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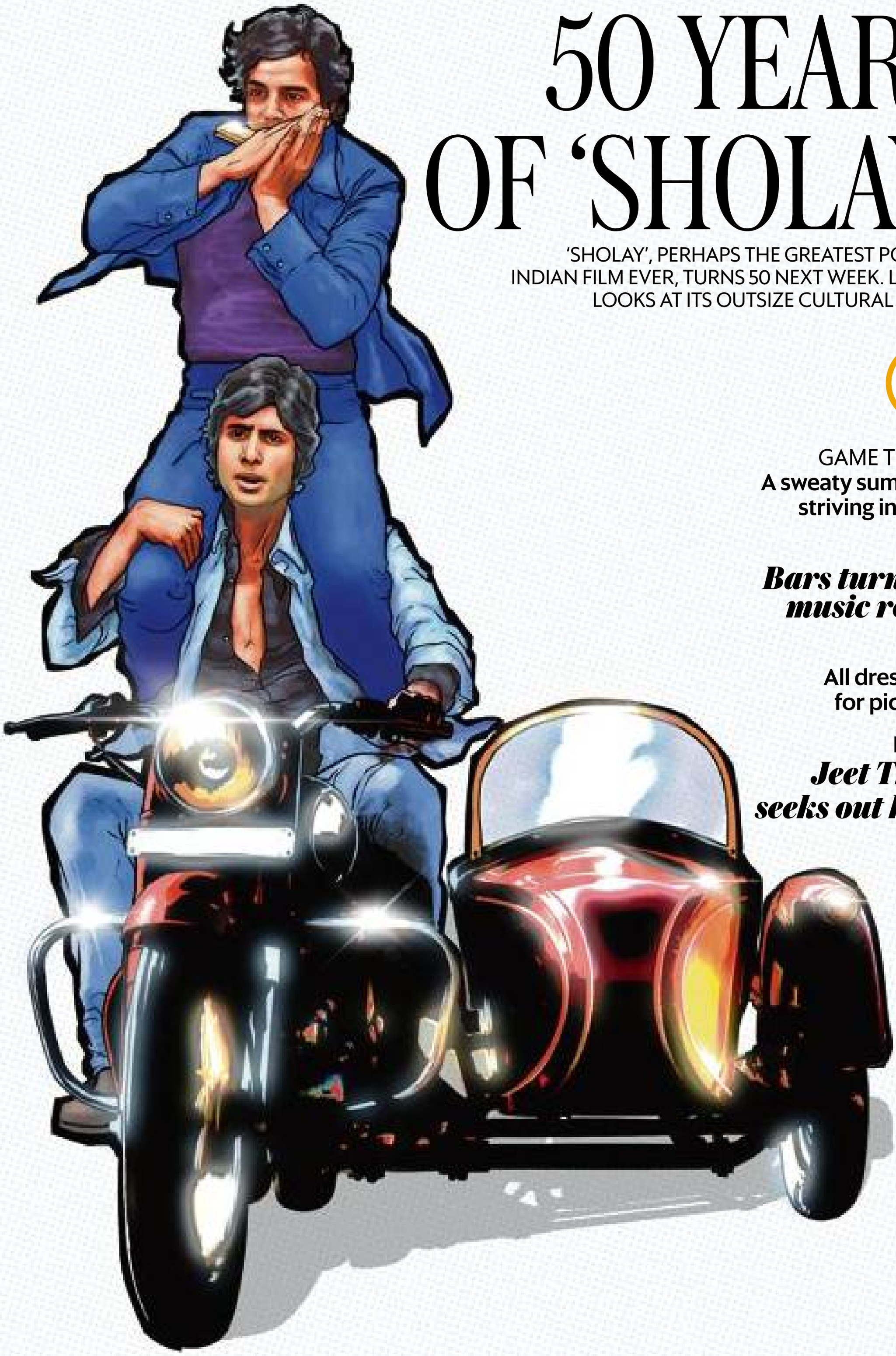
FANTASTICAL WORLDS

At Delhi's Latitude 28 gallery, three artists—Neha Sahai, Bhajju Shyam and Viraj Khanna—connect the personal and the universal, the real and the imaginary in the exhibition 'The Personal is Mythical'.

SEE PAGE 11



50 YEARS OF 'SHOLAY'

'SHOLAY', PERHAPS THE GREATEST POPULAR INDIAN FILM EVER, TURNS 50 NEXT WEEK. LOUNGE LOOKS AT ITS OUTSIZE CULTURAL IMPACT

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN

Everyone's got a 'Sholay' memory

When songs from *Sholay* appeared on TV in the 1990s, my parents always livened up. It wasn't just the music; they also had a story to tell about trekking to Leicester from London, a distance of about 100 miles, to find a theatre that screened Hindi films in the UK of the 1970s. It's a day that came alive with just a few bars of music. They'd loved the cast, the music, the drama, and described it all in vivid detail, saying we should watch it, but somehow, we never did. It was almost as if they didn't want to erase the memory of a time before they had the depressing responsibilities of raising children and making ends meet. Or as Virginia Woolfe wrote nearly a century ago in her essay, *The Movies and Reality*, "As we gaze, we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence."

Most people have a *Sholay* reference of their own. Even people like me who grew up in places where Hindi wasn't terribly popular. To date, I haven't seen *Sholay* in full. I know the songs. I can spot scenes from it. I know when it's being quoted (well, somewhat) but I don't really understand it. Yet—just like people who have watched the film—I have memories of it. What makes a film seem timeless, even iconic, and a part of popular culture and memory? It's the question writers—Jai Arjun Singh, Nasreen Munni Kabir and Raja Sen—attempt to answer in this issue to mark 50 years of the film.

Rohit Brijnath looks back on the long summer of sport—from Tests at the Oval to the Tour de France—and contemplates the grit of sportspersons who slog everyday for one win. Shrabonti Bagchi writes about a new crop of restaurants that pay as much attention to music as food, setting up listening rooms where the menu matches the mood and the sound. And then there are all your popular favourites—books to read, shows and exhibitions to see and recipes for quick weekend meals.

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NEW ON SCREENS

Jia Zhangke looks back, Zach Cregger returns with a new horror film, and other titles to watch

WEAPONS
One night, 17 children from the same class walk out of their homes without any warning and disappear. The ensuing mystery grips the town and especially the teacher whose class they attended. *Weapons* is directed by Zach Cregger, who made the breakout horror hit *Barbarian*. (In theatres)

GHICH PICH
A coming-of-age film about three friends and high school classmates, and their complicated relationships with their fathers. This lo-fi production is set in Chandigarh in the 1990s. Written and directed by Ankur Singla. (In theatres)

SORRY, BABY
After a traumatic experience, Agnes must pick up the pieces and carry on with her life. Eva Victor, an actor and writer who shot to fame making short comic sketches, wrote, directed and stars in *Sorry, Baby*. This bittersweet film also stars Naomi Ackie, Lucas Hedges, John Carroll Lynch and Kelly McCormack. (In theatres)

CAUGHT BY THE TIDES
Jia Zhangke's film stretches from 2001 to the covid-era northern Chinese city of Datong, and tells the story of Qiao Qiao (Zhao Tao) who goes in search of her lover the unreliable Guao Bin (Zhubin Li). *Caught by the Tides* is an extraordinary film in both scope and conception. Using a variety of film and video styles, Zhangke nimbly traverses two decades of Chinese history, repurposing footage he'd shot over the years and scenes from some of his earlier films starring Zhao Tao. The film was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 77th Cannes Film Festival. (MUBI)

Compiled by Uday Bhatia

PLAN THE WEEK AHEAD

MOMENT IN MODERNITY

A new show at Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai draws connections between the rhythm of the soul and the workings of nature. Titled *A Moment in Modernity*, the exhibition is curated by Alka Pande and features works by husband-wife duo, Sharmila and Haren Thakur. Both artists draw inspiration from the indigenous communities of Bengal and Jharkhand to present contemporary works that reflect the simplicity and powerful spiritual belief in the human bond with nature. While Sharmila works with paper pulp, plaster of Paris and enamel paint, Haren's recent series features large mixed media paintings.

At Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, till 11 August, 11am to 7pm.

MIXED MEDIA EXPERIMENTS

Experimenter is presenting a solo show, *Mashrabiya*, of Praneet Soi's works—his third at the gallery. Soi studied painting at Vadodara's Maharajah Sayajirao University. Spanning a decade of his work, the exhibition looks at the archiving and re-appropriation of the circulated image, and the link between body and architecture. The paintings, sculptures, painted papier mache and porcelain tiles, bring together Soi's ongoing engagement with the craftspersons of Srinagar and traditional porcelain makers in Guangzhou in China.

At Experimenter Hindustan Road, Kolkata, 13 August to 26 September, 10.30am to 6.30pm (closed on Sunday and Monday).

—Compiled by Avantika Bhuyan

LOUNGE ONLINE

YOUR FAVOURITE WEEKEND READ NOW THROUGH THE WEEK

The best stories from **livemint.com/mint-lounge** from the week gone by

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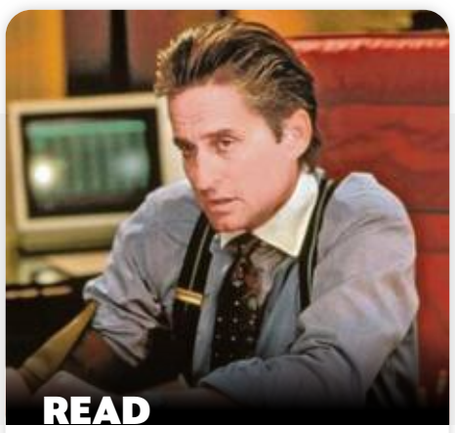


READ

Michael Douglas and male insecurity

Popular movies have always been used as a loudspeaker to propagate our worst impulses. This is the central premise of Jessa Crispin's new book of criticism, *What is Wrong With Men: Patriarchy, the Crisis of Masculinity, and How (Of Course) Michael Douglas Films Explain Everything*. The US ushered in a number of legislative and societal reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, the goal being equal rights for women. Crispin locates Michael Douglas as representative of a certain kind of liberal man who struggles to cope with the shifting role of men in such a landscape. In his review, **Aditya Mani Jha** looks at the author's interpretation in which Douglas is the "performing hysteric" for the men of the 1980s and 1990s.

BUY

Samsung's foldable gets a makeover

For most of the world outside of China, Samsung is synonymous with the foldable phone category, having been the pioneer of the form for well over half a decade. Of late though, iterative updates and heated competition had made its very mature and otherwise capable lineup feel a little behind the times. With the launch of the Samsung Galaxy Z Fold 7, that changes, writes **Tushar Kanwar**. The foldable phone that costs close to ₹2 lakh looks like it's fresh off a successful diet, transforming into one of the slimmest and lightest book-style foldables around, a transformation that fundamentally changes how it handles (for the better). The Fold 7 weighs lesser than the iPhone 16 Pro Max or the S25 Ultra.

DRINK

Seeking Vietnam's best egg coffee

French colonisers brought coffee to Vietnam in the mid 19th-century. The Vietnamese introduced local variations, like coconut, yogurt and the now famed egg, which was invented in 1946 by a bartender at a Hanoi hotel. Faced with a milk shortage during the war, the resourceful gent whisked eggs and condensed milk to make cappuccinos—and egg coffee was born. The bartender, Nguyen Van Giang went on to open his own cafe. Today, the light, frothy and sweet egg coffee is a must-try when visiting Hanoi. The frothy drink tastes like an airy, coffee-flavoured custard, writes **Prachi Joshi**, while recommending the most popular spots to get your egg-coffee fix in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

THINK

Why surrogacy scams persist in India

A decade ago, the business of fertility treatment was at its peak in India. With guidelines firmly in place, there were well-established clinics with experienced doctors, state-of-the-art equipment and streamlined services that attracted couples from all over the world. The ban on commercial surrogacy in 2019—and the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act in 2021—changed things. Today, the fertility business is in chaos. Until lawmakers understand that women have reproductive rights and that women's labour doesn't come free, we will continue seeing "fertility" scams like the recent instance of a doctor in Hyderabad who offered fake fertility treatments and was involved in trafficking babies, writes **Gita Aravamudan**.

ON THE COVER: ILLUSTRATION BY TARUN KUMAR SAHU/MINT

Source

A compendium of pretty objects inspired by the Indian tricolour

FINE VINE
Son Of A Noble Kevin Vine White Kurta Set
The slim-fit *kurta* features all over print with appliqué detail and is paired with matching pants. *Available on Sonofanoble.com; ₹22,000.*

STRIDE UP
Stoique Luck Rust Orange Pant
Rust-orange flared and pleated trousers made in Mysore silk include a button and zip closure and side pockets. *Available on Elahe.in; ₹7,500.*

BLUE POP
Neelam Chokor Boota Scarf
Add an element of kitsch to your ensemble with this blue scarf that's crafted in handwoven *Chanderi* fabric and features a lively digital print. *Available on Torani.in; ₹16,500.*

DIALSHOW
Hermès 'Cut' Automatic Watch
The Hermès watch features a 36mm dial set in a stainless steel case and an orange rubber strap. *Available on Mrporter.com; ₹7.50 lakh.*

IN BLOOM
Raw Mango 'Elbrus' Sari
The "Elbrus" *gulmohar*-orange silk twill sari from Raw Mango features a mélange of flowers printed all over and highlighted with hand embroidery. *Available on Rawmango.com; ₹30,500.*

EASY MIX
Reik White Silk Dress and Green Jacket Set
This Reik design includes a sleeveless white dress with *bandhani* print and a green jacket. *Available on Ensembleindia.com; ₹30,500.*

TIGHT KNIT
Eugenia Kim 'Chelsea' Leather-Trimmed Crochet Tote
The Kelly Green-toned "Chelsea" tote is crocheted using two different stitches and trimmed with leather straps. *Available on Net-a-porter.com; ₹34,403.*

BIG STEPPER
Golden Goose 'Ball Star' Distressed Sneakers
White "Ball Star" sneakers decorated with a star are made from scuffed leather. *Available on Goldengoose.com; ₹58,029.*

GREENING
Marta Ferri Green 'Ramatuelle' Jacquard Vest
The "Ramatuelle"vest is jacquard-woven with a vibrant abstract pattern and has a relaxed fit. *Available on Net-a-porter.com; ₹1.65 lakh.*

Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

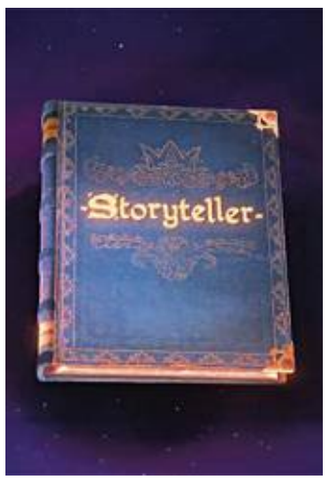
LOUNGE LOVES

Things to watch, read, hear, do—and other curated experiences from the team

A SAMBAR'S DAY OUT

Last weekend, a few of us drove down to the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai for an excursion. The rains had transformed the forest into a lush green landscape. After walking for over two hours, we found ourselves by a stream, excited to unpack our breakfast for a little picnic. Just then someone from another group shushed us. He pointed towards the road, where a sambar had just stepped out to graze. Naturally, out came the phones, everyone hurriedly clicking pictures. But the deer was unmoved, going about getting her morning dose of vitamins. At one point she looked up and almost seemed to be posing for the many cameras. While everyone enjoyed the moment, we also couldn't help but wonder at how wildlife had adapted to the urban landscape of this bustling metropolis.

