal Nehru began breaking down, Sen argues, as early as 1962, following the Indo-China war. Tension between the Congress organisation and its elected governing core mounted in subsequent years, such that by the time of Indira Gandhi's installation in 1966, the rift had widened to the extent that a split in the party, which eventually came in 1969, was almost inevitable.

Sen outlines the dysfunction that a lack of consensus fostered in terms of weakened institutional cohesion and failures in policy implementation, which Mrs. Gandhi's electoral victory in 1967 did little to mitigate.

Lack of consensus

With the atrophy of consensus also came a shift away from Nehruvian socialism, leaving Mrs. Gandhi walking a tightrope between polarised wings of the party. In this context, Sen writes, Mrs. Gandhi "increasingly asserted the autonomy of the ministerial wing in running the government;" which necessitated a considerable amount of horse-trading with both left and right factions, as well as with party bosses at the organisational level. Sen looks into the question of bank nationalisation, in particular, as a fulcrum around which these tortured negotiations revolved.

The factionalism, infighting and dysfunction at the Centre, Sen illustrates, was endemic to the Congress as a whole. In the second chapter of the book, Sen examines the byzantine inner-party fragmentation that characterised Congress politics in Bihar in the late 1960s and early 1970s. If there was a lack of coordination between party organisation and governance at the Centre, at the State level, things were worse.

Moreover, a lack of coordination between the States and the Centre led to a mutual attenuation of governing effectiveness at both levels. While in Bihar, Sen notes, dysfunction was at its most extreme, in many other States as well, factionalism, instability, failures of implementation and inter-personal rivalries had rendered consensus-building a distant dream. In Bihar, neither President's Rule, nor frenetic coalition-building could stem the tide of organisational disintegration. All across northern India, in fact, the once vaunted cohesion of the Congress was in shambles. By the end of the decade, party defections and "floor-crossing" exacerbated the slide into chaos. As Sen demonstrates convincingly, ideological considerations played much less of a role than is often imagined. Rather, it was political process that fostered polarisation, fragmentation and disunity.

In 1971-72, Mrs. Gandhi won a landslide electoral victory, but the devil was still in the detail of party fragmentation. Even widespread popular support could not reverse the centrifugal forces behind dysfunction.

Fragmented organisation

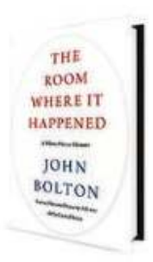
In chapter four, Sen examines the extremely deleterious impacts that this prevailing dysfunction at both the Centre and in the States had on food policy, and particularly food procurement. Far from being able to wield an autocratic diktat from Delhi, considerations of food policy were again fraught with contingency and a decided lack of federal coordination. Emergency, when it came on June 24, 1975, then, Sen argues, should not be understood as the culmination of Indira Gandhi's authoritarian personal trajectory, but rather as the end result of her failure to translate her mandate into effective governance based on organisational consensus.

Emergency, Sen argues, was a much more radical departure from the playbook of Gandhi's politics than is often assumed. In this sense, Sen seeks to highlight process above personality. It is most often due to policy failure, dysfunction and disunity that authoritarianism arises. In *The Paradox of Populism*, Sen's use of extensive archival material and intricate analysis is an important contribution to the study of modern political processes, a foundational work on the Indira Gandhi years, in particular.

The reviewer is Associate Professor of History, Ryerson University, Toronto.

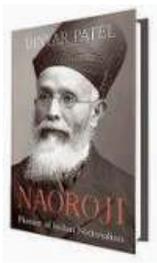
The Paradox of Populism: The Indira Gandhi Years, 1966-1977
Suhit K. Sen
Primus Books
₹995

The Room Where it Happened
John Bolton
Simon & Schuster
₹568 (Kindle price)
As President Trump's National Security Adviser, John Bolton spent many of his 453 days in the room where it happened. The result is a White House memoir that is a substantial account of the Trump Administration, and one of the few to date by a top-level official.



The COVID-19 Catastrophe: What's Gone Wrong and How to Stop it Happening Again
Richard Horton
Polity Press
₹1,178
The editor of the medical journal, *The Lancet*, takes stock of the pandemic, and says "missed opportunities and appalling misjudgements" are leading to avoidable deaths of people.

Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism
Dinyar Patel
Harvard University Press/HarperCollins
₹699
Dadabhai Naoroji, the 19th century activist who founded the Indian National Congress, was the first British MP of Indian origin, and inspired Gandhi and Nehru. The biographer says Naoroji put Indian politics in touch with the wider world.

