

Magazine



LITERARY REVIEW

D.H. Lawrence was writing about the loneliness of the deracinated individual more than a century ago **p4**



WIDE ANGLE

Will the new guidelines make the Oscars better represent gender, race and sexual orientation? **p6**



BOOKEND

Podcast *Scrolls & Leaves* takes science, health and history beyond the dominant Western perspectives **p7**



BACK PAGE

Writer, poet, grassroots activist Trepan Singh Chauhan of Uttarakhand died last month **p8**

COVER

The big wage Gulf

Hundreds of Indian migrant workers in GCC countries have had to pack their bags and return home without months of salary owed to them **p3**



Breadwinners
Construction workers on a building site in Dubai, 2006. AP

last week



Kapila Vatsyayan no more

Arts scholar, institution builder, and founder of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Padma Vibhushan Kapila Vatsyayan passed away in New Delhi aged 91. Mentored by Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay and Rukmini Devi Arundale, Vatsyayan authored classics such as *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*, *The Square and the Circle of Indian Arts*, and *Bharata: The Natya Sastra*.



Invisible deaths

The Labour Ministry told Parliament that there was no data on the migrant workers who had lost jobs and lives during the lockdown, so the question of compensation "does not arise". This invited scathing attacks from the opposition. A database of migrant workers is supposed to be maintained under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, and activists have raised concerns over this.



Trials resume

Days after the Serum Institute of India stopped trials for the coronavirus vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University following a notice from the DCGI, the institute resumed them after it got a go-ahead. Phase 3 trials by AstraZeneca and Oxford University were suspended briefly after a volunteer in the U.K. developed transverse myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord.



No questions

In an unprecedented move that was sharply criticised, the Lok Sabha did away with Question Hour and private members' business for the current parliamentary session, citing extraordinary circumstances and curtailed sittings. Opposition MPs called it a violation of norms and an erosion of legislative oversight of the executive. Defence minister Rajnath Singh claimed it had already been discussed with opposition leaders.



Wildfire

As many as 28 major wildfires in California, exacerbated by high temperatures, high winds and lack of rain, killed 24 people and destroyed 4,200 structures. Since the beginning of the year, wildfires have burned over 3.2 million acres of land — larger than the State of Connecticut. So intense is the fire that smoke reached the skies of New York city and even Europe.



Continuity cabinet

Yoshihide Suga was formally elected Prime Minister of Japan after winning the race to become leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party following Shinzo Abe's exit. The 71-year-old, Abe's former chief cabinet secretary and long regarded as his right-hand man, indicated that he would pursue many of his predecessor's policies, as he put together a 'continuity cabinet', keeping roughly half the ministers in place.

Conspiracy theory

After arresting former JNU student leader Umar Khalid under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act for his alleged role in the Delhi riots, Delhi Police said it would confront him with 40 GB of data — 11 lakh pages — extracted from his phone. Khalid's arrest came a day after the police named several politicians and intellectuals as 'conspirators', including CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury.



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No nervous nineties for VETERAN DIPLOMATS

Here is a snapshot of a few former IFS officers who don't live in the past

K. Natwar Singh

People in their nineties are generally seized by a strange and nagging melancholy. Each new dawn is a blessing. The best is not to be. But a few of us do not brood. We have fond memories of our years in the IFS, but we don't live in the past.

Of the five, the oldest is V.M.M. Nair. He was born on October 8, 1919. He took degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. He joined the ICS in 1942 and was allotted the Bihar cadre. In August 1946, he was permanently seconded to the Indian Political Service, which was abolished in 1947. He was Under-secretary, External Affairs Department from September 1946 to September 1948.

Only M.K. Rasgotra could manage so mercurial, egoistical and brilliant a man like Krishna Menon

He was inducted into the newly formed Indian Foreign Service in 1947. I succeeded him as Ambassador to Poland in 1974. He retired in 1979. He lives in New Delhi.

Maharaja Krishna Rasgotra was born on September 11, 1924. He did his MA from Panjab University. He



Glory days K. Natwar Singh (right) with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Cuban President Fidel Castro at the Non-Aligned Summit in New Delhi on March 7, 1983. • THE HINDU ARCHIVES

was a tutor at the Government College, Lahore from 1944 to 1946, Head of the Department of English, S.A. College for Women, Sialkot, 1946, and Head of the Department of English, Arya College, Ludhiana, 1947. He was appointed to the Punjab Educational Service in March 1948 and as a lecturer in English Government College, Ludhiana in 1948. He was selected for the IFS through the UPSC competitive examination on September 27, 1949.

He served as First Secretary, Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations from 1958 to 1962. There he was attached to V.K. Krishna Menon, who was the leader of the Indian delegation to the annual ses-

sion of the UN General Assembly. Menon was temperamental, unpredictable, erratic, unbalanced, and a fine debater with spectacular success. He managed to get under the skin of not only Indian delegates but also other delegates to the UN, in particular the U.S. establishment. Menon had been High Commissioner of India to the U.K. from 1947 to 1952 and was largely responsible for India remaining a member of the Commonwealth.

Only M.K. Rasgotra could manage so mercurial, egoistical and brilliant a man. That was no ordinary achievement. Mr. Rasgotra retired in 1984 after becoming Foreign Secretary.

Eric Gonsalves was born on May 9, 1928. He was selected for the IFS on May 25, 1950. He retired as Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs in 1988. He now resides in Chennai along with his charming wife, Rose. Among his important postings were London, Washington and Tokyo. In him, India had a gentleman diplomat, utterly reliable, warm-hearted and a professional of a high order.

Now, I shall commit the final act of immodesty by writing about myself.

K. Natwar Singh was born on May 16, 1929. He was selected for the IFS on April 14, 1953. His first posting was to Peking (not yet Beijing) from 1956 to 1958. He served in the Perma-

nent Mission of India from 1961 to 1966. He worked in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's secretariat as Deputy Secretary, Director and Joint Secretary from 1966 to 1971.

He served as Ambassador to Pakistan from 1980 to 1982 and Secretary-General of the seventh Non-Aligned Summit held in New Delhi in March 1983. He was chief coordinator of the Commonwealth Summit, held in New Delhi in November 1983. He was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1984. He took premature retirement in 1984 to join politics. He served as Minister of State in the Rajiv Gandhi government from 1984 to 1989.

K. Natwar Singh is the author of several books, in-

cluding his autobiography, *One Life is Not Enough*.

He was the first IFS officer to become External Affairs Minister. He lives in New Delhi with his wife, Heminder Kumari.

There are two more of us who lived to the nineties but passed away quite recently. One is Kayatani Shankar Bajpai, who died in New Delhi on August 30 at the age of 92. He was the son of Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai, ICS, the first Secretary-General of the Ministry of External Affairs. Shankar Bajpai was born on February 30, 1928. He was selected for the IFS on April 2, 1952. He was the only IFS officer to have been Ambassador to China, Pakistan and the U.S.

Natrajan Krishnan died in Bengaluru on September 15, 2020. He was born

V.M.M. Nair joined the ICS in 1942 and was inducted into the new Indian Foreign Service in 1947

on October 6, 1928. He joined the IFS on July 17, 1951. He served with great distinction as Permanent Representative of India at the UN in the mid-1980s. He was an accomplished, self-effacing, low-key diplomat.

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Purging prejudices

I. Satya Sundaram

All of us want to lead a happy life, but blemishes of our character come in the way. One of them is prejudice, which closes our minds to the truth. Voltaire called prejudice the reason of fools.

Our thinking is stymied by prejudices. We have many preconceived notions. We assume they are correct. The fact is, universally accepted principles do not emerge from a single man's experience.

We have to respect the views of others. It is not that our own judgments are wrong. Socrates had said: "I am extremely desirous to be persuaded by you, but not against my own better judgment." Thomas Carlyle said: "It is useful, nay essential, to see his good qualities before pronouncing on his bad." In the words of Ambrose Bierce, "It is a vagrant opinion without visible means of support."

Very often, man's social behaviour is guided by worn-out customs and sustained by age-old prejudices. Most people are unwilling to give up their prejudices. They are not even aware of the need for jettisoning them. Our habits are fixed firmly.

Sometimes, prejudices emerge from the generation gap. The youngsters think that the aged are conservative and lack progressive thinking. The elders believe the youth lack values and spend money carelessly.

Experts say it is not easy to eliminate prejudices. According to an American historian, George Bancroft, "The prejudices of ignorance are more easily removed than the prejudices of interest, the first are all blindly adopted, the second wilfully preferred." It is also said that our prejudices do not hurt others as much as they hurt us physically, mentally and spiritually.

We should be aware of the deleterious dimensions of dangerous prejudices. These crucified Jesus Christ, poisoned Socrates, and assassinated Martin Luther King. Under their influence, some people have axed moral values. The prejudices strengthen sectionalism, communalism, regionalism and parochialism.

Let us pulverise prejudices; otherwise, they will pulverise us.

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Smitten by cottagecore

The best option is to escape to a rustic environment

Sudha Rao

Ever dreamt of escaping to a cabin in the woods or to sunlit meadows filled with flowers? Then, you have cottagecore in your soul, a lifestyle mantra of innate attachment to Nature. Every now and then, an idea about well-being becomes a rage - mindfulness, Zen, gratitude diary, hygge, Marie Kondo and Ikigai are examples. Such ideas are gaining wider acceptance in a world grappling with a virus and badly needing a stress-buster.

Cottagecore conveys an emotion of bliss around rolling green hills, lush forests, blue seas and the fragrant earth. It's about renewing our acquaintance with Nature and enjoying slower, more intentional moments. The best option is to escape to a rustic environment. The next best thing is to bring a touch of nature into our inescapable city lives. So, we have people who grow microgreens, cook with natural ingredients or bake brioche (banana walnut cake is so yesterday!). Yet others indulge in



Slow lane Gently pamper yourselves in the middle of nature with peace and tranquillity. • GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

nature-themed art.

Several years ago, we visited the Amish Village of Lancaster, near Philadelphia, and were surprised to see an entire community of people living in absolute simplicity. The Amish have little interaction with the rest of the world and are slow to adopt the conveniences of modern living. They wear traditional attire, travel in buggies and are self-sufficient. They know nothing but Cottagecore, and it seems to have made them the happiest people on earth.

It is ironic that the idea

has gained momentum, thanks to the Internet, when the point is to take a break from technology! Yet who can resist the pleasure of sharing pictures of activities centred on an idyllic pastoral life on social media?

Deep in nature

"Look deep into nature and you will understand everything better," Einstein said. As we gently pamper ourselves in the middle of nature, making use of her bounties, the thought of slowing down and savouring life's precious mo-

ments is vastly appealing. Lots of activities have been revived around this niche aesthetic that promotes peace and tranquillity. Anything with a rural touch - pottery, barbecuing on woodfire, folksy music, embroidery of motifs from nature, handwritten letters, traditional crafts and skills - is welcome.

Cottagecore dreams are made of outdoor fun in picnics, interacting with farm animals and generally living life in all its simplicity. For those of us who cannot pack up and go away into the rural landscape, there are cottagecore-themed books and movies that bring a refreshing slice of the countryside into our humdrum city lives.