— Rituparna Roy



STORYTELLER FOR A DAY

Tired of the mindless merge and match-three mobile games I used to play obsessively, I started exploring cosy, casual games that might be just a little bit more emotionally and intellectually satisfying, like my all-time favourite *Monument Valley*. The Netflix game *Storyteller* caught my eye and has proven to be a literal page-turner. The gameplay takes place within a magical storybook, with the player deciding how the plot unfolds. The stories are simple at first and grow in complexity as the player works their way through a series of puzzles. The artwork in the game is delightful and so are the voice-overs and music, giving me a restful break from the blingy, noisy graphics of *Candy Crush*.

—Shrabonti Bagchi

GHOST STORIES

Haunted house stories will never go out of style when it comes to ghost stories. And yet, these days it is a tired trope since the general plot of such a story is highly predictable. The question then is how does an author keep things interesting? Well, Jennifer Thorne certainly cracks it in the superlative *Daviola*. Set primarily in Tuscany in Italy, it charts the harrowing experience of an American family that has rented a 500-year-old villa for the summer holidays. Thorne slowly ratchets up a sense of growing dread and ominous doom, while balancing it with a satirical look at a rich, dysfunctional family of "Ugly Americans", and some excellent travel writing to boot. Unputdownable.

—Bibek Bhattacharya

A CHEWY TREAT

When my indie dog was younger, had boundless energy and chewed on everything (one week, I lost three pairs of shoes to her), I came across the yak chew. I wasn't optimistic about it, since every chew claimed to be the best for toothy dogs, but it surprised me. Made of yak milk cheese, the chew was hard but clearly also tasty (in my dog's opinion). She quickly got very attached, and to my relief, it would keep her busy for far longer than any other chew had. In my experience, dog chews can also be made of questionable ingredients, so I was pleased to have found one that my more delicate Retriever could also have. I learnt to take it away from my indie before she broke it into pieces and swallowed them, and sometimes I would microwave the small bits for a tastier snack.

— Dakshayani Kumaramangalam

STREAM OF STORIES
RAJA SEN

The friend is the benefit

A still from 'Platonic', on Apple TV+.

There are times when friends are fighting when no punches are pulled. In the second season of the exceptional Apple TV+ comedy *Platonic*, we see Rose Byrne's Sylvia and Seth Rogen's Will really going at it. She is significantly upset at lines he has crossed. He is aggrieved that those lines exist in the first place. Both of them are indignant and wounded and sore, having it out with that brutal honesty only afforded to true friends. Then, mid-fight, Will makes a joke. It isn't a particularly good line, but Sylvia, mid-fight, is instantly compelled to acknowledge and even applaud this clumsy bit of innuendo. Palms are slapped, fives are exchanged, but the argument goes on.

Respect. It's what keeps a friendship together. I had thoroughly enjoyed the first season of *Platonic* back in 2023, primarily because the show—created and directed by Francesca Delbanco and Nicholas Stoller—understood how vital it is to keep old friendships alive as we ourselves get older, as well as the fact that a true friendship can often be entirely incomprehensible to those outside it. They don't get the co-dependence, the overreliance, the oversharing, the exact flavour of the nuttiness—and they don't have to.

By obliterating the will-they-wont-they undercurrent holding most sitcom twosomes in place, *Platonic* keeps the chemistry fresh right from the outset. We root for Will and Sylvia not because we want them to end up together, but because we each have our own Wills and our own Sylvias. The second season tests the unconditionality of their dynamic with Sylvia being hired to manage Will's upcoming wedding. Catastrophe is not only imminent but inevitable. Therefore, even as their worlds take turns burning, we want more than ever for them to have each other. And to not let a fight get in the way of a silly pun. Or vice versa.

Rogen, as you may know, is on a tear. *The Studio*, the Hollywood satire he created for Apple TV+ is a smash hit and a critical favourite, already up for many awards. That show is cinematic, cool and edgily crafted—and I loved it—but *Platonic*, in its new and improved second season, feels funnier, smarter and even more insightful. Rogen's Will is that slacker man-child we know from the Judd Apatow movies, and in one hilarious scene, a character says he loves Rogen's signature laugh, calling it unique and infectious. "Thank you," says Rogen, taken aback. "I've honestly had pretty mixed reviews on it thrown my way." Heh heh. Mixed reviews seem like a thing of the past for Rogen, who seems increasingly assured as a performer and a storyteller.

Platonic belongs to Byrne. The Australian actress has always been compelling and charismatic, but it is here—when overextended by her three children and pets and a game-show-addicted husband who wants to write a legal paperback—that she is delivering the performance of her career. Most of the show's jokes are on Sylvia. She's the uncool one in the show, not only for her kids (one of whom says she has "newscaster hair") or her celebrity client, but even for Will, who seems to enjoy hanging more with other women. Including her friends. "A person from my world is forbidden to you," she cautions Will, who is bewildered by the line: "What is this, *Avatar*?"

Playing the straight-man part in a show studded with gags is as thankless a job as a mother forced to clean up after kids—kids who, thanks to having two lawyers as parents, are efficient little blackmailers—yet it's within Byrne's exhausted performance that *Platonic* finds its heart. This season she is the one who can't afford to be irresponsible even as the world flakes around her. She's the lame one, the tired one, the one being laughed at whenever she tries to put on a voice or tell a joke, and yet she also has to find the reserves to call out someone her age for crushing on a girl with a Deadpool tattoo. It's a wonderfully weary and knackered performance, all eyerolls and sighs and muttering under one's breath.

Platonic vividly shows off Los Angeles, and alongside *The Studio* and Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, these comedic LA chronicles painting an evocative picture of a sunny and dirty and messy city, gradually overrun by robots. The writing is great, always clever but never trying too hard. There is one inspired sequence, for instance, where two men in their 40s sit around drinking beer and raving incessantly about one particular actress. "Sydney Sweeney is cantilevered," marvels Will. "She's like a Frank Lloyd Wright building."

The man he's talking to is called "Wild Card". He is a relic of Will and Sylvia's past, the anarchistic friend from college who was always up for mayhem and bad decisions. He's come from out of town for Will's bachelor party, and has brought along gummies—which happen to be mostly CBD-oil, sugar-free and good for joint pains. He's also increasingly eager to hit the sack, a fact that breaks both Will's and Sylvia's hearts. The two best friends, combative as they have been all season, are briefly united, making cruel jokes against a common, sleepy target. That's life for you. Sometimes the wild cards of our past turn out to be mild cards. All that matters is that we can laugh at them.

Raja Sen is a screenwriter and critic. He has co-written Chup, *a film about killing critics, and is now creating an absurd comedy series. He posts @rajasen.*

STREAMING TIP OF THE WEEK

Friendships have rarely been as iconic—or as funny—as Mike Judge's *Beavis and Butt-Head*, now streaming on JioHotstar. The show isn't quite as funny as in its MTV heyday, but their kind of irreverent, slacker commentary may only be more necessary in these overcommunicated times.

On land and in water, a shining summer of striving

GAME THEORY

ROHIT BRIJNATH

GETTY IMAGES

AP PHOTO

Oleksii Sereda and Sofiia Lyskun of Ukraine at the World Aquatics Diving World Cup 2025 in Beijing; (right) Mohammed Siraj during the India-Australia Test in London, on 3 August.

July sweats and bleeds and vomits into August.

In Toulouse, during the Tour de France, Jonas Abrahamsen, who starts the race 10 days after fracturing his collarbone, wins a stage. In Singapore, in a draining heat, 10km open water swimmers at the world aquatics championships are handed mid-race feeds and then regurgitate part of this gruel into the water. "It's not pretty," says Australian swimmer Moesha Johnson.

Yet they go and on and on, just like Mohammed Siraj charging in at the Oval, cheeky, grinning, prickly, transparent, and finally everyone can see who he really is, a study in endeavour, a bearded foot soldier who gives weight to all those words you tried to teach your kid. Unswerving. Wholehearted. Unstinting.

Siraj, like the cyclist and the swimmer, must be always asking himself an ancient, elemental question.

What you got?

How much more?

What is tired?

Winning is wonderful, but it's the striving to get there which seizes us, isn't it? The bloody-mindedness, the vigorous application of skill, the aching tilting at limits in search of something more profound than medals chucked into cupboards. It's one-armed Chris Woakes, like Anil Kumble with his strapped broken jaw, every wincing step an act of resoluteness. It's Tour riders falling and then taking abraded bodies down slick slopes at filthy speeds. "You play with your life," former rider Fabian Cancellara tells *The New York Times*.

The legendary climber George Mallory spoke of responding to the challenge of the mountain. The struggle, he said, "is the struggle of life itself, upward and forever upward". Every athlete has their mountain. For high-divers in Singapore, it's 144 steps up into the sky, 20m for the women, 27m for the men, more storeys than you can imagine from where they fall elegantly. Below, scuba divers wait.

Shohei Ohtani throws a baseball at roughly 160 kmph, these high-diving bodies can hit the water at 85 kmph.

"(The fear) just never goes away," says Rhiannan Iffland, the multiple-time world high-diving champion. Her tribe is her echo and so their daily striving lies in managing fear, wearing it, overcoming it.

This striving by athletes is a search, a finding of all of themselves, not just on good days but bad ones, when the body feels unsure, unready, hurting, or their rival is flicking them aside, but still they push because it's who they are or want to be.

Long before the Oval, this is who Siraj was, this was always his guarantee, his compensation for any perceived lack of skill, his promise to his shirt to bring effort and all its cousins—suffering, pride, desire—to every one of his 185.3 summer overs. Like the 3,338km Tour rider and the 10km swimmer, he's a long-form hero.

Striving isn't as obviously sexy as hand-eye skill (for example, the sublime Jasprit Bumrah) and so it takes longer to appreciate, like a museum piece which requires considered study. But rivals recognise this quality faster, they respect it, for they know 100% is an easy quote but a hard life, and Ben Stokes perfectly encapsulated the nagging, harassing force that Siraj has been by saying he keeps "coming and coming and coming".

Athletes empty themselves, day after day, which is why there is a bin at the swimming world championships. A bin which an official takes me to see, just a few strides away from the mixed zone, and below some stairs, sitting on a chair, plastic bag inside. A bin that acknowledges effort, salutes pain, reflects madness and invites release. A bin into which athletes can vomit.

> Oleksii Sereda of Ukraine had to go to Hungary and Poland to train, 'to prepare normally, physically and mentally to not hear rockets, shelters and stuff like this...'

I'm somewhat unfamiliar with water tribes and in Singapore I receive an overdue education. One Australian talks about her national trials where she vomits into a bag while still in the pool after the 1,500m. Her teammate, Johnson, competes in the 10km, 5km, 3km, 1,500m relay in open water, then the 1,500m heats and final in the pool, and in the end stands with hands on hips, proud, and says, "I'm absolutely ruined".

These swimmers talk about headaches, ears ringing, hands shaking, with a shrug. As if pain is intoxication. On a car ride, an open water swimmer from Singapore tells me that leading up to the Tokyo Olympics her "periods were so irregular because my body was just under so much stress all the time". The route to greatness wanders through suffering.

Striving is an attitude, a compulsion, a habit honed at practices. Like the 22x100m set Hungarian backstroker Hubert Kos once used to do. It's mostly hard to measure striving though, for there's no gauge to establish percentage of effort given, but of all the things I heard in the late summer, it's a diver I never met who put everything in perspective.

Oleksii Sereda is Ukrainian and had to go to Hungary and Poland to train, somewhere, he said, "to prepare normally, physically and mentally to not hear rockets, shelters and stuff like this. To sleep normally, to just live normally". And as he dived in Singapore, his father was on his mind, his father who is "almost on the front line", his father who was the reason why he was "feeling stressed every single day... trying to call him as much as possible, because it's really dangerous to be there".

There's pressure everywhere, on the cycling Tour, at the Oval as Siraj begins his run up, but also on this diving board where a 19-year-old Ukrainian stands wondering about his dad. Still these athletes march on, turning striving into a sweaty, shining hymn. Sereda won silver in the 10m platform and then his thoughts wandered to the man who could not be there.

"I think today he watched me," said the teenager.

"I'm not sure."

Rohit Brijnath is an assistant sports editor at The Straits Times, *Singapore, and a co-author of Abhinav Bindra's book* A Shot At History: My Obsessive Journey To Olympic Gold. *He posts @rohitdbrijnath.*

Is Urdu the language of Indian Muslims alone?

Rakshanda Jalil has recently translated a collection of Urdu stories by non-Muslim writers into English

Somak Ghoshal
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Urdu scholar and translator Rakshanda Jalil's new collection *Whose Urdu is it Anyway?* is linked by one theme: to challenge the notion that Urdu is the language of Muslim writers alone, especially in a pluralist country like India. She brings together 16 stories by non-Muslim writers who wrote in Urdu, most of whom were born in the early years of the 20th century, and achieved varying degrees of fame during their lifetimes. From Krishan Chandar (1914-77), one of the key figures of the Progressive Writers' Association, to the much-loved Gulzar (b. 1934), the volume features a range of styles and sensibilities to illustrate a powerful sentiment: "...as long as Urdu is yoked to religion—Islam—and a certain community–Muslims—it will never be understood in its entirety," Jalil writes in the introduction.

Urdu, along with its spoken variant Hindustani, was ubiquitous in public life once upon a time, especially all over the north of the Vindhyas. In the south, it still survives in the form of Dakhini, but in the last decade, the language is less visible and heard in the public domain. The written form of the language is no longer ubiquitous on signages, cinema titles and names of railway stations. Instead, Urdu has become politicised and framed as a language of appeasement.

Jalil's selection defies the Islamic exclusivity of Urdu. While a substantial body of fiction written in the language deals with Partition and its aftermath, writers like Devendar Issar, in his story *Mortuary*, and Surendra Prakash in *Scarecrow* focus on the plight of the poor and downtrodden. Renu Behl's *Draupadi Has Woken Up* is a sharp indictment of female foeticide in Punjab, while Deepak Budki's *The Rape of an Abandoned House* is a story of loot (most likely in the aftermath of a communal riot) that is at once original and disturbing.

By bringing attention to famous and less-known writers, Jalil shows that Urdu "belongs to whoever is willing to embrace it and in their capable hands, willing to be moulded like pliable clay."

Excerpts from an interview.

What were some of the surprising or unexpected insights you discovered while researching this book?