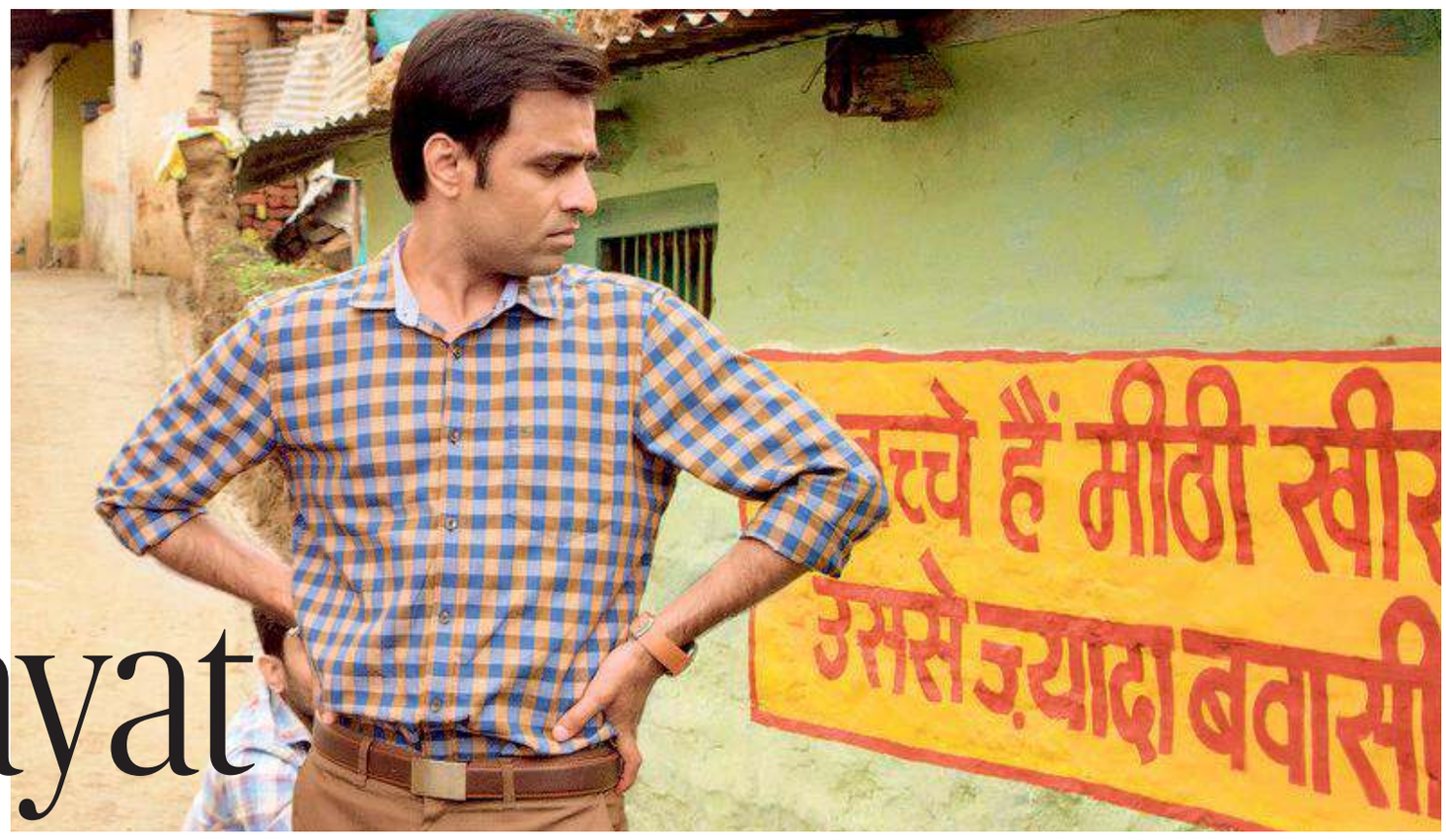


The King and the People
Abhishek Kaicker
Oxford University Press
₹960 (Kindle price)
This volume is an exploration of the relationship between the Mughal emperor and his subjects in the empire's capital, Shahjahanabad (Delhi). By placing ordinary people at the centre, it offers fresh perspectives on imperial sovereignty and everyday politics.

ON STREAM

Web series *Panchayat* is located somewhere between Ambedkar's 'dens of vice' and Gandhi's 'heart of India', and gives a glimpse of the world our migrant workers were trekking towards

Panacea in a panchayat



Mukulika Banerjee

The makers of the recent web series *Panchayat* could not have anticipated the pandemic, but the timing of its release could not have been more serendipitous. It is the story of an Indian village where a young man from the city is like a fish out of water.

In a mirror image, as the show launched, urban Indians were also confronted with the sight of millions of their compatriots leaving cities to return to their villages. They left not because they wanted to, but because the unplanned lockdown revealed the faultlines of their precarious existence – their daily wages stopped overnight, their meagre savings evaporated within days, and their employers and even the government were seemingly not much concerned whether they lived or died. Not only did the chance of a better life seem no longer possible, the lack of concern or support made them feel unwanted.

Living it

The only option then was to leave this unfeeling universe and head back to the places they knew were poor and prejudiced but where people cared. As they left, urban Indians responded with bemusement. It was as if they were startled by the sight of their fellow citizens, normally hidden away in cramped slums and under plastic sheets, on highways and railway stations. There was little they could draw on to imagine what life in these villages must be like.

Recent cinematic representations of rural India have been awash with blood and caste politics, confirming Ambedkar's famous characterisation of villages as 'dens of vice'. On the other hand, Gandhian characterisations of villages as the real heart of India have always been met with scepticism by dynamic urban Indians. The truth is, recent films and plays have rarely been set in rural India; the villager has simply vanished from national popular culture and even our stalwarts who wrote so eloquently for and against villages, had scarcely lived in one themselves. *Panchayat* took us right inside one.

Reassuringly nondescript Stills from the web series.
▪ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The audience encounters the village through a young, urban, male gaze as it did in the much-loved novel from the 60s by Srilal Shukla, *Raag Darbaari*, which was also set in Uttar Pradesh

Five stars

Reassuringly nondescript, its cluster of buildings, trees and water tank sit on the vast dusty Gangetic plain alongside thousands of others. The audience encounters the village through a young, urban, male gaze as it did in the much-loved novel from the 60s by Srilal Shukla, *Raag Darbaari*, which was also set in Uttar Pradesh. The Panchayat Secretary's job is available to anybody who is a graduate and willing to conduct the business of government at this lowly level, at a commensurately lowly salary, and thereby open to outsiders.

But governance at this level remains opaque to most urban Indians. The Panchayat, drawn from the concept of an assembly of five (*paanch*), is represented here by five key characters – the urban Panchayat Secretary, his assistant, the Pradhan, her husband and the Deputy Pradhan. Together, they represent Indian democracy as it functions at the most local level, an arm of representation and government that did not exist when Shukla wrote his novel, but a need for which its grim reality anticipated. *Panchayat* aired in April and painted a picture of village administration just as it also became evident to everyone reading the news that it is good governance at this level that is key to meeting challenges like the pandemic.

The magic of the show lies in the dynamics between these five characters and by the end of each episode, the viewer, like the newly appointed Panchayat Secretary from the city, is able to recognise that the village may not be such a bad place after all. While people still eat petha rather than biscuits, mistake computer monitors for TVs, and are willing to believe in ghosts, the village has people who help each other out, forgive failings and who are willing to forego their own convenience and expectations. The young man has only to blurt out how lonely he is to find his newfound friends arrive with beer and snacks. In each encounter, the contrast between the restless young man from the city for whom this job is the equivalent of failure and the village that is willing to embrace him is stark.

Not a paradise

In the last episode of the series, much drama ensues over the celebration of Republic Day. But as with problems everywhere, solutions are inevitably found, with everybody giving way for the sake of rubbing along. Every such encounter weakens the city dweller's disgust for the village and softens his self-loathing at failing to secure an urban job.