But the idea of a retreat into nature does sound great. So let's leave behind our devices and experience the music of songbirds, the lullaby of the surf, and the pageantry of the stars and planets. Sure there is no WiFi in these parts, but we will certainly find a better connection - with ourselves, of course.

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Is the first impression the last?

All is not lost as frequent positive interactions and demonstrating competence can help

Anuj Anil Narkhede

"You never get a second chance to make the first impression," Andrew Grant, a British writer, said.

On your first day in the new workplace, your car broke down, which made you late for office, and then in the evening, you spill coffee on your supervisor's desk during the first interaction with him. Your new supervisor and executives get the impression that you are unprofessional. It can be challenging to recover from a bad first impression.

Research in social psychology suggests that people are quick to form a lasting impression of others, just by inferring a person's character traits from his or her single behaviour. We do make a judgment about that person's trustworth-

ness and competence in a few seconds.

Based on initial inference, we tend to predict the future behaviour of that person. Therefore, if any person behaved absurdly with us, we expect him or her to behave similarly in the next meeting. We don't change our impression that easily.

Behavioural researchers have found that our brain has certain patterns to process information and update their impression. Learning highly negative and immoral information about some person has a higher impact on our brain than learning highly positive and moral information about any person.

Therefore, the employee who came late on the first day may get less weightage for his



talent and skills. But still, there is hope to recover from a bad first impression.

When it comes to making up for a bad first impression, the preferred action is to take the right turn and show your other side of the personality, which will be easier to like. Compensate for coming late in the morning with overtime in the evening. Demonstrate sincerity in work. Studies have shown that people tend to change their opinion about others after eight positive interactions. Therefore, allow people to reinterpret their opinion about us positively.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the Magazine can be e-mailed separately to mag_letters@thehindu.co.in

Cover story

Does the epic preach 'dharmic' principles? ('The many layers of the Mahabharata', Sep.13) The answer is yes and no. My law college lecturer used to say that all the characters in the epic, with its tales of gambling, deceit and war, can be charge-sheeted for various offences under the IPC today.

K. PRADEEP



Historians and Indologists agree that the Mahabharata could not have been authored by one person. The epics mention episodes and attitudes that are often 700-800 years apart. For example, the epic shows economic practices of 900 BCE but also mentions the Greeks, who came to India after 400 BCE. The didactic section was added later to the narrative section, when the epic started to be seen as a religious text. However, its literary merit is immense.

K.M.K. MURTHY

When asked about

Yadava prince Krishna representing 'Brahminisation', Sunil P. Elayidom misquotes Marxist historian

Kosambi to say that an earlier Upanishad spoke of Krishna as an asura. Krishna is referred to in the Chandogya Upanishad but not as an asura. Moreover, the word asura in the Vedic lexicon did not refer to a non-Aryan; the Vedic gods Indra, Varuna and Rudra were also referred to as asuras in the Rig Veda. While Elayidom's concern that one must not allow texts like the Mahabharata to be hijacked by Hindutva projects is valid, no less valid are concerns that these texts be saved from Marxist misrepresentations. Ideology corrupts and absolute ideology corrupts absolutely.

G.L. KRISHNA

To assert a moral or dharmic equivalence between the Pandavas and Kauravas is tantamount to gross misinterpretation. The central question, 'Did dharma really win?', is answered by the fact that characters like Drona and Karna wilfully offered support to Duryodhana, who symbolised an arbitrary oligarchy. The Pandavas

G.L. KRISHNA

I subscribe to The Hindu on Sundays, mainly to read Mr. Mathrubootham's hilarious letters. I wish you would publish a compendium of his selected letters.

STANLEY PINTO

Holistic education The 'collective act of undoing' that Mathangi Krishnamurthy proposes ('Learning in virtual space', Sep.13) seems hopeful. The goal should be to embrace the essence of 'education' and not the mere act of teaching.

KAVYA RANJIT

Unknown delights Meher Mirza gives a delightful account of the gastronomical joys of Parsi society. ('The joy of eating', Sep. 13) I hadn't heard of these lesser-known foods, and I enjoyed the article.

AJAY SINGHA

More on the Web

thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The mousetrap

Can rodents develop Stockholm Syndrome and become empathetic to their captors?

HARI ARAYAMMAKUL

Gym and a sinful cake

To be avoided for its richness, but to be relished for the love

K. THAMMAYYA UDUPA

Digitally divided homes

With just one laptop, online teaching has become a source of daily arguments and fights

G. PONNAMMAL

Winning hearts with Indian food Living it up with the spices and flavours of the land in Geneva

RANI DEVASAR

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.



LABOUR

The great wage heist

Hundreds of Indian migrants in GCC countries, dismissed from their jobs, are returning home but without months of salary and other due benefits

was laid off. And even this gives no space for workers to elaborate on their grievances if any. As for Indian embassies, they have not been encouraging in-person visits by workers because of COVID-19 protocols. The in-person visits are restricted to a token system.

"We are recording only the reasons for Indians leaving the country. We are neither addressing the workers' rights violations nor taking any power of attorney," says a senior Indian Embassy official in Kuwait. Meanwhile, courts in the migrants' home countries are not running at full strength due to the pandemic, and neither are labour ministries addressing wage theft issues or other grievances that migrant workers may have before repatriating them.

Shashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament, has suggested that an escrow fund be set up where the employer deposits wages for six months once the worker's visa is approved. Such a fund, says Tharoor, can help pay the worker during a crisis such as the present one.

Extraordinary measures

William Gois, Regional Coordinator of the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), a regional network that looks into the rights of migrant workers, says extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. "There is a need to set up a transitional justice mechanism to address grievances, claims and labour disputes of repatriated workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic," he says.

"For migrant workers in particular, the pandemic has heightened pre-existing problems of wage theft. Some businesses have taken advantage of the pandemic to unlawfully dismiss and withhold the wages of the migrant workers. Many workers return home empty-handed, having been coerced into forgoing their wages and benefits, while others continue to work under exploitative conditions and reduced wages for fear of losing their livelihood in this climate of global economic recession," says Gois.

In June, the MFA along with a few other civil society organisations and trade unions called on governments to set up an international claims commission and a compensation fund, and to reform national justice systems to address wage theft.

However, says the MFA, even such commissions and funds are no substitutes for fair and functioning justice systems at the national level. And so far, national justice systems have largely failed migrant workers. This failure should no longer be accepted or normalised.

The current pandemic provides an opportunity to ensure that such systemic and structural barriers are forever removed, says Mandha Bheem Reddy from the Emigrants Welfare Forum. "I am seeing hundreds of Indian workers returning empty-handed. I know cases of people who lost six months' salary, and end-of-service benefits when they were repatriated in a hurry. Unfortunately, the Indian mission houses in the Gulf are not recording these worker grievances. And there is no platform to claim the lost wages," says Reddy.

Quoting a World Bank report that says there would be a 20% dip in remittance, Raifeek Ravuthar, a migrant rights activist, said this decrease would hit India's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) too. "Remittances contribute to reaching the SDGs in a variety of ways. At the family level, remittances eradicate poverty and hunger, grant access to healthcare and quality education, and ensure gender equality. If remittances go down, then it is going to have a negative impact on all of this," he says.

According to the World Bank, remittances could fall by \$100 billion because of the pandemic. In 2019, the global remittance was \$714 billion, and India received some \$80 billion, the largest share in the world. "A 20% dip is going to have a huge impact on India, especially on Kerala, as the State depends heavily on remittances," says Ravuthar.

Some 90 lakh migrant Indians work in West Asia. And the majority of them are low-paid workers. They cannot afford to be robbed of their rightful wages.

The writer is a researcher and writer on migrant rights.

Rejimon Kuttappan

Haneesh Kumar P.B., an Indian migrant supervisor in an automobile company in Oman, was told to resign on April 30, along with some 400 colleagues. In all, the company asked around 1,400 workers to resign in phases, citing as reason the COVID-19-induced economic crisis.

Haneesh, who was among the first to go, refused to sign the 'voluntary' resignation form and insisted on being terminated so that he could get the attendant benefits. As per his contract, if the company terminated him, it would have to give him either a 30-day notice period or a 30-day salary.

As the company couldn't serve him the 30-day notice period, he was eligible to a month's basic salary, around \$570. But he was not only not paid this amount, he was forced to work until May 11, for which the company did not pay him either. Even more shocking, he didn't get the \$181 food allowance for the 35 days either, which he was assured of when he was terminated.

In all, Haneesh was denied \$960 of dues by the company. In other words, he was a victim of wage theft, a trend that often goes unreported and unnoticed.

Wage theft is the non-payment for overtime; denying workers their last pay check after he or she leaves a job; not paying for all of the hours worked; not paying minimum wages; not paying a worker at all; and not adhering to the terms of the contract.

Empty-handed

In Haneesh's case, the company failed to pay him for the 10 days he worked, the 30-day salary for being terminated, and the food allowance clearly stated in the contract.

"I realised the wage theft only after they credited the amount into my bank account just two days before I travelled out. So I didn't have time to complain either to my office nor to the Indian Embassy. I had to just give up that money and fly back," says Haneesh.

Even if Haneesh indeed had enough time to approach the Indian Embassy in Oman, there is little it could have done, with no process in place to help Indian migrants subjected to wage theft.

All 1,400 employees who were dismissed from the company faced similar issues. If we assume the lowest monthly salary to be \$250, and calculate the unpaid amount for 10 days as well as the denied food allowance for each of the 1,400 workers, Ha-

neesh's company would have saved – or stolen – \$369,000 from its workers.

This is not an isolated case: it is happening in several companies across the Gulf countries during the pandemic.

R. George, an engineer with a petroleum company in the U.A.E., had to return after giving up two months' salary. "I had to return empty-handed. I was owed at least \$2,500. I have a pending bank loan here and I am clueless about what to do," says George.

Six million jobs

Beginning from the first week of March, all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries locked down their borders to contain the coronavirus. As sea, land, and air borders were shut, the market came to a halt forcing businesses to pull down shutters and send workers back to camps or to their home countries.

The World Bank's June *Global Economic Prospects* predicted that economic activity in West Asia and North Africa, which includes GCC countries, is expected to contract by more than 4% in 2020, as consumption, exports, and tourism are severely disrupted by the pandemic.

Parallel to the pandemic

As of September 9, there were 3,22,237 COVID-19 positive cases with 4,137 deaths in Saudi Arabia. In the U.A.E., the number of cases was 75,098; in Bahrain, 56,778; in Kuwait, 91,244; in Oman, 87,950; and in Qatar, the number of positive cases was 1,20,579.

And by March-end, the benchmark Brent crude oil price was \$22 per barrel – less than half the price at the beginning of the month. Because of the dual shock, the growth downgrade for the GCC as a whole is 2.6 percentage points in 2020. In U.S. dollars, this amounts to about \$41 billion.

In the Arab region, an estimated six million jobs will be lost, the International Labour Organisation said in its May report; and the majority of jobs in the Arab region are held by migrant workers. Media reports reveal that since the start of the pandemic, millions of migrant workers have been repatriated to Asia, many of them hurriedly and without proper protocols in place.

And taking advantage of these mass repatriation moves are employers who terminate workers without paying them their legitimate wages, compensation and benefits.