That Urdu fiction is a faithful mirror of a writer's times and draws from their milieu and circumstance. And that it steadfastly refuses to follow a formula, hence the output is so far removed from the stereotypical understanding of Urdu writers and by extension Urdu writings.

Tell us about your thoughts behind the selection. Why these authors and stories?

All collections are, by their very nature, selective. I make no claim to be objective nor do I claim to be comprehensive. There are many non-Muslim Urdu writers I have perforce not been able to include. I wish I had the space to include Fikr Taunsvi (whose real name was Ram Lal Bhatia), Kashmiri Lal Zakir, Zafar Payami (Diwan Birender Nath), Shamsher Singh Narula, Prakash Pandit, Balraj Menra, Balwant Singh, and several others. By the same token, I have omitted some of the best-known names of Urdu literature: Premchand, Upendranath Ashk and Ram Lal. None of these omissions are oversights; mindful of the immense variety before me, I have had to exercise editorial discretion and choose stories that pique the interest of modern readers. I wanted to present as comprehensive a range of concerns, topics and voices as possible.

Urdu is often perceived as a florid language due to its usage in poetry. But prose fiction and non-fiction in Urdu seem to have a spare, modernist style. Can you talk about these two faces of the language?

Yes. Urdu poetry and prose are like apples and oranges, though it is also true that Urdu prose can occasionally be very poetic and there is some excellent "prose poetry" being written by modern poets. But as I have said, much of modern Urdu short fiction draws from its time and circumstance, hence it is spare, spartan, sometimes staccato, given the circumstances. A dialogue between present-day characters cannot be in florid Urdu; that would take away from the realness that the modern Urdu writers are at pains to create. Renu Behl's characters in rural Punjab cannot speak in courtly Lucknowi Urdu; it would be absurd. Similarly, Krishan Chandar's footpath dwellers cannot speak in the same tone and tenor as Kanhailal Kapur's husband and wife—even though both writers are from Bombay.

Were there specific challenges involved in translating the texts?

I didn't want to flatten out the variations I found in the original Urdu into standard 21st-century English. I wanted to retain as much of the cadence of the original stories (as possible). For that I had to remain mindful of the context: Who is speaking? Are they rural or urban characters? Educated or illiterate?

ISTOCKPHOTO

Urdu has had a ubiquitous presence in public life in India; and (left) Rakshanda Jalil..

Are there any stylistic or cultural differences in the way in which Muslim and Hindu writers use the language?

Not in the early years, no. I think both were well aware of the cultural contexts of the "other", which explains why Muslim writers have written with so much authenticity about, say, Navratri celebration or about festivals such as Holi, Diwali, Shivratri, and so on. And it was the same with non-Muslim writers writing about Muslim festivals and religious figures; Premchand's *Karbala* and *Eidgah* instantly spring to mind. Among women writers, I can see a difference but to be fair, my sample size is very small: Sarla Devi's language is very different from all the other writers included here and yes it is different from an Ismat Chughtai or a Khadija Mastoor.

I would like to know more about Sarla Devi.

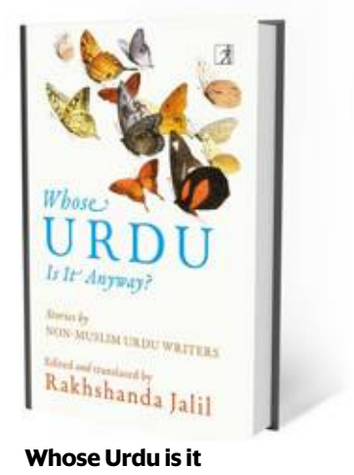
I must confess I had to look very hard to find a non-Muslim woman Urdu writer. Knowing full well that boys in non-Muslim families were taught Urdu and Persian whereas the girls were mostly taught Hindi, I was still hoping to find at least a few names who might have bucked the trend and proved to be in the same league as a Chughtai or a Hajra Masroor or any of the other male writers in this collection; regrettably, it took a great deal of diligent digging to find a lone Sarla Devi. Having found her, I was hard pressed to make a choice from her work spread across two collections of short fiction and numerous stories scattered in the literary magazines of her time, some even edited by her, such as *Shahrah*, along with Prakash Pandit. She was the sister of Krishan Chandar and Mahendar Nath, and wife of the Hindi writer Rewti Saran.

While the Hindi-Urdu binary is much spoken these days, does Hindustani survive in contemporary literature, if at all?

If a language is defined by vocabulary then yes there is a huge difference between the writers who have been active in the past 50 years than those who were active in the post-Partition years. The writings of Devender Issar, Surendra Prakash, Deepak Budki, Balraj Komal are very close to the spoken language. So the question we need to ask is: Are languages differentiated by script, grammar or vocabulary?

What are the most promising current efforts—institutional or grassroots—to reclaim Urdu as a shared cultural heritage in India today?

The single most promising thing in our times is content-driven programming. When it is intelligently done, it can truly open a window into a shared literary culture and sensibility. You may or may not know the script, you may not have read a lot in translation either but if you are willing to sit and listen to good literature being read or recited and allow yourself to be transported into another world, you can truly soar above the picket fences of language politics devised by petty minds.



Whose Urdu is it Anyway?: *Edited and translated by Rakshanda Jalil, Simon & Schuster, 208 pages, ₹499.*

Let's hear it for the new music bars

Listening rooms inspired by Japanese 'kissas' are showing up in India, with a focus on intimate bar experiences

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Akhila Srinivas recalls that the two things she associated with Bengaluru during her college days were beer and music. In the 1980s and 1990s, long before pub culture became mainstream in India, Bengaluru was a rock and jazz hot-spot with bars like Pecos, Styx and Purple Haze serving up a heady mix of music and Kingfisher beer. So when a spot opened up at the Courtyard, a community space she runs within a repurposed home that hosts a number of restaurants, cafés and bars in seemingly impossible nooks and crannies, she and her team zeroed in on recreating this, but doing something "a bit unexpected".

The result is the Middle Room, a music-forward bar inspired by Japanese *kissas* or listening rooms: intimate, dimly lit spaces where the focus is on listening to carefully curated music on vinyl records through high-end music systems. Along with Baroke and The Dimsum Room in Mumbai and Analogue in Goa, it is among a handful of new bar spaces in India that make playing music the old-fashioned way—on turntables and cassette players—the focus of your experience.

Articles on Japanese listening rooms, which have surged in popularity over the past decade, suggest that they evolved from Japan's music cafés (known as 'ongaku kissas') from the 1920s, with Tokyo listening rooms such as Ginza Music Bar and the Music Bar Cave Shibuya regularly featuring on the itineraries of audiophiles from all over the world. New listening rooms have emerged in cities like New York, London and Bangkok, blending serious audio-mania with craft cocktails and small bites.

The Middle Room faithfully recreates the vibe of these listening bars with its minimalist decor, wood-panelled walls, table lamps that create warm pools of light, and a row of shelves displaying vinyls. The sound is piped in through speakers from the audiophile-favourite Danley Sound Labs, which music consultant duo "Murthovic and Thiruda" of Elsewhere in India, a transmedia music practice that creates music installations at museums and galleries, insisted on. Guests are encouraged to speak softly and turn their phones off.

"In the older Japanese music rooms, people were discouraged from talking at all, though most of them are more relaxed about it now," says Akhila, who made several research trips to Tokyo before opening Middle Room. "We of course don't want to do that, and we want people to enjoy our food and drinks. But it is, first and foremost, a listening room." Signalling this is the fact that Middle Room charges a listening fee of ₹500—something that has come in for criticism on social media. "This isn't set in stone—it's something we are experimenting with because we want people to come here for active listening instead of music being an ambient element," she says.

It is not such a reach when you consider that India's audiophile and vinyl communities are growing steadily. As a 2022 *Lounge* story noted, bars and cafés have been setting up turntables and welcoming the vinyl-curious to explore the medium's resurgence, and there are groups in every big Indian city that connect over their love of analogue music.

Listening rooms are perhaps an extension of that culture—while the slightly older spaces like Bengaluru's The Record Room (temporarily closed, according to their Instagram page) and For The Record in Goa play vinyls, listening rooms take the game a step ahead by defining themselves within the parameters set by Japanese listening rooms.

It is somewhat of a rebranding, but a natural one, says Nehal Shah, founder of India Record Co., an online store selling vinyl and other analogue music and musical equipment. "Creating a listening room is different from acquiring a bunch of records and playing them. It has to be done with focus and intention, and the music list should convey an experience. It's not background music," explains Shah, who is a music consultant for Bengaluru-based speciality coffee chain Kink Coffee, which is setting up a listening room in their new outlet on Church Street. "It is definitely a trend today, and whether you serve cocktails or want to create a sober experience, the music is central to these spaces," she says.

(top) The Middle Room in Bengaluru; and The Dimsum Room in Mumbai.

A handful of new bar spaces in India make playing music the old-fashioned way—on turntables and cassette players—the focus of your experience

Diners want fresh experiences all the time, says Mayank Bhatt, founder of All In Hospitality that runs The Dimsum Room in Mumbai's Kala Ghoda, which has a dedicated listening room within the larger space. Designed by Munro Acoustics, which has worked on the expansion of the iconic Abbey Road Studios in London, it draws inspiration from vinyl lounges and bustling teahouses, layering jazz, ambient, and electronic music to create what Bhatt calls "a multi-sensory experience."

"With this beautiful 100-year-old property in Kala Ghoda, we wanted to create a unique space, and with my background in creating music-forward spaces and events like Blue Frog and antiSOCIAL, the concept of starting a listening room emerged organically," says Bhatt. "We want people to enjoy the food and drinks, and also be able to have a conversation at a normal decibel level."

It doesn't bother Sri Rama Murthy, aka Murthovic, that the Middle Room is, at the end of the day, a regular bar that serves dainty bar bites crafted by chef Adithya Kidambi along with draught beer and cocktails created by mixologist Arijit Bose.

"India is just a different culture from Japan, so you have to localise things without losing their essence. We are not purists in that sense. We do have a poster suggesting that people turn off their phones, but it's just a gentle suggestion," says Murthy, grinning.

The rice paper rolls are stuffed with dry fruits. STERLING PALAVELLI GODAVARI

Andhra's delicate dessert art

A trip to Atreyapuram village in East Godavari to see first-hand how 'pootharekulu' is made

Prachi Joshi

Emerald fields, small towns, large temples—the three-hour drive from Vijayawada airport to Yelamanchili Lanka village in West Godavari passes in a blur as I doze off and on. Every time I open my eyes, I see lush paddy fields fringed by swaying palms. Fed by the Godavari, the Konaseema region of Andhra Pradesh is a rich, fertile land, and I'm excited to explore this pastoral corner far removed from bustling cities. I arrive at Sterling Palavelli Godavari, a resort set on a coconut plantation, and check in for a weekend of rest and relaxation. Being a bit hungry, I immediately raid the welcome basket in my room. A cane box contains gossamer-thin rice paper rolls stuffed with a *ghee*-drenched mixture of dry fruits and jaggery. The accompanying note tells me that the sweet is called *pootharekulu*.

In Telugu, *pootha* means coating and *reku* (*rekulu*, plural) translates to sheets, an apt description of *pootharekulu*. This is one of the most popular sweets in Andhra Pradesh and is always a part of festivals, weddings and other special occasions. So, I'm surprised to learn that *pootharekulu* is almost exclusively made in the tiny village of Atreyapuram in the East Godavari district. Since the village is just 50km from the hotel, I'm keen to see first-hand how the sweet is made. I hop into a car with a guide and we head north.

Andhra Pradesh grows many rice varieties, of which the Jaya rice is used to make *pootharekulu*. But how this rice transforms into sheets that encase the sweet is the real work of art. In Atreyapuram, my guide brings me to a shed where Varalakshmi is hunched beside an upturned pot with a plate of thin rice batter in front of her. "The rice is soaked for about an hour then pounded into a watery slurry. The seasoned clay pot is heated from below with dried twigs or fronds of coconut trees," explains my guide. I watch fascinated as Varalakshmi dips a thin cloth in the rice batter and slaps it on to the pot, all in one fluid motion. The batter forms a sheet-like layer on the pot, and in less than a minute, it turns into a crisp, paper-thin sheet that she deftly removes and places in the growing pile on hand.

The making of *pootharekulu* is a thriving cottage industry in Atreyapuram in which some 400 families and several women's self-help groups are involved. A rice paper sheet is drizzled with *ghee* and chopped nuts like cashew, almond and pistachio are added. The sheet is folded over, more *ghee* is spooned on it, followed by a generous sprinkling of powdered jaggery. It is then tightly rolled up and placed in a box, ready to be packaged. *Pootharekulu* has been produced in Atreyapuram for nearly three centuries, and in June 2023, it received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Apart from the traditional dry fruit and jaggery combination, it also comes in honey and date variations as well as in new-fangled ones like Horlicks, Boost, and even Oreo.

I return to my hotel to an elaborate Konaseema *thali* dished up by the kitchen. After feasting on local delicacies like *gummadikaya dappalam* (sweet and sour pumpkin stew) and *gongura* rice , the chef brings out dessert. In a glass bowl, the "paper sweet" rests next to a serving of *gajar halwa*, a decidedly odd combination in my opinion. Ignoring the *halwa*, I bite into the *pootharekulu* and it practically melts in my mouth. I returned home with two boxes of this unique wispy sweet, and no, I did not share.

Prachi Joshi is a Mumbai-based travel and food writer.

A stent, low fats and high spirits

OUR DAILY BREAD

SAMAR HALARNKAR

Two days after his arrival from Australia and a day after he had a stent shoved up into one of his arteries, my friend Roger Galway sat up brightly in bed and watched as a young woman made her way into the hospital room.

She said, "What would you like to have for dinner, sir?" She was the dietician. "What I would like to have," he said, "you can't give me—a biryani." She smiled. "I can't give you a biryani, sir, but perhaps a *khichdi*?" She felt sorry for him and eventually promised a chicken curry.

Making lifestyle changes after a cardiovascular event can be challenging. I should know. It's been 12 years since the shock to my system. It took two years before I could figure out what was good for my body, as I tried to create a new version of myself. A former sportsman who played competitive cricket, hockey and football but let things slide in middle age—enjoying his regular beer and steak Down Under—my friend now faces the challenge of figuring out how to make the most of his second chance.

So it is for the millions who join the ranks of India's widening epidemic of cardiovascular events. To those who enjoy their food and drink—as do I, and as does my friend—making lifestyle changes can be harder than we realise. Once these changes become a habit, though, it becomes much easier to limit oil, alcohol, red meat and other things that we take so much for granted in many Indian cuisines.

At our home, we adhere to a reasonably healthy diet with minimal oil, lean meat and lots of greens, vegetables, fruits and nuts. But we have instituted cheat evenings, mainly when we have guests over and cholesterol concerns are temporarily abandoned. After all, you can't have pork without fat, and what's a biryani without mutton.