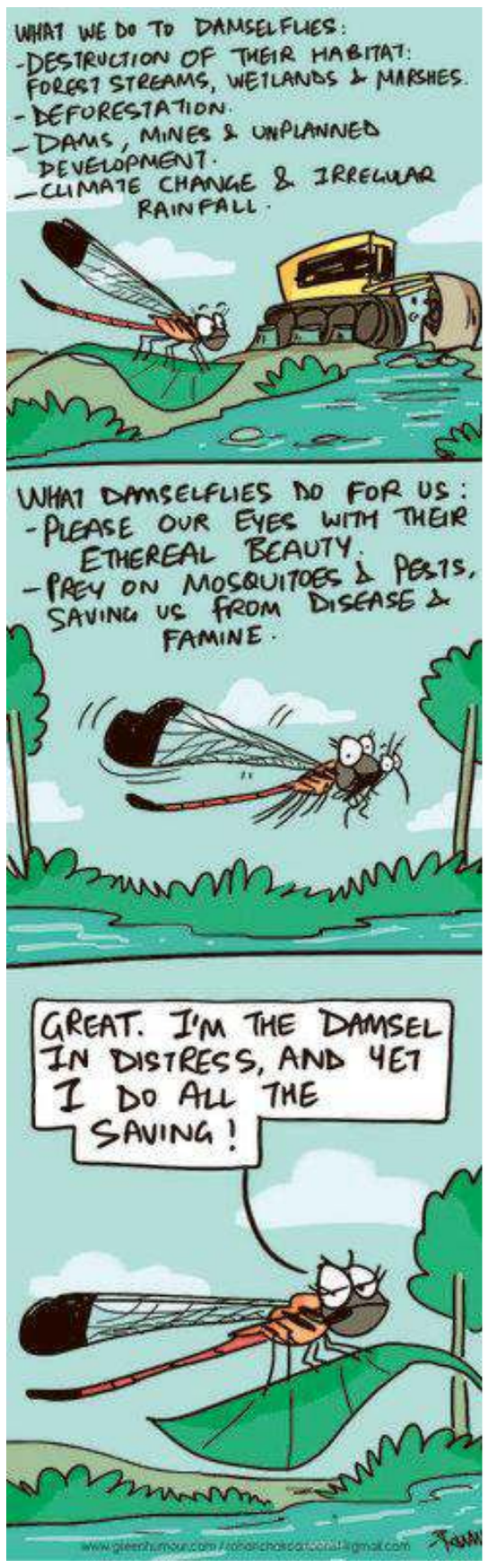
While this may seem like a bit of a bucolic paradise, we can also see it isn't one. Water still has to be pumped out laboriously, men do not have jobs, women are illiterate, people have children they cannot feed, caste still matters and petty rivalries abound. The message however is that if people are inventive and willing to work together for a common good, in the spirit of what sociologist Ashis Nandy called an 'alternative cosmopolitanism', much good can be achieved. *Panchayat* invites us to look beyond the deprivation and prejudice that we know exist in villages to examine its positive attributes, much as we do with cities.

So, as we watched workers walk away from India's cities, risking life and limb to get to their villages, *Panchayat* might help us understand their motivations a little better. Perhaps it was humanity that they looked forward to when they got home, a humanity that the city had failed to display. In their minds, the village was a place where they were not just a statistic and where people knew their names even if it was stigmatised by caste, and where their presence, thoughts and actions counted for something.

For they knew, as we do now, that the village can be a place of solidarity and care, where no one dies alone, and that alone can redeem the most curmudgeonly sceptic.

The writer is Director, LSE South Asia Centre, and Associate Professor of Anthropology at London School of Economics and Political Science.

GREEN HUMOUR BY ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY



PASSING BITE

Books in a bottle

Books and their special smells might become a thing of nostalgia after the COVID-19 rupture

▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

I read recently that after this COVID-19 rupture, many things will move forever into the realm of nostalgia. This got me thinking about objects, environments and experiences that people of my generation or older, and of similar background, will never again be able to access except as memories. Lists cascaded in my head, different categories of lost things. Two suspects kept being caught together in the roving searchlight of recall: smell and books. We know from Proust and others how a smell can take you straight back to childhood, just as we know from reading Kandinsky about the deep emotional effect colours have on our early minds. Books come a bit later, imprinted on our mental hard drives only if and after we start reading. The marriage of the two, the object of the book and its smell, also perhaps begins to register around the same time.

I became aware of the different smells of books after I joined a lending library attached to one of Calcutta's big 'English' bookstores. You passed through the store and entered a low-ceilinged cave at the end; here, crowded on shelves were books of all sorts, mostly published in England, some in America, for the most part fiction.

The librarian was a crotchety old Parsi Kaka who would snarl in a low voice at everyone save those who happened to be young and female, in which case he would simper and smarm and take simply years to register the names of the three books the girl was trying to borrow. Waiting in the queue, if you showed the slightest impatience at Kaka's laborious flirtations your borrowing life would suddenly become very difficult. All the while you were in Kaka's domain you breathed in not just his cigarettes (what was air-conditioning for, after all?) and the spores of his unwaveringly age-inappropriate heteronormative enthusiasms, but also the waft from the bound volumes, some of them published almost at the beginning of the century.

That sexy smell

I was just starting to become entrapped in the business of reading, and so everything about a book was fascinating – the old cover design under the scratched and dented lamination, the insides of the cover, sometimes with a map or Latin inscription, the tiny publishing date, the binding, the typeface, the illustrations, everything. Sometimes I'd borrow a book just because I liked the way it looked and Kaka would sneer and grimace while signing it out, "What do *you* want with this, you boy?" I just wanted to hold the thing, open it properly and look at it. I now suspect I also wanted to see if it smelt it slightly different from the Enid Blytons, Billy Bunters and Biggles that were my staple.

As I turned the corner of age 10 and sidled into what one would now call pre-teen, I began to move from British children's books to more contemporary thrillers, such as Irving Wallace, Helen MacInnes, Ian Fleming, Alistair Maclean and John Creasey. These were published more recently and many were paperbacks. The smell that came through the lamination was, I noted, entirely different, somehow less iodinous, and one I began to associate with modern automatic pistols and general sexiness.

Sometimes I'd borrow a book just because I liked the way it looked and Kaka would sneer and grimace while signing it out, "What do *you* want with this, you boy?"

Gluey mystery

This awareness of book bouquets led to an awareness of the smells of other books as well. School textbooks had varying odours, the foreign-printed ones carried one kind of threat, the locally printed ones, including the Hindi ones, had a totally different release. Special again were the Indian books printed on letterpress, but even here there were separations to be made: the Gujarati books, of which my house was full, had one kind of aroma; *Sahaj Path*, the classic Tagore and Nandalal Bose Bangla primer and various Bengali books and magazines were nasally identifiable as another specific group; the foreign art books, with copious picture plates, had their own gluey mystery; the propaganda magazines from the two big superpowers also gave off competing essences – *Span*, the official American organ in India, was glossy and smelled like refined chemicals whereas *Soviet Land*, the Russian counterpart, made one think of machinery clawing into chalk quarries.