Unfortunately, the Indian repatriation form, an online Google document, shows that of the nine boxes listed here asking for the reason for repatriation to India, there is only one box that asks if the migrant worker



Toiling masses Some 90 lakh migrant Indians work in West Asia. And the majority of them are low-paid workers. • AFP & AP

I returned empty-handed. I was owed at least \$2,500. I have a pending bank loan here and I am clueless about what to do, said R. George, an engineer with a petroleum company in the U.A.E.

ESSAY

The interpreter of loneliness

D.H. Lawrence, born 135 years ago this month, might be remembered chiefly for his candid exploration of sex, but his deepest concerns were about the isolation of the deracinated individual

Argha Kumar Banerjee

In a letter dated December 6, 1918, written to an unidentified recipient, D.H. Lawrence talks of his deep anxiety about pandemic-ridden London. He describes the city under the grasp of the “accursed Flu” as a “veritable death-trap”. The sickness has spread to the countryside too: “The weather is very nasty and damp, and the Midlands stricken with the fear of death: this Flu.”

Though recurrently suffering from bouts of bronchial infections, Lawrence survived the Spanish Flu, which claimed millions of lives in 1918-19 – dwarfing even the casualty count at the Western Front. While he viewed his own vulnerability with exasperation, he was disdainful of the general attitude towards the pandemic. In his letter, he writes, “They are horribly frightened, all of them: but it is not fear of the Lord, merely selfish fear of death, petty and selfish – when will one get the spark of a new spirit out of these people?”

What does Lawrence imply here by the “spark of a new spirit”, which might come out of the death and destruction wreaked by the pandemic? An examination of Lawrence’s canon may yield the answer.

Pure ugliness

In her landmark book, *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag argues that a widespread disease tends to become emblematic of its era. Lawrence would have agreed: the depictions of a diseased society in his novels suggest that he was thinking of illnesses not so much as an individual ailment as a sickness afflicting the masses – in other words, an epidemic. This is what Birkin means when he says in *Women in Love*: “One is ill because one doesn’t live properly – can’t.” Writing at a time when the maladies of modern living – rampant industrialisation, consumerism, pollution, exploitation of natural resources, urban-centric economies and destruction of suburban and rural landscapes – had just begun to make themselves felt, Lawrence proved to be prophetic in his vision of the wasteland these afflictions would eventually create. His works resound in these times of profound isolation, when we are cooped up with the

monsters we have let loose. Lawrence had foreseen it all, it seems, raising alarm bells more than a century ago.

In his fiction, non-fiction, poems and paintings, Lawrence bitterly criticised industrialisation and its impact on human lives and relationships. In his 1929 essay, ‘Nottingham and the mining countryside,’ he stares horrified at the “nasty red-brick, flat faced dwellings with dark slate roofs” that have come up in the once picturesque landscape – not only are they unaesthetic but they are also against nature.

This stance is further elucidated in his fiction, which repeatedly examines the result of industrialisation in the mining areas of provincial towns. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul’s search for employment opportunities in the Co-operative Society reading room suddenly triggers thoughts of claustrophobic entrapment, as he imagines himself as a “prisoner of industrialism”. In *The Rainbow*, Wiggiston, a “hamlet of eleven houses” is transformed into a vision of “pure ugliness” as mechanical monotony takes over: “Everything was amorphous, yet everything repeated itself endlessly.”

Along similar lines, in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, as Connie drives through the “long squalid straggle of Tevershall”, the bleakness of the desultory surroundings is underlined: “the blackened brick dwellings, the black slate roofs glistening their sharp edges, the mud black with



Inner vision John Everett Millais’s 1856 oil, ‘The Blind Girl’, depicting vagrant musicians, and (below) Lawrence clicked by Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1915. • WIKI COMMONS

coal dust, the pavements wet and black.” The author’s disgust is palpable: “It was as if dismalness had soaked through and through everything. The utter negation of natural beauty, the utter negation of the gladness of life, the utter absence of the instinct for shapely beauty which every bird and beast has, the utter death of the human intuitive faculty was appalling.”

Dignity of labour

Later in the story, repugnance gives way to a genuine concern about human destiny: “What could possibly become of such a people, a people in whom the living intuitive faculty was dead as nails, and only queer mechanical yells and uncanny will-power remained?” In Lawrence’s scheme of things, the people with

the dead intuitive faculty are the educated urban elite, who have moved farthest away from the life of nature, losing touch with their innermost self in the process.

In the tenth chapter of *Sons and Lovers*, there’s a long conversation between Paul and his mother on various issues of life, where Paul says: “I don’t want to belong to the well-to-do middle class. I like my common people best. I belong to the common people.” He goes on: “The difference between people isn’t in their class, but in themselves. Only from the middle classes one gets ideas, and from the common people – life itself, warmth. You feel their hates and loves.”

Lawrence’s advocacy of the working class was not merely fashionable – he was one of them. What

would he have made of the present crisis in India, where the lockdown rendered thousands of labourers jobless, leaving them to trundle home to their villages amidst overwhelming uncertainty?

Life itself

In a recent piece, veteran journalist Mark Tully talks of his indebtedness to Lawrence while trying to seek explanations for the faint response to the plight of migrant workers: “Why has the outcry against this suffering inflicted on men and women who are more than 90% of India’s workforce been so muted? It is, I believe, in part at least, because those in a position to raise their voices have not identified themselves with those who are suffering. This idea came to me from re-reading D.H. Lawrence’s

once-controversial novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* during the lockdown.”

Lawrence’s observations on social gaps and friction ring true even after a century. In fact, class tension fuels the plot of many of his novels, most notably that of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, centred on the unorthodox relationship between the upper-class Constance (Connie) Chatterley and her gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors. The air around the lovers sizzles with tension, as Sir Clifford Chatterley, the mine-owner, freely expresses his disdain for the working class and the resentment of the exploited colliers threatens to boil over. Oliver vents his anger before Connie: “But what I want to know, do they feel any sympathy with workin’ men as has nothing but work before them, till they drop. Do they sympathise –” Clifford’s dismissive attitude towards the miners (they “are not men” but “animals you don’t understand, and never could”) is equally typical.

Yet Lawrence is remembered less for his humanism than for his depiction of sex in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The sexual content of the novel is read and reread by the thrill-seeker without understanding the context, which gives it meaning. For Lawrence, the deracination that modernism brought could be cured only by a return to the primal, the basic, at the level of both the individual and society. His advocacy of working-class life is tied up with his celebration of passionate, sexual human relationships: as Paul says in the aforementioned quote, both amount to “life itself, warmth”.

Lawrence was a later-day Romantic foregrounding the holiness of the heart’s affections when consumerism and greed had blackened the heart almost beyond repair. As he said in his last book, *Apocalypse*, written in 1929-30, when he was dying: “What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family.”

In *The Rainbow*, on his return journey from London, Brangwen wonders, “How had helpless savages, running with their spears on the riverside, after fish, how had they come to rear up this great London, the ponderous, massive, ugly superstructure of a world of man upon a world of nature!” Brangwen’s realisation of human folly in creating a civilisation deaf to the intrinsic rhythms of nature frightens and awes him. Yet, at the end of the novel, Lawrence offers hope, through the symbolic rainbow as envisioned by Ursula. Overcome with nausea at the blackness of her life and surroundings, she spots the rainbow in the sky and “saw in the rainbow the earth’s new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven.”

The writer is Dean of Arts at St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata.

The depictions of a diseased society in Lawrence’s novels suggest that he was thinking of illnesses not so much as an individual ailment as a sickness afflicting the masses – in other words, an epidemic



FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

And no birds sing

Effectively conveys the few highs and many lows of a depressed mind

Preethi Ramamoorthy

Crippling self-doubt, fits of rage, an alcohol overdose and an escape through art – *Goner* is a fictional first-person account of a young woman’s struggle with mental health and depressive disorders. It is said to be inspired by real-life events.

The protagonist, whose name we never get to know, is a failing artist going through a mid-20s crisis. She is trying to cope with several issues at the same time – remnants of a broken family, memories of an abusive ex-boyfriend, and constant insecurities about her failing job and capacity as an artist.

What happens when it gets too much?

Goner takes us through the few highs and several lows of a depression

that ultimately leaves the protagonist in the middle of a blackout. It explores the triggers for a breakdown – right from doorbells to unfinished dishes. The author is able to effectively convey the darkness, the selfishness and the mental clutter that come with depression. Passages are deliberately fractured with random song and rap lyrics, echoing an unstable mind.

A particularly evocative passage of *Goner* describes how depression and anxiety can be very physical: “You can rub the discomfort between your fingers, feel it pulsating in the side of your neck, going all the way through your head, throbbing in your temples, flowing and flushing down bit-

terly and hotly from your eyes.”

But such passages seem like fleeting shadows. Building a novel around a character who is suffering from depression puts immense pressure on the author: she has to write about repetitive, bleak episodes and yet evoke something to hold the reader’s attention. In several parts, *Goner* reads like an entitled, privileged rant.

If you’re looking for literary pleasure, *Goner* may disappoint. The prose is formulaic young adult fiction.

That said, *Goner* offers consolation and an encouraging note for those battling their own darkneses. Such works break the silence around an illness that is still stigmatised.



Goner
Tazmeen Amna
Penguin eBury Press
₹299

TRANSLATION

God save the thief

A sincere morality tale about the subtle science of thievery

Rohan Manoj

Imagine that you could open a lock simply by looking at it. Moreover, imagine that this little trick was the hallmark of a discipline practised and honed over the centuries by ancient masters, who distilled their wisdom onto palm-leaf texts in Sanskrit and Tamil with scientific precision, leaving them to be discovered by an eccentric modern-day professor who could transmit these teachings to his chosen disciple, a hitherto undistinguished member of the thieving fraternity.

That’s the conceit of V.J. James’s *Chorashastra* – “the science of thievery” – a Malayalam novel published in 2002 and freshly translated into English by Morley J. Nair. But it’s not a straightforward romp by any means. Certainly there is humour and even lewdness, especially in the earlier parts, and plenty of adventure, but this

is leavened throughout by a thread of spirituality that thickens over the course of the story as we worry about the state of our thief’s – he is unnamed, like most characters in this book – soul.

Our concerns are reflected in the thoughts of the Dravidian king, a powerful yet almost helpless figure whose own story is imbued with a certain amount of pathos. Philosophical interludes and quotations from ancient texts are found interspersed, while deities – particularly Subrahmanya (Skanda), who is constantly invoked as the patron god of thieves – are frequently called upon, at first to provide moral justification, but finally as a refuge in desperation. It ends as a morality tale, with a very traditional Indian lesson on the dangers of attachment.

And as a tale rooted in tradition, it is important to realise that this book is sincere. James fully leans into the trope of magic-adjacent ancient Indian super-science, which was perhaps not so worn out in 2002 as it is today. Despite the early humour, this isn’t the place to look for satire or subversion, at least in that regard.

The translation is serviceable. Certain choices, like how the thief’s family consists of his “she-thief” and their “child-thieves” can elicit a chuckle. It could have been more consistent in how certain names are rendered – is it Skandan or Skanda? There is the odd typo, and the tendency to leave certain Malayalam terms untranslated is another peeve.



Chorashastra
V.J. James,
trs. Morley J. Nair
Eka
₹299

BROWSER

The Phoenix
Bilal Siddiqui
Penguin eBury Press
₹299

In this dystopian tale of espionage and global terror, ex-intelligence officer, Intelligence and Research Wing, Aryaman Khanna, is on a mission to foil the bioweapon strike an international terror group has been planning to carry out in Mumbai. A story of his love for his family and country.