We had two dinners lined up for my friend. During the first one, he was still in hospital. The dinner went on anyway. He insisted, so we complied. In his honour, we ate what he craved: a brilliant, flavour-packed mutton biryani made by a friend who uses the proceeds to fund an old-age home that she runs (if you're in east Bengaluru, call Ameena Taj at 9886990205).

We are a brutal lot. We sent him happy photos of us and the biryani. Later, he admitted to feeling a bit blue but was satisfied that the show went on. Roger was out and about the next day, and for the next weekend we planned a heart-friendly dinner.

Roasted red pepper salad. ..... FOR REPRESENTATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY; ISTOCKPHOTO

We thought long and hard about it. On party nights, I avoid lipids, triglycerides and other banned substances, I swap teaspoons of oil for tablespoons. I simmer fish in coconut milk instead of tomato. I choose pork with its fat intact over skinless chicken. Even the salad dressing gets a freer hand—more olive oil, more indulgence across appetisers and vegetables.

But what if we sacrificed our infrequent moment of indulgence and continued with the healthy theme for Roger's re-welcome party? It wasn't a bad idea and if it worked, would set a trend for future evenings that could be enjoyed without guilt. As we often do, we called for a potluck.

Harish—better known as Chocolate—the only one among us with professional culinary training, was assigned the main course: chicken and vegetables, crafted with strict restraint on ingredients frowned upon in the cardiovascular universe. He delivered a light chicken curry, delicately spiced with *baharat*, the warm, aromatic Middle Eastern blend. The dish, Quwarmah al Dajaj, a Kuwaiti curry with unmistakable Indian undertones, was fragrant and comforting. Alongside it came a ratatouille—moist, glistening and dripping with promise.

I made a roasted red pepper salad I hadn't attempted in years, pairing it with fish marinated in a touch of salt and Japanese Edo spice (with chilli and citrus)—a recent gift from a generous friend. The fish was pan-fried in just enough oil to sear, not soak.

Another friend brought a tart, refreshing pomelo salad. At home, we cooked up a pot of lemon rice, added a sliced baguette with a labneh dip, and with that, we were good to go.

The healthy outing was a success—though it may have owed something to the fact that it was washed down with a tipple or two. The man with the stent cast off his post-op abstinence, introducing his new stent to not one, not two, but perhaps three (maybe four—I stopped hovering) Old Monks. He declared he would embrace reformed ways once he got home. I hope he did.

ROASTED RED PEPPER SALAD
Serves 4-6

Ingredients
4 red peppers
3 tbsp chopped parsley
5 garlic cloves, finely chopped
2 tbsp red wine or sherry vinegar (the latter, ideally)
1-2 tbsp olive oil (depending on how much you want)
Salt to taste

Method
Char the red peppers in a grill until the skin starts to blacken (it took me two rounds in the oven, first 40 minutes at 180 degrees Celsius, then 40 minutes at 220 degrees).

Remove the peppers and place either in a ziplock bag or cover with a dish towel. This allows the skin to soften and makes it easy to peel.

Discard the skin, cut a slit in the bottom of each pepper and drain the juice into a bowl. Slice the peppers lengthwise, discarding most of the seeds.

Sprinkle lightly with salt. Mix the pepper juice with vinegar, olive oil, garlic and parsley and whisk.

Pour over the pepper strips and marinate in the fridge for an hour at least. Bring back to room temperature and serve.

Our Daily Bread is a column on easy, inventive cooking. Samar Halarnkar is the author of The Married Man's Guide to Creative Cooking—And other Dubious Adventures. *He posts @samar11 on X*

Native cotton in the spotlight

The second edition of 'Weave the Future' focuses on the resilience of local cotton in the face of climate change

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PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY WEAVE THE FUTURE OFFICIAL

'Weave the Future' highlights regenerative textile practices, the beauty of handloom and ways of incorporating natural dyes in modern design.

At the Crafts Museum in New Delhi, three long tables come into view. They feature an assortment of natural dyes, snatches of fabric and samples of indigenous cotton varieties. On one of the tables, there's an assortment of tools. Usually popular imagination does not go beyond the *charkha* or the loom in this context. However, there is a wide variety of equipment which has been used for centuries in the processing and weaving of indigenous cotton.

The three-table installation, titled *Cotton O.O.*, is based on grassroot insights by the likes of Kora Design Collaborative, a design and research practice headquartered in Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam, that works in the textile and craft sector. *Cotton O.O* showcases the journey of 12 native varieties of cotton seeds from harvesting to processing and finally weaving. Underlying these exhibits is a story of intangible heritage, inherited knowledge, and adaptation.

Cotton O.O is part of the second edition of *Weave the Future*, being organised by the Development Commissioner for Handlooms (DCHL) of the Union ministry of textiles to commemorate National Handloom Day (7 August). It spotlights regenerative textile practices and future of indigenous cotton in the context of pressing concerns such as climate change and overconsumption. Panel discussions outline possible ways forward of creating sustainable and viable economic models for farmers and weavers through dialogues with grassroot implementers like Kora and Khamir—a platform for the craft, heritage and cultural ecology in Kutch, which launched the Kala cotton initiative in 2010. The journey from the farms and the weaving clusters to the design board and finally the market can be seen through showcases by brands like Dhi Earth, Lafaani and Indigene.

The event's focus on native cotton is part of the overall resurgence in various varieties across India. The usage of Kala, Punasa, Konda Patti and Gavran Kapus cotton is seeping into the design language at major fashion labels such as Anavila and Anita Dongre. Being pest-resilient, rain-fed and sturdy, indigenous cotton offers a way forward in the face of water scarcity and climatic vagaries.

Indeed, today, several pockets of India are seeing persistent droughts and water scarcity. It is in such areas that organisations such as Khamir are attempting to revive "old world cotton". They are doing this by getting certifications for the cotton and supporting weaver-ginners-spinners clusters while also maintaining ecological balance in the region. Khamir has also tried to create awareness about the strength and flexibility of the fibre.

For Satish Poludar, founder, Kora Design Collaborative, it is also important for people to understand the diversity that *desi* cotton offers in terms of its texture, fibre length and strength. It is a thought echoed by Shubhi Sachan, founder Material Library of India for DC Handloom, ministry of textiles. "Today, we are aware that saffron from Kashmir would have a different quality from saffron produced elsewhere in the country. Then why do we expect cotton to have a homogenous quality?" she asks. "If the soil is right, the seed will flourish, producing a fibre length, which is best suited for the region. Not every region requires the same kind of length."

If the installation helmed by Kora Design Collective jolts you out of a stupor, the one by Lafaani, an artisanal circular clothing brand, is meditative. It shows how inherited craft skills can be merged with modern sensibilities. The work, *What if Every Thread Remembered*, makes indigenous cotton both its subject and material. A light cotton panel, woven by an artisan cluster in Bengal, has been embellished with floral dyes using a drip-dry technique. These abstract landscapes give a sense of the expanse of artistry and craft in the country. The eco-printed panel with hand-appliqued dried flowers—sourced from an organisation in Mumbai that upcycles discarded blooms—also alludes to the cultural memory that comes with the handmade. "All of the patches in the panel are joined together with *kantha* stitches—a technique which was born out of resourcefulness. It stands as a symbol for the strength of craft in the country," says Rashmick Bose, co-founder, Lafaani.

The brand was founded in early 2022 by Bose and Drishti Modi, who met while pursuing environmental science at the TERI School of Advanced Studies in New Delhi. Modi picked up on the complexities of regenerative cotton farming while working on a project for the United Nations in Andhra Pradesh in 2018. When they founded Lafaani, they were clear that collaboration with grassroot initiatives reviving these practices would be at the core of their design label.

Currently, they work regularly with eight artisan clusters. "We are also engaging with an additional five clusters and grassroot organisations that are reviving the Akola 7 cotton variety in Maharashtra," says Modi. The brand is collaborating with Kandu, which works with growers of organic brown cotton in Karnataka. "Our role is to create products around indigenous cotton that are aesthetically pleasing and desirable so that people make that initial shift and then look deeper into stories of sustainability," she adds.

At Crafts Museum, New Delhi, till 17 August.

> Being pest-resilient, rain-fed and sturdy, indigenous cotton offers a way forward in the face of water scarcity and climatic vagaries.

COURTESY 'THREADED TALES OF VIDARBHA'

The Karvat Kathi sari.

A dictionary on Vidarbha textiles

'Threaded Tales of Vidarbha' documents the region's saris but leaves you asking for more

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In a country rich in traditional textiles, motifs and crafts, it's a tragedy that little has been done to document their histories, relevance and the role they play in the lives of those who create them.

That's enough reason to call *Threaded Tales Of Vidarbha*, a new coffee-table book on the handwoven textiles and traditional motifs of the Vidarbha region in Maharashtra, special. A collaborative effort between the Weavers' Service Centre of Nagpur, under the Union textile ministry, and designer Shruti Sancheti, the 108-pager is a dictionary of sorts that restricts the documentation of Vidarbha's vast, yet rarely explored, 200-year-old handloom history, to the famous saris it produces. The book, published by DC Handlooms, is available in public libraries and government institutions.

It begins with the Ganga Jamuna sari, known for its dual-coloured borders symbolising the rivers Ganga and Jamuna. Then there's the Karvat Kathi sari, which features zigzag temple motifs, and the minimalistic nine-yard *lugda*, traditionally worn while farming and doing household chores. "Its extra length allows for a secure, no-pleat drape tucked at the back, enabling ease of movement," the book states. The second section of the book is dedicated to demystifying the motifs on the saris. You will find geometric *narli* (coconut) motifs generously used on the *pallu* or the border because they add spiritual and festive significance. The book does not elaborate further. The "*karan phool*", inspired by the *karanj* (pongamia) flower native to the region, on the other hand, symbolises natural beauty, regional identity and fertility; *devri*, in the shape of a small temple, stands for spirituality, protection and divine presence; and *muniya* (parrot in Marathi) represents playfulness. Each style of sari and motif is explained in a short paragraph, using striking visuals, making the book an easy-to-access guide for design students, history enthusiasts and those who want to get acquainted with traditional textiles.

And that's where the book falters. Who are the weavers behind the Vidarbha saris? Which part of Vidarbha do they belong to? Do they use a specific colour combination in a specific type of sari? Are their children involved in taking the craft further? Has their work flourished despite the introduction of powerlooms? A comprehensive view could have helped create a larger picture.

The book ends with photographs and quotes of two male weavers—Prahlad Katwe and Rajesh Lade, both from Nagpur and practitioners of the craft for over two decades. The belief behind their words is similar to the other traditional artisans in the country. "When people from outside our region admire our work, it fills my heart with pride," says Katwe in the book. "This is not just a job—it's our art, our identity, and a gift we give to the world."

The book might be trying to introduce Vidarbha's textile legacy to the world, but by not spending more time with the people who've built that legacy, it ends up offering an incomplete story.

Rallying in style for pickleball

The social aspect of the game makes it popular and a perfect canvas for fashion—brands are trying to cash in on this

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Pickleball looks from Terra Luna.

In July, to promote the latest season of their show, the cast of OTT series *Panchayat* chose to swap the rustic settings of their village for a pickleball court. The actors turned up in pickleball-core: Neena Gupta in a matching white shirt and pleated skirt layered with a green sleeveless sweater vest; Jeetendra Kumar in a white shirt, cardigan and track pants; and Sanvikaa, in a blue mini dress. It was proof enough that pickleball fashion is a "thing" now.

Created in 1965 in Washington, pickleball can be described as a tennis-badminton-table tennis hybrid. Abhinav Shankar, co-founder of Go Rally, a Bengaluru-based premier pickleball arena chain, attributes the popularity of the sport to its accessibility and social nature. "Whether it is in terms of ease of learning or courts available to play, pickleball is extremely accessible. This easiness also makes it a social sport that families or groups of friends can play while barely knowing the rules," explains Shankar.

It is this social aspect that also makes the sport a perfect canvas for fashion. If tenniscore is about clothes and accessories that lean towards a pronounced white to off-white palette, pickleball fashion—and to an extent padelball, a slightly newer entrant—is about drenching the court in bright neons, emerald greens, pinks and blues with some quirky prints. Shankar adds, "Because it's a social sport, people want to look good on the court. It also makes for good social media content."

As a former tennis pro who switched to professional pickleball in October, Sharmada Balu, 31, explains that there's a shade of difference when it comes to choosing appropriate gear for tennis and pickleball. "Tennis is a complex sport that involves a lot more movement, so you need to wear comfortable sporting attire like shorts or tights. Pickleball doesn't entail as much movement and so you can get away by playing it even in yoga pants." As for what she prefers wearing while playing, Balu says, "I like to train in shorts or tights but when it comes to tournaments, I like to wear skirts and dresses."

It is the stylistic liberty of pickleball that has attracted fashion designers and labels to create capsules dedicated to the sport.

In India, a couple of indie fashion brands like Mumbai-based Terra Luna have toyed with the idea. "Pickleball as a sport is extremely contemporary and gives you space to present your interpretation of fashion," says Terra Luna's founder Stuti Dhanuka. The brand's latest pickleball collection includes T-shirts, shirts, shorts, tank tops and playsuits in khadi and linen.

The scope of pickleball and padelball's growth in India was a compelling enough reason for Indian School of Business, Hyderabad, alumna and friends Pranav Bimbhat, 29, and Aditya Agarwal, 28, to start FirstEdge, a Mumbai-based brand dedicated to making pickleball and padelball gear such as rackets, balls, erasers and grips. Launched eight months ago, their rackets are priced between ₹3,799-9,499 with thought being put into the colour combinations as both pickleball and padelball have strong visual appeal.

Shankar, Bimbhat and Agarwal seem optimistic about the growth of the game. "The number of players in India is estimated to go up to 1 million by 2028," Agarwal says. Dhanuka, however, feels that pickleball fashion is probably going to enjoy the spotlight for a another year or two. "The demand for fashion will grow this year, and then soon, something else will catch our attention." And that's how the fashion ball rolls.

Making sense of 'Sholay'

Dharmendra and Amitabh Bachchan as Veeru and Jai, respectively.

Hema Malini as Basanti.

'Sholay', perhaps the greatest popular film made in India, turns 50 this month. To fans, the film can resemble an oral epic, constantly surprising those who believe there is nothing more to learn

Jai Arjun Singh

Is it possible for the most iconic and mythologised film in your life—the one that is most thoroughly familiar—to also feel like a jigsaw puzzle that took a long time to put together?

Sholay is widely acknowledged as the most polished and fully realised Hindi film of its era, the most flawless technically, the one with the best action scenes and sound design, the fewest loose ends or awkward cutting. The sort of mainstream film that even Satyajit Ray could (grudgingly?) admire. But however complete it may be, I still think of it as a series of moments that are so embedded in one's consciousness (and so easily accessed from the mind's old filing cabinet) that it almost doesn't matter which order those fragments come in—there are any number of entry points. It's a bit like knowing key sections of a legendary epic—say, the Mahabharat—rather than every last detail, and still feeling like you know it in its entirety.