When I went abroad, entering my college library in America for the first time I told myself, "Ah, this is where the books will smell like those foreign books in Kaka's lair." Except, of course, they didn't. The aroma of a late 70s' library in Vermont had no connection to the gammaxene incense waft of a late 60s' lending library in Calcutta. I never saw a Billy Bunter or Agatha Christie book in my college library, but had I come across one of them I'm sure the smell would have been completely different.

In this COVID-cracked moment people are urging others to find new professions, to 'become your own entrepreneur'. If there was some way I could bottle smells, I would launch a website called *Tome-Aromas.com* and market specific book wafts for people who miss that sort of thing.

Ruchir Joshi is a filmmaker and columnist

Notes from Hanoi

Raul Dias

▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

In the future, if pop culture historians were to ever dredge up the top social media trends that defined the COVID-19 worldwide lockdown, I can bet my last coffee bean that dalgona coffee would be right up there riding the crest. The creamy-headed beverage, itself jostling for space with everything from banana bread and bad home haircuts to auto-tuned renditions of *bella ciao*.

And while the genesis of dalgona coffee is (erroneously!) attributed to both a popular Korean caramel-coffee candy of the same name and to our very own, beaten to submission, desi *phheti hui* coffee, its true origins lie in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi in the guise of *ca phe trung*. Something I discovered on a trip to Vietnam a year ago. This, back in the good old days when I believed social distancing to be my private idiosyncrasy and when 'Corona' was still just another brand of beer!

Egged On

Lending a certain gravitas to the "necessity is the mother of invention" proverb, dalgona coffee's egg-enriched predecessor *ca phe trung* was the canny invention of a Hanoian barista named Nguyen Van Giang in 1946 at his coffee shop called Café Giang.

Relishing the thick, creamy and surprisingly non-eggy tasting hot coffee, seated in the legendary café perched along Hanoi's 'Coffee Street' aka Trieu Viet Vuong in the historic Hai Ba Trung district, I got a crash course in all things *ca phe trung*, thanks to the chatty manager.

Apparently, a post WWII shortage of tinned condensed milk that went into the then-popular iced *ca pe sua da*, steered Giang in the direction of stiffly beaten egg yolks to provide a creamy heft and rich taste to the coffee beverage that he decided to serve hot. Thus, imbuing his brand-new coffee concoction with a sort of rich, Tiramisu-esque texture and taste.

But unlike dalgona that has just the creamy layer sitting atop hot or cold milk, *ca phe trung* has a thick body all the way through, making it more of a hybrid hot dessert than drink. One that is best tackled with a spoon, not sipped.

Back story

Akin to the coffee beverage version of a set of nesting Russian dolls, I was soon to learn that there was yet another story within the story related to how Vietnam's obsession with condensed milk – both as the dairy and sweetener component – in regards to its coffee drinking experience came about. And it was the French colonialists that set the course.

After producing the easy to cultivate robusta variety of coffee beans in Da Lat in climatically suitable central Vietnam in the early 1900s, the French realised that milk was hard to come by. This was because milk and other dairy products had never been a part of the Vietnamese diet. And are still not, to this day.

There is no 'grab-and-go' coffee shop concept here. People prefer to sit down at cafés and have leisurely, conversation-enhanced coffee drinking sessions

To fill in this deficit, the French started to import tinned condensed milk, which was first used in traditional French coffee preparations like *café au lait* and then in the more localised Vietnamese iterations that sprung forth.

Chain reaction

Over my one week in the country, as I dove further into Vietnam's coffee culture, I soon came to some interesting realisations. There is no 'grab-and-go' coffee shop concept here. People prefer to sit down at cafés and have leisurely, conversation-enhanced coffee drinking sessions.

Despite being second only to the Brazilians in terms of coffee bean (both arabica and robusta) exports at an annual turnover of about $3.10 billion, the Vietnamese prefer the sharper, bitter flavour and higher caffeine content of the less popular robusta coffee beans for their personal consumption.

And this is why the big international coffee chains like Starbucks and Gloria Jean's Coffee – both of whom primarily use the milder arabica beans in their beverages – have failed miserably in the local market that is dominated by cheaper, more artisanal cafés.

And why not? It is in places like these, literally on every street corner in the big cities and small towns of Vietnam, that one can get a taste of even more experimental versions of coffee beverages. From a yogurt coffee to a hipster-chic avocado and banana smoothie-meets-frappe called *sinh to ca phe chuoi bo*, the variety on offer boggles the mind. Maybe they'll even have a dalgona someday. If not already.

The Mumbai-based writer and restaurant reviewer is passionate about food, travel and luxury, not necessarily in that order.

LETTER FROM A CONCERNED READER

Not so lucky

Respected Madam/Sir,

How are you? Any health emergency or everything is ok?

Shall I put one philosophy? Please listen carefully. Sometimes good luck is bad luck. Sometimes bad luck is good luck. This is the life.

Maybe you are thinking ok, old man has started giving lecture from first paragraph of letter itself. Non-stop lecture. Morning to evening Mathrubootham is giving lecture only as if life is Brilliant Tutorials.

Madam/ Sir, you mind it. In this country actually doing work means useless. Giving lecture means you can become prime minister also. People will say aha oho look at beautiful lecture, anyone has given such lecture before? Work and all is nothing compared to lecture. Come let us beat bucket with spoon.

So you please don't give lecture about lecture okay? Okay.

Yesterday I decided suddenly to watch DVD of superhit film *Escape to Victory*. Have you seen? If you have not please immediately submit resignation letter from your esteemed newspaper and procure one DVD. But where is my DVD? Is it under TV? No. Is it inside bookshelf? No chance. Is it inside box in almirah? Never. So where is it?

I am looking and looking and looking and looking, not even dust of the DVD is available anywhere. But then suddenly one good luck happened. Inside one drawer in the dining room what did I discover? One birthday present from last year for Mrs. Mathrubootham. Totally forgotten. It is simply sitting inside the drawer. What is the gift?

It is one ₹5,000 gift voucher for Amazon website. Madam/ Sir, just imagine the excitement going through the mind of Mathrubootham. Too much excitement. Immediately I ran to Mrs. Mathrubootham and said, "Kamalam Eureka! Look at this gift voucher. What shall we purchase from Amazon? I am not able to control only."