Inheritance
Bali Kaur Jaswal
HarperCollins India
₹499

Fifteen-year-old Amrit disappears from her house at night and returns a different person. Over the next two decades, her actions haunt the lives of her Sikh family in Singapore. A story of mental illness as well as a portrait of a family struggling to preserve tradition in a changing nation.



The Silence of the Hyena
Syed Muhammad Ashraf, trs
M. Asaduddin and Musharraf Ali Farooqi
Aleph Book Company
₹599

Award-winning writer Syed Muhammad Ashraf’s Urdu stories usually revolve round animals and are characterised by a sense of foreboding. The translated short stories, interlinked tales, and novella in this collection attest to the power of his writing.



The Geometry of Holding Hands
Alexander McCall Smith
Little, Brown
₹699

Isabel Dalhousie yet again applies her philosopher’s mind to wrongdoings in Edinburgh. There are whispers of mysterious goings-on – only Isabel can be trusted to get to the bottom of this while she deals with her merciless children, husband and her tempestuous niece, Cat.



EXPERIENCE

A city of hidden abundance

A journalist wanders around Kabul, mapping both its rich heritage and the complex present

Sudipta Datta

Pashto writer Sher Zaman Taizi explained Afghanistan in three sentences in his very short story, *The Field*: Sultan Bacha was killed. Mir Bacha was sentenced to transportation for life. And that field for which the two brothers were fighting was taken by others. Afghanistan has a long oral and written literary tradition in both Pashto and Dari, its two major languages. Writers have explored its history of war and conflict, the 'Great Game' involving other powers, themes of home and exile, religious and ethnic tensions, the rise and fall and return of the Taliban.

From Rabindranath Tagore who wove his beautiful short story *Kabuliwala* around the friendship of Mini, a little girl in Calcutta, with a man from the distant land of Kabul selling dry fruits, to Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, a coming-of-age tale of two boys caught up in violence, and Ahmed Rashid's *Descent into Chaos*, readers have connected with Afghanistan through fiction and non-fiction.

What lies behind

To this rich heritage of story-telling, add Taran N. Khan's *Shadow City* which maps Kabul's hidden spaces. One of the things she was told when she arrived in 2006 was never to walk. But it was five years since the overthrow of the Taliban and as spring arrived, Khan headed to Mandayi Bazaar south of the Kabul river. Winds of change would blow over Afghanistan again, but in her wanderings from 2006 to 2013, she unravels a city of abundance: "...what is seen is often simply one aspect of the truth. What lies behind – the shadow city – is where layers are revealed."

On her first walk, Khan notices the mountains that encircle Kabul, Koh-e-Sher Darwaza and Koh-e-Asmai, and the new suburbs of Shahr-e-Nau, extending from the old city of Shahr-e-Kohna. "In the bluster and immensity of war... it is easy to forget that Kabul existed 3,000 years ago," Khan writes, as she begins to "exhume history" and excavate the present in an 'amnesiac' city. There is a lot that wants to be forgotten – the debris of war is everywhere, walls are riddled with bullet marks, graves dot the land, addiction is rife, the divide between rich and poor immense, and in a heavily-mined city only stones marked in white are safe, red stones mean danger.

Growing up in Aligarh in a family descended from Pashtuns, Khan encountered Tagore's story in her maternal grandfather's library who also gave her a copy of *Baburnama*, the memoirs of the young emperor Babur who had conquered Kabul at 21, to help her discover Kabul. She found *Baburnama* in one of the city's iconic bookshops, Shah M. Book Co., which has "remained open through each of Kabul's shifting eras: Communist, Mujahideen, Taliban, ISAF [International Security Assistance Force]."

The owner, Shah Muhammad Rais, had contested the portrayal of him and his family in Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad's best-selling tome *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

It is not surprising that in a land where Rumi is popular, poetry flows in the streets. Among the many people she meets is an old employee of Kabul Public Library, Haideri Wojodi, who believes "that words are important through the darkest times." With her book, Khan has ensured that a part of Kabul will be kept alive.



Shadow City
Taran N. Khan
Vintage/
Penguin
Random House
₹599

POLITICS

Origins of Nehru's 'Asianism'

With access to the first Prime Minister's papers, Francine Frankel builds a solid account of his ideas on diplomacy, which continue to define India's foreign policy

Stanly Johny

Writing in *The Atlantic* monthly in April 1940, Jawaharlal Nehru, by that time one of the most influential leaders of India's national movement, wrote: "India is far from America but more and more our thoughts go to this great democratic country, which seems almost alone, to keep the torch of democratic freedom alight..." Nehru, with strong views against imperialism and fascism, saw the democratic U.S. as an ally of freedom loving peoples in the colonies. "There was a real possibility that India would emerge as a friendly power to the U.S.," writes Francine Frankel in her latest book, *When Nehru Looked East: Origins of India-US Suspicion and India-China Rivalry*.

But history turned out to be different. Frankel, a professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, explores the roots of India-China-U.S. ties in the book. Having got access to the Nehru papers, Frankel has built a solid account of

Nehru's ideas on diplomacy, which continue to define India's foreign policy.

Neutral position

Well before India gained independence, Nehru was particular that India should remain neutral in the great power contest between the Soviet Union and the U.S. This was partly because Nehru considered India as a great Asian power and he wanted to avoid India being sucked into a military conflict. He had positive views on the U.S., but he later concluded that American policies towards India had always been "subservient" to that of the British Empire. Heavily influenced by his anti-colonial views and struggles, Nehru turned to Asia, considered China a civilisational partner, and kept India out of any alliance system.



When Nehru Looked East: Origins of India-US Suspicion and India-China Rivalry
Francine R. Frankel
Oxford University Press
₹995

But his 'Asianism' backfired. He was humiliated by the Chinese in 1962.

Frankel blames Nehru's 'Asianism' and non-alignment for India's China debacle. It's true that Nehru miscalculated on China. He never expected China, a country which he defended in international fora, would attack India. Frankel's indirect counter-factual argument is that had Nehru chosen to be an ally of the U.S., he could have taken on China better.

She writes: "The outstanding question on this study ends in this: Will India be able to set aside its post-Independence suspicion of American motives to join the U.S. in establishing a new natural balance in Asia?"

The title of her book also refers to "suspicion" between India and the U.S. But it was more than a suspicion, which Frankel's own account testifies. The strategic dilemma Nehru faced was real. Nehru was wrong on China; but he was right on Pakis-

tan, the U.K. and the U.S. Nehru had trusted the West when he agreed to take the Kashmir issue to the UN, but he saw India's cause being betrayed at the UN and he needed the Soviet Union to bail India out. He saw that Pakistan was being used by the U.S. and he was right. By the time the Cold War set in, Pakistan had joined the U.S.-sponsored alliance systems, and the U.S., which Nehru once saw as a torchbearer of democracy, had turned out to be an aggressor in Southeast Asia.

Frankel appears to have overlooked these factors while exploring the origins of Nehru's Asianism. While reviewing British historian Perry Anderson's *The Indian Ideology*, Prabhat Patnaik called his account "modern India sans the impact of capitalism". If one paraphrases Prof. Patnaik, the key problem with Frankel's account is that it's modern India's foreign policy sans the impact of imperialism.

India's fight

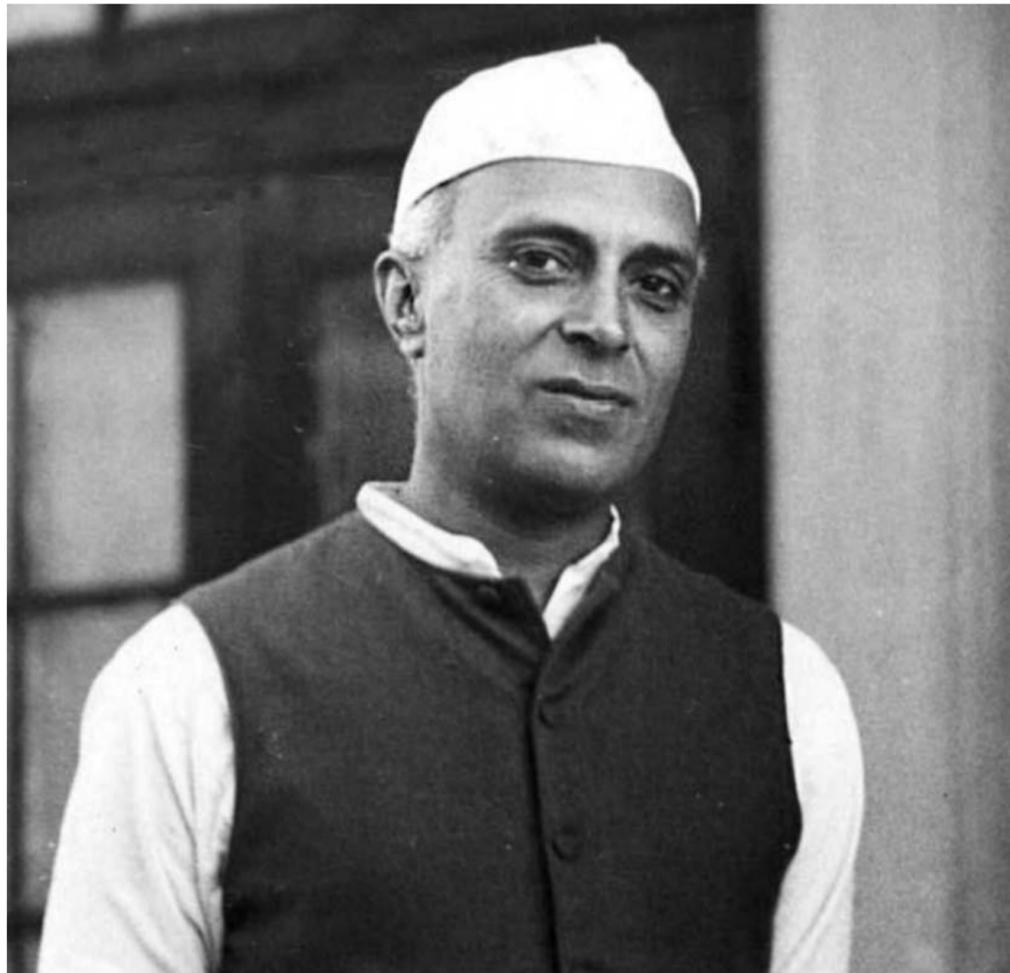
Frankel's insinuation that an alliance with the U.S. would have allowed India to resist China's expansionist policies better also holds weak when it's tested on the altar of history.

Pakistan had submitted itself as a client state of the U.S. It joined American-led alliance systems in West Asia and South East Asia. It had signed a bilateral treaty with the U.S. Still, the U.S. could do little to help Pakistan in the 1971 war with India. New Delhi checkedmate Pakistan and the U.S. with its outreach to the Soviet Union, which had despatched a task force to the Indian Ocean to prevent a U.S. intervention and vetoed an American-sponsored resolution at the UN Security Council calling for a ceasefire, allowing India to fight till the Pakistanis surrendered unconditionally. India managed to achieve this without joining any Soviet-led alliance system.