Like any other super-fan, I have my personal *Sholay* history, and it includes this confession: though the film is central to my pop-cultural journey, looming forever on the horizon like those boulders against the sun in Gabbar's domain, there have been many gaps in my viewing. Of course, I have watched it in the conventional way from beginning to end, at least five or six times (as opposed to the dozens or hundreds claimed by other devotees)—and yet it always feels like I came to it piecemeal through a melange of things. Heard and read, narratives constructed, back-stories related in magazines and books... and finally, prints with scenes missing in them.

Here's how this can happen.

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You're six or seven, and going for a rare family outing to a hall, to see a film that's less than a decade old but already fixed in legend. Someone dawdles, you reach 10 minutes after the show has begun, walking into a noisy action sequence involving a train, bad guys on horses, and three leading men whom you like without. It's exciting but you're overwhelmed, and lost about who is doing what: why is one of the "heroes" in police uniform while the other two look roguish, though they all appear to be fighting on the same side?

Then, in the very next scene, Sanjeev Kumar—the cop on the train, energetic and youthful—is older, tired, speaking slowly. The concept of the flashback and flashforward, the idea that these images can jump rudely from one period to another, is not something you have fully assimilated. A few moments later the other heroes, Dharmendra and Bachchan (your childhood crushes), are goofing around on a bike, singing, clowning about in jail.

It's a night show, you may be drifting off now and again. The spectre of Gabbar Singh arrives: first his name, spoken fearfully many times, and later the man himself. But even amidst the terror of his first appearance, with the minatory music and the belt being dragged along the rocks, you feel confusion: you think he resembles one of the dacoits on horseback—curly-haired, green shirt—from that train scene, and wonder if there's a link you missed.

A mid-film flashback where Sanjeev Kumar is young again. Through blurry eyes you register the shifts: black moustache to grey moustache, hands to no hands, police uniform to sombre shawl. Later, a fragmented viewing at someone's house will leave you with more confusion about the two major flashbacks and more questions about the sequence of events. Which is to say that there was a time in my childhood when the plot of *Sholay* was as much of a maze as a convoluted David Lynch or Christopher Nolan film might be.

Navigating the labyrinth was complicated by the fact that for a while it was done simultaneously along two mediums: listening to the famous double audiocassette of the film's dialogue, and watching a videotape that was much cherished.

The audio-cassette was unnerving: you had to identify characters by their voices; it didn't feature entire songs, playing only the first couple of bars of each familiar tune, before returning to the prose scenes. Some excitement lay in the details—I was tickled to bits by the line "*Thakur ne hijron ki fauj banayi hai* (*Thakur has assembled an army of eunuchs*)", not having expected to hear a word like that in a film—but on balance I preferred to watch *Sholay*, not hear it.

The videotape, one of my favourite childhood possessions, came for some reason from faraway Lagos, brought by a visiting uncle who had been assured that the thing I wanted most in the world was my own *Sholay* cassette.

I was 10 now, we had just got a video player at home, and I must have worn it out over days with this tape. The train flashback now made sense to me, as did the overall chronology (though there was still some disorientation in, for instance, seeing Gabbar's henchman Kaalia alive and gloating in a flashback after he had been bumped off in that sadistic roulette scene).

At last I was getting to watch the complete film, from start to finish. Or so I thought.

There were abrupt cuts here and there—it took some time to realise that chunks had been snipped to fit the VHS's 180 minutes.

Sleuthing, carefully matching the video footage with the audio on my dialogue-cassette, I realised that the scenes involving Soorma Bhopali (Jagdeep) and the Hitler-like jailer (Asrani) had been excised. That makes some sense if you have to cut 15 minutes: those sequences are fun and show off the skills of two fine character actors, but they are dispensable to the main narrative, and they greatly delay Veeru and Jai's arrival in Ramgarh.

Even so, I feel cheated that it took me years, maybe decades, to realise that the beloved Keshto Mukherjee had a small role in *Sholay* (in the jailer scene).

Things were also complicated by the fact that *Sholay's* characters were continuing with their lives in other forms and media. Gabbar Singh was selling glucose biscuits in ads long after he had been vanquished (or killed, in the ending that was shot but not released). In late-1980s came a film called *Soorma Bhopali* with Jagdeep, featuring Dharmendra and Bachchan in cameos unrelated to their *Sholay* roles; after that, *Ramgarh ke Sholay*, which seemed cheap and B-grade-ish, being filled with star-impersonators, but which still had the real Amjad Khan (looking much paunchier, as if Gabbar had taken his role as biscuit mascot too seriously).

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Between all this, *Sholay* did perform the epiphanic functions that a landmark film is expected to. For instance, I can never forget the tense scene where the villagers turn hostile towards their mercenary protectors, because this was the moment when the idea first entered my nascently movie-obsessed head that a camera movement is a deliberate, engineered thing that builds meaning: when the line "*Kab tak jeeyoge tum, aur kab tak jeeyenge hum, agar yeh dono iss gaon mein rahe?*" ("*How long will we stay alive if these two remain in the village?*") is accompanied by a camera swish that places Veeru and Jai at the centre of the frame, precisely on the words "*yeh dono*".

I learnt about the mysteries of personality too, and how a creative work can bring catharsis or draw out aspects of yourself that you hadn't fully processed yet. As a painfully shy and quiet child with a taste for sardonic humour, there was every reason for me to relate to Bachchan's Jai; instead I was always more drawn to and even felt a kinship with the boisterous Veeru.

But that Nigerian tape was also responsible for the biggest of my *Sholay* gaps—one I was unaware of until well in my 30s. That's how old I was when I watched *Sholay's* great opening-credits sequence for the very first time. While that might not be a big deal for most Hindi films of the period, in *Sholay* the craft and attention to detail begins right here—in the scene where the manservant Ramlal leads a policeman on horseback from the railway station to the Thakur's *haveli*.

My tape had the credits only until the names of the six principal actors; there was a sudden cut after the title "And Introducing Amjad Khan". This is a major bone I have to pick with the anonymous tape-editor sitting, in my mind's eye, in some squalid little Lagos bootleggers' shop. Because, watching the full sequence on DVD decades later, I saw how it sets the stage, giving us a detailed view of Ramgarh and its surroundings, long before the narrative actually takes us there. The superb R.D. Burman background score changes from a guitar-dominated tune as the riders move through a barren, American Western-like setting to a more Indian sound, with mridangam and taar shehnai, as they pass through the village. The symbolic nature of *Sholay's* mise-en-scene is made obvious, with the contrast between swathes of rough landscape (where the dacoits, creatures of the wild, perch like vultures) and the village, where people live together in an ordered community—a setting that will soon welcome two rootless men who will learn about taking on responsibility and integrating into a larger world.

When I screened and discussed the sequence in classes I taught, the discussions were perceptive, intense and wide-ranging—even when they involved students who had never actually watched the film (yes, there are now many such movie buffs). But the possibility of being surprised by a detail here, or a fresh re-watch, still exists, for them as well as for old fans like me, who thought there was nothing more to learn.

Jai Arjun Singh is a writer and critic.

Helen and Jalal Agha in the song 'Mehbooba Mehbooba'.

Retaining a movie's magic in translation

Author Nasreen Munni Kabir discusses Salim-Javed's writing on 'Sholay' and how she tried to retain its stark power while subtitling the restored film

Tu kya ladega mujhse, Thakur? Tere to haath kaatkar phenk chuka hoon main.
(How can you fight me, Thakur? I cut off both your hands and threw them away.)
Saaap ko haath se nahi, pairon se kuchla jaata hai, Gabbar.
(You don't trample a snake with hands, you use feet, Gabbar.)

Fifty years of *Sholay* have passed yet much of the film's dialogue still resonates with movie lovers, feeling as fresh as if it was heard yesterday.

What makes for successful film dialogue? Lines that provide information while also suggesting the temperament of the characters. Dialogue can carry poetic weight, be replete with clever repartee, roll out unexpected punchlines, and carry forward the narrative. Alongside actors' performances, dialogue creates a deeper connection between story and viewer.

Salim Khan is credited with writing the story and screenplay, and Javed Akhtar with the dialogue. Their masterly structure and arrangement of dramatic situations effortlessly lend themselves to original exchanges, as evident in countless scenes. So it is unsurprising that *Sholay* is among only a handful of films—like the epic *Mughal-e-Azam*—whose dialogue soundtrack was released on an LP in the 1970s.

Audiences at the Il Cinema Ritrovato film festival in Bologna, Italy, this year were the first to see an excellently restored version of *Sholay*, undertaken by the Film Heritage Foundation and producer Shehzad Sippy.

When I was asked to subtitle this version, which included the original ending, it proved both a delight and a challenge. I had certain hesitations about the translation, which were resolved during a conversation with Javed Akhtar, who happened to be in London. I explained I was unsure about the Urdu word *karaare*—which Gabbar uses to describe Basanti's body in the final scenes. Firm? Sturdy? He suggested "toned"—so the subtitle now reads "Look at her arms and legs. How toned they are".

Many years earlier, I had asked Javed Akhtar about the purpose of creating Gabbar's shrieking Saambha who has only one memorable line in the film: "*Poore pachaas hazaar (Full fifty thousand)*" in response to Gabbar's question about the bounty on his head. He explained that a man with an outsized ego like Gabbar's could not belittle himself by announcing the reward money, so the scene required a lackey.

For the most part, when translating, I found it unnecessary to be too clever or find English turns of phrases that depart from the original Hindustani because *Sholay's* lines are full of simple power and imagery. Why would anyone mess with lines like these:

Gabbar: *Tera kya hoga, Kaalia?*
(*What will become of you, Kaalia?*)
Kaalia: *Sardar, maine aap ka namak khaaya*
(*Chief, I have eaten your salt*)
Gabbar: *Ab... goli khaa*
(*Now... eat my bullet*)

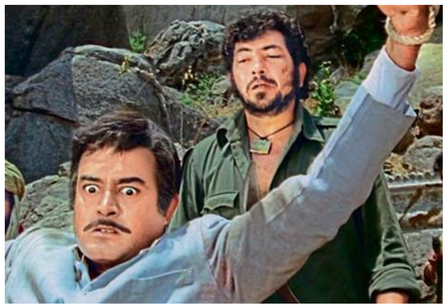
Nasreen Munni Kabir is an author, a documentary filmmaker, curator and subtitler.

Gabbar is both theatre and terror.

Bang bang, he shot us down

Today's villain is less a character than a stepping stone for the hero's glory. Gabbar, in contrast, is a charismatic force of nature

Raja Sen



Who is the hero of *Sholay*? This is a valid question. Thakur, played by Sanjeev Kumar, gets the revenge. Veeru, played by Dharmendra, gets the girl. Jai, played by Amitabh Bachchan, gets the heroic sacrifice at the close of the film. Which of them is the hero? You may as well toss a coin to decide.

There is no question about the man on the other side. Gabbar Singh has no peer, no equal. He is a villain beyond comparison. As played by Amjad Khan—a breakthrough performer in an all-star sea—Gabbar is theatre and terror, a villain who feels less taken from cinematic archetypes than conjured from folklore and nightmare.

Gabbar Singh. He arrives on screen through dust and sweat. He's wrapped in sun-bleached olive green fatigues, hanging on him like the regalia of an absconding general. Part pirate, part Sergio Leone villain, grimy and ruthless and bearded, a man made for Ennio Morricone music. The way the bandolier falls across his swarthy chest, the way bullets hang from him like he is ready to take on an army by himself. A battered service revolver droops from his hip, casual as a house-key. His shirt is open wide at the neck, flaunting an amulet, a *taabeez* that may well stop a bullet. His boots, those heavy cavalry-style steely boots, announce him to us before the camera does, every crunch on Ramgarh's rocks working like the number on a countdown.

Khan's face looks ravaged by wars internal and external. His curls are sweaty, beard scraggly and unpredictable, eyes baggy with exhaustion... yet, also, a-twinkle with mischief. The mischief of the man who doesn't sleep and who doesn't let the world sleep. He grins a wonky grin and his teeth flash, irregularly. Unforgettably.

Cinematographer Dwarka Divecha frames Gabbar low and wide, giving the monster the horizon for a halo. Sippy cuts to sudden, hungry close-ups—the bristly beard, veins throbbing on his temple—so the audience isn't watching him as much as interrogating his evil. Birds cease, dust hangs mid-air, and it is Gabbar who fills the vacuum with that sing-song chuckle, a child's lullaby turned carnivorous. Every rag, every stomp, every chuckle feels like choreography, a savage ballet. In a landscape of moustache-twirlers and cape-flappers, Gabbar's style is guerrilla-couture: dirty, deliberate, and impossible to imitate.

Before *Sholay*, the Hindi film villain came in recognisable flavours. In the 1950s and 1960s, they wore smoking jackets and smug smiles, oozing menace with manicured fingernails. They were often *zamindars* with *zamindari* diction or foreign agents who would occasionally wax poetic while cocking their pistols. Pran, the gold standard, brought flair and finesse to villainy: his evil was often charming and methodical. These were villains with posture, with protocol. After *Sholay*, the tide turned gaudier. Villains became cartoonish tyrants in lairs shaped like animal heads. Bond-inspired oversized villains shrieking threats into microphones and dressing to test the limits of Technicolor. From the camp genius of Ajit's Lion to Amrish Puri's Mogambo, big-screen baddies turned louder and loopier.

Even when placed alongside these lowlifes, Gabbar is an outlaw.

He stands singular and unique. Nobody before Gabbar Singh burned as bright. It was as if Hindi cinema flew too close to the flame with this one villain, and decided to cool it afterwards.

The Hindi action film of today trains its spotlight so firmly on the hero that the villain has been reduced to a smudge on the lens: dark enough to contrast, but never sharp enough to distract. The maximalist spectacle has become about one star. Today's villain is, therefore, less a character than a stepping stone. In *Pathaan*, John Abraham is a gym-bro with zero nuance, while *Jawan* gives the great Vijay Sethupathi a half-baked role. They are written not to menace Shah Rukh Khan but be mauled by him. The punchlines belong solely to the hero. If *Sholay* were greenlit by a studio today, Veeru would be the one wondering which day is Holi.

Gabbar demanded our attention. There is a stillness and a silence that accompanies those first footsteps, alerting the viewers that something wicked this way stomps. That deliberate, arrhythmic crunch of boots on gravel. It is menace set to metronome.

His voice is the real score. Amjad Khan, both baritone and broken-glass, modulates each line with sadistic precision. "*Kitne aadmi the?*" is a simple query, something a ruthless *daku* would naturally bark within a gang. He doesn't explain his evil, doesn't justify it, doesn't seek applause. He's committed exclusively to disorder, which makes him fascinating. He matches well, I believe with Heath Ledger's Joker from *The Dark Knight*. They're both anarchists with a taste for mayhem. We can understand cruelty, ambition and revenge, but these villains want to make the world flinch. They want to unnerve. The actors deliver performances so volatile, so instinctive, that even the camera appears unsure of what they'll do next. They grin too much, enjoy the sound of their own voices, and black films built around heroic men.