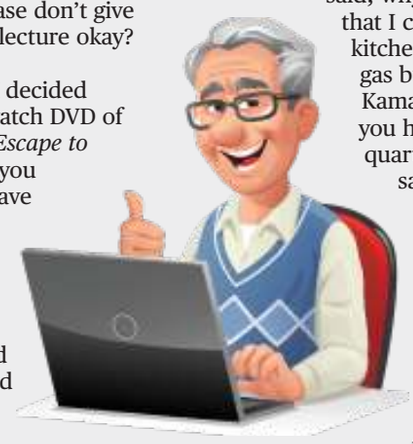
First she said, "Old man, this is very mysterious. Who is sending this voucher?"

I said, "Kamalam when mango is so delicious why you are asking for name and address and PAN Card and Aadhaar Card of mango tree? Nonsense."

She said, "Ok this is wonderful news. Let us do one thing. Have you seen our vacuum cleaner? It is model from Indira Gandhi period. Shall we buy one new one? New model is less than ₹10,000."

I said, "Kamalam Kamalam please, this is more boring than Carnatic music concert. Think some exciting things no? Shall we purchase new DVD player? New Alexa? New mobile phone? New wireless headphone for watching TV?"

She said, "First one request, please give me your purse." I said, why? She said, so that I can take it to kitchen and put it on gas burner. I said, Kamalam, whether you have put one quarter brandy? She said, no, no, I only wanted to help you waste money nonstop.



▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Then what happened for next 20 minutes? Nonstop fighting. I said, novels? She said, no. She said, new table lamp? I said, no. I said, new mixie for making juice type items? She said, no. She said, new wifi router, old one is *mannangkatti*. I said, never.

And then finally we decided no more fights. I will use ₹2,500, she will use ₹2,500. And then we went to the computer, and carefully put all details and then website is saying hahahaha *muttaal* fellows gift card is expired last month itself hahaha.

Card is gone. Fight is gone. Argument is gone. Life is back to normal.

That is why I said Madam/Sir. Sometimes good luck is bad. And sometimes bad luck is good.

Yours in exasperation,
J. Mathrubootham

GOREN BRIDGE

Safe extraction

East-West vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

	NORTH ♠ J 3 2 ♡ A ◇ A K Q 9 7 ♣ A K Q 2	
WEST ♠ 7 ♡ Q 8 7 6 5 ◇ J 8 6 5 3 ♣ 10 9		EAST ♠ K 10 8 6 ♡ J 10 9 3 ◇ 10 ♣ 8 6 5 4
	SOUTH ♠ A Q 9 5 4 ♡ K 4 2 ◇ 4 2 ♣ J 7 3	

The bidding:

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

Opening lead: 10 of ♣

We like South's control bid of four hearts, promising that he did not have two quick losers in hearts. Blackwood instead would have been a mistake. South would not have known what to do after a two-ace response.

South won the opening club lead with dummy's ace. There was some chance for a defensive ruff, probably in clubs, so South went after trumps right away. He led a spade to his ace and another spade to dummy's jack. This revealed the trump position, which South could have handled easily, but East ducked the jack of spades! The reason why became apparent when South led dummy's last trump. East won with his king and led the 10 of diamonds. What now?

South had to find a way back to his hand so he could draw the last trump. Still fearing a possible club ruff, he tried to cash the king of diamonds. East ruffed this for down one. Besides guessing to lead a club rather than a diamond, was there anything South could have done?

Yes! South should have cashed the ace of hearts and one high diamond before leading the last trump from dummy. He would then be in the driver's seat when East won his king of spades. South could win a heart or a club from East in his hand and draw the last trump. Should East lead a diamond, instead, South could then safely ruff a third diamond to get back to his hand.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

'The human voice is the first and most natural musical instrument, also the most emotional'

Berty Ashley

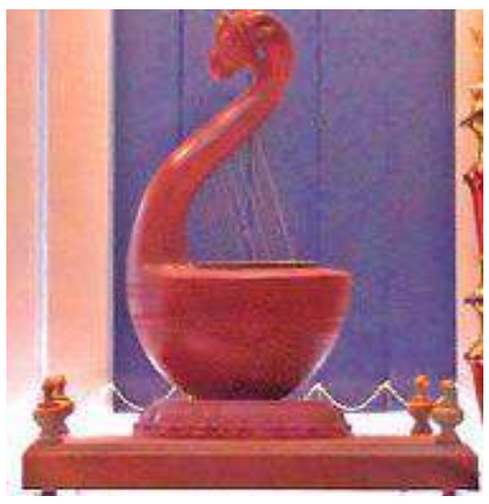
1 On June 28, 1846, Belgian musician Adolphe __ obtained his patent for a new musical instrument he had invented. Though these instruments are made of brass, they are categorised as woodwind instruments as sound is produced by an oscillating reed rather than lips vibrating in a mouthpiece cup. The player controls the pitch by covering different holes by pressing keys. What is this instrument you'd hear in any smooth jazz or instrumental romantic cover? What is Adolphe's full name?

2 This ancient musical instrument has been used to create divine sounding music for more than 6000 years. There has been some variant of it in every ancient culture, from the 'yazh' in ancient Tamil civilisation to the lyre in ancient Greece. Generally it is a frame which has string made of catgut but nowadays nylon or metal. What instrument is this that cartoon watching kids usually associate with angels?

3 This stringed instrument has an Italian name that refers to the fact it is a smaller version of another instrument that looks like an 'almond'. It commonly has eight strings bunched up in pairs and is featured prominently in European classical music. It became popular in India, thanks to classical musician and child prodigy Uppalapu Srinivas. What instrument is this you might have heard and seen Shashi Kapoor play in *Tum Bin Jaun Kaha*?

4 The oldest version of this instrument can be traced back to Greece in 3rd century BC. The driving force behind the music in this usually massive instrument is wind. The smallest version usually has about 12 pipes going all the way up to one particular instrument in New Jersey which has more than 33,000 pipes and weighs 150 tonnes. These pipes have 'stops' on them which reduce the volume, and gives rise to the phrase 'pulling out all the stops'. This can result in an earsplitting 130 Db sound. What grand instrument is this you'd mostly see in cathedrals?