No deterrence

Unlike Nehru, Prime Minister Narendra Modi doesn't have any ideological commitment to 'Asianism'. He didn't turn towards China at the expense of India's ties with the U.S. On the contrary, India's ties with the U.S. deepened under his leadership. Could it deter China? The Doklam standoff of 2017 and the violent clashes in eastern Ladakh earlier this year, which have effectively altered the status quo on the Line of Actual Control, are comparable to the border clashes of 1959.

Nehru realised by the late 1950s that India had a serious problem on the border. "On one hand, India must not surrender to Chinese claims. On the other, India had to remember that 'China is our permanent neighbour and to invite trouble from China is wisdom neither in the present nor in the future,'" Frankel writes, quoting Nehru. Almost six decades later, the dilemma stays real for the Indian leadership.



FOCUS

Strike a pose and click to see the family wedding album

A social anthropologist explores the power of the photograph, which records a moment 'that has been', as a conscious way of seeing the world

Jinoy Jose P.

If you are an Instagram user you would know how important a fad pre-wedding photoshoot has become today. Social media is flooded with 'candid' photos of couples-to-be, inviting awe, vitriol and jealousy among their 'consumers' on digital platforms. In a few cases, intimate ("steamy"), in the parlance of click-bait media) portraits of a few prospective partners went viral, triggering heated debates around such emerging sociocultural practices.

'An episode of history'

Pre-wedding photoshoots are relatively new, unlike the practice of

wedding photos which dates back to the early 19th century. The first wedding photographs emerged in the 1840s, not too long after photography itself was established in Europe, notes cultural anthropologist Sasanka Perera in his *The Fear of the Visual? Photography, Anthropology, and Anxieties of Seeing*. One of the first couples to be properly photographed was Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England in 1840. Evidently, the social practice of wedding photography was meant for social elites, courtesy factors such as cost and access to technology. But in the late 19th century and early 20th century, as access to technologies improved and "posing time" for each session reduced, wedding pho-

tographers started experimenting with multiple shots of the couples. This plurality of photographs paved the way for the advent of the wedding album, observes Perera in the illuminating chapter, 'Framing and Performing Intimacy: An Incomplete Social History of Wedding Photographs'.

For Perera, photography is not something technical, which one engages in by manipulating and impersonal apparatus, but it is a social document. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes essentially every photograph delivers just one message: "That has been." Barthes found 'death' in the photographic image. On that cue, each photograph represents an episode of his-

Perera is a photographer himself and belongs to a family that has taken the art of photography seriously

tory. Inarguably, it is the most trustworthy representation of the moment it captures. Further, if you can take the example of the wedding portrait as an example, photographs reveal intricate and curious details about the society and people they represent. Still, social anthropologists do not take photography seriously enough, observes Perera. The book is his attempt to answer the question of why photography has not become a more conscious

way of seeing the world in disciplines such as social anthropology and sociology.

That said, Perera is not a run of the mill academic probing the anthropological possibilities of the photograph. His approach is personal. He is a photographer himself and belongs to a family that has taken the art of photography seriously. Perera turns his lens onto the evolution of photography in South Asia, the impacts of colonialism, imperial power on image-making and a clutch, to build a strong case for photography's importance as a sociological tool. In this journey, he introduces a bevy of characters, including his family members, scholars such as Susan Sontag (*On*

Photography) and John Berger (*About Looking*), studio owners, lensmen and businessmen who influenced the growth of photography in South Asia and beyond. He also looks into curious trends such as the selfies (and the meaning of Self, which is a must-read for millennials), and the need to have disciplines such as visual anthropology and visual sociology.

Perera's language is terse and his tone reassuring. With sharp insights and broad research, Perera has created a pioneering and deeply engaging work in the field of social anthropology that even lesser mortals can enjoy. The only blemish is that the photos could have been printed on better-quality paper.



The Fear of the Visual? Photography, Anthropology, and Anxieties of Seeing
Sasanka Perera
Orient BlackSwan
₹850

Rebels with a Cause

T.T. Ram Mohan
Penguin Random House
₹599

Through an exploration of the lives and ideas of well-known dissenters like Arundhati Roy, Oliver Stone, Kancha Ilaiah, David Irving, Yanis Varoufakis, U.G. Krishnamurti and John Pilger, Prof Ram Mohan argues that, while one may not agree with them always, their views merit discussion and debate.



Rage

Bob Woodward
Simon & Schuster
₹899

A veteran *Washington Post* journalist goes behind the scenes of the Trump presidency and finds new details about early national security decisions and the President's moves as he faces a global pandemic, economic disaster and racial unrest. Woodward shows Trump up close.



The Brass Notebook: A Memoir

Devaki Jain
Speaking Tiger
₹599

In a no-holds-barred memoir, a noted feminist economist and academic recalls her own story and also that of an entire generation. She writes candidly of her personal and professional life and about how she became deeply involved with the cause of 'poor' women.



No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention

Reed Hastings, Erin Meyer
Penguin Random House
₹799

Netflix is in a unique position as a leader in both the worlds of entertainment and technology. Founder Reed Hastings explains the radical business culture that makes Netflix one of the most inventive companies in the world.





Fair enough? (Clockwise from far left) Stills from *Moonlight*, *Hidden Figures*, *The Personal History of David Copperfield* and *Crazy Rich Asians*.
• SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

SPOTLIGHT

Will the new Oscar guidelines make Hollywood a more inclusive industry? Only time will tell

The diversity fix

Roland Mascarenhas

April Reign is irritated. It's early 2015, and the Oscar nominees for the year have just been announced. The Washington, D.C.-based lawyer, appalled at the stunning lack of diversity in one of the most prestigious entertainment industry awards, tweets: '#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair.' It sets off a cultural firestorm, perhaps the largest in the decade, with actors, audiences and activists everywhere calling for fair representation and greater inclusion.

Five years later, September 2020. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has just released a set of diversity guidelines that films must follow to compete in the Oscar Best Picture category from 2024 onwards.

The new rules address the issue of adequate representation of gender, race, sexual orientation and disability, asking films to meet the criteria in at least two of four areas: on screen; behind the camera; studio/distribution level; and audience development. With this move, the merit vs. tokenism argument re-surfaces.

For Reign too, diversification is the solution: "In 2015, the Academy membership was 92% white and 75% male... now, its membership is 84% white and 68% male," she writes. "It is about operating outside of the same networks that have been used for years." Cherry Ng, a writer, adds: "The Oscars is a reflection of the entertainment industry; the entertainment industry a reflection of our popular culture; our popular culture a reflection of humanity."

Untold stories

But other questions arise. Is including author J.K. Rowling and rapper Kendrick Lamar in Academy membership the solution? When I questioned the standing of actor-influencer Issa Rae, a friend retorted: "There are tons of atrocious white actors. Why do people of colour have to be excellent at everything we do? It's exhausting and unfair." But if we are aspiring for institutional change, shouldn't we raise the bar?

Perhaps #OscarsSoWhite's largest outspoken constituency has been the African-American community. Prior to 2015, there was a sparse number of commercially and critically successful Black-centric



films – *The Help*, *Hustle & Flow*, *12 Years A Slave*, *The Butler*. The post-2015 period saw a dramatic rise in such films, with the theme recurring in political documentaries (*13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*) and historically-influenced films (*Mudbound*, *Marshall*, *Detroit*, *The Banker*, *Harriet*).

Complicated hope

Recently, there have been new films that share untold stories in the U.S. (*Hidden Figures*, *Dolemite Is My Name*, *Just Mercy*) and in Africa (*Queen of Katwe*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Beasts of No Nation*). This re-drew the boundaries of the 'black experience', featuring a mix of sensual cinematography and complex characters meant to defy stereotypes: families in crisis (*Waves*, *Fences*, *Native Son*), romance (*Loving*, *The Photograph*, *Southside with You*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*), black comedy (*Sorry to Bother You*, *BlackKkklansman*) and the unconventional (*The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, *Monsters and Men*, *Minding the Gap*).

"In blackness, hope is often complicated by the intrusion of death, bloodshed, depression, incarceration, grief, brutality," writes Carvell Wallace in *The New York Times Magazine*, evoking memories of George Floyd's death and the corresponding protests. "It is first and foremost about loving black people... when we are angry, when we are frightened, when we are kind and when we are hurting. It is easy to love us when we are dead, our emotions suspended in history like a bug trapped in amber."

Familiar but foreign

Two stalwarts for diversity in films have been Brad Pitt's Plan B Produc-

tions, and indie film producer A24. A24's *Moonlight* (co-produced by Plan B) is widely considered the best film of the past decade, with *IndieWire* saying it "broadens the potential for black artistry to permeate popular culture in fresh ways".

The success of *Parasite*, *Roma* and *Crazy Rich Asians* broke a "psychological barrier," as one producer said, echoing reports from UCLA and Creative Artists Agency, that diversity sells. India is making a nascent global mark: Anurag Kashyap's *Sacred Games* for Netflix, with its Scorsese-like grittiness, outperformed in the Philippines, Singapore and Korea, feeding an "audience that wants to see something familiar but foreign at the same time," said the *Hollywood Reporter*. *Mighty Little Bheem* was viewed by "27 million households outside of India," said Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, while the search for an Irrfan Khan-like crossover star – whose untimely demise was mourned internationally – continues.

Despite a shift in the industry, larger questions remain about the line between meritocracy and tokenism in awards. "You can't vote for an actor because he's black," said Oscar winner Michael Caine.

Even as less than 25% of Americans supported #OscarsSoWhite, *The Economist* noted that Black Americans are 12.6% of the population but make up 10% of the Academy's acting nominations, a small discrepancy.

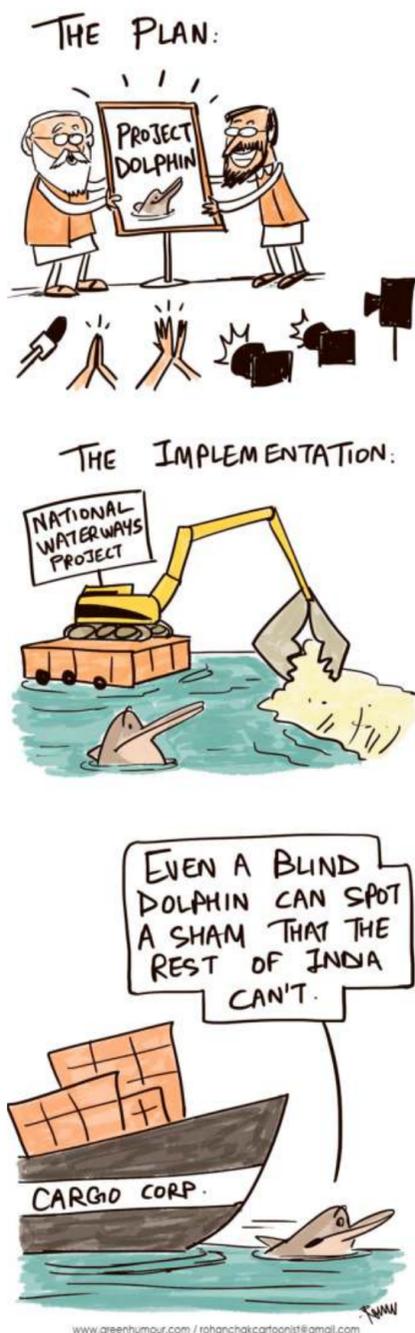
Just as organisations develop mission statements, Reign and the #OscarsSoWhite movement must set an objective. Do they want to make the industry more accessible to outsiders? Or attain more Oscar nominees and winners? Or share different stories beyond Hollywood?