"Why so serious?" and "*Jo darr gaya, samjho marr gaya*" are two sides of the same coin. *Sholay* is full to the brim with quotable lines, but it is Gabbar's twisted poetry that etched itself into the national consciousness. He was the one we would quote as kids posing with toy revolvers in front of mirrors, declaring our intent to spin the chamber before we spun it. Psychologically speaking, audiences quote truly scary villains not to glorify them but to keep them at an arm's length, to make them feel less frightening. We repeat their words like a spell, as if naming the monster will somehow keep it in its cage.

"*Kitne aadmi the?*"

The line lands like the crack of a whip because of the way the infamous dacoit stretches the consonants, corrugates the vowels, lets them echo across canyon and cinema, before fading into an ominous silence... a silence that sets the table for the violence. He asked the question 50 years ago, and we have never forgotten it. Gabbar Singh was the one who counted.

Raja Sen is a Lounge columnist.

> Before 'Sholay', the Hindi film villain came in recognisable flavours. They wore smoking jackets and smug smiles, oozing menace with manicured fingernails

Embracing the slow life in Aurangabad

Luxury farmstays and bespoke dining experiences are transforming the home of the Ajanta and Ellora caves

Shoba Narayan

Former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton was the first guest at Dhyaana Farms in February 2023 but it took several months for the luxury farmstay in Verul, Maharashtra, to open for guests. Two years later, this 14-acre property with just five rooms has transformed itself into an oasis of biodiversity in the arid lands of Aurangabad. Neem and banyan trees border the organic farms that supply 80% of what the guests eat. Native trees, including papaya, banana and pomegranate, are ripe for the plucking. Milk and butter come from Gir cows on the property. Rescued Marwari horses take guests on rides through the grasslands surrounding the farm. Sunbirds, kingfishers, *munias* and bulbuls fly between the fragrant *parijatha*, frangipani and night jasmine shrubs. Beehives supply honey and palm-sized hibiscus flowers are plucked for rose-tinted iced tea. There is no plastic; electricity is solar and water is harvested from rain. The air quality index sits at 11.7. In contrast, Mumbai, the state capital, veers near 80. "Slow living is the ultimate luxury," says Sahaj Sharma, one of the two owners.

Aurangabad, now Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, has long been the gateway to the Ajanta and Ellora caves that date to the 2nd century BCE. These rock-cut caves were the first in India to be listed as Unesco World Heritage Sites. India now has 44, compared to China's 59 and Italy's 61, the highest in the world. In March, India added six more sites to Unesco's "tentative" list, bringing up its number to 62 tentative World Heritage Sites, a prerequisite for them to become permanent.

My first sighting of the caves was from the top of the deep gorge carved by the Waghora river over millennia. The 30 caves carved into the layered basaltic rock of Marathwada are shaped like a giant horse-shoe. According to our guide Sanjay Vaswani, they were part of an ancient pilgrim route and served as pit stops for wandering Buddhist monks. Each set of caves were 30km apart, about the distance a human can traverse in a day.

To stand in front of the Bodhisattva Padmapani, whose downcast eyes and elegant posture adorns the covers of most books and posters depicting these caves, is to experience grace. In contrast, the later period Ellora caves holds riotous stone-carvings of Hindu gods doing battle. Even though the 100 Ellora caves include Buddhist and Jain ones, the Hindu caves have the most carvings. Giant sculptures depict tales of Shiva, Parvathi, Vishnu, Ganga, Rama and other gods.

The most famous structure in Ellora is the Kailasa temple, the largest monolithic structure in the world. Go with a guide who can explain the process of how the artists used simple hammers and chisels to remove 400,000 tons of basaltic rock and create the structure. Stone sculpture, unlike most other visual arts, allows for no mistakes. Intricate depictions of the Ramayan and Mahabharat fill two rock panels. The Buddhist caves are carved to amplify chants, making them reverberate through the space. At the end of four hours, the sensory overload leaves you hungry.

The traditional Maharashtrian *thali* with *masala bhaath*, *aam ras*, comforting *varan dal*, *kokum*-flavoured *rasam*, tiny brinjals cooked in a peanut gravy and *jowar rotis* hits the spot. "Almost everything is from here, except for things like cheese and olives, which we buy," says Aparna Phalnikar, one of the owners of Dhyaana. When Clinton came visiting, they brought in chef Mohib Farooqui to cook for her from nearby Aurangabad. For the last five years, Farooqui has been quietly offering what is arguably India's best bespoke home-dining experience in his eight-seater dining room in Aurangabad. His Accentuate Food Lab serves a *kaiseki* experience that could be set in Tokyo or Manhattan. On the day we visited, he served a vegetarian degustation menu that he was designing for a restaurant in Ahmedabad.

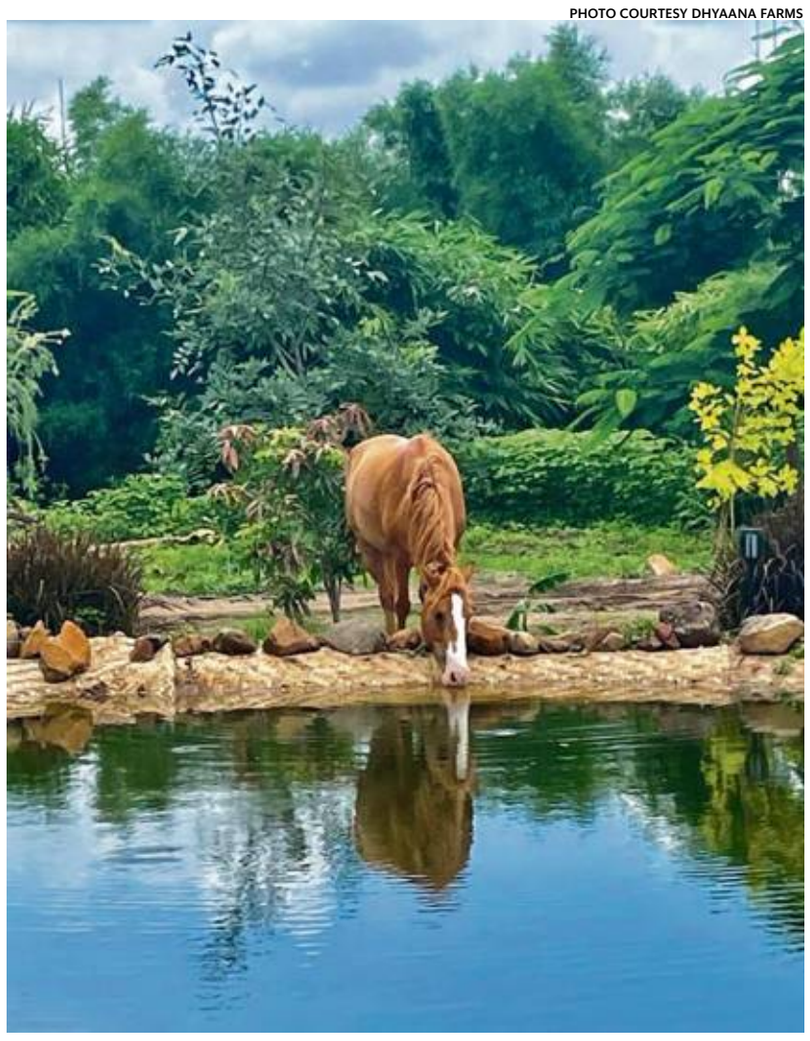
While global flavours have made their way to all our tables, the charm of farmstays is their connection to rural India. Everywhere we travelled, we saw men in white *dhotis* and *kurtas* with distinctive white caps or *pehtas*. Women vendors near the caves wore beautiful noserings with *nauvari* saris. Near Ellora are weaving centres that sell *himroo* and Paithani saris with their distinct peacock and parrot designs. *Himroo* was patronised by Mohammed Tughlaq and is similar to the *khinkhwab* with its mango-paisley designs. Paithanis, whose history can be traced back to the Satavahanas who were patrons of Ajanta, thrived under the Peshwa rule.

When the pandemic ended, I made a vow to myself that I would travel within India to experience the distinct humour and mindset of our land. Even though the word farmstay seems like an oxymoron, combining luxury with travel in rural India is becoming possible thanks to owner-run boutique lodges. The pleasure is in the creature comforts, but also the ability to glimpse a way of life that is impossible in a city.

Every morning, I sat outside my cottage with a cup of coffee, listening to birdsong, and watched butterflies, and langurs clambering up trees. I read, napped and ate in between visiting heritage sites. Best of all, I touched animals—horses and *desi* cows with their silken skins, cats and dogs with their limpid eyes, each of whom helped me connect with the earth.

Shoba Narayan is an author, an independent journalist and a long-time Mint *columnist based in Bengaluru.*

PHOTO COURTESY DHYAANA FARMS



SHOBA NARAYAN

At Dhyaana Farms; and (below) Kailasanatha temple at Ellora.

Antwerp cathedral with a statue of Rubens in the foreground. ANITA RAO KASHI

Antwerp's other diamond: Rubens

The legendary painter's legacy can be found everywhere in the Belgian city

Anita Rao Kashi

Like most classic European cities, the beating heart of Antwerp is the Grote Markt or the Market Square and its surrounding areas. Of course, the Belgian city's claim to fame as the global hub for diamonds is undisputed, but this facet is rather low-key and the Antwerp Diamond District is a loosely demarcated square mile of glittering stores and less visible facilities for cutting, polishing and trading. Less subtle is the Cathedral of Our Lady or Antwerp Cathedral whose 15th century Gothic spire towers over the central part of the city and acts as the perfect marker to orient oneself.

Situated in a large open area, the cathedral is imposing, its spire rising over 400ft; it is supposedly one of a twin set but the other was never completed. But I am searching for Antwerp's other diamond, or at least the legacy, and I find it on the cathedral's walls and on special pedestals.

Scattered throughout the cathedral are works of art. Of particular interest are three done by legendary 17th century Baroque Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens—*The Raising of the Cross*, *The Descent from the Cross* and *The Assumption of the Virgin Mary*. My guide says the first two were stolen twice. First by Napolean during the Napoleanic wars, transported to the Louvre in Paris and returned in 1815. Almost a century later, in 1914, both were again seized by the Imperial German Army and housed in Berlin before being returned in late 1918. *The Raising of the Cross* is a striking triptych, depicting the pale, almost lifeless figure of Christ, nailed to the cross. The contrast against the boldly coloured men trying to raise the cross is haunting. *The Descent from the Cross* has fewer characters but grief and sadness seem to come off their bodies in waves. *The Assumption of the Virgin* is completely different, done in a combination of pastel shades and cheerful colours and depicting the lifting of Mary by angels.

Rubens, it turns out, is integral to the city and is everywhere in Antwerp. Close to three dozen landmarks are associated with Rubens and his associates and there are guided and self-guided walks to see them all. If there is one place as important as the cathedral, it is Rubenshuis or Rubens House, constructed in the early 1600s. Located in the Wapper area, the house was designed by Rubens himself and is modelled to resemble an Italian villa or palazzo. Sometime in the mid-20th century, it was turned into a museum.

The residence is now closed for renovation till 2030 but the gallery has an extensive collection, including his self-portraits. A bit of Rubens can also be experienced first-hand in the Baroque garden and his studio.

Heading back towards the market square, I encounter Rubens everywhere: on chocolates, on fridge magnets and mugs, and his paintings reproduced on tea towels and postcards. Near the cathedral is the statue of Rubens. And in keeping with his reputation, it is a bit larger than life. Above him, the sky is a patchwork of blue with the setting sun tinging the few cottony clouds vivid pink and orange. Uncannily, it feels a bit like the backdrop in his paintings. Clearly, everything in Antwerp is about Rubens.

Anita Rao Kashi is an independent journalist based in Bengaluru.

Tasmania's superpower is its fresh produce

The rugged island is home to creative mixologists and chefs who make local ingredients shine

Smitha Menon

In a dining hall bathed in sunlight, I dig into a plate that represents the essence of springtime in Tasmania: sweet peas tumble off a bed of salted fish, finished off with a sprig of tarragon. Bright and tart with just a hint of sweetness, these peas were plucked a few minutes before they made their way to my plate at The Agrarian Kitchen, chef Rodney Dunn's restaurant and garden in Tasmania's verdant Derwent Valley.

Ten minutes before we sat down to our meal, Dunn took us on a tour of the garden and greenhouse, where he plucked Lacey Lady Peas off the stem and watched in delight when we squealed in surprise as we bit into them.

"It's easy to be creative with your cooking when your produce does more than half the job for you," he laughed as we walked through the garden, once an exercise yard for ward prisoners. That the restaurant sits on land that was once a mental asylum is just an example of how the restaurant embraces regenerative practices and thinking across its space.

Tasmania is fast emerging as a hot new food destination for a number of reasons. Over the past couple of years, soaring rents in mainland Australia have prompted chefs and creative food folk to flock to Hobart, Tasmania's capital, to launch their ventures. This symbiotic blend of talent and Tasmania's naturally bountiful fresh produce, owing to its unique geographical history, has led to this little island of rugged mountains, ancient forests and dramatic coastlines becoming a unique food mecca.

Over lunch, Dunn explains how the island's unique location has helped the survival of heirloom varieties and lesser-known artisanal techniques that have given rise to a food culture that's respectful of the land. Here, a burgeoning food movement is producing award-winning whiskies, best-in-class wines and artisanal cheese and chocolate, apart from offering a range of restaurants to explore.

Later that day, I learn about Tasmania's "whisky super climate" from Bill Lark, the founder of Lark Distillery, the first whisky distillery in Tasmania.

"The island's cool, humid climate slows the maturation of whisky, allowing for a richer flavour profile with a floral note thanks to Tasmania's cold climate barley. Lark is the only distillery with a consistent supply of Tasmanian peat—among the many drams we sample, the *Earth* series, a collection of single cask releases inspired by the island's unique ecosystems, stands out.

The Moss Hopper, which celebrates the distillery's Central Highland peat marsh, features notes of Tasmanian floral peat, ripe cherries, honeysuckle and chocolate, while The King Billy Pine, a tribute to the endemic froglet, is characterised by honeyed sweetness, highland peat, and notes of sea salt.

The whiskies come paired with an unusual but delightfully crunchy accompaniment: bakes from the homegrown Pigeon Whole Bakers. It's just one of the many examples of how the local food community is proud of their thriving food culture.

I pick up on the same deep local pride at Frank, an Argentinian steakhouse with a Tassie twist that I dine at later. Run by Hobart hospitality veteran Scott McMurray, high-quality Tasmanian produce is the focus here. On the menu, I spot local gems: Wagyu from Robbins Island Wagyu Beef, oysters from Tasmanian Oyster Co., and mushrooms from Mr Brown & Towns.

While the fare is wildly different in style from The Agrarian Kitchen, it reflects a similar food philosophy of letting the ingredients shine. I'm grateful for this diktat as I dig into fire-roasted oysters, whipped cod roe tostadas and an addictive cola-glazed pork belly.