5 The name of this beautiful instrument comes from the latter part of the Italian term meaning 'little violone'. It is one of the largest stringed instruments to be played with a bow and is used to produce the low end bass sounds in western classical music. Put to amazing use by Bach, this instrument is an integral member of all classical music. What instrument is this that players such as Yo-Yo Ma and Jacqueline du Pré have amazing videos of on Youtube?



Strings of melody A yazh at a museum in Tamil Nadu. ▪ WIKI COMMONS

6 The name of this western instrument comes from the German term for 'a concord of sounds' and is usually slung around the shoulder and played with both hands. Another version of this is kept on the ground and one hand is used to pump air in to the reeds. This gets its name from the Latin word meaning 'joining or concord'. Both these instruments are quite popular in the Indian subcontinent movie music scene. What are these instruments?

7 This instrument has two names. The first comes the Latin term for 'musical' and the latter comes from the fact that you play it by blowing into it. It is usually a small flat instrument that is tuned to individual pitches. R.D. Burman was an expert player and used it to great effect for a sequence in *Ziddi* where he mimics the sounds of a train and an ensuing chase. What are the two names of this instrument?

8 This instrument is said to have originated from the Caribbean and its name is supposed to have come from the Bantu word for an African stringed instrument. The main design of this instrument is the thin membrane stretched over a frame which forms a resonator giving this instrument its characteristic twangy sound. What instrument is this that caught the fancy of 90's kids when the song 'Cotton eye Joe' by Rednex hit MTV?

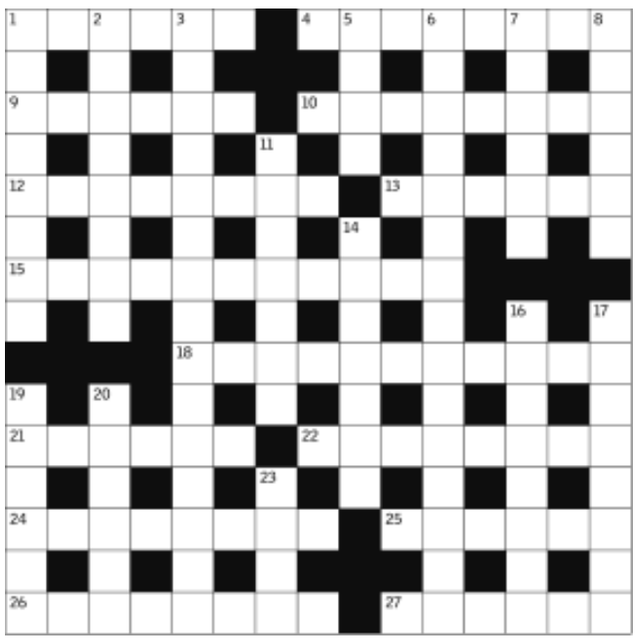
9 This is a percussion instrument characterised by small metal jingles called 'zills', which are attached to the drum head. This instrument is usually played by either shaking the hand or tapping it against the palm. You can see them being played in many Bollywood movies including memorably in 'Yamma Yamma' from *Shaan* where the performers show off their percussion skills to an Indian version of Ernst Stavro Blofeld. What instrument is this?

10 This is the lowest-pitched musical instrument in the brass family. Its name is the Latin word for 'trumpet' and first became part of the orchestra only recently in the 19th century. Its curvy build can trace its roots to the 'serpent', a snake-like shape, so that players had access to the holes. What instrument is this that composer John Williams puts to good use to introduce both sharks and spaceships in Spielberg movies?

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. Saxophone, Adolphe Sax
2. Harp
3. Mandolin
4. Pipe Organ
5. Cello
6. Accordion, Harmonium
7. Harmonica or Mouth Organ
8. Banjo
9. Tambourine
10. Tuba

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO.3106



Across

1 In conversation, nag perhaps is grating (6)
4 Soldier getting into old woman's starter of entrails, wanting seconds and offal dishes (8)
9 Stir an army, to some extent, somewhere in Albania (6)
10 Spooner's fervent penguin perhaps gets soy paste (4,4)
12 'A fancy ship'? That's a joke (3-5)
13 Lousy fool about to show respect? On the contrary (3-3)
15 You're telling me to wink and nod manically before Congress (4,1,4,2)
18 I'll eat gelato endlessly, voraciously (it's Italian fare) (11)
21 Mostly regressive rule suppressing the theologian (6)
22 Injured veteran English respect (8)
24 A German refused caffeinated concoction: 'This is not skinny' (3-5)
25 Eat too much, and sulk about hollow icing (3,3)
26 Seek damages about Scandinavians becoming members of African Union (8)
27 Slider prepared for lazy folk (6)

Down

1 Drink offering cold comfort? (3,5)
2 One wearing green with silver trim, going well together (8)
3 Thin, asinine grin displayed in Hollywood musical (6,2,3,4)
5 Primarily: 'Agreed! Manifestly! Endorsed! Naturally!' (4)
6 We don't weigh thin comic for Hollywood drama (4,4,3,4)
7 He painted horses, mostly fat, on a ship (6)
8 Some caused a terrifying calm (6)
11 Before start of Epsom, support horse that's old (13-19 years) (7)
14 Expected to be amazed when taking in little island (7)
16 Poultry served in beer for hoodlum (2,6)
17 Reminders of *monsieur* being passionate, stone me! (8)
19 Isn't honest with banks (6)
20 Said 'Full!' having swallowed a bit of tomato (6)
23 Goes with 'Look up!' (4)

Solution No. 3105

▪ ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

60 MINUTES WITH AMAN WADUD

'When you can't find foreigners, you manufacture them'

The Assam-based human rights lawyer decries the "decades of lies" around the issue of illegal migration

Rahul Karmakar

- B.A.L.L.B. from Bangalore University
- Practised at the Supreme Court before moving to Guwahati in 2013
- Lectured at Harvard, Yale and Columbia Law Schools on citizenship laws
- Deposed before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its hearing on citizenship

Aman Wadud, Guwahati-based human rights lawyer, has in six years fought more than 300 citizenship cases for people who have been declared foreigners in Assam. He has taken up most of these cases *pro bono*. Keen on removing the 'Bangladeshi' tag from Bengal-origin minorities, he has helped "manufactured foreigners" regain their Indian status.

While this has earned him respect within the legal fraternity, he has also been threatened with criminal cases and been told to back off. In this interview, the 34-year-old discusses the social stigma that minorities face, the iniquities of the legal process, and how he was drawn to the cause.

What made you take up law as a profession?