Perhaps colour-blind casting could help too. In *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), producer Kevin Loader trusted audiences' openness, and chose Dev Patel, of Indian descent. Loader told *The Guardian* about his choice that he looked for actors "embodying the character as perfectly as possible, regardless of their ethnicity."

Actor Steve Martin, a frequent Oscar host, when asked how he made it in show business, famously said: "Be so good they can't ignore you." Will these new guidelines finally offer people of colour that chance?

The writer is an HR and strategy consultant based in Mumbai.

GREEN HUMOUR BY ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY



ALLEGEDLY

To swipe or not to swipe

There is only one activity that is completely immune to screen infiltration: being in coma

You can perhaps ignore the irony of intelligent people tweeting away, "Everyone, watch *The Social Dilemma* on Netflix right now!" These tweets each have at least 500 likes and retweets. You can ignore that too. But it does get to you when people start messaging you directly. So, I hereby inform the global non-bot community that I've already watched the documentary, and request the aforementioned community to stop spamming me with exhortations to drop everything and watch it.

Having seen the documentary, my first response is that it does nothing for my dopamine deficit. Yes, there were some memorable quotes. But the funny thing is I only remember that the quotes were memorable. I can't remember the quotes themselves. Sure, there is value in stitching together a series of interviews with people who've made tons of money by helping entities like Facebook and Twitter make tons of money by turning you into a screen-pawed zombie. For instance, it enables another round of monetisation of the dwindling attention span of the swiping dead – this time for Netflix, the latest entrant to the elite club of Silicon Valley's apex predators. But there's little else on offer.

Apocalypse menu

It made much of what is already known: social media platforms are ad-



• GETTY/IMZZGES/ISTOCK

dictive by design, and not by accident; they are vile entities that exploit an evolutionary vulnerability in human psychology; spreading lies and dividing nations are a profitable pathway to dystopia that the global elite has embraced, just as it has embraced fossil fuels, a profitable pathway to climate disaster. So, in addition to climate doom and nuclear holocaust, we have one more option on the apocalypse menu. All this we know. And thanks to this film, now we also know that no one has any idea how to get rid of the Matrix. There is no Neo. Or rather, every Neo turns out to be a Trump or a *tadipaar*.

As of today, there are just two kinds of activities available to humans: screen-based and non-screen-based. *The Social Dilemma* tells us we should

minimise the former and maximise the latter. Can we? Screen-based activities include work, study, socialising, leisure, entertainment, food-gathering, travelling, sports, exercise, meditation, prayer, etc.

As for non-screen-based activities, there is only one that is completely immune to screen infiltration: being in coma. Some people think sleep is also screen-proof but it isn't. I know people – my wife, for example – who can't sleep without a mobile. Her sleep comes tethered to an app, a 'personal sleep assistant' that monitors her sleep for quality control and gives her a report the next morning, with graphs and pie charts based on her sleep data. She says it makes a lot of sense even philosophically. If the purpose of life is to generate data for amoral algorithms

and evil corporations, then why should you stop emitting data just because you are sleeping? In other words, we should officially re-classify sleep as a screen-based activity, which brings us back to coma.

What if you're not into coma, which, let's be honest, is not everyone's cup of tea? Are there other ways to stay off the algorithmic grid? Actually there are, and I'm mystified why the makers of *The Social Dilemma* are silent about them.

Lockdown of consciousness

Here's a partial list of safe, non-screen activities that anyone can undertake with zero risk of being dragooned into data-extracting, zombifying social networks: for starters, you could give yourself an eye massage, gently pressing your eyeballs in clockwise and anti-clockwise direction to check if they are still there; you can use your reserves of bile to self-digest your food; you can circulate your blood, first in your arteries, then in your veins; you can play synaptic Chinese whispers, wherein you directly transport electrical impulses from one neuron to the next; you can participate in mitosis and/or meiosis, depending on your mood; you can lead your own paramilitary force of armed antibodies into battle against foreign armies of viruses that dare to cross the Line of Immunity Control (LIC) and intrude into your body; and last but not the least, you can grow organic fingernails.

The options are many. But sadly, most people have been brainwashed into finding them insufficiently stimulating, which then opens the door to the screen, taking us back to the social dilemma: to swipe or not to swipe. Perhaps I'm being over-optimistic here, but I think as a species we must seriously explore the coma option.

Tell me honestly. What would you rather have: seven billion humans aggregated into fiercely antagonistic camps and fed daily on a diet of hateful misinformation that could lead to massive strife and destruction, or seven billion humans in a peaceful coma (a collective lockdown of consciousness, as it were) that could potentially not just avert climate catastrophe but also save humanity from extinction? Call it the anti-social dilemma if you like. But to my mind, this is the real dilemma.



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

PEACE IN A POD

Scrolling through the leaves of history

A research-based narrative podcast that brings together science, health and culture

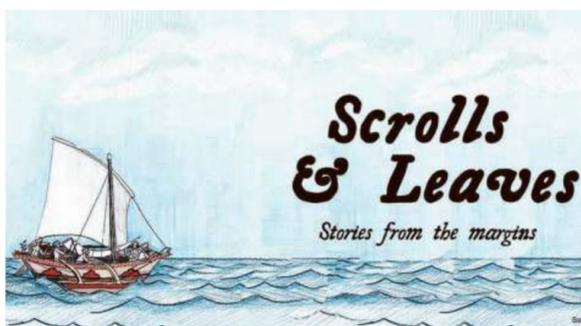
Usha Raman

“It feels like we’re policing ourselves and our neighbours these days. Our governments are certainly tracking us. States keep opening and closing borders.... We stay at home, waiting for permission to leave.... Our lives feel a bit dystopian, and the question is, how did we get here?”

The journey toward an answer takes up the next 35 minutes or so, as Mary-Rose Abraham and Gayathri Vaidyanathan explore archives, speak to experts, bring up old stories, and puzzle through the mists of time in *Pandemics and Borders*, the opening episode of the new podcast *Scrolls & Leaves*. The series emerged as a collaborative effort between the two longtime journalists and the Bengaluru-based National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) Archives.

Natural process

The podcast came up “almost as a very natural process”, explains Abraham, when she and Vaidyanathan were talking to Venkat Srinivasan, an archivist at NCBS, about the need for a research-based narrative podcast that brought together elements of science, health, history and culture, especially one that went beyond dominant Western perspectives. Access to the NCBS Archives helped them find an array of stories that could be brought to life with the



Sailing Trade Winds has six episodes that span the first two millennia.

added heft of historical record. “We really wanted to prioritise the voices from the margins,” says Vaidyanathan.

The first episode has four segments that explore how disease prompts the construction of borders and walls—from the masks we wear to the doors we shut to the passport control at airports. While the opening scene is set in the present time, drawing on our experience of the COVID-19 lockdown, the documentary quickly tunnels into the past to recreate the context of the first global pandemic—cholera—and the ways in which it was understood by science, interpreted by colonial power, baked into policy and draconian law by exclusionist administrators and, ultimately, experienced as

tragedy and hardship by an entire people.

Atmospheric storytelling

From a hut in Jessore in early 19th century Bengal to a Haj pilgrimage, the episode, in the manner of an audio documentary, moves between narration, expert interviews and atmospheric storytelling.

“We were very conscious of the fact that the podcast had to go beyond the usual interview format... we wanted to bring more of an auditory experience... in a way that makes the past come alive,” says Vaidyanathan, speaking on Skype from Canada. Nikhil Nagaraj, a Bangalore-based sound designer adds this element, helping create what they call a bi-aural “3-D immersive sound experience”.

The podcast’s storyteller, Sumit Kumar, voices a series of roles that fill out the human side of these complex histories.

Trade Winds

The first season, called *Trade Winds* has six episodes that span the first two millennia with a focus on stories that pursue the question, how did global trade over two millennia shape our lives? The first two episodes use the lens of the current pandemic to understand the historical forces that govern our response to disease (the second, *Healing Plants*, is scheduled to drop next week). The podcast also includes a series of “Chatroom episodes” with extended interviews with experts featured in the main episodes—in one, historian of medicine Alison Bashford traces the complicated backstory of quarantines and border regulations as a response to contagion: “...that’s when you get... a link between keeping disease out, and keeping out people.”

In terms of technical sophistication, storytelling techniques and depth of research, *Scrolls & Leaves* has much to recommend it. But listeners have a long wait between episodes; the rest of Season 1 comes out only next year!

The Hyderabad-based writer and academic is a neatnik fighting a losing battle with the clutter in her head.

GOREN BRIDGE

NORTH
 ♠ A Q J 2
 ♥ K 10 2
 ♦ Q 2
 ♣ 5 4 3 2

WEST
 ♠ 10 9 8
 ♥ A J 9 5 4 3
 ♦ 10 9
 ♣ A J

EAST
 ♠ K 7 6 3
 ♥ 8 6
 ♦ 7 5 3
 ♣ K Q 8 7

SOUTH
 ♠ 5 4
 ♥ Q 7
 ♦ A K J 8 6 4
 ♣ 10 9 6

The bidding:
 SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
 20 20 30 All pass

Opening lead: 10 of ♠

Think on your feet

Neither vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

It’s unusual for the weak twobidder to have as strong a hand as the over-caller, but both bids were reasonable. South won the opening spade lead with dummy’s ace and drew trumps in three rounds. He then led a spade to dummy’s queen



and East’s king. East shifted to a low club, South played his 10, and West won with his jack. West cashed the ace of clubs and the ace of hearts, but that was it for the defence. Dummy’s jack of spades provided a parking place for declarer’s third club. We don’t know how often the final contract would be three diamonds in a duplicate contest, but we would ex-

pect to see the same defence at many of those tables. It is a lazy defence, however, and we think West should have done better. East made a good play when he shifted to a low club. The defence would have had no chance had he shifted to a high club. From West’s point of view, it was certainly possible for South to have the queen of clubs rather than the queen of hearts, but how could the defence prevail after West wins the jack of clubs? West should see that the only chance for the defence was to win the club shift with the ace and return the jack. That would have led to down one. Always be on the lookout for an unusual play that can’t cost and might be very successful.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

The only time a man can be brave is when he is afraid: Ned Stark

Berty Ashley

This gentleman, born on September 20, 1948, used to write stories as a kid and sell them in the neighbourhood for a penny. He had to stop when one of his stories induced nightmares in a young customer. He started writing his epic seven-part series in 1991 and is currently writing the sixth book. An adaptation of this series was made into a TV show that had an award-winning run of eight seasons, but had a somewhat disappointing conclusion. Who is this author and which TV show did his books inspire?



Predictable This show was originally titled *House of Comics*.

This show is about a Voice Input Child Identificant, who is an android built by Ted, an engineer, in an effort to assist handicapped children. To study human-android interaction, he takes it home and tries to keep it a secret. But their disagreeable neighbours, the Brindles, keep on popping up at the most unexpected moments – especially nosy next-door neighbour Harriet. How better do we know Voice Input Child Identificant and in which show would you have seen it?