The next day, I walk off my many calories at the subversive MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art. Having marvelled at *The Great Wall of Vagina*, 151 porcelain vulvas sculpted from real women, and the infamous "poo machine", Wim Delvoye's Cloaca Professional that turns food into excrement, I make my way to Faro Bar + Restaurant, a gorgeous sun-drenched restaurant in the museum that is arguably more a culinary exhibit than an eatery.

Faro's "platedropping" menu features dishes like "Carcass in Swamp" or cured and smoked wallaby, warrigal puree and salt-baked beetroot, and "Eat The Problem" with wild Tasmanian fallow deer, candy carrots plus blackberry and coffee vino cotto. Years ago, the restaurant took farmed animals off the menu as an extension of artist Kirsha Kaechele's 2019 book *Eat the Problem*, which is dedicated to finding sustainable solutions for food while protecting local native species. The sprawling museum also houses Moorilla Estate, one of Tasmania's oldest vineyards.

Of all the wine regions in Australia, Tasmania is one of the cooler climate regions, which means it produces distinctly different wines from the rest of the country. The wines are naturally elegant, intensely flavoured and aromatic, with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir as the renowned varieties. Of the many vineyards, Pooley stands out.

When Denis and Margaret Pooley planted seven rows of Pinot Noir and 10 rows of Riesling in the Coal River Valley as a retirement plan in 1985, they could not anticipate the impact their farm would have on Tasmanian wine.

In 2023, Pooley Wines was awarded Winery of the Year by *James Halliday's Wine Companion*. Taking in a view of the sprawling vineyards, enjoy a crisp Riesling or a Syrah paired with wood-fired pizzas and locally made cheeses from Bruny Island Cheese Co.

Should you wish to explore the local cheese scene, take a short ferry ride over to the tiny island off Tasmania's south-eastern coast, where you can taste Alpine-style or bloomy-rind cheeses at Bruny. Pair them with the label's craft beers of which the saison is highly recommended.

If wine is your jam, Hobart is home to a host of wine bars like Institute Polaire, which serves cold-climate wines, lavish snacks and the freshest local seafood in an elegant dining room.

At Sonny, where the vibe is laidback and communal, the friendly staff recommends and pours wine while handing out plates of asparagus fusilli, prosciutto toast and kingfish crudo.

Lucinda Wine Bar is another option if you're looking for something that feels more upscale. Pick from an extensive Tasmanian wine list as well as the many unique ones from across the globe.

For our final meal, I headed to Maria for a Mediterranean-inspired menu that brings together local and Australian-sourced produce and traditional Mediterranean flavours and cooking techniques.

Across plates of fresh oysters with wild fennel pollen *migonette* and charred octopus with burnt lemon and mountain pepper, chef and co-owner Christian Ryan summed up what makes Tasmania's food culture so special. "The biggest difference about Tassie's food scene is that everything is locally owned. We're driven by passion here. Freshness is our superpower."

Smitha Menon is a food journalist and the host of the Big Food Energy podcast. She posts @smitha.men on Instagram

A spread at Faro, the bar and restaurant at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart.

For Neha Sahai, the fish is symbolic of an all-pervasive feminine energy.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE ARTIST/ LATITUDE 28

Myth-making in a modern context

In 'The Personal is Mythical', three artists connect the personal and the universal, the real and the imaginary

Avantika Bhuyan
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At *The Personal is Mythical* exhibition at Delhi's Latitude 28 gallery, you can see a series of canvases featuring female figures with fish heads. Each of these hybrid women is dressed in a sari, with a dainty necklace around the throat and blooms in the hair. They seem to be in various moods of contemplation—one is holding a book, another is staring into emptiness while seated on a settee.

For Neha Sahai, a 39-year-old artist, the fish motif becomes a symbol of feminine energy. Her works—spanning oil, acrylic, gouache and ink—reject the "idealised depictions of female divinity" in favour of a feminine energy imbued with gentle strength. "Fish is symbolic of feminine energy, which is all-pervasive. It has nothing to do with gender. Even men or male beings in nature can have female energy. It's all about balance," she says.

Sahai, Bhajju Shyam and Viraj Khanna are the three artists who are part of *The Personal is Mythical*, curated by gallerist Bhavna Kakar. The works on display complement one another in the way they connect the personal with the universal—they also have an underlying dream-like quality about them. The title of the show itself is quite interesting. All of us have a personal history—journeys of our families, the place we hail from and the one that we make our home in—which is visible in certain physical and cultural markers. And yet, there is a parallel journey of our internal worlds, which is intangible. The artists are responding to this overlap between the real and imaginary.

The vibrant works of Bhajju Shyam, a master artist from the Pardhan Gond community, feature fantastical worlds, highlighting the relationship between humans and the ecology. He interprets inherited oral and visual traditions and landscapes in the modern context.

In one of his paintings, *Dera Khoj*, you can see how nature has asserted itself, taking over the built landscape. Animals clamber on top of huts and overgrown trees loom large. This fragile ecology rests on the backs of gigantic elephants.

Multidisciplinary artist Viraj Khanna has always placed his works—acrylics on canvas with the *khakha* (frame)—in the grey area between the authentic self and the way we manifest our identity to the world. In his playful assemblages, the constructed identity—influenced by consumerism and pop culture—plays out as a masquerade.

In the works of each of the artists, one can see "how private narratives, memories and artistic vocabularies can evoke timeless, universal themes, transforming the deeply personal into the resonantly mythical," states Kakar's curatorial note.

Sahai's works are deeply autobiographical—her affinity with nature rooted in her childhood experiences of growing up in the jungles. Her father—now a retired Indian Forest Service officer—would be posted to areas dense with wildlife across the country.

"I understand birds, fish and insects better than humans. The natural world is a sacred space for me," says the artist, who is a fashion designer by training. Her many interests come together in her works. For instance, you can see design flourishes in the detailing and silhouettes of the saris. Sahai started painting with a serious intent in 2019.

Around that time, she came across a folklore of selkies, a seal that takes a human form as soon as she removes her skin. A man lures her out of the ocean on the promise that she could return after seven years once she married him. But after the stipulated time, the husband refuses to return the sealskin.

"She somehow found it and returned to the ocean. But before doing so, she told the story to her son. Everyday, then on, the son would go to the beach and sing to his mother. Having been raised in the jungle, I feel the same longing to return where I belong. But on some days I feel that the society has hidden my skin so that I can't go back," says Sahai. So, her paintings become songs of this longing—reminders to herself of a world that she has such close affinity with.

"You have female figures in the surrealist paintings wearing saris, holding books, having chai. That is who I am," she says.

On view till 18 August , 11am-7pm.

Horsing around in a Sunil Shanbag play

Based on Hungarian playwright Julius Hay's 'The Horse', Sunil Shanbag's play has both scale and satire

Prachi Sibal

Over 20 actors—all on stage together at times—are in sync relaying the chaos that comes with a wild albeit deeply political satire. Music interludes elevate the crowd scenes or craft moments of intimacy and idiocy around a horse. The horse is called Incitatus and has Rome—and specifically its notorious emperor Caligula (Akash Khurana)—in a tizzy. After all, no one's ever seen an animal so magnificent. The last in Aadyam Theatre's Season 7 is a play by veteran director Sunil Shanbag featuring horse heads and halters too.

Shanbag first read Hungarian playwright Julius Hay's *The Horse* in the 1980s. It was one of three in a collection of Eastern European plays published by Penguin. The other two were by noted Czech writers Vaclav Havel and Christy Rozek. "It was a time when there was a fair interest in Eastern European plays. Satyadev Dubey had already done Rozek. Anmol Vellani had done Vaclav Havel. Marathi playwright Vrindavan Dandavate had travelled to Eastern Europe. Mahesh Elkunchwar had spent time in Eastern Europe," recalls Shanbag.

He remembers being "delighted" when he read it, but was aware that it wasn't possible to mount a production of such scale at the time. The play stayed with him and cropped up during workshops and readings at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA).

"On further reading, I found out that Hay was a contemporary of Bertolt Brecht. While both were interested in the theatre of ideas, they had differing opinions about the nature of theatre," he says. When the time came to do a play for Aadyam, Shanbag recalled *The Horse* for its inherent scale and satire. Then came the task of acquiring a copy of the play and requesting permission from Peter Hay, the son of the author and the translator of *The Horse*.

The play begins with a scene at the tavern—a young man, Selanus (Neil Bhoopalam), on his first day in Rome; emperor Caligula in disguise; and a coterie are playing a game of dice. Selanus has lost it all with nothing left to wager but his horse, the mighty Incitatus. Caligula is so taken by the animal that he will go to great lengths to acquire it. With erratic ideas and a God complex, Caligula passes decree after decree, including one to erase every other decree. Another such is the appointment of Incitatus as the Consul of Rome. And the revered Consul must eventually find a suitable bride. There's a love story somewhere in this mix. There's also a donkey and a man pretending to be a horse.

The satirical play is large and loud. Shanbag didn't set out to do a comedy but believes it can make complex ideas accessible to an audience. "Comedy is perhaps the most difficult form of theatre. It must come with comic skills, comic timing and a sense of fun and joy. This play has an additional challenge of an underlayer of satire," he says, adding that it's been a fascinating journey for him and the cast. "We don't get to do comedy often. It's not looked upon as serious enough," he says.

'The Horse' cast members; and (below) Sunil Shanbag.

The play—first staged in 1965—is over half a century old but Shanbag believes that satire with a certain depth of ideas resonates with the contemporary regardless of when it was written. "Besides, history has patterns," he says. "There are some common themes—the seduction of a population with an idea, the abandonment of rationality and blind faith—that are all relevant today," he adds.

> The play was first staged in 1965. Shanbag believes that satire with a certain depth of ideas resonates with the contemporary regardless of when it was written

As for scale, Shanbag finds it both daunting and thrilling. Daunting for the planning (eight months) and the organisation that it takes to bring a 20-member cast together in a rehearsal room, and thrilling for the ability to perform to an 800-member audience.

"I don't think we get enough opportunities to do that. It's lovely to perform in intimate spaces but the thrill of 800 people watching and laughing is quite something. I believe that with our kind of theatre, we should not surrender or abandon mainstream spaces. We should seize every opportunity to occupy them," he says.

The scale also allows him to bring in skilled collaborators like Kaizad Gherda for music, and Shampa Gopikrishna and Bertwin D'Souza for choreography. This, in addition to a vibrant cast which includes senior actor and co-founder of Shanbag's Arpana Theatre Akash Khurana. The two have reunited for a production after three decades, and Khurana portrays the maniacal Caligula with rare charm.

While Shanbag's preoccupation with the theatre of ideas has always been evident (his last production was Utpal Dutt's *Barricade*), he believes comedy is as valid as any other form. He hopes the audience takes a moment to reflect amid laughter.

"That's what theatre can do—hold a mirror and help you reflect a little. In this case, it is through laughter and the absurdity of the situation. All comedy relies on the ability of people to laugh at themselves," he says. "I want people to have an entertaining and stimulating evening. For me, that's the perfect definition of an evening at the theatre."

On 9 August, 7.30pm, and 10 August, 4pm and 7.30pm at Bal Gandharva Rang Mandir, Mumbai. On 6-7 September at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi

Prachi Sibal is a Mumbai-based culture writer.

The hidden gems from India's rap scene

LOW FIDELITY

BHANUJ KAPPAL

As a professional music critic, my inbox is always overflowing with new music—advance copies of major label albums pushed by corporate PR, indie artists sending me their new EPs, even demos from teenagers just starting out on their musical journey. As much as I'd love to listen and respond to them all, there are only so many hours in the day. So I end up engaging in a form of triage, passing the emails, DMs and WhatsApp texts through a bunch of mental filters—have I heard this artist before? Is it in a genre that I usually write about? How much do I trust the friend or music publicist who recommended it to me?

It's a process that I've got down pat, and that I usually trust. But it's also not perfect. I know that, somewhere in that big digital archive of music that I haven't heard—or only sampled in passing—there are bound to be some records that might rock my world, if only I had made the time to check them out. So every once in a while, I like to spend a couple of days digging through my grab-bag of advances and demos, hunting for hidden gems that I couldn't get to in time, that found themselves lost in the shuffle.

On my last such deep dive, I found three. And so, instead of my usual column about one of the previous month's big ticket releases, I'm gonna give them their moment in the sun, in the hope that they entertain and challenge you as much as they challenged me. They're all rap records—which tells you something about what the most exciting Indian music scene is these days—but they come from different parts of the country, and speak in different tongues.

The first record is *Natya Alaapika*, the latest full-length by Bhojpuri rapper and producer Shikriwal. There's very little info about Shikriwal available online—his first name's Sanket, he hails from Jharkhand, and he started dropping music in 2020, during the early pandemic. His debut mixtape—2020's *Cactus*—was largely unremarkable, showcasing an artist with potential, but still searching for a sound that set him apart from the flood of rappers trying to recreate the formula that propelled Naezy and Divine to stardom.

He spent the next few years experimenting, lurching from glitchy, East Coast bass (as on 2022's *Fuck The DJ*) to the chilled-out jazz-hop of 2023 EP *27.05.1997*. After releasing a string of singles last year, he dropped *Natya Alaapika* this May to little fanfare. Which is a tragedy, because it's one of the most inventive and vital Indian records I've heard all year. Shikriwal and his gang of collaborators—including Yash Raj Mishra, Abhi Shakti and Vilohitt—fuse Bihari folk, Bhojpuri pop, jazz, hip-hop and lo-fi electronica into a sonic dreamscape that feels both global and hyperlocal, strongly rooted in Purvanchal soil but with its tendrils ranging far and wide.

Ahmedabad-based rapper Dhanji.

Jaunty upright bass moves in counterpoint to flute on the folk-jazz cut *Baate Karti Ho*, while *Rajkumut* lurches forward with keening, ominous synths and propulsive bass. Over the jazz-funk grooves of *Vyapar*, Shikriwal delivers *paan*-stained braggadocio rhymes over a mouthful of *gutka*, and somehow manages to make it all sound cool. *Tanashahi* channels Danny Brown flows over warped, cartoonish synths while *Nirnayak* is a torch song that layers Shikriwal's gravelly raps and collaborator Nihaarika's breathy croon over melismatic saxophone runs. In an ideal world, this record would be splashed all over your Spotify and Instagram feeds. And if Shikriwal can keep up this level of craftsmanship, then he'll soon get there, even in this far-from-ideal timeline.

Slightly less polished—but even more thrillingly experimental—is *Shall We Proceed?*, an eight-track mixtape by Kerala rap duo Bunnyboo. 14thIndian and Nerdyrengan craft a dark, dystopian sonic universe out of jagged industrial synths, feedback-drenched guitars, discordant keys and eldritch, manipulated vocal samples—like JPEGmafia crossed with Xiu Xiu, then filtered through the post-modern absurdism of *Om-Dar-B-Dar*. It's the perfect sonic backdrop for the duo's snotty, sneering brand of conscious hip-hop.