■ The trigger was a TV channel flashing the word 'Bangladeshi' while covering the 2008 communal riots in Udalguri. The scroll on the screen read "Clash between Bangladeshis and tribals in Assam". I called up the TV channel from Bengaluru, where I was studying, and told them to prove those people were Bangladeshi or change the caption.

They soon changed it to 'Muslims', which was more acceptable, although not ideal. That made me change my mind too – from preparing to be a civil servant to becoming a lawyer.

When did the stereotyping of Bengal-origin Muslims hit you?

■ Goroimari, the village where I grew up, has a large Muslim population followed by Bengalis and Assamese Hindus. We never knew about illegal migration or foreigners or Bangladeshis. Cricket, the same thing that forged communal harmony among diverse communities across our rural landscape, ironically put up barriers when I moved to Guwahati for college. Being called 'Pakistan supporter' and 'Bangladeshi' because of my identity as a Bengali Muslim, despite our community's efforts over a century to adopt the Assamese language and assimilate, rankled.

Then came a series of riots and a community constantly branded as Bangladeshi because of a narrative built over the years, a narrative that painted Bengal-origin Muslims as aggressors, encroachers, settlers. I wanted this narrative changed.

Was the National Register of Citizens (NRC) an opportunity to change that narrative?

■ Unlike the national NRC being planned, I supported Assam's NRC. So did those who wanted to be rid of the stigma of being called a Bangladeshi in their own motherland. We wanted a free and fair NRC under the supervision of the Supreme Court because we believed it would bring out the truth. After the list came out on August 31, 2019, some people started saying the NRC was not acceptable.

Why, because 'only' 19 lakh (out of 3.3 crore applicants) were left out, that too with parents in, children out? Three of my cousins were left out of the list while my uncle and aunt are in. This, when our great-grandfather settled in Goroimari in 1890. This pointed to a design. Many Bengali Hindus were left out because their refugee certificates, which were admissible, were rejected. Those excluded will have to go to the Foreigners' Tribunal (FT) within 120 days of receiving notice from the NRC authority. If the FTs decide these cases judiciously, there will be less than one lakh people who will end up as declared foreigners (DFs). That will primarily be because of bad legal representation, since there are hardly any foreigners in Assam.

Wasn't the NRC demanded in the belief that Assam has at least four million 'Bangladeshis'?

■ Various imaginary figures have been thrown around. But what has become gospel is a false, bigoted report on illegal migration in Assam submitted by former Governor S.K. Sinha in 1998. The SC subsequently justified his document and it became gospel for the political narrative on illegal migration.

The report revived the illegal migration issue, which had been dead after the Assam Accord. It sells in politics; if you don't have anything better, rake it up. If there are illegal migrants, the government has completely failed to detect them. So illegal migrants have been manufactured by turning genuine Indians into "foreigners", destroying lives of mostly poor, illiterate people. I have not seen any foreigners, neither did my seniors who fought more than 3,000 cases.

How fair is the process of detecting illegal migrants?

■ The Border wing of the Assam Police and the Election Commission of India are set periodic targets. I have met investigating officers who confess that they were under pressure to detect between five and 20 per month. Each case referred to the FT has a column stating "country of origin". They name districts such as Mymensingh, Sylhet and Rangpur (all in Bangladesh) but the police station and village names are fictitious.

I have googled to find many of those names in Bihar and West Bengal. The entire process is bunkum because when you can't find foreigners, you manufacture them. FT members who fail to send a certain number of DFs to the detention centres are chucked out.

If the FTs decide these cases judiciously, there will be less than one lakh people who will end up as declared foreigners. That will primarily be because of bad legal representation, since there are hardly any foreigners in Assam

Most FTs were quite judicious before 2016 because there was no pressure on them. I don't disagree with the view that the FTs are violating the processes of fair trial. They should be allowed to act independently, as they decide the most important constitutional right to citizenship.

How justified are the detention centres?

■ The Centre has sought to establish detention centres across the country. Such centres with proper facilities and consular access are for foreigners who overstay their visa period. Every such foreigner is ultimately deported. But most of those in Assam's detention centres are DFs, so declared by the FTs for mere technical reasons.

Most of their parents and family members are Indian citizens. They cannot be deported to an alleged country of origin. In the last seven years, not more than five DFs have been deported. They can't be deported because their country of origin is India.

Many were indefinitely detained from 2010 and were released only after the Supreme Court ordered the release of anyone who had completed three years in detention. Following our petition in March, the SC reduced the detention period to two years, ensuring the release of more than 300 DFs. If deportation is not forseeable, detention for even two years is not reasonable. But the government is building an expensive, exclusive detention centre in Goalpara for 3,000 people.

Where is the issue of illegal migrants headed?

■ At some point in time, the government should be embarrassed about the handling of this issue that has killed 30 people in detention centres, separated mothers from children, sent fathers to their deaths still hoping to free their sons, and made Indian Army soldiers like Ajmal Hoque and Mohammad Sanaullah foreigners.