Michael Crichton went to Steven Spielberg with a script for a movie based on events that happened in a hospital. They got talking about another book he was writing, and eventually that became the movie *Jurassic Park*. The first script was later picked up by another company and made into a TV show that ran for 15 seasons. Which show is this whose name is made of two letters denoting the part of a hospital where anything can happen at any time?

This American drama series follows the adventures of a teenage girl who is one of the ‘chosen ones’ and has to battle mythical beings and forces of darkness while trying to live a normal life of a schoolgirl.

This show also showed the first usage of the word ‘google’ as a verb in media. Which show was this that launched the career of Sarah Michelle Gellar?

This show was originally titled *House of Comics* and was about three comedians living together in a house. When writer Jeff Franklin pitched it to ABC, they told him they were looking for something more family-oriented. So he turned it into a scenario where only one of the three was a comedian and the other two were a musician and a widower whose three daughters the others help raise. Which show was this that had a catchy theme tune that started with the words ‘What ever happened to predictability??’

Lyndsy Fonseca and David Henrie, who played the narrator’s kids, had to shoot all of their scenes during Season 1 to work around the fact that Henrie was going through puberty. Therefore, they had to keep the secret about the show’s ending.

around which the entire premise was built, for nine years. Which show was this that gave us the iconic phrase ‘legen-wait for it-dary’?

This show was initially titled *Insomnia Café* or *Six of One* and eventually got the single-word title we are familiar with now. It was usually shot in front of a live audience, except the cliffhanger episodes. When the series started, each cast member had a different salary, but in 1997 they became the first to negotiate as a group so that everyone got an equal salary, eventually earning a million dollars per episode. Which TV show was this that is almost always playing on some channel?

This show was produced by music production legend Quincy Jones, and he even cameos as a cab driver in the title sequence. The lead character and Quincy also composed most of the music for the show, which laid the foundation for the actor to become an award-winning

musician in his own right. Which show was this that followed the exploits of a street-smart teenager from west Philadelphia as he is sent to live with his wealthy uncle?

This TV show follows the life of the title character as she faces the regular personal and social issues of being a teenager. One of the stand-out parts of the show was her animated alter-ego, who would translate her inner monologue at all times. The show won many awards for portraying how she and her best friends Miranda and Gordo dealt with multiple issues such as bullying and peer pressure. Which show was this that was led by the amazingly talented Hillary Duff?

The creator of this spooky show came up with the idea when he read a report that more than three million people claim to have been abducted by aliens. The show became a cornerstone of the Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) movement, thanks to one of the lead characters who is a skeptical detective. Which era-defining show was this that had the tagline ‘The Truth is Out There’?

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. George R.R. Martin, *Game of Thrones*
 2. Vic, *Small Wonder*
 3. ER (Emergency Room)
 4. Buffy the Vampire Slayer
 5. Full House
 6. How I Met Your Mother
 7. F.R.I.E.N.D.S.
 8. The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air
 9. Lizzy McQuinn
 10. The X-Files

LETTER FROM A CONCERNED READER

Shopping shopping

Respected Madam/Sir,

Mr. Mathrubootham wants only one single thing in whole world. Only one thing. What is that thing? Peace of mind. But what is world saying? World is saying all other items are available Mr. Mathrubootham but peace of mind is out of stock. More stock is coming in two weeks shall I put booking?

This is the problem. Thursday morning what is happening? Nothing. 7 a.m. onwards I am waiting for tension. Some tension will come from somewhere like black cat commando. But by 10 a.m. no tension commandos are coming. So I am thinking let me enjoy day without any chicaneries. At that moment doorbell is going ting tong and I thought welcome chicanery.

Outside who is standing? Mrs. Pramila from 11th floor. Previously she was air hostess in Vayudoot and Indian Airlines and all. Nowadays she is predicting future with playing cards and aromatherapy type things. Two-three years ago she said, Mathrubootham you are tension party. You please take hibiscus oil put it into water and spread the aromas in the house. All tensions will go away. I said, ok why not. If you are giving free oils means I will do.

Madam/ Sir, what happened? I put hibiscus oil in hot water. Then as I am picking up bowl, oil bottle fell on the floor. Next moment I stepped on oil bottle. Next moment I fell on the floor. And hibiscus water fell on me. From 2017 to 2019 I am smelling of hibiscus nonstop. This year only smell is gone.

When I saw Mrs. Pramila I said, hello hello how are you, I have hibiscus oil no need for more supply. She said, very good Mr. Mathrubootham you are feeling totally tension free no? I said, yes, since 2017 no tension.

She said, ok can you do me one favour? My one nephew is here. Nephew said, hello uncle. I said, hello to one young boy 100% ruffian. Mrs. Pramila said, can you please teach him some manners.

Every day he is saying purchase this, purchase that. I am asking whether money grows on trees? No value for money. Will you tell him stories from your childhood with nothing but poverty and monthly shopping?

Madam/ Sir, why such things happen only to me? Other people are enjoying like anything. Eating, reading, feeding peacock and all. But Mr. Mathrubootham? Non-stop irritation morning to night.

At that moment Mrs. Mathrubootham came. No problem whatsoever, she said. You please leave the boy for two hours.

Pramila said, thank you and left like snake. Then

Mrs. M said, you please give education to this young man immediately. Then she also left like second snake. Whether this is flat or Tirunageswaram Naganathaswamy Temple?

I said, boy sit down. I did not wear chappals till 11 years of age. He said, why not? I said, because no money. He said, when money came, you bought chappals or no? I said, yes,

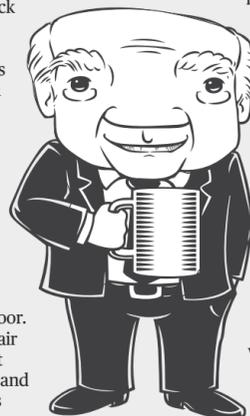
immediately my father purchased. He said, I am also saying same thing uncle. If money is there let us do shopping. I said, young man what shopping-shopping you are talking? No other activities are there? When I was your age shopping was maximum once a month. He said, what about these days? You are still shopping once a month?

I was thinking of one punch dialogue when Mrs. M came and said, old man yesterday you purchased wrong type Marie biscuit. Today when you go shopping please get better brand. I said, thanks Kamalam, very useful input at this moment.

Young boy is sitting and smiling. Then he is saying, Uncle, you are shopping every day no? Why you are wasting so much money in old age?

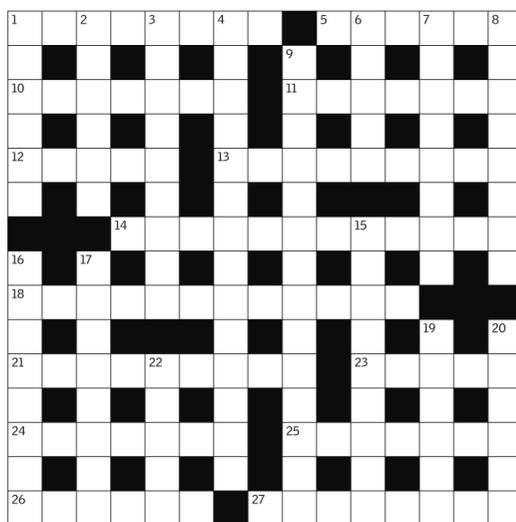
Madam/ Sir, I told him, young man, when you become Prime Minister, please give autograph. Then we proceeded for lunch.

Yours in exasperation,
 J. Mathrubootham



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3117



Across

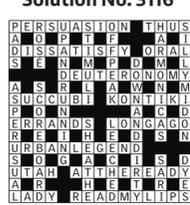
- Fluttering leaf? As if! Sure! (4-4)
- Subject is suppressing resistance ring (6)
- Comman not about to get left in prison (7)
- Pensioner disrespectfully told ‘not to start reckless dare’ (3,4)
- Rishi’s reconstruction – people allegedly lucky (5)
- We’re told, alternatively, a conservative has debts or works (9)
- Actor in Shakespeare’s *Trouble and Strife* (4,8)
- Unlikely apricot-lover? (12)
- Furor with turkey as practical joke (5,4)
- Everyman, rank and fuming (5)
- Performing male’s accepted by Everyman formally (2-5)
- Frightful migraine, head splitting somewhere in Africa (7)
- 26 South American congress assembled ancient kingdom (6)
- Primarily, style Yazoo notably tried, having plenty of pep? (5-3)

Down

- Geological evidence from UFOs? Silly (6)
- Regularly seen in mist, tall birch tilting (6)
- Musician rejected movement of ‘phony music’ like Beethoven’s 5th (9)
- Move one lorry of bananas at

- any cost(3,4,2,5)
- Auntie’s known for this: some flipping rheumatoid arthritis (5)
- Quiet about struggles to include Western trailers (8)
- Brief agreement written up, son’s respectful gestures (8)
- Like Bugs when bugged? (3,1,5,5)
- Walking in fog, lost, going after love, wearing belt (7,2)
- Excuses given by European missing in attacks (8)
- Spies ill prepared ... (8)
- Dog holding tune, Come Together (4,2)
- Vicar gets electronic kit to modernize (6)
- Somewhere in church, reported villainous character (5)

Solution No. 3116



The writer's GAZE

Trepan Singh Chauhan — poet, novelist, social activist — touched the lives of lakhs of people in Uttarakhand

Shankar Gopalakrishnan

On August 13, in the ICU ward of Synergy Hospital, Dehradun, writer and activist Trepan Singh Chauhan passed away at the age of 48. But what ended that day was not only his body — wracked by motor neurone disease (MND) — but a life that had touched lakhs of people, one rooted in the best of Uttarakhand's and India's traditions.

I had the privilege of knowing Trepan as a colleague, comrade and friend. He was born in the village of Keparas in Tehri Garhwal district, Uttarakhand, and had a colourful childhood, running away briefly and working as a child labourer in a temple and a hotel in Meerut. But by the time he was 14, he had also started organising young people as part of the Chipko movement. After joining and leaving other groups, he and a handful of comrades founded a new organisation, Chetna Andolan, in 1994.