Fuck Jerry Seinfeld—featuring guest appearances by Anohnymouss and The Siege—layers pulsing bass lines over 1970s Bolly-disco grooves as they trade bars about smoking weed and catching temple priests rocking Pierre Cardins. *Buff Curry*, as the name suggests, is a horror-rap takedown of those who would lynch a man for what he eats. These guys pull no punches.

The final record is by an artist with whom I was already familiar but whose latest record I could only get to after the music press's relentless news cycle had moved on to newer releases. Ahmedabad rapper Dhanji's 2023 album *Ruab* was a cinematic masterpiece of Motown soul, blaxploitation funk and absurdist, iconoclastic rhymes (and one of my albums of the year). His latest mixtape with producer Rasla, titled *Drive-In Cinema 2.1*, leans even further into avant-garde experimentation, while trading funk for chromatic trap synths and 808s.

Rapping in Gujarati, Dhanji tosses off tongue-in-cheek rhymes about Ahmedabad life, drugs, booze and sex, never quite taking himself seriously. His voice and delivery mutates with each track—autotuned to codeine elasticity on tracks like *Khushy Khushy, gushy gushy* and lead single *Company Building*, modulated to a smoky rasp on the surprisingly catchy *Italy Ni Piye Ame Daru*.

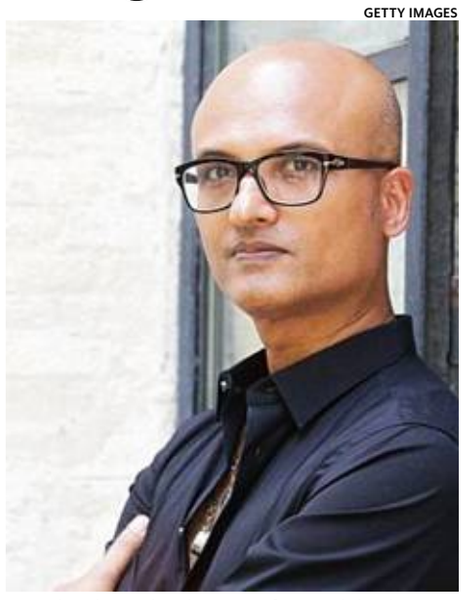
The 19-track mixtape might lack the conceptual ambition and consistency of *Ruab* but it still showcases an artist who keeps pushing boundaries, always just a little ahead of the curve. And I challenge you to find an Indian rap song nearly as absurdly funny—and scathingly satirical—as *Nakli aur alsi Polis* (*In The Spa*). If you're looking for India's answer to RXKNephew, then "Dhanji da 1 2 do it".

Bhanuj Kappal is a Mumbai-based writer.

The autobiography of a nomadic family

ISTOCKPHOTO

GETTY IMAGES



Jeet Thayil switches between first and third person in the book.

Jeet Thayil's new book, 'The Elsewhereans', is a hybrid of fiction, biography, history and imagination, revisiting the story of his parents

Somak Ghoshal
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Jeet Thayil's new book *The Elsewhereans* has been published as fiction, but it defies neat generic classifications. With its moorings in memoir, biography, travelogue, photography and history, it is at once an impulsive creature as well as recognisably part of an august literary tradition, heralded by writers like W.G. Sebald and J.M. Coetzee, among others, who dissolved the line between fact and fiction in their work. The style of these writers has inspired epithets like "facto-fiction" or "ficto-fact", both of which accurately describe the affinities of the story Thayil tells us in this book.

At its core, *The Elsewhereans* is Thayil's take on his parents' life: T.J.S. George, a distinguished journalist with multiple careers in India, Hong Kong and New York ("the first editor of independent India to be charged with sedition," as Thayil tells us) and Ammu George, a former school teacher who lived a peripatetic life with her husband before passing away in 2024. The story of their first encounter, love affair and marriage is the foundation of the book. It begins in 1957 and runs for over 60 years, interspersed with vignettes from Thayil's own life as well key moments in the social and political history of India.

The story is told through two voices, switching between the first and third person, though it is clear that the narrative consciousness is one. The occasional "I" voice belongs to a character named "Jeet", who has grown up between several places, though he is not entirely deracinated from his roots in Kerala. A poet with a nomadic life who has tragically lost his wife, he has fallen into a habit of using drugs and alcohol to excess. But these autobiographical details—which Thayil had explored in finer detail in his 2020 novel *Low*—do not lead him off track. His focus remains the story of his parents' life together and for this reason he needs the third-person omniscient voice to put a bit of distance between himself and his subjects.

The Elsewhereans: *By Jeet Thayil, HarperCollins India, 224 pages, ₹699.*

The urge to revisit and understand our parents' past isn't uncommon. British-American writer Christopher Isherwood wrote a masterful account of his parents' lives in his 1971 classic *Kathleen and Frank*, cleverly subtitled, *The Autobiography of a Family*. *The Elsewhereans* pays homage to this truism as well. A biography of one's parents is, in its broadest sense, an autobiography of all the people they came from and all those they leave behind. In this sense, the first-person narrator is as essential a scaffold for the story as the gallery of eccentric aunts, grandparents and cousins is. All of them come and go into the narrative at will but remain firmly etched in the reader's memory.

The Elsewhereans has affinity with books like Michael Ondaatje's exhilarating memoir *Running in the Family* (1982) but it unfolds at a slower pace. It meanders like a river, whimsically gathering memory pieces, like flowing water carries stones and silt along the way. There are many digressions—a fleeting glance is cast on the Opium Wars while talking about a Malayali midwife's addiction to the substance, for instance. The anecdotes turn gossipy sometimes, the reader gets a glimpse into a cousin's failed marriage, which she had agreed to as a rebound to a heartbreak over a lesbian affair.

The narrative flows mostly chronologically, as George and Ammu keep moving from place to place with their two children, pitching tents in Bombay (now Mumbai), Patna, Hong Kong, New York and Bangalore (now Bengaluru), carried along the winds of change and circumstance. At the end of their restless peregrinations, there is always the promise of refuge in Ammu's ancestral home in Mamalassery, a hamlet in Kerala's Ernakulam district. That house remains the only still point in a world where the idea of "home" keeps shifting faster than any of the characters can keep pace with.

At its most abstract as well as permanent, the word "home" brings up, for each member of the family, people they have become attached to in the past. During George's brief stint in Vietnam, first as a journalist to cover the American war, and later as a schoolteacher in the country's north, he gets close to a beautiful Vietnamese guide, who is one of the most moving characters in the story. Ammu discovers a friend in Prasanna, a fellow Malayali homemaker in Hong Kong, and together they grow their financially illiterate husbands' corpuses by investing in the stock market.

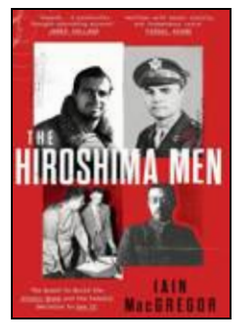
Jeet bonds with a drug dealer called Obelix in Berlin—his name uncannily resonant of his looks. A husband and father who feels as displaced as Jeet does, Obelix is much more desperate to find a foothold in the world than him, even willing to embrace the hardships of a city life for the sake of a better future. But Jeet has no such intentions. "I am a migrant," he explains patiently to Obelix, "not an immigrant. In some time, in a month or two or three I'll leave." When his flummoxed interrogator asks, "But why?", he gives a pithy riposte: "Melanin."

The quest for home is a well-worn trope in fiction. In the hands of lesser writers, it can fall flat and turn into an exercise in solipsism. But there is no such danger in Thayil's book. From the very first page, with its tall stack of epigraphs (including one from Ammu: "Old age is a shipwreck"), to the sepia-tinted photographs of people and places—all too real as well as all too achingly born out of the writer's imagination—not a single gesture in the book feels overextended. Each page is laced with grief for the vanishing present, including a brilliant evocation of Kerala's uncontrollably wild monsoons, but there's no trace of melodrama.

As George and Ammu enter their 90s, their son sobers up. But the family's primal itch to be on the move, to discover the world beyond their doorstep, never leaves them. In her grand old age, the third-person narrator tells us, "it seems to Ammu she has no home, for home is no longer a city or a country and the people in them, but the rooms of the houses in which she's lived."

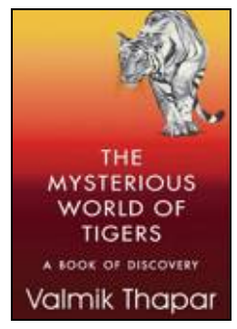
She would be glad that her final resting place is between the pages of this haunting book written by her son.

NEW ON SHELVES



Eighty years ago this week, the US dropped the world's first atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In his new book, acclaimed writer and historian of World War II, Iain MacGregor takes the reader back to the political and scientific events that led up to the fateful moment that wiped out thousands and scarred generations thereafter.

'The Hiroshima Men', by Iain MacGregor , Hachette, 448 pages, ₹799.

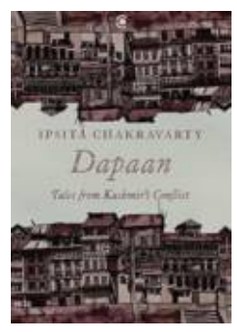


This slim volume brings together a selection of the late Valmik Thapar's writings on tigers, the species he studied his whole life. Based on 50 years of observations and field notes, Thapar, who died in May, portrays the majestic creature through the scientific eyes of a conservationist who was also keenly alive to the beauty and grace of wildlife.

'The Mysterious World of Tigers', by Valmik Thapar, Aleph, 128 pages, ₹399.

Aparna Sen made an early mark as the teenage heroine of Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya* and never looked back. From arthouse to commercial films, she was a familiar face in modern Bengali cinema in her heyday—also a writer, editor and outspoken feminist. Devapriya Sanyal's study of Sen's life and career will not only interest Bengalis but also film enthusiasts.

'Aparna Sen: A Life in Cinema', by Devapriya Sanyal, Rupa, 184 pages, ₹495.



Journalist Ipsita Chakravarty reconstructs the history of Kashmir, from Partition to the lockdown and communications blackout in 2019, through a series of interviews with people living in the state. The result is a fresh perspective on a decades-long legacy of conflict, told through myths, legends, stories, songs, fables and other cultural media.

'Dapaan', by Ipsita Chakravarty, Westland, 320 pages, ₹699.

An outspoken Adivasi leader's testimony

A new edition of Mundari leader Jaipal Singh's memoir brings together a compelling story of brilliance and bravado

Somak Ghoshal
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On 19 December 1946, Jaipal Singh, who was one of the six Adivasi members of the Constituent Assembly (out of a total strength of 389), rose to address his colleagues on the "Objective Resolution". The latter had been introduced by Jawaharlal Nehru five days earlier and dealt with the soon-to-be-independent India's status as a sovereign democratic republic.

"This Resolution is not going to teach Adibasis (sic) democracy. You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them. They are the most democratic people on earth," he said to B.R. Ambedkar, chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution, and the others gathered.

"What my people require... is not adequate safeguards as Pandit Jawahar Lal (sic) Nehru has put it. They require protection from Ministers... We do not ask for any special protection. We want to be treated like every other Indian." The foresight, as well as prescience, in his statement induces goosebumps 80-odd years later.

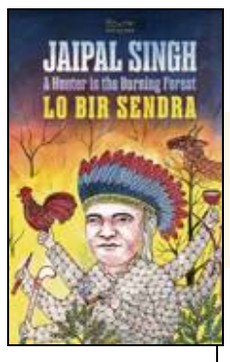
This incident appears in *Lo Bir Sendra: A Hunter in the Burning Forest*, a memoir of sorts that Singh wrote in 1969, a year before his sudden death. The handwritten manuscript—which remained in the custody of an Italian anthropologist for several decades—was discovered and published in 2004 by the late Jesuit priest and tribal rights activist, Stan Swamy.

Recently, editors at Navayana, the Delhi-based indie publishing house, retraced the original text back to a student of the Italian scholar. Comparing the copy of the handwritten manuscript with the first edition, they corrected any errors and inconsistencies, added back the missing passages, and came up with a new, revised and annotated edition in consultation with Rashmi Katyayan, the Singh family lawyer. The intellectual sleuthing behind the making of this book is itself a feat of patient editing in the otherwise rushed landscape of trade publishing in India.

At Oxford, Jaipal Singh excelled in hockey. PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY NAVAYANA

Although *Lo Bir Sendra* is more like a series of episodic reminiscences rather than a structured memoir, the reader gets a strong sense from it of the extraordinary man Singh was. Born in 1903 in Takra Pathantoli, a village near Ranchi (then in Bihar and now in Jharkhand), to a Munda family, he was lucky to be the beneficiary of a progressive education. Recognising his potential, W.F. Cosgrave, the principal of his school, arranged for Singh to study in England. Once there, he not only shone for his academic merit at Oxford but also received a prestigious "Blue" for his excellence in hockey. Eventually, Singh would lead the hockey team (which included stars like Dhyan Chand and Shaukat Ali) to victory in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics.

The first Adivasi to qualify for the Indian Civil Service, Singh would also be the first to quit the profession. He married Tara Majumdar, granddaughter of W.C. Bonnerjee, the first president of the Indian National Congress. Later, he became a Member of Parliament and led the Adivasi Mahasabha party. His second marriage to Jahanara Jeyaratnam (also a politician) in 1952 was widely noted, too.



Lo Bir Sendra: *By Jaipal Singh, Navayana, 184 pages, ₹399.*

Singh started with a corporate job, then taught at Achimota College in former Gold Coast (now Ghana), founded a magazine for Adivasi issues (published in Mundari, among other languages) and was the principal of a college for Indian princes, before entering politics. A staunch opponent of Congress elitism, he was forced to accept an alliance with the party later in life.

Yet Singh never hesitated to air his opinions. He objected to the constitutional provision that advocated prohibition, arguing that alcoholic drinks like rice beer, consumed widely by Adivasis, is an intrinsic part of their culture. He spoke up against Article 13(1)(b), which defined peaceful assembly as one "without arms". For the Adivasi, Singh argued, the bow and arrow are part of their attire and identity—not necessarily seen as arms and weapons.

For all his anti-establishment politics, Singh knew how to have a good time. Equally popular among Indian and British glitterati, he always managed to land on his feet. He was a victim of intrigue and envy fuelled by Indian babudom or the petty outrage of racist *sahibs* but made short work of these conspirators.

For instance, in 1953, in a typical act of bravado, he organised a two-day cricket match between the Prime Minister's XI, led by Nehru, and the Vice-President's XI, led by S. Radhakrishnan, for the PM's National Relief Fund for flood victims in Bihar, Andhra State and Uttar Pradesh. Nehru scored 1, and the match ended up in a draw.

As *The Hindu* reported, "Jaipal Singh threatens that Parliamentary sporting activity has come to stay. He thinks that sporting events would bring all groups and parties much closer and enable them to consider national problems from a broader rather than narrow sectional viewpoint." Half a century after his death, Singh must be turning in his grave, considering the state his country is in.