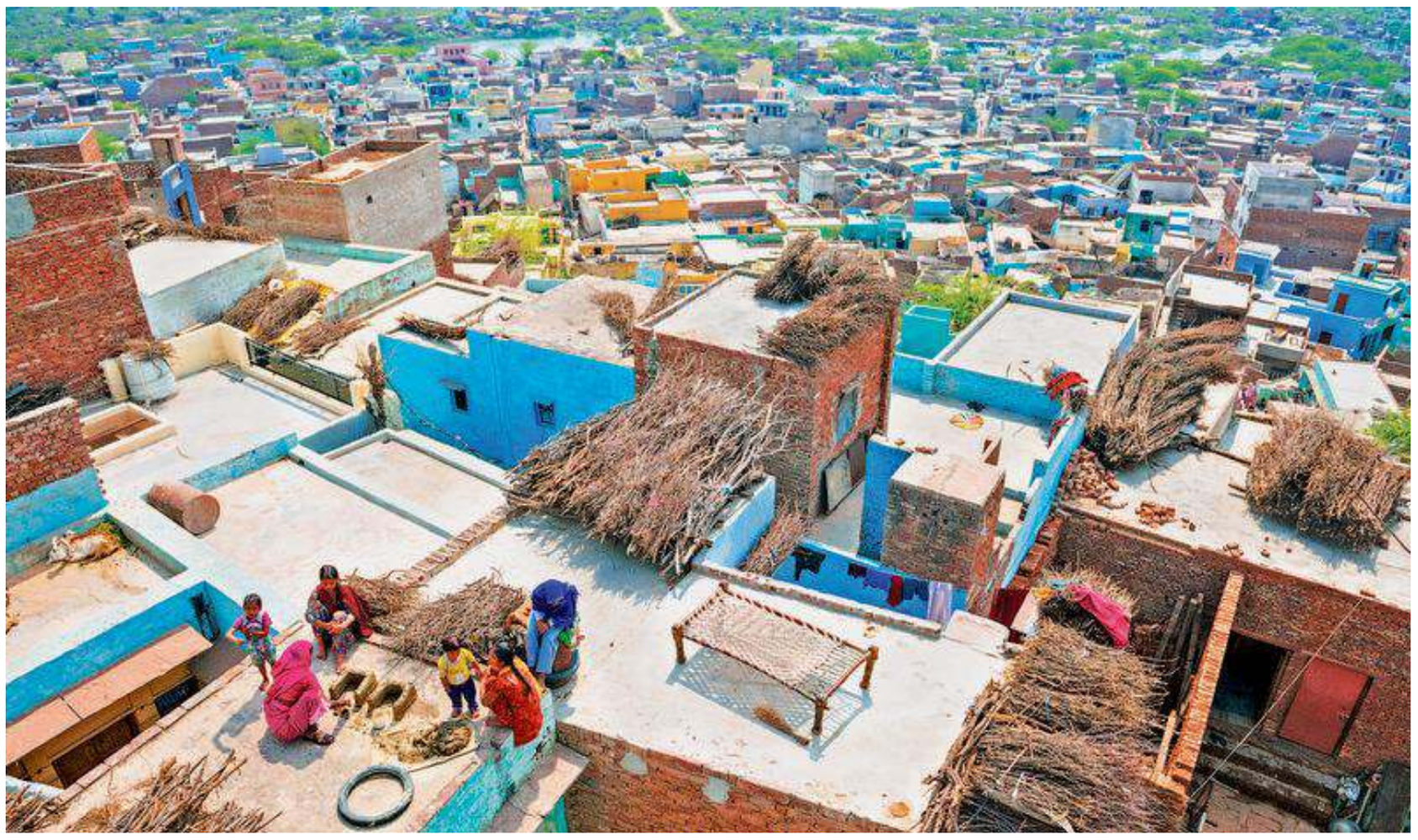
It is expected that those excluded by the NRC will be tried when normal life resumes after the COVID-19 lockdown. The excluded people will have to appeal before the FTs, which should be allowed to function independently without any pressure. The rule of law should not be subverted just because the results don't match decades of lies around the issue of illegal migration.

SUNDAY RECIPE

Aralu sandige

Ingredients
1/4 kg puffed paddy rice
125 gms sago
4-5 medium-sized onions or 200 gms white pumpkin
8-10 green chillies
Salt to taste

Method
1. Wash the puffed paddy rice and squeeze out the excess water, ensuring no husk is present.
2. Finely chop onions and green chillies. You can also use finely chopped white pumpkin instead of onions. Add this to the popped rice mix. Add salt.
3. Wash the sago pearls and boil with water till it gets a gruel-like form.
4. Now pour the gruel into the puffed paddy rice mix.
5. Mix well and divide into small portions.
6. Place on butter paper and allow to dry in the sun, turning over the sides till it is fully dry.
7. Heat oil and fry — a well-made aralu sandige will expand well to almost double the size. Enjoy with rice.



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NOSHTALGIA

Remembering the magic of deep-fried aralu sandige still brings a smile to my face

Huff, puff and crunch

Bindu Gopal Rao

Summer, my least favourite season, is winding to an end. Growing up in Hyderabad, it meant scorching hot days and sudden power cuts. However, the little house I grew up in was surrounded by greenery and had a small backyard open to the sky, where something I loved happened every summer. This was when my mother made aralu sandige, which is still my favourite vadam or fryums. Made with puffed paddy rice, sago, green chillies, salt and either onions or pumpkin, a heady aroma would fill the house as she started cooking the base porridge for the sandige.

As children, my sister and I would always eat some of the mushy gruel with utmost relish, and even break bits off the still-wet sandige when it was put out to dry. The unrelenting summer heat was conveniently forgotten in the excitement. The drying process took just a couple of days thanks to the bright sunlight, and then the sandiges made their way into the kitchen, to be deep-fried and land on our plates. The sight of the shrunken sandiges rising and expanding magically in the hot oil is still a vivid memory. There would be enough made to last a couple of months, and after that I would look forward to the next season's ritual.

This became a rarer occurrence when we shifted to an apartment in Secunderabad where space was limited, but a few years later we moved to Bengaluru, where many traditional stores used to stock sandige. I found out that not all sandiges expand and that many were quite flat – and not as tasty either. That is when I discovered an old traditional store in Basavanagudi that made some of the better tasting sandiges, and that's where I replenished my stock every summer. But I always felt that something was missing, and realised soon enough that it was the flavour and taste; of sandiges made at home years ago that still lingered in my mind.

Made with puffed paddy rice, sago, green chilies, salt and either onions or pumpkin, a heady aroma would fill the house as my mother started cooking the base porridge for the sandige

Revisiting roots

Fast forward to the summer of 2020 and the lockdown left me with enough time on my hands to revisit some of my culinary roots. I decided to make aralu sandige at home. My first challenge was to source the ingredients, especially the aralu or puffed paddy rice. Concerned that the project would derail even before it started, it was my mother who told me that some of the alternatives could be puffed rice (the sort used to make bhel puri) or even the staple avalakki (the paper version as opposed to the hard version) that was available at home.

However, I decided to stick to the original recipe and was lucky enough to find cleaned and de-husked puffed paddy at a store very close to my house. Thrilled, I headed home, where my mother helped make the gruel using the sago and puffed paddy with a helping of onions and green chillies. And soon the wafting aroma reignited childhood days. Of course, I had to immediately taste the gruel, and it instantly connected with the taste I had been missing all this while. While the mix turned out fine, the issue was how to dry it. We put out the small batch to dry in the balcony. It took more than three days, and as I was rather concerned that it would not dry completely, I used the microwave as well (putting them in to dry after the pre-heated mode). Three days later, the sandiges were ready to be fried. Hesitantly, I lowered one into the hot oil – and, magically, it expanded and the crunch from the puffed paddy and sweetness of the browned onion transported me to culinary heaven. I'd rediscovered that I could make what I loved after all, even if it did mean bending over backwards a bit.

The freelance writer and photographer from Bengaluru seeks offbeat experiences through travel.