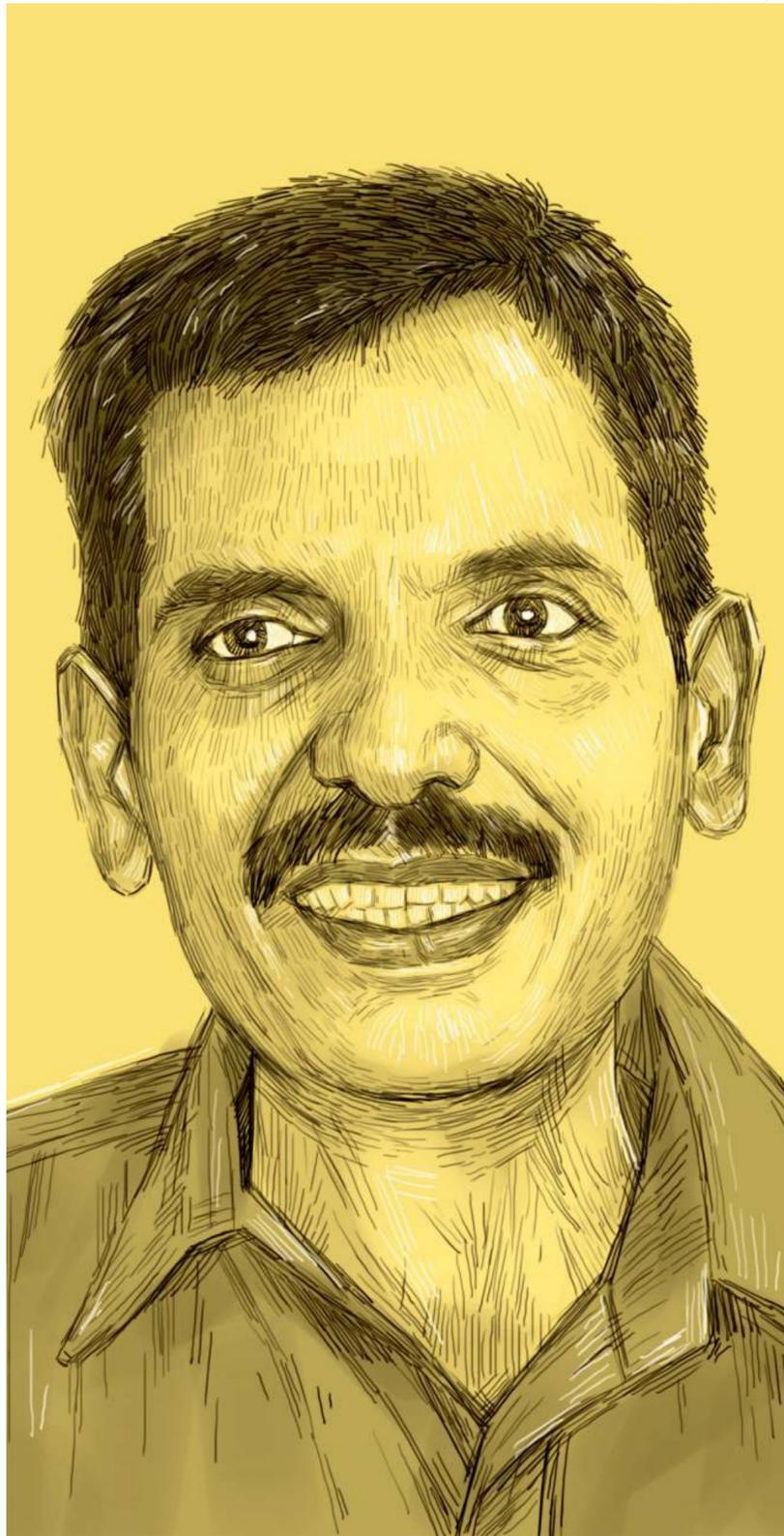
The organisation fought first for the right to information — holding mass public hearings — and went on to take up a whole range of issues. These included movements for forest rights and natural resource rights, including one major struggle against a destructive project in a village called Falinda, which culminated in the only agreement in Uttarakhand between a village community and dam developers that was actually implemented. During these

movements, Trepan faced numerous false cases and was jailed briefly, but neither he nor the Andolan backed down. From 2009 onwards, he began organising daily wage workers in Dehradun, which led to a struggle for welfare benefits through which thousands of workers have received their rights. Alongside all this, Trepan campaigned against communal hate politics and mob violence, contested caste discrimination and untouchability, and opposed patriarchal norms in his own home area.

Beyond boundaries

In fact, it's difficult to even summarise all the different initiatives that Trepan began, led or joined over the years. He went beyond the boundaries of what might be considered 'traditional' activism, becoming an accomplished writer who published poems, short stories and novels, including *Yamuna*, the best-known novel on the Uttarakhand movement. He started an alternative school that has now been running for 15 years. He helped found a producer company, a kind of cooperative, which will hopefully soon set up a wholly vil-

Trepan campaigned against communal hate politics and mob violence, contested caste discrimination and untouchability, and opposed patriarchal norms in his own home area



• ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

- Wrote the well-known novel *Yamuna* on the Uttarakhand movement
- Was a social activist from the age of 14, involved in almost all of Uttarakhand's major movements
- Was nominated for but declined the Reebok Human Rights Award
- Once described as the "brain of Uttarakhand"

He built his life around that understanding.

Final struggle

He also brought it into his last, terrible struggle, his fight against MND. MND (better known as ALS) is a neurodegenerative disorder that damages the nerves that control muscles, affecting and often over time destroying the ability to move, speak, eat or even breathe. Trepan showed the same creativity and courage in this struggle as in every other. He was aware of the overwhelming odds and he felt the terror and pain, but he always found a basis for hope. He threw himself into every medical option we could find and celebrated every tiny gain. His doctors were moved to remark, repeatedly, that they had never seen a patient fight like this.

In 2017, both his hands now hanging limply by his sides, Trepan walked 18 kilometres to a mountain village for a discussion. As long as he could move, even when he later needed someone to hold him up, he would come to every meeting and every protest. When we obtained an eye-tracking device that made it possible for him to use a computer, within five minutes he started writing his next novel. In his final weeks, lying plugged into a ventilator in the ICU, unable to move or communicate except through his eye tracker, he still had his *lekhak ki nazar*. On one of my daily visits, he instantly noted the signs of despair on my face. He wrote, "*Niraasha mai hona, Shankar, hameisha lad kar jeete hain, is baar bhi lad kar jeetenge*" ('Don't lose hope, Shankar, we've always fought and won, and we will win this time too').

He was wrong about that. Now it seems almost a betrayal to try to reduce that life of struggle and inspiration to a few hundred words. But Trepan believed in the power of words, in the power of writing and song, in the soaring heights people can reach if they can only see themselves. So I can only hope that these words give you a tiny glimpse of this man's extraordinary love for humanity, and the gaping hole his passing leaves in this world.

The writer and activist is with Chetna Andolan, a people's organisation in Uttarakhand.

lage-owned and democratically run hydel project. In 2016, he persuaded the rest of us in Chetna Andolan to go along with what we regarded as a slightly oddball plan — holding a competition for *ghasiyaris* (women who cut grass), both to honour their contribution to the State's struggles, and as a way to reach rural women on the issues that mattered to them. The competitions, two of which were held, resoundingly disproved our scepticism. Over 5,000 women spread over more than 200 villages participated, and the events were front-page news across the State.

Those competitions were only one particularly striking example of Trepan's exceptional creativity, his ability to find methods that could break through cynicism and apathy. In the process, he blew apart the lazy generalisations so often made about Indian society — about 'traditional' communities versus secular elites, local rootedness versus ivory-tower liberals, social activists versus mass politics. Trepan belonged to all those worlds and more. When he passed away, every Hindi media outlet in Uttarakhand carried the news, and everyone from senior police officers to reporters to writers poured out their grief on social media. It was not for nothing that Rajiv Lochan Sah, himself one of the State's foremost intellectuals, once described Trepan as the "brain of Uttarakhand".

For Trepan himself, though, his work was just a reflection of a way of thinking. He called it his *lekhak ki nazar*, his writer's gaze. It took me years to understand what he meant by that phrase. Trepan's genius went beyond his expressed political views and rested on his deep, abiding understanding of people, his empathy for what drives us to fight, to love and to sacrifice.



Conventional Models of the proposed Ram Mandir. • PTI & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Gautam Bhatia

One of the true indicators of secular democratic behaviour is how a country and its people treat its minorities. After the tragedy of 9/11, a mosque on the periphery of the old World Trade Center was damaged. To make the point that Muslims were equal citizens, and not to be made potential targets of racism, the New York authorities were quick to provide relief to the damaged mosque and restore it for prayers, despite strong opposition from local right-wing groups. It was an important civic statement, and a just settlement of an issue that could have become contentious and overblown. Compare this to the Chinese government's approach to its Muslim minority. With the Han Chinese in a majority, the government has incarcerated more than a million Uyghur Muslims from the country's northwestern Xinjiang region in vast concentration camp-like facilities set up to

convert them to a Han mindset.

India's muddled secularism falls somewhere between these extremes; it is often jolted out of its stagnant slumber to be pushed in the Chinese direction by the government, and then put on a corrective course by journalists and NGOs who cry foul. The Ram temple saga carried on for so long that the tale went sour long ago. Its recent inaugural stone-laying was the jaded conclusion of a resigned storyline, where everything had already been said by everyone.

However, as widely reported, thousands celebrated the temple's *bhumi puja* on August 5 like Diwali. The Prime Minister added his endorsement by actively participating in the ceremony. As with many recent construction projects, size matters. The ₹300

OFF-CENTRE

As the Ram Mandir comes up, its architectural design is satisfied to reflect an idealised past that ignores its troubled history

A temple so perfect

crore mandir will be twice the size of the original 1988 design, and will involve thousands of masons and other craftspeople over a three-and-a-half-year period.

Sprawling structure

Designed by the Ahmedabad-based Sampura family and built of Bansi sandstone from Rajasthan, the structure will sprawl across 10 acres of the 57-acre site. The vast

additional acreage around it that has been acquired from the Sunni Waqf Board will remain a public garden.

Is this exclusionary design a reasonable proposal for a place of such contentious history? Would a more deliberate inclusionary project, and one with multiple identities and functions, have been more effective in a situation exhausted by the heightened religious polarities it has seen? It would have been so much better if we had learnt the values of religious engagement from the inclusive ideas of architectural history.

The Alhambra in Spain went through numerous historic interventions. It was built on top of Roman foundations in 889 as a Muslim palace; 600 years later, it was converted into a Christian royal court for King Ferdinand II of Aragon, and later, in the 16th century, a Renaissance palace was added to the grounds. Now a world heritage site, the complex is an Islamic original, with a Christian palace and a Moorish garden, all sitting on Roman foundations. Such intrusions enlarge and engage with human history and give spaces — whether religious or secular — the feel of real life.

Narrow vision

Sadly, a narrow religious view seems to be on the rise everywhere today, especially in places where the majority rules. In Turkey, the Hagia Sophia was built in 537 AD under Roman emperor Justinian I as a Christian church. The building remained a cathedral for a thousand years, till the Ottomans converted it into a mosque. Early in the 20th century, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk — eager to build a secular nation — turned the mosque into a museum, open to everyone.

Now a world heritage site, the Alhambra complex is an Islamic original, with a Christian palace and a Moorish garden, all sitting on Roman foundations

Barely a few weeks ago, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reopened it as a mosque.

In India, we remain partial to a sanitised view of history, where architectural symbols are cleansed and made visible in immodest and monumental perfection. The Ram Mandir begins and ends on a clean slate, on ground scrupulously prepared for a glittering new structure with a permanent future. Reviews have described the temple blueprint as 'truly unique', yet the architecture is so guarded, so traditionally conventional in design, it could be anywhere. It could be a model, it could be a plaster cast or a replica, built in the 18th century or the 21st. A temple so perfect, without the scars of time or any evidence of its tumultuous past, with no reflection of the site's bloody battles, in court and on site, the demolitions, the intrusions or acquisitions.

What would have happened if the ruins of the mosque had been allowed to remain in the undergrowth of the proposed garden near the new temple? What would it take to make a museum display on site attesting to the shifting physical record of the place, documenting its pained history? Only when we learn to accept history as a changing process — and not a perfect product — can we reveal who we really are.

The writer is a Delhi-based architect and sculptor.

